

## Book Reviews

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**Amiria Henare, *Museums, Anthropology and Imperial Exchange*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, hardback £.53.00, pp. xix+323**

This wide-ranging and ambitious book will be essential reading for those interested in the history of museums, material culture, anthropological thought, settler-indigenous relations and migration. It offers a series of rich and stimulating narratives through an original analysis of material culture and anthropological exchange between two countries that are not usually brought into comparison so directly. Henare demonstrates the way that Scotland and New Zealand share 'histories of imperialism, colonization, migration and settlement' (p. 11) in a survey of why and how people, artefacts and ideas travelled between them, from the time of the Pacific voyages of Captain Cook to the present, ending up in museums across the length and breadth of both countries. She charts a fascinating path 'through an examination of the changing importance of museums and their collections (with particular reference to anthropology), a critique of historical representations of exchange in the context of Empire, and an assertion of the central role of artefacts in any understanding of society and culture'(p.11).

*Museums, Anthropology and Imperial Exchange* is both an historical and 'material' ethnography. The first chapter makes a strong case for a re-invigorated material culture approach in anthropology and laments the shift in this discipline from the museum to the academy and its attendant linguistic-based methodologies. Henare wants to return to an appreciation of what is distinctive about the 'artefact *qua* artefact, that it might instantiate meaning in a different way than language' (p. 5). The text is interspersed with Henare's own observations as she visits museums and examines exhibitions and collections. I found these less enlightening than the surrounding discussion and they often interrupted the narrative flow.

The second chapter, 'Objects of Exploration' opens with Henare's account of going to look at Maori (indigenous New Zealand) cloaks in the National Museum of Scotland. She examined one presented to Queen Elizabeth by the Maori people, which she takes with her to wear every time she visits New Zealand, and two other much older cloaks collected in the eighteenth century, probably on one of Cook's voyages. One of the delights of this book is the careful attention to each object and its provenance (or lack of it), demonstrating, for those who have not worked in museums, how objects are catalogued and what may happen to the information over time. With older colonial objects that passed through many collectors' hands, new stories and information were often created around them that may or may not be true. This consideration leads to a nuanced discussion of the centrality of artefacts to exploration and the forging of relationships with the indigenous and how both the potential colonizers and the colonized viewed these processes. The changing view and value of these artefacts, particularly from the point of Maori for whom they are 'taonga' or cultural treasures in the present is also emphasised.

In chapter 3, 'Objects of Knowledge', Henare surveys the way that the collecting, comparison and discussion of objects were crucial activities for the development of Enlightenment thought. The central role of Scottish figures and Edinburgh as the leading intellectual centre of its day is made abundantly clear. The museums they developed to house these objects were the proving ground for their theories of the improvement of mankind, which prepared the way for 'imperial expansion into the Pacific, shaping future relations between indigenous peoples and Europeans, as well as life in Britain' (p. 49). Subsequent chapters trace 'Improvement and Imperial Exchange', whereby agricultural and social reform led to mass emigration from

Scotland within Britain and to its colonies; more exploration in the Pacific in the search for natural resources to be exploited; and the Imperial experiments carried out in the name of 'Improvement' on Maori and other colonized peoples via missionaries especially. 'Colonial Baggage' provides a detailed analysis of the ideological and material basis of the colonization of New Zealand, culminating in 'a new Britain in the South Seas' and specifically the founding of the Scottish settlement of Otago in co-operation with the Free Church of Scotland.

The parallel story of the development of museums and artefact-based research continues in 'Storehouses of Science'. The mid-nineteenth century is shown to be a period of 'thinking through things': museums played 'a significant role in the colonial process, by developing knowledge of the landscape and its resources which facilitated industrial exploitation, and by generating theories about the Maori people which legitimised the imposition of imperial control' (p. 178). Through the scientists and scholars in New Zealand, museums continued to exchange ideas, artefacts and specimens, visit each other and contribute to key debates of the day. 'Trophies and Souvenirs' provides an illuminating account of early twentieth century recreational travel and cultural scholarship that acknowledges the Romantic inventions of tradition and identity formation in each country. Parallels drawn between the accounts and representations of Highlander experience in Scotland and those of Maori are striking.

'Things and Words' is the theme of Chapter 8 which continues the chronological account of the development of anthropological research with artefacts. In the 1920s and 30s, Maori became more closely involved in the development of the discipline as informants and as go-betweens. Henare has interesting speculations to make about the motives and goals of Maori who contributed taonga to museums and who were involved in international exhibitions and other cultural tourist ventures, but they remain just that – speculations. More recent research not only traces how the meaning of Maori objects shifted from curio to taonga, enlarging upon and supplementing some of the material used here, but also reveals a lengthy history of Maori interaction with museums.

