The Other Archive: Archaeology and history in New Zealand

Pākehā Settlements in a Māori World: New Zealand Archaeology 1769-1860
Reviewed by Jonathan West

Pākehā Settlements in a Māori World surveys the historical archaeology of New Zealand from first European “footfall on these shores”, through to the 1860s, by which time Pākehā were numerically dominant. The first book of its kind published in New Zealand, it will remain influential for a long time. Pākehā Settlements is the culmination of a life’s work: published in late 2019, its author died on 3 January 2020.

Ian Smith has since been hailed as “virtually” founder of historical archaeology in New Zealand – that is, the archaeology of the recent past, which can also draw on written documents, oral histories and images.¹ Smith would have disavowed this; he had an old-fashioned concern for firsts. In a 1991 survey of historical archaeology’s emergence he identified forerunners as early as Elsdon Best in the 1920s, and acknowledged recent predecessors such as Nigel Prickett.²

Smith then foresaw a bright future for his discipline.³ And, over the next thirty years, he and his collaborators – especially Atholl Anderson, Nigel Prickett and Angela Middleton – together with his many students, conducted digs across the New Zealand archipelago, from Stewart Island to the Bay of Islands, exhuming a succession of our most significant coastal sites – from Cook’s landings, through the first mission, to the first sites of government. Analyses of the material unearthed in these excavations are the foundation of Pākehā Settlements.

All the while, however, Smith fought the rising prevalence of digger chasers compiling an inaccessible grey literature, of a salvage archaeology providing bare records of sites then destroyed for development. He despaired by 2004 that historical archaeology, “underdeveloped, hidden from view,” had failed to inform “a broader understanding about the social and cultural history of New Zealand”.⁴

Ian Smith contended his discipline could add valuable data to the evidence of word and image, to create a more complete picture of the recent past, in particular in reconstructing everyday life. What the earth preserves is more democratic than the written word; the archaeologists who rematerialize the past are privileged by their data being “reflective of the intricate patterns of behaviour at home, work and leisure”.⁵ Smith’s triumph through Pākehā Settlements is to illuminate these truths.
Figure 1: Coloured glass beads from the Hohi mission site.  
Photographs by Ian Smith.

Figure 2: Thimbles, buttons and sewing pins found at the site of the Te Puna mission station, Bay of Islands. 
Photographs by Angela Middleton.
Consider the glass beads of Hohi and the thimbles of Te Puna. Hohi was New Zealand’s founding mission, established by Samuel Marsden in 1814, celebrated as “the first permanent European settlement”. Actually it didn’t last long, and after its closure in 1832 has never again been occupied, making it the perfect archaeological site. Te Puna was then established just a kilometre away by John and Hannah King and their children. Historians have made much of the substantial archives surviving missionary men like King, who were prolific journal keepers and letter writers. However Hannah and her daughters left no writing. Their legacy is uncovered by the excavations of Ian together with Angela Middleton, partners in life and work, through artefacts that, as Angela put it, “reveal the mundane world of everyday domesticity”, a realm only glimpsed in the archives, and largely ignored by historians. Objects such as these were the currency of mission instruction: in 1816 Thomas Kendall sought from his superiors items like these thimbles, needles, buttons and beads to provide to pupils in return for school attendance. These beads were likely dropped by Māori children; the artefacts of sewing and needlework could equally have been used by Māori students or by the Pākehā introducing them to the female arts, Christianity, and colonialism. As Smith puts it, such objects “provide an immediacy that seldom fails to grip” (p12) and display the distance between lives recounted in writing, and “the material practices of everyday life” (p13).

Historical archaeology attempts to reconcile the distance between two disciplines, and bring two archives into dialogue: one on paper, the other archive preserved in the earth. Its practitioners seek to walk what Ian calls “the borderlands between archaeology, history, and tradition” (p278). Perhaps are as many paths through such disciplinary diversity as there are practitioners. Smith’s own has some decisive strengths.

