

At the Margin of Empire: John Webster and Hokianga 1841-1900

Jennifer Ashton

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Reviewed by David Colquhoun

Hokianga trader John Webster (1818-1912) lived a long and sometimes colourful life. It was enough to get him a page in Guy Scholefield's 1940 *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, which concluded with praise for Webster's "knowledge of Māori and sympathy for the race."¹ James Cowan was similarly hagiographic in his 1930s series on famous New Zealanders in the *New Zealand Railways Magazine*. For Cowan, Webster was one of those "who sought their fortunes in the wildest parts of the earth, and distinguished themselves as pioneers of enterprise, self-reliance, and cool courage."² But our views of history have changed since then. The editors of the current *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* thought there were far too many white male settler stories. They purged the cast, and Webster was one of the banished.

Now, in Jennifer Ashton's very good book, history's spotlight has picked him out again. Her view is rather different from that of Cowan and Scholefield, though, grittier and much less celebratory. It is a book about Webster's life amongst Ngāpuhi and Te Rarawa hapu on the Hokianga river, but also very much a wider study, using Webster's story to explore and explain some of the interactions, tensions and self-interest that strained and shaped Māori-Pākehā frontier relations in northern New Zealand.

A Scotsman from Montrose, the young Webster arrived in Sydney in 1838, keen to make a fortune. He soon found work on an inland cattle station as a stores officer assisting with long overland droves to Adelaide. His second and last of these expeditions was almost a disaster as the party became lost and were then stalked and attacked by Aborigine fighters. In a series of bloody skirmishes, spears were no match for European guns. A similarly violent episode occurred during his Pacific voyaging on the yacht *Wanderer*, ten years later. At Guadacanal, for some unknown offence, the captain was killed and the crew attacked by a war party. Again European firepower prevailed. Several islanders were killed and Webster's party then proceeded to ransack the local village and destroy its plantations. Ashton argues that these two imperial adventures helped confirm the imperial presumptions Webster had grown up with, European superiority and the inevitable march of colonisation.

In between these two imperial adventures, though, his early experience in New Zealand was very different. Webster had arrived at Hokianga in 1841, by which time the Treaty had done its rounds and a new colonial administration established. But there was little evidence of colonial rule on the river, which remained largely untouched by European officialdom. It remained a Māori world, in which success as a trader meant deference to Māori leadership, and acceptance of Māori custom.

At no time was this ongoing dependence on Māori more obvious than during the northern war of 1845-1846. The argument that this was as much an inter-hapu civil war as a clash between Hōne Heke and the new colonial government is hardly new, but Ashton's chapter on Webster's part in the war reemphasises just how much Webster and the other Hokianga settler participants were foot soldiers for Tāmāti Wāka Nene, the leader of Māori opposition to Heke, who was fighting very much for his own political ends. These inter-hapu tensions remained well after the fighting had ended and, as Ashton points out, that meant "an ongoing sense of threat and occasional alarm...among Pakeha in the north, exacerbated by the fact that the government had effectively withdrawn from the district after claiming its hollow victory" (p.75).

It was a situation Webster could do little about. Ashton makes good use here of the “Maori journal” that Webster kept during the first half of 1847. It is a remarkable document giving lively descriptions of his life as a trader on the river, enlivened by naïve sketches (some of the best of which are reproduced in the book), all revealing Webster’s reluctant acceptance of Māori ways of ordering the world. Little used before (apart from my own thesis of many years ago), the journal has now been usefully transcribed and published by the Hokianga Historical Society. (As an aside, though, it is a pity that the late Professor Judith Binney was never able to interest a publisher in her plans for a scholarly edition of it.)

Webster’s early imperial experiences and expectations set the scene for the book’s later chapters, covering the second half of the century. It was then that Webster became the richest man on the river, mainly through the supply of timber to New Zealand and Australian markets, as well as through the trade in kauri gum and the sale of general merchandise. A good marriage set him up. On his return from his Pacific travels he married Emily, daughter of George Russell, owner of the river’s main trading station at Kohukohu, and Hautonga Haira, of Ngāti Hao hapū and a close relative of Tāmāti Wāka Nene. Russell had previously been Webster’s employer for a time, and somewhat of a patron. When he died in 1855, Webster inherited the business.

