

A History of New Zealand Women

BARBARA BROOKES

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I was unable to attend the Otago conference, *Making Women Visible*, which followed the launch of Barbara Brookes' *A History of New Zealand Women*, so when I had the opportunity to review the book I jumped at the chance. The book builds on years of research Brookes has undertaken during her career as historian and university professor. It is the first book in New Zealand to focus on the history of New Zealand women from the settlement of Māori pre-1814, to modern women making their mark in New Zealand society today.

At 560 pages long the book is a comprehensive volume showing the considerable amount of research that went into it. Although not a quick read I found that I was instantly enthralled by the narrative Brookes has woven together from a wide variety of sources. The book provides an excellent overview of a topic which is broad and complex but at the same time Brookes manages to keep the voices of individual women to the forefront. Each of the fourteen chapters is begun with a story about an individual woman, setting the scene for the remainder of the chapter.

In this way Brookes begins chapter one with the story of Hineteaparangi, wife of Kupe, as the woman who is said to have sighted the New Zealand coast and to have given Aotearoa its name. The stories of well-known individuals such as Whina Cooper, Kate Sheppard and Helen Clark are included; however lesser known stories of individual women provide the reader with new narratives of New Zealand history that are in many ways just as significant.

Following on from the first chapter, the next chapters set the scene of early Pākehā settlers and missionary wives who were viewed as the markers of morality and civilisation. Brookes asserts that although it was men who were seen to tame the new country through construction and local government "it was really the women's ability as home makers which settled the land". Although this sentiment was true of Pākehā settlers Brookes also identifies Māori women as more than passive figures in their interaction with 'civilised' Pākehā women: rather as individuals who had their own traditions who chose which aspects of Pākehā culture to take on or dismiss.

Brooke uses these dual narratives as a way to highlight differences between the two groups of women throughout the book. She demonstrates

that initially the arrival of European settlers signalled a sense of freedom and independence for Pakeha women but challenged the rights of Māori women, especially in relation to land. This contrast between the two groups is shown predominantly in the first few chapters with details of Māori women and families declining through dispossession of land, disease and war whereas Pākehā women and their families often fared better during this earlier period.

Later chapters explore the many changes women experienced during and after the World Wars with a new generation of working women emerging. In chapters eleven and twelve, Brookes covers the intense period of change in the 1960s and 1970s, covering issues such as birth control, abortion and second-wave feminism. Chapter thirteen goes on to explore the 1980s and 1990s, a period in which women were pushing boundaries further than before in areas such as politics, with two female prime ministers, Jenny Shipley and Helen Clark, and sport and film, with individuals such as World Squash Champion Susan Devoy and playwright Riwia Brown.

Although the book is a history of New Zealand women it is set in the context of the greater narrative of New Zealand history. It therefore allows the reader to see significant moments of New Zealand history, such as missionary life, the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, World Wars, 1981 Springbok Tour, and so on through the eyes of women and therefore provides a fresh perspective of already well established narratives.

As well as being an enthralling read the book is beautifully illustrated with colourful images of objects taken from a wide variety of heritage collections. Although they do not always correlate to the story being told in the text, in an editorial note at the back of the book Brookes states that she intended for the illustrations to provide their own narrative centred on the framework of presenting a woman's perspective. It seems to me that she has achieved this by using the illustrations to add further depth to the story of New Zealand women with revealing self-portraits by female artists and diary entries of missionary wives along with photographs of objects which made up the fabric of daily life, such as clothes, jewellery, and sewing kits. None seem superfluous and all add to the complexity of the New Zealand woman's unique experience.

The final chapter looks at New Zealand women of the last decade. Although Brookes has stated that the period 2000-2015 is not her natural comfort zone as a historian, this final chapter is a pleasing conclusion to the book. Within it she acknowledges the achievements of contemporary women, such as Lorde, and places them in context of the women that

have come before. At the same time she explores some of the challenges that exist for contemporary New Zealand women, such as the extreme focus on body image and the disparate experiences that continue to exist between different groups, including migrant communities.

Overall I found *A History of New Zealand Women* thoroughly enjoyable and illuminating. Details revealed in the fascinating stories of individual women provided a personalised narrative to a broad and overarching history. The beautiful illustrations throughout the book allow the reader to follow a different narrative altogether and showcase some of the brilliant objects and manuscripts that tell the story of New Zealand women. Brookes' extensive and thorough research is evident and the book reveals the way in which the lives of New Zealand women have changed drastically from the experiences of the pioneering settlers to those of modern women today.

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