

The Meeting Place – Maori and Pakeha Encounters, 1642-1840

By Vincent O'Malley. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2012.

ISBN 1869405943

A Savage Country: The Untold Story of New Zealand in the 1820s

By Paul Moon. Penguin Books, Auckland, 2012

ISBN: 0143567381

Reviewed by Sam Ritchie

The period bookended by initial Māori-Pākehā contact at one end, and the Treaty of Waitangi and the beginning of mass Pākehā migration at the other, is an underrepresented stage of New Zealand history. In his study *The Meeting Place*, Vincent O'Malley purports to examine 1642-1840.¹ Likewise, in a prequel to his previous studies of New Zealand in the 1830s and the 1840s, Paul Moon's *A Savage Country* is confined to the 1820s.² It is pleasing to see this important time of change, for both Māori and Pākehā, as the focus of further historical investigation.

During the early-nineteenth-century, whalers referred to the Tasman Sea as the 'middle ground' and, as James Belich notes, during this period 'the Tasman Sea was more bridge than barrier', linking New Zealand and New South Wales.³ The importance of New South Wales in the history of New Zealand at this time is acknowledged, albeit implicitly, in both *The Meeting Place* and *A Savage Country*. This recognition represents a pleasing historiographical turn since Belich's 1996 assertion that New Zealand and New South Wales share 'a joint past historians in both countries seem reluctant to recognise.'⁴ An implicit understanding of a connected Tasman world is not sufficient however. Moon's discussion of the Reverend Samuel Marsden and Māori, for example, would benefit greatly from an understanding of Marsden's interactions with and beliefs about Aboriginal peoples of New South Wales, which shaped his encounters with, and belief in the potential of, Māori.⁵

Early-nineteenth-century whalers' notion of a 'middle ground' inadvertently heralded Richard White's *Middle Ground*, in which he reshaped histories of Amerindian-European relations in the Great Lakes region of North America into 'a more complex and less linear narrative' of accommodation rather than acculturation.⁶ O'Malley applies White's theory of a 'middle ground' to Māori-Pākehā encounters prior to 1840. This is a sound theoretical framework in which to explore the pre-Waitangi period of New Zealand history, and, although not the first New Zealand historian to do so, O'Malley applies the 'middle ground' theory comprehensively, successfully, and with interesting results.⁷ Moon, on the other hand, evinces little evidence of a theoretical framework through which to investigate the 1820s, outside perhaps his brief mention of (and counter to) 'the Whig version of history' at the beginning of chapter four.⁸ *A Savage Country* thus reads as a somewhat one-dimensional narrative of Māori-Pākehā contact from 1820-1829.

The 'middle ground' began, in northern New Zealand at least, in 1814, with the establishment of the Church Missionary Society mission and increasing ships' visits, which had dwindled in the wake of the *Boyd* incident and the resumption of which the mission's presence encouraged – an upcoming bicentenary all but forgotten in the present rush to remember the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War. The subsequent arrival of British government 'changed everything and nothing'. Māori communities continued to operate autonomously, yet 'the arrival of a new player complicated existing relations between Māori and Pākehā', particularly with regard to land 'sales'. More importantly, O'Malley continues, the Crown's formal agreement also prompted a mass influx in migrants 'that in time would render Māori a

small minority in their own land'. The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi was the beginning of the end of the 'middle ground' in New Zealand, as simple demographics decided its fate.⁹

Despite his title promising a study of 'Māori and Pākehā encounters, 1642-1840', the 127-year period from 1642 to 1769 is only fleetingly examined by O'Malley, and is done so only to dismiss its contribution to Europeans' knowledge of Māori and Māori knowledge of Europeans, and its relevance to the 'middle ground' thesis. It is not here suggested that O'Malley's brief discussion of Tasman's 1642 visit is unimportant, merely that a more apposite title for the book would claim 1769-1840 as the significant timeframe. Many early encounters were, on the European side, centred on investigating what pre-contact – that is pre-1769 – Māori society might have been like. The *Endeavour* crew for example, James Cook and Joseph Banks especially, were fascinated by internecine Māori conflict and sought to discover much about the extent and nature of Māori violence. Discounting Tasman's visit as not having any great relevance to Māori knowledge of Europe and Europe's knowledge of Māori is a defensible position. However, O'Malley's non-engagement with the historiographical debate concerning Māori violence during the period between Tasman and Cook, particularly with regard to European conceptualizations of and responses to that violence in the early post-contact period, somewhat detracts from the excellent history he has produced. Discussion of Angela Ballara's assertion that violence was endemic in pre- and early-contact Māori society, as against Belich's contrasting analysis of the extent of Māori violence would, for example, have strengthened this work.¹⁰

Although it is encouraging to see this under-analysed period of New Zealand history receiving more attention, Moon's extensive citing of secondary sources suggests the claim in his title that 'the story of New Zealand in the 1820s' was 'untold' prior to the publication of his book is hyperbolic. Outside his dramatic title, Moon softens this claim to 'an era that is comparatively little known' – a much fairer assessment of the state of New Zealand historical enquiry.¹¹

