CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-85095-7 — The Discovery of Islands
J. G. A. Pocock
Excerpt
More Information

CHAPTER 1

*The antipodean perception**

(1)

This introductory essay must be initially autobiographical; to explain what it is to write history from New Zealand I need to explain how I came to do it, and place myself in context as a transitory figure in the history of historiography. It is relevant to what I have to say in these essays that I am of settler descent in the fourth generation, and relevant also that though I write as a New Zealander, I write as that not uncommon phenomenon, a New Zealand expatriate. It would take a long time to explain why this is one way of being a New Zealander.

My great-grandfather, Lewis Greville Pocock (1823–88), joined his brother John Thomas (1814–76)[1] in the Cape Colony of South Africa in the year 1842, and my father, also Lewis Greville (1890–1975), after wartime service in the Royal Field Artillery, took a degree in classics at University College, London, and was appointed professor at what was then Canterbury University College in New Zealand, to which country we moved at the end of 1927, when I was three years old. I am reciting what Maori term a *whakapapa*, a record of one's ancestors and the voyages by which they arrived, and it is part of this statement that his sister, Mary Agard Pocock (1886–1977), became professor of botany in what was then Rhodes University College in Grahamstown, Cape Province, so that the move from middle-class business to middle-class professional life was made by both genders in the generation before my own. If I am a fourth-generation colonist, I am a second-generation academic.

I studied the classics, my father's subject, since I was of the last generation to learn Latin because that was the way to become educated and had been

*[Written for this volume in 2003.]

[1] For him see Ashworth, 1974; Holder and Gee, 1980; and Pocock (Tom), 1996.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-85095-7 — The Discovery of Islands
J. G. A. Pocock
Excerpt
More Information

for a thousand years;[2] but of history, which was to be my main subject, I learned more than any school was able to teach me from my mother, born Antoinette Le Gros (1889–1976), who continued as a teacher after she moved to New Zealand. It is relevant to the theme of these essays that she was by birth a Channel Islander, the daughter of a French-speaking Methodist minister; how there came to be such people is an episode in 'British history' as I suggest it should be studied. Of settler descent on my father's side, I am on hers descended from an island people on the seas between the Atlantic archipelago and the peninsula of Europe; a fragment of the ancient duchy of Normandy which conquered England in 1066, never fully incorporated in the United Kingdom which it now serves as a tax shelter. I recall visiting St Heliers with my mother and sister in 1950, and seeing engraved on the wall of some public building – perhaps that of the States of Jersey? – a couplet by the Norman chronicler Wace:

> Jeo di et dirai ki jeo sui,
> Wace de l'isle de Gersui.

By that time I knew about islands and the need to proclaim oneself from them. It was a lesson I had learned in the Antipodes.

(II)

The New Zealand in which I grew up, during the 1930s and 1940s, no longer exists, though a little digging will reveal many of its virtues and limitations still operating. Though it has disappeared, it is entitled to the respect and understanding due to the phenomena of history, and I describe it here because it shaped a view of history which I still find valid. It consisted of a small and fairly recent human population and their cultures, occupying an archipelago of two major and many lesser islands situated on the globe at a point nearly but not quite the antipodes of the Atlantic archipelago with which most of these essays deal. The New Zealand archipelago is one of a chain of sharply distinct ecosystems running from Indonesia through Papua-Melanesia and Australia, but oceanic distance, currents and weather systems have meant that it has had very limited contact with any of these. It was colonized from the central Pacific; that is, the first terrestrial mammals, who were members of the human species,

[2] I attended Medbury School, a private institution in Christchurch, and recollect arriving there at the age of eight to find the first declension of the Latin noun already written on the blackboard. I was neither astonished nor oppressed by this experience, and found ways of profiting by it.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-85095-7 — The Discovery of Islands
J. G. A. Pocock
Excerpt
More Information