Figure 3: Archaeological excavations at Hohi mission station, the first permanent Pākehā settlement, founded in 1814. Excavation is a careful process of uncovering remains of past human activity by removing accumulated soil layers one at a time so that items recovered can be placed into a sequence of events. In this area of the Hohi site, archaeologists discovered...
the first school in New Zealand, opened in 1816 and demolished in 1824, and a subsequent building that was probably a storehouse. Photograph by Ian Smith.

Ian Smith studied and then worked with Atholl Anderson at Otago. Anderson has shaped archaeology in New Zealand (and indeed the Pacific) as first and foremost a scientific practice, from the techniques of excavation, through analysis of assemblages, to the proposing and testing of hypotheses. Smith’s PhD dissertation, which pioneered analysis of sea mammal exploitation by Māori, exemplifies their methods, and highlights that he worked to integrate archaeology, tradition, and history from the beginning of his career to the end. As his abstract puts it:

After reviewing pertinent archaeological and ethno-historic evidence a series of hypotheses were formulated regarding the methods by which sea mammals were procured, the manner in which their exploitation was integrated within regional patterns of subsistence and settlement, and broad temporal and regional variations in its occurrence and importance.

Three sets of analytical techniques crucial to the testing of these hypotheses were developed…

One result of such methods is analytic rigour. Pākehā Settlements begins by outlining the Māori world as context for what follows. Smith is at ease quick-stepping through what archaeology can tell us about Māori arrival and adaptation. Smith’s explanation of changing settlement patterns is one that he and Atholl were first to promulgate based on their excavations at Shag River Mouth in coastal Otago: a shift from large coastal villages established to exploit seal and moa, to forced dispersal, following the extinction of these and all other species of large game. Smith is readier than Anderson, however, to acknowledge Māori adaptation to the fragility of New Zealand environment. Here he highlights the fruits of his recent research collaborations with a range of natural scientists, which have found that several species we are accustomed to see as native, including some penguins, shags, and sea lions, are in fact recent arrivals from separate subantarctic populations that recolonised the New Zealand mainland after Māori exterminated their predecessors. Their survival in such tenuous circumstances enables Smith to suggest only “a change on the cultural practices of harvesting” allowed them to stay (p36).

Applied to the historical period, Smith’s methods bring a refreshing clarity. Pākehā Settlements steps through a sequence of five ‘chronological pulses’ to 1860 (p19): ship-based exploration (1769-1791); sojourning (1792-1813), in which Pākehā were first left on shore to fend for themselves; the beginnings of permanent residency, though confined to the far north and far south and to single function settlements (1814-1828); dispersal around the entire coast and diversification across trades (1828-1840); and colonial governance and settlement (1840-1860).

These divisions are derived from the first dates of distinct differences in the nature of Pākehā behaviour here, differences clearly reflected in the material culture captured in the archaeological archive. The distinctions may strike some as superficial – since, for example, exploring continued after 1791. This would be a mistake. As Smith stresses, the initial explorers came “as visitors with no intention of staying” (p65); the nature of their engagement was qualitatively different from those who lived here, even as sojourners, so leaving material traces of a different, domestic order. Others may see some distinctions as self-evident. Over the course of his work James Belich has similarly parsed New Zealand’s past, highlighting for example the significance of the temporary settlement of 1792 by the Britannia crew in Making Peoples, and later emphasising the explosive growth of settler Australasia from 1828 in
Smith prefaces his discussion of early exploration with an enjoyably rapid-fire demolition of the proposition Portuguese or Spanish onshore arrivals pre-date Cook. Those already-converted are probably hopeless causes, but Smith incisively undermines any reasonable faith in ‘mystery objects’ finds such as an iron helmet recovered from Wellington Harbour. All such objects are effectively meaningless, because they lack provenance – “information about the location and context in which an item was found” (p44).

