

*Athens to Aotearoa: Greece and Rome in New Zealand Literature and Society*

Edited by Diana Burton, Simon Perris and Jeff Tatum

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Classical Reception Studies has developed over the last twenty years, with Classicists and Ancient Historians finding never-ending sources of academic inspiration. With its origins in Comparative Literature Studies and the Classical Tradition, Classical Reception Studies has extended beyond textual analyses to include the visual arts, film, popular culture, and socio-political histories and philosophies. It has also extended beyond Britain and Europe – its traditional strongholds – to research embedded in the influence of ancient Mediterranean cultures on the Antipodes.

*Athens to Aotearoa: Greece and Rome in New Zealand Literature and Society* is the first collection dedicated to Classical Reception Studies in the Southern Hemisphere. The book is the result of a conference held at Victoria University of Wellington in 2014, on the Greco-Roman influences in New Zealand culture. Comprised of fourteen chapters and carefully edited, *Athens to Aotearoa* not only aims to champion New Zealand's classical inheritance, but also to interrogate it.

Perris' Introduction (7-47) provides a detailed appraisal of Greco-Roman antiquity in New Zealand's history from past to present, and aims to open a dialogue on a subject prone to controversy, post-colonial examination and cultural debates. For international readers, in particular, the Introduction includes a useful contextual analysis of New Zealand as a 'settler nation and former British colony' (13), and situates the beginning of Classical Reception therein; for example:

Early observers often turned to the classical tradition to make sense of Aotearoa, New Zealand. Joel Polack's *New Zealand* (1838), cluttered with French and Latin, includes numerous classical references. In *Excursion in the Northern Land of New Zealand* (1844), William Colenso recalled how, noticing his Māori guides' happiness at seeing open-woodland plants again after days in dense bush, he was reminded of Xenophon's Greeks in the *Anabasis*, happy to see the ocean again. (14-15)

From such beginnings, Perris takes readers on a historical and cultural tour of the Greco-Roman presence in New Zealand; a small but significant component of a complex national narrative.

The book is divided into five parts, beginning with 'Writers and Artists'. As Classical Reception Studies is interdisciplinary, and welcomes practice-based research, part one features essays by two novelists, one poet, and one artist. Witi Ihimaera's 'What if Cyclops Was Alive and Well and Living in a Cave in Invercargill?' is a personal response to the subject at hand. Ihimaera mixes his love of Classics with meditations on his own writing, seeing 'classical literature as Māori literature's analogue' (60). Karen Healey's 'Girls Going Underground: Navigating Mythologies in Aotearoa's Literary Landscape' also discusses the combination of Māori and Greco-Roman narratives in New Zealand literature. Like Ihimaera's chapter, Healey writes about the writer, providing a contemplative work on her own practice in a process she calls 'autoethnography' (76): 'a deep-mining expedition through palimpsestic strata of influence; a solipsistic katabasis of the imagination.' (76)

Anna Jackson's 'I, Clodia': I Had a Dream I Was a Ghost' is also self-reflexive. As Healey looks back to past work, Jackson does too. As Healey reflects on her fiction (with a voice of humility and honesty), Jackson reflects on her 2014 sequence of poems, 'I, Clodia', the second of two collections inspired by Catullus (with a voice of artistry and dreaming). Marian Maguire

discusses the methods of the print-maker in 'A Fabricated History of Greco-New Zealand Interaction'. Maguire considers the place of myth, history, lies, and truth as conduits to the creation of three exhibitions undertaken from 2002 to 2011 on the ancient Greeks in Aotearoa. Like Healey, Maguire considers the female Pākehā as creator in a post-colonial nation; a contested status rendered more contested when the creator works with both classical and Māori motifs. As the chapters of Ihimaera, Healey and Jackson are enhanced by writing excerpts, Maguire's chapter is illustrated with examples of her art.

Part two, 'Visual Arts' has a chapter by Greta Hawes on Maguire's work. 'Discussions with Mountains in Marian Maguire's *A Taranaki Dialogue*' excavates the artist's 2011 series of six etchings that were part of the exhibition, *Titokowaru's Dilemma*. Hawes' chapter is erudite and innovative, utilising the Socratic method as a means of viewing Maguire's series; an approach in keeping with the artwork, as she explains:

The series plays on the repeated motif of an imported figure – Socrates ('What is Wisdom?'), Rodin's *The Thinker* ('An unexamined life ...'), the Nike of Samothrace ('What is Victory?') and Athena ('What is Justice?') – set against an iconic feature of New Zealand's landscape (in all but one instance, the distinctive cone of Taranaki). (132)

All six etchings are included in the book: five in Hawes' chapter, and one in the preceding chapter by Maguire. Tom Stevenson's 'Julius Caesar in *Xena: Warrior Princess*' is the second and final chapter in part two. While the television series has received widespread academic analysis, little has been written from the perspective of Classical Reception Studies. Stevenson discusses the New Zealand landscape, cast and crew before turning his attention to the character of Caesar, played by New Zealand actor, Karl Urban and analysing the seven episodes in which he appears. Stevenson considers Caesar as a 'strong' manifestation of a 'New Zealand responsibility for ... [his] creation' (167). This is an interesting angle, and one Stevenson presents with an eye to Ancient History, Classical Reception, and Popular Culture Studies.