A particular strength of *The Meeting Place* is O'Malley's successful refraction of European observations to discuss perceptions and responses on both sides of encounters. One example of this is his excellent discussion of the encounter between the *Endeavour* crew and a group of Māori which led to the former accusing the latter of being sodomites. While Banks thought this incident no more than Māori willingness and ability to employ trickery in trade, and, of course, the scorned European crewman saw evidence of Māori sodomy, O'Malley sees evidence of 'the likely impression the large all-male crew of the *Endeavour* had made upon local Māori'. 'It may have been', he notes, 'that the British were suspected of favouring the "Vice of Sodomy" themselves'.¹²

While he concludes 'the underlying processes of navigating the middle ground shared some familiar features', O'Malley's acknowledgement that Māori-Pākehā encounters were far from uniform is of significance. He notes 'the nature and extent of contact and encounter ... varied greatly from one end of the country to the other', and discusses the situations in northern, southern, and middle New Zealand separately. O'Malley's rejection of the notion that a homogenous Pākehā encountered a homogenous Māori is important. 'There was a world of difference', he writes, 'between Hongi's audience with King George, for example, and the typical encounter at the Bay of Islands with an escaped convict. Class, religion, gender and nationality all influenced and helped to shape the course of cross-cultural dealings'.¹³

Moon also acknowledges European-perceived and assigned Māori homogeneity. 'For a Briton intending to sail to the antipodes, the place was a single geographical entity, and was labelled as such on most maps of the world. Yet to Maori the country was still a political archipelago in which each hapu or iwi "island" was connected by a shared language and culture, but separated into self-contained political structures with distinct and sometimes conflicting territorial aspirations'.¹⁴ These are important distinctions to make.

O'Malley rejects the notion that Māori-Pākehā trade was simply part of a process of acculturation. 'Neither wholly Māori nor Pākehā in nature, much economic interaction could be seen as occupying a liminal space between the two cultures – the space where the middle ground came to life'.¹⁵ He shows Māori agency in both the goods they sought and the prices (in goods, labour, and services) they paid. 'What on the face of it appeared a simple acceptance of European norms', he notes, 'instead seems to end up highlighting the way in which new meanings could sometimes be constructed out of the old'.¹⁶ This is an important application of White's middle ground thesis to early-contact history in New Zealand. The 'sale' of land also fits this interpretation. 'For all the heated debate between essentialist and acculturalist viewpoints concerning the nature of these [Māori-Pākehā] land transactions' ... 'it now seems clear that they occupied a space that was neither wholly Māori nor Pākehā. They occupied the ground between'.¹⁷ Revitalizing Raymond Firth's 1929 study, *Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Māori*, O'Malley argues that recent writers have failed to distinguish between pre-contact Māori gift exchange and pre-contact Māori trade, making their subsequent comparison of pre- and post-contact trade problematic. He notes that while a comparison of pre- and post-contact economic exchanges which does distinguish between pre-contact gift exchange and pre-contact trade does show some significant changes in Māori society, these changes are not as drastic as argued for by those who compare pre-contact ceremonial exchanges with post-contact trade.¹⁸

While O'Malley's use of the 'middle ground' thesis highlights the successful Māori adaptation of traditional practices to incorporate new, European ways, Moon dismisses such adaptation as unacceptable. The trade of mokomōkai, tattooed preserved heads, with Europeans is an example of this Māori adaptation, yet Moon sees this trade, which he terms 'barbaric' and 'degraded', as 'a corruption of something that was profoundly sacred to Māori culture'. Moon seems to want Māori to be a static society; Māori were, in his eyes, not allowed to change. He then slips into a return of the pseudo-psychology which plagued *This Horrid Practice*, his earlier work on Māori cannibalism.¹⁹ Kaitangata, Māori cannibalism, apparently demonstrated 'that there already existed within the culture a deep wellspring of contempt for the human body', and the trading of mokomōkai with Pākehā was, for Moon, a natural extension of this. Unlike O'Malley (as discussed below), Moon value-loads past actions with present ideals. For Moon, the Māori trading of mokomōkai with Pākehā confirmed Māori 'savagery', thus confirming the artist August Earle's 1827 assertion that New Zealand was 'a savage country' – hence his title.²⁰

Moon also writes of 'paedophilia' practiced against Māori 'girls' by ships' crews visiting New Zealand. His discussion of what he further terms 'child prostitution', 'this heart wrenching practice', 'moral regression' by Māori, evinces little understanding of the emotive and conscious language employed by those critical contemporary European commentators who wrote of the practice, the missionaries especially.²¹ When Europeans wrote of Māori 'girls' visiting ships, their wilfully emotive and paternalistic language and their reasons for employing it need to be considered. An examination of the relative contemporary practice of prostitution in Britain and wider-Europe is also necessary for a deeper understanding of this particular Māori-Pākehā encounter, yet this too is missing from Moon's analysis.

