



**“CULTURAL IRRITANTS”:
PROBING THE
COMPLEXITIES OF
MISSIONARY-MAORI
ENGAGEMENT**

AN INTERVIEW WITH TONY BALLANTYNE

New interpretations of early New Zealand missionary encounters with Maori continue to appear. Joining the list is *Entanglements of Empire: Missionaries, Maori, and the Question of the Body* (Duke University Press/Auckland University Press: 2014) by Tony Ballantyne of the University of Otago. Editor of *Stimulus*, Martin Sutherland sat down with Dr Ballantyne to discuss the approach and significance of this ground breaking work. A full review of *Entanglements of Empire* will appear in the next issue of *Stimulus*.

Stimulus: Tony, thank you for taking the time to talk about your most interesting new book. On the face of it, given that you do not currently teach New Zealand history, *Entanglements of Empire* seems a departure for you. How did this project come about?

Tony Ballantyne: Well, there are two ways of answering that.

Firstly there is my own “conversion experience” with regards to becoming a historian. I encountered this material as an honours student at Otago. We were given a mandatory research exercise in which we had to use missionary manuscripts. Before that, I guess, I had imagined that, like some of my brothers and sisters, I’d become a teacher. I think maybe I had vague notions of becoming a town planner or something. But it was the experience of encountering this big collection of manuscripts here at the Hocken Library and reading through the material and being plunged into a world that was filled of drama and uncertainty and conflict. It was amazing really. It was through that research project that I thought, “well, I actually really like this history business!” Some others in my class did that same exercise and became historians but didn’t come back to the material. I went away and trained as a historian of Empire, which explains the second thread of my interest. I had remained very engaged with the questions about evangelization and cross-cultural engagements raised by these manuscripts, partly because of my work on India and the relationships between religion and empire. The complexities of that relationship particularly highlighted the ambivalent position of missionaries within the empire. They were often (though of course, not always) dependent on the empire. They were working in spaces that were perhaps opened up to them by British imperial activity, but their aspirations were typically quite distinct from that of, if you like, the East Indian Company in India or the New Zealand Company, or the British state. So they ended up have a slightly angular relationship to the imperial project. I was therefore interested to come

back to this early New Zealand material and to think about those questions at an historiographical level.

Stimulus: You put the story in the context, as you mentioned, of the history of Empire. There has been a lot of work being done over the recent years about “New Imperial History” and so on. What do you take that to mean, and in particular, how are we to see that affecting our understanding of early New Zealand?

Tony Ballantyne: I guess I’d say that this body of work which has often been called “The New Imperial History” has developed in two stages. The first stage began with the work of people like Catherine Hall and Antoinette Burton. What they were trying to do was to make an argument in British history about the way in which the “entanglements of Empire” made Britain. So they were trying to emphasise the cultural traffic between Britain and its colonies. There had been a strong tradition within British historical writings to see the colonies as kind of “out there” and distinct from British domestic history. So they were kind of pressing against that – in their own context, of course, and against the backdrop of all the debates in the 80s and 90s about the nature of Britain. We can identify a second stage developing out of and overlapping with that pioneering scholarship, particularly through the work of people like Alan Lester and myself. That second wave of work has been particularly interested in the networks or webs that linked colonies and made up the empire, and it has been through exploring New Zealand’s changing place in the “webs of empire” that my work threaded New Zealand in that ‘new imperial history’.

Stimulus: “Entanglement” is obviously a key concept. It provides your title and you play on that quite a bit through the book. Can you explain its significance?

Tony Ballantyne: The term “encounter,” that we use all the time, often gives us the sense of two forces or two peoples meeting each other, bouncing off each other and not necessarily being modified by that encounter. I think “entanglement” captures a sense of lasting transformation and interdependence. It reminds us that there are long term consequences to these relationships. That first stage of that New Imperial History was consumed with thinking about Britain and individual colonies. The second phase is what my work has really been really associated with, addressing not only the vertical links between Britain and the colonies, but the horizontal ones *between* the colonies as well. So building on the kind of approach I developed in my first book *Orientalism and Race*, one of the key commitments of *Entanglements of Empire* is

an interest in returning early New Zealand to that broader field of empire. Obviously Britain is very prominent. If you compared it to Judith Binney's work on missionaries, her biography of Kendall, for example, there's much more Britain in my work than in hers. New South Wales is very important, as is the Pacific: so I'm interested on how New Zealand sits in that broader world.

Stimulus: So, is this then a very different approach to the New Zealand story from that promoted by Keith Sinclair and others where trying to understand it from the inside out on its own terms only.

