
SCOPING YEOTOPIA: TOM BROOKING AND THE MAKING OF RURAL NEW ZEALAND¹

GRAEME WYNN

Department of Geography
University of British Columbia

Abstract

Prompted by the retirement of Professor Thomas Warden Hastings Brooking from the Department of History at the University of Otago, and his expressed interest in writing a new book on the making of rural New Zealand, this article is the product of a particular moment. Attempting to weigh the contributions of a busy scholarly life that is still actively unfolding, these pages look backward in hope of boosting onward momentum. They triangulate and reflect, too briefly, upon Professor Brooking's wide-ranging and productive career as a New Zealand historian, consider some of the challenges involved in creating a new synthesis of rural history in that country, and suggest a small handful of possibly pertinent themes for further consideration in this endeavour.

Keywords: rural history, New Zealand, environmental history, Tom Brooking

Making is an arresting and familiar term. It suggests **action** and **accomplishment**. No wonder it appears so frequently on bookshelves and in library catalogues. So we might choose *The Making of ... The Middle Ages; Urban America; Modern Tibet; New World Slavery; or The Roman Army*. If ideas appeal more than times, places and institutions, we might linger over *The Making of ... The English Middle Class; Middlebrow Culture; An American Philosopher; or The Creeds*. Then we find *Making ... Musical Apps; An Extraordinary School; Strategic Spatial Plans; and Table Wine at Home*. Who would not want to be part of this?

¹ This reflection was prepared to mark the retirement of Professor T. W. H. Brooking from the University of Otago in 2018. My thanks to Professor Tony Ballantyne for the invitation to participate, Associate Professor James Beattie for his interest in publishing the paper, Eric Leinberger of UBC Geography for reworking the diagrams, and Tom and Trish Brooking for their hospitality. Permit me then a personal recollection. Trolling the web in search of inspiration for what I might say, I found a promising link: 'A life lived to the full, Tom Brooking', *New Zealand Books: Pukapuka Aotearoa. A Quarterly*, 1 December 2006, nzbooks.org.nz/2006/non-fiction/a-life-lived-to-the-full-tom-brooking, accessed 21 January 2020. Sadly, this turned out to be a Brooking review of a Beaglehole biography, rather than a pre-packaged encomium for the 2018 retiree.



Figure 1: Budding historians at the feet of the master: Thomas Warden Hastings Brooking.

Source: blogs.otago.ac.nz/crocc/tag/tom-brooking/.

But here's the thing. All these works use 'making' as a verbal noun. The word has no subject. None of these titles identifies the agents or performers of the action. Adding 'Tom Brooking', as I have to my title, might seem to address this problem. But it implies that Tom has single-handedly created the New Zealand countryside. This is too much to ask of any one man—though we might well imagine the mighty Tom, tramping boots firmly laced, golf clubs in hand, warden of all he surveys, hastening on his way and brooking no restraint in his mission to beat back the bracken, stamp out thistles, herd the sheep, turn tussock into pasture grass, and carry the economy on his back.



Figure 2: Thomas Warden Hastings Brooking.

Source: The author.

Enormous energy has gone into the making of rural New Zealand, poured forth in the lives and labours of hundreds of thousands of men and women, young and old, over the generations, as well as through the straining labour of horses, the harnessing of kinetic and potential energy, and the conversion of radiant, thermal and chemical sources of power to human ends. Māori, sealers, gold diggers, small-time settlers, run-holders and their workers, male and female, poured sweat and tears into creating a foothold, and more, where none had existed before. Some were sufficiently mindful of the challenges they faced to offer a record of the progress to which they contributed in making a new land. A few—such as Herbert Guthrie-Smith on Tutira—were particularly aware of the transformative effects of their endeavours, and assumed undue responsibility for their consequences.²

There was much to write about. Half a millennium of Māori settlement, fire, hunting and horticulture left their considerable marks on the land, but they pale by comparison with the imprints made by Europeans in the last 2 centuries. Kenneth Cumberland, one of New Zealand's first professional geographers, put it succinctly in 1940 when he declared that in subjugating nature to human purposes over 100 years, New Zealanders had matched the work of 20 centuries in Europe and 4 in North America. In a simpler, later iteration of this point, Cumberland insisted that the story of humans as makers and shapers of the landscape was simply 'more apparent, more flagrant in New Zealand than in other parts of the world'. Here the impact of people upon land had been 'violent and disruptive', 'ruthless and profound'.³

Cumberland and several other scholars of his ilk did much to document this profound change. Broadly they saw the physical environment as a stage on which humans performed, changing the props and backdrops by 'moulding and fashioning nature's diversity of habitats' to fit their own evolving 'needs and purposes'.⁴ They described the development of New Zealand's landscapes in vivid, compelling ways. But these authors were less interested in people than places, and their work was shunted aside by new approaches to thinking about and writing history in the latter part of the twentieth century.

In the 1960s, some historians of North America declared their interest in the study of human interactions with nature. Grounded in the traditions and steeped in the practice of history, they framed these interactions in more dialectical or reciprocal terms than most historical geographers had done. Some described this new approach

2 W. H. Guthrie-Smith, *Tutira: The Story of a New Zealand Sheep Station*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1953), first published 1921; Graeme Wynn, 'Remapping Tutira: Contours in the Environmental History of New Zealand', *Journal of Historical Geography* 23, no. 4 (1997): 418–46, doi.org/10.1006/jhge.1997.0061.

3 Kenneth B. Cumberland, 'A Century's Change: Natural to Cultural Vegetation in New Zealand', *Geographical Review* 31, no. 4 (1941): 529–54, doi.org/10.2307/210498; Kenneth B. Cumberland, 'Canterbury Landscapes: A Study of New Zealand Geography', *Geographical Review* 30, no. 1 (1940): 19–40, doi.org/10.2307/210448; Kenneth B. Cumberland, *Landmarks* (Surry Hills, NSW: Reader's Digest Association, 1981), 6.

