

*Ko Te Whenua Te Utu: Land is the Price: Essays on Maori History, Land, and Politics*

By M.P.K. Sorrenson

Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2014, 338 pp.

ISBN 978 1 86940 810 7

By John Weaver

As an outsider drawn to New Zealand history, it has been a privilege to review this selection of essays, not only because of the erudition but due also to the artful style. Invisibility of craft is an enviable achievement; Sorrenson's clear and unforced narratives carry reconstructions, analysis, and judgment. Writing with confident authority about the subjects in the book's subtitle, he draws us voluntarily into these complicated topics by means of unadorned narratives. The chapters open with concise observations leading without theoretical diversions into a thoughtful discussion of racialism, colonialism, land grabbing, acculturation, demography, national identity, and the malleability of historical inquiry. Any one of these topics could have been occluded by layers of theory. These have their place, happily not here. When Sorrenson explains that Sir Āpirana Ngata and Sir Peter Buck dismissed theory, he drops a hint of approval. They may not have understood all the fleeting theories of Anthropology, writes Sorrenson, 'but I do not think that mattered very much' (p.144). That remark concludes a fine essay, a primer on ideas about assimilation that Sorrenson advances by chronicling a friendship. Before we know it, we have been agreeably educated.

'All of the essays', Sorrenson admits, 'are a reflection of the intellectual environment in which they were conceived' (p.7). If that environment is the source of his respect for readers with a willingness to tackle substantial subjects, then past intellectual environments deserve great respect. There are thirteen essays, fifteen if the important introduction and epilogue are included. Their arrangement more or less follows Sorrenson's career and interests. Roughly speaking, the essays move from the more distant past into the recent past, including his time as a member of the Waitangi Tribunal. Experiences there inform chapter 12, 'The Waitangi Tribunal and the Resolution of Māori Grievances'. The chapters can be taken out of the sequence and shuffled into thematic sets: perceptions and acculturation, the gyrations of the law to facilitate land taking, and resistance and politics.

In chapter 1, 'The Whence of the Māori: Some Nineteenth-century Exercises in Scientific Method', Sorrenson categorizes hare-brained race-migration theories that eventually were swept away by a more scientific approach. Mindful of twists in history and writing with a sense of irony, he concludes that at least the romantic quests for Māori origins 'helped make them a suitable subject for amalgamation with their long lost Pākehā 'brothers'' (p.39). 'How to Civilise Savages: Some 'Answers' from Nineteenth-century New Zealand', chapter 3, follows-up on the theme of assimilation, particularly the associated misjudgement of colonisers about the success of assimilation, an error arising from cultural arrogance. Chapter 7, considering Ngata and Buck, brings out the complexity of acculturation, ethnography, ethnology, and the politics of development. The chapters on law and land indirectly suggest that the ratio of pages of statutes to acres taken might be the highest found in any settlement society. The Treaty of Waitangi made a difference and the statute books capture that reality. This theme is developed further in chapter 3, 'Treaties in British Colonial Policy: Precedents for Waitangi,' chapter 4, 'Folkland to Bookland: F.D. Fenton and the Enclosure of the Māori 'Commons,' and in the seminal essay that forms chapter 5, 'Land Purchase Methods and their Effect on Māori Population, 1865-1901'. Resistance is covered in chapter 8, 'Colonial Rule and Local Response: Māori Responses to European Domination in New Zealand since 1860'. Chapter 9, the long discussion of 'Māori Representation in Parliament', explains how some of the colonial era 'grassroots' responses influenced the thinking of some of the individuals who were elected to represent Māori. At the same time, this chapter covers inter-tribal rivalries and

debates about abolishing the Māori seats, ‘the crumbs that have fallen from the Pākehā table’ (p.216).

To my mind, chapter 6, ‘The Māori King Movement, 1858-1885’, is the collection’s showpiece. It dazzles as a model of research, perception, and fine writing. It has a depth of understanding that I can admire, learn from, and never approximate. I add that self-criticism because, I was taken aback as an outsider by Sorrenson’s quotation of Ngata’s observation that outsiders ‘cannot get very far in’. I think that is true. I am possessive enough of my background to believe that no one from outside could ‘get very far in’ with southern Ontario. Who could match the insights of Nobel Laureate Alice Munro when she is on this home ground? Never the less, we interlopers may add an occasional dash of freshness, or obtuseness if you will, by applying transnational outlooks. As it happens, transnational comparisons are in Sorrenson’s kit. Does he get very far in? No. However, the effort to comprehend native affairs in Canada and especially the United State, enhanced his comprehension of the Treaty of Waitangi’s importance.

