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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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BOOK REVIEWS

Patrick Kirch, Feathered Gods and Fishhooks. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1985. 349 pp., numerous illustrations, index. U.S. \$26.00.

On the very first page of the preface Pat Kirch makes explicit the aim of this large and impressive book. It is an "up-to-date review of Hawaiian archaeology and prehistory", a summary for students, professionals (from outside the Hawaiian scene), and the interested, informed non-professional. This clearly includes every category of member of the New Zealand Archaeological Association! "We professionals", he writes, "owe it to society as a whole to set out the fruits of our investigations". Of course the time is never right for the definitive synthesis so he settles for a broad outline built on a set of lectures given to Anthropology students at the University of Hawaii.

This origin, I believe, explains the quite complex structure of the book, a structure which includes aspects of all the ways that prehistory and archaeology can be taught in a lecture situation. It can be taught as a history of archaeological discovery and the gradual modification of theories of prehistory with each new find (this approach is followed in Chapters 1 and 3). It can be taught as a culture history from first settlement to the historic era (Chapters 4-6, and 12). One can also start with the Contact period to provide a contrast with the earliest evidence (Chapter 1). The study area can be sub-divided and the archaeology reviewed region by region (Chapter 6). It can be taught as a test case in ecological adaptation beginning with the natural setting (Chapter 2) and documenting the changes to both man and environment (Chapter 12). It can organise and present the evidence as themes such as settlement pattern, marine exploitation, agriculture, material culture, and burial practices (Chapters 7-11). Speaking from experience (having taught New Zealand prehistory since 1969 in nearly as many ways), I can predict that this book will become the most quoted and plagiarised text on Hawaiian prehistory, because structurally it is tailor-made to academic pigeon holes. What is much harder to predict is whether such a structure is suited to the needs of the interested member of the public.

The structure poses some problem to the professional too. For example a researcher interested in the Mauna Kea quarries will find a brief description of McCoy and Cleghorn's work and its significance in the history of research section (p. 20), a short summary of location, site distribution and age in the regional archaeology section (pp. 179-80), quo-

tations from Cleghorn concerning the adze manufacturing sequence in the chapter on material culture (pp. 188-9), and the slotting in of the complex into the Expansion Period within the overall cultural sequence (p. 304). Curiously the only text reference to the fascinating shrines which overlook the largest workshop area on Mauna Kea (p. 259) makes no mention of their clear association with adze manufacture, though an earlier photo caption (Fig. 158) indicates that the shrine figured is at the quarry. The opportunity to comment on their similarity with the craft specialists' shrines of the Society Islands was sadly missed.

Similarly the reader who wants a review of the Makaha Valley findings will find the material divided between the regional section, the thematic chapters on agriculture, that on settlement pattern (in several sub-sections), the cultural sequence, and the final chapter on historical archaeology. This difficulty is not unique to Kirch's book - prehistorians have struggled with the dilemma for several decades. If prehistory is written by theme it may be open to the criticism that it has not presented a coherent overall sequence or set of regional sequences, but if it concentrates on sequence, readers may fail to grasp the significant transformations in adze, fishhook or ornament styles, for example. If a book adopts several approaches, as this one does, it faces structural problems from the start which involve the dangers of repetition and of fragmenting a coherent body of data. And while academics will methodically extract details for their own syntheses, the intelligent lay person may lose the thread altogether.

Ironically, Pat Kirch's earlier book The Evolution of the Polynesian Chiefdoms, which was written for an academic audience, displays a degree of structural unity from which Feathered Gods and Fishhooks would have benefitted enormously.

Despite the structural dilemma and its consequences, this book will be welcomed with open arms by all students of Hawaiian prehistory without access to the piles of unpublished site reports (or those with restricted circulation) which have built up since contract archaeology began in Hawaii. Within this one book appear details of all the major discoveries made up to 1984, complete with a profusion of classic monochrome photographs from the Bishop Museum anthropology collection and archives, as well as reproduced site plans and artefact drawings. These illustrations together with the accompanying text will breathe new life into our interest in Hawaiian archaeology which has for so long put up with low budget monographs and their unsatisfactory photo reproductions - but I must add that we could at least afford to buy these monographs! Some of the most fascinating photographs include several of Kenneth Emory and Yosihiko Sinoto

at Pu'u Ali'i, the Bellows site stratigraphy, the extraordinary marae and stone figurines of Necker Island, offering bundles from a Kaho'olawe fishing shrine, and the Kalahuipua'a cache of large wooden fishhooks.

Readers with an interest in comparative studies will feel a certain frustration that Pat Kirch has not given us the benefit of his extensive knowledge of Polynesian cultures when discussing particular items. I experienced this especially in the case of fishing gear. Certain types are described as similar to early Marquesan forms but there is no discussion of how they fit into the pattern of changes occurring over West and East Polynesia in the crucial post-Lapita phases. Take, for example, the development of two-piece hooks. This book states plainly that they were invented by Hawaiians as a response to lack of pearl shell for one-piece hooks (pp. 74, 88,200). However there is no explanation of their occurrence in the earliest Hawaiian settlements, nor reference to the two-piece hooks of Easter Island and Archaic New Zealand. In an earlier publication (his Chapter 12 in The Prehistory of Polynesia, ed J.D. Jennings, 1979) Kirch outlined two possible interpretations: "The development of two-piece hooks in Hawaii, Easter Island, and New Zealand perhaps can be traced to an ancestral form in Central Polynesia, or alternatively, may represent independent adaptations to the problem of shear stress on the hook's weakest point, the bend." We are left wondering if Pat Kirch has now abandoned the idea of possible common ancestry, or whether he has chosen to ignore it in the context of a book focussed on one island group.

