

Becoming Aotearoa: A New History of New Zealand.

By Michael Belgrave.

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Reviewed by Diana Morrow.

Although Michael Belgrave notes in the Introduction to *Becoming Aotearoa* that national histories are currently unfashionable, he believes they provide an opportunity to weave together disparate aspects of the past into an overall framework that can help to reveal what was, and possibly still is, distinctive about New Zealand. His overall interpretive position thus corresponds with a long tradition that explains New Zealand history in terms of its exceptional characteristics. He contends that the key factors are Māori, this country's specific geographical conditions and economic potential, and the state's central role in building an open liberal society based on a series of social contracts. The introduction concludes with the observation that throughout many dramatic changes in our history: 'the one constant has been the relationship between the state and Māori as tangata whenua. The social compact of the late nineteenth century has been reset and now rests again on the Treaty of Waitangi and the idea of rights that has been fundamental to it. As has always been the case, what that means in practice remains contested' (p. 11).

The first four chapters of *Becoming Aotearoa* address the arrival and settlement of Māori to these islands and the nature of the society that evolved. They then move on to early European visitors such as mapmakers and explorers; sealers, whalers and missionaries, and conclude with the Musket Wars of the 1820s. Chapters five to fourteen deal with increasing missionary influence, Wakefield colonisation, the various factors that culminated in colonisation by Britain, the Treaty of Waitangi, the Land Wars, Pai Mārire and confiscation. Chapters fifteen to twenty-one describe the exponential growth of settler numbers, farms, towns, railways and industries in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the aspirations and achievements of the Liberal government and its eventual decline. Chapters twenty-two to twenty-six deal with the Great War, the interwar years and the national experience of the Second World War. Chapters twenty-seven to thirty move from the economic and cultural stability of the 1950s and early 1960s to the protests and counter-cultural currents of the late 1960s, the Māori Land March, the creation of the Waitangi Tribunal in 1975 and the anti-nuclear movement. Chapters thirty-one to thirty-four deal with Robert Muldoon's period as Prime Minister, the violent clashes over the 1981 Springbok tour, the election of the fourth Labour government and the dramatic economic reforms that ensued from 1984 to 1993. Chapter thirty-four briefly and rather eclectically surveys the period from 1993 to c. 2016. Events post-2016 the author deems 'a little too recent for this history', (p. 504) although he does venture into very recent developments in the Preface and Epilogue.

The first fourteen chapters of *Becoming Aotearoa* are definitely the most effective and compelling. They are also the most detailed, drawing on Waitangi Tribunal research reports and Belgrave's experience as a research manager at the Tribunal Unit and as an academic historian at Massey University specializing in nineteenth century Māori-State relations. Chapter seven, 'Agreement at Waitangi', the most absorbing, even at times thrilling, chapter in the book, explores the aims and understanding of the signatories to the Treaty. Instead of focussing on an interpretation of events that relies on the status of the Māori and English texts, it focuses on the motivations and perceptions of those Māori, British and French (i.e. Bishop Pompallier) individuals who participated in the debate at Waitangi. Belgrave points out that many Māori had made up their minds to sign even before Henry Williams produced the Māori

text. Debate centred on other matters, most critically Māori aspirations for a relationship with the governor that hinged on retaining rangatiratanga/chiefly authority over their people and their land. Māori advocates for the governor were very clear that under the Treaty they would keep their rangatiratanga, and that the Crown would protect it.

Over time however, these aspirations were frustrated by the implications of mass settlement. Belgrave explains that as settler numbers eroded governors' ability to prioritise Māori interests and needs, the Treaty 'started to take on new meaning as a protection for rights threatened, a reminder of Crown responsibility in the present and the future, and increasingly a symbol of loss. What Māori rights were and how they would be articulated by Māori themselves would only emerge over time' (p. 99).

Chapter ten, 'Governor George Grey: One Country', another immersive chapter, even-handedly assesses both Grey's talents and his failings. Autocratic, often duplicitous, and responsible for more Māori land loss than all other governors and premiers combined, he nevertheless, Belgrave points out, did not believe (unlike many of his contemporaries) that assimilation meant cultural absorption. Upon arriving in New Zealand, he quickly learned *te reo* and became an admirer and scholar of Māori culture.

One important development during Grey's second tenure as Governor, the advent of the four Māori seats in 1867, is mentioned only fleetingly, within the context of Hawke's Bay Superintendent Donald McLean's support for their creation. Given that a prominent theme of *Becoming Aotearoa* is the relationship between the state and tangata whenua, this neglect is baffling. From 1867 onwards the seats gave Māori males voting rights, irrespective of any property qualification, twelve years before non-Māori. As John Wilson points out in a 2009 research report on the subject, they were 'not created in a moral and legislative vacuum.' That Māori paid taxes and had rights under the Treaty were invoked to justify this new form of political representation.

