

At the Margin of Empire: John Webster and Hokianga, 1841–1900

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This is an impressive book. Jennifer Ashton presents a study in the dynamics of colonialism on the ground in the Hokianga district. The sources for Webster's life are scattered and diverse; Ashton has ranged far and wide through repositories in Auckland and elsewhere. The only criticism I have in this regard is that her publisher allowed her to eschew a list of such sources in the bibliography; it is not satisfactory to be told that the book 'makes use of many letters, journals and other archival records, details of which may be found in the endnotes.' Readers with an interest in the archives used may wish to have this information presented more accessibly.

John Webster left Montrose, on Scotland's east coast, as a young man of 20 in 1838. After some time in Australia, he landed in Auckland and settled in the Hokianga in 1841, initially as an agent for Brown and Campbell, then after a Pacific sojourn on his own account. He remained there almost until the end of his long life, dying in Auckland in 1912. Deftly weaving the various threads of Webster's activities into an engaging narrative, Ashton gives much insight into the colonial timber trade and its networks across the Pacific (Honolulu, Tahiti, Sydney, Valparaíso) and the integration of the Far North settler economy into a wider world. As well as timber, which he divested in the 1870s, Webster's business interests included storekeeping (he called himself a merchant) and importing, gumdealing and farming.

Naturally Webster's business activities depended on amicable relations with local Māori, especially Ngā Puhi. He became competent in Te Reo Māori, as he would have had to, and cultivated Tāmāti Wāka Nene and other influential rangatira. In time he married Emily, the daughter of another local Scottish entrepreneur George Russell (although it is not clear whether Emily's mother was Hautonga Haira or Herina Tuku). So far, it might be inferred that Webster's life was one of close and sympathetic engagement, in which Māori agency was to the fore and in which Webster took care to respect local protocols.

Nothing of the sort. Webster's engagement with Māori was very much in the service of his own agenda of accumulation. Throughout the book there is ample evidence of Webster's thorough dislike of Māori, and his commitment to the civilizing mission of Empire. Ashton

navigates the politics of the Northern War (in which Webster fought alongside his patron Tamati Waka Nene, effectively being co-opted by Nene) with exemplary skill, emphasising that it was really a Māori war. In her account, Nene was as well as defending the interests of his people, defending his own decision to accept the Treaty and the Crown, a decision from which he could not resile. Webster, of course, saw taking up arms as a necessary defence of Empire, but an earlier chapter on his two years in Australia make it clear that he personally waged imperial war, killing a number of Aborigines as he and a group of pastoral explorers pushed towards Adelaide. Likewise, his Pacific voyaging in the early 1850s included shooting up a Guadalcanal village. Webster wrote many of these experiences up in his journals, later published, and Ashton is very perceptive about how Webster constructed his image as an adventurer, a man of action.

By 1860 Webster was a very prominent Pākehā settler in the Hokianga district, although Maning dismissed him as ‘a very good shop keeper, but neither a gentleman, or a true Scotch man, but a “lowland loon” who has a great wish to be thought somebody’ (p. 127). Maning and Webster were at that time feuding, but the description would apply to a fair number of New Zealand Scots. What Webster did have in common with Maning was the desire to pose as, and be regarded as, an authority on local Māori and in control of them. Webster, like Maning, thought he could direct northern Māori to fight for the government in Waikato; as Ashton points out, any possibility they might was based on old scores. In fact, it wasn’t only Webster who had less power than he liked to imagine; until well into the 1870s the government’s authority was marginal at best in the north. Inter-tribal feuding continued, and even a murder conviction could carry relatively light consequences.

Webster was hardly the dominant figure of civilisation he liked to pretend, and he would have heartily agreed with the *Daily Southern Cross* observation that, given the Māori and mixed-heritage population, ‘to call [Hokianga] a British settlement at present is simply absurd, and the sooner an infusion of new blood is made the better for the present and future prosperity of this district’ (p. 151). Here, as elsewhere, infrastructure was directed to ending Māori autonomy. Even in 1891, Māori were still 60% of the district’s population, and Webster frequently complained about the lack of ‘civilisation’.

Webster was, it seems, fairly typical of bush merchants in his practices of ensuring Māori became indebted to him, which facilitated land alienation, although it is less clear how much land he himself

acquired. As he grew older, Webster increasingly romanticised the past, idealising the older Māori generation in order to denigrate the new, whom he described as 'only fit for hewing wood and drawing water for the Pakeha' (p. 164) and of course enthusiastically absorbing the idea that Māori were a dying race. At the same time, Webster increasingly liked to pose as learned in ethnology. His extensive collection of tools, weapons, clothing and ornaments from Māori, and other Pacific and indigenous Australian peoples, filled his house as he shaped and reflected colonising perceptions of indigenous cultures. Educated Māori of the new generation he dismissed as 'unbearable' and 'diabolical' (p. 174). Even in the Dog Tax conflict of the 1890s, he liked to pose as a mediating authority.

Ashton also avoids a modern binary, purveyed by a number of historians who like to emphasise their post-colonial credentials, of 'Māori had agency therefore not much was wrong'. She also makes it clear that implicit suggestions that because settlers like Webster dealt amicably with Māori, therefore colonisation was benevolent and peaceful are simplistic nonsense. The one dimension in which the book is rather uninformative is Webster's family life. Perhaps the sources do not permit much discussion; Ashton makes some good points about how mixed-heritage children like Webster's could be 'imagined' as European. I should have liked, though, to know a little about what became of them and their descendants, and also the valuation of Webster's estate when he died – not only out of curiosity, but where in the scale of wealth did he fit?

As Ashton emphasises, histories of European settlement in New Zealand often emphasise heroic pioneers, with little attention to their relations with Māori; alternatively, a disembodied 'Crown' is presented as the agent of dispossession. It is necessary, she argues (and I have long thought this) to consider also the intimate connections of first generation settlers with Māori dispossession. It is, as she says, past time to think about how 'settlers like Webster contributed to New Zealand's past. Rather than portraying settlers as inheritors of land made available to them by government action ... settlers played a vital role in shaping ongoing change in a colonial frontier context: they were active participants in the process of colonisation rather than just recipients of its rewards' (p. 208). Through exploring the life of this (as he seems) thoroughly unlikeable man, Ashton has put down a marker for other historians.

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