

Reviews

A Concise History of New Zealand. By Philippa Mein Smith. Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2005. xviii, 302 pp. NZ price: \$36.95. ISBN 0-521-54228-6.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO Philippa Mein Smith co-wrote with the Australian historian Donald Denoon an excellent regional study, *A History of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific* for the publishers Blackwell. Given this endeavour, and her other extensive research in the area of public policies towards childbirth, child care, women and families, we should not be surprised that she accepted Cambridge University Press's invitation to try her hand at writing a short history of New Zealand for their series of national histories. Stuart Macintyre wrote the Cambridge volume on Australia. While many leading historians are energetically promoting the widening of history writing from its customary focus on events within national boundaries — an approach that the Blackwell book delivered with distinction — there remains a continuing interested readership for histories of nation states. The short national history is an exacting undertaking, given the competing pressures of selection and the responsibility of saying something meaningful about so vast an array of human experience extending over centuries. In the case of New Zealand, a number of prominent historians have preceded Mein Smith in the task, and she would not wish to duplicate their approaches. To my mind her history stands up very well indeed in company that includes books by Michael King, James Belich, W.H. Oliver and Keith Sinclair (recently republished with Raewyn Dalziel's revisions). In a genial and accessible style Mein Smith has brought together with admirable succinctness a wealth of information and ideas that will be bound to stimulate reflections on history, memory and representations of the past that are so critical to current national debate.

For an academic like myself, part of the interest in reading a short history lies in tracking the writer's particular treatment of the form. In a short history historians may take the opportunity to craft what is in effect an extended interpretative essay that stems from a very particular historical vision. These often make compelling reading. The brief Mein Smith worked with demanded her alignment with Cambridge's expectation for the series in terms of content, coverage and balance. This would have deterred her from adopting any very particular vision. For her book she follows a chronological structure of chapters that appears at first glance conventional. The narrative starts with the geological creation of the islands and the arrival of Maori and pre-colonial Maori and white encounters. Then follow chapters covering the early colonial period of settlement including the wars of the 1860s, the establishment of a country distinguished from Australia with its specific economy geared to Britain. New Zealand's continuation as a white Dominion through two world wars and the intervening depression open up considerations of the prosperity immediately following World War II, the sharp social changes New Zealanders have experienced since the mid-1970s, and the revival of Maori hopes and demands with revised understandings of the Treaty of Waitangi.

But look closely and it becomes clear that Mein Smith has revisited the major watersheds of New Zealand history and put her particular stamp on them, displaying the achievements of New Zealanders while eschewing celebratory conclusions. She accomplishes her goal by grounding her confident and firmly directed narrative in innovative recent scholarship explored through themes at the cutting edge of studies of new white societies. With New Zealand this time at the centre of her story, she interprets its past through a transnational approach that integrates the country's history in relation to the world beyond: Britain, of course, but also the United States, the Pacific islands and, above all, Australia. Mein Smith's core narrative focuses on New Zealand as a British settler colony in the double meaning of the term: while the imperial power began the colony,

the settlers themselves were deputy colonizers not only of Pacific islands but of Maori people. She analyzes settlers' decision to retain an amicable relationship with Britain well past the period of local self-government. At the same time she interrogates white New Zealanders' prolonged posturing as a benevolent senior partner in nation building within a bi-racial society. She demonstrates well the ways that the later twentieth-century resurgence of Maori political pressure delivered a shock to white New Zealanders. This outcome, she suggests, came as a natural consequence of the depth of injury sustained by Maori and the blithe ignorance of that injury by most Pakeha.

Interwoven in this account is a subtle analysis based on gender. Mein Smith foregrounds issues related to women, children, families and constructions of masculinity that emerge as basic to comprehending the country's history. When she writes of causation, events and outcomes she is always mindful that there is no private sphere that is unrelated to the public realm, nor national identities forged that are outside of constructions of gender. Women as well as men are actors in this history, in which the writer is able to note women's importance without the obligation to construct them unambiguously as heroines. She indicates, for example, how the fortunes of women's civil rights campaigns interfaced with successive government's racialized policies, and persuasively demonstrates the ways women reformers' leadership on childbearing and child rearing interfaced with national health and population concerns inflected by class.

A Concise History of New Zealand is a fine addition to the Cambridge series that will be widely read and appreciated. The book points to the maturing of New Zealand's history writing, indicating the growing acceptance of revisionist appraisals of the histories of new white societies that have elsewhere caused anger and political backlash. One only needs to consider the labelling of similarly critical accounts in the so-called 'history wars' in Australia to appreciate the difference. It is heartening that Mein Smith and her publishers perceive a market in the country as well as abroad for such a challenging history. Mein Smith, it must be acknowledged, has been able to rely on the ample constructive work that the historical profession has produced in the last two decades. The search for social justice in the country can only have been furthered by the vitality of the profession and its commitment to communicate historical research to a wide readership as exemplified in Mein Smith's short history.

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Sites of Gender: Women, Men and Modernity in Southern Dunedin, 1890–1939. Edited by Barbara Brookes, Annabel Cooper and Robin Law. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2003. xiii, 434 pp. NZ price: \$44.99. ISBN 1-86940-301-0.

SITES OF GENDER is a product of the Caversham project undertaken by staff and students of the University of Otago over a period of more than a quarter of a century. The contributors to this book first met to discuss this work in 1995 and, since then, have presented their findings in conference papers and journal articles, and now an integrated collection of essays. Their agenda has been 'to analyse gender by "setting it deep" in a place and time: the suburbs of southern Dunedin between 1890 and 1939' (p.vii). This is a place well known to students of New Zealand history; perhaps it is the most thoroughly known of all our suburbs, yet *Sites of Gender* adds new insights, new stories and new understandings of its people, institutions and culture. Old South Dunedin hand Erik Olssen is joined by a new team of historians, Annabel Cooper, Barbara Brookes and the late Robin Law as editors, and other contributors working on a new aspect of the ongoing project.

The agenda of the book makes for both its strengths and weaknesses. It provides the