

Unquiet Time: Aotearoa/New Zealand in a fast-changing world

By Colin James, Fraser Books, Masterton (2017)

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Reviewed by Malcolm Menzies

Colin James has been observing and commenting on New Zealand affairs for nearly fifty years. He's clearly a voracious reader across many fields and extremely well connected (very few writers of today could recount a personal conversation with Sir James Henare in 1980). Indeed, this book has the touch of a memoir. But it is much more than that. It seems to be the third of a trilogy, following *The Quiet Revolution* (1986) and *New Territory* (1992) and covers a broad, multidisciplinary swath including history, geopolitics, economics, business, philosophy and environmental science, all with an eye towards future implications for New Zealand.

Before entering the first of two halves, which describes "A World in Transit", there is an opening gallop through New Zealand's history since the time of Samuel Marsden. Breathing deeply, we reach the present day, where four drivers of change are identified: a newer and denser phase of globalisation; the coming of age of digital technology; looming environmental limits; and a disjunctive shock, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Actually the disjunctive shock is not a single event. Post-GFC, a new normality has yet to be found and another, likely greater (unknown) shock is in prospect in this or the next decade. All these drivers potentially add up to social transformation: the *Unquiet Time* of the book's title.

The scene being set, the reader is taken on a journey with rapid changes of horizon – for example on the same page 29 we get references to both 500 years of Western thought and growth in world trade in the first quarter of 2017. Here, both the historian and the journalist seem to be having a say. On page 37 there is an extraordinary paragraph:

Europe's social and economic innovation and reinvention necessitated by the bubonic plague's savaging of its populations fuelled its expansion into brutal domination and ravenous exploitation of the Americas from the fifteenth century, then over the next four centuries of much of Asia, Africa and the Pacific. The industrial revolution after the 1770s enhanced Europe's already superior technologies, including military weaponry, and enable [sic] the establishment of vast empires which had access to cheap raw materials and slaves in colonies, to which surplus population could also be exported.

One can't argue, though nearer-term, meso-level events might not be amenable to this level of distillation. For instance, while it may be true to say that "Ukraine began to explore association with the EU", was there not also wooing the other way, in the full knowledge that the Russian bear was bound to get grumpy? But quibbles such as these are irrelevant, since the author's main aim is to establish that there is an unquiet time upon us.

He certainly succeeds on that score. When the focus switches to the here and now, things move unpredictably. Like most other New Zealanders, Colin James has not quite anticipated "Jacindamania", despite his prescience about the implications of a potentially new, charismatic leader. Nor has he foreseen a red-green-black coalition in government or the significance of developments in Catalonia, although his description of underlying forces helps make sense of events in that region. This is the curse of the futurist who can see the signals of what is emerging, without knowing the actual outcome (there's a nice quote from Peter Carey: "You say things about the future but you have not been there so you cannot know").

I'm not sure that Colin James would call himself a futures thinker, but he writes like one. He implicitly employs some futuring techniques – for example scenario-like prospects for the future described on pages 48-9: "...while populists and other forces slow or reverse trade-based globalisation based on freer market access and harmonised regulation, digital technology might push globalisation on, though in a super-state, or virtual, way that is less manageable by terrestrial national governments."

There's also a list of scenarios for climate change, a global pandemic, China and Indonesia. This is an ambitious book. There's a nice analogy of a distributed democracy being like an electricity distribution network and an excellent description of long-term trends in political party support in chapter 14, entitled "Power Shift", that every New Zealand politician should read.

Aside from politics, New Zealand has a lot of issues, which are well laid out. Our economy has been based on "quarrying": cows (soil and water), tourists and international students. Moa, Seals, Coal, Orange Roughy and any number of commodities might be added to this list but they're another story. Suffice to say that "more is not everything" (Colin James has a knack for capturing big issues in short catchphrases). We have low productivity, which may be a permanent feature of the economy. But we should be measuring "stocks not flows". We read of the struggle between national and corporate "sovereignty", for example in tax shifting. New models of global governance are required, and - one of the most interesting insights in the book - cities may become the primary vehicle for international cooperation. Even further, global person-to-person links may redefine the future although this assumes that these links will be based on "good" values and there is a question, not addressed by the author, about where these values will come from. New thinking is required but we are told this will not come from the North Atlantic (a big call to make).

There are also major environmental issues to think about. Another catchphrase used to describe inherent trade-offs inherent is "yes/unless". "Yes', value, protect, enhance or conserve the environment and natural resources, 'unless' doing so affects one's property rights and use, one's profit or jobs or adds a noticeable cost, such as taxes or levies" (172).

