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REVIEWS

Geoffrey Thornton. *Cast in Concrete; concrete construction in New Zealand 1850-1939*. Auckland, Reed, 1996. \$95.

During last year's conference fieldtrip we passed by, on the right bank of the Waipaoa River inland from Gisborne, a dramatic and extraordinary concrete ruin that had once been a freezing works. Construction began in June 1915, just three weeks after a public meeting formed the Poverty Bay Farmers Meat Company. In five months the building was up and equipment installed. The works closed in 1931.

The Waipaoa freezing works is one of many buildings and other structures which is introduced in Geoffrey Thornton's book on the history of concrete construction in New Zealand. I had not known that as early as the middle of last century New Zealand played a pioneering role in developing techniques for building in concrete. Nor had my eyes been opened to the many wonderful structures built in this strong, flexible and relatively cheap material.

The 1903 George Street bridge in Dunedin is New Zealand's first concrete arch bridge. Iron railings and stone facings and abutments at street level accord with an older aesthetic. A decade later Taranaki County engineer E.C. Robinson designed and supervised the construction of charming and functional all concrete bridges to carry country roads over Taranaki's swift and narrow streambeds.

In 1910 Auckland's Grafton Bridge was opened for traffic. At the time it was the largest concrete span in the world. Since I walk across it every morning, I can report that the ugly barrier against suicide attempts - very visible in Thornton's photograph - has since been removed. Above the parapet on both

sides of the roadway are now the grand cast iron lamp supports which help restore the structure to its original glory.

Among the earliest concrete buildings pictured in this book are musterers' quarters at Lake Coleridge Station, dating possibly from 1861, and the fine 1862 Invermay farmhouse near Mosgiel. Also on the Taieri Plain, at Outram, is an 1870 steading and men's quarters designed by the well-known Dunedin firm of Mason and Wales. F.W. Petre designed the superb St Dominic's Priory in Dunedin, dating from the 1870s, a period which gave to the city many wonderful buildings in concrete and in stone.

There is an interesting archaeological connection with the oldest evidence of concrete construction Thornton has been able to track down in New Zealand. In August 1857 the Kaikoura whaler George Fyffe employed two men to build a shed, in the construction of which they uncovered a famous moa egg. A surviving concrete wall belonging to the shed is dated by the *Lyttleton Times* report of the moa egg discovery.

Houses, commercial and industrial buildings, sheds, bridges, power stations, churches, public buildings, water towers, monuments, retaining walls and even an early concrete fence post, all are represented. Many are simple practical structures - which does not prevent them from being graceful and even elegant. Unexpected is the beautifully proportioned Blenheim post office built in 1877 to the design of Colonial Architect W.H. Clayton. This outstanding building was demolished in the 1960s.

Geoffrey Thornton's own superb black and white photographs make this a book to savour. His sympathetic eye for the structures themselves and for their landscape contexts puts me in mind of Mark Adams' groundbreaking "Land of Memories". There is something very archaeological about showing how our built environment belongs. This book will have readers looking again at familiar structures which are known to them, learning something of their history, and learning also to appreciate the technical issues and aesthetic possibilities of this very New Zealand building material.

Nigel Prickett
Auckland Museum

The Social Construction of the Past: Representation as Power edited by George C. Bond and Angela Gilliam, 1994. One World Archaeology Series, Routledge New York and London.

The papers in this volume represent a fairly disparate collection of subjects. Ranging from historical analyses of workers' organisations in the Southern United States to an examination of the gendered division of labour in the discipline of archaeology to a highly interesting discussion of archaeology, history and the apartheid regim in South Africa there is bound to be at least one essay here for virtually anyone with an interest in the past.

That said, *The Social Construction of the Past* is not for the faint of heart. The tenor of the book is more familiar and comfortable for those with some background in post-processualism and in particular the recent works of workers such as Randall McGuire (1992), Alison Wiley (1992) and Mark Leone (1995). Some knowledge of Foucault would probably be useful too. Nevertheless, determined reading and a little open-mindedness can yield some important insights from this book.

The major conceptual focus of this collection is the politics of knowledge and the way in which knowledge is both submerged and deployed by different actors. According to Bond and Gilliam, understandings of the past play an important role in supporting or challenging power relationships within situations of social inequality. The analysts in this volume chart out the historical and theoretical dimensions of various examples of these processes in three distinct sections. Each section can probably be read alone in conjunction with Bond and Gilliam's dense though deeply interesting introduction.

"Section I: the representation of ethnicity" is the most theoretically challenging section of the book. Using historical and ethnographic cases, the analysts in this section examine the ways in which ethnicity is represented and in particular, the use of past practices or images of people in stigmatised ethnic, racial, class or gender categories. Pem Bucks' historical piece on the convergence of race and labor politics in Kentucky suggests some interesting directions for historians and historical anthropologists in New Zealand, other offerings such as Alcida Ramos' discussion of race in Brazil, and Peter Wade's treatment of blacks in Colombia offer food for thought in the form of comparative examples. Wade's investigation of the idea that only white people's pasts were thought worthy of study in Colombia might strike some

familiar chords in both directions here in New Zealand.

Archaeologists will probably gain the most direct benefit from Section II. The papers here are more diverse, but those of you wanting a quick summary of the most enduringly valuable of Martin Bernal's (of *Black Athena* [Bernal, 1987] fame) ideas will want to read his chapter on the image of Ancient Greece and European Classicism. Joan Gero's discussion of gender and the practice of archaeology is also useful and important reading. Michael Rowlands' discussion of ethnicity and nationalism is too vague to be compelling but Nandini Rao's chapter on the relationship between archaeology and nationalism as exemplified by the Ayodhya mosque controversy in India is both illuminating and interesting.

The last section in the volume is a case study of the way in which social inequality can be given sustenance or be subject to critique by knowledge-production. Three essays on the uses of the past in South Africa during the apartheid-era and the transition, illustrate both the considerable strengths as well as the weaknesses of this kind of scholarship.

From each of the essays by Martin Hall, Andrew Spiegel and Mala Singh, there are some important observations regarding the role that narratives about the past have played in creating and maintaining the ideology of apartheid. Hall's discussion of the historical archaeology of Cape Town is particularly noteworthy in this respect and Spiegel's deconstruction of the concept of "native tradition" is comparable with the best essays in the famous Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) volume.

However, very little substantive comes out of any of these essays in terms of genuine attempts to democratise knowledge or to involve those trendily-labelled "subaltern voices" in the actual process of knowledge production. This may be more a commentary on the overall state of affairs in archaeology as a discipline (or even the academy as a whole), but it seems that while the critiques of the problem rise steadily in number, accounts of practitioners who are genuinely putting these ideas and critiques into action are much smaller in number. There are undoubtedly many examples of such actions by archaeologists at work in this country as well as elsewhere. I for one, would welcome the chance to read about their work and their experiences dealing with this most pressing of issues.

In short, I would recommend this book for readers with a serious interest in

the anthropology of race or theoretical issues to do with representation, power and the uses of the past. Those readers wishing for treatment of these issues in a more applied context might instead opt to read *Reckoning with the Dead* edited by Tamara Bray and Thomas Killion (1994) or the volume *Making Alternative Histories* (P. Schmidt and T. Patterson, ed.s, 1995). New Zealand archaeologists have been aware of many of these issues for a number of decades, what is useful about all of these works (including Bond and Gilliam's volume) is the genesis of a vocabulary of ideas and language with which to articulate some of the issues we face.

Christopher Fung
Department of Anthropology
University of Auckland

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