

Book reviews

A HISTORY OF NEW ZEALAND WOMEN

Barbara Brookes

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Histories of Aotearoa/New Zealand seldom foreground the experiences of women, while a preference for preserving diversity in historical studies by collating edited collections makes survey histories written by a single author less common than they once were. In *A history of New Zealand women*, Barbara Brookes undertakes the ambitious task of creating a single-authored national history which single-handedly weaves together diverse historical narratives. It is a richly illustrated book, bringing together deeply resonant expressions of what it is like to be a woman, living here, across decades. Reading Brookes' *A history of New Zealand women* is like a home-coming: familiar, nostalgic, evocative, and inspiring. Due to the efforts of women like Brookes whose own research output is immense, Aotearoa/New Zealand history is at a stage where such a book is possible.

In *A history of New Zealand women*, Brookes traces the relationship between Māori and Pākehā constructions of gender, demonstrating the impact of one on the other, and the impact of colonisation on both. The book is a chronological bicultural history, beginning with a chapter focussing on 'Origins, traditions and "civilisation"', where Brookes juxtaposes women from largely pre-contact Māori and Pākehā cultures. Narratives of origin (Hineteaparangi naming Aotearoa/New Zealand, for example, or Eve being made from Adam's rib) lead into a discussion of pre-contact social norms for both cultures. Similarly chapter two, 'A civilising mission', documents the arrival of white women in Aotearoa/New Zealand – as missionary wives and then Wakefield settlers – and the ways in which both Māori and Pākehā women were situated within domestic, sexual, and business arrangements for the first half of the nineteenth century. The strength of these early chapters is that Brookes presents Pākehā and Māori histories in conversation with one another, enabling an appreciation for the interconnectedness of Māori and Pākehā during these years of early contact.

Brookes provides the reader with insight into the very human experiences and responses that make up the history of this country. Rather than applying a top-down narrative of trends and structural change, for example, in chapter three Brookes describes the ways in which, as Charlotte Warburton described it, Pākehā 'women's ability as home makers' (cited in Brookes, p. 61) enabled the land to be settled. In this chapter, Brookes documents the experiences of women as they travelled to Aotearoa/New Zealand on ships and the environmental disasters – from floods to earthquakes – that impacted their attempts at creating new homes once they arrived. We are also shown the entrepreneurial side of colonial life for women settlers, and the tragic reality for women positioned as *femmes couvertes* under Aotearoa/New Zealand law; a

situation which led to, among other issues, Māori land passing into the hands of the Crown at the time a Māori woman entered into a legally recognized marriage. By chapter four, we see settler aspirations for quiet domesticity upset by the event of war and gold rushes, resulting in an influx of Pākehā men to Aotearoa/New Zealand shores.

Following the heightened awareness around citizenship apparent as the nineteenth-century came into its closing decades (covered in chapter five), Brookes showcases the tension between emerging possibilities for women and wider gendered expectations as the twentieth century progressed. In chapter six, Brookes covers the late nineteenth century leading to the end of World War I, a period of new possibilities for women in terms of changes towards equality in divorce and widening career prospects. Foregrounding the post-war emphasis on live births, in chapter seven Brookes discusses the 1918 flu epidemic, attitudes towards female heterosexual freedom, and the medicalisation of motherhood, alongside other topics. Chapter eight reflects on the primarily urbanised and modernised environment in which the fashion-conscious woman found herself during the interwar years. In this chapter, Brookes traces the growing acceptability of employment for single women, albeit in gendered roles, where appropriate women's work during these years remained centred around domestic service. Among other themes, women's employment remains a focus of the book, with chapter nine covering Aotearoa/New Zealand's 'homefront' during World War II and immediately beyond, where women were first drawn into non-traditional industries in support of the war effort, and then evicted from them once the men returned from military service. In this chapter, we also find rich discussion of wartime relationships and changes in women's expectations, demonstrated in key politically active figures during these years, such as Mabel Howard and Iriaka Rātana.