Tony Ballantyne: Indeed. What that kind of national and nationalist tradition does is retrospectively puts the national framework on a past that wasn't in fact national yet. New Zealand doesn't exist as a nation in this period before 1840. In framing the history of these islands in that period as a national story, historians are basically taking a cookie cutter and forcing it on the past and cutting off the connections and the forces that reached out beyond the shores.

Stimulus: Your book is raising some interesting issues as to what we mean by "context" – which, for both Maori and missionary, was multi layered then?

Tony Ballantyne: It is. So you can think about the fact that there are at least three contexts at work. There was a Maori cultural historical context for all of these things that are playing out in the book. So Maori communities were shaped by history, the way they operate in the world was shaped by culture, and those things were really powerful. The one thing that this book really tries to ensure is that we do not turn back to an imperial history with no indigenous people, so it takes the indigenous side very seriously I think. So, you've got that Maori context. Then, if you like, you've got missionary communities here on the ground, shaped by their cultural inheritance and their religious worldview, but also shaped by the weight of history. Then, thirdly, both of these communities were dependent upon all those networks and connections that linked them out to this wider world that were bringing them muskets, that were bringing them iron for trade, that were providing them with seed potatoes or material for printing and writing on. So, I'm interested in those three layers and how they lock together, or not quite lock together, on the ground.

Stimulus: Your "entanglements" word seems very useful here, because it also conjures up the messiness of the situation.

Tony Ballantyne: Exactly, and the loss of control. Even as you try and maybe fight these connections you're still caught up in them in some way. Here a useful example would be to think about the Maori Prophets. There has been a tradition of work that

has stressed their autonomy and their creativity and their innovation and that is all undoubtedly true, but all those things are still articulated in some senses either against or with the Christian message or the message of the Old Testament or whatever portions of scripture that they've been given and whatever message they've received from missionaries or indigenous teachers.

Stimulus: Judith Binney comes into the picture again. Does her influential work on Te Kooti, for instance, need to be laid alongside these wider contexts?

Tony Ballantyne: I think so. That's a magnificent book and she's been such an important historian for us. But I think there are other stories and other ways of approaching the same material that need to be laid alongside her work, and offer those different kinds of angles of vision on the past.

Stimulus: In terms of sources, where did you find the richest material for your analysis?

Tony Ballantyne: A lot of material was in the very rich collections held here at the Hocken collections, which were collected by Thomas Hocken both directly from the Church Missionary Society but also through his work with missionary descendants. It is a very large collection of manuscript material. Also the Alexander Turnbull library and the Auckland War Memorial Museum Library, some Australian stuff in the Mitchell and the State Archives in NSW and some British material.

Stimulus: It is striking how much of your material is very immediate – letters, journals and testimonies, accounts of events and so on – first-hand accounts of all different types.

Tony Ballantyne: One of the things I was very keen to achieve in writing the book was to try and recover those voices and make them accessible and at the forefront of the analysis, because I think the material is so rich and compelling. But it is also in reading this sort of material that you gain the sense of the "otherness" of the past – the difference of the past. It is so full of drama. You think about Thomas Kendall getting into this terrible fight over a sieve, or the fist fight that he has with Richard Stockwall after he finds out that Stockwall has gotten his wife pregnant. They are incredible stories and moments which you can imagine very readily I think.

Stimulus: Very human moments of engagement. In terms of sources, the Hocken is putting quite a body of material online isn't it?

Tony Ballantyne: That's right, through the Marsden Online Archive. That has been a joint initiative between the Hocken and our Centre for Research on Colonial Culture here at Otago. We are hoping

that it provides a great resource for people. Again, it just makes that material readily available.

Stimulus: It opens up the possibility for studies of this “Origins” period, in ways reminiscent of what the Americans have done for so long of producing every word every uttered by George Washington – those sorts of things. You get this enormous body of material from which to glean stuff.

Tony Ballantyne: My sense would be for Maori and, if you like, Pakeha Christians, that kind of archive is a place of foundations to go back to and to explore the big stories and the little stories in a way in which these cross cultural conversations developed in often unexpected and compelling ways.

Stimulus: You make quite a lot of the notion of “the body” in your book. As you note, the body has had a lot of attention in post-modern literature new approaches to history. What major senses of the body are you using as you approach this subject matter?

