

*Acknowledge No Frontier: The Creation and Demise of New Zealand's Provinces, 1853–76*

By André Brett

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Reviewed by Malcolm Prentis

Starting at the beginning, one does not always pay much attention to Acknowledgements but it came as a surprise to find two paragraphs in the Acknowledgements of this book concerning the author's debt to music. He writes history with headphones on. Fair enough; the reviewer listened to Ravi Shankar when studying Indian history. And this old buffer was relieved to recognise a few of the author's favourite bands. The book title comes from the Split Enz song 'Six months in a leaky boat'. I'm not sure the phrase 'acknowledge no frontier' has exactly the same meaning here, but this reviewer can't afford to be too critical, since he used the title of the same song even more dubiously as the title of a conference paper presented in Dunedin in 2003. More questionable, perhaps, is the quotation from a song by the British neo-prog outfit, Porcupine Tree, 'Pure Narcotic', with which the author concludes the book – 'Leave me dreaming on a railway track'. However, these eccentricities do not prompt me to do what the last line of that song suggests, to wrap up the book and send it back. Under the rap-related handle, DrDreHistorian, Brett has tweeted 'Baffled when people say #NZHistory boring. Decades of Pākehā/Māori war. An ill-fated wooden railway. 1st to enfranchise women. THAT is dull?' The wooden railway in struggling Southland is actually important to the story here. Nevertheless, DrDreHistorian has had to work hard – and successfully – to make the provinces less boring. There's even a joke from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (71).

As it should be, this book and the PhD thesis on which it is based were a labour of love for an Australian-based exile from the Kapiti Coast who has tweeted on the excitement of New Zealand history – 'And, of course, there are my beloved provinces, the awesomeness of which I hope to convince everybody sooner or later.' Ironically, because of the success of this book, the demise of the provinces tends to suggest that they were the opposite of awesome. But he does it in an engaging way, having been extremely thorough in his research and thoroughly engaged with the literature.

This Australian reviewer writes 'As an outsider drawn to New Zealand history', to quote a Canadian reviewer in the pages of this very same journal in June 2016. The topic of this book does indeed invite comparisons with Canada and Australia and the author explicitly considers the comparisons, although 'contrasts' might be the better word. Canada obviously has provinces and Wakefieldian South Australia was actually referred to as a province initially - but it quickly became just another colony, albeit more respectable than the others. Tasmania and Queensland, like New Zealand, as the author points out, had more than one node of settlement (248). Queensland especially, with its late start, small and dispersed settlement, financial struggles and regional identities, seems the Australian colony most likely to have provided a comparison. Its separation from New South Wales in 1859 was apparently an inspiration to separationist Julius Vogel of Otago (154). Interestingly, George Ferguson Bowen was first Governor there before being Governor of New Zealand from 1868 to 1873, when he played a bit part in what the author calls the 'suffocation of the provinces'. But provinces just didn't happen, even in Queensland. Another overall difference in the Australian colonies might be that a system of local government was instituted in 1842 in Van Diemen's

Land and New South Wales, before Victoria and Queensland formed separate, viable colonies and before they received self-government. Another Australian element relevant to the weakness of the provinces is that some of them related more to Australia than to each other, Westland especially. Otago had strong ties with Victoria. As late as the 1890s, Southland was the only part of the country leaning towards federation with the Australian colonies. Auckland, which old James Busby weirdly campaigned to be a separate colony (149-152), had strong commercial and cultural links with Sydney.

The conventional wisdom on the topic of this book includes the notion that the provincial system failed because the country, unlike the bigger dominions, did not federate pre-existing colonies and had too small a settler population to create effective subdivisions. The author accepts the significance for the viability of the provincial system of geographical/demographic and communication factors and the impact of the New Zealand wars on the North Island 1860s and 1870s. But, as any good historian is bound to do, he questions the received wisdom. In some ways, it is a matter of emphasis but he also adds nuance and depth to a wide range of factors.

I suspect that some historians couldn't be much bothered with the Provinces, as they assume they were doomed from the outset (as the conventional wisdom had it) for reasons too obvious to state and irrelevant to the more important national story. Michael King's *Penguin History of New Zealand* (2003), for instance, says very little. He does highlight somewhat the difficulties of provinces for Māori and vice versa. Brett spells this out in more detail, noting Māori rejection of 'proto-provinces' in 1848, the effects of war, proposals for a Māori province in 1860, and that in the 1870s Māori MPs felt excluded from considerations of the provincial system and had little interest in abolition but that some Māori saw that it did nothing for them and feared for their land (228-9). Of course, northern provinces had far less potential land revenue than the south because most of the land was still held by Māori. Going further back, Raewyn Dalziel's account in the original *Oxford History of New Zealand* (1981) has a little more but it is interesting that the present account, whilst much, much more thorough, is essentially compatible with it, emphasising the clearly greater capacity of the central government to raise loans for development and infrastructure. The author is respectful towards W.P. Morrell's *The Provincial System in New Zealand, 1852-76* (1932) as a history of the workings of provinces, though he criticises Morrell for too great a focus on London and Otago and too little attention to the later, smaller seceder provinces and to Māori interests. He goes on to show that Morrell falls short in explaining the demise of provinces. Brett was able to be more thorough in his research, helped by the explosion of online archives, which benefits particularly his development of local and New Zealand perspectives.

An important thread through Brett's account is Vogel's political career, which he traces carefully, from separatist in the 1850s and 1860s to the assassin of the provincial system through his Great Public Works Policy in the 1870s. I have previously glimpsed this story through the career of provincial engineer Charles O'Neill, who gets a mention here for his support of the 1874 New Zealand Forests Act when representing Thames (219). In 1866, when based in Otago, he had been burned in effigy in Dunedin as a lukewarm provincialist, while the future centralist Vogel was welcomed back there as a heroic separationist. In 1874 they were both enthusiasts for forest conservation, a cause which clearly demanded central colonial action and which provided one of the last nails for the provincialist coffin.

Although the provincial system was, in the end, an abject failure, Brett accepts that there were at first good reasons for trying something like it. He writes that ‘provincial government perished ... not for a want of provincialist sympathy or identity’ (242) but the irony is that ‘parochialism and self-interest brought New Zealanders together as one people’ (24). Only the central government could provide adequate investment in infrastructure and railway development looms large. Ten provinces competing with the colonial government for British investment made very little sense. So the author does not reject old explanations of failure, but he both deepens them and puts them in a broader perspective, wherein the Great Public Works Policy was the killer blow. He makes a powerful case and his account should stand the test of time at least as long as Morrell’s. He also makes a bid for contemporary relevance. As related here, local government structure has been a constant challenge throughout the whole of New Zealand history. Indeed, in his conclusion, the author devotes some space to a consideration of more recent reforms and of the lessons of failed provincialism for local government since and in the future.

Otago University Press is to be congratulated on the quality of this publication. They have done the author proud with the quality of design and production, the prolific monochrome and (*mirabile dictu*) coloured pictures and maps and other graphics provided, the copious statistical appendices, full bibliography and index, excellent editing and production values and, not least, by allowing personal touches and humour which old-fashioned publishers would have slashed. In sum, André Brett has breathed new (OK, awesome) life into old-fashioned political history. However, the reviewer is still inclined to think that the provincial system was doomed from the outset. As a resident and student of a federation, I see the golden rule in action: they who have the gold make the rules.