4 Cumberland, *Landmarks*, 6.

as giving agency to nature (or ‘the environment’)—acknowledging that it was more than a stage shaped by and for humans. With their disciplinary inclination to focus on ‘change over time, causality, context, complexity, and contingency’, these new ‘environmental historians’ were also, generally, more alert than historical geographers to the complexities of contexts and the relationships between context and agency.⁵

At much the same time, new foci of inquiry became fashionable. Class, race, ethnicity, disability and gender were, perhaps, the most urgently pursued; recognising that people often occupied more than one of these ‘social positions’, a new generation of scholars emphasised the importance of intersectional analysis to tease out the impact of intertwining systems of power on those consigned to the margins of society. Concurrently, history and the humanities were roiled by questions about how the past should be studied, about what can be known of it, and about peoples’ relations with it. Soon, self-described postmodernists were asserting that ‘there is nothing in the past to be found’.⁶ All of this produced a good deal of introspection—as well as a dazzling array of innovative work. It also massively complicated the task of writing history in the twenty-first century—and made any attempt, such as this, to summarise recent trends in 2 paragraphs quite absurd.

But onward we must press. Although I cast doubt above on Tom Brooking’s power to make rural New Zealand with his clubs and boots, we do know that he has been thinking for a very long time about wielding his pen to the same end. Indeed, a couple of years ago he framed a book prospectus, in which he envisaged ‘pulling ... a lifetime’s research’ together into a big book on the making of rural New Zealand under the title ‘Mud, Sweat and Dreams’.⁷

Before we get to this, we need to recognise that Brooking’s oeuvre is extensive and diverse, and his ‘lifetime’ of research on rural affairs has been fitted in around many other things. Two graphics help to establish these points succinctly. The first (Figure 3) presents a sample (i.e. an incomplete) enumeration of the journals in which he has published (in black italics); edited collections to which he has contributed chapters (blue); and books that he has authored, edited, co-authored or co-edited (in red capitals).

5 Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, ‘What does it mean to think historically?’, *Perspectives on History*, 1 January 2007, www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2007/what-does-it-mean-to-think-historically, accessed 21 January 2020.

6 Hayden White, ‘The burden of history’, *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 111–34, doi.org/10.2307/2504510; Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). For an assessment of White’s contributions, see Herman Paul, *Hayden White* (London: Polity Press, 2011). Keith Jenkins was perhaps the most vigorous advocate of postmodern history in the wake of White. His books are usefully reviewed in Alexander Macfie, ‘Keith Jenkins Retrospective’, *Reviews in History* 1266, www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1266, accessed 21 January 2020.

7 T. W. H. Brooking, Draft proposal for a book on ‘The Making of Rural New Zealand’ (potentially ‘New Zealand’s’) provisionally entitled ‘Mud, Sweat and Dreams’ (typescript), 18 March 2016. Copy provided by Brooking in possession of author.

Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History NZ-Australia relations: Moving together or drifting apart?
 The Historical Atlas of New Zealand *Immigrants and Minorities*
 THE HISTORY OF NEW ZEALAND Making our place: Exploring land-use tensions in Aotearoa New Zealand
 New Zealand Geographer Edward Gibbon Wakefield and the Colonial Dream: A Reconsideration
 MILESTONES: TURNING POINTS IN NEW ZEALAND HISTORY *Environment and History*
 Essays in the History of Rural Education in Australia and New Zealand A HISTORY OF DENTISTRY IN NEW ZEALAND
 Oxford Dictionary of National Biography *Journal of New Zealand Studies*
 Agricultural History Going Public: The Changing Face of New Zealand History
 Environmental History *Journal of New Zealand and Pacific Studies* RICHARD SEDDON: KING OF GOD'S OWN
 Rural Canterbury: Celebrating its history Encyclopedia of World Environmental History
 Rushing for Gold *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* Wild Heart *Social History*
 Storia della Nuova Zelanda MAKING A NEW LAND: MASSEY: ITS EARLY YEARS
 AND CAPTAIN OF THEIR SOULS: *History Now* The Cyclopedia of Otago and Scotland
 LANDS FOR THE PEOPLE? *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health* UNPACKING THE KISTS: THE SCOTS IN NEW ZEALAND
 New Worlds: The Comparative History of New Zealand and the United States
 British Review of New Zealand Studies THE HEATHER AND THE FERN... *Historical News* Heartlands
 ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORIES OF NEW ZEALAND Sites of Gender: Women, Men and Modernity in Southern Dunedin, 1890-1939
 New Zealand Journal of History The Oxford Companion to Scottish History
 Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography
 Immigration and National Identity in New Zealand: One People, Two Peoples, Many Peoples?
 A global clan: Scottish migrant networks and identities since the eighteenth century

Figure 3: Brooking diversity: Titles of some of the journals carrying Brooking's articles, edited collections in which Brooking has chapters, and books edited and authored by Brooking.

Source: The author.

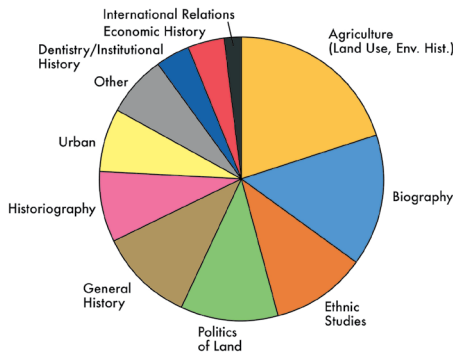


Figure 4: Schematic proportional representation of Brooking's scholarly interests.

Source: The author.

The second (Figure 4) attempts to represent the relevant importance (by the simple metric of approximate page counts) of topics upon which he has published with some frequency (subject to all the necessary disclaimers about the perils of pigeonholing).

