

# BOOK REVIEWS

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*Beyond the imperial frontier: The contest for colonial New Zealand.* O'Malley, Vincent. (2014). Wellington, New Zealand: Bridget Williams Books. 284 pp. ISBN: 9781927277539. Book review DOI: 10.20507/MAIJournal.2016.5.1.7

The frontier is a provocative concept to use as an organising principle for a collection of 12 essays relating to Māori and Pākehā interactions in colonial New Zealand. “The frontier” has often been a central part of the mythology of colonisation. In the United States in particular, it has come to play a key role in the self-perception of American identity. In his 1893 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”, Frederick Jackson Turner theorised the frontier as an essential feature of American development. According to Turner, the frontier represented a free space into which civilisation could expand and the march of progress could continue. Turner does not show much interest in how the Native American population experienced the frontier, but then the frontier itself was something that tended to be defined by colonial institutions—with boundaries on colonial maps defining the borders between the rugged pioneers and the “others”.

With that somewhat troubling baggage, it is interesting that historian Vincent O'Malley chose to invoke the concept of the frontier in *Beyond the Imperial Frontier: The Contest for Colonial New Zealand*. O'Malley addresses the challenge of frontier history head on and one of the most striking features of the book is how well O'Malley deploys the concept of the frontier to provide a strong thematic coherence

to the essays in this collection. Sometimes, one of the disappointments of collections such as this is that nothing is gained by bringing a series of separate essays together. I was delighted to find this was not the case with *Beyond the Imperial Frontier*. Reading these essays (just over half have been previously published) as a single collection adds insight for the reader. The collection is, in that sense, very much more than the sum of its parts. The frontier framework set out in the introductory note does important work in bringing these essays into the same conceptual space.

O'Malley addresses Turner's view of the frontier and its problematic “triumphalist and Anglo-centric connotations” but argues that there is another way of conceptualising the frontier

not as lines on maps, but as zones of contact and encounter. They could be permeable places, where European and indigenous groups met and mixed . . . the intersection where peoples came together—to trade, to fight, to procreate, to preach contrary conceptions of the good life, to restore old worlds, and to make sense of new worlds. (p. 11)

Understanding the frontier in these terms provides a useful frame for examining the kind

of interactions between Māori and Pākehā people and institutions addressed in this collection. The idea of a space of intersections is directly addressed in the second essay, “Cultural Encounter on the New Zealand Frontier”, and here O’Malley points to the important practices of cross-cultural accommodation that took place, largely in the first half of the 19th century, between Māori and Pākehā. The existence of this type of “middle ground” is useful in understanding that cultural change was not always a one-way street; however, O’Malley notes that this model becomes less applicable as colonial attitudes harden and Pākehā hegemony is asserted.

Essays 3–6 (“Manufacturing Chiefly Consent”, “Beyond Waitangi”, “English Law and the Māori Response”, and “Reinventing Tribal Mechanisms of Governance”) tease out contestation between Crown and Māori authority. These essays address attempts by the Crown to engage with Māori through mechanisms and institutions of English law and highlight the agency of Māori in these processes, whether through active negotiation, direct resistance, or other creative responses. Some of the thrust of these essays is captured in O’Malley’s summary of some key themes of Essay 6:

nineteenth-century Māori society responded to colonisation in creative, flexible and dynamic ways . . . Thus, while the British were able to extend their imperial frontier, Māori were never entirely subsumed within it. Strategies of survival and subversion persisted instead. (p. 16)

The subsequent four essays (“Te Riri ki Waikato”, “The New Zealand Settlements Act 1863 in Wider Context”, “The East Coast Petroleum Wars”, and “Frontier Justice?”) examine conflict on the frontier and the effects of war, confiscation of land, and the violence of state institutions in this period. These essays provide a rounded discussion of subject matter which might otherwise have been presented in

more black and white terms. The essay on the Waikato War is grounded in the all too real details of the effects of the conflict on Waikato Māori. In contrast, the following essay zooms out to take in experiences of confiscatory laws and policies in other countries. Throughout this group of essays, O’Malley draws out the complexity of relationships at the frontier and describes a carefully nuanced account.

