

raupatu history and will not know or care, satisfied instead by the populist and simplistic view that ‘we got ripped off by Pakeha’.

Like sunflowers following the passage of the solar disc across the sky, Maori faces are expectantly turned towards settlement.

Making Sheep Country: Mt Peel Station and the Transformation of the Tussock Lands

by Robert Peden. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2011
xi, 280pp. ISBN 9781869404857

Reviewed by Brad Patterson

For many years, most recently amidst controversy over high country tenure reviews, the pastoralists of the South Island’s tussock grasslands have received a bad press. It has been alleged that they misread their environment from the outset, that their often poor management of the grasslands led to degradation, indiscriminate burning of the indigenous vegetation and overgrazing with sheep, reducing the ground cover to such an extent that it facilitated invasion by rabbits. The result was destruction of the grasslands, at least in the form encountered by the first Europeans, consequent erosion, and the proliferation of scree slopes and near dustbowl areas – some claim a form of ecological catastrophe. Moreover, beyond attributing this landscape change to ignorance, an inability to interpret and adjust to the encountered landscapes, there has been a tendency to excoriate the pastoralists as the ‘wool kings’, individuals who employed their land monopoly to found a wealthy social and political elite, caring little about the environmental costs. In a long overdue review of the hard evidence, Robert Peden sets out to assess the validity of these interpretations.

The book’s title suggests its principal focus is Mt Peel station, a South Canterbury property high in the Rangitata River valley, about 60km from Timaru, the nearest town. Established in 1856 by relatively well-heeled young Englishmen J.B. Acland and C.G. Tripp, it at one time encompassed nearly 300,000 acres. Despite undergoing a number of reshaping in the subsequent 150 years, the residual remains in the hands of the Acland family. Yet the book’s title is a little misleading. This is no insular account of the triumphs and tribulations of a single run, nor is it a hagiographical recounting of the fortunes of the occupying family. Rather Mt Peel is advanced as a continuing reference point for much wider discussions, a yardstick for evaluating the experiences of other pastoral properties from Marlborough to Southland. What is made very clear is that there was no single South Island tussock grassland environment, instead an infinite variety, from coast and plain to

the steep tops, from relatively lush to semi-arid conditions. The lesson is that generalizations are difficult.

Often termed New Zealand's 'pastoral era', the roughly seven decades to 1914 are the chronological scope of the study. These were the years in which the squatters first became licensed runholders, then established sheepfarmers, with a parallel switch from exploitative or robber pastoralism to more sophisticated livestock husbandry. After a brief outline of the initial occupation of the grasslands, three chapters are devoted to considering the prosecution cases for indiscriminate burning of the tussock, overstocking of the frequently sparse sward, and the paving of the way for rabbits. These are the most contentious sections of the book and will no doubt elicit cries of protest from some ardent conservationists. Evaluating the charge of constant indiscriminate burning, Peden lodges a challenge to generations of 'experts', from John Buchanan and the Cockaynes to current champion Alan Mark. That fire would be embraced as a first pasture management tool was inevitable, he argues, the dominant tall tussock being unpalatable to sheep, but thereafter it was generally used in a more controlled manner. As always there were exceptions, and this is conceded, but citing station diaries and personal memoirs he persuasively demonstrates that burning was rarely an annual occurrence on most runs, that it tended to be localized to run sections, and that it was confined to seasons when there was little risk of the flames running out of control, with conditions optimum for plants to recover. Utilizing the same sources, he addresses the linked charge that overstocking for short term gain exacerbated pasture depletion. His conclusion is that station records indicate that despoliation had little impact on stock loading. The late nineteenth-century declines in sheep numbers, often suggested as an index of decline in carrying capacity, arguably had much more to do with improved breeding practices and the emergence of the frozen meat trade. With doubt thus thrown on two key aspects of the prosecution's case, it is harder to conclusively sheet home blame for the rabbit irruption on the pastoralists. It was a wider problem. The greatest devastation was on those runs in semi-arid conditions that were always most vulnerable. The defence mounted is at least plausible, and in many respects compelling.

