

Reviews

The Penguin History of New Zealand. By Michael King. Penguin Books, Auckland, 2003. 563 pp. NZ price: \$29.95. ISBN 0-14-301867-1.

IN THE PREFACE of his new general history of New Zealand, Michael King states that 'this book is not written *for* other historians'. His audience, he tells us, is the 'curious and intelligent' general reader, those 'who are *not* historians'. Not a writer to resort to italics lightly, we should heed his warning. There is little in *The Penguin History of New Zealand* that will surprise the readers of this journal. King charts a predictable journey from the prehistory of the land through to an optimistic 'Posthistory' conclusion, where he claims that most New Zealanders are 'commonsensical and tolerant' (a reading challenged by the aftermath of Don Brash's recent Orewa speech). In between the pre- and post-history, King covers all the bases we expect in a conventional general history: major political and economic developments are noted; wars are fought, lost and won. He offers a story of progress, of a society growing in diversity and independence as the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first.

The Penguin History of New Zealand may not have been written for 'us', but judging by its sales 'we' will be dealing with its legacy for some time to come. There are several reasons I think 'we' should be concerned about that.

The cover of *The Penguin History of New Zealand* points to one of the major themes running through the book: the relationship of Maori and Pakeha with the land. King is much taken with the recent *Environmental Histories of New Zealand*, edited by Tom Brooking and Eric Pawson. Tim Flannery's *The Future Eaters* was also important to his thinking about man's response to his natural environment. Throughout the book he returns to this theme, making it clear that this is an on-going relationship, rather than something experienced only at time of arrival. Given this, I was surprised that there was no mention or discussion of Peter Gibbons's 'cultural colonization' thesis, or Giselle Byrne's application of this thesis in her study of surveyors. Perhaps disappointed is more accurate than surprised, since in this book King joins South Island poets and mountain climbers in asserting Pakeha love of the land and connection to it. Cultural colonizers do not belong in this tale.

King's discussion of the land places him firmly in the cultural nationalists' camp. He does not offer an end date for colonization, but the text makes it clear that the process is over and a new, independent, bi-cultural nation has taken its place. He goes so far as to refer to Maori as the country's 'first indigenous people' (p.413) thereby implying that Pakeha can claim indigenous status too. This might explain why so many (Pakeha) reviewers of *The Penguin History* have praised King's discussion of race relations. King writes of Maori who were smart, sassy and in control. '[M]ore than a match' for early European explorers (p.113), they were soon thriving capitalists, invented trench warfare, and generally coped well with the arrival of another people, languages, and ways of life. The 'better natives' story lives on in his account. The twentieth century, though, proves more problematic — not because Maori did not cope (King focuses on success stories like the men of the Young Maori Party, other Maori MPs, Princess Te Puea and Dame Whina Cooper) but because the story is not as bi-cultural as readers might expect. Maori now find themselves in separate chapters. The titles are positive (Maori Lifeways, Maori Survival, Return of Mana Maori), but the segregation is real. Perhaps this is what appeals to reviewers.

Or perhaps what appeals is the 'wriggle room' King offers reviewers and readers who can only allow that 'our natives' were better in the past than they are in the present. Throughout the text King offers talkback radio callers ammunition in their war against racially based policy. Take the current fashion for referring to the country as Aotearoa/New Zealand. As King points out, Aotearoa was not the Maori name for New Zealand. The name, and the Kupe discovery myth associated with it, is an invented tradition. As for blaming the education system for the demise of the Maori language, King points out that English was the language of instruction in Native Schools '[a]t the specific request of Maori parents' (p.233). Even the 1834 'Flag of the Independent Tribes of New Zealand' can no longer fly proudly: the flag was imposed on Maori and celebrated with a 'feast' of cold porridge. In 1989 King published a book to dispel the myth that Moriori were the original indigenous inhabitants of the country, expelled to the Chatham Islands by invading Maori. Now he seems to be suggesting that the myths surrounding the flag and the name Aotearoa are more important than their actual provenance. But will his general readers see why the Moriori myth should be dispelled, while these others are embraced? Chances are they will find the facts he offers more useful than the collective memories King approves of.