By contrast, the first (and last) Liberal government gets much admiring attention. Belgrave contends that it created 'the mould for all political parties and governments to follow' (p. 247) and that most of the social contracts the Liberals established: between employers and labour, Māori and the Crown, women, the state and families; the promotion of small farmers and agriculture, protection of the environment and of public welfare remained 'crucial to New Zealand's social and political fabric until the end of the 1960s' (p. 248). Nevertheless, he does examine less admirable aspects of their legacy. Seddon, and many other leading Liberals, most notably William Pember Reeves, were racist, believing the Chinese to be racially inferior to whites and, in Reeves' words, 'dirty, miserly' and 'a danger to public health.' New Zealand's liberal values clearly did not extend to all. Indeed, a poll tax on Chinese immigrants, introduced in 1881, remained in place until 1944, long after other nations had jettisoned similar legislation. Moreover, though Māori, under the Treaty, were New Zealand citizens and long treated patronisingly as 'honorary whites' (p. 248), they remained in many respects second-class ones, only receiving equal access to rudimentary welfare benefits in 1939. Belgrave provides a highly effective treatment of Māori responses to the various inequities visited on them and their negotiation of the strong assimilative currents that confronted them throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In accordance with an intention set out in the introduction, he interweaves Māori and Pākehā history, a key aim being to show how Māori sought, as early as 1840, to be 'part of the new while retaining identities and futures that were still fundamentally Māori' (p. 14).

As in the first two thirds of *Becoming Aotearoa*, Belgrave's account of the evolving relationship between Māori and the state after 1945 is comprehensive and well-balanced. He is also very adept at characterising the dramatic political developments and economic reforms that commenced in 1984 with the fourth Labour Government and continued under National in the early 1990s. In many other respects, however, the coverage of post 1945 New Zealand is uneven, receiving less detailed attention (and far fewer pages), than earlier periods.

His treatment of second wave feminism for example, one of the most far-reaching social movements of the late twentieth century, is best described as once-over lightly. Readers will search the index in vain for the names of leading New Zealand second wave feminists, such as Sandra Coney, Sharon Cederman, Anne Else, Sue Kedgley and Ngahuia Te Awakotuku. The latter, from 1972 onwards, played a leading role in initiating and fostering New Zealand's movement for gay liberation, another subject that warrants more in-depth coverage. Despite prominent campaigning, New Zealand law reform on this issue remained well behind that of Britain and Australia, where homosexuality was de-criminalised in 1967 and 1969 respectively. When in 1985 New Zealand Labour MP Fran Wilde introduced the bill that would result a year later in homosexual decriminalisation, a protracted campaign by concerned citizens and various religious entities to thwart its passing ensued. Not for the first time in *Becoming Aotearoa*, the case for exceptionalism based on a consensus of liberal rights and values needs some qualification.

Regrettably too, the Dawn Raids of the 1970s receive a very brief, summative treatment. Including just one or two quotes from people who actually experienced the raids would have provided readers with a sense of their profound impact. Although Pasifika peoples' economic and cultural contributions to New Zealand are very briefly dealt within the chronological chapters, they are more fully examined in the book's final overview-chapter.

In that final chapter, 'Becoming Aotearoa', Belgrave paints a positive picture of 'a distinctively South Pacific country that combines the global with the local.' Sounding at times rather like a brochure for Tourism New Zealand, he extols a country that 'brings together enriching cultures, religions and traditions from around the world.' He then goes on to proclaim that 'New Zealand is organically becoming Aotearoa', while acknowledging, as the 2023 election has demonstrated, 'there may be bumps and setbacks along the way' (p. 506). Many aspects of contemporary New Zealand are then catalogued and praised, including inevitably *The Lord of the Rings*. The Treaty settlement process and the growing role of Māori in economic and public life are both justifiably hailed as 'a remarkable feature of recent decades' (p. 525). He then notes that non-Māori unease about this has led to demands that 'the clock be turned back' and that Māori be recognised only in terms of Article 3 of the Treaty, having common citizenship with all other New Zealanders (p. 527).

In the Epilogue, Belgrave briefly acknowledges aspects of New Zealand's past that were xenophobic, and which often treated Māori and other ethnicities as socially, economically and sometimes racially inferior. However, he then proceeds, in a rather boosterish fashion, to outline ways in which New Zealand's exceptionalism expressed itself when compared to other settler societies – notably a respect for law and rights under the Treaty, and the fact that revolutionary ideas and even calls for dramatic constitutional change have had little traction here. Even the civil disturbances arising from the anti-vaccine mandate protests outside Parliament in 2022 are dismissed on the grounds that the rioters, being nourished by overseas networks, represented 'a series of slogans rather than any programme for change'. The country's major political parties, Belgrave contends, remain 'true to their core liberal values

and traditions.’ In the final sentence of the book however he adds: ‘Only the future will demonstrate whether New Zealand’s exceptionalism will be strong enough to resist attacks on its commitment to constitutional gradualism and the liberal values on which it rests (pp. 530-531).

Though there is much to commend in this lengthy and, in many respects, insightful history, Belgrave’s restatement of an exceptionalist interpretation of New Zealand history is not compelling and evokes an outdated nationalism. New Zealand is far from unique in its commitment to liberal values and constitutional gradualism. While it is true that the recent focus on Māori Treaty rights is distinctive and that race relations may have been less traumatic for New Zealand’s indigenous people than in some other settler societies, Belgrave equivocates on this dimension of exceptionalism. After quoting Keith Sinclair’s much cited (and controversial) query of 1968: ‘Why are Race Relations in New Zealand Better Than in South Africa, South Australia or South Dakota?’ and noting that Sinclair ‘grossly’ overstated the equality and absence of racism in contemporary New Zealand and exaggerated the difference between those three other settler societies and New Zealand, he nevertheless insists: ‘the premise remains true’ (p. 528).