Tony Ballantyne: There is a couple of things to say there. One of the things I thought had not been grappled with sufficiently was the everyday nature of these engagements. So, in the book we get lots of stuff about discussions of illness and how we deal with death which, of course, is a fundamental human thing, which can be tremendously traumatic but was ubiquitous, particularly at this time. But also debates over hygiene, hair and clothing and how we organise our houses and who we sleep with and where we sleep, and how parents relate to children, and all those important daily things. So, I was interested in capturing that “everydayness”. For me, that meant that I had to write a book that thought about the body in a broader way than a lot of scholarship that takes its cues from cultural theory, which has been primarily about sexuality. For many scholars, the body often operates as a kind of shorthand for sexuality – and, of course, there is a chapter in here on sexuality, focussed on the Yate case. Sexuality certainly does crop up in many of the chapters, but I’m as equally interested in work and time and space as I am in matters of sex. Death is probably more important in the book, and that’s partly because of questions of illness and death – if you like, the “weakness” of the human body – was loaded with political significance. This became a major issue for debate over New Zealand’s status within the empire, about the nature of Maori communities and what their future might be.

Stimulus: Although the Evangelicals themselves had at the very least an ambivalence about the body, they are an interesting bunch in that era because they included social reformers who saw the emancipation of the body as an important thing. Even the “civilising” mission notion clearly values

materiality and physicality. What happens in this life really matters.

Tony Ballantyne: Yes, it is important to recognise that kind of positive investment in the body. If we go back to Judith Binney, she had factored in a thread of that story. In her biography of Kendall, she has a particular vision of Calvinism. There is a spiritual determinism – and she says something like “as a child of the English evangelical revival, Thomas Kendall was predestined to feel a tremendous sense of sin.” But one of the things that I’m interested in is that much wider sense of the body. So there is the drive for social reform, there is an anxiety over the ends to which sexuality might be put to, but there is also a sense, and I provide some good evidence for it, of an optimism despite the prevalence of death and the difficulties that families face about the value of procreation, the value of sexuality within Christian marriage. I quote a letter from Charles Baker to William Colenso that says “you’ve done a terrible thing”. His critique of Colenso’s adultery is not so much just the sin of being with another woman, but it’s the abandonment of his wife. So it is this neglect of something that is seen kind of as a pleasurable duty. Capturing that tradition slightly more in its full complexity is the important thing for us.

Stimulus: You focus mostly on the CMS missions, with some attention to the Wesleyans. The Marists arrive very late in the piece as far as your period is concerned. If they were to be incorporated in a study like this, what might their emphases suggest for the various notions that you explore?

Tony Ballantyne: Well I think the first thing I’d say is that I would love somebody to be working on the cultural history of that mission! We have fragmentary works around different aspects of that mission, but it would be great if someone – ideally someone with good French – could work on that source material. My instinct is that they would complicate these stories of entanglement in a couple of interesting ways. One is of course is that their cultural orientation and their political connections reflect a French world rather than an Anglicised world, which is very interesting. Then I think the second one is about the quite different strategy of evangelisation that they had. It is not to say that Protestants were not itinerant, but the Marists had a greater emphasis on that tradition that Pompallier oversaw. I emphasise the proximity and travel as very important in Protestant missionary work, but I think it’s even more important for the Catholics.

Stimulus: You use the word “evangelisation” a lot. You portray it as a richer conversation than merely on domination or conversion – something perhaps seen by both parties as being of something good

and worthy of discussion. Where does that place the missionaries, particularly the CMS missionaries, in relation to the State and to the efforts of empire and the commercial efforts of the empire – the New Zealand company and so on?

Tony Ballantyne: That story is a complex one and a very important one, and of course, it changes over time. Well into 1838 the CMS was pretty staunchly opposed, both within Britain and on the ground among the missionaries here to any extensive new contact of any type really with Maori, let alone systematic colonisation. That, as I show, begins to change for all sorts of reasons. Partly they begin to recognise that they've actually lost some of those political battles at home and they see that the Treaty, amongst other things, might be one instrument that could be used to mitigate and to give some sort of potential moral stamp to future contact. For the bulk of the period that I'm talking about, the missionaries' relationship with Empire is deeply ambivalent. They are opposed to colonisation, they are deeply critical of shipping interests and the mistreatment of Maori and Pacific Islanders on board ships as sailors and crew, they are suspicious of colonial authorities in New South Wales. Yet, at the same time, their activities depend upon those authorities in some ways and of course depend on the commercial networks of the Empire. So I think they were in quite a difficult political and moral position. They cannot entirely repudiate Empire because it creates a space for them. Nevertheless, they are very wary about condoning Empire because they are only too aware of the ill effects that indigenous people feel as a result of empire and colonisation.

Stimulus: It is outside the period you cover in this book, but the later transition from the Missionary church to the Colonial church as the dominant notion appears to change that equation, because the community of interest is different.