The sheer, not to say overwhelming, variety of endeavour portrayed in these 2 figures reminds us, first, of the breadth and richness of Brooking's grasp of New Zealand history; second, of the difficulty of summarising, adequately, his contributions to the literature on rural New Zealand; and third, the challenges involved in bringing such expansive accomplishment to coherent and compelling expression within the covers of a single book. Seeking to engage the second and third of these issues—the difficulty and challenges—against the backdrop of the first, I proceed as follows: I begin by 'Scoping "Yeotopia"'. Here I scan a good deal of Brooking's writing and the larger projects in which he has been involved, to sketch something of his, and 'our', understanding of rural New Zealand. This is, I suppose, a sort of *Country Calendar* approach to becoming aware, offering a series of vignettes, but falling far short of any systematic and comprehensive analysis.⁸ Then I turn, very briefly, to an early draft of the 'Mud, Sweat and Dreams' prospectus to think, with Brooking, about what a history of rural New Zealand might entail. Finally, in a section called 'A view from Erewhon', I draw upon my own incomplete understanding of rural things, in New Zealand and elsewhere, to suggest that there may yet be new 'themes to explore, concepts to develop, and resources to use' in discussing the making of rural New Zealand.⁹

Scoping 'Yeotopia'

Yeotopia is a term with Greek roots, broadly associated with the tilling of the earth. Brooking has adapted and adopted it in some of his more recent reflections on the making of rural New Zealand. I use it here as a catch-basin to bring together a few observations about Brooking's forays into this topic. They began many decades ago, when a sprightly 20-something Brooking compared the rural societies of late nineteenth-century England and New Zealand in a paper titled 'Larkrise to Waitahuna'. Years later, he would again signal an interest in Flora Thompson's account of late nineteenth-century life in her Oxfordshire hamlet, but this time he coupled her birthplace not with an obscure Otago hamlet but with 'Littledene', the small town otherwise known as Oxford in North Canterbury that was the focus of Crawford Somerset's ground-breaking sociological study published in 1938.¹⁰

8 *Country Calendar* is a New Zealand documentary television series. Since March 1966, it has examined aspects of rural life in New Zealand and is the country's longest-running television series. Something of the nature of the program can be gleaned from the 40th anniversary episode (2005): www.nzonscreen.com/title/40-years-of-country-calendar-2005, accessed 21 January 2020. Episodes from the 2013 season to the present are available to watch online, at www.tvnz.co.nz/shows.

9 The quoted phrase is from Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking, eds, *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13.

10 Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945)—a trilogy of earlier, semi-autobiographical novels about the Oxfordshire/Buckinghamshire countryside in the late nineteenth century, published by Oxford University Press as *Lark Rise* (1939), *Over to Candleford* (1941) and *Candleford Green* (1943). H. C. D. Somerset, *Littledene: A New Zealand Rural Community* (Auckland: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1938). *Lark Rise* was paired with Waitahuna in a paper Brooking delivered to the annual conference of New Zealand historians in 1977 and with 'Littledene' in the prospectus for 'Mud, Sweat and Dreams' (2016).

Between these 2 intriguing pairings, suggesting a transnational, comparative and experiential engagement with places literally half a world and time apart, Brooking invoked the notion of Yeotopia.¹¹ As I see it, the term signifies 2 things: one the *idea* that New Zealand took shape as an improved, southern version of rural Britain, a land of milk and honey offering a quiet, happy home for smallholders; and, second, the late nineteenth-century *reality* that most of the family farmers in New Zealand worked someone else's land. In 1890, fewer than 600 individuals and companies owned almost 60 per cent of New Zealand's freehold land.¹²

Closer settlement and cultural transfer

This tension undergirds Brooking's work on the Minister of Lands John Mackenzie, who did much to reform the land system in the late nineteenth century. In Brooking's summation, Mackenzie was responsible for opening up '1.3 million acres of land ... for closer settlement. Some 7,000 farmers and their families moved onto these properties, revitalised the countryside and accelerated New Zealand's move away from a "plantation" type of agriculture to family farming'.¹³ Politics was central to change. But so were social and cultural influences. *Lands for the People?*, Brooking's 1996 biography of Mackenzie, roots the politician's dislike of landlordism firmly in his childhood encounters with the misery inflicted upon people by the Highland clearances, and his deep-seated desire for independence. Here perhaps we see a new North British variant of the transnational, comparative impulse that coupled Lark Rise with Littledene. My Canadian colleague Donald Akenson, who knows more than a thing or two about ethnic group relocations, praised *Lands for the People?* as 'an unusually shrewd reading of the influence of Old World cultural patterns on New World behavior'.¹⁴

11 Brooking readily acknowledges his borrowing of the term from Paul Star, his sometime PhD student and long-time research collaborator.

12 'Yeotopia' appears in "'Yeotopia' Revisited: Ruminations on How the Vibrancy of an Ideal Hid the Relatively Early Industrialization of New Zealand Agriculture', paper delivered at the Agricultural History Association Conference, Little Rock, Arkansas, June 2009, and 'Yeotopia Gained: New Zealand 1840–1914', paper delivered at the 'Colonial Worlds, Elemental Histories' symposium, Dunedin, 31 October 2014. This paragraph also draws from various sections of T. W. H. Brooking, *The History of New Zealand* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004).

13 Tom Brooking, 'McKenzie, John', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 1993. *Te Ara—the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2m17/mckenzie-john, accessed 13 October 2018. For more on this theme, see Tom Brooking and Terry Hearn, 'Breaking up the great estates', plate 59 in *The Historical Atlas of New Zealand*, ed. Malcolm McKinnon (Auckland: David Bateman in association with the Historical Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs, 1997); Tom Brooking, 'Use it or lose it: Unravelling the land debate in late nineteenth-century New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History* 30, no. 2 (1996): 141–62; and Tom Brooking, "'Busting Up" the Greatest Estate of All: Liberal Maori Land Policy, 1891–1911', *New Zealand Journal of History* 26, no. 1 (1992): 78–98.

14 T. W. H. Brooking, *Lands for the People? The Highland Clearances and the Colonisation of New Zealand. A Biography of John McKenzie* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 1996); Donald H. Akenson, comment noted in T. W. H. Brooking curriculum vitae.