This chapter shows the development of an interest in folk like within anthropology and social history. Henare argues that museums shifted from being storehouses of science to places of memory over the twentieth century in both countries. Here I felt her analysis of the development of an equally important, but later, discipline of history less convincing than the authority and subtlety of the earlier chapters on the development of anthropology and imperial relations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Henare notes that the boom for Scottish folklife museums was in the 1930s and accounts for that in some detail. New Zealand local history museums expanded markedly in the 1960s and 70s not only because of town centenaries but also because of a range of mid-century memorialising and diverse forms of public history. This phenomenon was considerably broader and more diverse than Henare suggests here, as local scholarship shows. The 1940 Centennial Exhibition and related books, films, pageants and other memorials to 'noble pioneers' opened the floodgates. For example, the Provincial centenary led to the installation of an Early Colonists' Gallery in the Canterbury Museum (to which entry was charged), and later a department and suite of displays of Early Colonial History. The difficulty lies in the extent to which Henare's generalisations can be sustained. She is right to note that settler life was and is often exhibited ethnographically in diorama-like period rooms, which depict a generalised 'golden age' (although the hardship and privation is often emphasised) or in jumbled typological arrangements which give little sense of change over time. And Maori are often absent from displays altogether or confined to special 'ethnographic sections' occupying a 'parallel universe' in time and space. But exceptions can be found to all of these and the author's interpretation is stretched when institutions of vastly different scale and aim are put together. In fact, what is most interesting is the way that 'history' was often collected and displayed in large metropolitan institutions as an adjunct to the their scientific mode of collecting and display, which they maintained as their primary rationale.

The final chapter picks up the shift to a (second) 'linguistic turn' and begins with a detailed discussion of structuralism. This prepares the ground for a thorough-going critique of The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), and by extension other new national museums in former settler colonies, in contrast with her approval of the new Museum of Scotland, where, she argues, the emphasis is much more clearly placed on artefacts – the very substance of the Museum (p. 281). This is a constant refrain throughout the book and one that

at times, despite her careful analysis and judicious qualifications, almost works to reify the object in relation to discourse. This tends to overlook the way that museums have always been about both objects and ideas at the same time. Having worked at Te Papa through the period under analysis, I find it difficult to square some of this analysis with my experience. Te Papa did emphasise concepts, storylines, narratives and employed writers for label text. But the exhibition she declares to be the most post-modern, *Exhibiting Ourselves*, an exhibition about New Zealand's involvement at international exhibitions here and overseas, was devised based on the strength of Te Papa's collections in these areas, not primarily as an exercise in irony, subversion and irreverence. The careful explanation of the Museum of Scotland's exhibitions from top to bottom floor is paralleled by a superficial analysis of Te Papa's opening history exhibitions, which included a changing community gallery alongside the migration exhibition mentioned here and a 'Life in New Zealand' exhibition. The perils of publishing some time after conducting fieldwork also means that key changes and developments in all these post-settler museums and the literature related to them in the last five years cannot be included.

The strength of this book lies in its multi-faceted understanding of the changing nature of museums, anthropology and imperial exchange while not condemning them. It is a pity that it does not pay the same attention to late twentieth-century museums as to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century institutions. In trying to shift the emphasis from an over reliance on discourse back to material culture, the recent past becomes grist for the mill of anthropological field work rather than nuanced historical analysis. Henare's discussion of history and settler heritage will stimulate more work on twentieth- and twenty-first-century material culture, the key disciplines associated with them, and how artefacts continue to circulate in an age of visibility, consumerism and the virtual.

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**Kylie Message, *New Museums and the Making of Culture*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006, paper £19.99, pp. vi-viii, 1-241.**

The growing literature on museums in the South Pacific region would lead one to think that Message's book, *New Museums and the Making of Culture*, which includes two chapters on new museums in New Zealand (Te Papa) and New Caledonia (the Centre Culturel Tjibaou) is a welcome addition to it. However, this book does more than contribute to this body of work. Its main remit, a study of the role of new museums as vehicles for a critique of contemporary culture, encompasses a wide range of case studies in North America and Europe, apart from the South Pacific. The strength of this book is its ability to engage in a discussion of the ideology behind new museums by bringing together a number of institutions and projects which, at least initially, seem to have little in common: the refurbishment of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2004, the proposal for an International Freedom Centre (IFC) in New York (2004), London's Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851, and the proposal to renew the Palace's site in 2005, as well as the Te Papa and the Centre Culturel Tjibaou (CCT).