Tony Ballantyne: It does, and in the 1860s some missionary voices, particularly some who started quite early, like Hadfield, remain very staunch critics of the colonial state; whereas some others become somewhat more concerned with maintaining their relationship with colonists and with colonial authorities and are much more reluctant to challenge imperial power and defend Maori interests.

Stimulus: This raises intriguing challenges around the use of terms like "conversion". You seem to describe a two way process. How useful, then, is the term "conversion" do you think?

Tony Ballantyne: If I can just answer that by partly looking back to the comment about "evangelisation". One thing I was really committed to doing with the book was grappling with the fact that actually,

for missionaries, questions of faith and effecting religious transformations were the key concerns. And again if you read much New Zealand historiography you wouldn't necessarily get that. You would get an emphasis on cultural domination and an emphasis on the cultural imperialism of missionary work. Those have been valuable approaches, but they offer a thin reading of the complexities that we find in the archive. Cross cultural meetings are moments that can have these tremendous cosmological consequences as old gods and new gods meet and their worldly emissaries meet. So I think undoubtedly you are right about the two-way process. We need to think about these encounters and the resulting entanglements that had come out of them as having consequences for both sides. The missionaries themselves are transformed. Now, of course, the thing about missionaries is they are a very tiny minority within a British colonial culture, whereas the percentage of Maori that embraced Christianity was a much greater percentage of Maori community, so it has differential consequences. But if we think about missionaries and we think about this period in early New Zealand history, we actually have to reckon with that religious story much more fully. I suggest in the book that we might think about Missionaries as difficult ancestors for us, whether we are practicing Christians or not, because they are committed to a set of values with which I think even many Christians now would feel uncomfortable – in particular the idea of the primacy of religious transformation over any kind of cultural concern. I emphasise the fact that they did try to transform cultures; that they functioned as a kind of "cultural irritant". They were always asking questions and saying "why are you doing that?" "What's the justification?" "Why don't you do it this way?" So they were in there deeply engaged with Maori life, they're looking at everything, they're asking questions. They just wouldn't let things be. That's disruptive, but out of that disruption often new things come. The entanglements are very messy and you see a great deal of respect amongst some Missionaries for aspects of Maori culture. You see some people like Kendall and Yate becoming somewhat at sea in terms of their relationships with Britain and Britons, at least in terms of the institutional framework of the mission. But also having I think these cross-cultural entanglements raised deeper existential questions for them all, and not just those whom we might call "transgressor missionaries". If you look at the Williams Brothers, when they write to each other, they weave in Maori words. One of the arguments I make, echoing Alison Jones' and Kuni Jenkins' book, is that Samuel Marsden is successful partly because

he understands the importance of hospitality in the Maori world. So I think we need to recognise those kind of cross-cultural imprints. But what I would say is that again, back to that point about that there is only a few missionaries and lots of Maori Christians, that the terms of engagement were unequal. And, of course, the subsequent history of colonialism clearly shows that the stakes in those debates over Maori and empire were tremendously unequal in their outcomes.

Stimulus: Your mention of the “cultural irritant” type is interesting. That was what was happening in some contexts back in Britain too, where some evangelicals were doing a similar thing; calling for social reform on a whole range of things.

Tony Ballantyne: And, of course, facing an establishment which often thought that they were a great pain and a political nuisance.

Stimulus: In both places in fact. Once Selwyn arrives, one of key tasks really was to bring these CMS people into line because they are a bit of an embarrassment.

Tony Ballantyne: And they promote enthusiasms. And of course, you know, there was a question that was always attached to Marsden because of his own Methodist associations. He was too much of an enthusiast – even though of course he was a very worldly enthusiast!

Stimulus: Tony, thanks for this insight into your work. It has been tremendously interesting and points to this book making real contribution to our understanding of this period. We are grateful to you for it.

ENTANGLEMENTS OF EMPIRE

The first Protestant mission to New Zealand, established in 1814, saw the beginning of complex political, cultural, and economic entanglements with Māori. *Entanglements of Empire* is a deft reconstruction of the cross-cultural translations of this early period. Misunderstanding was rife: the physical body itself became the most contentious site of cultural engagement, as Māori and missionaries struggled over issues of hygiene, tattooing, clothing, and sexual morality.

In this fascinating study, Professor Tony Ballantyne explores the varying understandings of such concepts as civilization, work, time and space, and gender – and the practical consequences of the struggles over these ideas. The encounters in the classroom, chapel, kitchen, and farmyard worked mutually to affect both the Māori and the English worldviews.

Ultimately, the interest in missionary Christianity among influential Māori chiefs had far-reaching consequences for both groups. Ballantyne’s book offers important insights into this crucial period of New Zealand history.

