People and Place: The West Coast of New Zealand's South Island in History and Literature.
By Len Richardson. Canberra: ANU Press, 2020.
RRP: AU$50 ISBN: 978-1-760-463-441
Reviewed by Melissa Kennedy

In his poem "Zoetropes," Bill Manhire, writing from London in 1981, notes the exhilaration with which an expat Kiwi keenly notices the letter 'Z' in any text, instinctively scanning down the page, hoping to find the word New Zealand, that jolt-to-the-heart moment in which one is reminded of home. There is a local variant even within Aotearoa-New Zealand experienced by West Coasters who no longer live there, ever on the lookout for mention of Westland or for meeting other people with a connection to it. In media, however, the Coast only very occasionally makes an appearance outside of the weather report. 2020 was quite an exception, with the much-anticipated mini-series dramatisation of Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries*, as well as *A Madness of Sunshine*, a thriller novel by bestseller romance writer, Nalini Singh, and an academic history by Greymouth expat Len Richardson, *People and Place: The West Coast of New Zealand's South Island in History and Literature*. And so, like Manhire in London, I scan the screen and pages on the lookout for recognisable signals from home, of characters and place that capture West Coast experience.

One finds Coasters all over the country and indeed the world, many of whom describe an intense loyalty to the people and place, a pride mixed with guilt at having left, nostalgia for the past and the sadness of feeling it impossible to ever imagine living there. To be a Coaster elsewhere is to deeply identify with a place one has consciously rejected. Coaster longing may well also be a multi-generation migrant phenomenon. This is, indeed my case, as I was not born or raised there, so I have inherited this understanding of the place from my parents who left it, reinforced by a lifetime of visits to family there, with an emphasis each time on re-immersion and reintegration into the farming, shooting, tramping lifestyle and into the community of everyone who knows everyone and where they live—as well as who they are related to and where they used to live. Such ongoing connection relies on willingness to code-switch to a staunchly local vocabulary and range of interests that is often at odds with other aspects of expat identity. This attachment to place often seems to be lived through a prism of an already lost past. I have heard my Greymouth cousin talk about, for example, "the house where Mrs X. used to live," or "the Y family from Runanga," or "the new Blackball bridge," even though my cousin never met Mrs X, was born two generations after the Y family left Runanga, and never knew the old bridge. These constant references overlay a personal family map onto a collective local background that reinforces continuity at the same time as making apparent just how much has been lost. They are inherited landmarks of a place in such flux that without them there would be no visible continuity at all. With a population that has hovered around 15,000 from the first census of 1867 until today, that means a lot of leaving: being an expat Coaster might be more common than being one of the few who have stayed.

It is this complicated connection between people and place that prompts Len Richardson to trace the history of the West Coast, predominantly through the work of esteemed colleagues and fellow expat Coasters Philip Ross May, Patrick O'Farrell and Bill Pearson. As the title *People and Place* suggests, Richardson argues that there is something about the Coast that "nurture[s] historians and writers deeply conscious of this distinctive relationship". As the book's foundational concept, this would tidily fit the worn discourse of cultural nationalism if it weren't for the fact that May, O'Farrell, Pearson, as well as Richardson himself, all left

Journal of New Zealand Studies NS32 (2021), 202-208 https://doi.org/10.26686/jnzs.iNS32.6879

the Coast as young men to make their livelihoods in universities and their lives in cities, together in Christchurch and Canberra, then later Pearson in Auckland. The book is thus an academic attempt to express the uneasy and messy push-pull factors of attachment and distance, emotional connection and professional dissonance that sent these talented men away from a place where the urban and the intellectual are given little space.

As academics, their formative years on the Coast had far-reaching professional legacies. Each of these scholars made valuable contributions to New Zealand and Australian studies. Pearson was foundational to the teaching of New Zealand literature, in which his West Coast novel *Coal Flat* (1963) is a milestone. May's, O'Farrell's and Richardson's work on the trans-Tasman exchange of the history of ideas, particularly in relation to socialism and labour unionism, has been equally seminal in establishing an Australasian focus in the way history is taught. In effect, they each fought for the recognition and respect of regionalism; of the West Coast within New Zealand's national discourse and of Australasia and the Pacific within that of global history. This achievement has a particular West Coast feel to it, in that these rich legacies recognised on a national level will go largely unnoticed on the Coast by the very people and place to which Richardson pays homage from afar.