To stir the pot, I offer a few light challenges. My outsider’s perspective, acquired from living in a federal state where there have been tempestuous engagements with the idea of biculturalism, forces me to flash the amber light at the idea of ‘a nation with two peoples’, or ‘two histories’, or ‘two narratives’. Proceed with caution. I understand full well the argument’s foundation, especially as it applies in New Zealand to a co-management of resources. *Ko te Whenua te Utu* dwells on foundational injustices that rippled through time and these wrongs involved two peoples. Canada and New Zealand have founding peoples certainly, but in both countries immigration, human rights conventions, and celebrations of diversity have made dualism problematic at many levels. ‘Peoples’ and ‘nation’ are loaded terms when politicised. Further, attention to two peoples with a focus on the inequalities between Pākehā and Māori, for example, does not contribute analytical precision to or adequate awareness of distress (p.295). Finally, a two-peoples understanding of history is at odds with the globalising world; historians have the new task of explaining the global in the local. I do not mean to reproach Sorrenson, who would have anticipated these comments long ago. Nevertheless, I stand by my amber warning.

The economic reforms of the mid- to late 1980s get a rough ride from some historians. Sorrenson is one, but in a low key way. The Fourth Labour government took a number of government trading departments and converted them into state-owned enterprises with equity that could be sold in order to reduce the country’s debt. Sorrenson reports in chapter 13, ‘Waitangi: Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou’, that the suddenness of corporatisation without consultation provoked the Māori Council to litigate against the Crown. There had been no initial provisions for prior settlement of claims to the resources involved. The council won the initial suit and subsequently defeated the Crown’s appeal. It is worth adding that once it got the message, admittedly after a defeat on appeal, the government worked constructively and respectfully with the council to draft creative solutions. The exotic forests were one example. They were not exactly ‘about to be transferred to Forestcorp’, as Sorrenson suggests, since Forestcorp operated in a state of corporate limbo on account of the establishment board and government failing to agree on a valuation. It had no capital structure. The Crown owned the trees. The solution accepted by all parties, including the council, was to sell the cutting rights which belonged to the Crown, leave the land open to claims, charge forestry firms a ground rent and put that money aside into the Forestry Rental Trust. A few words about the uses of the interest on the trust funds to support research for claims would have been appropriate.

According to one careful study, the sale of the cutting rights ‘shifted the write-down of forest assets as a result of the 1998 Asian crisis from the Crown to Fletcher Challenge and its consortium partners. Clearly in this case the price received for the asset was, with hindsight, excellent.’ Writing chapter 13 at the turn of the millennium, Sorrenson seems to have held onto

the idea that Coalcorp should remain a state-owned enterprise (p.287). If the sale of the cutting rights has proven a wise step, the sale of Coalcorp (Solid Energy), assuming a buyer or buyers could have been found, might have been assessed similarly. From a Waitangi Tribunal perspective, assets to cover claims are undoubtedly important, although apart from areas of spiritual and historical importance, it is the convertibility of assets or the obligation for restitution that counts.

From a social history perspective, forestry and coal towns have shared the fate of resource dependent communities in other countries. Sorrenson remarks that in the second half of the twentieth century Māori often had to seek work 'in unskilled jobs in country districts, such as freezing works, forestry, and building hydro dams' (pp.294-5). They also moved to the cities. While the leading topics of this collection - land, law, and politics - are intrinsic to New Zealand, they have been joined by others of great significance such as the history of work and community. Sorrenson acknowledges that 'history is forever and historians are always remarking it according to their own lights' (p.7). Hopefully 'remakings' will come from individuals respecting the research zeal and writing skill exemplified by Keith Sorrenson. But it is not just our 'own lights' that shape historical accounts. Countries and their place in global networks also change and with these profound alterations our visions of the past will take new directions.