

The Lives of Colonial Objects

ANNABEL COOPER, LACHY PATERSON & ANGELA WANHALLA (eds.)

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In the past few years an increasing number of books have been published which set out to relate some aspect of history through a selection of objects, and I must admit that when I first received this volume to review I thought “Oh no, not again!” But thankfully this book is not just another collection of pretty things, but instead an intriguing and original exploration of the many and varied interrelationships between objects and their provenance(s), both immediate and societal.

In this medium-sized, soft-covered volume with its unassuming cover are the stories of fifty objects from colonial New Zealand, as told in a collection of brief essays by “academics in a variety of disciplines, archivists and librarians, professionals in the heritage sector, and independent scholars” (p.13). The book was inspired by a conference held at Toitū Otago Settlers Museum in 2013 on “Colonial Objects”, and the level of background research and the enthusiasm of each writer for the objects they discuss results in a very interesting and sometimes surprising read.

The selected objects are a highly eclectic mix. Ranging from a traveller’s diary to a road into the Urewera, from a bottle of mineral water to a tauihu, from a piece of rock to a minute book, from a tin billy to a whale skeleton, these objects are difficult to group by theme, so the arrangement is largely chronological, though the editors have attempted to make some kind of conceptual link from one to the next. They describe the result as providing a sense of history through “glimpses”, alternating larger political ideas with smaller domestic realities. It is not only the variety of objects that provides a range of views: each of the objects themselves is seen as part of many different stories and interpretations over time and according to differing perspectives, whether related to their original purpose or as illustrations of wider themes such as colonialism, migration, economic history, social mores, or of events in history or views of life at a particular time from the point of view of ordinary people.

Each object and its story is described in many-paged detail, with information about its social context, the people, function, place, and other objects to which it related over time, and its cultural significance. As each essay is written by a different person from a different academic

or cultural background, the approaches taken vary considerably. However the essays are not academic, instead taking a story-telling approach, and are therefore very accessible to the general reader. As is appropriate for such a personalised approach, each of the authors is introduced at the end of the volume with a brief biographical note, so their perspective can be interpreted together with their story.

The essays are accompanied by photographs, not just of the objects but also to illustrate the stories around them. Many of the photographs were supplied by the contributors, and most are excellent, with some of the images so clear as almost have a tactile effect, adding to the enjoyment of the book as an object in itself. The cover photograph is an attractive image of part of a feathered woven cloak, but the colour is a subdued grey-brown and does not seem immediately eye-catching. However, many of the illustrations inside are colourful and interesting, making for a visually appealing book that encourages browsing.

The book ends with a discussion of the value of “object biographies”, thoughts about the links between museums and colonialism, and the consideration of objects as a process within a changing set of physical and historical circumstances. In the end, perhaps not surprisingly in such an eclectic mix of objects, themes and academic disciplines, no comprehensive conclusion is reached, but overall, the book does provide access to a range of viewpoints which enrich the wider discussion of the history of colonial New Zealand.

The Lives of Colonial Objects does not provide any ground-breaking conclusions or startling new theories, but it is an interesting and enjoyable addition to the genre of object histories. The editors state that “attending to objects and their stories enriches our understanding of the material circumstances of colonial life, of how Maori, settlers and sojourners lived and related to each other and the natural environment, shedding light on beliefs and social structures, institutions and cultural practices.” As such, it could be a useful addition to a school library for senior students, or perhaps an appealing Christmas gift for someone with an interest in New Zealand history.

Belinda Battley