Essays 11 and 12 focus on the Native Land Court, again drawing insight from a close study of a particular case and situating the operation of the Native Land Court in the “big picture” context of colonial expansion of the imperial frontier. The final essay, “‘A Living Thing’: The Whakakotahitanga Flagstaff and Its Place in New Zealand History”, in many ways typifies the approach taken throughout this collection. O’Malley takes a well-known episode in New Zealand history and provides context and detail that has not previously been part of the popular account, taking the reader to the more flexible frontier—the space of cultural interaction and sometimes confrontation.

Many interesting threads are teased out in this collection, in the space “beyond the imperial frontier”. Of particular interest to me is O’Malley’s treatment of the Native Land Court. Building on the work of M. P. K. Sorrenson and Alan Ward, he discusses how the Native Land Court has generally come to be viewed as an “engine of destruction” in terms of its impact on Māori land-holdings. As O’Malley points out, the Waitangi Tribunal, with its focus on Māori claims, also played a role in consolidating this orthodox interpretation:

It generally accepted the newly established consensus of the court as an overwhelmingly negative institution, relying on hundreds of detailed research reports to document the localised impact on particular communities and iwi. (p. 177)

However, the orthodox historical interpretation of the Native Land Court has been challenged

in recent years. Richard Boast (2013, 2015), for example, in his recent legal-historical study of the operation of the Native Land Court takes great care to separate the practices of judges and the mechanics of the practical operation of the court from its effects on Māori communities. Boast does not dispute the devastating impact that the court had on many Māori communities but cautions against allowing the outcome to obscure the reality of the court's processes and its development of a complex body of law. O'Malley notes the value of understanding the way in which the court operated, but also considers that this cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader context:

Neo-revisionist accounts of the Native Land Court have raised some valid points. Not all judges were unsympathetic towards Māori aspirations and ignorant of their language and customs. Yet many were, and we are still some way off from establishing a new orthodoxy based on a more positive overall assessment of the court. (pp. 196–197)

To some extent, Boast and O'Malley come to their understandings of the Native Land Court in the context of their involvement in the treaty claims process. Both respond to the histories produced through the Waitangi Tribunal process but O'Malley does so more to tease out the implications of those histories rather than to directly challenge them. The historical interpretation of the Native Land Court looks set to continue to be a subject of debate amongst New Zealand historians for some time, yet it is interesting to note the role that the Waitangi

Tribunal process has played in shifting the ground of that debate and in providing an inescapable backdrop to the discussion.

The essays that address the Native Land Court illustrate the thoughtful and insightful character of O'Malley's essays in this collection. Overall, the essays demonstrate a willingness to think differently about key events in New Zealand's colonial history. There appears to be an openness to historical reinterpretation based on developing understandings of context rather than a contrarian drive to be revisionist. This collection might therefore best be seen as opening up a space for further conversations about New Zealand history and identity. There is much in this collection that would sustain such conversations and anyone with an interest in our history will be rewarded for engaging with the ideas that underpin the essays in this collection.

## References

- Boast, R. (2013). *The Native Land Court: A historical study, cases and commentary, vol. 1: 1862–1887*. Wellington, New Zealand: Brookers.
- Boast, R. (2015). *The Native Land Court: A historical study, cases and commentary, vol. 2: 1888–1909*. Wellington, New Zealand: Thomson Reuters.

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*Te Whiti o Rongomai and the resistance of Parihaka*. Keenan, Danny. (2015). Wellington, New Zealand: Huia. 276 pp. ISBN 978-1-77550-195-4. Book review DOI: 10.20507/MAIJournal.2016.5.1.8

For numerous New Zealanders, the story of Te Whiti o Rongomai and Parihaka remains a

complete mystery. Like other aspects of New Zealand history surrounding the Land Wars of