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‘Michael Belgrave, Becoming Aotearoa: A New History of New Zealand’

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Michael Belgrave, *Becoming Aotearoa: A New History of New Zealand* (Massey University Press, 2025), 648pp. Hardback. NZ\$65. ISBN: 978-0-9951-3186-6.

This doorstopper of a book by Michael Belgrave, one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most esteemed historians is an extremely ambitious and brave undertaking. It is the latter because with a book of this type there is always the risk of criticism of not covering or including something. Although the book does indeed cover considerable ground, encompassing the whole time period of the country, not just from Pakeha settlement in 1840, it does not claim to be comprehensive. What it does hope to achieve though is combining the two often disparate histories of the country, one Māori and the other Pākehā into one collective narrative. On a practical note, the book is divided into 35 relatively short and quite accessible chapters, along with an introduction and epilogue.

Furthermore, the book although generally taking a broad chronological approach also has several overarching themes. These include appropriation of Māori land and dispossession of Māori, migration and then exclusion (and then an openness to migration again), economic protection and then free trade, construction of infrastructure, involvements in overseas conflicts, and social reform. However, one of the most important and consistent features of the country's history has been heavy state involvement in the lives of its citizens. This reflected the fact that Aotearoa New Zealand has always had a relatively small population spread out across a large area. This has meant that the state has been called upon to facilitate the building of infrastructure, i.e. roads and railways to connect these often-disparate communities.

Belgrave also tackles head on some long-standing positive national stereotypes of the country. These include that relations between Māori and Pākehā have always been better compared to Indigenous and settler groups in other countries like Australia and the United States of America especially. As the book quite rightly emphasises, even if this might be broadly true, the experience of Māori in the country since Pākehā settlement in 1840 has not been a benign experience by any stretch of the imagination. As mentioned above, Māori land was appropriated and they were dispossessed from their lands. Even though Te Tiriti o Waitangi Treaty of Waitangi appeared to respect the right of self-governance of Māori, the reality for them since then has been far from this. And it has taken considerable energy and determination, not least through the Treaty of Waitangi Tribunal Whakamana i te Tiriti for Māori to receive any compensation for their lost land or respect for their rights.

Moreover, another common trope about Aotearoa New Zealand that Belgrave qualifies is that it is a relatively harmonious society without many of the sectarian divisions that other western countries face. The terrible 2019 Canterbury Mosque attacks by a white supremacist are highlighted as evidence in support of this. Incidentally it was these attacks that led to Belgrave embarking on his journey to write this tome of a book. Interestingly Jacinda Ardern, prime minister of the country at the time made a very famous and emotional speech following the attacks arguing that they did not represent the country. However, the book questions this as Aotearoa New Zealand has a long history of fearing 'the other', as demonstrated by its restrictive immigration legislation especially against Asians in the interwar period. In addition, certain Māori commentators also situated the Canterbury Mosque attacks in a broader context of the prevalence of white supremacy in the country, which Māori were the first to experience with the destructive effects of settler-colonialism.

I enjoyed reading this book. I think it takes quite a refreshing perspective on the history of Aotearoa New Zealand. And as a historian of the country myself, I look forward to being able to direct ignorant people to it that I have met in the past who have exclaimed surprise that I focus on the history of Aotearoa New Zealand as they do not think it has much of a history. This book illustrates just how wrong they are. Aotearoa New Zealand might be a small country in the Pacific, but it has played an important role not only in its Pacific region but beyond. And it has been the source of many firsts in the world, one of the most famous of course being female suffrage. I recommend this book to readers, both specialist and more general. It would make an important addition to the bookshelves of both. It certainly has to mine.

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