The West Coast resists neat labelling within historical frames and flows, creating frustration in the work of each of these writers, including in Richardson. Stuck "between the unused landscape and the misused one, the pristine landscape and the exploited and degraded one" (Griffiths qtd in Richardson, 10), West Coast identity appears petulantly changeable yet forever stuck. Richardson identifies this discord as based on incompatible ideologies of land use and the role of humans in it. In the context of the above quote, this is exemplified in the contradictory demands of the extractive timber industry and that of environmental protection. He largely diagnoses this as "a narrative of betrayal", of the various U-turns of successive governments and private companies that set the Coast up to fail, most publically witnessed in the 2010 Pike River disaster, a compendium of relaxed labour and safety laws and lack of oversight from the publically-listed, Wellington-based, internationally funded company. Yet Richardson summarises May's and O'Farrell's work to argue that this latest tragic example fits a long history of contradictory influences that have buffeted the Coast, and that these have been internalised in the local psyche, as captured in Pearson's social realist novel.

The difficulty of representing the Coast in either literature or history gives uneven shape to Richardson's analysis, try as he might to define clear patterns and constructive trajectories from this extraordinary place that has punched well above its weight in contributions to New Zealand society, including: the birth of the Labour Party; the home of Premier Richard Seddon; the labour union origin of the 30-minute lunch break; agitators for early nationalising of key industries such as mining; and provincial leaders of rugby league, including seven players in the Kiwis 1947 British tour. Instead of pride in such wins, however, the region is imprinted with a recurring pattern of loss, as relationships between people and place are constantly thwarted. The harsh terrain and climate reject human intervention, an ever-changing cast of highly mobile immigrant workers rarely settle, extractive primary industries pillage the very land the workers are to bond with, and a rapacious capitalist logic imports finance in exchange for goods that are predominantly exported. Within this agitated context, from the region's 1860s opening gold rushes to the 2010 Pike River mine disaster, the narrative is studded with ethnic, religious, political, legal

and union confrontations set to a backdrop of mining accidents and failed business ventures in a depressingly repetitive manner.

The tiny population, laissez-faire policies, and lack of development of tertiary industries and services on the Coast magnify the conditions of capitalism. In all phases of colonial settler, industrial, and neoliberal economies, people and place have had to be radically adaptable to accommodate each new onslaught of extractive-industry demands. The town of Bell Hill, where my father grew up, is illustrative. A small settlement on the edge of a gold-bearing creek around 1900 gave way to a large saw-milling town in the 1920s. After the mill folded in the 1950s, the town was abandoned, until in the 1980s an open-cast gold mine dug it up, then dairy conversions in the early 2000s demolished the last remnants of it, including the foundations of the former school and the last of the mill houses, terra-forming the land in uniform tracts of hump-and-hollow drainage. There is no longer any evidence of a place called Bell Hill, only the place name of the Bell Hill road. Such disappearance is commonplace on the Coast, in which historical boom towns—notably the gold town of Kaniere in the 1860s, coal towns Runanga, Dunollie and Blackball in the 1940s, and the sawmill towns of the 1950s—are today unmarked paddocks or regrowth bush. Such conditions help illustrate the reasons for a sense of lack of permanence of both people and place that the locals who are left behind, like my cousin, fill linguistically with memories handed down by their parents who lived them.

In the version of the West Coast that Richardson identifies, there are few women, little permanence, and little in the way of the social glue that holds communities together and maintains tradition. These absences are in stark contrast to the photographic and oral histories of which family narratives largely consist, the private archives of history with a small 'h,' of everyday culture that foreground clubs and social gatherings, school dances, sports days, A&P shows, and the formidable work of the Women's Division of the Federated Farmers. That the West Coast community and identity have survived despite the ravages of extractive capitalism attests to the fundamental importance of social reproduction, which includes a close relationship with the land that sustains, and the role of women in creating place out of space and community out of a group of people. Failing to find a living heartbeat or tūrangawaewae in Richardson's masculine tradition of history and literature, then, I turn my sights to women writers, Eleanor Catton and Nalini Singh, in my search for a more embodied evocation of the West Coast.

