

Sacred Histories in Secular New Zealand. Edited by Geoffrey Troughton and Stuart Lange. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2016. 232pp. NZ price: \$40.00. ISBN: 9781776560950.

This book, which brings together ten papers originally presented at conferences of the Religious History Association of Aotearoa New Zealand over the past five years, is a welcome follow-up to the previous volume, *The Spirit of the Past* (Victoria University Press, 2011). As Geoffrey Troughton points out in his thoughtful introduction, the decline of religious observance in New Zealand — one of the most ‘secular’ countries in the world — has, if anything, increased the need for understanding of religion as an important dimension in our past. Writing about the history of Christianity in this country continues to flourish, and this book presents some recent scholarship to a wider audience.

Two of the chapters make important statements about New Zealand historiography. Stuart Lange analyses the treatment of missionaries and Māori Christianity in general histories, along with more specialist religious histories of more recent years. Arthur Thomson’s *History of New Zealand* (1859) both commended and critiqued the missions, but for a century his successors swept aside such criticism and developed ‘the admiring tradition’. From 1959 a ‘disdainful tradition’ ‘came to dominate mainstream historiography’ with ‘openly scornful’ approaches to the missions. Subsequently, missions dropped off the radar in Pākehā historiography, while voices from the Māori cultural renaissance reinforced the ‘disdainful tradition’, with Christianity ‘just another aspect of colonialism’s assault on Māori’. These polarized ‘admiring’ and ‘disdainful’ traditions both survive, but have been increasingly joined, suggests Lange, by more ‘mixed’ perspectives. He concludes that ‘New Zealand historical writings about missionaries and Māori Christianity have often reflected the religious and cultural presuppositions of those who wrote such histories’. Although such arguments apply to all fields of history, they are perhaps especially strong when it comes to religion, and anybody writing about — or dismissing — the missions would be well advised to read Lange’s careful analysis of the existing scholarship. Historiography is also examined in John Stenhouse’s chapter on William Pember Reeves. In his usual lively style, Stenhouse examines Reeves’s life and writing and later interpretations of them, arguing that the ‘language, values and attitudes’ of the politician’s ‘Anglican past’ remained an important part of his repertoire and, further, that ‘religious issues constituted some of the most thorny and intractable of Reeves’s political career’. Historians, suggests Stenhouse, ‘ought as a matter of good democratic practice to recover God’s Own Country of history, in all its fractious imperfection, from the progressive secular New Zealand of nationalist faith’.

Several other chapters centre on texts, either written or oral. Malcolm Falloon presents an intriguing analysis of the evolution of one story (‘the iconic narrative of the early missionary period’): the killing of Tārore, a young girl from the Matamata mission by a Rotorua raiding party, and the subsequent reconciliation of her father, Ngākuku, and her killer. Falloon demonstrates how progressive changes to the story, from the eye-witness accounts in missionary journals to twenty-first-century versions ‘incorporating a mythical dimension’, reflected the changing priorities of New Zealand church and society. Falloon’s essay is ‘a rare instance of New Zealand reception history’, notes editor Geoffrey Troughton. Kirstine Moffatt — another lively writer — continues her project of recovering from ‘dusty archives’ and ‘rarely opened

volumes' some forgotten works of New Zealand fiction, in this case the works of two early-twentieth-century 'preacher novelists', Methodist Herman Foston and Baptist Guy Thornton. Their books do not rate highly for literary merit, but provide valuable insights into working-class masculinity and evangelical culture. Moffatt admires their 'fire and fury' on social as well as religious issues. John Tucker examines the preaching of renowned New Zealand Baptist leader J.J. North, whose sermons were conventional in their emphasis on 'the great evangelical verities', yet modern in their reference to current social issues, science and literature and use of the latest technology. As Tucker and Troughton both note, we have very few histories of preaching in New Zealand. Given the wealth of source material available and the impact of the sermon as a cultural form this is unfortunate; more studies like this would provide further insights into the messages regularly imbibed by past generations.

A series of three chapters looks at sectarianism from different angles. Nicholas Thompson examines the 1885–1886 New Zealand tour of anti-Catholic lecturer Edith O'Gorman, known as 'the escaped nun'. He places this in a broader context — she attracted large audiences, but less violent reaction in New Zealand than elsewhere — and considers what that reveals about sectarianism here, drawing a nice parallel with twenty-first-century responses to Islam. John Milnes presents an overview of sectarianism during World War I, with a focus on its religious, rather than political, dimensions. Allan Davidson takes a more focused look at wartime sectarianism in a study of military chaplains. Difficulties over the appointment of chaplains, their organization, and the particularly vexed issue of whether worship should be segregated or combined, highlighted the fault lines within New Zealand Christianity. But as Davidson shows, over the course of the war cooperation increased, sowing the seeds for future ecumenism: the army 'helped to undermine denominational divisions'.

Peter Lineham's contribution on the history of Christmas in New Zealand examines changes in both 'religious' and 'folk' elements of the celebration; as he suggests, it is a good phenomenon for investigating the way in which religious developments interweave with social and cultural trends. It is great to see this book conclude with a chapter by sociologist of religion Kevin Ward; his work deserves to be widely known by those with an interest in New Zealand history. His contribution summarizes trends in New Zealanders' engagement with Christianity and the churches since the 1960s, noting the ups and downs of different variants of religion and spirituality along with overall patterns.

This is a stimulating and useful book, but I was struck by how few women I encountered while reading; after all, women, notoriously, participated in religion at higher rates than men. Several of the chapters pay scant attention to individuals, but those which do include some vivid portraits of people from our past and most are male (the exceptions being young murder victim Tārore and visiting Protestant campaigner O'Gorman). The sole woman contributor, Moffatt, is the only one to engage with issues of gender and that is, ironically, in the context of the men she writes about. A book produced almost entirely by Pākehā men is vulnerable to unconscious bias and it is rather surprising to encounter such lack of diversity in a twenty-first-century collection.

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