Smith’s excavations form a roll call of significant early sojourning and settlement sites in the north and south, beginning with the 1792 Britannia settlement at Luncheon Cove in Dusky Sound, and extending through to discussion of shore whaling, anchored by Smith’s excavations, with Nigel Prickett, at Oashore, on Banks Peninsula. A particular highlight is the discussion of the settlement at Sealers Bay on Codfish Island / Whenua Hou, which Smith and Atholl Anderson located and excavated in 2007. Ngāi Tahu formed the community there in the early 1820s by relocating troublesome sealers and sailors together with Ngāi Tahu and Ngāti Mamoe women, many of them high-ranking. The archaeological excavations reveal the food eaten, and the methods of preparation, were mostly Māori – “muttonbirds and penguins were frequently on the menu”; alongside evidence of potato cultivation mint was found still growing. The men went sealing, and later shore-whaling, but also spent much time fishing, gardening,
and harvesting birds – so that their lives closely resembled their Māori neighbours. As Smith notes, the artefacts found bear “material witness to this integration of Māori and Pākehā cultural traditions” (p140). Māori artefact forms found include stone flakes of food preparation, fish hooks, files, adzes, an awl and a pounamu pendant; those of Pākehā are mostly nails and spikes, with an unusually large number of clay pipes and glass bottles, some plates (no tea cups), and a gold watch-hand.

Figure 5: Artefacts from Sealers Bay
TOP Bone buttons and a gold watch hand. Until the 1850s, bone buttons were made by hand, leaving many with an irregular shape. From left: University of Otago, CF.142.AB.2, CF.199.AB.6, CF.170.AB.3, CF.199.AB.5, CF.234.AB.7, CF.37.AS.2, photographs by Les O’Neill, courtesy of Te Rūnaka o Murihiku

BOTTOM Māori artefacts include (from left) a small tangiwai pendant; flakes of silcrete, obsidian and chalcedony; a bone fish-hook point; and a schist file. From left: University of Otago, CF.19.AS.1, CF.15AL.21, CF.9AL.19, CF.223.AL.154, CF.238, AWB.4, CF.269.AL.207, photographs by Les O’Neill, courtesy of Te Rūnaka o Murihiku and the Whenua Hou Committee.

A very different picture of the community of Māori and Pākehā emerges from excavations of William Cook’s shipyard at Port Pegasus, Rakiura (Stewart Island). At the instigation of William Stewart, nine Pākehā men with (mostly) Ngāpuhi women sailed to and settled in the far end of the country, and built two ships between 1826 and perhaps 1833, including the Joseph Weller for the whaling station then being founded on the Otago Peninsula. This story linking north and south cries out for fuller telling, but despite the historical detective work of John Ross (who conjectured Stewart and James Herd of the First New Zealand Company colluded in planning a joint settlement there only to be persuaded to prefer the Hokianga by John Rudolphus Kent) so much remains mysterious.16 Archaeological excavation has added useful ballast to Ross’s speculations about the settlement, not least by having found the site.
No artefacts in traditional Māori form were found, suggesting to Smith perhaps the Ngāpuhi women had neither knowledge nor networks for how to acquire them so far from home. The remains of bones suggest the community subsisted almost exclusively on seals and sealions.

![Figure 6: One of the stone fireplaces at William Cook’s shipyard. This, and the domestic artefacts found near it, provided evidence for dwellings in the vicinity. Photograph by Andy Dodd, Department of Conservation.](image)

Smith also details finds of fragments of plates in porcelain, which he identifies as Canton ware, a cheap export porcelain popular in Australia identical to those recovered at Hohi, making it “almost certain” (p143) they had come south from the Bay of Islands with Cook and his companions.
Figure 7: Items from William Cook’s shipyard include (from top) an iron chain link, a wrought iron nail, a Canton ware plate fragment, and a section of a square glass bottle. It is likely that the Canton ware crockery had been brought south from the Bay of Islands. From top: University of Otago, COC.3.M.2, COC.4.M.15, COC.1.C.1, COC.10.G.11, photographs by Ian Smith.