arrived from that quarter a thousand years ago or less,[3] in ocean-going galleys called *waka*,[4] and found the islands populated by large birds, of whom many species had become flightless in the absence of predators. The humans rapidly exterminated most of these, imposing on themselves changes in economy and culture which archaeology does more than tradition to recapture.[5] These occurred in the course of settlement and colonization, in an environment radically unlike that of the central Pacific's island systems; the major islands contained alpine ranges as well as volcanic peaks, and presented sizeable interior spaces of grassland, forest, and rock, snow and ice above the treeline. With all of these environments the Polynesian settlers had to establish a relationship, imagining and constructing systems of animism and ancestry which permitted them to call themselves *tangata whenua*,[6] or peoples of the land. In this imagery it is noteworthy that *te whenua* – the placenta, the birthplace, the land of the ancestors – is more prominent than *te moana*, the great ocean across which the ancestors came, without as far as we know establishing two-way systems of travel or commerce. *Whakapapa* commonly end by naming the *waka* in which the ancestors arrived, but the *tangata whenua*, though descended from great navigators, seem not to think of themselves as a people of seafarers whose culture is shaped by recurrent voyaging. The migration has happened once, and ended at the *whenua*.[7]

In this – if described correctly – the *tangata whenua* differ from the *pakeha*: a word in their language used to denote the European settlers who began arriving in the early nineteenth century and now greatly outnumber them. In the New Zealand of which I write these were overwhelmingly British and Irish in both birth and conscious identity, though subsequent immigration, European, Asian and Polynesian, has changed that and made the cities multicultural as the rural areas are not, while helping to treble the population of one and a half million that I remember. This population

[3] The most recent findings suggest a date between AD 1200 and 1300; Howe, 2003. All such datings depend upon archaeological techniques which change and develop rapidly.

[4] These craft were driven by sail and paddle, and have often been called 'canoes'. This word seems unacceptably primitivist to some, and 'galleys' is offered here as an alternative. The crews were not of course slaves or convicts.

[5] Howe, 2003, pp. 179–82; Belich, 1996, chs. 2 and 3. For further bibliography, see Howe, p. 208, n. 51; Walker, 1990, ch. 2.

[6] In New Zealand typography, Maori words are no longer italicized, in order to avoid making Maori culture seem exotic or inferior. In this volume, italicization is practised, in order to ease acceptance of the terms by readers who will find them unfamiliar. For a glossary, see below, p. 226.

[7] For a modern statement of the Maori world view, see Walker, 1990, ch. 1. For poetic comment on the role of the ocean in Maori imagination, see Williams, n.d., p. 10 ('Stride'); Sullivan, 1999. For *whakapapa* in the city where I grew up, see Tau, 2000 and 2003.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-85095-7 — The Discovery of Islands
J. G. A. Pocock
Excerpt
More Information

has been arriving since the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and has always been composed of peoples whose sense of history and identity is modern and European, more secular than religious. They know they have arrived as carriers of a history in which they are already involved, and which they must both continue and change. What has been and remains at issue is their capacity, and power, to engage in this process as autonomous agents.

The voyages that brought them to their archipelago committed them, before the voyages were made, to a global system of commerce moving in many directions. Every voyage, therefore, was remembered, repeatable, and might in other circumstances not have been made; identity was optional and in that sense fragile. It has yet to appear whether the voyagers in the *waka* knew that feeling. The *pakeha* were not merely capable of the two-way voyage: they were in New Zealand to engage in a two-way commerce, which did, has done and does much to make them what they are. They have remained the people of a dependent economy, exporting products in exchange for the capital they do not generate themselves; and the markets on which they depend are situated at global distances, and have until very recently indeed been the homelands of a particular culture which the *pakeha* have inherited and imported, while wondering how far they can generate culture of their own. This in brief is the antipodean condition. It has been the product of oceanic and global distance, and the proposition that the world-wide web has abolished distance has yet to be tested against the counter-proposition that a culture formed by distance may be willing to change only at its own speeds.

