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Review of Seeds of Empire: The Environmental Transformation of New Zealand by Tom Brooking and Eric Pawson, eds.

Tobias Harper

Providence College, tharper1@providence.edu

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H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Tom Brooking, Eric Pawson. *Seeds of Empire: The Environmental Transformation of New Zealand*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011. 256 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85771-920-1.

Reviewed by Toby Harper (Columbia University)

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Growing Grass

Visitors and residents alike tend to think of New Zealand as a clean, green land, rivaling Ireland in the luxuriance of its verdure and leading the world in the naturalness of its nature. In *Seeds of Empire*, Tom Brooking, Eric Pawson, and their collaborators point out that the rolling meadows that cover much of New Zealand were built on a particular colonial ideology of food production and inputs of large amounts of fertilizer. Grass, not grain or produce, was the primary crop in New Zealand, to be transformed first into wool, then later to meat and dairy products for processing or consumption on the other side of the world. The book explains the background to this unusual, often destructive, and by no means inevitable economic and environmental choice on the part of settlers, politicians, and scientific experts in New Zealand and beyond. In doing so, it clears new ground for thinking about the historical relationship between policy and the environment and revises old perceptions of New Zealand history (such as the assumption that the transition to an agrarian economy was a “sustainable” rather than “extractive” form of development).

This book comes out of a research project at the University of Otago funded by a Marsden Grant—a major New Zealand government academic funding source—led by Brooking and Pawson along with a set of PhD students. Most of the chapters are collaborative, with the exception of Jim McAloon’s chapter about imperial capital and trade and Robert Peden’s essay on pastoralism in the middle of the book. The chapters are arranged in roughly chronological order, tracing the transformation of New Zealand’s terrain from the initial phase of European settlement through to the 1930s. Pawson and Brooking were the editors of the 2002 collection *Environmental Histories of New Zealand*, a productive and important contribution to this small subfield of New Zealand history and geography. This book is an expansion of one of the most important themes in the environmental history of that small

country: the at times almost irrepressible expansion of grassland farming after European settlement.

Seeds of Empire begins by outlining the nature, speed, and scope of the pastoral transformation of the New Zealand landscape in the nineteenth century. Once European settlement began in earnest after the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, settlers faced a number of questions about what to grow, where. Pawson, Brooking, and their collaborators explain how pastoralism, at first to produce wool for a global market, came to be the dominant form of land use by British settlers, in spite of the fact that many Māori in the North Island were already producing grain for an Australian market. This is interesting not only as an explanation for New Zealanders’ historical destiny to join the Welsh as the butt of jokes about sheep, but also because the authors are able to show, in a fair amount of detail, how settler, Māori, and scientific forms of knowledge about the land and farming helped influence the fate of that land. The section on the burning of brush in the South Island, which uses various farmer diaries and observations (including those of Samuel Butler) is particularly interesting, as it challenges contemporary and more recent critiques of early New Zealand pastoralists as wanton and foolish in their use of fire as a tool for managing the often harsh scrubland.

Later, the book moves from the initial land clearance, to New Zealand’s position in the global market for grass and produce, then finally to the way in which, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, knowledge and expertise shaped farming practices. Up until the 1920s, state involvement in grasslands farming was sporadic, but it was to become increasingly important. At the same time, farmers’ “working knowledge of the land” became less important as the state began to oversee a monoculture of two types of grass seed (ryegrass and clover) as opposed to the various mixes used by farmers in the past (p. 177). “Authority” about farming shifted from lo-

calized, fragmented knowledge, to farmer's associations, supplemented by some periodicals, to the scientists of the Department of Agriculture by the 1930s. Brooking, Pawson, and their collaborators also explain in some detail the importance of fertilizer in reshaping expectations about what land could be used and how farmers could use it: New Zealand's joint ventures with Britain and Australia into imperialism in the Pacific (and, in particular, Nauru) are explored briefly in the context of this demand for fertilizer. The variable availability of phosphates would prove to be a key determining factor in the success of New Zealand farming at any given time. Again, through this the authors show that the notion that New Zealand was a land made for pastoralism was reliant on artificial means. The intersection of the political, imperial, and environmental in determining important shifts in New Zealand society and politics shows that historians of that country need to be attentive to the centrality of this aspect of the environment to its history.