Figure 8: Ceramics from the Hohi mission. Whiteware, which became the dominant ceramic type after the 1820s, was decorated in a range of different ways. At Hohi these included (clockwise from top left) transfer printing, shell-edging, sprigging and industrial slip. Clockwise from top left: University of Otago, HM.WW.25, HM.SH.4, HM.SPR.1, OM.IS.1, photographs by Jessie Garland.
Significant excavations of northern settlements include Hohi, Kororareka, the significant Hōreke shipyard in the Hokianga, along with Gordon Browne’s spar station in the Mahurangi Harbour. Smith’s excavations with Angela Middleton of Hohi yielded more than 13,000 artefacts, and are unsurprisingly the centre-piece of his discussion of the northern mission-stations (none of the others has seen extensive excavation). The artefacts were almost exclusively imported, so as Smith points out, for Māori living and working at Hohi, or visiting there, it was clear this was a Pākehā place, different from the Māori world. There is also material evidence of social difference within the community – Thomas Kendall’s household’s more expensive and fashionable tea wares reflected his view of his position as leader of the community. Smith is also careful to highlight evidence of intertwining practices as glass bottles, for example, joined obsidian as sources from which sharp edged flakes could be struck. Most evocatively, the slate pencils and tablets found were used to do something new to all concerned: to teach Māori to read and write in their own language. They so speak to what Smith calls the ‘entanglement’ of traditions, “through which they develop a degree of reliance upon each other and out of which new cultural practices emerge” (p123).

Figure 9: Slate tablet and pencil fragments found on the site of the Hohi school. Traces of writing are discernible between scratched lines on the slate fragment at right, while there appears to be a drawing, perhaps of a house, on the fragment at left. Some of the pencils have been marked with crosses or notches, presumably to personalise them. From left: University of Otago, HM.662.OS.1, OM.339.OS.1, OM.419.OSP.1, OM418. OSP.8, OM256.OSP.2, OM.192.OSP.4, photographs by Ian Smith

Smith here advances arguments in terms very similar to those of Tony Ballantyne, but with the difference, perhaps, that he always anchors his case in the material record. Indeed, the principal way Smith’s work augments our historical knowledge is through his deep interest in ordinary objects – the jars, jugs, bottles, plates, cups and cutlery used to store prepare and serve food and drink, glassware, or pipes, or the array of colonial building materials in earth, timber, iron, stone or brick – preoccupations that perhaps have no equivalent among historians here. Smith is superb when tracing making and traffic in such things. Through describing the provenance of the products Pākehā brought, he makes material the networks that enabled the globalisation of New Zealand. He can then offer new suggestions about the patterns of domestic life, such
as that at Oashore, a shore whaling station Smith excavated on Banks Peninsula, where the distribution of pipe remains around the buildings suggests even then the smokers had to sit outside; analysis of their pipes also allows inferences about the currents of commercial traffic, such as that from about 1840 “the main source of pipes shifted from New South Wales to Britain” (p180). It allows also for the occasional telling observation: analysis of the crockery found at the General Assembly building that housed our first Parliament showed such a various array of white-ware patterns that “New Zealand’s first parliamentarians appear to have supped from a mismatched array of china.” (p204).

Figure 10: Bottles had to be imported into New Zealand, so they were often reused. These were among thirty gin bottles excavated from the basement of the Te Puna mission house. They were called ‘case-gin’ bottles because their square cross-section made them easy to fit into a packing case. *Photograph by Angela Middleton.*
Figure 11: Among the new types of glass bottles brought to New Zealand by colonists in the 1840s were containers for (from left) sauce, salad oil, vinegar and carbonated soft drinks. Salad oil and vinegar bottles had moulded decorations as they were intended to be used at the table. The torpedo-shaped Hamilton’s patent bottle (at right) was designed to be stored on its side to prevent the cork from drying out and letting the ‘fizz’ escape. *From left: University of Otago, HA.582, HA.357, HA.772, HA.510, photographs by Les O’Neill.*