It is quite remarkable that both of New Zealand's only two Booker Prizes, for Catton's *The Luminaries* (2013) and Keri Hulme's *the bone people* (1983), were won nearly 30 years apart (2013 and 1985 respectively) by novels set on the Coast. This gives the false impression that rain, bush, the rough sea coast and very small towns peopled by labourers form the symbolic national landscape in which readers will find the quintessential national identity. Yet unlike the Aussie battler in the Australian outback or the wild Irish girl from Ireland's south-west, continually storied into being throughout each nation's literary history, there is no equivalent to be found on New Zealand's West Coast. Not even popular author and peripatetic deer shooter, Barry Crump, gave much time to the Coast, even though deer culling and possum trapping were the region's major cottage industries from the 1960s to early 1980s. Hulme's *the bone people* is anchored in its Okarito environment, but its narrative focus on three loners make the evocation of community slight and gestural. The beach, which Hulme evokes with great intimacy in all her writing, is her chosen site of interface between people and place, of great knowledge, respect, and belonging, but the

ubiquitous bush functions only as site of apocryphal Māori spirituality. Thirty years later, in *The Luminaries*, Catton's rendition of the Coast flips this focus entirely. Populated by a large and colourful caste of characters that, if they stayed, would become the first generation of Coasters, the novel is noisy and busy with people but rather devoid of place: the West Coast location has as much depth as a stage set for a spaghetti western. Readers are warned of these priorities right from the opening scene, a tongue-in-cheek Victorian sensation novel set piece, complete with a terrible storm battering the flimsy rough-sawn boards of a hotel "furnished very approximately, as in a pantomime where a large and lavish household is conjured by a single chair" (22). This panto sketchiness extends to the Coast geology, geography and weather, which serve only a practical function, usually in the form of a hindrance of distance, mud, and floods. Over 800 pages later, the last two words of the book, "The rain" (830), gives a belated cameo spot to the weather, though the short, sketchy sentences of dialogue mean that meaning is again merely suggested.

While the quality of the sounds, light, the textural density of the bush, the different kinds of cloud and rain, and the way smoke hangs in wet air may be missing from the novel, they should be hard to miss in the 2020 period drama mini-series based on the novel, for which Catton wrote the screen play. There is a saying among deer shooters that "everything looks like a deer, but a deer looks like nothing else," which neatly captures the meshing of heightened alertness and will of imagination when the recognisable suddenly appears. Imagine the Coaster's surprise, then, to find that production decisions excised the inconvenience of the Coast for a more user-friendly, accessible location setting of quasi-suburban Auckland. While the series has been praised for its close attention to detail in its historical mise-en-scène, I found the cognitive dissonance too great in trying to believe that the golden tussocky hills and clay dust framed with scraggly clumps of wind-swept manuka was supposed to represent Hokitika. Narrative continuity was further visually disrupted by editing that showed characters stepping from tussock to bush to beach, as if in one sequence, although filmed at opposite ends of the country.

The uneasy line between artifice and authenticity negotiated by any historical re-enactment is perhaps most ironic in the production's constant wetting-down of the Auckland dust to achieve a muddy West Coast look, while real rain on the Coast prevented them from filming in the novel's original setting of the Arahura river. With actual West Coast scenery used only to depict a couple of scenes of gothic foreboding (prostitute Anna walking to a Chinese opium den) and Māori spirituality (Te Rau Tauwhare showing Emery Staines pounamu), wild nature remains at the level of cliché. The only scenes more outrageously stereotyping are those filmed on Auckland's Piha beach that cinematographically mimic the nearly 30-year-old imagery of Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), filmed next door at Karekare. While Northland's smooth, black, volcanic sands evocatively convey the whodunnit mood, this false setting undermines the motivations of greed and wealth that require Westland's harsh and shifting alluvial shingle on which goldmining was founded.

Catton, when talking about both her novel and her screenplay adaptation, draws out the blunt economic motivations of early West Coast history, particularly evident in the clash of values symbolised in the Māori taonga of pounamu and the immigrant greed for gold. Certainly, there is certainly narrative consistency in having her foreign characters fail to notice the land through which they move in their narrow quest to get rich and get away with the sought after "homeward bounder." Here, Catton's interpretation of history chimes with Richardson's reading of May, in the lack of commitment to place by the first generation of restless settlers.