Three chapters comprise part three, 'Myths': Simon Perris' 'Orpheus, Māui and the Underworld in New Zealand Literature', Geoff Miles' 'The Darkly Recurrent and Improbable Dream': James K. Baxter and the Venus/Anchises Story', and Sharon Matthews' 'Dionysus, Christ and the Publican: Ambiguous Gods in *The Day That Flanagan Died*'. Classical myth in literature is the unifying theme here, and each scholar discusses leading New Zealand practitioners. Perris compares Orpheus with Māui, both of whom 'have attracted the attention of Māori and Pākehā writers' (174), as have the stories of their experience of *katabasis* (the journey to the underworld). The focus is on Ihimaera's *Nights in the Garden of Spain* (1995), a mid-life 'coming out' narrative, and *The Trowenna Sea* (2009), which chronicles Māori prisoners in Tasmania during the mid-1840s and the historical trope of penal Australia as an underworld. Other writers include Robert Sullivan (*Captain Cook in the Underworld*) and Karen Healey (*Guardian of the Dead*). Miles, one of the foremost scholars on Baxter, continues to research the poet's engagement with classical myth, this time the 'love story of Venus and Anchises' (203). Like other contributors, Miles considers a classical hero, namely Anchises, as an archetypal New Zealander; the figure he refers to as 'a classic New Zealand 'man alone'' (212). Venus, too, is important in Baxter's New Zealand; associated with its sea-girt landscape: Encounters with Venus in Baxter often take place on the beach, that liminal space between sea and land which can also signify the meeting of other binary opposites ... as Baxter notes ... the beach in New Zealand poetry can be 'a place where revelations may occur', 'the no-man's-land between conscious and unconscious' and ... 'an arena for sexual adventure'. (210)

Matthews also writes on Baxter; Baxter the playwright, who, like Baxter the poet, makes extensive use of ‘overdetermined mythic figures and iterated themes and images’ in his ‘working and reworking’ of his ‘personal concerns’. (218) The play’s central figure, Flanagan, is symbolic of Christ, which facilitates the theme of death and resurrection; but, according to Matthews, Dionysus as per Euripides’ *Bacchae* is an additional intertextual signifier, who also characterises the alcohol-fuelled protagonist (and the playwright himself).

Part four, ‘Poets’, opens with Maxine Lewis’ ‘C. K. Stead Writes Catullus: Persona, Intention, Intratext and Allusion’. Lewis discusses ‘Catullan personae, themes and intertexts’, which ‘have been a significant and consistent element of Stead’s poetry since the appearance of a poem titled ‘Caesar is still Caesar’ in the 1979 collection *Walking Westward*.’ (249). As Lewis goes on to explain, there have since been over fifty ‘Catullus’ poems by Stead, and she explores the various ways of understanding – and not understanding – the Catullus of Stead, and the Stead of Catullus. Her chapter is an impressive combination of poetics, interview, Latinity, and critique. The next chapter is by John Davidson, rightly described by Perris in the Introduction as a ‘pioneering scholar of classical allusions in New Zealand poetry’ (39). In ‘Horace, Catullus, Virgil, Lucretius and Mason’, Davidson considers the influence of these three Latin poets on New Zealand poet, R. A. K. Mason, a skilled Latinist and translator, and a significant member of a burgeoning bohemian enclave of poets active in the 1920s and 1930s. Peter Whiteford’s ‘Anna Seward’s *Elegy on Captain Cook*’ ends the section with a beginning; namely, an early foray into the trope of Athens in Aotearoa. Whiteford provides a big picture of the ancient Mediterranean cultures in New Zealand – for good and (sometimes) bad – and introduces readers to Seward (1742-1809), not a New Zealander, never a visitor to Greece or Italy, but the composer of a Cook encomium. Scorned and mocked for her literary outputs, though not without some admirers of note, Seward laments Cook’s death amid classical allusions that begin at the very beginning:

The poem begins by imagining the sorrowing Muses having been rendered mute by Cook’s death ... Seward implores them to re-sound his praises with ‘sacred verse’ and ... demands that they should ‘In sad procession wander round the shrine, / And weep him mortal, whom ye sung divine!’ (302)

The last part of the collection, ‘History and Society’, has two chapters: Matthew Trundle’s ‘The Reception of the Classical Tradition in New Zealand War Reporting and Memory in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’ and Arlene Holmes-Henderson’s ‘Classical Subjects in Schools: A Comparative Study of New Zealand and the United Kingdom’. The New Zealand Wars (1860s), World War I, and the recourse to classical imagery, are the focus of Trundle’s research, which provides a much-needed complement to the material on Australia, World War I and the Classical Tradition. Holmes-Henderson brings worrying news at the end of the book:

The study of classical languages is in decline in New Zealand schools. ... Classical Greek in schools is almost non-existent ... Over the four-year period 2010-2013, there has been a steady decline in students studying Latin in Years 11 and 12 ... (327-28)

Enrolments in Classical Studies are much stronger, but Holmes-Henderson also shows a recent decline in these numbers also. The rich creative harvest that comes from a Classical education, or schooling in related disciplines, is powerfully demonstrated by *Athens to Aotearoa: Greece and Rome in New Zealand Literature and Society*. Surely this is a major imperative to keep Classical subjects alive?

What is fascinating and rewarding about the collection is the intertwining of differing views on poets such as Mason, Baxter, Stead and Jackson who are ‘presented’ together in one volume, linked by debts to the classical canon, shown to be similar, and radically different. The

scholarship is uniformly strong, the writing erudite. There are ‘moments’ of interrogation, but more of contemplation; but this is not a surprise in a work that marks new ground and shows how much more needs to be done. If another project is planned by this team, or by others, a suggestion would be to expand the theoretical and scholarly horizons to include stronger conversations with Classical Reception Studies outside New Zealand, to privilege not only Aotearoa but Aotearoa within a global context.