Unpacking the Kists dives much deeper into the question of cultural transfer, and owes a particular debt to Brooking's long-term interest in the Scots in New Zealand.¹⁵ A systematic and analytical collaborative enterprise, a decade or more in the making, this volume is near seamless in its presentation of the work of several researchers. In that part of the story authored by Brooking, we find a heterogeneous group of practical, industrious, economic migrants making concerted efforts 'to banish the alien and recreate the landscapes, spatial layouts, and economic systems of home'. Unpacking this formulation reveals the newcomers' roles in naming and surveying the land and in constructing farming landscapes. Those who toiled hard 'improving God's creation' sometimes clashed with their conservation-minded brethren, because no group of such size was ever of one mind on all things. Particular breeds of cattle and stone walls aside, perhaps, there was little to distinguish the cultural landscapes of Scottish Otago from those created by English migrants in the North Island bush. Fired by the spirit of improvement, Scots acquired smallholdings, became runholders, worked as shepherds and labourers, and engaged in off-farm sectors of the farming economy as nurserymen, seed merchants, agricultural implement manufacturers, and so on. Others of course found their ways into a variety of urban occupations. This is a valuable story, effectively, even lovingly, told, but, like a Merchant Ivory film, it comes to rest in ambiguity and contradiction. Scots, about 20 per cent of New Zealand's nineteenth-century immigrants, played major parts in the remaking of New Zealand, but they differed in their appraisals of the land and their attitudes towards it and were not markedly distinct from other groups. Moreover, many of those whose ideas are most fully recorded were not even consistent in their views. They were men and women of their time and place: the age of progress and the raw edge of empire. For all that, 'subtle [but important] Scottish influences' shaped New Zealand politics, law, religion and education—and the writings of Robbie Burns offered moral justification for the closer settlement movement.¹⁶

15 Brad Patterson, Tom Brooking and Jim McAloon, *Unpacking the Kists: The Scots in New Zealand* (Montreal: McGill–Queens University Press; Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2013). Brooking was responsible for chapters 6 and 10. The 2 quotations that follow are from 144 and 150. For more by Brooking on this broad theme, see Tom Brooking, 'Weaving the Tartan into the Flax: Networks, Identities and Scottish Migration to Nineteenth Century Otago, New Zealand', in *The Global Clan: Scottish Migrant Networks and Identities Since the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Angela McCarthy (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 183–202; Tom Brooking and Jennie Coleman, eds, *The Heather and the Fern: Scottish Migration and the Settlement of New Zealand* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2003); Tom Brooking, "'Tam McCannoy and Kitty Clydeside": The Scots in New Zealand', in *The Scots Abroad: Labour, Capital, Enterprise*, ed. R. A. Cage (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 156–90; and Tom Brooking, 'Green Scots and Golden Irish: The Environmental Impact of Scottish and Irish Settlers in New Zealand—Some Preliminary Ruminations', *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* 3, no. 1 (March 2010): 49–67.

16 Patterson, Brooking and McAloon, *Unpacking the Kists*, 122–5.

Making environmental histories¹⁷

One of the aims of *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* when it appeared in 2002 was to push back against a ‘pernicious form’ of presentism that tended ‘to portray landscapes as if they “are” rather than as having histories by which they have come to be’.¹⁸ With 18 chapters by 21 authors, the book offered multiple, wide-ranging and complementary narratives that encompassed many disciplinary perspectives. The editors Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking worked to achieve thematic and chronological coherence and made the book more than a disparate set of essays. The volume has 5 sections: Encounters; Colonising; Special Environments; Modernising; and Perspectives. Its opening chapter, ‘A Fragile Plenty’, treats the environments of Aotearoa before the arrival of Europeans. Its last, dealing with the early twenty-first century, is titled ‘Losing ground?’ Along the way, essays consider some of the big themes of environmental transformation, reflect on their disruptive ecological and cultural consequences, and mark the effects of the impulse to improvement. When a revised edition of the book appeared, with half a dozen new chapters, in 2013, it was appropriately called *Making a New Land*. This title, and the book’s pedigree in *Environmental Histories*, rightly mark the collection’s debt to the work of an earlier generation of historical geographers—and its distance from it.

Seeds of Empire is the joint product of 8 authors, all of whom have been closely associated with the universities of Otago and Canterbury.¹⁹ It is a model of what the ‘output’ of team projects in the humanities and social sciences should be. Truly collaborative and integrative, it benefits from the diverse disciplinary affiliations of its contributors. In stark summary, the book addresses 3 major questions: who or what were the local drivers of change, and when, where, and why did these changes take place; how did global contexts impinge on the transformation of New Zealand landscape; and are there new insights to be found in the patterns of biotic (and other) flows—of grass seeds, fertilisers, wool, meat, butter and cheese (and knowledge)? Perhaps a better way of understanding the approach and emphases of *Seeds of Empire* is through the authors’ own diagrammatic representation of its key themes and questions (Figure 5).

17 Here I coalesce the titles of Pawson and Brooking, *Environmental Histories*, and Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking, eds, *Making a New Land: Environmental Histories of New Zealand* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2013).

18 Pawson and Brooking, *Environmental Histories*, xii (Preface).

19 Tom Brooking and Eric Pawson, eds, *Seeds of Empire: The Environmental Transformation of New Zealand* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

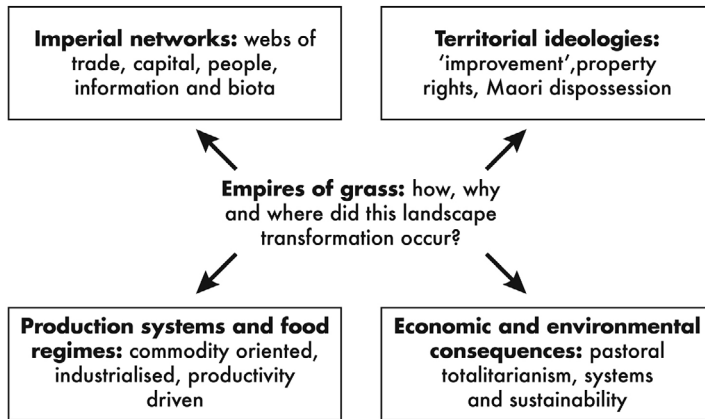


Figure 5: Key themes and questions of *Seeds of Empire*.

