

Editorial Introduction

MIGRATION HISTORIES AND WRITING THE NATION



THIS SPECIAL ISSUE of the *New Zealand Journal of History* is the outcome of the Migration Histories and Writing the Nation Symposium held at the University of Waikato on 21 June 2007. The symposium, jointly hosted by the University of Waikato's History Department and the Irish and Scottish Studies Programme (Victoria University of Wellington), was superbly co-ordinated by Rosalind McClean. The occasion brought together academics, secondary teachers, students, museum professionals, family historians and other interested participants to explore the role that migration studies might play in the critical reframing of New Zealand history. Both the timing of the gathering and its central focus seemed appropriate. In the first place, it offered an opportunity for those present to take stock of the rapid strides made by migration history over the past decade and to reflect on its connection to emerging perspectives in New Zealand scholarship. Second, the forum provided a conduit for dialogue between migration specialists and other historians, many of whom were moving in a transnational direction in their own work. Finally, it was clear that the topic for discussion had significance beyond the narrow confines of academia. It spoke unequivocally to contemporary public debates over immigration policy; the discourses of biculturalism and multiculturalism; Māori claims to particular rights and resources; the question of citizenship; and the management of diversity, so powerfully dramatized by Fouzya Salim's refusal to 'unveil' in the Auckland District Court.¹ The symposium challenged participants to consider the relationship between past and present, including the ongoing impact of colonial processes and the development of more recent transnational linkages to the Asia-Pacific region which disrupt older narratives of nation-building.² Above all, it made space for genuine conversation about the issues, as well as the possibilities for future research.

Despite a promising exchange of ideas, creative tensions became apparent during the symposium. The explicit 'postcolonial interventions' of several presentations aroused deep suspicion among some practitioners of migration studies; the champions of postcolonialism, in turn, seemed to be frustrated by the historical understandings of their colleagues; and the final summary drifted aimlessly on darkening waters. A major point of difference — and one highlighted in the keynote address — was that 'retelling the nation' has not been a major goal for migration historians, whose research combines theory and evidence to provide a better understanding of migrant experiences and the social worlds they created.³ This task demands an analytic optic that incorporates various levels and contexts, from individuals, households, and local interactions and circumstances, to 'the most global of global structure'.⁴ National contexts and nation-based comparisons are invaluable tools for the historical investigation of mobility and ethnicity, as Angela McCarthy has

brilliantly demonstrated.⁵ Nonetheless, it is also true that the principal themes of recent scholarship — transnationalism, diasporas and networks — emphasize the relationships migrants maintained with people and places outside the nation states where they settled.⁶ Migration histories like McCarthy's *For spirit and adventure* move beyond the insularity of national historiographies, illuminate dynamic patterns of interaction across borders and reach international audiences. In this regard, at least, there is common ground with postcolonial critiques, which have also adopted transnational perspectives that interrogate the position of the nation as the primary category of analysis. Both reflect the cross-disciplinary ascendancy of social constructivism over recent decades and dominant subjectivist understandings of relational phenomena such as ethnicity and nationhood.⁷

Giselle Byrnes offers an explicitly postcolonial approach to the relationship of migration and nation in the opening contribution to this volume. Drawing on the work of revisionists within the field of imperial history, as well as scholars of postcolonialism and nationalism, she reminds us that nations are modern constructions associated with 'nineteenth-century colonial ambition' and exploitation. The problem with the nation, she suggests, is not just the tendency to elide difference, but also its continuing role as 'a colonizing tool'. Yet the task of teasing out the connections of nation to migration — and in deconstructing the nation and its privileged analytical status — is complicated in a New Zealand context by several factors: an emphasis on biculturalism; emerging postcolonial perspectives; and 'transnational practicalities'. Byrnes notes 'a begrudging acceptance' among postcolonial writers that the nation remains powerfully entrenched as a way of representing, framing and understanding the social world. It is this very resilience, she concludes, that requires 'ongoing inquiry' and the reconfiguration of our diverse historical experiences so that we might 'participate in transnational and internationalized historical understandings where we do not entirely abandon the local or the national'.

