

## Reviews (Books)

*The Face of Nature: An Environmental History of the Otago Peninsula.* By Jonathan West. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2017. 376pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN: 9781927322383.

THE OTAGO PENINSULA has long been a taonga to Māori; important for its coastal resources, its fisheries and its highly productive land. The first and subsequent European settlers to arrive in the area also appreciated its rich soils and potential as a farming region. In Jonathan West's *The Face of Nature*, based on his 2009 doctoral thesis, a unique history of this diverse region is offered for the historian, geographer, student, local resident or generally interested reader. This is one of those publications we did not know we lacked, until its appearance showed us what we were missing.

On the final pages of the book, West offers a challenging summary of his intent: 'telling stories is the essence of history. ... Dividing the seamless past into particular events and processes — the loss of some species, the arrival of others, the shifting sands of Otākou, the development of farming, the removal of forest — only makes meaningful sense within the context of a story, one shaped by its beginning in a peninsula ecology of stunning richness and diversity and its ending and a landscape of deep and rich human history' (p.287).

*The Face of Nature* is organized into three sections. The first, 'The Primordial Peninsula and People', traces the transformation of the land-mass and flora into a unique region, and discusses the arrival, adaptation and transformation of southern Māori as they made the area home. Part two, 'The World Washes Ashore', examines the histories of European exploration and Māori discovery between 1770 and 1830, as well as providing a comprehensive history of whaling. The third section, 'Improving God's Creation', addresses British settlement on the peninsula, the scrub and forest clearances of the 1860s and 1870s and the lasting transformation up to 1900. The theme of environmental change and ecological loss is threaded throughout the book. Few writers, and even fewer historians, have been brave enough to tackle Māori-origin biota, habitat or other loss in pre-European days, but West has done so in a way that is both fair and even-handed. He successfully avoids being overly censorious in tone, opting instead for the hopeful conclusion that 'the surviving life on the Peninsula is still in our hands' (p.288).

This is by no means the first book to examine the history of the Otago Peninsula. In 1978, Hardwicke Knight, the London-born photographer, amateur historian and resident of Broad Bay, wrote his J.M. Sherrard award-winning essay *Otago Peninsula: A Local History*. In 2007, professional photographer Stephen Jaquier published his photographic essay 'Otago Peninsula: Path to the Sea'; and, in 2013, Paul Sorrell and Graham Warman, in *Peninsula: Exploring the Otago Peninsula*, offered a pictorial examination of the artists, industry, architecture, wildlife and even recipes of the peninsula, while discussing the histories of people and place. Nevertheless, West's *The Face of Nature* should be considered separate from these other offerings due to its comprehensive, in-depth study of its subject. The acknowledgements section contains a veritable 'Who's Who' of Otago Peninsula expertise, revealing that West has called upon the prowess of eminent scholars from botany, entomology, archaeology, marine science, history and Ōtākou Māori. Anchored by the geographical limits defined

by the peninsula and its coastal region, this ‘environmental history’ engages across conceptual borders with these other disciplines, even including the pūrākau (narratives) and taonga tuku iho (heritage concepts) of te ao Māori, and utilizing many studies of the minutiae of the Otago Peninsula environment. As a research methodology, this interdisciplinary approach avoids the potential limitations of a local history, and, with a seamless integration of these disparate perspectives on the peninsula, yields clear, incisive historical writing.

The history of the Otago Peninsula is a bicultural one, and when writing on the Māori aspect, West reveals a unique skill in being able to write realistically of Māori environmental history, conflict, the effects of land loss and the more recent attempts to (re)assert rangatiratanga. This is not done at the expense of his excellent writing about the farming narratives of the Pākehā who settled there. Readers interested in the entwined histories of both peoples will find much to challenge them and much to admire.

The production values of the book are excellent. High-quality colour photographic and artistic illustrations support the writing, historical maps and surveys contextualize material, and all this combines with extensive use of colour pages and deft graphic design to produce a significant book of which West can justifiably be proud.

Ōtākou/Otago Peninsula is a place which deserved a closer examination of its unique history and its remarkable environment. With a significant part of the region having retained the status of Māori land in the face of governmental action, settler pressures and ecological change, and with a legacy of 200 years of farming, demographic and architectural endeavours, this is a story that demanded to be told. In recording the comprehensive history in this way, West offers a wero (challenge) to historians of other regions of New Zealand, as well as providing a research methodology for them to emulate.

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*Pathway of the Birds: The Voyaging Achievements of Maori and their Polynesian Ancestors.* By Andrew Crowe. David Bateman Ltd., Auckland, 2018. 288pp. NZ price: \$49.99. ISBN: 9781869539610.

FEW BOOKS CLEAVE SO PRECISELY to their titles as this one. Andrew Crowe has interests in Pacific flora and fauna, especially migratory birds and the plants and animals significant to Polynesians, which are discussed and illustrated profusely with maps and images. Behind this attractive foliage lies a tangle of branches that seeks to join the natural history to a discussion of Polynesian voyaging in the early pre-European era. Crowe explains that this ‘is not the work of an academic, but the sincere effort of a science writer to summarise in an accessible way [the work of many specialists, focusing] primarily on the journey or enquiry, rather than on promoting any particular theory’ (p.10). However, the result, far from impartial, promotes a particular theory relentlessly.