The *pakeha* are a people of European, mainly British, colonists. There has occurred a remarkable shift in vocabulary, whereby the word 'imperialism', denoting among other things the subjugation of non-Europeans to European empire and culture, has been replaced by the word 'colonialism'; peoples formerly so subjected use this word to denote that state, and the word 'post-colonialism' to denote the state in which they find themselves after the empires have been liquidated. It is probably too late to alter this set of usages, and the case for doing so is not specially strong; but it is worth pointing out that colonists colonize, and are not 'colonized' in the sense appropriate to the vocabulary of (post-)colonialism. The imperial culture they brought with them was not imposed on them by alien rulers; they regarded it as theirs by inheritance, and if they come to wish neither to inherit nor to go on producing it, it is to themselves that they must explain that it is no longer their inheritance – to selves, therefore, who did think themselves native to this culture, with the result that its replacement will

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-85095-7 — The Discovery of Islands
J. G. A. Pocock
Excerpt
More Information

probably not be a revolution, certainly not a liberation, but a complex and never complete historical process. They may share with non-Europeans in the post-colonial condition a sense that they have not had a share in power sufficient to make them autonomous actors in this process; but almost certainly, they will have had enough power to make the term 'post-colonial' both metaphoric and questionable. Colonies have a way of becoming politically autonomous while remaining economically dependent and culturally 'colonial'; their history becomes one of tension between these conditions.[8]

Colonists, meaning settlers, are involved in what is now called colonialism to the extent to which they are settled among previous or indigenous populations whom they reduce to political and cultural subjection. The South African English-speakers who are among my forebears settled among both Africans and Afrikaners (a settler people of a very different type) by whom they were outnumbered, and it can be said that they never attained political or perhaps cultural autonomy. British policy in South Africa was made in London, or on the Rand, and not by them. In Australia and New Zealand, colonies were established among, and expropriated, Aboriginals and Maori. These peoples, their responses to colonization, and what it did to them, differed so greatly as to give Australian and New Zealand history radically different characters; but in neither case were relations between settlers and indigenous peoples so dominant or obsessive as to be central to the self-formation of the former. Having seized the land of the *tangata whenua*, they did not need their labour, or think about them very much, but set about the importation of a white working class, relations with whom dominated their subsequent politics and history. The New Zealand in which I grew up was able to construct a historical narrative in which Maori played no independent part after about 1870; that people has spent the last fifty years asserting itself in politics and compelling a new historiography.[9]

The history constructed and written by a settler people under these conditions will therefore be a history of itself: of the foundation of a self out of the relationships and conflicts among its component parts. The history of any political community whose awareness of a collective self requires establishment, is increasing, or has been conventionalized, is liable to be

[8] In this paragraph I begin to take issue with a currently dominant paradigm which presents New Zealand history since 1945 as a history of 'decolonization'. For a modified and subtle statement of this thesis, see Belich, 2001. A bibliography of recent New Zealand historical writing is not attempted here; it would be rich, complex and lengthy.

[9] Sharp, 1990, 1997; Sharp and McHugh, 2001. These titles stand for a large bibliography.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-85095-7 — The Discovery of Islands
J. G. A. Pocock
Excerpt
More Information

a history of self, intended for its members, of limited interest to other communities, and not requiring much attention to their histories. A rigorously critical historian will be inclined to say that this is myth, not history, since narratives intended to build up a self will be resistant to critical investigation. (Is the self also a myth?) I desire to present a more complex picture, in which the myths that form the self are always accompanied – not necessarily happily – by critical scrutiny, because the self being constructed becomes aware of its own contingency, insecurity and (in this case) antipodean remoteness. If this should appear at first sight an over-simple account of the conditions under which a critical history of self may appear, the reply is that under these conditions it is not easy to decide on a narrative in the first place.[10]

There were several narratives of settler history partaking of the character of myth: a Whig narrative of the growth of parliamentary sovereignty, relating how the crown in New Zealand had come to accept embodiment in a representative parliament; a social-democrat narrative, focussed on the growth of social welfare, an economy in which government intervened, and a politics of capital and labour; an imperial narrative, proposing that the formation of nationhood was pursued and achieved through participation in the wars – though not the wars alone – of a global British presence, culture and power. All three of these have lost much of their mythic power with the disappearances of both empire and democratic socialism and the growing alienation of the electorate from its representatives (in New Zealand, the last has led to some interesting constitutional experiments); but none has ceased to be the narrative of a process which did take place in history. They have lost mythic power because it is felt that they have ceased to supply identity; the processes they relate do not provide an imaginatively adequate account of who we are or where we have come from. The question becomes that of what narrative is to take their place, and one immediate danger – on the whole, quite successfully avoided – is that of imprisonment within a facetiously patronizing deconstructive account of these myths and any which offer to take their place. Any narrative of autonomy must instantly be rewritten from the point of view of those it fails to include; it is right to do this, but wrong to suppose that the alienation of the excluded automatically deprives the history of

