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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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REVIEW

SIMMONS, David R.: The Great New Zealand Myth: A study of the discovery and origin traditions of the Maori. A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington, 1976. XI, 504 pp., appendices, bibliography, index of Genealogical and Personal Names, general index, 1 map. Price (N.Z.) \$18.50.

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This book is a landmark in the study of Maori tradition. Its thorough documentation of Maori tradition relating to the origin and discovery of New Zealand is the most extensive and scholarly attempt yet published. My perspective in reviewing this book is that of the student of New Zealand prehistory. The synthesis presented by Simmons will be of lasting importance in this field.

Two lines of scholarship are apparent. Firstly, Simmons insists on a systematic form of analysing copies of tradition which are essentially constructed for oral transmission. The critical technique outlined by Simmons in chapter two of the book is not very different from the routine scrutiny which would be applied by any good historian. Robertson (1962) had previously advocated such an approach. Its implementation here is both thorough and enlightening.

Although it might be stretching a point to suggest that this was the main thrust of the work, this book is basically an attempt to face up to the gross misinterpretation of Maori tradition recording the earliest activity of Polynesians in New Zealand. The capable way in which the analytical technique has been applied, and the consequent effectiveness in ordering the final product, makes the final synthesis a permanently respectable reference work.

Simmons's rather crushing analysis elucidated the kind of manipulations which Percy Smith carried out to make Maori tradition conform with his preconceived ideas. If any document should be singled out and branded with this heresy it must be The Lore of the Whare Wanaga. It is sad that this source has been consulted by others, too numerous to mention, in a manner which demonstrates the uncritical use of sources at its worst. Moreover, its use has led to the perpetuation of a 'myth', which has served, not only to bolster up the reconstructions of pre-history of some scholars (Duff 1956), but also as a basic framework of New Zealand culture history for generations of school children.

Kupe, Toi, and the Fleet have been reassessed by Simmons in such a way that further perpetuation of the 'Great New Zealand Myth' would indicate nothing short of ignorance. When the traditional accounts of this model are closely scrutinized the evidence suggests a different picture from that previously accepted. In contrast to a date of AD 950 for Kupe, Simmons's study suggests a date as late as the early fourteenth century in the areas where this figure was known. Of Toi, Simmons suggests that there was more than the one implied in the original 'myth'. Toi of Bay of Plenty is said to have lived "in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries according to the Bay of Plenty sources, or between the eighth to twelfth centuries according to other sources" (Simmons 1976:100). The Arawa Toi is thought to have landed in the late thirteenth century. Yet if the 'myth' were to be followed, a date of AD 1130 would be derived.

Simmons has shown that the two figures mentioned above were not common to the whole of New Zealand, but are in fact, mentioned in different places in different contexts, and by no means in all tribal areas. The Great Fleet is portrayed by Simmons not as a movement of Polynesians into New Zealand, but as one of internal migration. It is the reader's reward (if he has the endurance) to have unfolded before him with systematic clarity, the actual nature of the various tribal traditions of the origin canoes.

As pointed out by Leach in her review (1977), this book is the detailed documentation of an article which Simmons published in 1969, and the result of research done for a thesis in 1966. The 1969 article presented the basic thesis contained in the book and is more readily comprehensible than the larger volume. The advantages and disadvantages of publishing the more detailed account will be apparent to those who take the time to acquaint themselves with both. Certainly this volume will form an essential part of any reference library, private or public, for those professionally involved in anthropology or prehistory in the Pacific. Yet the general public (including students) are not likely to purchase this book while the more concise 1969 article is available.

The many pages of songs (with translations) and genealogies are difficult to digest and not absolutely necessary to understand the central thesis; though someone with a professional interest in the study may be able to use these to recognize the finer points of the study beyond the layman's comprehension. Simmons has given a very full bibliography (pp. 389-471), further reinforcing its value as a reference text. The Appendices (pp. 325-387) include Maori manuscripts (with English translations) and detailed papers on the sources of the works of Grey and Smith.

I find this book fascinating, if somewhat difficult to follow closely. For the central thesis I prefer the 1969 article by Simmons for its concise synthesis. This volume, however, makes it only too clear,

both how much work is involved in this sort of research, and the difficulties in communicating the supporting evidence of any thesis arrived at. It might in fact be an indictment on the more superficial works that have appeared in anthropological and archaeological literature over recent years on this general subject, that we find it difficult to digest this thoroughly professional synthesis. It would certainly be naive to attempt to review this book for its best seller potential, for it has none.

At the recent N.Z.A.A. conference the influence of Simmons's work in the field of the study of Maori tradition was demonstrated in the papers given by Foss Leach and Helen Leach on the migrations of the Ngai-Tahu. Whether in fact we can still call the movement from north to south a 'migration', depends on the interpretation one places on the traditional sources. These have been shown to suggest that the movement was probably slow and diffuse. At this same conference Janet Davidson reopened the debate over multiple origins for New Zealand's prehistoric inhabitants. The canoe origin traditions still have an application to this debate, and Simmons's assessment of them can form the basis of a more reliable appreciation.

The impact of Simmons's thesis on the professional community of prehistorians and anthropologists has been complete; nobody worth their salt expounds the old chronology any more, unless with a broad smile.

References:

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