Reviews I have read have praised King's handling of the history of race relations, but have not commented on what I consider one of the book's major short-comings. This is a man's story. Men create history; men are history. This is not to say that King is indebted to Jock Phillip's man's country thesis. At one point he acknowledges the concept of mateship (p.229), but does not cite Phillips, or the work that has been written in the wake of Phillips' path-breaking book. Later he mentions Phillips when discussing Maori and Pakeha playing rugby and drinking together, but conveys no sense that this is part of a large, national interpretation found in Phillips' *A Man's Country?* Almost two decades of scholarship on the histories of masculinities have not impacted on how King approaches his national story, which is not so surprising given that over three decades of feminist scholarship also goes unacknowledged. The main discussion of women's history is about the achievement of suffrage, although the version offered here shares much with William Pember Reeves' view that women woke up one day and found themselves enfranchised. Important work on the history of women's organizations and politics, the home, family and sex have no place in King's story of public men. Even women's home front activities during war are not worthy of mention. Homosexuality is mentioned, thanks to the preferences of writers like Frank Sargeson, but I am concerned that readers in the early twenty-first century are being presented with a general history that is blind to gender as a force shaping the nation and almost silent when it comes to the histories of the female half of the population.

I am not suggesting that King should toe a particular gender line. It may be that King is very familiar with the scholarship on gender and decided that the work of Phillips et al is not important. The problem is, I cannot conclude this from the text or the scaffolding supporting the text. This is a general history without notes or even a bibliography. Instead readers are offered a combined 'Further Reading & Acknowledgements' essay at the end of the book. If curious and intelligent general readers turn to this to broaden their study of New Zealand history they are going to find themselves with a fairly odd reading list. They will not be aware that in 1959 Keith Sinclair wrote a general history of New Zealand, or that Bill Oliver followed with a short history in 1960. They will not know that this journal exists or that graduate students' theses contain some of the most important work in the field. And they will be totally ignorant of the now extensive scholarship in the field of women's history and the many authors who take a social and cultural focus to their historical writings.

This bibliographical shortcoming would be less problematic if the text provided readers with a better sense of how the discipline of history and the historical profession

in New Zealand has changed in recent years. But despite comments in the Preface about there being many versions of history and many ways of approaching national stories, readers will be hard pressed to detect historical debate in King's pages and will find it near impossible to identify what form these multiple approaches to history have been taking. I am not suggesting he replicates Miles Fairburn's method from *The Ideal Society and Its Enemies* (although I would enjoy reading a general history that took such an approach). As King notes in his Preface, the book will end up as 'a history' (its title, though, is more emphatic than that), but through the text he could alert readers to where other approaches and versions have been offered and why he has settled on a particular account. Fairburn's atomization thesis, for example, does not rate a mention in the book. Is this because King rejects it, or just did not consider it important enough to mention?

Some readers may be surprised that when Fairburn is quoted at length the subject is not his controversial view of the nature of late nineteenth-century Pakeha society but the place of women in the interwar period. One might well question why King ignored the scholarship of those whose primary focus is women's history and opted instead for a historian many have criticized for his lack of insight into the histories of women. This is not the only instance where King cites approvingly the words of historians who were writing outside their fields of expertise. David Hamer is quoted on systematic colonization. Erik Olssen becomes the expert on the 'settler nationalist' writers of the 1930s when Rachel Barrowman or Peter Gibbons were surely more appropriate authorities. And why turn to a North American historian for a quote on the nature of post-war (American) society when Erik Olssen and Andrée Lévesque wrote an essay in 1978 that offers the perfect quote for the nature of post-war New Zealand society?

At least Fairburn, Hamer and Olssen are named in the text and the 'Further Reading' essay. Curious readers can follow up the references should they wish. Others in the profession are overlooked entirely, or their work used, but only acknowledged by a reference to an unnamed 'one historian'; hardly helpful for the general reader. Overall, King's attribution practice is puzzling. The closest I can come to unravelling it is that if you are over the age of 50 and/or a cultural nationalist, chances are you will be named. Other members of the profession remain anonymous.

The least anonymous historian in this book is King's fellow cultural nationalist and general history writer, James Belich. King follows closely in Belich's footsteps. He repeats the line that Maori invented trench warfare, accepts the erroneous claim that butter is a protein, and tailors his story around New Zealand's growing independence from the mother country. Alternative analytical frameworks are not offered, although a close reading provides enough textual inconsistencies to question such a sweeping claim.

I doubt many will read *The Penguin History of New Zealand* that closely, though. Most will not want to work that hard. They will read the best seller to be told what happened and when. Questions of why, let alone alternative interpretations would only interfere with the narrative flow. If this was written as a rollicking good yarn I would be sympathetic to that position. But it is not. This is a sober, old-fashioned general history. King nods in the direction of recent environmental history but for the most part this could easily have been published at least ten years ago. Although not aimed at 'us', I still think we should be disappointed that King did not employ his considerable talents to offer all readers a more challenging and less clichéd general history.

CAROLINE DALEY

The University of Auckland