Journal of New Zealand Studies NS32 (2021), 202-208 https://doi.org/10.26686/jnzs.iNS32.6879

However, the twentieth-century discourse of cultural nationalism concerned with becoming Pākehā, followed by biculturalism's invitation to Pākehā to consider their relationships with Māoritanga and local iwi, render Catton's symbolic and gestural understanding of the Coast as incongruent. Her evocation of "the wilderness of the mind" suggests the distanced relationship with the land she envisions: "wild spaces are important even if you never visit them, because simply by knowing that they exist, your imagination is reassured in its own potential wildness, and therefore freed. I think that New Zealand occupies a place like that in the minds of many people. It's important even if they've never been there." This attitude allows the mini-series'setting to be treated as mere scenic backdrop, which contradicts the production's great attention to historical accuracy and research-based realism in other areas, including the granularity of rough-cut timber cladding, the texture of mud on a flounced skirt, and the colour of gold in candle light. A production that treats nature as fantasy, in the overseas-facing mode established by Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* visual epics, is surely not made for a local, knowing audience, a point that Catton's above quote also suggests. And so again I must turn elsewhere in my search for the West Coast as a real, grounded, inhabited place.

While I am disappointed that *The Luminaries* did not bother to film on the Coast, I am much more indignant that romance writer Nalini Singh sets her first thriller as a West Coast gothic novel. Populated by brown-skinned characters with Māori names sitting on front "porches" drinking "mugs of coffee" to a backdrop of dark, dangerous, lethal, impenetrable "forest," *A Madness of Sunshine* makes a mockery of Coasters and their relationship to the environment they live in. The only trampers are tourist "hikers" who get fatally lost and "hunters," who appear equally afraid of overgrown bush tracks. There is enough domestic abuse, violence, alcoholism and delinquent youths to suggest that Singh has mixed up *the bone people* and *Once Were Warriors* to create her setting, the fictitious Golden Cove, as Alan Duff's Rotorua on the beach of Hulme's Okarito. Geographically speaking, however, Golden Cove is described as a "harsh and unforgiving landscape with water as treacherous as the rocks" (6) with "dangerous cliffs" (8) and "old-growth forest" (18) in a former gold-mining settlement close to Greymouth. Picking fact from fiction, the local reader identifies the northern Coast Road towards Punakaiki, though that bush is scarred by logging and coal mining, not gold, and the smooth flanks of the Paparoa Ranges make it one of the most domesticated parts of Westland, with straight roads, farms and the prosaic Rapahoe campground.

Even ignoring the American spelling and idioms ("bangs," "store," "cabin" and "butt" clash with "cop," "girlie" and "eh"), the novel wears its regional and ethnic markers lightly. Singh, an Auckland-based Fijian New Zealander most famous for her Harlequin paranormal romances is published in the United States, which requires a firm eye on her international readership, similar to the joint British-New Zealand coproduction of *The Luminaries* mini-series. The novel is tone deaf to local culture on many levels, including rural New Zealand, both Pākehā and Māori. Although most characters are superficially described as Māori by their skin colour, names, and the ability to periodically slip into te reo, characterisation is more in the style of film noir: they are all deeply individualistic, brooding loners with dark pasts and submerged secrets, antipathetic to the "desolate West Coast town" (20) and its gothic bush. In such an inhospitable place, the driving motivation for almost all characters is to leave, as having dreams is associated with ambitions that cannot be fulfilled at home. Unlike the real phenomenon of West Coast exodus, however, Singh's expats, including a Maori academic, a classical pianist, a Formula One mechanic and two rich businessmen,

have all returned home, although their role in the community is unclear. These characters provide articulacy and cosmopolitanism against which to contrast out-of-work alcoholic wife-beaters, a few shift workers of the silent type who are never home, and one Maori local gone bush, who insists three times in the one scene he appears in that people tend to "'think we're pōraki, nē.' He circled a finger by his temple. 'Living out here in the bush'" (232).

Any sense of connection to place is deeply ambivalent, even for the heroine, a returnee, whose tragic and violent upbringing is echoed in the dark language used to described her feelings of homecoming: "Anahera returned her eyes to the horizon and to a sunrise that screamed 'home' with the same angry beauty that it whispered of the dead" (27); "Golden Cove was branded into every cell in her body [. . .] perched on the edge of an ocean so pitiless it had taken more souls than the devil" (18); and her "cabin" home is "a place of ghosts" (2) to which she is in no hurry to return, "[s]he had plenty of time to be alone with the memories, dark and brutal" (13). Singh makes it clear from the novel's start that nothing good can happen in this godforsaken place or to these broken people.

As a murder mystery, the novel segues from an interpretation of untamed nature as potentially lethal to humans to that of nature as the setting for murder. Not only does the bush never get a chance to enchant without at least an equal reminder that it can kill; it is portrayed as the natural domain of a serial killer. As the police detective outsider muses "[i]f you wanted to disappear bodies in a sparsely populated country covered in dense forests and jagged mountains, deep lakes and rivers fed by glacial melt, the landscape itself would be your coconspirator" (90). Interaction with the land is almost wholly negative, as the only reason that characters get out into the bush and onto the beach is to search for bodies.

