
Book Review

Rebecca Priestley

Mad on Radium: New Zealand in the Atomic Age

Review by Allen Petrey

In this very readable book, Rebecca Priestley reveals the history of 'nuclear New Zealand' – a country where there was much enthusiasm for nuclear science and technology, from the first users of x-rays and radium in medicine; to the young New Zealand physicists seconded to work on the Manhattan Project; support for the British bomb tests in the Pacific; plans for a heavy water plant at Wairakei; prospecting for uranium on the West Coast of the South Island; plans for a nuclear power station on the Kaipara Harbour; and thousands of scientists and medical professionals working with nuclear technology.

Priestley's account of this New Zealand is based on her University of Canterbury doctoral thesis 'Nuclear New Zealand: New Zealand's Nuclear History to 1987'.

Priestley then considers the transition to 'nuclear-free New Zealand' policy in the 1980s. The change was dramatic: in the late 1970s, less than a decade before becoming so proudly nuclear-free, New Zealand was considering nuclear power to meet growing electricity demand in the North Island and the government was supporting a uranium prospecting programme on the West Coast. But following the nuclear-free policy, anything with nuclear associations came under suspicion, especially by the general public.

By uncovering the long and rich history of New Zealanders' engagement with the nuclear world and the roots of our nuclear-free identity, by leading us into popular culture, politics, medicine and science, Priestley reveals much about our culture's evolving attitudes to science and technology and the world beyond New Zealand's shores.

However, as she concludes, New Zealand's 'rejection' of nuclear power and uranium mining can be seen as the consequence of economic decisions made in the 1970s. The fact that New Zealand does not have a nuclear reactor can be viewed as a pragmatic decision made by a country with a limited budget for science that it chose to focus on agriculture and supporting sciences. The fact that economic arguments were used against these things makes it possible that economic argument could be used for these things – nuclear power and uranium mining in particular – in the future.

As befits such a publication, 22 pages of chapter notes and selected bibliography are provided, with the author noting that any reader who so wishes may obtain her full references list and complete bibliography from her August 2010 thesis from the University of Canterbury.



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