From chapter ten onwards, Brookes narrates the history of what was to become 'second-wave' feminism and its attendant social and political contexts. We see the impact of the post-war baby boom and the development of modern suburbia on women's lives, including the effects of developing technology within the home. Chapter ten also looks at young women's experiences, reflecting the growth in an identifiable youth sub-culture from the 1950s and its attendant fashions. In chapter 11, Brookes builds the history of baby boomers as they reach maturity, with a focus on social politics, often showcased through the feminist organisations that women joined in the 1960s and 1970s. In chapter 12, Brookes brings her story into the 1980s, considering the broadening 'girls can do anything' ethos of 'second-wave' feminism, while chapter thirteen covers the growing awareness around women's rights as patients, victims, and mothers, with particular attention paid to the experiments conducted on women without their consent, such as at Auckland's National Woman's Hospital. The book's conclusion brings the history of Aotearoa/New Zealand women into the present, documenting changing demographics and the continuity of sexist attitudes albeit showcased in new and developing media.

In *A history of New Zealand women*, Brookes demonstrates the value of women's history as a discipline, and her own mastery of the field. I found this to be an enjoyable book, covering both familiar and new ground. For me, this book also raises issues about the primacy of legislation in framing Aotearoa/New Zealand histories, and the 'inclusiveness' of histories which, like the state, often assume that all subjects are heterosexual and/or cisgender.

Like many national histories, Brookes' narrative is often anchored to the political ebbs and flows of the Aotearoa/New Zealand nation-state. It is this kind of anchoring that allows something as broad in scope as Brookes' book to retain coherence. However, there is a trade-off when this approach is used for the history of a white settler nation-state like Aotearoa/New Zealand. While Brookes tells stories about Māori women and their political activism within their own iwi, *A history of New Zealand women* remains a history tied to the trials and

tribulations of women's relationship to the developing Pākehā state, where such iwi narratives are illustrative rather than structural. It strikes me that despite a wonderful Māori presence in this book, a narrative could have been developed where the framework for many of the chapters originated from within Māori – as much as within Pākehā – politics.

Similarly, given that Brookes intended to 'tell many ... stories to highlight the diversity of women's experiences over time' (p. 2), she is slow to acknowledge that, despite the book's emphasis on heterosexual relationships, motherhood, and housewifery, some women were not heterosexual. We are a few generations into the book before the possibility of heterosexual non-conformity comes into view. I might guess that Brookes chose to leave her subjects in their heteronormative historical context wherein, unless homosexuality was being talked about publicly, Brookes didn't write about it either. While such a rationale can be justified from a historiographical perspective, this also perpetuates the illusion that homosexuality (or at least heterosexual non-conformity) did not really exist in Aotearoa/New Zealand until the 1950s, which is simply not the case.

A history of New Zealand women also comes to fruition against a backdrop of increasing complexities in the realm of gender identification, further unsettling the notion that we can write a history of one 'sex', or gender, through an uncritical lens. While it would seem self-explanatory to assert that the women of Brookes' book belong there because they were legally identified as such during their lives, to do so without qualification obscures the diversity of experiences and perceptions associated with and contained within the term 'woman'. Although Brookes presents a 'diversity of women's experiences over time', assertions like 'being born female or male has, for most of our history, determined life's trajectory' (p. 2) can undermine that inclusivity, where those who experience (and have experienced) gender in more complex ways are obscured. Nonetheless, Brookes' book is a landmark in women's history, and will provide a rich resource for future historians wishing to grapple with the possibilities of articulating the history of women in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

A history of New Zealand women, with its glossy pages and tight typographical incisions, is a delightfully presented and well-crafted object. In short, it is a beautiful book. Too stout for the ubiquitous 'coffee table book', and with paper too weighty for a book on the bedside table, I found that *A history of New Zealand women* is best read at the kitchen table. A fitting locale no less, for a book that documents the terrain mapped out by those New Zealanders who, by virtue of their gender, are situated against the paradigms of hearth and home.

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