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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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BOOK REVIEWS

Philip Houghton, The First New Zealanders. Hodder and Stoughton, Auckland, 1980. 156 pp., numerous illustrations, bibliography, index. Hard cover \$9.95, soft cover \$6.95.

Many books and many more scientific articles have been written about the Polynesian settlement and occupation of New Zealand. Some have been based upon Maori traditions - or more often, upon Pakeha interpretations of those traditions. Others have analysed the material culture, the shapes of adze-heads, the ornaments, the fishhooks, the rock art and the wood carvings that have been found preserved on sites throughout the country. A few have even presented dry data pertaining to the remains of the people themselves, bone measurements, morphological features and the cranial indices so little understood yet so beloved by past generations of anthropologists. But never before has there been a publication on New Zealand's past quite like this book by Philip Houghton.

It presents a wealth of information on the prehistoric New Zealanders, the Maori race prior to European contact (although the author prefers not to use the term 'Maori' in this context if he can help it, explaining that the name Maori came into use only last century and that its use here would tend to obscure the possibilities of differences within New Zealand and of multiple settlement). For several years now Dr Philip Houghton of the Otago Medical School has been making specialised studies of these people - their health, stature, life-span, disease, the adequacy of their diet, the size of their families - and while he stresses that much more is yet to be learnt he has thrown a completely new light on many aspects of their lives.

This book is written essentially for the interested layman rather than the professional archaeologist who will already be familiar with the author's referenced papers in various scientific journals. Nevertheless it has an important place on all archaeologists' bookshelves as a most useful summary of Dr Houghton's research findings. It has been written in an easy-to-read style, and it places the results of the author's own work within the broader context of information on the prehistoric past that has been obtained from the studies of archaeology and linguistics. As we are only too aware, popular summaries of what is currently believed about New Zealand and Polynesian prehistory are still vastly outnumbered by publications of traditional (and sometimes not so traditional) speculation. Dr Houghton briefly discusses the possible origin of the Polynesians, and what is known of the original settlement of New Zealand about a thousand years ago. Naturally enough, he examines the problems largely from the viewpoint of a physical anthropologist, though he has

also drawn heavily where necessary on the data produced by his colleagues in other disciplines.

Through the courtesy of various Maori groups, archaeologists and museums, Dr Houghton has had the opportunity to study human bones that have been uncovered throughout the country, often as a result of erosion or construction works or the unfortunate activities of curio hunters, and from the few archaeological investigations in which useful human skeletal material has been excavated.

While some archaeologists may feel a little uneasy about the basing of prehistoric stature predictions on Maori Battalion somatology, or the way that the age assessments of the Wairau Bar burials depended upon little more than the fragmentary evidence from two individuals, this is not the place to discuss the validity of the methods used (they have been fully described in relevant publications). There were in any case no alternatives in these situations, and congratulations are due to Dr Houghton for the development of such techniques that have made a maximum use of the very little diagnostic evidence available.

The book appears to be free of major faults, though sometimes accuracy seems to have suffered just a little for the sake of simplicity (referencing would have helped), and I have to admit to a little surprise at a couple of illustrations which have been adapted from a familiar but unacknowledge source. With the possible exception of some tangled argument such matters are unlikely to affect the average reader for whom, after all, the book has been written.

A feature of The First New Zealanders is that the author explains and illustrates the methods that he uses, thus removing to a large extent the air of mystery that often surrounds the work of a paleopathologist. Houghton explains how it is possible to estimate stature from a single limb bone, how some diseases leave tell-tale signs on the skeletons, the methods he uses to estimate from bones and teeth how old a person was when he died, and he describes the 'pits of pregnancy' on pelvic bones which give clues to how many children a woman has had. Roughening and grooving of the collar-bone in some individuals is reasonably interpreted as being due to canoe paddling, whereas degeneration of the lower part of the spine, and an absence of collar-bone marks, points more to heavy load carrying, possibly by people who were unable to use canoe transport.

Dr Houghton's prehistoric New Zealanders were tall, robust people of distinctive Polynesian form. Although they were generally healthy, their average life span was no more than thirty years, an age not surprising considering the harshness of their lives and the lack of

effective treatments for illnesses and injuries. Tooth wear with its associated infections and pneumonia are given as the greatest health problems. Women bore no more than three or four children on average. It is a very different picture of pre-European Maori life than the one most of us were brought up to believe. And it is books like this that will make this new picture widely known and accepted.

Michael Trotter

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Atholl Anderson (ed), Birds of a Feather : osteological and archaeological papers from the South Pacific in honour of R.J. Scarlett. British Archaeological Reports, International series 62, 1979. New Zealand Archaeological Association Monograph 11. 295 pp., 53 figures. \$20.00.

This latest addition to the NZAA's monograph series is a fitting tribute to a man who has made an outstanding contribution to archaeology in New Zealand, and parts of the Pacific. In the editor's own words Ron Scarlett has provided a "prompt, painstaking bone identification service" for over 30 years. Yet, from the comments made by contributing authors it is clear that Ron's interests extend far beyond the narrow field of avian osteology.

I found this publication most enlightening. Perhaps the biggest thing that struck me was the quality and quantity of data that has been accumulated, and the contribution that analysis of bone material can make to the understanding of early Maori life. It also plays an important role in environmental reconstructions and the assessment of environmental changes.

Although the title suggests a common avian theme, over half the volume has little or nothing to do with birds or bones. Only 9 of the 17 contributions deal in some way with avian osteology or birds. These range from a rather heavy going article on moa type specimens to analyses of bird bones from excavated sites and an interesting 'short story' on the breeding habits of moas. Alas, for the layman, some of the terminology and statistical jargon in these papers could be somewhat daunting. For those whose interests don't lie in birds there is a range of stimulating papers on such topics as the Maori dog, crayfish, axe heads from the Solomons, and a new thing to me, octopus lures (fascinating). A review of Archaic midden sites on the Coromandel Peninsula and a summary of the extensive excavations at Tai Rua, North Otago are also useful contributions.

If there is one major criticism of this volume then it must be the price. It is unfortunate that the work had to be published overseas as this undoubtedly added to the cost, but unless the archaeological community at large is prepared to financially support publications of this kind then we must accept the consequences. Price apart, this monograph is a credit to those who organised its publication, and contributed to it. It deserves to be widely read.

Phil Moore

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LETTER

The Editor,
New Zealand Archaeological Association
Newsletter.

10 June 1980

Dear Sir,

My first reaction on reading the review of Niue Island Archaeological Survey in your March issue was to do nothing more about it. After all, readers of the report can make up their own minds about it. But when the publication has already been very well received in erudite circles in New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific, I think that some comment is not only justified, but necessary in sheer self defence.

I must first say that Hunt's criticism of the presentation of the introductory section may have some validity; shortcomings in the arrangement of information were touched upon by referees. But his comments on the lack of "organised research objectives", "overall research design", "problem-oriented design and survey sampling strategy" and "tenable analytical results" are just so much jargonistic nonsense. As is made clear in the preface, the Niue survey was carried out for, and financed by, the Government of Niue for specific reasons; this was not some dilettante student research project that had to be undertaken in a manner calculated to impress a supervisor, but a field survey carried out in strictly limited time. The Government had defined its requirements precisely and to the best of my knowledge these were adequately met. There was no obligation to publish this report, but it was my belief that the information should be made available to others.

Yours faithfully

Michael M. Trotter