

New Zealand Nurses: Caring for Our People 1880 – 1950
By Pamela Wood. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2022.
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Reviewed by Helen Rook

Pamela Wood's *New Zealand Nurses: Caring for our People 1880-1950* reveals nursing through the eyes of fierce pioneers of New Zealand nursing. It provides a valuable window on the foundations of professional nursing and is likely to be of interest to nursing scholars and other curious readers. At the same time, however, it is missing the voice of Māori, the tangata whenua of Aotearoa New Zealand. By failing to consider the nursing practices before colonisation, or the impact of colonisation, Wood falls into the trap of colonial nostalgia, focussing on imported systems, rather than on their contextualisation in Aotearoa.

Wood, a nurse and historian, explores the period from 1880, when nurses trained in the Nightingale system in Britain were recruited to work in New Zealand hospitals, assuming roles as matrons and contributing to the establishment of a formalised system for training probationary nurses in the Nightingale tradition.

From a technical perspective the book is exemplary. Wood employs what she calls three kinds of “nursing narratives”. Firstly, she incorporates personal accounts from individuals engaged in nursing across diverse settings, such as hospitals, homes, rural areas, urban slums, Māori communities, clinical environments, factories, schools, war zones, and disaster areas. She then draws upon the perspectives of nurses and others from the historical period, capturing insights into the ideals and expectations of modern New Zealand nursing. Lastly, Wood undertakes an exploration of what she calls “the emergence of a nursing culture” during this time. A central element of this nursing culture was the written word, exemplified through the journal *Kai Tiaki: The Journal of the Nurses of New Zealand*. A certain irony, or perhaps foresight, is evident in the Māori name of the journal. This publication (in press since 1908) was a platform for communication, information exchange, and reflection within the mainly colonial nursing community. Cultural symbols, such as uniform, cap, and medal emerged. These symbols embodied, reinforced, then continued to contribute to the traditional view of the nurse today. The book meticulously documents primary and secondary sources such as archives, official records, newspaper articles, journal interviews, and published material, including letters and diaries. Additionally, each chapter is enriched with supplementary notes. The book has 11 topic chapters relating to the establishment of formal nurse training in New Zealand and nursing registration, nursing practice across settings and building a nursing culture at the edge of the empire. The character of those nurses is described as innovative and determined, with a strong sense of duty. The chapters are well designed for readers, allowing them to dip in and out of the book, and not requiring them to read it from beginning to end.

One of the key drivers for Wood's inquiry was to understand if a British nursing culture was transplanted, or if a distinct New Zealand nursing culture emerged during this period. She explores the role these nurses played in shaping New Zealand's self-image as a modern colony or dominion. In addition, Wood examines whether the nurses arriving in New Zealand were seen as agents of the empire. She examines how these nurses perceived themselves in relation to the empire and the broader nursing world. Her conclusion is that they saw themselves as part of a worldwide nursing sorority of professional women, serving the needs of people and communities.

Wood includes a chapter on Māori patients and Māori nurses; however, this is written from the perspective of the government's public health strategy and in the context of a Pākehā dominated health system. The public health strategy redirected Māori nurses' attention from Rongoā Māori, the traditional Māori healing system, to the benefits of western medicine. The impact of this shift, which Wood fails to address, on individuals and their ancestors, is a far reaching hermeneutic injustice meaning an injustice where a substantial aspect of social experience is obscured from the collective understanding. Instead, she emphasises the presence of a humanitarian yet paternalistic philosophy of care from nurses, underscoring the complexity of the challenges faced by Māori nurses within a Pākehā dominated health system, at the expense of such concepts as *oranga*, *whakapapa*, *whenua* and *whānau*.

There is a second form of injustice, what Miranda Fricker calls testimonial injustice. This is where there is an injustice that harms people's ability to know things and be seen by others to know things. Testimonial injustice arises from how the colonising nursing discourses influence and direct *contemporary* professional practice in a way that fails to value the determinants of Māori *oranga*. Considering these complexities, it is challenging to engage with *New Zealand Nurses: Caring for our People 1880-1950* without considering the impacts of colonisation and how it is viewed in contemporary society.

This book brings to mind New Zealand musician Dave Dobbyn's hit song 'Welcome Home'. Dobbyn referred to Aotearoa New Zealand as a place "out here in the edge, where the empire is fading by the day". These two positions, one as the empire serving as the dominant source of knowledge and method of training and the other, representing a place where the shackles of the empire are fading, sit uncomfortably side by side.

New Zealand Nurses, Caring for our People 1880-1950 therefore, must be read carefully, with an awareness of its limitations in the wider socio-political context. To understand nursing practice in New Zealand, it is essential to give voice to Māori nurses and Māori nursing practices. This is necessary to restore balance to the Western-dominated narratives about the emergence of nursing in Aotearoa New Zealand. With this in mind, the title of the book "caring for *our* people" is problematic. Who are "our" people if only the colonists' voices are shared. To claim the Māori people as *theirs* is a presumption. And yet despite this criticism, there is much to value in this book. Wood provides a way of understanding how New Zealand nurses arrived at the forefront of professionalism, including drafting of the world's first Nurses Registration Act passed by Parliament in 1901.

The book celebrates pioneering nurses. Yet it is important to critique this pioneering nursing history and see its colonial bias. Readers have a moral and ethical responsibility to read *New Zealand Nurses, Caring for our People 1880-1950* with a critical eye, so as not to create any further nostalgia toward nursing based on an incomplete and colonising account.