

Te Papa: Reinventing New Zealand's National Museum 1998–2018. By Conal McCarthy. Te Papa Press, Wellington, 2018. 255pp. NZ price: \$45.00. ISBN: 9780994136268.

A PROPER HISTORY of a New Zealand museum is a rare thing. Most museum books are glossy coffee table texts, highlighting collection objects or specific exhibitions. This work, however, is a 'proper' museum history: a critical overview of Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand since it opened in 1998. This is an in-depth and reflective look at how this institution came about, what it was like to be part of opening day, and how things have gone since then. It explores the creation of New Zealand's national museum in a specific time and place, and how museum policy has changed to reflect changing museology and society.

It has been 20 years since Peter Blake, five-year-old Tama Whiting and eight-year-old Grace Sweeney opened Te Papa on Valentine's Day in 1998. Since that time the museum has experienced controversy, restructures, successes and countless exhibitions. This book covers all of these, not shying away from those controversies, including the fuss around 'Parade', initial concerns about the 'dumbing down' of history, science and art, and ongoing criticisms about the amount of art on display. It also looks at the successes, especially the consistently high visitor numbers and Te Papa's international reach.

The 'newness' of what Te Papa was trying to achieve is a key theme of the book: a new national museum which was bicultural, emphasized visitor experience, and combined art, history and science in multi-disciplinary exhibitions but which was commercially positive. McCarthy describes Te Papa as an influencer, 'a radical example of the new museology, and a strikingly original reinvention of the national museum as it was then understood' (p.39).

Conal McCarthy is ideally placed to write this history. He has been the director of Victoria University of Wellington's Museum and Heritage Studies programme since 2005 and has written extensively about museum practice in New Zealand and overseas. McCarthy is also a former Te Papa staff member and was there on opening day in 1998. He has noted in an interview that museums are very 'presentist', and don't have time to look back at where they have come from.¹ Fortunately, he had been preparing for this book for a long time. A quick check of the endnotes shows that he started collecting material back in 2000. The voices of past and present staff members are a key strand of the book. These interviews and conversations offer rich insight into the factors influencing decision-making and they enliven the book. One chapter is dedicated to conversations with current staff members, and McCarthy takes the opportunity to demystify what museum staff actually 'do'.

The most enjoyable section for me was the two related chapters about Day One exhibitions. 'A guided tour of the museum' is just that – McCarthy dusts off the introductory tour he once gave to visitors and guides the reader through Te Papa as it was in 1998. The chapter charmingly describes exhibitions that will be familiar to many (some of which are currently being de-installed to make way for gallery renewal) and drops some knowledge about objects and displays. The companion chapter – 'What the staff intended and what the critics thought' – gives a fascinating behind the scenes view, explaining the new focus on visitor experience and how this influenced labels, displays and whole exhibitions.

For what is essentially a corporate history, this is an engaging read. Although it was commissioned, McCarthy notes that it is not an ‘official authorised account’ (p.25) and that he was free from direction by Te Papa’s management. Focus is given to how the museum’s policy has changed over time, especially the subtle shifts to thinking around the Māori dimension. Appendices record Te Papa’s strategies and values and include a glossary of museum jargon and te reo Māori. There is also a timeline which looks at a variety of highlights – exhibitions, acquisitions, events, visitor numbers and significant staff – over the past 20 years. As well as highlighting key staff and events, it also covers changing technology, the growing significance of digital displays and the development of systems like collections databases. Te Papa’s leadership role in repatriation and the value of visitor research is also recognized.

While this book is aimed at the general reader, I imagine it will be widely used in the museum and heritage sector. It covers a great deal of ground, but it also interrogates Te Papa’s decisions; it is both critical and celebratory.

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NOTE

1. <https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/about/te-papa-press/our-authors/conal-mccarthy-biography-and-interview>, accessed 4 July 2018.

After the Treaty: The Settler State, Race Relations and the Exercise of Power in Colonial New Zealand. Edited by Brad Patterson, Richard Hill and Kathryn Patterson. Steele Roberts, Wellington, 2016. 356pp. NZ price: \$39.95 (softback), \$59.95 (hardback). ISBN: 9780947493158 (softback), 9780947493325 (hardback).

THIS FINE COLLECTION of essays is a tribute to the country’s one-time chief historian, Ian Wards, who held the post from 1963 until 1983. Unsurprisingly it has been published almost a decade and a half after his death. Wards did not deliver public history quickly. Anyone whose view of Wards came through the University of Auckland was likely to have experienced Keith Sinclair’s critical contempt for the chief historian, as a historian and as custodian of the country’s public history. For Sinclair, Wards was an inconsequential historian and a muddling administrator, and one of the main reasons why public history was in the doldrums between winding down the war histories of the 1940s and the new age of public history beginning after his retirement. This volume presents a very different perspective on the man, one which attempts to right Sinclair’s imbalance and recognize Wards as a critical historian, a mentor of young historians, an advocate for libraries and archives and a leader whose ideas had a significant impact on the development of New Zealand’s own new understandings of its past. From this volume’s perspective, the development of public history in New Zealand after 1983 was the culmination of Wards’s efforts, not made possible by his retirement. In these objectives, the volume is not completely successful.