Source: The author.

All of this breaks new ground, yet it is at the local level that this book excels. How did newcomers, buoyed by stories of beautiful scenery, ‘Italian’ skies, a mild climate and prospects of wealth for all, adapt to the howling wilderness of the Canterbury Plains and other locales? Chapters 3, 4 and 5 work ingeniously at the microscale to show practical people—experimenters, innovators and inventors—learning and coping in a variety of ways, mixing grasses and broadleaved herbs, liming sour soils, using fire judiciously, adopting sheep breeds to suit different environments, and so on. To my knowledge at least, there are few discussions of these processes at such scales of resolution in the literature, anywhere.

Seeds of Empire offers thorough, well-grounded and thoughtful accounts of early land clearing and the shifting dynamics of rural transformation in the twentieth century as science, technology and distant demand honed the discourse of ‘improvement’ into an ideology of production for (and substantial dependence on) overseas markets. It revises established views of New Zealand history by demonstrating the contingent and (unintentionally) deleterious character of many of the economic and environmental choices made by New Zealand settlers, politicians and even scientific experts. And it casts new light on the links between policy and environment. Finally, it rejects the core–periphery model of colonial development to see New Zealand as a node on a network of diverse multidirectional flows (of everything from information to guano). The book’s concluding lines comment on the Marcus King painting of the 1950s reproduced on its cover: ‘Other than the mountains, everything portrayed in this painting is artificial, and gains its existence and meaning only in relation to the wider networks into which the activities portrayed are connected.’²⁰ Here rural New Zealand seems fully ‘made’. Even this cursory scoping of yeotopia prompts the question: What more is there to write?

20 Brooking and Pawson, *Seeds of Empire*, 210.

Mud, Sweat and Dreams

Tom knows. There is deep time to engage, and the dairy boom to reckon with, and many other things to be said about everything in between. His 40-page prospectus for *Mud, Sweat and Dreams* (MS&D) overflows with ideas and a cornucopia of sources.²¹ It is nothing if not ambitious. Organised thematically, to respond to the ‘absence of a substantive, national overview’ of New Zealand’s rural past, MS&D would aim to unfold a coherent chronological synthesis in 11 chapters ranging in length from 3,000 to 15,000 words. It would be richly illustrated and treat ‘economic, social, ideological, cultural, political and environmental aspects ... from a range of perspectives’. Race, class, gender, power and environment would receive their due. The book would necessarily emphasise both change and continuity: there can be no doubt, insists Brooking, that ‘farming will look very different in two generations but its survival ... depends on building on what we have done well in the past and avoiding repetition of unnecessary mistakes by learning more about that past’.

Encompassing the *longue durée*, this account would begin in physical geography, to question the widespread view that Aotearoa was ‘designed by nature as a farm’. It would consider the environmental impact, between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, of the Eastern Polynesians who eventually became Māori, before summarising 2 centuries of agricultural change and idealisations of rural life in Britain after 1700. With these foundations laid, the focus would turn to the contributions of sealers and whalers to the development of farming in New Zealand. Then pairs of chapters would tell the stories of high country sheep farming, downland subsistence and crop farming, and the triumph of the family farm between 1846 and 1990. A final chapter would attend to the diversification, and the shift to industrial (dairy) farming, of the last quarter-century.

This story would be set apart from other forays into this territory by its ‘farmer-centric’ focus. In Brooking’s prospectus, it would ‘concentrate on farmers [themselves a rather heterogeneous bunch], their wives and children’, and all the other people, both Māori and Pākehā, with whom they were connected. Inescapable in all of this would be the close examination of farmers’ relations with labourers, contractors and the people of small towns, as well as consideration of the ‘often fraught relationship with government officials, both local and national, agricultural scientists and politicians’. Nor, of course, could this work neglect ‘farmers’ daily encounters with their crops and animals and the broader environment’. Beyond this, comparisons would show the extent to which New Zealand farmers defied Marxist dialectics, the determinations of hard capitalist processes, and the limitations of powerful environmental and ecological realities.

²¹ Brooking, Draft proposal for a book on ‘The Making of Rural New Zealand’. The quotes that follow are drawn from this proposal. The next 3 paragraphs are a stark précis of the proposal, and quotes are drawn therefrom.

MS&D is, clearly, an ambitious venture. We should not forget for a moment, though, that this rendering of it is a précis of a preliminary prospectus. Brooking acknowledges that there is work to be done. Hard thinking and difficult choices lie ahead in framing the central argument that will emerge, he anticipates, in the process of writing, as he reconsiders old orthodoxies and interrogates new materials. In that sense, the prospectus is an initial assemblage, a gathering together of ingredients before they are sieved and diced and measured out in appropriate quantities, to be stirred and kneaded and seasoned and baked into a satisfying repast. Brooking has demonstrated (as the first, ‘yeotopian’, part of this article shows) that he has the tools and the experience to work in this metaphorical kitchen. But success, in culinary practice as well as academic life, lies always in the ability to adapt, to adjust recipes to circumstances, or narratives and analyses to sources and lacunae. Good cooks, like good historians, are forever asking questions, appraising new possibilities and going beyond the orthodox. In this spirit, I offer my view from Erewhon.

A view from Erewhon

Why ‘Erewhon’? By comparison with Brooking’s wide, deep and detailed local knowledge, my own perspective on rural New Zealand comes from a position very much akin to Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*, as a place that is ‘not only a disguised *no-where* but a rearranged *now-heré*’.²² I come to these concluding remarks from nowhere in particular, but now that we are here, I hope to challenge, nudge and provoke. I do this to raise a caveat or two about Brooking’s preliminary design for a history of the making of rural New Zealand, to suggest a few notions that might be helpful in framing that work, and to recognise the value of the enterprise on which Brooking is embarked.