Figure 12: Ceramic fragments from whiteware cups, saucers and plates used by early parliamentarians in the General Assembly building. *Photographs by Ian Smith.*
Indeed, considered simply as history, *Pākehā Settlements* has few peers, especially for the period 1769 till the 1830s. In part this indicts New Zealand’s historians. Our understanding of the early explorations and engagements still relies overly much on anthropologist Anne Salmond’s *Two Worlds* and *Between Worlds*; and these end in 1813. The best work on sealing was already Ian Smith’s own;¹⁷ that on both the flax and timber trades is Roger Wigglesworth’s unpublished (and much raided) 1981 doctoral thesis;¹⁸ Harry Morton’s *The Whale’s Wake*, published forty years ago, is still indispensable (with honourable mention to Nigel Pricket’s *The Archaeology of Shore Whaling*). Recent historians, hewing tight to the most prolific writers, have dwelt on missionaries, most obviously Tony Ballantyne’s *Entanglements of Empire*, or have had tighter focus – for example work by Mike Stevens on maritime communities in Murihiku, or Angela Wanhalla, Kate Stevens or David Haines’ investigations of Māori involvement in shore whaling. But there has been little synthesis since James Belich’s 1996 *Making Peoples*, saving perhaps Ballantyne’s own important arc of essays (to borrow one of his favoured phrases) about sealing and whaling,¹⁹ or Vincent O’Malley’s *The Meeting Place: Māori and Pākehā Encounters, 1642-1840*, which however belies its broad title by being too narrowly about the Bay of Islands.²⁰ Of course Smith considered historical archaeologists to have done much worse, forthrightly condemning his profession for its failure to break free of simple site description and identify and explain broad patterns.

*Pākehā Settlements* reveals what we have lacked. It combines a more than respectable reading of the historical archive with a deep knowledge of the archaeological evidence, to achieve a concise analytic survey of the whole period, with equal weight to commercial extraction as to missionaries, and to the south as much as the north.

Objects with secure provenance may give material witness – but it is still mute testimony. That Smith can make so much of the things found in the ground speaks to his close reading of the historical record. It is Smith’s analysis of the records of every known sealing voyage, for example, that is the primary basis for his usefully distinguishing three strategies for the animals’ exploitation, from shore, ship or boat. Sealing is notorious for leaving little trace in the archive – but the knowledge to be gleaned from the archaeological record is evidently scantier still. The pain of this paucity becomes almost poignant when Smith acknowledges the temptation to identify finds in the caves of South Port of an ink bottle, and a feather cut to form a quill pen, as being left by John Boulbee’s journal writing. But for Boulbee’s journal we would not even now know it was he and other sealers who used those caves.
Figure 13: A feather cut to form a quill pen could have been used by the journal-keeping sealer John Boultbee, who in 1826 stayed in one of the South Port caves.  
Southland Museum and Art Gallery, photograph by Lindsay Hazley.

Such yearnings to break the silence of the archaeological past and connect to the particularity of history surface only occasionally, but seem all the more acute for that, as when Smith discusses the site of New Zealand’s “first seat of government” at Ōkiato, in the Bay of Islands. This was built for merchant and trader James Clendon in the early 1830s, but briefly housed William Hobson and his retinue through 1840, before they relocated to Auckland in 1841, and the house burnt down in 1842. Excavations of the house’s well, found objects deposited prior to the fire, including “a thin fluted, free-blown medicine bottle, perhaps used for laudanum or other opium-based treatment”. Smith can scarcely resist the temptation to associate the bottle with Hobson’s ill-health throughout his occupation at Ōkiato — but can only conclude “there can be no certainty about its ownership” (p201).
Questions about the ability of archaeology to explain a bigger picture persist too, and are much more problematic. This is admittedly difficult for archaeologists. Sampling the past with a spade is so labour intensive that the view shafts provided will always be very narrow, and it is hard to meet Smith’s demand for “repeated sampling and comparative analysis”. Smith himself admits defeat at certain points in his effort to break free and achieve a broader synthesis. For example, he postulates that with fewer than 200 Pākehā living in New Zealand by 1828, their impact on the Māori world might have been slight – but has to acknowledge he lacks the archaeological evidence with which to test this, since only a handful of Māori sites for the period have been excavated. The discussion that follows on the questions of the extent of continuity and change in te ao Māori is driven almost entirely by oral tradition and history.

