

The Invention of New Zealand: Art & National Identity, 1930–1970. By Francis Pound. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2009. 425pp. NZ price: \$59.95. ISBN 978-1-86940-414-7.

THE MAJOR THEME OF THIS BOOK, surely the longest volume on New Zealand art history published to date, is ‘Nationalism’ and ‘Nationalist’ artists and critics. This is defined in the preface as ‘that body of art and letters which, between c. 1930 and c. 1970, set out to uncover the essence of New Zealand and, in so doing, to invent a specifically New Zealand high culture’ (p.xix). Francis Pound never properly elaborates on this, and shows little cognizance of how puzzling such a term might appear to anyone whose awareness of it has been formed through familiarity with such authorities as Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and Anthony Smith. With the partial exception of Canada, the nationalisms of other nations which might potentially afford valuable comparisons with, and insights into, that of New Zealand are ignored. By ‘Nationalism’, Pound really means the lower-case ‘cultural nationalism’ of the period, addressed by historians such as W.H. Oliver, James Belich and Michael King, none of whom are cited here. Admittedly, ‘cultural nationalism’ might appear a weak-kneed appellation when one devotes 425 pages to the deconstruction of that phenomenon. And, to Pound’s credit, *The Invention of New Zealand* is anything but weak at the knees.

The ten chapters explore such themes as signatures of place, the harsh clarity of light as an aesthetic and doctrine, God in New Zealand nature, the country and the city, the peculiarly New Zealand versions of modernism, Primitivism and the construction of a nationalist art historical canon. Close readings are devoted to Colin McCahon and Gordon Walters. Pound writes with insight, passion and erudition about them both, and if anything Walters emerges as the more impressive figure. In retrospect, Walters’s critical treatment by nationalist ringleaders (notably Hamish Keith and to a lesser extent Gordon Brown) seems not so much shabby as baffling, given his deployment of the koru motif, not to mention the graphic power of his aesthetic. But Pound protests too loudly about this. His assertion that the Robert McDougall Art Gallery ‘did not bother to offer Walters an exhibition’ (p.259) in his later years when he resided in Christchurch would have been promptly corrected had Pound asked the then director for the gallery’s version of the story.¹ Pound repeatedly reveals a hubristically Auckland-centred approach. He berates the National Art Gallery in Wellington for its failure to collect modernist New Zealand art, and the priority that it gave to acquiring banal ‘academic’ twentieth-century British works (p.297).² He unfairly contrasts the Auckland City Art Gallery’s bold acquisitions of New Zealand art, past and present, in the 1950s with the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, which ‘between 1932 and 1948 *bought not a single New Zealand work*’ (p.341). Not only does he choose a different timeframe, but he fails to recognize that the McDougall was originally intended as a static collection and, despite repeated entreaties, received no Christchurch City Council funding for acquisitions during this period. Pound also claims that other centres refused to host Auckland’s touring exhibitions of modern art, whether local or international (pp.78, 262). Again, brief archival perusal reveals a different picture, even during the supposedly reactionary 1950s and 1960s. Pound consistently underestimates the role of art societies in making artists from different regions aware of one another, and the societies are stereotypically characterized as purveyors of conservatism. Worse, Pound trivializes New Zealand art education as being ‘based on life drawing and drawing after casts from the classical antique’ (p. 290). W.A. Sutton, who spent almost his entire student and working life in the art school environment, would have corrected Pound there, while Jim Allen, whose early 1950s ‘primitivist’ sculpture was admired by Francis Shurrock, his instructor at the Canterbury College School of Art, still could do so.

For a post-modern revisionist of yesteryear, Pound’s view of art history is surprisingly conservative. Apart from Walters and the ‘derided’ Milan Mrkusich (p.240), Pound

repeatedly endorses essentially the same canon of twentieth-century artists identified decades ago by Peter Tomory, Keith and Brown, albeit for sometimes differing reasons. Pound's assiduous research on McCahon's likely study of reproductions in American art magazines in the Auckland City Art Gallery prior to his extended visit to the USA in 1958, indeed reveals that he responded more deeply to Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman than Gordon Brown had recognized in his monograph.³ But Pound forgets that Brown was necessarily dependent on what McCahon told him (as indeed Pound himself was on Walters), and should be a little more lenient. Indeed, Brown acknowledges the significance of Richard Diebenkorn, whose influence on the *Northland Panels* (1958), the triumphant outcome of McCahon's American trip, is writ large.

Pound's highly opinionated approach is both his strength and weakness. He takes a deep view of a few favoured artists but offers a surprisingly narrow, indeed elitist, one of what purports to be 'Art & National Identity 1930-1970'. 'High art' is assumed as a given and, like 'Nationalism', is never adequately teased out in relation to 'low'. Thus there is no mention of the popular cultural nationalism of Peter McIntyre and the impact of his bestselling, eponymous *Peter McIntyre's New Zealand* (1964).⁴ When Pound claims that professionalism was not a possibility for New Zealand painters until the 1970s and 1980s (p.116), he ignores the 'unmentionable' McIntyre, Austen Deans and Douglas Badcock. Nor do we hear anything of the arena that showcased such painters: the avowedly nationalistic Kelliher Art Award and its celebration of figurative landscape themes. Its annual exhibitions between 1956 and 1977 attracted rather more visitors than the 70 brave modernist souls who made it to the McDougall to see the Auckland-generated 'British Abstract Art' (1958). It is perhaps not surprising that Pound has room for the literary mandarins Allen Curnow, Charles Brasch, M.H. Holcroft and later C.K. Stead, but none for the good, keen Barry Crump. This is surely a missed opportunity in the context of Pound's interesting discussion of the overwhelming nationalist preference for rustic virtues over city corruptness. In the process, he blithely ignores a swathe of urban- or suburban-themed art of the mid-twentieth century, ranging from the Art Deco of Rita Angus (portrayed at the hairdresser), to Lois White, Russell Clark, Charles Tole, Peter McIntyre, Leonard Mitchell, Paul Olds, Brian Dew, Garth Tapper and, more recently, Nigel Brown. A counter-nationalism is clearly in the offing!