Singh, like Catton, recognises that her readers are not likely to be fellow New Zealanders. She ends her Acknowledgements by thanking "*you* for picking up this book set in a remote part of what will be, for most of you, a distant country. Come visit. It's lovely and dangerous and beautiful" (344, italics in original). Whereas Catton perpetuates a myth of the Coast as wild because unknowable, Singh suggests that it is outright dangerous. If her sense of danger is one of crime, she may well be inviting her readers to her hometown of Auckland. If she is referring to the Coast, however, most danger of death lies not in nature but in man-made accidents in mines, mills and farms: agriculture is the deadliest industry in New Zealand.

Certainly, neither Singh's novel nor Catton's novel or screenplay are intended for locals hoping to see themselves and their region represented, as the West Coast remains largely ignored with highlighted spots of melodramatic cliché that exist only in the fiction. These exceptional portrayals from non-Coaster New Zealanders cannot be said to arise out of national stereotypes about this, the country's most sparsely populated region that hardly registers on the nation's cultural radar. Rather, such writers are accomplice in creating new archetypes of the Coast, taking the "unused landscape and the misused one" to inscribe another kind of—here creative—"misuse." As Richardson's history attests, Coasters are used to seeing their home adopted or appropriated by outsiders who see a nowhere on which to project their various somewheres: the elusive golden nugget "homeward bounder," the unsustainable logging of slow-growth trees, the high-grade coal that explodes at every attempt to access it, or the fickle tourist dollar. As Richardson also registers, in his frequent use of scare quotes around the place name, each of his writers has a different version of his "West Coast," a sentiment taken to imaginative extremes by writers such as Catton and Singh.

Where, then, is my "West Coast," the place that I do not find in any of the works surveyed here? Richardson's argument for an uncomfortable, unreconciled relationship between people and place is perhaps most acutely felt by those of us who have left, for whom sporadic visits are overlaid by the remembered traces of semi-effaced pasts recorded not in history texts or novels, but in oral family histories and our own interaction with the land. Let us look, finally, at a view of the Coast from an expat tourist perspective, where again the "unused landscape and the misused one" jostle together. On a fine day you can drive over the Arthur's Pass viaduct from Christchurch to your friend-of-your-cousin's renovated Te Kinga mill house, now a bach in the Iveagh Bay subdivision, with lake-front view of Lake Brunner. The trip only takes two hours, including a latté stop in the café that used to be the tea rooms that used to be the train station at Otira. On your drive over, the viaduct bypasses the older West Coast Road that winds above it, slipping and scouring in scree down the steep pass, effacing the physical reminders of what used to be a momentous journey. As you drive past the fertiliser-green, man-made, hump-and-hollow hillocks of the 5,000-hectare Landcorp multi-farm at Te Kinga, you hardly notice the two old houses on the terrace by the turnoff, all that is left of a town that until 1970 had a school, post office, shop, and hotel to service one of the larger of about 80 Westland sawmills. You arrive at your own patch of bush at Iveagh Bay, on land that used to be owned by the Forestry Board, now part of Ngai Tahu Corporation, as part of its Treaty reparations. At the height of the pre-2008 housing bubble, Ngai Tahu sections for lake-front baches sold in blind auctions for upwards of $400,000. Yet the bush is only scrubby regrowth, as it was heavily logged up to the 1960s, and cleared areas swiftly degrade into poor land that leaches into the lake. Most of the sections never sold, however, and the subdivision now looks abandoned, empty sections and new asphalt sprouting rushes and gorse; it will take a few more years for scrub growth to begin the process of bush regeneration. From your bach veranda, you look out over the lake, hoping to see a kotuku winging its way between the jet boats breaking the still surface.

These partly hidden histories of violence and absences that peek through the veneer of sublime nature give rise to the kind of latent contradictions that make it difficult to represent the Coast in history, literature and analysis. In this place, the juxtaposition between pristine landscape and its mutilation are visible in a way that is rare in most other parts of New Zealand. As such, the Coast speaks a truth about destructive use of land and people that, if we chose to see it, could provide a valuable lesson, or warning, for future decisions and future generations. It is within this troubling context that, at the end of every visit, I leave, again, forced, like all expats, to admit my distance and agree to leave the business of creating the Coast to those who have committed to living in the present and constructing their futures, together, with other locals rooted in place.