

Reviews (Books)

Over the Mountains of the Sea: Life on the Migrant Ships 1870–1885. By David Hastings. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2006. 294 pp. NZ price: \$40.00. ISBN 1-86940-375-4. *Women and Children Last: The Burning of the Emigrant Ship Cospatrick*. By Charles R. Clark. University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 2006. 174 pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 1-877372-145.

THESE TWO WORKS TAKE US BACK TO THE SEA, adding to what is amounting to a Hartzian turn of the historiographical tide. Charles Clark and David Hastings are both urging greater attention be paid to the central enactment of the migrant experience: the voyage 'out'. And in doing so they reiterate that it is in the composition of the migrant body that lies the key to understanding what made New Zealand settler society distinctive. Their arguments come in the wake of a rash of projects focusing on the ethnic origins of the predominantly 'British' settler influx. That legacy, the nature and circumstances in which the fragment came to be planted is at the forefront, rather than Frederick Jackson Turner's new world frontier.

Clark's subject is the tragedy of the *Cospatrick*, in which all but three of the ship's company of 479, including 178 men, 125 women and 126 children travelling as emigrants to New Zealand under the Vogel scheme, perished in the fire and sinking of the ship in the South Atlantic in November 1874 six weeks into the voyage. Hastings's scope is the experience of the migrant voyage across the 'Vogel' period and into the mid-1880s, in which the *Cospatrick* loss is but one, albeit dark, episode in a wide-ranging depiction. Based on 250 voyages, for 82 of which shipboard diaries were kept (and have survived), Hastings's discussion broadly follows the sequence of the journey from the chaos of embarkation to the euphoria of 'land fever'. Taking existing historians to task for discounting voyage diaries Hastings uses these as his principal source, along with copious immigration commissioners' reports produced, by order, at the conclusion of each voyage. While shipboard diaries were undoubtedly commonplace and deserve greater study, Hastings delves little into the conventions of their composition, attributing some of their sparseness to 'inexperienced writers who felt uncomfortable trying to express anything introspective' (p.23). He is stronger in conveying the smells and sounds of life at sea, including the richly ornate seafarers' culture captured in the ceremonies of sinking the dead horse and crossing the line, in the rhythm of shanties pounded out to pace the work and the watch, and in language — 'donkeys breakfasts', the term describing the straw mattresses used by the crew, is but one example.

Hastings is particularly interested in the 'social map' of the migrant voyage: the rigid division of people by class, gender and status (crew/passenger/migrant) in the space of the ship, and the strict routines by which the day, week and voyage were regulated. Binding these together on the long-distance migrant voyage was, he suggests, a 'science of discipline' through which order, safety and health were to be upheld. Where the 'science' of regulations and the system of authority failed, irons, firearms, straitjackets and ropes were a final resort. Five of the ten chapters deal specifically with the maintenance (or attempted maintenance) of order, including one in which crew mutinies are considered in some detail. Of the 11 mutiny attempts only four were successful in achieving some redress. Drink was never far distant from most incidents. At one point Hastings dallies with a Foucauldian analysis but is not insistent on it, preferring a multivariate account of the ways in which the 'little republics' of shipboard communities were held together. Overall, Hastings concludes that migrants were 'socially conservative', they went along with divisions by class and gender and showed little sign of seeking an egalitarian or

levelled society. Their determination to migrate did not translate in any way into a challenge to the social or political order as they made their way to their futures in the new world. Perhaps not so surprising?

Disease rather than disorder was the real threat to migrant welfare. Even with the terrible toll on the *Cospatrick* and the shipwrecks of the *Strathmore* and *Knowsley Hall*, deaths from disease far outnumbered losses from these disasters (900 to 600 deaths). Hastings acknowledges this appalling mortality, devoting a whole chapter to 'Births, deaths and the doctor'. No reticence is shown in using doctor's case notes in the opening passage where Catherine Holmes's labour and delivery of a baby girl on board the *Chile* is recounted in detail. Dr Millen Coughtrey, the colourful surgeon superintendent on the ship, features strongly throughout the book. While the child, named Catherine Chile Holmes, survived a coiled umbilical cord and ophthalmia contracted in birth (associated with gonorrhoea), others were not so fortunate. The high toll of infants and children on board migrant ships was a persistent stain on the migrant trade. Most notorious in the period 1870–85 was the voyage of the *Scimitar* from Plymouth to Dunedin in 1873 in which 26 people died, 25 of them children. Hastings discusses the circumstances in which measles and scarlet fever swept through the ship but leaves the reasons for the tragedy unresolved, mired only in mutual recrimination of immigration and health officials at either end of the journey. Was Dr Eccles, Board of Trade sanitary inspector in Plymouth, right in saying that the mortality of children on ship was no different from that on land? It is an important question. Recent and searching work by Robin Haines on this very subject in the Australian migrant trade could have been usefully consulted (*Life and Death in the Age of Sail*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2003 and elsewhere). If *Mountains of the Sea* was simply an evocation of the shipboard experience perhaps this would not matter, but it extends further to offer a new assessment of the safety and character of the long sea voyage. Haines's conclusions from analysis over a very large span emphasize the considerable public health success of antipodean migrant voyages, along with a later and slower fall in infant mortality.

