



NEW ZEALAND  
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**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER**



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BOOK REVIEWS

Frances Porter (ed.), Historic Buildings of New Zealand: South Island. Auckland, Methuen, 1983. 264 pp., numerous illustrations, index. \$60.00.

This book has been eagerly awaited since publication of its North Island counterpart in 1979. It does not disappoint. Prepared by the Historic Places Trust under the editorship of Frances Porter, it consists of 27 chapters on historical buildings of the South Island - organised north to south, from "Nelson houses" to "Southland buildings". It is lavishly illustrated including many high quality colour photographs.

Another reviewer wrote that this book has more impact than its North Island companion volume because of a basically richer subject matter! A statement such as this could provoke all sorts of argument. There is, however, little doubt that South Island 19th and early 20th century public and commercial buildings and larger private houses are generally more noteworthy than are their North Island equivalents. This is because 100 years ago the South Island was wealthier - through sheep, grain and gold - and because stone was so often a preferred building material. The rambling wooden homesteads characteristic of wealthier rural districts in the North Island are present as well in the south. Also present are homesteads such as the lovely Stonyhurst (p. 47) and Parau (p. 57), made of locally quarried stone.

Many different groups of South Island buildings are dealt with and range from the Canterbury Provincial Government buildings with Mountfort's gothic masterpiece, the Great Hall, to humble coalminers' huts at Blackball on the West Coast which were reported in 1919, "not fit for habitation". Through buildings the book gives a history of the past 150 years in the South Island - the Wakefield settlements and the church, the sheepmen and small farmers, the goldminers and growing industrial and commercial strength. Some buildings are grand, others mundane, all have something to say on the history of this country.

There are inevitably personal favourites among the many buildings illustrated. I have mentioned Stonyhurst, others are Broadgreen in Nelson (p. 18), Meadowbank on the Canterbury Plains (p. 121), Olveston (pp. 186-187), the Petre churches (pp. 150-159), the stone farm and other buildings of central Otago, rural Nelson's simple wooden churches (pp. 20-29) and First Church (p. 162) and Knox Church (p. 167) in Dunedin. I am delighted

to see attention given to the brick terrace houses of north Dunedin. These have provided student housing for many years now while so much of the nearby flat has been devoured by the university with its horrible four-square concrete blocks. When I first went to Dunedin to study archaeology I flatted in Victoria Terrace, George Street, which is pictured on page 184.

As with all books on historic places, losses are suffered between the writing and the final appearance. The Whitehouse Hotel at Henley on the Taieri, said to be still operating (p. 201), was burnt down some two or three years ago. There was not even rubble left of Dunedin's Edinburgh House (p. 188) when I drove past at the beginning of July this year. In its last use as government offices it housed, I seem to remember, the Dunedin Registry Office.

The chapters are inevitably of a somewhat uneven quality with some authors having a surer grasp than others of the social and economic milieu that gave the buildings their historical basis. Similarly some of the photographs are less successful than others. Mostly, however, the text is well researched and authoritative and the illustrations superb. Geoffrey Thornton's photographs especially deserve mention. His opportunity as chairman of the Trust's Buildings Classification Committee has been taken to build up what must surely be an unparalleled collection of photographs of New Zealand buildings. His collection is extensively drawn on here. The photographs show a strong sympathy for both building and setting which lift them from the ordinary. Out of many such pictures, I could mention in particular those of McRae's hut (p. 127), the woolshed at Benmore (p. 221) and the Ida Valley flourmill (p. 232). The quality of Thornton's photographs is that they convey how well the buildings, especially those in rural landscapes, belong where they are. It is the message of the book as a whole that our history is told in the landscape if we care to look.

Nigel Prickett

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Betty Meehan, Shell Bed to Shell Midden. Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1982. 189 pp. A\$10.95 (soft cover), A15.95 (hard cover).

This is an excellent book: informative, thorough, well set out, and reasonably priced. The first chapter, "The abominable shellfish", contains a short general introduction to shellfishing and midden studies, and a discussion of the lowly status of the

first, if not the second. The next three chapters describe the Gidjingali speaking community of the Anbarra, their environment around the mouth of the Blyth River on the north coast of Arnhem Land, and the fieldwork of 1972/73 season. Chapter 5, "Linnaeus and Modj", compares shellfish taxonomies. Chapters 6-9 examine various aspects of shellfish exploitation among the Anbarra: patterns of predation; collection, cooking and disposal; hunting performances; and the role of shellfish in the total diet. In chapter 10, "Dead shells, dead men and dreaming", the general relevance of the 1972-73 fieldwork is discussed from several viewpoints, including changes caused by the large-scale destruction of shellbeds late in 1973 and changes deduced from earlier (probably prehistoric) middens, and by checking the food-value/population-size calculations carried out on middens in recent years against the Arnhem Land data. An extensive bibliography, appendices on Gidjingali shellfish taxonomy and Blyth River shellfish, and an index, complete the volume.

I found a couple of points rather irritating: one particularly is a peculiarity of the illustrations of the shellfish exploited. Some species named in the captions to plates 2 and 3 are indicated as appearing elsewhere, and others, including the unidentified 'ngurika', are listed as 'not illustrated'. Another was the use of mean and standard deviation in representing highly variable data. It seems to me that  $118.5 \pm 126.6$  kg total weight gathered per woman (p.129) is practically meaningless as a measure, and some other way of representing the range of observations is desirable.

