

*Moon* a mine of accessible information and references, as well as providing entertainment and tools to think with.

ANNETTE WILKES

*University of Canterbury*

#### NOTES

- 1 Port Daniel Press, Dunedin, 2005.
- 2 Creed in John White, MSS- Papers-1187-201 & 202, ATL, Wellington.

*The Silence Beyond — Selected Writings*. By Michael King, with an introduction by Rachael King. Penguin Books, Auckland, 2011. 240pp. NZ price: \$41.99. ISBN: 978-0-14356-556-7.

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS BY MICHAEL KING is an enjoyable read. As always, his writing is beautifully clear. His clipped sentences, vivid images and clever, often circular, structures are a delight. The content is unfailingly engaging. There are some fascinating stories. At times the book is very funny indeed; at other times it is deeply self-reflective and revealing.

The question for this journal is what value the book is for the historian, as distinct from the reader who wants intelligent entertainment. What one might expect from the posthumous essays of a fine historian would be short interpretive pieces about the past — snippets of research which were left over from larger book projects. There are three essays on Māori–Pākehā relations, but these are more amplifications of the polemical arguments in *Being Pakeha* than any new contributions about the history of that relationship. The last essay, ‘Maori and Pakeha: Which People and Culture has Primacy?’, is refreshingly direct on the claims of Pākehā culture alongside Māori, but it is a personal reflection, not a report on research. The essays have no footnotes, and few references to historiography. There are a couple of unfortunate typos. Eleven of the 18 essays have been published before.

So what would a historian find of value in the book? For any Pākehā contemplating working on Māori history, there is an excellent essay about Michael’s learning from the path-breaking television series, *Tangata Whenua*. It is an invaluable guide on process and etiquette, and should be compulsory reading for students of Māori history.

The book also provides a most useful collection for anyone interested in Michael King’s life. King was an important person in New Zealand historiography, partly because he helped develop new audiences for the subject and partly because he uncovered with high-quality research some really important stories — the life of Te Puea, the Moriori tragedy, the biographies of Frank Sargeson and Janet Frame, for example. At some point someone will write the biography which Michael never had the chance to do for himself, and for that biographer this volume is a good start. Three of the essays are explicitly about his own life — two are exercises in family history, and the third is a piece about growing up as a Kiwi male. Nearly all the others are in the first person and are laced with autobiographical anecdotes. Just on the basis of this volume alone, the outlines of his formative influences become clear — the Irish-Catholic heritage; a father who collected New Zealand books and whose advertising business brought him into contact with writers from Pat Lawlor to Denis Glover; the discovery of history around the Pauatahanui inlet with the help of James Cowan; the repression of St Pat’s Silverstream and the release at Victoria University. For those readers interested in Michael’s life, one would have liked more context before each essay — why it was written, who was the audience, what was

happening in his life at that time. One notes, for example, that all but one of the essays are either from the mid-1970s, or the 1990s and early 2000s. The 1980s are conspicuously absent. This raises immediately unanswered questions. The editor, Michael's daughter, Rachael, has chosen to let her father speak for himself — which is fine for the general reader, but a bit frustrating for the scholar.

The third group of historians who will find *The Silence Beyond* of value are those interested in literary or intellectual history. Almost half of the essays are about writers, and there is also a brilliant and moving tribute to the photographer Robin Morrison. These pieces on writers are full of fascinating gossip. They are not literary criticism but usually tell of Michael's personal encounters with the individuals. Janet Frame (in two essays) and Frank Sargeson are to be expected. But I particularly enjoyed Michael's meetings with Dan and Winnie Davin, and a hilarious piece about Charles Brasch. In the company of some boozing student mates, Michael went along to Charles Brasch's home to enjoy what they expected would be some Saturday night carousing with a fellow writer. That's what writers did on Saturday nights. But not Charles Brasch. He was fast asleep when the knock on the door came, and he was not amused. They had to make do with a thimble-full of sherry! There is also an amusing account of the peregrinations of the *Landfall* desk which, with legs sawed off unevenly and cut in two, became Frame's writing desk, following her from one provincial town to another. In these essays King presents in one sense as a successor to Pat Lawlor, in every way a superior writer to Lawlor, with more intelligent judgments and a much superior ability to tell a really good story. But like Lawlor he was a cultural nationalist and, above all, a 'bookman'.

What comes through, in the end, is that Michael King liked to think of himself primarily as a New Zealand writer, rather than a professional historian. He searches out meetings with other 'creative' writers and devotes his last years to writing the biographies of the two most important writers of the previous 40 years, Frame and Sargeson. There is one lively essay in which Michael describes being mistaken several times for Maurice Shadbolt. One gets the sense that he is pleased that he is recognised as a writer, even if the wrong one! His community is not that of academic, or even 'public', historians. In that sense Rachael King has edited this book in a way her father would have approved. The essays have been put together to work as a flowing and always entertaining piece of literature, rather than to inform scholars about Michael or his history. Enjoy it or leave it on those terms.

JOCK PHILLIPS

Wellington

*The Snake-haired Muse: James K. Baxter and Classical Myth.* By Geoffrey Miles, John Davidson and Paul Millar. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2011. 380pp. NZ price: \$50. ISBN: 978-0-86473-658-1.

'LIKE A STRANDED WHALE, the poem lies resting on the beach of New Zealand literature, an embarrassment that no one knows what to do with' — so Patrick Evans described Alfred Domett's 500-page epic *Ranolf and Amohia*.<sup>1</sup> James K. Baxter's oeuvre is similarly whale-like in its proportions, and while it is not so hopelessly out of fashion as Domett's poem, it is somewhat embarrassing to contemporary New Zealand literary historians who do not know how to place it, for there is nothing quite like it in New Zealand literature. Despite Baxter's early death at 46 in 1972, he produced a quantity of work that is very difficult to see around. In addition to the 429 pages of poems in the *Collected Poems*, there are the many uncollected poems published in periodicals, the 29 manuscript books