A novel counter argument is implicit: the pastoralists, while landscape modifiers, were at the same time landscape improvers. After the first burn, oversowing with imported grass seed constituted the initial, and often only, improvement until greater security of tenure was achieved. In the establishment years most grazing was under Crown licence, and this system long continued on marginal runs, but systematic freeholding was a *sine qua non* if greater capital sums were to be invested. Once there was

a firm grasp on strategic sections of the properties, subdivision by fencing and the laying down of permanent pastures followed. Other improvements included the formation of roads, sometimes drainage, the construction of station plant and buildings, and in later decades the building of elaborate homes. In conjunction with property improvements, there was livestock improvement, selective breeding being undertaken in response to market demand. The ubiquitous merinos steadily gave way to a range of cross-breeds, better supplying the late nineteenth-century meat and wool trades. All of this activity was uncommonly expensive, scarcely expenditure likely to be contemplated by fly-by-nighters. As early as 1860 Samuel Butler calculated a pastoralist would require at least £6000 to set up, no small sum. By 1871, J.B. Acland's Mt Peel station was heavily in debt, to the tune of £22,000, and in the succeeding two decades the situation deteriorated even more drastically. Mt Peel was only saved through the financial intervention of family and friends. At least Acland's station survived; an uncomfortable number had changed ownership several times by 1914.

Given the financial stringencies that peaked in the 1880s, to what extent is the stereotype of the pastoralists as a prosperous and privileged elite justified? Some did very well indeed. George Duppa, for example, vacating his St Leonards run in 1863, departed for England with a reputed £150,000 in his swag. Despite having already transferred much of his assets to his daughter, George Moore of Glenmark's estate was valued at £253,000 in 1905 (his daughter's estate in 1914 was near £1,000,000). There is more than a smidgeon of truth in Stevan Eldred-Grigg's 1981 depictions of 'the South Island landed gentry'. But for many more pastoralists, in the deprecating words of an Acland descendant, grazing could be 'not much of a business'. As noted, the cost structures were high. Market fluctuations were a constant and the threat from diseases such as scab and footrot ever present. Floods, droughts and snowfalls could take heavy toll of flocks. As Peden shrewdly observes, profitability depended on a number of factors (capital, initiative, experience, early arrival), but no less important were the quality of the natural resources of individual runs and sheer luck. Luck could be the difference between making a fortune and failure. For those who did succeed, the major pay-off could be delayed until later generations.

What sets this book apart from most previous New Zealand studies of pastoralism and landscape change is its authorship. Based on extended research for MA and PhD theses, the latter deemed 'exceptional' by examiners, the scholarship is impeccable. The insights, however, have not simply been gleaned from traditional historical sources. Prior to Robert Peden's emergence as an historian of talent he spent 25 years shepherding and managing sheep stations in the South Island. He knows first-hand the

hills, the other landscape components, the handling of sheep. This is by no means to imply that Peden is an apologist for the pastoralists, past and present, their decisions and actions. Far from it. But he exhibits a deep understanding of, and sympathy for, the South Island tussock lands and those who first settled them.

The Settler's Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand

by Alex Calder. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2011

xii, 299pp. ISBN 9781869404888

Reviewed by Philip Steer

Alex Calder is the type of Pakeha I think I'd like to be. Witty, articulate, cultured yet self-conscious about what it means that he is not tangata whenua, he is also – to top it all – an excellent close-reader. The presence of such a persona ensures that *The Settler's Plot* is highly readable, and has as good a chance as any work of literary criticism I've read at garnering a non-academic audience. That persona is also central to the methodology of this first full-length manifesto of 'Settlement Studies', a 'form of postcolonial inquiry' whose 'basic premise is that the foundational problems, injustices and consequences of European settlement of this country will not disappear' (p.x). If it weren't written in such a conversational style, one might almost think it was a declaration of war on Patrick Evans. Despite the absence of Evans' name, passing remarks suggest that Calder has *The Long Forgetting* (2007) in mind: 'I have opted to examine a few illustrative case studies in the hope that one or two detailed examples are worth a hundred cursory glances' (p.viii). Calder's affability effectively goes toe-to-toe with Evans' renowned wit, and their battle is over the direction of postcolonial analysis in New Zealand literary studies.

As the title neatly indicates, *The Settler's Plot* foregrounds the depiction of place in New Zealand literature, yet it is also about literary form, for Calder's argument is that the narration of Pakeha identity in particular settings inevitably produces ideological and formal complications. There's a slight tension here between generalizing about place – 'I have tried to be the anthropologist of the tacit cultural knowledge Pakeha have invested in the most common settings in New Zealand literature' – and privileging particular representations of it in 'classic New Zealand texts' that deserve to belong in the 'canon' of the nation's literature (pp.viii, ix). F.E. Maning's status as the patron saint (or trickster god) of Settlement Studies is thus reinforced here both because he seems 'prophetic' of a general ongoing ambiguity surrounding the settler's status in New Zealand (p.71) and because