

## Reviews (Other Media)

*Black Sheep* [podcast] by William Ray et al. Radio New Zealand, 2016– <https://www.rnz.co.nz/programmes/black-sheep>

SINCE OCTOBER 2016, the Radio New Zealand (RNZ) podcast *Black Sheep* has profiled ‘the shady, controversial and sometimes downright villainous characters of New Zealand history.’ Host William Ray is joined by historians, biographers, museum professionals, sociologists, journalists and sometimes the descendants of these black sheep to discuss their lives and legacies. There are now more than 30 episodes available, featuring figures like Thomas Russell, Hongi Hika, John Cullen, Charlotte Badger, Cyrus Haley, Horatio Robley, Amy Bock and Arthur Worthington. Podcasts like *Black Sheep* can be a powerful way of sharing history with new and diverse audiences.

So what is a black sheep? William Ray has five categories for the people he profiles: ‘straight up criminals who were recognized as bad people who did bad things’; complicated criminals who clearly committed crimes but whose stories are not black and white; establishment villains who were seen in their time as doing good but who, from a historical perspective, had a negative impact; grey sheep, who demonstrate complicated morality; and rogues.<sup>1</sup>

While William Ray is not a historian, he has involved the historical community in the project since the beginning. He approached a variety of institutions for suggestions for both experts and subjects. A vast array of experts have featured in the podcasts, including Peter Lineham, Vincent O’Malley, Hilary Stace, Mark Derby, Barbara Brookes, Grant Morris and John Crawford, among others. Ray’s approach is multi-disciplinary and often multi-perspective; for example, in the double episode about Horatio Robley, artist and collector of mokomokai, Tim Walker (who wrote his MA thesis on Robley) contributed alongside Haami Piripi of Repatriation Karanga Aotearoa at Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

As well as focusing on specific black sheep, the series has produced three thematic episodes: one focusing on eugenics, and the second a live panel discussion about the history of executions in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the wake of the 15 March terror attacks, a third special episode about the history of white supremacy in New Zealand was released. This episode’s guests were Dr Leonie Pihama, Professor Manying Ip, Pro Vice Chancellor (Pacific) Damon Salesa, Mark Derby, Dr Scott Hamilton and Distinguished Professor Paul Spoonley.

*Black Sheep* uses reconstructions and voice actors, songs and readings from contemporary newspaper articles and documents alongside historical analysis. At 20–40 minutes long, the episodes give Ray and his experts an opportunity to develop context and explore multiple perspectives of an event or life. The list of black sheep is currently very male-oriented, so it would be great to see some more of the complex women in New Zealand history in future episodes.

Podcasts like *Black Sheep* are an opportunity for historians and other experts to engage with the public, to share their work and to educate. Podcasts can be an exciting and accessible way to share history with a general audience – they are available for free, online and on demand.

Podcasts are also an intimate way of storytelling. A listener is not part of a large audience watching a speaker on the stage; they are more likely to be sitting on the

bus on the way to and from work (as I usually am) cocooned in headphones, making an active choice to engage with the story being told. The intimacy of podcasts can be powerful: some episodes have made me yell (usually just internally, since I am on the bus) at the unfairness of history, while others have moved me to tears. Damon Salesa's telling of Robert Logan's stubborn refusal to quarantine New Zealand-administered Samoa and the cultural and demographic repercussions of his decision is history that moves. Powerful and engaging history story-telling like this can be a way of counteracting the all too familiar cry of 'But that's not what I learned at school'.

It can be difficult to measure how many people are listening to a podcast, because of the multitude of platforms available, but their reach can be tremendous. Ray said there are usually around 40,000 downloads per episode. The history of white supremacy episode had 93,000 downloads in just two weeks, reflecting New Zealanders' attempts to understand how the terrible events of 15 March could have occurred.<sup>2</sup> *Black Sheep* was able to be responsive to the event but also sought experts who were well-informed and able to pick up on themes raised in earlier episodes of the series. *Black Sheep* was a finalist at the 2019 New York Festivals Radio Awards as well as the 2019 New Zealand Radio Awards.

There are surprisingly few New Zealand history podcasts out there. The Ministry for Culture and Heritage (MCH), Auckland Libraries and other institutions turn their history and heritage talks into podcasts. There are also some enthusiastic non-historians producing podcasts about New Zealand history. Not all have the authority of an institution such as MCH behind them, so it is significant that *Black Sheep* is produced by RNZ, another authoritative source, with the input of experts. RNZ's *NZ Wars: The Stories of Ruapekapeka* is another example of their successful historical programming.

So how can you listen to *Black Sheep*? You can catch it live on RNZ, you can listen to it through their website or you can download it from platforms like Apple Podcasts, RadioPublic, Spotify or Stitcher (or one of the many other podcast apps available).

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#### NOTES

1. Personal communication with William Ray, 11 July 2019.
2. Pers com with William Ray.