There are many places in Feathered Gods and Fishhooks where readers will inevitably draw parallels between the course of archaeology in Hawaii and that in New Zealand. Given that the indigenous cultures of the two island groups shared a common ancestor, and were subject to European contact and settlement at the same period, it is not surprising that prehistorians draw heavily on the Polynesian background and on historical documents to explain many archaeological features. But the parallels go further. New Zealand, too, had its era of exciting excavations in the 1950s and '60s which to this day remain unpublished. Though Pat Kirch refers to such episodes as "great tragedies" (p. 81), he refrains from direct criticism of the directors. In fact the kid glove approach is taken to controversial matters throughout the book, from unpublished site reports to hydration rim dating and Ross Cordy's sequence. Sadly there is only brief comment on the problems that beset contract archaeology in Hawaii (c.f. N.Z.A.A. Newsletter 29:109-119) and which may develop here in New Zealand as contract work expands.

Feathered Gods and Fishhooks epitomises the orthodox view, avoids radical interpretation and sidesteps personal criticism. It is work that will be cited for its reliability and comprehensiveness, and enjoyed for its exciting illustrations. I cannot think of a better way of marking the impressive contribution which Pat Kirch has made to Hawaiian archaeology than by the publication of this book.

Helen Leach

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Jeremy Salmond, Old New Zealand Houses 1800-1940. Reed Methuen, Auckland, 1986. 246 pp., numerous illustrations, bibliography, index. \$38.50.

Geoffrey Thornton, The New Zealand Heritage of Farm Buildings. Reed Methuen, Auckland, 1986. 268 pp., numerous illustrations, bibliography, index. \$43.95.

These two books emphasise what a very rich cultural landscape we have in New Zealand - and they are important steps in the definition of that landscape in our own terms. Jeremy Salmond and Geoff Thornton put into historical and functional context the common and familiar buildings of New Zealand's farms and suburbs.

For all that the two books are very different in approach and treatment. Salmond's book is much the most satisfying in its detailed history of change and elaboration in vernacular dwellings. Thornton's approach has something of the scrapbook about it - very evocative and often quite fascinating but not going in any particular direction.

The cover of Salmond's book depicts an often admired farm house on the main road north of Auckland. Despite this, however, the book itself is concerned almost entirely with urban houses. This is a pity because rural houses have a different character from town and city buildings and they also deserve some attention. In fact Salmond's opening section on the period up to 1860 does deal with rural dwellings to some extent if only because of the rich available resources of illustrations and because in the country, but not so often in the town, these early cottages have survived.

Nonetheless, it is in its examination of urban dwellings - especially the late Victorian villa and 20th century 'Californian' bungalow - that the strength of Salmond's book lies. Here the author really knows his stuff. Variations on basic forms and the range of decoration which was used can give

every house a unique character. Everyday excursions down suburban streets will never be so dull again.

To return to the first part of the book, there is one aspect in which I think an important opportunity was lost. Salmond writes regarding the use of local materials and methods of house construction that, "there was no clear regional distribution of these methods in the early days of settlement". I don't agree: it is precisely in the regional variation of houses of the first generation of European settlers that much of the interest lies.

The cob and thatch of early Nelson is very characteristic of that region. Nikau roofing was unknown in the south for an obvious reason. Cottages of horizontal ponga logs and mud were very much in vogue on the Thames goldfields. (They are not mentioned in the book).

Our ancestors were indefatigable statisticians and much data is available. A table lists Otago buildings of 1849 and 1850 under 'wood', 'brick', 'stone', 'clay, battens and poles', 'poles or logs', and 'grass and poles', with fully 45% made of 'clay, battens and poles'. In another table, in 1848 40% of Nelson houses are thatched and 40% shingled while in Wellington the figures are 20% and 70%. (Both tables are from Statistics of New Zealand for the Crown Colony period 1840-1852, published by Economics Department, Auckland University).

The theme of regional variation might also be picked up in later sections of the book. Anyone familiar with Dunedin, Wellington and Auckland for example will know that their 19th and early 20th century streets can be very different. Late 20th century housing as well often has a regional character - even when architects intervene.

But don't be put off, Jeremy Salmond's book is a rich feast for anyone interested in our cultural landscape. The hundreds of photographs are well reproduced and the many clear schematic drawings are worth pages of description.

Geoffrey Thornton's book is also full of interest with many fascinating illustrations - often unfortunately rather murky in reproduction. The wide three column format marks the book for the coffee table.

Again, less is made of regional differences than might have been although Thornton does draw attention to some variety such as the roof ventilators of Wairarapa and Hawkes Bay wool-sheds (pp. 166-167).

The major criticism, however, is that the book is almost entirely concerned with sheep stations. In there nothing of interest on Taranaki, Waikato or Bay of Plenty dairy farms? Thornton follows the emphasis of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust (the author is chairman of its Building Committee) which has always paid far too much attention to the houses and other buildings of the great 19th century runholders. If it does nothing else Salmond's book redresses that imbalance marvellously.

Nigel Prickett

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