

Matters of the Heart: A History of interracial marriage in New Zealand

Angela Wanhalla

Auckland University Press (2013)

ISBN: 978 1 86940 7315

Reviewed by Henry Reynolds

Matters of the Heart is an important and an engaging book. As Angela Wanhalla explains, it traces the history of interracial relationships in all their variety over a two-hundred-year period, beginning in the 1770s and ending in the early 1970s. And it is all done in less than 200 pages. But while the survey is necessarily thin in places the range is impressive, the prose fresh, the arguments cogent and sustained. A vast amount of research underpins the text carried out in archives and libraries all over the country, both in the major institutions but also in small specialised and regional collections. The bibliography lists a little fewer than 500 books and articles and more than 50 newspapers from all over the country, although the more engaged reader might appreciate the dates as well as the titles of the papers consulted.

The book is abundantly illustrated. Over 90 well- chosen images are grouped in five discrete sections. Wanhalla has employed them to be more than decorative embellishments, wanting them to carry some of the thematic burden and assist in the more challenging aspects of her project. She tells us that the title itself ‘signals a desire to illuminate the emotional basis of interracial relationships’ (xix). But gaining access to emotions and expressions of feeling is a formidable task in the absence of diaries or letters. It is here that photographs can be used to help illuminate the ‘tender and affectionate aspects of relationships that are not always obvious in the written records.’ Physical proximity and tactility register one mode of intimacy between couples but such interpretations must remain particularly personal leaving a wide area for disagreement. The unknown couple pictured on the cover of the book is a case in point. Wanhalla concludes from the image alone that they may not in fact have been in a relationship. But it is anyone’s guess.

Matters of the Heart is written for a New Zealand audience. This is not to suggest that it is parochial. Wanhalla clearly illustrates that she is alive to the wider, international reach of her main themes. But interracial marriage lies at the heart of Māori-Pākehā relations and as a result intrudes into the enduring national debate about the nature of the country and the meaning of its history. At the very end of her epilogue, entitled ‘Marriage and the Nation’, Wanhalla explains that at different historical moments interracial marriage has been ‘co-opted into state policy, condemned as an immoral and pragmatic practice of the past, rejected as uncivilized and tied to notions of bicultural national identity’. It was and remains, she observes in her concluding sentence, ‘a matter of the heart too’ (167).

The history of New Zealand race relations is of wider interest. It is a truism to say that it has been quite distinctive. But the most interesting point for anyone outside the country is how international ideas worked out locally. All those ideas, spreading outward from Europe and the United States during the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, found disciples in New Zealand. Race was an inescapable concept, as were related ideas about miscegenation, about mixed race children, biological degeneration and of peoples condemned to fail in the struggle for survival. Wanhalla is an astute guide to this complex intellectual heritage and the ways in which they were locally received. She is particularly instructive about the earliest period of European intrusion before and soon after British annexation. The European and American sealers and whalers and assorted other adventurers found it advantageous to enter into marriages with women from prominent Māori families. They built complex webs of kinship and interest and produced the first generation of mixed descent children. It was a tradition that was of lasting importance that persisted even when the harsher and more prescriptive racial ideas of the following two generations swept into the

country. Interracial marriage was never universally condemned. Government policy supported the practice as a means of assimilation. The existence of interracial families and healthy children was compelling local evidence to discredit the racial doomsayers. Interracial marriage, both formal and de-facto, became less common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but men and women continued to defy family and community opposition to be together. These are the people who are the heroes and heroines of this continually interesting story.