

Beyond Hostile Islands: The Pacific War in American and New Zealand Fiction Writing.

By Daniel McKay.

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Reviewed by Dougal McNeill.

The value of Daniel McKay's *Beyond Hostile Islands*, a study of treatments of the Pacific War in fiction from the United States and New Zealand, is its range. McKay follows master narratives and images from war writing across decades, and through archives many readers are unlikely to look in or move between. His gifts are for breadth, and his patience in moving between the unjustly and the justly forgotten, and treating both as potential sources for insight and understanding, shows what can be done with creative juxtaposition, reading and reflection. Rather than establish a virtuous New Zealand canon against a vicious American one, or some variety on that kind of evaluation, McKay shows instead how, for much of the post-war period, New Zealand and American war writing were involved in a project of "ideological coproduction" (p. 8), the smaller literature borrowing from the larger "in a process that is accommodationist when it comes to shared ideologies" but "dissimilar on particularly points and in narrative details". If the diplomatic or political history of the post-war period might look at collaborations between Washington and Wellington, in ANZUS and after, this literary history tracks the slipperier subject of feelings, impressions, senses, and how they form, or are set in literature.

"Literature", here, is a term used in a capacious way. It takes in memoir, Young Adult fiction, "popular" as well as canonical texts. This is a good thing, and some of the volume's interest comes from the surprising continuities McKay finds between seemingly unrelated sources. From James Bertram's memoir of his war experience to Susan Bocker's 2010 YA novel, from Vivienne Plumb's short story to Peter Wells' fiction, from Cathie Dunsford to James George to John Pule to Lloyd Jones, *Beyond Hostile Islands* gets about. It is hard to imagine a reader coming away without learning some new, for them, text or source. To this McKay's comparative questions are helpful: could "a sense of geographical separateness" develop "a war literature canon in ways that were less disposed to the tropes and ideologies commonly found in American writing" (p. 4), he asks? The answer, much of the time, is "no", but no in a variety of shifting ways. McKay is good on some of the "Japan Bashing" rhetoric from the 1980s at work in Keri Hulme's "Kaibatsu-san", although less curious than he should be on the complexity of that fiction or the shifting uncertainty of its tone, finding only "Japanophobia" (p. 65) in a work that is creatively nasty every which way. A reductive or literal-minded strain, common enough in survey work of this kind, does occasionally frustrate; dealing with fictions really should involve dealing also with their fictionality. And there are gaps: no David Eggleton, no James McNaughton, no Ian Wedde. What led McKay to consider some texts and not others is never made fully clear. Patricia Grace's *Chappy*, surely one of the most important novels to try and think the war's legacy and human connections between Aotearoa and Japan across the Pacific, should have had a central role in a study with this focus. It doesn't.

The book is divided into five sections, with each moving between American and New Zealand examples to keep McKay's comparative aims in view. Chapter One, "Revelations and Comedy", focuses on the combat novel itself. Chapter Two, "Camera Men", follows clichés and ideological images from the war as they percolate through anti-tourist and economically anxious texts of the 1980s. Chapter Three looks at the experience of internment, and Chapter Four prisoner of war texts. Chapter Five, finally, considers what it calls "project novels" (p. 132) of the nuclear age in the aftermath of the United States' bombing of Hiroshima and

Nagasaki, and the human catastrophe that followed. Janet Frame's *Intensive Care* is discussed here, as is James George's *Ocean Roads*.

What is left for the reader? McKay's aim, following the long after-effects of the war in the imagination, and documenting how the kinds of imaginatively limiting tropes that sustain mis-recognition can shore up and repeat themselves, is valuable, as is his willingness to compare American and New Zealand writing with a view to sometimes uncomfortable parallels and shared mythologies. This is a book for students and researchers, and is a resource to draw on rather than, unless one has been commissioned to review it, a book to work through cover to cover: its style ensures none will read it for, or with, pleasure. Its own arguments are, unfortunately, layered in a prose sometimes so clotted with references and so coagulated with half-developed asides and academic mannerisms that it takes an effort to reconstruct them, an effort not always equal to the rewards then on offer. The New Zealand material may well be unfamiliar to readers coming from the American context, and so fresh in other settings. For the audience this journal serves, however, McKay's *Beyond Hostile Islands* represents a useful survey and careful literary history other scholars and critics will be able to draw on and engage with for further research.