

*The Lives of Colonial Objects*

Edited by Annabel Cooper, Lachy Patterson, and Angela Wanhalla

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Reviewed by Paul Diamond

As the three editors explain in their introduction, *The Lives of Colonial Objects* is a collection of 50 essays in which objects serve as pathways into New Zealand's colonial history. The project came out of a 2013 conference on 'Colonial Objects' at Toitu Otago Settlers Museum, Dunedin organized by the Centre for Research on Colonial Culture at the University of Otago.

'Colonial' is defined broadly, from the period of contact between Pākehā and ā, up until New Zealand's involvement with World War Two. Neil MacGregor's *A History of the World in 100 Objects* is mentioned several times as an inspiration for this book. Whereas all the objects in that book came from one collection (the British Museum), the objects in this book aren't all from museums, or restricted to what would usually be expected to be found in museums. The final essay surveys the extraordinary range of things: large (buildings, monuments and whales), small (stamps and jewellery), natural and cultural (rocks, trees, mineral water and art and craft), crafted (shoes and textiles), and manufactured items and machines (billies, presses, harpoons, stereopticons and radium activators). Some move (flying boats, tents) but most remain still. There are objects that unfold in the landscapes (roads), and objects that perform, resonating in space and time (pianos, pūtōrino). Some objects have immense power (cannons), and some are light and seemingly insignificant (feathers)' (314).

The stories associated with these objects are the focus of the book, and this approach allows for the varied backgrounds and specialisations of the authors to shine. This focus gives the book a cohesion, and makes it more accessible to a general audience. In telling these stories, the aim, we are told, was to keep the object and its colonial context connected, without allowing the social history or object to dominate.

The last essay in this collection is a collaboration between the late Jonathon Mané-Wheoki and Conal McCarthy. When Mané-Wheoki became too ill to revise his conference presentation about the Mataatua Whare for the publication, he worked with McCarthy to produce a wonderful essay illustrating the bicultural themes which run through the whole book. As well as outlining the significance of Mataatua Whare, the final chapter provides valuable additional context for the essays, and background about contemporary arguments and theories about museums, material culture studies and history.

As you'd expect with public history, or history from the ground up, one purpose of this book is to give precedence to dimensions of past lives not always made prominent in historical writing (16). This isn't restricted to groups such as women, and gay men, who are represented, but also the editors tell us, to 'the senses, for many objects discussed in *The Lives of Colonial Objects* were designed to be touched, worn, held, exchanged and gifted, or to be heard, played or read. Musical instruments and albums register the importance of paying attention to sound in history, helping to identify potential approaches to uncovering the aural experience of men and women in the colonial era' (16).

Some of the authors have taken a material culture approach to unlock the stories of their objects. For example, Chanel Clarke's and Catherine Smith's essay about Major Kemp's exquisite tāniko slippers ('A Gentleman's Slippers'), presents quite a different, domestic image of the Land Wars veteran and politician. As a Wellingtonian, I was fascinated by Catherine Bishop's chapter about Spinks Cottage ('Spinks Cottage: *Heritage, History and Use*'), part of the St John's in the City Church. Bishop charts the history of the house, including its physical changes and threats to its survival as the Church's priorities changed. More significant is the foregrounding of the story of the lives and work of the original owners, the Spinks family, and

in particular the daughters Florence and Jane. The sisters ran a school from the cottage; Jane Spinks kept a diary, which Bishop uses to reveal a hidden story of businesses run by women across Wellington. It doesn't matter that the cottage has been extensively renovated and is essentially just a shell; by bringing together sources, Bishop demonstrates 'the power of objects as witnesses to the colonial past' (314). She also makes a strong case for improved interpretation of the house. 'As a colonial object, then, Spinks Cottage is unusual in that it is a rare surviving visible place of female entrepreneurship in the mid-nineteenth century. In combination with Jane Spinks' diary, this building takes us beyond the aesthetic appeal and architectural history of built heritage. Spinks Cottage also tells us a story about the serendipity of survival: it lasted only because it could be made useful. Ironically, however, that very usefulness has obscured its colonial history, leaving a picturesque heritage shell. Perhaps it is time to breathe new life into this object, to give it a new usefulness as a connection to New Zealand's colonial past' (78).

Mané-Wheoki and McCarthy note that photographs, together with books in various forms, and taonga are the three groups of objects which stand out in this book. A photograph was the starting point for an essay by Alison Clarke ('A Photograph, a Feeding Bottle and the Tragedies of Colonial Family Life'). As part of her research for a history of childbirth in New Zealand, Clarke came across a carte-de-visite portrait of an unidentified woman holding a baby beside a table with a feeding bottle on it. After the photograph was published in Clarke's book, a descendant recognized it as a portrait of her great-grandmother, Rachel Stewart (then aged 24), with her son, Westwood. Knowing that the baby died when he was just five months old, of dysentery, changes the significance of the feeding bottle in the photo. Although it's uncertain why this was included in the portrait, the bottles were attached to a teat via a rubber tube, making them traps for bacteria and putting babies at risk of infection. As Clarke notes, it is very likely that this feeding bottle contributed to Westwood's death, though his family may not have realized it. The family was prosperous, illustrating how wealth and the medical care it could buy didn't protect people from illness in the nineteenth century. For Clarke, knowing more about the provenance of the photograph in her essay was a springboard for a fascinating discussion about breastfeeding and the lives of colonial women.

Sometimes provenance is the whole story, as in the case of Charlotte Macdonald's essay, 'The Face on the Wall: *Mrs Humphrey Devereux as Object, as Art, as Family*,' about the portrait of an American woman painted in Boston in 1770. Macdonald charts the story of how the portrait ended up in the collections of Te Papa, by exploring the life and career of the artist, John Singleton Copley, and the historical context behind its production. Bringing these threads together deftly illustrates how and why objects endure: '*Mrs Humphrey Devereux* presents the continuing puzzle of long-lasting objects: for all that their lives trace the circumstances of their creation, their subsequent ownership, use and transmission, they also transcend these. For portraits, this may be especially so. Copley's *Mrs Devereux* continues to convince us of the presence of a person. For all that this is 'only a picture', the face on the wall looks out, as much as we look in' (73).

Not all objects have such well-documented provenance as *Mrs Humphrey Devereux*. For example, the Haberfield family kahu Kiwi (kiwi feather cloak), which belonged to William Isaac Haberfield, the great-great-grandfather, and pōua of Michael Stevens, the author of an essay about the cloak. Very little is known about how the cloak came to be produced, but Stevens explains how its significance relates to how it operates as a tangible link to Haberfield. 'It also connects us to more recently departed family members as well as significant family events beyond tangi and hura kōhatu, such as weddings and university graduations. This cloak then, this colonial object, has remained within our whānau because of a lived sensibility of whakapapa, which it helps to illuminate' (257). This Māori approach to seeing objects as more than 'things,' isn't limited to the Māori objects in this book. As Mané-Wheoki and McCarthy

note in the final chapter, ‘the book embraces two key Māori concepts: taonga, or cultural treasures, and kōrero, or stories’ (312). They cite the story of Mataatua whare, returned to the Ngāti Awa iwi in 1996, 117 years after it was taken by the Crown, as ‘an example of the ways in which culture and history are being reclaimed so that the past can be kept alive in the present’ (312). This idea of keeping the past alive in the present connects all the essays, with their varied approaches and objects.

*The Lives of Colonial Objects* is well-served by its production, with consistently high quality photography throughout, skillful editing and a smart design.

With its championing of material culture and bicultural approaches to history, this book is an important, engaging contribution to our scholarship which will hopefully inspire further research and writing.