

*Encounters: The Creation of New Zealand. A History*

By Paul Moon

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Reviewed by Erik Olssen

Paul Moon's *Encounters* is a fairly big book, and an ambitious one as well. Organised into four parts and 47 chapters, it focuses on the encounters between the two founding peoples and these islands, exploring both landscape and identity. As Moon admits, however, within that ambitious aim his themes 'are often as rambling as the terrain they apply to ...'. Often his rambles brought changes in direction that seemed quite arbitrary, but for all that I enjoyed the way he used art and (less often) literature to explore his several 'rambling' themes. I also enjoyed his end notes – Mircea Eliade, Plato, Hegel .... Sometimes I wondered whether he viewed New Zealand as a mere province of the big wide world, however, or at least the big wide Western world, for he would pluck a quotation from some American or Frenchman to illustrate some point he wished to make about New Zealand as if neither time nor culture mattered. A peculiar position for an historian to adopt. There were also occasional grand but unsubstantiated claims. For instance forest had covered all of New Zealand for millennia. (He likes the word forest, incidentally, but seems to dislike bush.)

A particular strength of this book lies in its handling of Maori as well as Pakeha perspectives and experiences. From time to time I found his reliance on first-wave post-colonial theory irritating, but by and large he was very skillful in delineating Maori attitudes and beliefs about the natural world (there is no word for landscape in te reo Maori, as he points out).

Despite the 'arbitrary delineations' and the rambling nature of *Encounters*, there is an argument. After a very long and loose-knit introductory section Moon settles to a theme that meanders through Parts 3 and 4. The colonists wanted not so much to re-create a 'Better Britain', as to create an idealized rural English landscape and society which reflected not so much an English reality as a nostalgia for an England that had never existed. The idea is far from original to Moon, although he acknowledges no forerunners, but I found his use of nostalgia as an analytical concept both stimulating and persuasive. Unlike other historians who have emphasized the importance of 'Better Britain' he also recognizes that this vision often had a Utopian aspect.

Pursuing this theme, he attempts to unravel the lineaments of an autochthonous New Zealand nostalgia. 'The shift from Britain to New Zealand as the energizing source of the nation's nostalgia ... ended up mutating into ... a stream of insularity that was eventually elevated into a national virtue ...' (p. 298). I was less convinced by this argument, however, and thought the clumsiness of the sentence marked the argument's tendentiousness. At moments like this I thought *Encounters* less a history than an opinionated essay in cultural criticism.

In the fourth and final part of *Encounters* he makes much of the point that our 20<sup>th</sup> century poets imagined an empty New Zealand, a land without people, or history, a land of exile and solitude. This was only ever a South Island trope, as several North Island poets pointed out at the time, and it had no purchase among novelists and pot-boilers. Whatever the merits of his overall argument, however, in this fourth part one's interest is held by the way he skillfully addresses each new theme by going back to mid and late-19<sup>th</sup> century sources and examples, often providing quite detailed discussions, although the main focus has become the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Chapters 38 through 40, for instance, we get short sketches and analyses of various works – sketches, poems, memoirs, paintings – by such diverse artists as Lady Barker, James Brown, Thomas Bracken, Hector Bolitho, William Satchell, and Samuel Butler, before getting to a clutch of 20<sup>th</sup> century landscape artists, not to mention Frank Sargeson. To illustrate his

various themes Moon usually takes only one work, occasionally two, by the author or artists he has selected. Often I found myself asking why *this* work by *that* artist or author. He almost never says.

*Encounters* is a big book of strong opinion. I often felt that I was in a conversation with someone who hogs the floor by raising the volume whenever I wanted to ask why he had focused on this author or that painting. Not that I didn't generally find him interesting, but whenever I checked what other critics and commentators had said, I decided that my interest had been captured by the boldness of his opinions if not the unpredictable storyline. In every instance I checked he was unfamiliar with most of what had been written or said about the artist or the work.

In too many of Moon's rambles the initial excitement sparked by his lofty ambition turned to disappointment as I realized how little he knew about the topic. Although Moon's bibliography is interesting and impressive, too often he made a sweeping claim about a topic and the end-note left one astonished by how little he had read. There are countless examples. For instance, at some length he discusses gardens and gardening, but has not read Helen Leach let alone Louise Shaw. Nor has he read Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (1983), although one might think that book essential. Similarly with his discussion of welfare policy. He cites two women authors I did not know, citing an article apiece published in American journals, but you look in vain for Francis Castle, David Thomson, or Margaret Tennant, let alone the special issue of *Australian Historical Studies* issued in 2009 on the Australasian welfare state. Readers of this journal will probably be less concerned that he also completely ignores or overlooks the countless social scientists who have written on welfare.

Given the importance he attaches to the work of artists I was also surprised and often disappointed to find time and again that he had read virtually none of the relevant secondary sources (his own slim book on Augustus Earle excepted). Given that small libraries exist on some of them, notably McCahon, who is treated at some length in the third Part, I was disappointed. Although initially intrigued I also became disenchanted with the somewhat adolescent use of Freud to decode the sexual meaning of so many of the works he chose to discuss. Ironically McCahon's *Otago Peninsula*, which graces his cover (as it long since graced that of my *A History of Otago*), is described as 'inviting penetration by the viewer' before being compared to 'a listless corpse' (p. 230). One assumes that Moon decided before starting that he had nothing to learn from such scholars as Bernard Smith, Leonard Bell, or Nicholas Thomas, to name three significant scholars. (Michael Dunn's work on sculpture figures, but not his study of *New Zealand Painting*.) If he had read these authors they would certainly have complicated most of his sweeping claims and assertions, some of which seem half-baked. Indeed I came to feel that he disdains most work by other historians and art-historians of New Zealand, because he rarely cites them and gives little evidence of having read them; indeed, from memory, he has learned nothing of note from the *New Zealand Art Bulletin* or the *Turnbull Library Record*. Nor has he learned much from the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* or *The New Zealand Journal of History*. Although he writes quite a lot about politics, especially in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, he has learned nothing from *Political Science*. It is almost as if the autodidact has claimed jurisdiction over all scholarly fields.

There is a homespun, folksy quality to this big book that both intrigues and irritates, more or less in equal measure. Moon generally writes well even if he writes books more quickly than I can read them, let alone take notes. My advice would be: less haste, more speed. Penguin have served him well, the illustrations being generous in number and well placed in relation to the discussion.