Charles Clark does not have the problem of reconciling the hugely diverse journeys or the even more varied ways in which people enjoyed, endured or suffered through their voyage to New Zealand. The *Cospatrick's* story presents a compelling drama. The power of the ship's sinking and survivors' story was not lost on contemporary Archibald Forbes, special correspondent for London's *Daily News*, who spared no expense in hiring his own tug to ensure he got the scoop before the three survivors even landed back on English dry land. The loss of such a large group of migrants —men, women and children, passengers and crew, was grievous; the fate of the five who were finally rescued ten days later, only three of whom survived, hardly less so. For the 30 people who were lucky enough to make it into the one lifeboat which was still afloat after two nights following the sinking (and Clark has an important story to tell as to why it was almost always men rather than women, crew rather than passengers or migrants who survived on this, as on most occasions), thirst, hunger, exhaustion and madness induced by drinking sea water took a daily toll. At first survivors redistributed the clothing of those who died; by day five they were also redistributing the blood in what Clark describes as 'survival cannibalism'. These were acts of desperation, at once both comprehensible and the subject of fascinated revulsion to contemporaries. Of the three, second mate Henry McDonald gave up the sea, tried various livings, took to the bottle and died in a lunatic asylum within ten years; Edward Cotter and Thomas Lewis coped better, Cotter even appearing on the music hall stage in a nineteenth-century version of 'celebrity survivor'.

Clark's sympathy is clearly with the seamen, strongly refuting findings of the inquiry attributing the cause of the fire to likely cargo broaching by the sailors. He places the *Cospatrick* story within the longer story of campaigns for better safety at sea. It was not until after the *Titanic* that the number of lifeboats required to be carried had to match the

number of passengers and crew, while Samuel Plimsoll's campaign to stop overloading was only secured in the Merchant Shipping Act of 1875, the same year as the *Cospatrick* story made the new year headlines. Clark's research has left no stone unturned, much detail being presented in six full appendices — which makes the absence of a bibliography and rather idiosyncratic referencing more to be regretted.

The two authors negate each other in key areas of their arguments. Where Clark is happy to confirm the contemporary condemnation of the *Cospatrick* (and all of 'Vogel') migrants as 'mere off-scourings of the towns' (p.56), Hastings accepts the revised view that these were skilled and quality people. But he accounts for the *Cospatrick's* fire in the old orthodoxy (the contemporary inquiry); terms Clark rejects. In both books the richness of contemporary illustration, story, verse, song, sketch, drama and engraving testifies to the impressive hold the sea voyage had over contemporary individual and collective imaginations. Cabin passenger Mary Dobie's sketches made on the *May Queen* in 1877, included in *Mountains of the Sea*, are splendid. The sea voyage in all its diversions and tribulations is clearly a topic ripe for further exploration in late Victorian culture as they remain solely in the realm of the illustrative here. A view from the sea is always valuable to an island history and both these books tell a good story, one worthy of 'old' and 'new' salts.

CHARLOTTE MACDONALD

Victoria University of Wellington

Maoriland: New Zealand Literature 1872–1914. By Jane Stafford and Mark Williams. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2006. 350 pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 0-86473-522-7.

NEW ZEALAND LITERARY CRITICS HAVE LONG LABOURED under the weight of the masculinist tradition of cultural nationalism instigated by the 'reality gang' composed of A.R.D. Fairburn, Allen Curnow, Charles Brasch, Monte Holcroft, Keith Sinclair et al. It is a weight which even feminist and postmodern critics have failed to truly shift, despite a range of strategies. Too many commentators are still comfortable with the suggestion that New Zealand literature only really began during the economic depression of the 1930s, when our (mostly male) writers began to suffer enough to produce art worthy of comparison with the outside world. Here, it is suggested, our literature finally developed to a stage broadly comparable with our rugby. In *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature 1872–1914*, Jane Stafford and Mark Williams present what must surely be one of the most stimulating and intellectually satisfying contributions to our literary history in the past two decades precisely because they succeed in undermining this myth of origins, using a brand of writing that makes the work as useful for cultural historians as it undoubtedly will be for literary critics.

While it is difficult to tell whether the displacement of the cultural nationalist narrative of our literary history was the ultimate *raison d'être* of the book (it is clear that the authors are motivated by a variety of purposes), there should be no doubt that Stafford and Williams have hit on its most fundamental weakness: an insufficiently historical attention to the writing of late colonial New Zealand which has led to anachronistic judgements based on personal antipathy and, in some cases, outright prejudice. On more than one occasion the authors point to an inability of literary critics to move beyond simplistic denunciations of *Maoriland* writing, the convincing implication being that they have found the way — through a blend of cultural criticism and historicism — around this literary–historical impasse. The book signals a recognition that the Victorian era in New Zealand literature demands serious attention and that we need to start viewing the poems