[10] For further theoretical enquiry, see Pocock, 1997d and 1998a. I was concerned in the latter essay with the role of those imperfectly included in, or actively excluded from, the politics of making history, which nevertheless they deeply affect. This is another criticism to which the makers of history must reply, but must retain the capacity to do so.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-85095-7 — The Discovery of Islands
J. G. A. Pocock
Excerpt
More Information

the included of its substance. By far the most interesting development in New Zealand historiography has been the growth of Maori-centred narratives which relate the history of conflict and interchange between two identities; but as we have already seen, the history of the *pakeha* is not reducible to its repression of the *tangata whenua*. They have done other things beside that; whether Maori have been able to do other things beside responding to the presence of the *pakeha* is a question that takes us closer to the themes of post-colonialism.

A historiography which undermines the traditional narratives providing identity may carry the pseudo-radical implication that identity may be found simply in the rejection of the undermined tradition. But those who are forever emancipating themselves will never be free, and the perpetually reiterated rejection of imperial myths serves to perpetuate them – or rather, to perpetuate the fear of a former identity, and the inability to manage oneself within it, which is at the heart of the culture of resentment.[11] Too much fear of a former colonial identity inhibits one from replacing it, and one of the objects of these essays has been to prompt New Zealanders to rethink, not merely to reject, British history and their role within it as it was (and may perhaps continue being). To manage one's history is to study it, not simply to subvert it, and the post-modern suspicion of all identities is dangerous to former colonial societies, as perpetuating their sense of dependence upon a history they are not making (as perhaps nobody is).

I have begun using the word 'colonial' in the special sense proper to a society of colonists who formerly thought of themselves as 'colonials', meaning that they lived in a culture and history which they had brought with them, not yet one which they were making for themselves, and were uneasily aware of a certain contempt in which they were held by metropolitans. At this point I must revert to the study of history as it was when I was a schoolboy and undergraduate in the 1930s and 1940s. I do not think of the view of history it implied as 'colonial', but others do and it is desirable to see why; part of the story may be that as a fourth-generation colonist but first-generation New Zealander, I was less troubled by the thought of being 'colonial' than those whose fathers and grandfathers were New Zealand born often were. I valued the voyage as well as the land.

It is certainly the case that, in those decades, we studied Western, European and especially British history more than we did that of

[11] I develop this term from 'the culture of complaint' (Hughes, 1993). By it I mean the culture of those who cannot live without seeing themselves as insurgents and insist upon others whom they may see as dominators; a world view which is often true, but must not become a necessity.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-85095-7 — The Discovery of Islands
J. G. A. Pocock
Excerpt
More Information

New Zealand. That is scarcely the issue; there was a good deal more of the former to be studied. The problem was – and was known to be – that we had not yet found ways of rendering New Zealand history interesting to ourselves, or central to our self-formation. The three myths I have mentioned were in place and not without historical substance; but they did not avert a feeling that the formation of a New Zealand society and culture was rather dull as a subject of study; colonial (of course) rather than provincial, and lacking in intellectual excitement. As far as I remember, such were my own feelings at the time; history that excited the intellect and imagination had happened elsewhere. But it is important to stress that this did not prevent – it rather stimulated – a lively concern, often frustrated but now and then satisfied, with finding a home for the imagination in New Zealand and imagining that country in new, challenging and if possible enriching ways. In this process the re-imagination of tradition – of what had come in and with the ships – might stand beside the imagination of place and distance; but the relation between the two would not be an easy one.