Much as I admire ambition, I worry about implementation. Writing history always entails selection. But make the scope too broad, try to cover too much ground in a limited space, and the specifics—that make the past real and give historical writing its allure—slip away. A history of everything is akin to a history of nothing. I fear an overstuffed portmanteau. Large generalisations slip easily into the banal. Preoccupation with detail descends quickly into triviality. These concerns are real but they are comments on risk, rather than universal truths, or specific references to Brooking’s MS&D proposal.

²² Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 333, n. 7; Samuel Butler, *Erewhon, or, Over the Range* (London: Trübner & Co., 1872), doi.org/10.5479/sil.1036699.39088016476525.

The broad-stroke implications of my apprehensions are quickly qualified, if not contradicted, by a scan of my bookshelves. Attuned to our concerns here, my eyes alight on Pamela Horn's *The Rural World, 1780–1850*.²³ The book is ambitious, fascinating, vivid and successful. But Horn's rural world comes down to a discussion of social change in the English countryside. Her interest is in what country life was like for English villagers—agricultural labourers, craftsmen and farmers—through 70 years. She paints local detail to illuminate larger themes—poor relief, village institutions, crime and punishment—and captures change and continuity by bookend chapters describing the rural community at the beginning and end of her time span. Her focus is 'farmer-centric' but it is also narrow and resolute. Politics and protectionism—essentially the debate over the Corn Laws—figure in the story, but with a tight focus on farmers' views of the proposed changes. Horn feels no compunction to recount the political machinations in Westminster, or the changing patterns of world geopolitics. Nor does she feel a need to begin at the beginning or end in the present.

This observation brings to mind a long-ago but pertinent article about a Canadian public intellectual that opens with the question 'Was Donald Creighton a narrative historian?'²⁴ In response, the author of that piece distinguishes between the historian's ordering of the past and the 'real' order of the past as recorded in the archive. In this view, narrative is 'an order of telling that honours certain proprieties of temporal sequence, interconnectedness and closure'.²⁵ It is neither 'found' nor 'necessary'. Historians are free to select a particular form of telling, but it must be appropriate to 'the questions they ask, the interpretations they reach, and the aspect of the past they seek to recount'. This is to say that the historian's choice of form is 'neither arbitrary nor entirely free'. So is Tom Brooking a narrative historian? I would say yes. But I would also say that essaying a big synthesis requires a deal of reflexive awareness of an author. Narrative forms differ. Broadly, however, they all seek to construct an ensemble of relationships that reveal 'the narrator's comprehension of things together'. Furthermore, authors must 'attempt to represent the past as contemporaries witnessed and experienced it' even as they understand that 'their interpretations depend on their own knowledge of how things turned out'.²⁶ These are issues with which Brooking will have to grapple in realising the potential of his *Mud, Sweat and Dreams* prospectus.

23 Pamela Horn, *The Rural World, 1780–1850: Social Change in the English Countryside* (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

24 Kenneth Dewar, 'Where to Begin and How: Narrative Openings in Donald Creighton's Historiography', *Canadian Historical Review* 72, no. 3 (September 1991): 348–69, doi.org/10.3138/CHR-072-03-03.

25 Dewar, 'Where to Begin and How', 351.

26 Ibid., 364, 357.

Let me, then, offer a few specific observations as signposts along the way. First, with *Lark Rise* and *Kists* in mind, I recall that years ago Andrew Clark (of *The Invasion of New Zealand by People, Plants, and Animals* fame), sought to make the transfer of agricultural practices from old world to new by different ethnic groups the mainstay of historical geographical research.²⁷ Ultimately, this program foundered on its inclination to social and spatial aggregation. How robust are correlations of ethnic group presence and different combinations of crops and livestock at the county or precinct level? Does a simple plurality of one or the other make a census district Scottish or Irish? Are Scots or Irish (or any other such designations) actually homogeneous? What of the influence of climate, soil, terrain, transport and markets on farming practices? There is much at stake here, but John Mannion did much to clarify the issues almost half a century back.²⁸ By comparing the retention of material culture and traditional practices among 3 groups of Irish settlers in eastern Canada, Mannion demonstrated that cultural discard was more rapid and more complete the closer settlers and their practices were to the market. Subsistence farmers might persist in planting with dibble sticks, but those who aimed to sell their oats quickly adopted the plough; elements of material culture, dialect terms and the like lingered around the family hearth, but soon gave way, beyond, to general forms and phrases, although the clustering of people from particular localities enhanced retention. Broadly we might anticipate similar but less diverse patterns in New Zealand.

After the attention already lavished on the making of the New Zealand countryside by the ‘Cumberland school’, a farmer-centric account of social change in rural New Zealand is certainly needed. But it would be unfortunate to jettison an interest in the look of the land, especially as much early work on New Zealand and other landscapes suffered from a version of the verbal noun problem. Authors described transformations of the land, but paid less attention to who drove the changes and how they did so.

Typically, efforts to identify the motor of modification invoked *deus ex machina* forces. So years ago, the scholarly and talented American geographer David Lowenthal identified particular American predispositions to explain the American landscape.²⁹ Others put it all down to capitalism. There is a beguiling assurance about such claims. But as Anthony Giddens once put it, ‘the only moving objects

27 Andrew H. Clark, *The Invasion of New Zealand by People Plants and Animals: The South Island* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1949). For more on Clark’s program, see Graeme Wynn, ‘W. F. Ganong, A. H. Clark and the Historical Geography of Maritime Canada’, *Acadiensis* 10, no. 2 (1981): 5–28; Michael Roche, ‘A. H. Clark’s Framing of Geographical Change’, *Historical Geography* 41 (2013): 191–206; and James R. Gibson, ed., *European Settlement and Development in North America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), doi.org/10.3138/9781487595814.

