

BOOK REVIEW

Ko te whenua te utu—Land is the price: Essays on Māori history, land and politics. M. P. K. Sorrenson. (2014). Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press. 338 pp. ISBN: 978-1-86940-810-7.

Ko te Whenua te Utu is a compilation of M. P. K. Sorrenson's work to date; an anthology of sorts bringing together his seminal writings on Māori history, land and politics. Sorrenson is considered one of New Zealand's premier historians, with an impressive academic pedigree in history and politics. He was a member of the Waitangi Tribunal for 25 years, and an academic teaching history at the University of Auckland for 31 years. Through his writings and his professional work he has contributed to both shaping and curating politics within this country.

The writings themselves were published over a 56-year period, though their content is much broader than that—spanning from Hawaiki in the essay “The Whence of the Māori: Some Nineteenth-century Exercises in Scientific Method” to the post-Treaty settlement era in the final stanza “Waitangi: Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou”. It is loosely structured around the chronology of the subject matter; an approach which reminds any reader that politics and history are never completely linear nor completely orderly. There are overlaps, intersects and what I will call “historiographic cross-contamination” filtering through nearly every chapter. This, I think, only enhances the value of personal accounts of the time where the authors are able to reflect or comment on

the events they themselves were a part of by reference to the context that existed at the time.

The collection provides the reader with an interesting vantage point from which to approach Māori history, land and politics. Sorrenson was an insider on many of the major developments concerning Māori rights and interests for four decades, and his lens, in this regard, is somewhat unique. It is not a tell-all exposé of the inner workings of the Waitangi Tribunal; it's not riddled with scandal and tabloid fodder. Instead it is a commentary on events, now considered historical, which Sorrenson found himself participating in. His own contribution to shaping New Zealand history through his participation—for example, in early formative reports of the Tribunal or in his writings regarding Māori representation in Parliament—is downplayed; the author preferring perhaps to let the work speak for itself and have others judge it by its usefulness. In that regard his humility leaves the reader unprepared for the cumulative effect of writings when grouped together, and it is all but impossible to reach the end of this anthology without a great respect and admiration for a man who has dedicated almost the entirety of his professional life to examining the state of our nation. That is not to say the reader would necessarily agree with every proposition put, or

every interpretation made, but the totality of the work represented by these writings is impressive by any standard.

“It has been the crowning climax of my life as a professional historian and brought me into contact with the lively minds and memories of numerous distinguished kaumatua and kuia, lawyers and fellow historians” (p. 2).

Chapter 9 contains the seminal essay “Māori Representation in Parliament” and represents one of those unique times when history is being curated contemporaneously with its progression. The essay was influential at its time, and has been often quoted since. The renewed review of constitutional arrangements in this country will likely call upon it again as an important commentary in our national politics.

Three quick observations about the book immediately spring from it, and will, undoubtedly, shock some readers. The first is that the writings in the book have not been updated for publication, save for minor corrections. That approach necessarily means the language utilised at the time is maintained, and sometimes this smarts a more modern reader. Likewise the simplification in describing a dichotomy between Māori–Pākehā relations is likely now to be seen as somewhat inappropriate and/or read with, ironically given the subject matter, a slightly colonial feel. This is more a sign of the times, a reflection of the period in which the essays were originally written, and I think they ought to be viewed for their value notwithstanding. The fact that some of the language is at times chafing is a sign also of this country’s academic progression as much as anything else, and I do not necessarily think this reflects poorly on the writer at all. The essays must be contextualised, and the language actually helps to remind the reader of this.

The second observation is also that, perhaps in deference to academic convention, Māori and iwi are always described as “them” and “their” throughout the writings. At times this feels excluding, positioning, as we often see, indigenous people as “other” in academic writing,

when increasingly the call is for indigenous voices to be championed in their own right. Sorrenson of course has Māori whakapapa to Ngāti Pūkenga, and it is of great delight to the reader when, in both the “Introduction” and in the “Epilogue”, you are treated to rare insights into his personal character and are able to connect with the person “behind the work”. Again, this I think highlights a more modern progression in academic thinking, and indigenous participation in academia over the last few years that has seen a breaking away from academic orthodoxy in exchange for the championing of our own histories and narratives.

The last observation regarding style is again a product of publishing the original essays; it is not that the conventions or comments are necessarily incorrect, by any means; there is just question around their continued employment or relevance. For example, generalisations about Māori and the Māori population may no longer have resonance as appropriate given that now we understand much more about the complexity of Māori relationships, of iwi identity and of the variance in Māori political positions. It is now not possible, if it ever was, to generalise simplistically about Māori aspirations; the spectrum is now openly acknowledged as wide and varied.

Likewise, the comment regarding the naming of the book that “land was the price Māori had to pay for signing the Treaty of Waitangi, accepting British sovereignty and allowing European colonisation to proceed” would likely be an affront to many who have worked to challenge the rhetoric that hapū ever willingly accepted British sovereignty, and is in fact now inconsistent with the major Waitangi Tribunal finding in Stage 1 of Te Paparahi o Te Raki Inquiry, in 2014, that iwi and hapū never ceded their sovereignty to the Crown.

The issues of the dated content should not dissuade the reader from seeking the value in this book. Sorrenson’s aim, as he describes in the introductory paragraphs, is to “provide a progression of my thoughts on various aspects

of Māori history” (p. 1). He doesn’t look to claim a definitive history of New Zealand politics and race relations, but notes that “history is forever and historians are always remaking it according to their own lights. Others can refashion mine” (p. 7).

Review author

Dayle Takitimu, LLB, LLM (Envir)(Hons). Ngāti Porou, Te Aitanga a Hauiti, Te Aitanga a Mahaki and Te Whānau a Apanui. Email: mauatuatrust@gmail.com

Glossary

hapū	subtribes
iwi	tribes
kaumātua	elders
kuia	female elders
Ngāti Pūkenga	tribe centred in Tauranga in the Bay of Plenty region of New Zealand
Pākehā	New Zealanders of European descent
whakapapa	genealogy