

Reviews (Books)

The Meeting Place: Māori and Pākehā Encounters, 1642–1840. By Vincent O'Malley. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2012. 284pp. NZ price \$45.00. ISBN: 978 1 86940 594 6.

IN *THE MEETING PLACE* Vincent O'Malley sets out to consider the encounter between Māori and Europeans in the two centuries spanning the first contacts of these peoples in 1642 and the commencement of large-scale British colonisation in the early 1840s. At first there were only fleeting encounters between Māori and Europeans. From the late eighteenth century, however, a small but growing amount of contact took place in some areas of Aotearoa, especially the northern and southern reaches, as Māori encountered sealers, whalers and traders and, finally, missionaries. At the same time some Māori encountered Europeans as they ventured beyond the shores of Aotearoa, especially to Port Jackson (Sydney) and even as far afield as London.

This historical period has been the subject of a good deal of scholarly research in New Zealand over the past 50 or more years, and especially the last 20. There have been many fine studies by the likes of Harrison Wright, Judith Binney, John Owens, Kerry Howe, Ann Parsonson, Angela Ballara, Russell Stone, Paul Monin, Hazel Petrie and Tony Ballantyne, which have focused on particular aspects of the relationship between Māori and Pākehā or on particular areas. More especially, the nature of the cross-cultural encounter between Māori and Europeans was the concern of two large volumes by the anthropologist Anne Salmond, *Two Worlds: First Meetings Between Māori and Europeans 1642–1772* (1991) and *Between Worlds: Early Exchanges between Māori and Europeans 1773–1815* (1997), as well as a later book, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog: Captain Cook in the South Seas* (2003). This said, a modest-sized volume that seeks to provide an account of the relations between Māori and Europeans in the pre-1840 period by synthesising this research is to be welcomed by lay readers, teachers and students.

O'Malley seeks to provide more than this, however. On his own account, he has sought to shed new light on encounters between Māori and Europeans, especially during the 25 or so years between c.1815 and 1840, by undertaking his own research. He adopts the concept of a 'middle ground' that Richard White used to such good effect in his 1991 study of the relationships between Indians, the British and the French in the area of the Great Lakes in the period lasting more than 150 years between the mid-seventeenth century and the early nineteenth century. White's argument, as Philip J. Deloria has noted, was a subtle one concerning matters of 'power, perception and cultural production'. First, White sought to describe a *process* by which peoples of diverse cultures met one another and tried to accommodate their differences. More especially, and this is where the novelty of White's argument principally lies, he contended that this process was largely characterised by 'mutual and creative misunderstanding'. In his introduction to *The Middle Ground* White emphasised this point. 'People try to persuade others who are different from themselves by appealing to what they perceive to be the values and the practices of those others', he wrote. 'They often misinterpret and distort both the values and practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices.' Second, White sought to describe a very particular time and place in which diverse peoples created this 'middle ground'. It was a historical space, he explained, in which neither whites nor Indians could dictate or ignore one another. 'The middle ground depended on the inability of both sides to gain their ends through force', he states. 'The middle ground grew according to the need of people to find a means, other than force, to gain the cooperation or consent of foreigners.'

In recent years White's 'middle ground' has become very popular, but most of the

scholars who have adopted the concept have stripped it of its interpretive power because they have largely used it to denote the occurrence of compromise and negotiation (or what historians have long called ‘accommodation’) in cross-cultural situations. Indeed, many authors seem to have been attracted to ‘the middle ground’ as a counterpoint to what followed, namely the imposition of European power and the destruction, dispossession and demise of indigenous peoples. For some, it has been a way of trying to envisage a past that might have been or to envision a future that could be. This is what appears to have encouraged O’Malley, who might be characterised as a public rather than an academic historian, to invoke the metaphor of a middle ground. ‘Aotearoa/New Zealand did not have to be solely Māori nor Pākehā but could accommodate both cultures and still find ways to meet in between’, he suggests near the end of the book. ‘Perhaps that is the greatest lesson we might take from the pre-1840 era as a resurgent Māori people face up to — and continue to ask questions of — Pākehā in the twenty-first century.’

There is little if anything in *The Meeting Place* to suggest that O’Malley has grasped the first of White’s two arguments, and this is where the value of his approach lies for historians of New Zealand since many of the scholars who have researched the pre-colonial period of encounters in Aotearoa anticipated White’s second argument many years ago. Perhaps it is significant that O’Malley, in the course of referencing a passage in the introduction of *The Middle Ground*, misquotes a key part of White’s argument by accidentally omitting a passage in which White stresses that people on the middle ground ‘often *misinterpret and distort* both the values and practices of [the other]’ (my emphasis). Certainly, O’Malley argues in large part (as many liberal historians have done in the past) that a middle ground arose in New Zealand because the two peoples came to interpret and understand each other *better* over time. For example, he states at one point: ‘Before the “middle ground” came a time of mutual incomprehension’, and at another: ‘On each occasion Māori and those Europeans encountered learned a little more about each other Periodic and sudden outbreaks of conflict and violence could still occur when things went badly wrong, but in other situations gave way to greater understanding and tolerance. A deeper relationship was gradually being forged.’ As a result of O’Malley making this argument we get little sense of how new meanings, and new practices in turn, arose out of a process of mutual *misinterpretations* and *misunderstandings* that commonly occurred in the course of the cross-cultural encounters. Actually, readers might be forgiven for concluding that O’Malley has no real scholarly interest in investigating the nature of cross-cultural encounters let alone tracing a process marked by ‘mutual and creative misunderstanding’, even though it can be argued that crucial matters such as the ‘sale’ of Māori land and the signing of a treaty (which are subjects O’Malley knows very well as a result of his long involvement in Waitangi Tribunal claims research) invite this kind of analysis. Instead, O’Malley devotes a good deal of his discussion to the outcome of these encounters in terms of impact on Māori and the Māori response, which is well-trodden ground. Finally, O’Malley forgoes the opportunity for a larger and deeper consideration of the middle ground by ending his study in the late 1830s even though he realises that Māori remained the dominant party in many parts of New Zealand until the 1860s.

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Tuhituhi: William Hodges, Cook’s Painter in the South Pacific. By Laurence Simmons. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2011. 346pp. NZ price: \$60.00. ISBN: 978 1 877578 17 5.

TUHITUHI: marking or painting a surface, such as a *tapa* cloth or a face. That is what