The balance swings between yes and unless, but Colin James has already introduced a potential middle way with an attention-grabbing opening line in chapter four: "the natural environment is infrastructure". This assertion is hammered home to the extent that it betrays a human-centric (unless) view of the environment which is incompatible with other comments to the effect that "the presumption that humans rule nature is under challenge", as is "human superiority to nature and command of it" (103, 155). A cohesive society is also characterised as infrastructure and the use of this term to describe pretty much anything becomes a little excessive, but if it is being used as a rationale for longer-term investment, then that's probably fair enough.

Speaking of fairness, we are deep into the second half when Colin James nostalgically reflects on how a "fair go" used to be the cornerstone of how New Zealanders thought about themselves and the "contract" they had with their fellow citizens. "While the term fell out of favour in the 1990s, it is likely they would readily relate to it if it came back into fashion. The 'fair go' brings together individualism and mutual responsibility. Everyone has a fair go to make the best of themselves and do what they want to do. That's the 'go' part. The 'fair' part is that all others have a fair go too" (216).

This is not simply Colin James opining – he cites a formidable authority in John Rawls. But he will lose many people – especially international readers, by adding into this discussion the concept of *utu*, in both narrow and wider senses. It doesn't help that *utu* isn't included in the glossary of Maori words. This oversight is one of a number of signs that the book could have benefited from just a little more editing. *Sirocco* is/was a *kākāpō* not a *kokako*; National

Super has been New Zealand Super for a long time now. A visit to the dictionary could be avoided if “hysteresis” were explained when it first occurs, rather than on page 222. There’s quite a lot of duplication - we are introduced several times to Treasury’s standard of living framework. Parts of the book will rapidly date. Page 92 refers to the 1914-18 war “of which we are commemorating the centennial”.

Such grumbles may seem trifling, but not so the two versions of Dame Silvia Cartwright’s speech on Waitangi Day in 2004. On page 152 Dame Silvia is quoted as saying “We two peoples make a nation” then on page 169 the phrase is “We many peoples together make a nation”. Both statements are very interesting and profound reinterpretations of Hobson’s pledge of “he iwi tahi tatou”, but which did the Governor General actually say in the 21st Century? Or did she say both? It would be nice to know without having to resort to Google.

In short, notwithstanding the impressive scholarship and quality of the writing, there are indications here of a slightly rushed end game. One can’t help wondering why this might be. Perhaps the decks were being cleared for the next book, post-election 2017 (regardless of the winner)?

The memoir-like qualities provide some possible clues. Colin James writes with detachment, but there are many personal observations and a few wry asides, such as on page 64: “of course, many humans lack common sense too, from time to time”. New Zealand’s Rock Star Economy status may have been due to hallucinogenic drug-taking (the drugs being a dairy boom, the soaring house market and consumer credit). On page 86 we get a statement of personal philosophy and some polemic on page 167: “if we are to be genuinely bicultural, that implies making Te Reo Maori a national language, not just informally but actually”. There is some stern editorialising when we are told that Helen Clark *unwisely* observed that if Al Gore had won the 2000 election there would have been no invasion of Iraq.

Some of the author’s connections are given high praise. Who wouldn’t want to be “regarded as having one of the country’s finest economic minds”? Others have been more influential than I realised. Read the book to find out who was an apostle for the “third way” in Steve Mahary’s office. On the other hand, the identities of the Ministry of Social Development analysts who first thought of Social Investment in the 1990s remain a secret. There’s clearly a story to be told about “Shine”, the Ministry of Justice and Domestic Violence Programmes, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade might blush to read the flattering remarks on page 151.

Not everybody fares so well. A former Cabinet minister is given a somewhat gratuitous cuff around the ears – one wonders if an old score is being settled there. And I felt a bit sorry for those who have been completely written out – for example in the description of the rise of Social Credit the author goes to great lengths *not* to mention the names of Vern Cracknell, Bruce Beetham or Garry Knapp.

These dashes of personal perspective enhance the book rather than detract from it. A particular upside of the author’s “connectedness” is that if an assertion is not fully referenced, you can still bet on it being valid. That said, the references are formidable and the endnotes exhaustive, although the lack of an actual bibliography is disappointing.

Returning to the purpose of the book, this becomes clear in the final chapter which asks the question “who will we be?” It contains wise counsel to a country setting out into a world full of opportunities and risks. Such counsel can’t be delayed. This is a labour of love dedicated to New Zealand/Aotearoa, to help it build resilience in turbulent, unquiet times.