

The West Island: Five Twentieth-Century New Zealanders in Australia

By Stephanie Johnson. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2019.

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Reviewed by Helen Bones

Stephanie Johnson's *The West Island* is a collective biography of four writers and one artist and their experiences of living trans-Tasman lives. Like Johnson herself, Ronald Wakelin, Douglas Stewart, Jean Devanny, Eric Baume and Dulcie Deamer were born and raised in New Zealand and then spent a considerable portion of their lives in Australia.

Johnson begins with an imagined gathering of her New Zealand characters at an art gallery opening in Sydney in the 1940s. She continues to paint these evocative word pictures at intervals throughout the book, focusing on particularly significant years for each of the characters—part speculation, but also dense with interesting details about the time—giving an effective sense of life in New Zealand and Australia in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.

Through their experiences, and with reference to her own, Johnson explores various themes relating to the differences between New Zealanders and Australians and the interesting effects of having strong ties to both countries. Because the closeness of the relationship is taken for granted, and from an outsiders' perspective New Zealanders and Australians are so similar as to be barely distinguishable, it is hard to understand or articulate the feeling of dislocation that a move across the Tasman can bring. As Rosemary Baird argues, New Zealanders moving to Australia still experience some of the traumas of migration, but such traumas are "invisible" and therefore unexamined. This leads to a strange blind spot, particularly with regards to one another's literature, which is one of the major themes of the book.

The book is not dense with footnotes like a purely academic text, and makes no claim to be so, yet it is scholarly, well referenced and filled with careful and comprehensive detail. For this reason, it is surprising to see some key works missing from the bibliography, including some important historical and literary scholarship on the trans-Tasman relationship. The work of Philippa Mein Smith and Peter Hemenstall, such as *Remaking the Tasman World*, has influenced my own work on trans-Tasman literary connections in the first half of the twentieth century. Neither Lydia Wevers nor Terry Sturm, both of whom have commented on the disconnection between the two countries' literary cultures, warrant a mention. And most surprisingly of all, this account does not refer to Brigid Magner's work tracing the trans-Tasman careers of four New Zealand writers, including Stewart and Deamer. Magner's article focuses on the various "impostures" expatriate New Zealanders were forced to perform in order to survive in Australia. However, given that work situated "in-between" the two national contexts often fails to gain traction, these omissions in some ways serve to bolster Johnson's argument.

While there have been other attempts to find connecting threads for groups of New Zealand writers expatriate in Australia, Johnson's five characters are well chosen both because of their commonalities and their differences. Brigid Magner's chosen subjects include Barry Crump and an incident of trans-Tasman plagiarism, which she (quite unfairly) puts on equal "imposture" footing with Douglas Stewart's "fabrication" of an Australian identity. Johnson avoids this tendency of trans-Tasman scholars to disbelieve or be suspicious of people who claim to have flexible national allegiances. The *West Island* five have not been jammed together

to force some kind of point, but were chosen because they were unambiguously New Zealanders (they were all born and raised there), they were all the children of one or more first generation New Zealanders, and they all moved to Australia permanently (more or less) at relatively young ages. They were all successful in Australia and “forgotten” back home to variable extents. A further thread, which Johnson links to national character, is that they all felt different to their adopted countrymen and women, and retained this sense throughout their lives. But they were all different in such different ways, including Deamer the occultist and nudist, Baume the racist shock-jock and Devanny the tragic heroine of the working class. Such diversity raises the possibility that their sense of difference was a function of being from somewhere else as opposed to being from New Zealand in particular.

One thing the five subjects did have in common was a certain misplaced smugness about relations with Indigenous people and an idea that they possessed some right to speak authoritatively on this subject—something that is not entirely absent from the Pākehā New Zealand psyche even now. With Eric Baume as an extreme outlier, all the book’s literary subjects wrote about Māori people and culture in a way that is considered problematic through a contemporary lens. This topic is a preoccupation of the book, and Johnson freely admits she has skin in the game, having been accused of cultural appropriation for including Māori characters in her own works. She makes the very good point that Pākehā writers avoiding writing about anything but their own culture creates “a very warped, thin notion of how we live” (176) and a section of literature depicting an imaginary monoculture, which is surely counterproductive. It seems to me that it is the assumed authority with which writers approached their subject that is at fault here—although, with the exception of Baume, all had “good intentions,” the trouble arose when they assumed knowledge of Māori culture and way of life by virtue of being brought up in New Zealand, rather than deriving information from first-hand knowledge or extended relationships with actual Māori people. The absence of this naturally leads to the rehearsal of stereotypes and clichés, frequently ill-informed and insulting. When this is taken into account, Stewart’s literary rendition of his experience of the elderly Māori couple who took him in while he was self-indulgently wandering around the North Island is all the more disturbing, because we know his real experience was much more positive. The one consolation here is that the passage may have outraged Witi Ihimaera enough to kick-start his literary career (52–54).

Although this book focuses on people who left New Zealand and never returned, it manages to avoid over-emphasising certain well-worn tropes about the mass exodus of talent across the Tasman and further afield. Perhaps if different subjects had been chosen, a sense of trans-Tasman mobility and cross-pollination might have come across more strongly, though it is certainly present. It is, however, refreshing to see a trans-Tasman perspective portrayed as a positive feature rather than nothing but a terrible burden leading to a lifetime of melancholy and dislocation. As Nancy Keesing said of Douglas Stewart, maybe a “preoccupation with two landscapes enhances [one’s] interpretation” (230). The *West Island* characters, Stewart in particular, seemed less troubled with their multiple affiliations than other people have *wanted* them to be. At the same time, Johnson articulates the folly of imagining that a truly trans-Tasman existence is easy to attain, something that anyone who has tried to pitch trans-Tasman projects or publications will certainly attest to. How many literary or artistic outputs have been underappreciated because they are not “Australian” enough for Australia and vice versa for New Zealand? This book does not deserve to suffer this same fate, and I hope it doesn’t.