Smith acknowledges similar difficulties in discussing town-life from 1840. The settler towns, and the cities that grew from them, are too large and diverse to investigate archaeologically as single entities. Only many excavations of small parts (effectively chosen through the happenstance of inner-city demolition and redevelopment) can gradually build a broader picture across space, while the view through time is always complicated by the array of deposits from multiple successive occupations. So Smith is limited by the fact (at the time of his writing) only some 25 of several hundred excavations of urban New Zealand can be confidently dated.
to 1840-60. Sufficient excavations in cities such as Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin have been undertaken for Smith to describe their development in archaeological terms. His analyses of the development of commerce and industry – especially warehouses brickworks, and hotels, and infrastructure such as wharves, water supply, and roads – are especially valuable. The timber causeway shown below, for example, was found just east of Dunedin’s main thoroughfare George Street – when laid down, soon after the town’s founding, it crossed a mire or stream adjacent to the shoreline. As Smith says, it provides “a stark reminder of the conditions that prompted many locals to call their town ‘Mud-edin’” (p241).

Figure 15: This timber causeway constructed across a boggy streambed in the late 1840s or 1850s was discovered in 2008 during development of the Wall Street mall in Dunedin. Photograph by Peter Petchey.
Still, here again Smith’s broad picture is only made possible by history; the fruits of archaeology are much more fragmentary. The omission of Christchurch suggests Smith’s writing was overtaken by events – an enormous amount of archaeological work has accompanied the effort to rebuild the city, and the scale and detail of this work may well succeed in overcoming the issues Smith faced in describing other cities.22

Smith’s aims in Pākehā Settlements, though, were never to make a case for archaeology in isolation, but rather to show the value of archaeological data used alongside documentary, oral and pictorial evidence, to build a more complete picture of the past. He has amply succeeded. Smith’s demonstration of the wonder and beauty of ordinary objects owes much to publisher Bridget Williams Books. Pākehā Settlements’ production values are glorious, and full justice is done to the many exquisite artefact photographs. Smith’s use of pictures as evidence is also generally notable, as are his clear and simple explanatory maps.

It would be a fitting legacy for Ian Smith and the example set in Pākehā Settlements, if New Zealand’s archaeologists now take heart and work on much bigger canvas, while historians are encouraged to become curious about the array of archaeological evidence already readily available.23 And perhaps more scholars might be found brave enough to put aside disciplinary allegiances and wander in Smith’s footsteps – for as Ian found, “the borderlands between archaeology, history, and tradition have made for a stimulating journey” (p279).

1 Charles Higham, quoted in John Gibb “Prof Smith was a ‘remarkable, influential man’” Otago Daily Times 15 February 2020.
11 Angela Middleton, Te Puna – A New Zealand Mission Station: Historical Archaeology in New Zealand (Springer Press, 2008), p186.

https://doi.org/10.26686/jnzs.v0iNS30.6505


21 Ian Smith, ‘Archaeologies of Identity: Historical Archaeology for the 21st Century’, p260

22 See, for example, the many fascinating discussions of the historical archaeology of Christchurch at https://blog.underoverarch.co.nz/ or at https://thecityremains.org/

23 An enormous number of unpublished archaeological reports are freely available online at https://www.heritage.org.nz/protecting-heritage/archaeology/digital-library