



NEW ZEALAND  
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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## REVIEW

**Mark Bowden. *Pitt Rivers*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991. 182 pp., numerous illustrations. Aus. \$80.00.**

Some years ago Jeremy Spencer returned from Europe after hunting out early voyage material on New Zealand in U.K. and French institutions. He had been too poor to have his photographs developed and printed, this all being done when he was back in New Zealand. But he was not too poor to pass up a chance of buying Pitt Rivers' monumental "Excavations in Cranborne Chase", which he showed me one day in the Auckland Museum and which is surely one of few sets in private hands in this part of the world.

The Cranborne Chase volumes lie at the heart of Pitt Rivers' work. They report excavations carried out on his own property, Rushmore, on the border of Dorset, Wiltshire and Hampshire. The standard of archaeological description is still remarkable a century later; it was based on fieldwork which introduced new standards of scientific observation. As students at Otago University in the early seventies we learned of Pitt Rivers as a founder of modern archaeology.

Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers, DCL, FRS, FSA, was a man of many parts. As a soldier he played an important part in the introduction of rifles to the British Army in place of the old Brown Bess musket, and had a distinguished military career spanning four decades. As a collector and museum man he founded the idiosyncratic Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, as well as a museum and pleasure park at his home where the primary purpose was public education. It is as an archaeologist, however, that he is best remembered.

This biography is written by an archaeologist which is where the emphasis lies. It is interesting to learn that Pitt Rivers did not in fact invent stratigraphical excavation; he actually excavated in spits, which left a lot to be desired for accurate interpretation. And his gangs of workmen shovelled out deposits in a manner which made the General's spoil heaps rich sources of small finds.

Nonetheless, Bowden does give Pitt Rivers credit for careful curation of artefacts, for important aspects of interpretation, and for his use of experimental work to help analysis and understanding. In all this he had the advantage of enormous wealth. He paid people to do his excavations and illustrations, to look after the collections, make museum models of his sites, etc. Also he had a large house in which servants saw to every comfort and allowed him time to devote to his passions.

Among them, regrettably, was not his wife with whom he fell out long

before his death released them both. In the late 1870s he wrote to her that she was "utterly without heart" and that, "...for the last four years now you have made my life a perfect curse to me" (p.29). He also argued with his children and tenants, and held political views of a somewhat blood-curdling nature.

General Pitt Rivers may have been ahead of his time as an archaeologist but he was also, on the evidence of this book, a privileged, cold and unattractive man. Nor does the author help with his pedantic and academic style. The book is less a biography than a series of essays or notes on bits of the great man's life and work. The information is there but not the story.

Nigel Prickett