For Webster these were times of increasing political antagonism towards Māori, fuelled by the outbreak of war in the south, and by resentment at the way Hokianga Māori continued to resort to their own methods of law and order when it suited them. Ashton also shows how ongoing Māori expressions of independence continually undercut Webster’s efforts to present himself in settler circles as a man of influence amongst northern Māori. At the same time, he was also looking to establish his place within ‘respectable’ settler social circles. In particular that meant his social and domestic circles were increasingly segregated from any contact with his wife’s Māori kin, or with the lower-class Pākehā and mixed-race inhabitants of the river.

A key source for these hardening attitudes is the rich body of correspondence to Webster from his two closest associates on the river, Frederick Maning, the writer and Native Land Court judge, and the local Resident Magistrate, Spencer von Sturmer. This was uninhibited private correspondence, full of contempt for the Māori and Pākehā they saw as their social inferiors. Very little of Webster’s side of that correspondence survives, but Ashton is able to show that he shared his friends’ views, although it is unlikely he ever quite matched the eloquent virulence of Maning in full flight.

As Ashton points out though, the dependence on Māori that Webster so resented was also the source of his business success, and it was as an entrepreneur, she argues, that “he played his most important role, that of agent of economic change” (p. 207). Ashton’s research and writing about Webster’s business operations at the raw edge of frontier capitalism is particularly impressive, drawing on an array of primary sources, including Webster’s own ledgers and letterbooks and surviving Native Land Court records. Most of the labour was provided by Māori work gangs who were paid in goods, usually in advance, at rates that ensured profits for Webster on both the goods and labour. Chronic Māori indebtedness led to pressures to sell land as payment, which became easier with the establishment of the Native Land Court, where Webster’s friend Maning was the first local judge. Ashton is able to show a correlation between Maning’s court work individualising land title and subsequent land sale to pay off debts.

By the end of the 1880s, Webster was comfortably retired to a new house and model farm at Opononi. A final coda to his Hokianga story was the armed confrontation of the “dog tax war” at Waimā in 1898, where once again Webster claimed some peace-making credit, all of which actually belonged to local Māori leaders. By then, his views had mellowed. He continued to express racist contempt for the new Māori leaders emerging in the north, but was now prepared to romanticise the ‘good old days’ of his early years. He was an honoured elder of organisations like the Polynesian Society, committed to preserving Māori traditions, histories

and artefacts at a time when many assumed Māori were soon to disappear. Some of this later reputation was due to his extensive collection of indigenous artefacts. Perhaps Ashton could have made a little more of the irony of that, given that much of that collection had been gathered through imperial plunder.³

This is not a traditional biography. The life is used to explain the times, as much as vice versa, and that is an approach that works very well. It is a very well written and thoughtful book, using an impressively varied range of sources. Above all, Ashton's book gives new insights into the interactions of race, social class and settler capitalism on the New Zealand frontier. In many ways Webster's Hokianga was a very different place from other parts of New Zealand, but there are parallels and similarities too. As Ashton points out in her introduction, recent historiography has often focused on Crown/Māori relations, partly driven by the Treaty claim process. The complex patterns of post-1840 settler commercial interactions with Māori have received less in-depth attention. This book helps restore that balance.

¹ G. H. Scholefield (ed) "Webster, John", *A Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Whitcomb & Tombs, Wellington 1940, volume II, p. 477.

² James Cowan "Famous New Zealanders – No. 43 – John Webster of Hokianga – The Adventures of a Pioneer", *New Zealand Railways Magazine*, 1 October 1936, p. 17.

³ A telling anecdote in Webster's reminiscences recounts his looting of a still-in-use sacred burial site on the upper river: John Webster, *Reminiscences of an Old Settler in Australia and New Zealand*, Whitcomb & Tombs, Christchurch 1908, pp. 276-279.