

Pushing Boundaries: New Zealand Protestants and Overseas Missions 1827–1939

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Otago University Press, Dunedin (2016)

RRP: \$45; ISBN: 978-1-927322-17-8

Reviewed by Geoffrey Troughton

Among the many travellers and expat communities that could be regarded as part of the story of “New Zealand abroad”, the nation’s missionaries are among the most extraordinary. According to Morrison’s analysis, around 1000 Protestant missionaries—including some Māori—were sent abroad from New Zealand during the period from 1827–1939, the bulk of them departing in the twentieth century. This number represented a small proportion of the total global missionary enterprise, but was a remarkable contribution relative to the New Zealand population. Collectively, these missionaries sojourned in a diverse range of countries, taking them far beyond the usual destinations for New Zealand travellers. Looking back, from a global perspective, missionaries were arguably the most recognizable and influential face of New Zealand abroad for much of the twentieth century. Curiously, however, they have attracted relatively limited critical attention.

Pushing Boundaries details the growth of missionary activity within New Zealand Christianity during the period up to the beginning of the Second World War. More than this, it captures the emergence of a missionary consciousness within New Zealand Protestantism, such that missionary service abroad came to be not only authorized and promoted but also widely regarded as the pinnacle of Christian service and commitment. As the title of the work implies, missionaries pushed boundaries on a range of fronts—geographical, cultural, and religious. The book addresses these tangible and ideational boundaries, but also historiographical ones. It aims to explore the implications of the missionary movement for history writing, and the potential value of this somewhat marginalized dimension of New Zealand history for historical understanding. Focusing especially on Presbyterian and Baptist case studies, the book’s structure breaks down into two parts: the first maps the contours of missionary activity during the period, and the rise of a strong movement within Protestantism; the second uses case studies to explore a range of historiographical questions.

The first chapter in Part One provides a pithy overview of the growth of missionary activity, including the emergence of mission agencies, missionary recruitment patterns, detailed demographic data on the bases of support, and regional variations—both in terms of support and the destinations of missionary sending. Chapter 2 focuses on theology. It explores a cluster of images, texts, and values that were used to explain the missionizing project, and through which that mission was justified and sustained. A conversionistic emphasis consistently predominated, but Morrison’s analysis identifies other ideals and subtle variations, including some associated with gender and denomination. It also notes various shifts over time, underwritten by “an essentially pragmatic Antipodean approach to the wider world and its needs” (71). Chapter 3 considers the significant role that Australian and North American Christianity played in shaping New Zealand missionary activity through the creation of various missionary institutions, and exchanges of people and ideas. Morrison explores these as important factors in their own right, and as indicators of the range of transnational influences on New Zealand religion, culture, and society during the period. This account fits well with the “Tasman world” thesis, and emphasizes the significance of influences beyond the colonial metropole. A final “mapping” chapter deals with the issue of personal motivation, which is addressed through a rich examination of personal narratives, and considered alongside various contextual factors.

Part Two of the book focuses on historiographical issues. The first chapter in the section, Chapter 5, considers the potential contributions of overseas mission history to New Zealand

history, both in terms of addressing current lacunae and in testing paradigms. The chapter takes the history of the Bolivian Indian Mission as a case study, and interacts particularly with Peter Gibbons, suggesting ways that theology and micro-perspectives might usefully complement Gibbons' promotion of macro-historical approaches. Subsequent chapters address issues relating to mission and the historiographies of the British Empire and childhood. Another assessing the impact of missionary activity "at home" in New Zealand touches on a significant issue for further future exploration, given the scale of the Protestant missionary project, its broad denominational support base, the range of institutions it influenced and sustained, and its critical role in Protestant spirituality of the period.

The book closes with a conclusion that explores the question of "significance". This includes some consideration of impact, and therefore also discussion of the post-1945 story and the broader legacies of earlier missions viewed from the vantage point of the post-colonial era. The conclusion is somewhat cautious and ambivalent on the question of influence, noting the complexities and contestation involved in such assessments—including the practical observation that extensive fieldwork at mission sites would be necessary to gain a balanced perspective. It notes, however, the extraordinary global citizenship that marked the missionary activity of this earlier era, which pre-dated—and arguably helped to shape—more recent globalization. The "reflexive" impact of the missions, its role in shaping New Zealand Protestant outlooks and experience, is another key factor in Morrison's interpretation.

This is an important book, the mature product of patient and detailed study over an extended period. It demonstrates Morrison's command of the source material, and careful attention to a range of historiographical debates. It is not a thoroughgoing narrative history of New Zealand's contribution to the foreign missionary movement, though it does provide an authoritative overview and lays out much of the crucial information—augmented by helpful appendices outlining key institutions and sources. Nor does it aim to be a comprehensive history, since it consciously sets aside Catholic contributions, focuses mainly (though not exclusively) on Presbyterian and Baptist case studies, and concludes at the beginning of the Second World War.

These parameters partly provide a way of managing the vast scope of the field, with its plethora of institutions, individuals, and archival material. They also reflect Morrison's particular concern for the historiographical significance of the movement. Thus, Morrison effectively locates New Zealand missionary activity of the period within various contexts, notably colonial and imperial. Yet he is also concerned to consider how broader historiographical debates within those fields might be applied in interpreting the missions, and conversely, the "usefulness" of the missionary project for speaking back to the historiography. Morrison's handling of these issues is consistently well informed and fair-minded, raising many questions, and avoiding simplistic characterizations. He establishes the significance of his subject matter with clarity, in the manner of opening up a conversation.

While missionary work lost its cachet within the broader culture, it continued as a diverse, sizeable enterprise in post-Second World War New Zealand. There is clearly much more to be examined about this later period, and the role of missionary Christianity as a whole—both in "religious" terms, and more generally in connection with New Zealand's engagement with the wider world. *Pushing Boundaries* nevertheless makes a substantial contribution. It addresses issues of more than national significance, and brings a wide perspective to bear. Yet it is also a valuable national study, in terms of the history of Christianity in New Zealand, as well as the historiography of Christianity's relationship to culture and society.