The book's primary aim is set out in the introduction and chapter 1. This is a study of the rhetorical construction of the new museum, and it is informed by two key concerns: firstly, to investigate the notion of newness, its purpose and redefinition, through a number of projects and key museums and cultural centres; and, secondly, to explain why discourses and practices privileging newness co-exist with approaches favouring multiculturalism, diversity and social reform. The study of the type of newness articulated by new museums leads Message to ask whether the fact that they favour postmodern strategies of representation has led to a redefinition of modernity's notion of newness, with its associations with progress, and colonialism. In other words, is the adoption of postmodern representational strategies symptom of a novel redefinition of newness, opposing the newness embraced by historical museums such as the Louvre? If this is the case, how do new museums negotiate and present issues such as cultural rights and diversity? A strong point of Message's book is its capacity to engage in a specific study of newness whilst positioning it within broader key debates in any studies of culture: the

role of cultural policy and its impact on the agendas of new museums, as well as the negotiation of global trends with local concerns such as the redefinition of multiculturalism and biculturalism, as in the case of Te Papa.

Chapter 3 offers a context for all of the case studies through an exploration of how the nineteenth-century museum represented a form of newness connected to reformist nation-building programmes. It was during this colonial period that museums attempted to define, classify and produce racial otherness. This chapter is especially welcome because it sheds new light on the type of museological history informing the practices and agendas of institutions such as Te Papa and CCT, such as CCT's agenda to articulate forms of cultural identity that can form the basis for the political reconstruction of a new, multiethnic country such as New Caledonia.

The discussion of modern and postmodern notions of newness is well elaborated in chapter 2 on the refurbishment of MoMa where a modern and a postmodern notion of newness are said to co-exist. The museum is informed by images of newness valued by modernism, in regard to history, display and communication, whilst it also references a postmodernity 'that denies both historical precedents and the connection between museums and modernity as a progress-oriented project' (p. 61). The new MoMA's display techniques both assert and criticise the idealised modernity of the white cube exhibition space. External experiences and images are allowed to rupture the otherwise ordered galleries which favour activities of contemplation, whilst the interior windows offer artificial connections between upper and lower galleries, as well as the existence of external windows letting in natural light and providing Manhattan as an object of display. The museum privileges a newness that aspires to be ahistorical, and this is a key characteristic of modernist projects which embrace a desire for continual newness. In contrast, postmodernity is more commonly perceived as questioning the very possibility of newness. The problem, says Message, is that in privileging images of eternal newness whilst expressing them through postmodern theoretical discourses, they function as pastiche rather than offering something entirely new.

Chapter 4 focuses on the debate around the proposal for an International Freedom Centre adjacent to the site of the former Twin Towers in New York. But pressure from the victims' families' groups led to the rejection of this proposal when it was deemed that it failed to offer the confirmation of personal experience and memories they desired. The chapter's main aim is to investigate the role new museums can play in creating or legitimating collective memories, and whether they can foment the emergence of a public sphere. Message demonstrates that, after 9/11, what prevails is the articulation of multiple, pluralistic public spheres by local interest groups. The Museum of Chinese in the Americas is a case in point, in its efforts to address issues of trauma and multiculturalism by representing the constructed nature of the concept of nation.

Chapters 5 and 6 can be read together as the exploration of two cultural centres, the CCT and the Te Papa (both opened in 1998) from the Pacific region. Of particular importance is how they have balanced the demands of their local context with those of a transnational discourse with which they seek to engage (p. 141). Both need to celebrate national or territorial identities, whilst aiming to engage in postmodern representational strategies, as well as becoming significant cultural actors on a global stage. In each case, the reiteration of the new is tied up with specific cultural-political objectives, for example, the CCT remit to preserve Kanak heritage is also a means to seek reconciliation between coloniser (France) and colonized (the Kanak community) Similarly, Te Papa aims to balance its commitment to biculturalism with a multiculturalism prevalent in the general community, demonstrating a dedication to the diversity of Maori culture, as well as to those groups which are neither Maori nor European.

In my opinion, the most engaging aspect of this book is the question of how new museums contribute to the making of culture. Each chapter illustrates the various ways in which culture is in the making in different institutions and contexts. The fact that culture is continuously in the making, or rather being re-made, could be the reason why Message has chosen to work with a notion of culture with postmodern overtones. As she says, culture 'is discussed as a fluid, mutable concept that is used in various contexts and for the purpose of different outcomes' (p. 25). She then follows a contention of David Simpson's that 'It may be that we are beyond the point where anyone can usefully theorise what culture *is*... Culture now describes ... the dynamics of all social exchange: working, eating, sleeping' (p. 25). However, it seems to me that the book shows, precisely, how giving up on theorising culture would not be such a good idea.

It certainly is the case that what is meant by cultural identity varies depending on the institution and its socio-cultural context with each new museum producing its own rhetoric around this subject. Maybe what is more plausible is to change the types of questions we need to be asking about culture: how is it being put to use, and who are the main actors behind this process (both working within museums as well as those influencing their practices from the outside)? This seems a more reflexive way of engaging with changes at the level of culture. Overall, Message's book is an excellent example of why culture matters and how in the past, and at present, it has been put to use. New museums, as Message demonstrates, are a case in point.

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### **Reference**

Simpson, C. (2004) 'Politics as Such?', *New Left Review*, 30: 69-82