These are very minor points, however, and the book as a whole is sure to make a major contribution to midden studies, with observations of interest on just about every page. Some particularly worth mentioning are the long quotation from Labillardiere's detailed and informative description of Haliotis gathering in Tasmania in 1772; the individual treatment given to shells during preparation of Tapes hiantina, a large venerid ("cockle" in New Zealand), which is the most important species exploited by the Anbarra; the differences between cooking methods for large and small quantities of shellfish (and that dead shells are a major component of the large oven); that there are no expeditions specifically to gather gastropods; and that sites involving shellfish dumps can be quite large - up to several hundred square metres, and certainly too big to be understood by way of the kind of key-hole excavations usually applied to middens.

While the fate of the Anbarra's shellfish beds in late 1973 can only emphasise the hazards of extrapolating from observations in a single year, the information assembled here - the first large

body of data on the role of shellfish in a small-scale coastal economy - goes a long way to clarify the relationships between past human behaviour and the very numerous and so very troublesome shell midden.

Reg Nichol

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Aileen Fox, Carved Maori Burial Chests: A Commentary and a Catalogue. Auckland, Auckland Institute and Museum Bulletin No. 13, 1983. 100 pp., figures, 71 plates, 2 appendices. \$11.95.

This is a timely and very welcome study of an important group of Maori artistic masterpieces that have not previously received sufficient attention. Aileen Fox has done a great service by assembling all the available information on the total known corpus of Maori carved bone chests. This amounts to the surprisingly high number of 63 chests. For each chest she provides a detailed catalogue description and a large photograph. She has been able to personally handle all but three of the chests and the results of these examinations show in the fine detail of her consistent and thorough descriptions. It was a very wise decision to provide a new catalogue number for each chest instead of using the confusing museum registration numbers which have no real relevance beyond each institution.

But this study is much more than just a catalogue. It is also a stimulating discussion of the historical and cultural importance of these objects. Not content to simply study the chests in their present museum storerooms, Aileen Fox visited the locations of some of the burial caves under the guidance of local Maori elders. From these experiences and with information provided by other Maori sources (including the 1902 evidence of Heremaia Kauere, reproduced here as Appendix I) she is able to present a new synthesis of knowledge about the appearance of the chests in the caves and their cultural significance for the local hapu.

This newly-assembled information reminds us about the very restricted North Auckland distribution of this particular Maori burial practice and thereby helps to clear up much of the confusion surrounding the origins of the six chests from the Alexander Turnbull Collection, now in the National Museum, Wellington. These are said to have come from the Raglan area, but Aileen Fox demonstrates how unlikely this must be. Nevertheless, her comments show some uncertainty and the question of their origin still remains open.

By classifying the chests into five types and analysing their surface decoration, the author establishes a chronology for a stylistic sequence covering 300 to 350 years, from about A.D. 1500 onwards. She is well aware that this chronology depends on only one fixed date, that obtained by Richard Cassels for the Waitore swamp artefacts which bear incised and punched decoration similar to that on some of the chests. I find this proposed chronology rather tenuous and feel that other factors need to be considered. On something as tapu as burial chests any innovation would be severely restricted and consequently archaic forms of decoration might be continued into more recent times by carvers anxious not to offend in this most sensitive area of Maori culture. Further chronological hints may emerge from a more wide-ranging comparison with other types of northern carving.

Aileen Fox concludes her commentary with some fascinating speculative interpretations of the meaning of the images carved on the chests, but while quite convincing in themselves, these interpretations can only remain as speculative. I would like to have seen more attention paid to the distinctive hand and feet forms of the images. In particular, the webbed feet of No. 44 and some of the other chests remind me of the role of the shag as a guardian animal, as described by Schwimmer (1963) for Northland. His comments about the fusion and multi-form appearance of human and animal spirits suggest that the role of guardian animals could be more fully explored in relation to the burial chests.

It should be pointed out in reference to comments on page 5 that carved wooden tombs set up in the open were more widespread than just the Waikato, others being known from the Tuhoë, Te Arawa and Ngati Tuwharetoa areas. Also on page 5, the set of "carved wooden stele of anthropomorphic form" now in the National Museum, Wellington, came not from Pateko Island in Lake Rotoiti but from the Ngati Tarawhai urupa at Ruato on the southern shores of the lake.

One unfortunate omission should be noted. Plates 16 and 17 have their captions confused and both plates show the same chest, that is No. 14. This means that there is no photograph of chest No. 15 with its unusual feet design. Fortunately, photographs of this chest are available in several of the other references mentioned. Apart from this one lapse, the Auckland Museum authorities are to be commended for the excellent editorial and production quality of this publication.

There is much of value and interest in this Bulletin for all students of Maori culture, whether archaeologist, art historian or cultural anthropologist. The rapidly-developing field of Maori art studies needs more such basic detailed surveys. This Bulletin stands as a demanding model.

Reference

- Schwimmer, E. 1963 Guardian animals of the Maori. Jnl Polyn. Soc., 72:397-410.

Roger Neich

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