

The book is attractively produced with monochrome and colour images. It draws upon both primary and secondary sources and includes Völkner's letters to Grey as well as the 1992 pardon as appendices. This is a helpful narrative, though given its large cast and the many place names mentioned, it could have been rendered more useful to readers unfamiliar with the region and the story by the inclusion of an index and a map. But it is certainly worth a second reading.

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Acknowledge No Frontier: The Creation and Demise of New Zealand's Provinces, 1853–76. By André Brett. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2016. 343pp. NZ price: \$45.00. ISBN: 9781927322369.

THIS IS A WELCOME STUDY of New Zealand's provincial governments, a constitutional dispensation which lasted from 1853 until 1876. If it will not make W.P. Morrell's classic study redundant, Brett's work will certainly be read alongside Morrell, and Brett writes with an engaging style.

Brett opens with a useful discussion of the constitutional and political landscape before 1852, noting the impracticality of the 1846 constitution, especially several tiers of indirect election. After 1846, simplicity and localism would be emphasized, and principal considerations in what emerged in the 1852 constitution were geography and communication. George Grey's role in drafting the constitution is highlighted; he was largely responsible for the studied ambiguity about the status of provinces, an ambiguity which persisted.

Initially, provincial governments enjoyed widespread support. The first elections were generally contested enthusiastically, to say the least, even if some superintendents were elected unopposed. Until the question of responsible government was settled in 1856, the provincial councils were the more effective legislatures, or were so regarded by many parliamentarians. Indeed, the relationship between provincial governments and the colonial administration shaped the first responsible ministries. Stafford, for example, became premier because his pragmatic approach was generally acceptable. As Brett emphasizes, the provinces were decidedly unequal in their endowments, and the 1856 compact which allocated land revenue to the provincial governments reinforced that inequality.

The real problems, as Brett documents in some detail, were twofold. Isolation and challenging geographies were one. The sort of infrastructure which many demanded was almost impossible to fund. The other was a pervasive localism, which when related to the first problem fed secessionist movements. Too many provincial politicians were incompetent and small-minded; the talent pool was not extensive. Hawke's Bay, Marlborough and Southland all seceded from their parents. Brett shows that the legislation that permitted secession, in specifying that only the wish of the seceding region should be taken into account, fatally and deliberately undermined the provincial system. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there was little commitment to making provinces work. Of course, once localism had had its victory in

secession, as in Marlborough, the bacteria divided again. The account of the persistent rivalry between Blenheim and Picton — as bitter a vendetta as anything in fiction — shows the speed with which proceedings could become farcical. Marlborough and Southland both massively over-reached themselves; large provinces found it difficult enough to borrow and develop, but it was impossible for small ones. That basic fact, however, was often ignored, although simple incompetence had its role too, as when Southland's wooden railway was given kahikatea rails. Localism, perhaps, is the besetting curse of New Zealand.

The North Island was swamped by war in the 1860s, which (to say nothing of the effects on Māori) affected the public finances, increasing South Islanders' complaints about their status. Some talked of a separate South Island colony, and Brett plausibly suggests that such an entity would have been no more unified than New Zealand. Brett also doubts that Kīngitanga or other Māori jurisdictions could have functioned as provinces, or in a similar way, but surely the point is that the relevant provisions in the constitution were never tried. More generally, Brett advances a nuanced account of the 'war as centralising the state' argument; through prosecuting the war, building military roads and overseeing settlement of confiscated land, the central government did greatly increase its power. Provincial loans, however, diminished the central government's ability to borrow during the wars, and by the mid-1860s it was evident that the system was falling apart. Even those provinces that could afford to fund some public works thought in provincial terms, so there was no prospect of co-ordination. There were different railway gauges, which illustrated the problem perfectly.

A reckoning was inevitable. By 1867 the provincial debt was nearly half of the New Zealand total, and New Zealand was more heavily indebted per (European) head than any other Australasian colony. In 1867 the debt was consolidated, which meant, quite simply, that the provinces could no longer borrow. Yet public works remained a provincial responsibility; the solution of a centrally directed public works was obvious. Brett gives an able discussion of the provincial reactions, which were not all negative, to Vogel's plans, and the scheme won decisive support in the 1871 election. It was only a matter of time until the provincial governments were abolished, and their abolition was effectively ratified by the 1875 election.

With this book I have few quibbles. I think Brett underplays the radical democratic element in some areas, such as Nelson; and I have to observe that superintendents were not elected by one man one vote (p.52, which implies universal male suffrage) but by one voter one vote, for the property qualification remained. Reading Brett's wide-ranging discussion (and the appendices are very useful), I was left wondering how the provincial system lasted as long as it did. It was flawed in design from the beginning, and more flawed in execution. Covering a large history in a single volume inevitably means much is left for future studies. It remains remarkable that we have so few modern histories of provinces.

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