28 John J. Mannion, *Irish Settlements in Eastern Canada: A Study of Cultural Transfer and Adaptation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974).

29 David Lowenthal, ‘The American Scene’, *Geographical Review* 58, no. 1 (January 1968): 61–88, doi.org/10.2307/212832.

in human social relations are individual agents, who employ resources to make things happen intentionally or otherwise'.³⁰ People make places. We know that Capability Brown authored Chatsworth Park and that Chicago reflects the work of Daniel Burnham. The French historian Michel de Certeau further insisted that the 'real authors' of space are those who live and work and move through it every day.³¹ So 'the landscape, tells—or rather is—a story, a chronicle of life and dwelling [that] unfolds the lives and times of [those] who, over the generations, have moved around in it and played their part in its formation'.³² Environments are 'pregnant with the past' and thus, perhaps, especially worthy of consideration in studies of rural settings. There is scope here yet for the illuminating combination of historical and geographical, social and landscape, analytical and descriptive perspectives, even in a farmer-centric study to broach important questions about the connections between people and place, society and environment.

The role of plant and animal introductions in making a 'neo-European' landscape of New Zealand has been of enduring interest.³³ It is, of course, a substantial thread in *Seeds of Empire*, and it remains pertinent to further thinking and writing about rural New Zealand.³⁴ Scholars in other parts of the world have also turned to study the place of biotic introductions in the histories of their own territories. Among recent contributions in this vein I note *Fruits and Plains*, Philip Pauly's study of American horticulture. Reading culture as 'an umbrella term for efforts at biotic improvement' including everything from manuring to plant breeding, Pauly details the introduction, naturalisation, discovery and propagation of (certain) plants in the United States.³⁵ Ultimately, his account turns on the ways in which relatively well-placed and well-informed Americans related discussions about the foreignness and nativity of plants to questions of American identity, but his capacious, interdisciplinary approach opens windows on many other perspectives. How, and how strongly, we might ask, did ordinary rural (and other) New Zealanders come to

30 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 181.

31 This discussion draws upon Jan Kolen and Johannes Renes, 'Landscape Biographies: Key Issues', in *Landscape Biographies. Geographical, Historical and Archeological Perspectives on the Production and Transmission of Landscapes*, ed. Jan Kolen, Johannes Renes and Rita Hermans (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 21–47 (and especially 32–5), doi.org/10.1515/9789048517800-003. See also Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

32 Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 189 and 199, cited by Kolen and Renes, 'Landscape Biographies', 39–40.

33 As for example in G. M. Thompson, *The Naturalisation of Animals and Plants in New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922); Guthrie-Smith, *Tūtira*; and Clark, *The Invasion*.

34 Including Tom Brooking, 'Acclimatisation in New Zealand', in *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, ed. Pierre-Yves Sunier and Akira Iriye (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 8–10; Eric Pawson, 'Plants, Mobilities and Landscapes: Environmental Histories of Botanical Exchange', *Geography Compass* 2, no. 5 (September 2008): 1464–77, doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2008.00153.x. See also Doug Munro, Eric Pawson, Ian Tyrrell, John McNeill and Judith Bennett, 'Natives and Exotics' [review forum], *Journal of Pacific History* 46, no. 1 (2011): 117–131, doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2011.573641.

35 Philip Pauly, *Fruits and Plains: The Horticultural Transformation of America* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 6.

regard the native biota as inferior? What did the majority of countryfolk think of the work of acclimatisation societies, and their frequent enthusiasm for the wildly exotic? How did **they** respond to the teachings and initiatives of ‘agricultural improvers’? Certainly early nineteenth-century efforts to promote agricultural improvement in British North America were greeted with a certain, almost cynical, opportunism, or were disdained, by many settler farmers. Although some of these issues are touched on in *Seeds of Empire*, there is more to be said, and strategic probing may throw light on larger themes in New Zealand history.

Ever since Kate Brown told readers of the *American Historical Review* ‘why Kazakhstan and Montana Are Nearly the Same Place’ I have dreamed of a paper pairing Idaho and Canterbury in similar vein.³⁶ This reverie is rooted, of course, in Mark Fiege’s demonstration, in *Irrigated Eden* (1999), of the ways in which irrigation systems and other technologies wrought dramatic changes in the ecology of southern Idaho, and his strong argument that this created a hybrid landscape in which ecological processes complicated and confounded human designs for the territory. There are surely parallels on the plains. In the last 2 decades, much North American work has extended and refined Fiege’s use of hybridity to understand landscapes vastly different from his irrigated tracts. In New Zealand too trees and forests, seeds and pastures have been remade by science, management and technology. Other studies have illuminated the politics as well as the history of hybrids, and reminded us that people (especially in positions of power) have naturalised technology and technologised nature in efforts to depoliticise and legitimate development projects. In a further extension of these arguments, Michelle Murphy has shown that single objects ‘can concretely be many things at once’—they can simultaneously ‘have multiple meanings [and] be embedded within multiple worlds’.³⁷ All of this seems to me to offer a set of useful pointers for understanding debates and clarifying conflict (over the use to which ‘the environment’ might be put, or between different versions of ideal and reality) in rural New Zealand.

Finally, much is said and written these days about various supranational approaches to history: world history; the history of the British world; the Atlantic world; the world as a network or a web with connection and mobility its defining characteristics. These approaches incline, collectively, to emphasise themes of cross-cultural social

36 Kate Brown, ‘Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana are Nearly the Same Place’, *American Historical Review* 106, no. 1 (2001): 17–48, doi.org/10.2307/2652223.

