

Home in the Howling Wilderness: Settlers and the Environment in Southern New Zealand
By Peter Holland.

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The subject of this valuable work, by geographer Peter Holland, is environmental learning. Specifically, he poses the question: were European settlers ‘uninformed, disinterested people’ with a ‘single-minded urge’ to maximize production at the expense of the environment, or people who could ‘learn from their experience’ be aware of what was happening, and adapt accordingly (2).

Holland argues that settlers were initially deficient in their understanding of New Zealand as ‘a mosaic of ecologically diverse areas’, which led to ‘major environmental problems’ (4). They learned, however, to heed weather signals and to make informed decisions about land use. *Home in the Howling Wilderness* is devoted to telling how they learned, from whom or what, and to what effect.

Some chapters engage and support Holland’s thesis better than others. For instance, he establishes that European settlers largely failed to tap substantial Māori knowledge, perhaps because it was narrative rather than analytic. In meteorological matters the settlers were misled by Mediterranean analogies, but learned better through experiences, sometimes catastrophic ones. They too often disregarded the voices of those who recognized the virtues, indeed the necessity, of native species. On the other hand, they were attentive to evolving knowledge for the establishment of introduced species, especially pasture plants.

The treatment of livestock is less satisfactory; breeds and practices varied, and these things matter more than this book conveys. The discussion of soil erosion, which makes causative links to land use that are not sustained by the evidence and that contradict extant literature in soil science, also is less than convincing. In general, Holland may be too tied to classical ideals of ecology that are less than adequate in describing chaotic phenomena.

Major strengths of the work outweigh its debatable sections. The greatest virtue of Holland’s study is that he ascribes agency to people on the land. He makes them thinkers and doers, rather than mere objects of impersonal forces. This is complex and difficult scholarship. Holland recognizes, too, the necessity of the *longue durée* in environmental learning and, perhaps, in the recounting of it. He writes, ‘This process could not be rushed’ (189).

No reader should overlook the appendix, entitled ‘Words about Home: Diaries and Letters, Commercial Transactions, Newspapers and Magazines’. It is full of useful and exciting observations about encounters with evidence, and would serve well as basic reading for a research seminar. Here speaks a seasoned scholar at home among the documents.

Two aspects of Holland’s book raise barriers - one technical, the other intellectual - to the understanding of environmental learning he seeks to explicate. The technical issue is the use of tables and figures that are complicated to the point of impenetrability. They are data dumps

rather than illuminating features. The intellectual issue is the lack of narrative insight. Environmental learning was/is a longitudinal and situational process. Individuals in places pursued it over time. Some of this comes through, but too often the elements in the process are lumped. Simply put, Holland is not the greatest storyteller, and narrative is important to understanding processes. Admittedly, this is disciplinary grousing, and ought not to obscure the powerful findings of an exemplary work of historical geography.