

# Building God's Own Country: Historical Essays on Religions in New Zealand

*book review by Mark Hangartner*

**Stenhouse, J., & Thomson, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Building God's own country : historical essays on religions in New Zealand*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press.**

This book is divided into four parts: Southern Presbyterians; Communities of Faith; Missionary Encounters; and Gender.

Section one begins with a very useful account of the settlement of Otago. Many of the early settlers were "imbued with the principles and habits of Scottish piety" by a quite deliberate promotion of migration to this region to the Free Church of Scotland. The other articles in the section complement this with more narrowly focused studies; one on a leading 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian, another on sabbatarianism, and one on church music.

The articles in the next section, Communities of Faith, are also Otago-based. These reach beyond the Free Church to record the stories of an influential Congregational church, the Jewish community which included many leading New Zealanders including the Premier from 1873-1879 Julius Vogel, the origins of New Zealand's Catholic newspaper founded by the bishop of Dunedin, Patrick Moran, and the stormy genesis of the Salvation Army in the small town of Milton. 'Missionary Encounters' includes some rather unusual subjects: a difficult but effective CMS missionary, William Colenso. His life is well documented elsewhere but this article highlights Colenso's criticism of fellow missionaries' land grabbing. The story of the Mormon mission is interesting, and illuminates the mixed tolerance of New Zealand society. The biography of 'Teacher' Don is also fascinating as it confronts the difficulties of judging 19<sup>th</sup> century Pakeha missionaries (in this case to

Chinese immigrants) by 21<sup>st</sup> century standards. This article concludes that his attitudes were enlightened while James Ng highlights his prejudiced comments - 'it is very hard to say anything positively about a Chinese'<sup>1</sup>.

The Gender section exemplifies equality; two articles on men, and two on women. An essay about three leading Dunedin men argues that religious adherence seems to have little effect on their ideals but rather they were strongly influenced by Protestant traditions. I wasn't convinced but it is interesting history nonetheless. The Dunedin YMCA hostel, gymnasium, swimming pool and summer camps flourished in the early twentieth century. It was hard to discern any particular NZ flavour to this phenomenon. The deaconess movement in New Zealand Protestant churches was instrumental in opening these churches to the ordained ministry of women, and the article on the origins of deaconesses in the Presbyterian Church fits nicely with the last essay, on Anglican female priesthood. This is a thorough and very fair account of the potentially divisive debate within the NZ Anglican church.

ANZTLA members will be keen to add this collection of essays to their church history section. It will be particularly valuable to those with an interest in Presbyterianism. A slight caveat is the preponderance of material about Otago, which is not reflected in the book's title. A table of contents addition to the catalogue record would be desirable.

(Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Ng, James. 'Don, Alexander 1857 - 1934'. Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, updated 16 December 2003 URL: <http://www.dnz.govt.nz/>