New Zealand historians, therefore, should read this book. But what about its place in imperial history?—In spite of the title, there is no question that this book is focused on New Zealand and comes out of a New Zealand historiographical tradition (Brooking and Pawson are names that should be familiar to any historian or historical geographer of New Zealand). This book could not be renamed “Grass: An Imperial History,” as while the book makes occasional excursions to Edinburgh, the Punjab, Australia, and Bradford, for the most part the action is concentrated within New Zealand (and mostly in the South Island at that). But the intellectual focus of the book is at least in part oriented towards a larger historiography of imperial networks and environmental history. Brooking, Pawson, and McAloon use wider literature on U.S. environmental history (William Cronon is referenced in a number of places) as well as recent writing on imperial networks. Readers are told, in multiple places, that the case of pastoralism in New Zealand shows “the mobilities that lie at the heart of social life” (p. 4). Rejecting the core-periphery model of empire, the authors are keen to emphasize networks and nodes. This is a mode of explanation and description that, while in some ways more detailed than that of John A. Hobson and Vladimir Lenin (who are, strangely, identified as the main historiographical villains) is no clearer. This is in part because the brief survey of the historiography of imperial networks is only one of many different fields of scholarship with which the authors attempt to engage in a short introduction. The authors stress the analytical importance of these networks in a number of different ways, often employing a great deal of jargon, with-

out really explaining what the payoff is in the context of this work. Fortunately, the disappointingly rushed introduction is quickly replaced by detailed empirical work that explains the function of these networks and nodes far better than the introduction does. Brooking, Pawson, and their collaborators are better at showing than telling these relationships and trends within the imperial history of growing grass.

The various authors are interested both in how knowledge about farming practice originated both in Britain and the colonies, and in how “biotic flows” went in multiple directions—both from Europe to New Zealand and back, and from New Zealand to other parts of the empire. The most compelling case for this within the book is the way in which New Zealand became a major center in a global seed trade, as outlined in Pawson and Vaughan Wood's chapter “The Grass Seed Trade.” Because of trends within pasture farming in the 1880s, seed growers in the Banks Peninsular region (near Christchurch) were able to find a niche within the international seed trade for their locally grown (but not native) “Akaroa cocksfoot” seed. This product was exported to Australia, Europe, and eventually the United States. McAloon looks in more detail at the financial and marketing connections between New Zealand and Great Britain, tracing the roots of New Zealand finance to Scottish banks, and providing an interesting and helpful interpretation of New Zealand's successes in creating markets in Britain for various forms of sheep meat, especially lamb. Even then, once again, the book shows how New Zealand was not the ideal place for the production of meat, dairy, and wool: New Zealand farmers had difficulty supplying consistently good-quality meat to British markets, and even up until the 1970s farmers and scientists struggled to deal with nutrient imbalances causing health problems among livestock. Yet the commitment to producing grass persisted and, by the 1930s, won out (thanks, as the book shows, to the very active lobbying of a small group of agricultural scientists), seemingly fixing New Zealand's destiny as a pastoral nation and almost dooming the remaining native forests that now, revitalized, produce so many tourist dollars.

With the exception of a few typographical errors, this book—published by I. B. Tauris—is nicely produced, with useful charts and a helpful and interesting illustrated appendix about the varieties of grass used in New Zealand pastures. The writing is competent rather than inspiring, but it does the job, and the writers find a good balance between technical detail and accessibility. The tone is consistent through the book, and although the authors are unambitious in the explanatory and the historiographi-

cal sweep of their argument, the freshness of the material and the research makes it an interesting read for anyone with a preexisting investment in New Zealand history or imperial environmental history.

I recently attended a conference where, twice, speakers said something to the effect of: “Australia, Canada, South Africa and the other settler colonies.” In this language, New Zealand becomes something typical and generic: merely another settler colony, like the other ones, without having the distinction of being large, or populous, or particularly troublesome. Yet books like *Seeds of Empire* go beyond the sometimes parochial confines of New Zealand history to show how that colony

and later country’s unique characteristics, as well as its archetypal ones, should be interesting to students of imperial history. Its message about the imperial nature of environmental transformation is labored in places, but it is still an important and often interesting account of the successes and, more often, failures of settlers and a colonial state trying—in a very short period of time—to grow a functional economy out of a set of natural resources that were more unfamiliar than familiar. Growing grass is supposed to be boring—so the cliché goes—but this book shows that the practicalities and ideologies of grass have both been important, and continue to be potentially rewarding and interesting as a subject for study for the curious and creative historian.

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