

A History of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. By Donald Denoon and Philippa Mein Smith with Marivic Wyndham. Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford and Malden (Mass.), 2000, in *The Blackwell History of the World*. Edited by R.I. Moore. NZ price: \$69.95. ISBN 0-631-21873-4.

THIS BOOK is both timely and ambitious. Over the past generation several historians — usually but not always New Zealanders — have bemoaned the blinkered mindsets that nationalist paradigms produce. Until the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia, New Zealand was but one of the Australasian colonies. By the 1950s the term Australasia had almost disappeared from usage. In the first edition of his *History of New Zealand*, Keith Sinclair devoted some attention to the question of federation, and the first issues of the *New Zealand Journal of History* that he edited contained a lively debate on the issue. Most general histories largely ignored Australia, except as an economy. The silence at the Australian end was even more complete although the only indices for major metropolitan newspapers in Sydney and Melbourne during the nineteenth century show that events in New Zealand attracted much more attention than events in South or West Australia. If Australians and New Zealanders preferred mutual myopia for most of the twentieth century — except when beating the other at some sport — the situation was worse with regard to the Pacific. While specialist monographs exist which deal with aspects of nineteenth-century Australia's and nineteenth-century New Zealand's relationship with the Pacific, national histories ignore the subject almost entirely. If scholars threaten to stray, publishers police the postcolonial frontiers (a world in which postcolonial represents colonial writ in another scholarly language).

Denoon and Mein Smith constitute a formidable partnership and some of the most interesting sections draw on their own expertise and the dialectic with the co-author. It is not clear if Wyndham, a specialist in cultural studies, has contributed, although the final chapters are so distinctive in subject matter and tone that one suspects that 'with' merely indicates a substantially smaller contribution. Denoon and Mein Smith have also mastered the secondary literature relating to every aspect that they touch on and they conscientiously touch on almost all. Comprehensiveness is their major virtue. The volume is organized into chapters and the chapters are subdivided into sections. Many of the sections provide excellent essays on particular topics, thoroughly based on all secondary sources and informed by a comparative dimension. I was not only impressed by the essays on subjects that I am unfamiliar with, but often found those on subjects I know something about equally impressive. This strength will make the book invaluable for anybody teaching a paper that involves a comparative dimension. Indeed national historians will ignore some of the discussions at their peril. With any luck this book will encourage people to teach such papers. The comparison that works best, however, is that between New Zealand and Australia, although using modern nation-states as units of analysis for the nineteenth century obscures the diversity of the so-called Australian experience. That is hard to avoid without a lengthy blow-out. The comparison works less well for the Pacific, a notoriously complex region to summarize or sketch. I found the occasional discussions of New Caledonia particularly interesting, in part because I had never thought to read anything about that place, but as a whole the Pacific tended to be an add on.

Despite the book's impressive achievements it failed to satisfy some of my expectations. Some problems flow from the collaboration, I suspect, for the division of labour was too evident and the lack of a unified perspective too apparent. Occasionally it was not clear what they were trying to say (e.g., p.279), as if the text went to print before the drafting process had been completed. Where the essays impressed, too often they seemed self-contained, neither referring backwards nor forwards, as if suspended in isolation, thus giving the book a very fragmented character. The book lacked a potentially useful comparative dimension with Lawrence Jones's work on social realism in New Zealand.

Other interesting comparisons are picked up and pursued, such as the different histories of the 'bushman' in the two societies. Overall, however, the quest for coverage may have eclipsed a sharper and more interesting focus on themes. Indeed the theme that I most missed related to the comparative histories of the Labour movements and parties (this is a disappointing silence and Verity Burgmann, Barry Gustafson, and even my *Red Feds* are not to be found in the otherwise impressive bibliography).

Well, the authors might fairly say, you can't do everything. And they'd be right. Whether they — or Blackwell's general editor for the series — were right to sacrifice interesting and revealing thematic foci for thorough coverage remains a moot point. Yet it would be unfair to end on a note of disappointment. This is the first attempt at a history of Australia and New Zealand since the concept of Australasia was alive and well. The attempt to include the Pacific as well makes the book even more ambitious. That the authors have mastered so much complex material and written a clear analytical history places all historians in all those countries very considerably in their debt. I only hope that their path-breaking study will inspire or prompt more studies that tackle comparative topics, and tackle them on the same broad canvas. If that happens the historiographers of the future will consider this book an historical 'turning point' in its own right. That would be an impressive outcome worthy of this impressive book.

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