O'Malley provides a good historiographical overview of the arguments surrounding Māori 'conversion' to Christianity.²² The role of missionary mediation is warfare, successful when requested by rangatira of both sides seeking peace without a loss of mana, is, however, overlooked in *The Meeting Place*. Conversion began as the saturation of muskets ended the Musket Wars – an ending enabled by missionary-mediated peace, which allowed for neither side to lose mana and thus prompted an upsurge in Māori engagement with Christianity. This factor is missing from O'Malley's analysis. Moreover, missionary claims of success and failure are discussed by O'Malley without an analysis of the political factors which permeated

these evangelical assertions. Missionaries walked a tightrope: they had to portray Māori as ‘savage’ enough to need ‘saving’, yet not too ‘savage’ as to seem beyond redemption; the mission as evincing signs of success, yet not so successful as to either be found to be blatantly misrepresenting the situation, or to have succeeded, thus indicating funding and support could be better invested elsewhere. Similarly, Moon’s discussion of the Musket Wars – fleeting considering *A Savage Country* deals solely with the 1820s, the decade through which the wars raged – also does not engage with the complex reasons for their end. His failure to engage with the Musket Wars historiography, in particular Ballara’s comprehensive *Taua*, is puzzling, and weakens this history of New Zealand in the 1820s.

O’Malley has been accused of viewing the past through a presentist lens.²³ In fact, while other historians have perhaps imposed the outcome of the colonization of New Zealand onto the past, O’Malley’s penultimate chapter quite rightly highlights that the Māori acculturation of European society was not always seen as inevitable. Missionary experiences in particular provide evidence that the reverse was feared by some during this period of early contact. As O’Malley himself concludes, ‘[w]ith the benefit of hindsight it is all too easy to disregard or dismiss what came before the era of dispossession and attempted or enforced assimilation.’ Yet New Zealand in the period from first contact to 1840 was ‘much of the time more concerned with accommodation and simply getting along with one another.’²⁴ O’Malley’s attempt to apply his historical analysis to the present and future, with which he concludes, has been confused with an imagined attempt to apply the present to his interpretation of the past.

It is most pleasing to see the initial contact period the focus of more investigation, a relieving shift away from the notion that New Zealand history began in 1840. This is especially so when an analytical framework such as that of the ‘middle ground’ is applied, when the importance of New South Wales to New Zealand’s post-contact, pre-colonial history is understood, assigned Māori homogeneity at the expense of iwi and hapū differences is acknowledged, and when the past remains clear of judgement based on present-day values.

¹ Vincent O’Malley, *The Meeting Place: Māori and Pākehā Encounters, 1642-1840*, Auckland, 2012.

² Paul Moon, *Fatal Frontiers: a New History of New Zealand in the Decade before the Treaty*, Auckland, 2006; Paul Moon, *The Newest Country in the World: a History of New Zealand in the Decade of the Treaty*, Auckland, 2007. Paul Moon, *A Savage Country: The Untold Story of New Zealand in the 1820s*, Auckland, 2012.

³ J.S. Polack, *New Zealand: Being a Narrative of Travels and Adventures during a Residence in that Country Between the Years 1831 and 1837*, 2 Volumes, London, 1838, i, p.251, ii, pp.205, 414; James Belich, *Making Peoples: a History of the New Zealanders, from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century*, Auckland, 1996, p.134; James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: the Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939*, Oxford, 2009, p.183.

⁴ Belich, *Making Peoples*, p.132.

⁵ Moon, *A Savage Country*, pp.48-57.

⁶ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge, 1991, *passim*, esp. pp.ix-x; Richard White, ‘Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 63, 1, (2006), pp.9-14; see also Philip J. Deloria, ‘What is the Middle Ground, Anyway?’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 63, 1, (2006), pp.15-22.

⁷ see Grant Phillipson, ‘Bay of Islands Maori and the Crown, 1793-1853’, August 2005, Wai1040 A1, p.366.

⁸ Moon, *A Savage Country*, p.118.

⁹ O’Malley, pp.228-229.

¹⁰ Angela Ballara, ‘The Role of Warfare in Maori Society in the Early Contact Period’, *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 85, 4, (1976), pp.487-506; Angela Ballara, *Taua: ‘Musket Wars’, ‘Land Wars’, or Tikanga? Warfare in Māori Society in the Early Nineteenth Century*, Auckland, 2003, *passim*, see. esp. pp.83, 444; Belich, *Making Peoples*, pp.75-81.

¹¹ Moon, *A Savage Country*, p.9.

¹² O’Malley, p.28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.70-109, esp pp.92, 70,109.

¹⁴ Moon, *A Savage Country*, p.10.

¹⁵ O’Malley, pp.110-111.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.111.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ O'Malley, pp.110-161, esp pp.110-111.

¹⁹ Paul Moon, *This Horrid Practice: the Myth and Reality of Traditional Maori Cannibalism*, Auckland, 2008, *passim*.

²⁰ Moon, *A Savage Country*, pp.24-33.

²¹ Ibid., pp.122-124.

²² O'Malley, pp.162-169.

²³ Matthew Wright, 'A land before a Treaty', *Sunday Star Times*, 10 June 2012, p.F8.

²⁴ O'Malley, p.227.