

The Origins of an Experimental Society: New Zealand 1769-1860.

By Erik Olssen.

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Erik Olssen is a great kaumātua of Pākehā history, and this fascinating book on New Zealand's first post-contact century sustains his reputation. He describes his approach as 'a marriage of social and intellectual-cultural history' (p. 11). It also flirts usefully with several other sub-genres, such as health, religious and demographic history. But there is indeed more focus on ideas than in his previous work. He envisages this volume as the first of three, in which case it will fill the niche of Alan Atkinson's fine trilogy, *The Europeans in Australia*. The big difference is that Olssen is able to deal more evenly with indigenous as well as settler history. This book is rich, reflective, humane and benign – arguably too benign towards some of its leading characters, notably Edward Gibbon Wakefield.

Olssen's main themes are two experiments: the attempt to build a 'Better Britain' and the attempt to 'amalgamate' Māori as equals. He sees both as unique to New Zealand, which is a problem for the first 'experiment'. Many nineteenth century British settler colonies saw themselves as 'Better Britains'; settlers in the American West saw themselves as Better Americans, and settlers in Siberia similarly saw themselves as Better Russians. From about 1815, starting in Britain and the eastern USA, a 'settler transition' took place. Emigration was no longer social excretion, but the reproduction of improved versions of the old society. Egalitarianism, small freeholdings, instant townships and public spheres were widespread features, just as they were in New Zealand. That New Zealand history is globally resonant makes it no less interesting. Still, local variations on the themes of the new settler ideology are important and have the merit of being ours. Olssen enriches our understanding of them, not least by emphasising Better Britain's entanglement with the second experiment, 'amalgamation'.

Here, the case for New Zealand exceptionalism is stronger. Olssen argues that both the Imperial government and Europeans on the ground in New Zealand were genuinely committed to the Māori parity embodied in, and symbolised by, the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, and that they realised that this was a radical departure in colonial practice. They hoped to persuade, not coerce, the indigenous people into joining a new hybrid society. He attributes this to the influence of humanitarianism and evangelicalism, rooted in the late eighteenth century Scottish Enlightenment, and matured by experience of the dire effects of subsequent European contact on indigenes. This revives the old idea that New Zealand was founded in a short and rare 'humanitarian moment' in British imperialism, which Olssen dates to 1837-1844, and that this had positive ongoing effects on race relations. His original contribution is that the assertion that most New Zealand settlers, not just a few missionaries and officials, bought into this. He includes Wakefield's New Zealand Company, which therefore 'deserves rescuing from the condescension of history' (p. 228).

I remain sceptical about the Company's motives, but there is a lot to be said for Olssen's general thesis. He acknowledges that Māori military muscle was another factor in local colonialism's relative moderation. He also acknowledges that diminishing interaction between Europeans

and Māori, plus a new European racism soon began to corrode the equal amalgamation project. He notes a Māori-led version of amalgamation, namely intermarriage, which did produce ‘a new hybrid culture’ (p. 101), especially in the South Island, in which Māori wives and European husbands (whalers, traders and sealers), ‘civilised’ each other. Olssen’s reassertion of a genuinely humanitarian founding around 1840 converges with recent conclusions by Ned Fletcher and Michael Belgrave, which makes all three more compelling.

It seems we did strike it lucky in our founding moment. But the after-effects varied over time, from near zero in the 1890s to quite a lot in the 1990s, with a Māori-Pākehā relations dark age in between. I agree with Olssen that the turn against Māori parity began early but think that it was not just a matter of increased racism and less interaction. In 1853, with the establishment of provincial governments and their capacity to borrow, New Zealand picked up the virus of explosive colonisation, the notion that a settler society could grow very big very fast. Māori independence and retention of land were seen as obstacles to this great future, and were swept aside by military force, legal subversion, and sheer demographic swamping. The Treaty was buried for over 120 years, yet it had to exist to be exhumed in the late twentieth century.

Olssen emphasises that the Treaty, European settlement, and parity between peoples drew widespread consent from both sides, symbolised by the use of ‘Pākehā’, by Māori from 1815 and by settlers, for themselves, from 1850. ‘The colonists’ widespread use of ‘Pākehā’ denoted their new identity and underlined their commitment to amalgamation’ (p. 315). They were ‘delighted to signify that process of hybridisation by calling themselves Pākehā. It denoted participation in a unique experiment and membership in a unique society’ (p. 211). De-demonising the concept ‘Pākehā’ is one of the most important takeaways from this important book.