37 This discussion of hybridity and multiplicity draws heavily upon Sara B. Pritchard, ‘Toward an Environmental History of Technology’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 239–42. The felicitous phrase ‘naturalized technology and technologized nature’ essentially follows Pritchard. Works cited here and in Pritchard are: Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1999); Gregg Mitman, *Breathing Space: How Allergies Shape our Lives and Landscapes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Michelle Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience and Women Workers* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 12, doi.org/10.1215/9780822387831, for ‘many things at once’.

and environmental interaction across oceans, between continents and through national borders. By and large, they tend to favour cultural over economic and material interpretations, although the last remain important, and have become sufficiently common that Tony Ballantyne has identified

a new consensus amongst many, if not all, historians of empire that reconstructing the movement of plants and animals, people, capital, commodities, information, and ideas is fundamental to understanding how the empire developed and how it operated on a day to day basis.³⁸

There can be no gainsaying the importance of such connections in the remaking of New Zealand in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But a modicum of caution would seem appropriate here, in considering the prospects for and practicalities of a farmer-centric history of rural New Zealand. Historians of empire, interested in the workings of that conceptual entity, may well find great value in conceiving of their spatially extensive, multi-tentacled subject 'as a set of shifting, uneven, and often unstable inter-regional and global connections'.³⁹ For those interested in life on the land in a particular territory, some adjustment of focus would seem necessary. Common characterisations of New Zealand as the Britain of the South Seas must be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. Imperial connections there were, but the question, for students of New Zealand rural history, per se, is what happened in situ. For all the introductions of British people, English songbirds, the contents of Scottish kists, and the imperial careers of colonial officials, Aotearoa New Zealand developed as a place *sui generis*.⁴⁰ A unique combination of physiography, climate and soils; a distinctive flora and fauna; the effects of relocation on peoples' emotional and psychological states; the mixing of individuals from different traditions (or cultures); the inescapable corollaries of (continuing) changes in the ratios between land and labour; the increasing global swirl of people and ideas through time; and other factors combined to present unique opportunities and challenges that shaped an emergent society in particular and distinctive ways.⁴¹

38 Tony Ballantyne, 'The Changing Shape of the Modern British Empire and its Historiography', *Historical Journal* 53, no. 2 (2010): 429–52, doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000117. The point is also made in Brooking and Pawson, *Seeds of Empire*, 4, when they write that these approaches are used 'to analyse everything from the movement of ideas and information, to capital, technologies, and ... plant and animal materials'.

39 Ballantyne, 'The Changing Shape of the Modern British Empire', 451.

40 David Lambert and Alan Lester, eds, *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

41 For a general, somewhat abstracted discussion of the effects of changing relations between the costs of land and labour, see Cole Harris, 'The Simplification of Europe Overseas', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 67, no. 4 (1977): 469–83, doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1977.tb01156.x.

None of this is to deny that networks—economic, familial or personal—played parts in shaping the lives and fortunes of many a New Zealand runholder or small farmer.⁴² So we might recall that Guthrie-Smith came to New Zealand in 1880 to work on Peel Forest Station (then in the hands of his uncle) before he acquired Tutira in partnership with Arthur Cunningham, a friend from Rugby School. Years later, looking back on changes in the land during his tenure, he wondered whether his actions had been steered by the siren calls of his ancestors, ‘tenacious Scots and temperamental Irish Celts’. But this was speculative rhetoric. In truth, as he knew, he had been drawn ‘like water into the whirlpool’ to act as he did;⁴³ he had followed the stream of local tendency, itself the complex product of a thousand circumstances, from established systems of land tenure, through the slender attachment of newcomers to their acres, to late nineteenth-century settler capitalism’s worship of profit, progress and material improvement.

There are many paths to a history of rural life in New Zealand. Some have the landscape at their core; they variously emphasise (changing) patterns on the land (patterns of settlement, boundary surveys, farm shapes and sizes, the arrangement of fields, land use arrangements); the interpretation (functional, cultural, symbolic) of basic elements of material culture (houses and barns); or the processes of landscape transformation. Some trace the ‘social’ dimensions of farm life—exploring such topics as the demography of the rural population; the ethnic, class and occupational backgrounds of farmers; questions of isolation and sociability (were, as Miles Fairburn argued, community structures ‘few and weak [and] the forces of social isolation ... many and powerful’, to the point that ‘bondlessness was central to colonial life?’).⁴⁴ Some see economics and the hand of the marketplace as the key to understanding: Edward Gibbon Wakefield’s ‘sufficient price’ shaped early thinking about the organisation of settlements, shifting domestic and overseas demand shaped the patterns and profitability of farm enterprise, and the cultivation of markets was integral to successful cultivation of the land. Some make power and politics the signposts of their passage; closer settlement was a government initiative. Others see technology as the most significant driver of change; rural life was transformed by the railway, by refrigeration, by the tractor. Yet others would argue the importance of ideas—from notions about the ideal form of society to the science of soils and cross-breeding—to grasping the real shape of things. Other routes to understanding have also had their advocates. Each and all encompass alluring avenues, stunning vistas and potential pitfalls. Here and there they come together, to reflect and reveal

42 By way of provocative comparison one might consider here Douglas J. Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750–1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), which points to the familial and economic networks of Scots in the Caribbean to account for various aspects of their lives, including an oft-remarked-upon clannishness.

43 Guthrie-Smith, *Tutira*, 320.

44 Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies: The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society, 1850–1900* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989), 12.

the intricate interdigitated complexities of life on the land. Any attempt to traverse this terrain is sure to encounter figurative and literal mountains of mud, sweat and (unrequited) dreams.

Synthesis is never simple. Selection—and thus omission and exclusion—is essential to the success of any effort to fuse disparate elements into a coherent story or interpretation. Those who embark on such a venture need to be both bold and deeply knowledgeable about the ground they aim to cover. They must also be resolute in identifying the last to which they will shape their product—and sticking to it. Brooking is right to recognise the value of and need for a compelling integrated historical account of rural New Zealand. He is also ideally placed at this stage in a productive career to identify the pivotal themes necessary to define the parameters of and realise such a work. I cannot but admire his ambition, hold faith in his demonstrated talent, and look forward to reading Tom Brooking on the making of rural New Zealand.

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