

Reviews

Environmental Histories of New Zealand. Edited by Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2002. 342 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-19-558421-X.

ONCE WERE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHERS; and once were economic historians. While not long ago such species flourished in New Zealand, survivors now seem as rare as the kakapo. This volume suggests, however, that a number of former exponents of those academic sub-disciplines (and their students) have reinvented themselves, joined with others from linked disciplines, and become environmental historians. And, on the evidence presented here, they are doing rather well. In recent decades environmental history has become a thriving area of historical research and debate, especially in North America but also in former settler societies such as Australia and South Africa. This volume is devoted exclusively to the New Zealand experience. Ambitious in concept, *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* is lively, engaging and innovative, and will certainly stimulate further debate.

What this book reinforces is the newness of the New Zealand landscape, in terms of both natural processes and its human moulding. If landscape is profoundly a human construction, major modification of New Zealand's primeval environment arguably commenced little more than 800 years ago. Yet, even if a case can be made that Maori modification of the environment was more extensive than is frequently conceded, the most fundamental changes were effected in the 150 years following the commencement of systematic European colonization, possibly in half that time. It is salutary, for instance, to browse the early 1900s pictorial supplements of journals such as the *Weekly News*, to witness maturing towns where 60 years previous there had been only wilderness, but at the same time also note 'progress' in the form of kauri felling or the forcing through of the Main Trunk railway. Even in this reviewer's lifetime it has been possible to walk through the relics of bush burns, to watch buildings being erected on lands reclaimed from harbours and to be appalled by established landscapes (and townships) being drowned beneath hydro lakes. Until very recently the 'taming of nature' has been accorded high priority in public thinking, as well as local and national development strategies. This, of course, was fully in line with the vision of serving 'Home and Empire' as an extension economy specializing in the supply of food and raw materials. Small wonder, then, that the majority of the chapters are devoted to the impacts of resource exploitation.

The well documented (pictorially and textually), rapid and extensive recasting of the New Zealand landscape, particularly post European colonization, makes this country an ideal unit for study. Percipient early local observers such as T.H. Potts, G.M. Thomson and Herbert Guthrie-Smith recognized this, and practical environmental scientists including Leonard Cockayne, K.B. Cumberland and Lance McCaskill drew attention to environmental problems half a century ago. But major scholarly studies of the changing landscape have tended to be pursued by overseas researchers. In particular, Canadian historical geographer Andrew H. Clark paved the way with his *The Invasion of New Zealand by People, Plants and Animals* (1949), an investigation of Pakeha impacts. Nearly 40 years later American Alfred Crosby incorporated a major New Zealand case study into his internationally acclaimed *Ecological Imperialism* (1986). The present collection is the first major study to be conceived and carried to completion — if not actually published — within New Zealand.

The 17 essays (by 21 authors) are chronologically organized into five well-integrated parts. In each there are implicit tensions, for example, between Maori and Pakeha

attitudes to the environment, between production and protection imperatives. The differing Maori and Pakeha responses to a new land are central to 'Encounters', while the post-contact interactions between the races, culminating with the introduction of settler capitalism, are outlined. 'Colonising' considers key themes of landscape transformation (grasslands formation, mining, bush clearance) between 1840 and World War I. 'Special Environments' examines the beginnings of nature conservation, the mountains and wetlands. 'Modernising' then focuses on major themes of twentieth-century environmental change, including the employment of science for more efficient resource exploitation and the making of urban environments. Finally, 'Perspectives' introduces a number of contemporary environmental concerns. Despite the diversity of the topics and approaches, with each chapter being specially commissioned, and the obvious commitment of the writers, the parts make a cohesive whole. Omissions there may be, but the breadth of the collection is impressive.

Unusually for such works, the chapters are of a uniformly high standard. Readers will have their personal preferences. In the early essays, prehistorian Atholl Anderson places Maori colonization of Aotearoa firmly within the character of 'colonisation everywhere at all times'. If not totally discounting the modern 'Maori as conservationist' catch-cry, his demonstration of the extent of vertebrate extinctions and deforestation prior to 1800 at least suggests qualifications. Alongside, Jim McAloon delineates the early European switch from random resource extraction to a settler economy, linking the early phases of European colonization to the global political economy and early nineteenth-century cultural politics. Terry Hearn's chapter on the resource contesting and environmental impacts associated with mining merits special mention, mineral extraction being too frequently overlooked in environmental histories. So too with the 'Special Environments' chapters. Perhaps stirred by childhood curiosity over the straight drainage channels on the Rangitaiki Plain, Geoff Park's essay on wetlands held particular personal interest. The determination to convert swampy waste into pasture surely epitomises the European desire for 'improvement'. In the context of the twentieth century, Tom Brooking and associates provide a foretaste of what may be anticipated from their Marsden-funded grasslands research project, while Michael Roche proffers afterthoughts on 'wise land use strategies'. Eric Pawson argues that New Zealand towns, while founded as bridgeheads of civilization, have nevertheless been vulnerable to the natural elements, suburbs forming intermediate zones between urban form and nature. In a linked chapter Helen Leach discourses on the place of the home garden, what she terms 'landscapes of exclusion'. The final chapters tackle current environmental concerns in historical context. Tom Isern ponders the consequences of exotic introductions, Danny Keenan assesses the impact of colonization on Maori identification with land resources, Nichola Wheen emphasizes how environmental law has always facilitated the delineation of property rights and exploitation of resources, and Christine Dann addresses New Zealand's place in the modern world.

The moving spirit in this enterprise was Tom Brooking, his long-standing interest in rural landscape further stimulated by late 1990s journeying through North Island landscapes of his youth. Fortuitously, at the same time Eric Pawson's thinking was turning in similar directions. Together they have produced a tightly edited, well-referenced and (generally) well-illustrated volume. The editors' intentions were to situate New Zealand 'in the context of current thinking and practice in environmental history' and 'to provide signposts about how further study of New Zealand environmental histories might develop'. They have fulfilled both admirably. This book will be a landmark in the study of environmental history in New Zealand and well beyond the shores of these islands.

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