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‘Richard Shaw, The Unsettled: Small stories of colonisation’

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Richard Shaw, *The Unsettled: Small stories of colonisation* (Massey University Press, 2025), 224pp. Paperback. NZ\$39.99. ISBN: 978-1-9910-1668-3.

It is not often I read an academic book that really stays with me for some time afterwards, but this is one of those books. Building on his 2021 acclaimed memoir *The Forgotten Coast*, *The Unsettled* explores some of the questions raised by the former – namely how can Pakeha go about understanding the often-violent colonial pasts of their families? Shaw does not claim to provide a ‘manual’ to do this, but from his own experience of writing his memoir (which explored the relationship with his late father) and subsequent conversations he has had with like-minded individuals (although he admits that they do not agree on everything) he tries to share what he has learned.

The book deals with some very difficult subject matter, including the violent dispossession of Māori in the Taranaki valley in the late nineteenth century, the rape of Māori women, and the establishment of a disturbing land tenure system in the region whereby some Māori who had been dispossessed to make room for Pakeha farmers, and tried to return to their whenua (land) afterwards actually had to pay rent to Pakeha farmers to farm their own whenua, often leading to indebtedness. But it is Pakeha coming to terms with this difficult history that is the crux of what Shaw is advocating. He also tackles head on the potential criticism of his book that it prioritises Pakeha voices over Māori ones. However, Shaw quite rightly in my opinion makes the point that this is very much intentional as it is Pakeha who need to get their ‘stories straight’. Furthermore, he is also firmly of the view that Māori stories are not for Pakeha to tell.

A common theme that *The Unsettled* highlights between Shaw’s own family history and that of many others who like him are exploring their family histories to uncover the truth of their violent colonial pasts, is that quite often you had the sadly ironic situation of Irish or Scottish tenant farmers who were dispossessed from their own lands in the British Isles coming to Aotearoa New Zealand and dispossessing Māori of their whenua there. From the perspective of their ancestors, they were successfully ‘reinventing’ themselves in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, the fundamental point that Shaw and others in the book go to some pains to emphasise is that very often this ‘reinvention’ was based on the violent dispossession of Māori from their whenua.

Another important theme in *The Unsettled* is that Pakeha uncovering the true origins of their family histories in Aotearoa New Zealand is not just a historical exercise. The legacy of the violent dispossession of Māori from their whenua continues to this day, i.e. settler colonialism is not an event but a process, and a continuing one at that. So much land that was illegally confiscated from Māori after the Land Wars of the nineteenth century has not been returned, the economic benefit to be derived from this land for Māori since that time has been lost, and the consequence of this is that many Iwi and Hapu are impoverished today, whereas Pakeha families who benefitted from that confiscation continue to pass on their intergenerational wealth that has been accumulated over that period.

Another thing that I was quite struck by, although perhaps I should not have been surprised, is the range of reactions that Shaw had to his memoir from Pakeha. These seemed to range from others being inspired to question the sanitised family histories that they had also been taught to awful personal, verbal abuse directed at Shaw. But this range of reactions illustrates the importance of what Shaw is trying to achieve in his

book. The fact that there are such strong reactions to what he has said shows how crucial it is for other Pakeha to ask questions of how their families really established themselves in Aotearoa New Zealand and who paid (and importantly continues to pay) the very dear cost for this, i.e. Māori. Shaw refers to this process as 'looking for completion', but 'unfinished business' I think also similarly encapsulates this well. And until this business remains unfinished Pakeha will not feel truly settled in Aotearoa New Zealand. I seemed to have been doing this quite a bit in my recent reviews (but perhaps this reflects the truly thought-provoking books that I have been reading of late), but I sincerely believe that all New Zealanders, especially Pakeha should read this book. I thoroughly recommend it to all readers also, both general and specialist alike.

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