

The Face of Nature: An Environmental History of the Otago Peninsula

By Jonathan West. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2017.

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Reviewed by Megan Potiki

It is a tricky thing when one is asked to review a book on something that pervades your existence, your work and your whānau.

Jonathan West's book writes an environmental history of the Otago Peninsula. I have grown up at Ōtākou, the small village at the eastern edge of the Peninsula. I grew up looking across from the east to the west, I close my eyes and could draw an outline of the hills that embrace Aramoana and Port Chalmers. I have been told that Jonathan grew up at Port Chalmers, alternatively looking across from the west to the east, to the Otago Peninsula. This is perhaps where his connections to this piece of land sprung from. His book illustrates his passion for the Otago Peninsula and its interaction with all inhabitants from time immorial.

The book is an impressive history that is sectioned in to three parts. First, 'The Primordial Peninsula and People'. West has effectively encapsulated the essence of the Māori connection with the land. Including the pictures and maps, this is a great introduction to the breadth of whakapapa and Māori history at Ōtākou which continues to surprise people, particularly Māori from elsewhere. This beautiful imagery brings the Peninsula to life.

In commenting on his Māori history content, it comes with a bias slant from my perspective. I do not apologise for that but to be clear: this is my field of interest and my whakapapa is embedded in this narrative. I respect Jonathan for writing about our history; that takes some courage in the face of a fiercely proud hapū for whom their interpretation of events are always right.

Taking in to account West's basic Māori language ability and limited access to Māori language manuscripts, of which there are many relevant to the Māori history of the Peninsula, his version of our Māori history on the Otago Peninsula is sound. The text and Māori narrative might have been better supported if West had used further authoritative Ngāi Tahu sources, of which there is no shortage. Furthermore some of the te reo Māori interpretation is somewhat askew in areas and frankly, Māori words do not always need to be translated eg: Poatiri is not a fish-hook.

The one area I struggled with somewhat is the picture he paints of the Māori footprint on the larger Otago Peninsula when in fact the Māori demographic was centered at the mouth of the harbour extending out to the wider Harwood, Portobello, and Papanui area. However I appreciate the way he has treated the Māori history with care and has made a strong effort to acknowledge the mana of the people at Ōtākou.

The second part of the book is named 'The World ashes Ashore', referring mainly to the arrival of Europeans to the peninsula and whaling at Ōtākou. This section illuminates the seamless movement Māori and European had to the world when whaling and other trades and exports commenced. West discusses the trade returns across the Pacific to Australia and so forth and he accentuates the rapid impact modernity had on Māori and their desire to be a part of that world. His section on the Weller brothers is excellent, with great detail in areas like that of the Weller brothers' medicine chest. I have a keen interest in that history also. My father is named Edward Weller after his Whaler tūpuna who had a child with Taiaroa's daughter. Her name

was Nāni and she married Raniera Ellison; that marriage gave birth to the Ellison family from Ōtākou. West fittingly communicates the sentiment of Māori to the sale of the Otago Block in 1844, being the pivotal event which then opened up Ōtākou to colonisation on a scale that almost devastated our people's existence. Furthermore, it changed the environment on the wider Otago Peninsula forever.

The final part of the book is titled 'Improving God's Creation' and discusses the British settlement on the Otago Peninsula up to 1900. The incredible change from Māori occupation of land to the land holdings of the 1890s is illustrated effectively in West's maps. His explanations of dramatic environmental changes are a lament to the past. The loss of particular birdlife is just one example he refers to in demonstrating the transformation of the Otago Peninsula and in fact the wider Dunedin area from what it once was.

West has accomplished what he has set out to do, examining the relationship between the various layers of people on the peninsula. His attention to thorough research and comprehensive footnotes is noteworthy and extremely valuable for the reader interested in history on the peninsula.

Ultimately West has authored a beautiful book that I would hope goes some way towards enlightening the Kiwi reader about Māori and Pākehā history from another corner of New Zealand. The reader can step back in time and walk through a passage of change that is colossal for a small finger of land poking out from the South Island's east coast into the Pacific Ocean.