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The Colonial Imperative and the Transformation of the Taranaki
Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This study is an historical cultural geography of colonial Taranaki. I argue the history of colonial Taranaki can be better understood by focusing on the notions that underpinned the actions of the settler Government towards Maori, and the Taranaki landscape. The notions of 'civilisation', 'progress', 'savages', and 'order', are some of the concepts that were complicit in shaping the settlers' understanding of their 'reality'. These notions structured the settlers' own identity as 'civilised', and that of Maori as 'savages', and constituted the Taranaki landscape as 'wasted' and unproductive in the hands of Maori. In this context, both the landscape and Maori were constructed as needing 'culturing', to transform them from a state of 'savagery', to a state of 'civilisation'.

I argue that these notions constituted a context in which the dispossession of Maori land was constructed as 'just' and natural'. Maori land was alienated through war, confiscations, the compensation process, and the 'rule of law'. A legislative framework was set up to include Maori within its authority, based on the notions above. Maori resistance to the assertion of that authority was greeted as further proof of the 'savageness' of Maori. The settler Government maintained a paternalistic attitude towards Maori, and indirectly caused war and injustice through their refusal to deal with Maori as equals.

The identity of the settlers, and of Pakeha today, is based on a conventional history that represents the colonisation of New Zealand as a benevolent and beneficial process for Maori and Pakeha. I argue that by challenging this history and asserting the existence of other historical experiences, unseen by the conventional history, the politics of 'being Pakeha' and 'being Maori' can be engaged in. This engagement is crucial to the ability of New Zealand society to move beyond colonialism, to a state of post-coloniality.

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