ENNZ: Environment and Nature in New Zealand

Volume 3, Number 1, February 2008

About Us

ENNZ provides a forum for debate on environmental topics and a posting board of upcoming events, including conferences, books, seminars, etc.

If you wish to contribute articles or reviews of exhibitions or books, or want your details added to the Member's List, please contact:

Dr. James Beattie
jbeattie@waikato.ac.nz
Department of History
University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240
Ph: 07 838 4466 Ext 6459

Chief Editor

Dr. James Beattie

Associate Editors

Dr. Charles Dawson
Dr. Julian Kuzma
Dr. Matt Morris
Ondine Godtschalk

ENNZ Website

http://cres.anu.edu.au/environhist/eh-nz.html

Thanks

Thanks to Dr Libby Robin, the Australian National University and the Fenner School of Environment and Society for hosting this site and to Mike Bell, University of Waikato, for redesigning ENNZ.

Contents

Editor's Comment

Welcome to a new look *ENNZ* Volume 3, Issue No. 1. This issue includes a facsimile of an article by William Gorrie from 1880, which lists a number of New Zealand plants growing in Scotland. James Beattie introduces the topic and uses Gorrie's article to reflect on some of the prevalent scholarly themes on acclimatisation. Teresa Shewry provides a review of Paul D'Arcy's new book, *The People of the Sea: Environment, Identity, and History in Oceania*. Rounding out the issue is a call for papers for *Animals and Agriculture: A Multidisciplinary Workshop*, to be held at The University of Auckland in July 2008.

REVIEW

Paul D'Arcy, *The People of the Sea: Environment, Identity, and History in Oceania* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006)

Teresa Shewry
Duke University

In *The People of the Sea*, Paul D'Arcy tells us that humans are the only land animals that have a dive reflex: when our face touches the water, our heart rate slows and our oxygen consumption decreases (27). While such arresting vestiges of "aquatic pasts" remain, D'Arcy suggests that even in Oceania – unfolding in *The People of the Sea* as an ocean that inhabits lives, and as lives that populate and transform an ocean – there has been little research on maritime history.

The People of the Sea is a history of the entanglement of the sea and the lives of inhabitants of Remote Oceania (broadly encompassing Micronesia and Polynesia) from 1770 to 1870. Grounded in unknown or overlooked historical materials and scattered existing scholarship, *The People of the Sea* is appealingly and clearly written, and creative in its approaches. I think it will translate in interesting ways for people generally interested in the sea, or working on environmental, colonial and postcolonial studies across many disciplines and spaces. My discussion of this book will be from a cultural and literary studies perspective, rather than from within the history discipline.

D'Arcy opens *The People of the Sea* by re-working *nature* as an active, complicating presence in history. He argues that Pacific histories have come to exclusively emphasize the agency of culture, losing sight of that of the environment or nature (11). In writing about "nature" in the humanities, one risks being perceived as falling back into problematic histories in which Europeans regarded nature as something dictating the lives of the colonized. D'Arcy, however, poses messier, negotiated dynamics between people and the sea.

As part of this effort to move beyond "cultural determinism," an unusual dimension of *The People of the Sea* is its substantial overview of contemporary oceanography's visions of Remote Oceania. In the first chapter, D'Arcy moves through topics such as climate, the movements of sea water, reef communities,

and geological forces attending the formation of islands. The inclusion of these materials opens up interesting visibilities: for example, contemporary oceanography's depiction of marine ecosystems as dynamic and variable generates questions in the book about what particular kinds of social organization might be required for inhabiting such environments. While this material in *The People of the Sea* appealed to me, I did feel that D'Arcy could have more explicitly clarified what relationship the book perceives between the scientific and indigenous knowledges that it describes.

Oceania has sometimes been characterized as a vast, open, empty, nonhuman expanse, a pristine space of nature. D'Arcy finds a different sea altogether:

> The waters of the Pacific were cultural seascapes rich in symbolic meaning, crowded with navigational markers, symbols of tenure, fishing and surfing sites, and reminders of gods and spirits in the form of maritime familiars and sites of their exploits. These seascapes altered as territories changed hands, navigational knowledge expanded and contracted, and storms and climate affected reef and shore configurations and the distribution of species (168-169).

The middle five chapters of the book develop this understanding of the sea, drawing us from waters that are near and familiar to those that are more distant and less known. Chapter Two focuses on local activities such as swimming and diving, settlement, marine foods and fishing, and spiritual and practical knowledges of the sea. In the third and fourth chapters, we are led into the deeper waters in which Islander sea-travel was pervasive, and navigational techniques, sea-faring, and infrastructure were substantial. D'Arcy finds that island communities were, almost invariably, not "isolated" by the sea but had strong social, economic, and political ties with other communities and places. The fifth chapter addresses the sea in terms of marine tenure, conflict, and power, finding that the sea was not a space of free movement before Europeans arrived, while the sixth chapter examines experiences of Islander,

European, and meteorological intrusions (such as typhoons) from beyond the horizon.

In considering the kinds of spaces designated by oceans, and tracing histories amid waters on the move, D'Arcy experiments by spatially framing the project through the category "Remote Oceania," which he derives from a biogeographical division. In doing so, D'Arcy responds to calls in Pacific Studies to move away from imagining islands as closed, isolated cultural systems prior to European arrival. To create a "coherent overview" (169) of Islander relationships with the sea across such a broad space, as D'Arcy aims to do, is a huge task. I appreciated that in the fifth chapter, D'Arcy turns to a more specific case study (the western Caroline Islands) and that in the conclusion he emphasizes the necessity of further research, beyond this book. The possibilities of the "Remote Oceania" framework were clear to me – including its making visible lives not only on land but also on the sea – but given that the approach is somewhat new, I think it would have been useful if D'Arcy had discussed possible difficulties or limitations, including what might have fallen away from such a framing.

The People of the Sea concludes by gesturing towards present conditions in Remote Oceania, including the dominance of Western practices of sea tenure and of the modern fishing industry (he notes that the islands probably receive only around five percent of the market value of catches from agreements that allow corporations to fish in their Exclusive Economic Zones [168]). The turn to the present introduces into the book an unresolved sense of loss and uncertainty. But D'Arcy does suggest that the history which he has traced – including the organization required for lives entangled with the sea and the substantial connections stretching beyond what are now national boundaries – show possibilities for change.

I think that *The People of the Sea* finds Oceania a sea in which to re-think established practices, methodologies, knowledges, and possibilities. I hope that in turn the book will energize more inquiries and discussions related to the sea as a space that is not only natural, but also cultural, social, and historical.