Pound may be, according to the flyleaf, 'one of our most brilliant and original art historians' but he is no historian. The bibliography is lengthy but it is seriously outdated and skewed; besides the omitted historians mentioned above, Miles Fairburn and his thesis of 'atomisation' in *The Ideal Society and its Enemies: The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society* (1989) would have enhanced Pound's discussion of 'Solitude, suffering and silence' (pp.26-37). The concept of environmental history also seems foreign to Pound. Still more surprising is his omission of *An Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (1966) and its entries on the visual arts written in the heyday of nationalism by that significant historian and printmaker A.H. McLintock. Perhaps it is an inconvenient book, for the tone of its nationalism is temperate and liberal. Little sense of chronology or trajectory ever emerges, although there are brief attempts to address this in the introductory and penultimate chapters. No consideration is given to 'Maoriland', admirably explored by Jane Stafford and Mark Williams in its literary dimensions, which might have served as a foundation but also a fruitful point of contrast with the main theme.⁵ Further, the nationalism of c. 1930 is all too often conflated with that of c. 1970 to serve Pound's polemical thrusts, sometimes in successive footnotes (p.121). Nationalism was nothing like as unvarying as Pound maintains; Eric Lee-Johnson (consistently patronized here) was a major, perhaps *the* major, 'Nationalist' figure in art, admired by Charles Brasch, A.R.D. Fairburn and the Auckland City Art Gallery director Eric Westbrook, until the mid-1950s. But with Fairburn's premature death in 1957, by the end of the decade the momentum had moved decisively towards the modernism of McCahon, and to a lesser extent Toss Woollaston and

Rita Angus. Was nationalism as consistently anti-abstract as Pound maintains? Surely not in the later years of its reign, with Keith admiring Don Peebles and the young Gretchen Albrecht, and Brown, Ralph Hotere. Pound underestimates the intelligently anti-nationalist aesthetic of the Auckland dealer and uncompromising champion of Walters and Mrkusich, Petar Vuletic, whose inclusion on the last two pages of such a lengthy book is too little and too late.

To use some endearing ‘Poundisms’: I have no wish to ‘deride’, still less ‘revile’ *The Invention of New Zealand*; it is by no means ‘unspeakable’ or ‘deplorable’. Parts of it are excellent, not least Pound’s powerful argument for McCahon as a Christian artist, which previous critics of a ‘secularist’ persuasion have deliberately minimized. In the longer term, this aspect may well appear considerably more significant than McCahon’s nationalism. Admirable too are the opening pages to the chapter on Primitivism, when Pound applies this problematic concept to the New Zealand context. And then, to paraphrase McCahon, I must ‘give thanks to Pound’ for being infinitely more readable than in his post-modern incarnation, notably *Frames on the Land: Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand* (1983). How can we resist a sentence (p.53) that reads: ‘The fertile ground of the invented New Zealand is at once that of earth, and that of the canvas or page: fibrous, a humus, a compost, a vegetable tissue, a compound manure’?

MARK STOCKER

University of Otago

NOTES

1 John Coley to Mark Stocker, 30 March 2010. Coley writes: ‘At no time were we approached or had any pressure to present a major show of Gordon Walters — we had a long list of Canterbury artists and topics for our lone curator to deal with. As a member of the New Zealand Art Gallery Directors Council I was aware that other galleries, e.g. the National under Luit Beiringa, had a Walters show in mind. More importantly, the nature of Gordon’s practice made it difficult to formulate small focus shows of new work. While courteous, friendly and possessed of a personal integrity that did not allow him to speak ill of anyone, he was also a very private man’.

2 See, however, *Modern Britain 1900–1960*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2007; also Mark Stocker, ‘Wellington Booty: Modern British Art at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa’, *Apollo*, 171, 572 (2010), pp.40–47.

3 Gordon H. Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist*, A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington, 1984.

4 See especially Warren Feeney, ‘National Identity and Peter McIntyre’s New Zealand’, *Journal of New Zealand Art History*, 25 (2004), pp.1–12.

5 Jane Stafford and Mark Williams, *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature 1872–1914*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2006.

Raupatu: The Confiscation of Maori Land. Edited by Richard Boast and Richard S. Hill. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2009. 299pp. NZ price: \$50.00. ISBN 978-0-86473-612-3.

RAUPATU IS ANOTHER MAJOR CONTRIBUTION to scholarship from the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. The two Richards – Boast and Hill, both respected scholars in Maori–Crown legal history – have edited an interesting range of papers from a 2008 conference held at the Centre. Confiscation of Maori land features largely in any history of Crown–Maori relationships either as a reference to the acquisition by the government of substantial areas of land under the New Zealand Settlements Act 1863 and kindred legislation, or as a trope for Maori grievances about colonial dispossession by whatever means. This book focuses on the narrower sense of the term ‘confiscation’, which is a subject, the editors rightly observe, that ‘has not attracted the attention it deserves’.