Review


An excellent contribution to New Zealand history and to the increasing body of work regarding the Scottish diaspora, in this first monograph Bueltmann shows herself to be a scholar worth keeping a close eye on.

While throughout the volume Bueltmann poses new theoretical frameworks by which to understand Scots associationalism, and goes into a level of detail rich enough to keep even a critical specialist reader sated, the text is nevertheless thoroughly accessible for non-specialists. Concepts are clearly defined and introduced before the author explores the application of them to the topic at hand, never assuming a high level of specialized knowledge from the reader.

The volume is structured around Bueltmann’s key framework, what she terms ‘circles of belonging’, that places migrants at the centre of three inter-related networks encapsulating family and kinship, ‘sites of memory’, and ethnic associations. Through this framework Scots migrants’ interactions with their Scottishness and with the wider community they were living in is explored throughout the several chapters of the book, ultimately taking what could have been a very dry examination of New Zealand’s various public and private expressions of Scottish ethnicity and instead exploring the richness of these in terms of networks and wider settler society.
The opening chapters of the volume introduce her theoretical frameworks, acknowledge the inherent biases in such a study – notably that such a study privileges those who maintained their ethnicity over those who ignored or rejected it – and outline her central thesis, namely that Scottish ethnicity functioned both within and outside the Scottish community, working with wider social and civic developments, ultimately contributing significantly to the making of New Zealand society. These opening chapters also set the scene for the discussion of ethnicity thoroughly yet succinctly, offering, as too few studies of migrant ethnicity do, an overview of the key demographic features of the migrants in order to contextualize their influence and importance in the colony.

Each chapter offers extraordinary detail about the element of Scottish ethnicity under consideration, Bueltmann examining personal correspondences and epistolary practices among the migrants, analyzing 784 letters from 57 individuals and families to do so (no mean feat), before turning her attention to the history of Scottish associations in New Zealand and the function and day-to-day workings of those associations. Caledonian games are thoroughly scrutinized, as well as their role in the development of professional athletics in New Zealand, before Robert Burns is examined as a site of memory. Bueltmann appears to have left no stone un-turned in her investigation, going so far, for example, as to compile a database of society members based on extant sources when the destruction of the New Zealand census and loss of society membership lists meant such basic demographic information was otherwise unavailable.

While arguing that Scots played a pivotal role in the development of New Zealand society Bueltmann is nevertheless careful not to glorify their contribution. In her penultimate chapter, locating New Zealand’s Scots within the diaspora, for example, she portrays the dark side of this settlement in her discussion of policies implemented by
Scottish politicians in the colony that “failed to acknowledge the grievances of indigenous society with respect to the land question, grievances not dissimilar to those of Scottish Highlanders cleared of their lands” (p.196).

In addition to being an impressive account of Scottish ethnicity in New Zealand however, Bueltmann also engages with the notion of diaspora (rather than taking the term at face value), and with long standing debates within New Zealand history: In reply to “Belich’s call to avoid focusing on ‘reinvented and romantic Highland Scottishness’ when studying the Scots in New Zealand” she notes that Highland symbols were increasingly important and utilized by Scots from every part of Scotland in New Zealand as well as in Scotland and across the empire at the time, serving to “unify in the imperial context” (p.165); the discussion of the importance of networks, societies and associations among the New Zealand Scots throughout the volume challenges Fairburn’s atomization thesis – his argument that transience, individualism and a lack of community ties are key elements in understanding New Zealand during the colonial period.

In her final paragraph Bueltmann reminds us that “the Scottish Diaspora offers… a largely unploughed field for researchers” (p.212). One can only hope that those who go on to plough that field do so in such a thorough and accessible manner as Bueltmann has done here. I recommend this volume highly, especially to anyone interested in associational culture, nineteenth and early twentieth century Scottish history, or the Scots in New Zealand.

Rebecca Lenihan
University of Guelph.