

## Reviews (Books)

*Tuamaka: The Challenge of Difference in Aotearoa New Zealand*. By Joan Metge. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2010. 152pp. NZ price: \$29.99. ISBN 978-1-86940-468-0.

WITHIN A YEAR OF THE PUBLICATION of *The New Oxford History of New Zealand* — a collection that purported to challenge the progressive ‘nation’ frame which has dominated New Zealand’s history for decades — Joan Metge’s *Tuamaka: The Challenge of Difference* draws on Aotearoa New Zealand’s past and peoples to plait the nation back together. Using the metaphor of the tuamaka (‘a rope plaited in the round from five or six strands of fibre’), Metge argues that it is through the weaving of difference between peoples and cultures that the nation can achieve ‘unity and strength’. She describes the book as ‘positive and forward looking’, an aim from which some historians would probably recoil. But *Tuamaka* provides examples of how the interweaving of cultural difference plays a part in New Zealand’s history. It also gives local historians a timely reminder about the wealth of anthropological research and sites of history yet to be fully appreciated.

The book comprises six essays that Metge presented at various conferences between the years 1995 and 2008. All are bound by the ‘central issues of nation building’, with a particular emphasis on ‘the Treaty of Waitangi, the challenges and rewards of cross-cultural encounter, and recognition of Māori culture as a national resource’ (p.xi). Thus, the chapters touch on various areas of New Zealand ‘common life’, including ‘the language of communication between ethnic groups’; ‘public ceremonial’ and ‘creativity in the arts’ (pp.12–13). *Tuamaka* is not explicitly aimed at one particular ethnic group. In the foreword, Sir Edward Taihākurei Durie states the book ‘is not another study of Māori culture’, but is ‘about the transposition of cultural concepts to strengthen, if anything, the development of the several cultures in the country and the way they relate’ (p.ix). Notwithstanding the fact Māori readers can learn about and from their own past, the emphasis on Māori cultural concepts throughout the book gives the impression it is aimed at a non-Māori audience — an impression strengthened by Durie’s comment that an understanding of the Māori perspective is still required today, given recent controversies about ‘foreshore’, ‘W(h)anganui’ and the ‘Māori flag’ (p.ix).

The format of the book lends itself to the nation-building theme. In the first essay, Metge suggests that the personal challenge of securing a sense and place of belonging or *tūrangawaewae* in this country can be met by exploring three strands of knowledge: ‘self-knowledge’; ‘knowledge of the land’; and knowledge of ‘the people of the land’ (p.2). In order to understand the culture of another, Metge argues, one must first understand his or her own, and only then can the challenges of difference be fully appreciated and harnessed as a national resource. The latter part of the essay takes the reader through the ongoing relevance of the Treaty of Waitangi, a topic which is discussed further in chapter two. Indeed, Metge believes it is important to make the Treaty relevant in the ‘hearts and minds’ of New Zealanders, an aim difficult to attain through ‘off-putting textual analysis and legal arguments’, but perhaps more achievable through the ‘telling and retelling’ of the story of the Treaty’s signing at Waitangi in 1840 (p.13). Metge then narrates a story of the Treaty signing, highlighting the cross-cultural negotiations that took place, and at one point likening the two-day event to ‘an outdoor public event at which today’s kiwis would have felt at home’ (p.15). While Treaty claimants could well perceive that description as romanticised, if not bizarre, Metge does not intend to devalue the political relevance of the Treaty. Rather, she simply seeks to tell the story in a way that emphasises the longevity of Māori and Pākehā cross-cultural engagement,

which at the Treaty signing included instances of conflict, co-operation, negotiation and improvisation.

In chapter three Metge explores how Māori orators employed (and continue to employ) this ‘timeless’ form of storytelling (‘Kōrero Pūrākau-Myths’), before illustrating the multi-layered meanings contained in 11 whakataukī, in chapter four. By studying translations of whakataukī and the meanings Māori orators attach to them, Metge suggests both Māori and non-Māori who have little or no knowledge of the Māori language can gain an appreciation for ‘Māori poetry, storytelling and oratory in general’ (pp.53–54). The ‘transplantation’ of Māori words into the national lexicon is then discussed in one of the more fascinating essays of the collection, chapter five (‘Hurangatia — Māori words in English’). Here Metge outlines the multiple and shifting meanings of 23 Māori words that have also become part of New Zealand English over time. Although the author suggests that the process of language transplantation from a minority culture into that of the majority is indicative of a healthy degree of cultural interplay at the local community level, she also highlights how it has led to the erroneous use of Māori words and their meanings, and to instances of cross-cultural (mis)understanding. To some readers the process could be viewed as a clear-cut case of ‘cultural colonisation’,<sup>1</sup> and indeed Metge warns that there exists a fine line between the ‘appreciation and appropriation’ of Māori identity and culture (p.53).

These later chapters of the book, in particular, showcase Metge’s fine analytical skills, broad knowledge base, and her ability to explain complex Māori concepts and devices of knowledge transmission in an easily readable and understandable way. In turn, Metge positions herself as a facilitator of cross-cultural communication, a kind of cultural conduit through which Māori and non-Māori might draw to redress past and ongoing instances of cross-cultural ignorance and misunderstanding. Undertaking that role has required Metge walk a tight-rope through a Māori world in which Pākehā researchers have at times been challenged and charged with cultural exploitation. She recalls such experiences in the book, exposes her sensitivity to such criticism and allows us to reflect on her life as an anthropologist who has remained grounded, mentored and supported by many Māori and Pākehā (within and outside the academy).

These and other personal recollections are shared in ‘Anga ā Mua: Living History’, the final chapter of *Tuamaka*, where Metge charts her ‘journey towards appreciation of the historical dimension’ in her work (p.108). She openly discusses her childhood interests. She also considers the work of Māori and Pākehā academics who helped shape her career, and the challenges she encountered from historians as an anthropologist entering the realm of history-writing. Of particular interest is her discussion of the historical method and her early desire to ‘develop methods and skills for studying not only what happened in the past, but also the way that it is interpreted’ (pp.116–17). This analysis would have enhanced my reading of the previous chapters, and for that reason I was disappointed to find it relegated to the end of the book. It showed that it is through — and partly because of — her enduring relationship with Māori that Metge has maintained an unwavering and forward-looking eye on the big issues of nationhood, New Zealand race relations and the challenges that Māori and non-Māori have yet to overcome. Overall, *Tuamaka* shows that the challenges and reasons for cross-cultural engagement in this country remain important and understudied aspects of our past — a past that contains multiple cultural strands co-existing in a range of historical sites that should be acknowledged, explored and perhaps even plaited into a national narrative that speaks to Māori, non-Māori and their relationships to the land and to each other. Indeed, *Tuamaka* suggests that attempts to deconstruct the nation may have been premature.

MELISSA MATUTINA WILLIAMS

*The University of Auckland*