Byrnes's thoughtful and provocative piece sets the scene for the essays that follow. Nēpia Mahuika pushes the frameworks in new and fruitful directions with his call to revitalize the subordinated story of Te Ika-a-Maui as a means of transforming our perceptions of the past and shaping pathways for the future. He vividly illustrates his notion of reclamation through the 'historical episode' of post-war Māori urbanization. Contrary to what he calls 'the myth of disconnectedness', Mahuika shows that the urban settings of these migrations remained 'colonial sites, built on the bones and warmth of earlier Māori histories and settlements'. By contrast, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay draws attention to the ways that national histories have obscured the connections between 'New Zealand's egalitarian nationhood' and the exclusion of Asians. In a far-reaching analysis, he casts fresh light on the emergence of majority anxieties about Indian migration and places that story in its wider imperial and transnational contexts. The very presence of these newcomers challenged several 'discursive planks' on which ideas about national identity were being constructed in self-governing Dominions like New Zealand and Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Britishness, civilizational

difference, class harmony and pride in empire. ‘This transnational history of nation-building’, he concludes, ‘is seldom recognized in the extant literature on nationalism’.

The remaining essays in this volume explore quite different aspects of the relationship between nation and migration. Tanja Bueltmann closely examines the social organization of New Zealand’s Scottish migrants with a specific focus on ethnic associations. She makes incisive use of concepts such as ethnicity and memory to demonstrate how the Scottish nation provided a crucial reference point for expatriates and a valuable cultural resource that assisted migrants’ adaptation to new realities. In the next piece, Lyndon Fraser and Sarah Dwyer emphasize the importance of transnational practices for Ulster Protestant migrants in nineteenth-century Canterbury. Their ethnographic research also underlines the need to balance the study of these kinds of dynamic interactions with ‘the imaginative exploration of local geographical contexts’ and the network connections that developed within them. The concern with material culture and place evident here is central to the work that Michael Fitzgerald describes in his research note on the making of Te Papa’s ‘community’ exhibitions. Despite its status as Aotearoa New Zealand’s *national* museum, the relationships built between the institution and their various partners in representation provide space for stories that reconfigure dominant historical narratives of the nation. The platform might be a national one, but the histories constructed during the temporary exhibition development process and indeed elsewhere at Te Papa, reflect postcolonial approaches toward the past.

Together with my fellow editors and historians, Nēpia Mahuika and Rosalind McClean, I would like to warmly thank Caroline Daley, Deborah Montgomerie, Barbara Batt, the anonymous referees and all the contributors for making this special issue possible. Our hope is that some of the ideas, concepts and methods deployed in these essays will inspire new research which refines, adapts or challenges the frameworks we have used. Perhaps, as Nēpia suggests in this volume, we can then begin to re-imagine New Zealand in ways that allow us to ‘create narratives that liberate not only the colonized, but the colonizers, by recognizing and bringing to the centre those narratives that have been silenced in the colonial process’.

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NOTES

1 Nick Smith, 'Lifting the Veil', *New Zealand Listener*, 27 November–3 December 2004, pp.14–17.

2 One of the more familiar nation-building stories is epitomized by the 'Contents' page of W.H. Oliver with B.R. Williams, eds, *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Wellington, 1981. According to this narrative, New Zealand moves from its early 'Beginnings' to 'Growth and Conflict' and beyond a rather spotty and painful adolescence to 'A Time of Transition' and 'Precarious Maturity'. Presumably, on this account, the nation has now reached a paunchy middle-age. Compare this structure to the one that underpins Giselle Byrnes, ed., *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, Melbourne, 2009.

3 Lyndon Fraser, 'What Role Do Migration Histories Play in Retelling the Nation?', unpublished address given at the 'Migration Histories and Writing the Nation' Symposium, University of Waikato, 21 June 2007, p.1. Yet it is also clear that 'retelling the nation' may still become an unintended consequence of this research, and further that migration histories have been difficult to integrate into standard narratives of the nation — as the silences in some first-year New Zealand history courses attest.

4 Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, London, 1993, p.69.

5 Angela McCarthy, *Personal Narratives of Irish and Scottish Migration, 1921–65: 'For spirit and adventure'*, Manchester and New York, 2007.

6 For an introduction to the literature and its possibilities, see *ibid.*, pp.1–14, 154–78.

7 See John L. Comaroff, 'Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Difference', in Edwin N. Wilmsen and Patrick McAllister, eds, *The Politics of Difference: Ethnic Premises in a World of Power*, Chicago and London, 1996, pp.162–83; Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, London and Sterling, VA., 2002.