(iii)

In the early 1940s – as I was beginning my undergraduate studies – a group of poets began publishing their work at the Caxton Press in Christchurch. Charles Brasch (1909–73), Allen Curnow (1911–2001) and Denis Glover (1912–80), who was printer as well as poet, were South Islanders, inhabiting a landscape where mountains and forests immediately confronted farmland and cities, there was an ocean eastward of one's back, and it was known that another sea lay not far west of the formidable ranges.[12] Samuel Butler, nearly a century before, had looked at the Southern Alps and longed for the partly humanized landscape of alpine Switzerland;[13] he was obliged to imagine the descent into the anti-utopia of Erewhon instead.[14] It was the first statement of the problem with which a landscape so recently inhabited by humans confronted an imagination that must hesitate even to conquer it; the high country does not lend itself to the facile pantheism of the environmentalists. The Caxton poets, as they were sometimes known, had

[12] Their poems were published in many forms over many years, and the process of collecting them may not yet be completed. There is a valuable bibliography, not limited to its immediate subject, in Ogilvie, 1999. See also Sturm, 1991, and most recently, Jones, 2003.
[13] Butler, 1923, vols. I (*A First Year in the Canterbury Settlement*), II (*Erewhon*).
[14] For an account of the curious route by which Butler's imagination came to affect the narrative in these pages, see Pocock, 1991c.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-85095-7 — The Discovery of Islands
J. G. A. Pocock
Excerpt
More Information

much to say about the encounter between the human and a land which resisted all attempts to imagine it, and made it their business to present this encounter as itself imaginatively exciting; it is this paradox which we have yet to locate in the imagination of the *tangata whenua*.[15] The *pakeha*, as I have said, remember a voyage before they imagine a land, and the tension between the two is very strong. The poets situated the unimagined land – an essayist of the time called it 'the waiting hills' – in what he also called 'the encircling seas';[16] an island or archipelago, 'not in narrow seas'[17] but in the vastness of the planetary ocean. But the ocean had been traversed, and what came out of it – 'always to islanders', wrote Curnow, 'danger is what comes over the sea'[18] – was not the unknown, but history; a history we already knew, which might overwhelm and smother our attempt to make a history out of the encounter with the land and ourselves, and might present us with problems – there was a world war in progress – that we had not made and might not be able to solve.

It was through the poetry of Allen Curnow that this conjunction of images and problems became in my mind a way of looking at history and living in it, when both had to be done a long sea voyage from anywhere else. He presented an imagination which could never be fully at home where it was, could never fully return to where it might have come from, and had travelled too far to fly off and live anywhere else. The poems written in the first half of his long life developed this theme – 'Whole-hearted he can't move from where he is, nor love whole-hearted that place'[19] – with a crispness and energy of language that made it clear that this was not an unhappy or impotent condition, but one intensely stimulating to the imagination it challenged; and this was Curnow's contribution, in the 1940s and afterwards, to a project it remains inadequate and misleading to call nationalist. It was about nationality, not nationalism. To his readers in that decade it was anything but news that nations were imagined communities; we were saying that ours would not be a nation or a community until it learned to imagine itself; but we were saying also that the antipodean imagination could not create itself out of any unifying myth – if we had known anything about our Maori fellow islanders we might have said to them that there was no *whenua* – but out of knowledge

[15] See, however, a summary of the tradition of *waka* settlement in both islands in Walker, 1990, ch. 3.
[16] Holcroft, 1940, 1943, 1946.
[17] Curnow, 1939. It is a theme of this volume that neither England, Britain nor the Atlantic Archipelago is encircled by the narrow seas east and south of them.
[18] Curnow, 'Landfall in Unknown Seas' (Curnow, 1943; 1997, pp. 226–9).
[19] Curnow, 'The Eye is More or Less Satisfied with Seeing' (Curnow, 1962; 1997, p. 184).

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-85095-7 — The Discovery of Islands
J. G. A. Pocock
Excerpt
More Information

of its own historicity and fragility. Since the voyage to Erewhon had carried us beyond the islands of myth, there was no Tír na n'Óg, no being born again, at the end of it; we must learn to live in more places than one and more histories than one. It was not a bad lesson to spend the rest of the twentieth century learning.

This phase of Curnow's poetry came under vehement attack, later in the 1950s, from younger poets, often living in the northern cities: Wellington the political capital and Auckland the commercial, both aspiring – as Christchurch did not – to be the cultural capital as well. Members of urban élites that could believe themselves self-sufficient, these writers took exception to an easily misunderstood line in which Curnow had mentioned 'that great gloom which stands in a land of settlers, with never a soul at home'.[20] I read him as aiming to dispel that gloom and make the condition of never being quite at home a spring to the imagination. The younger poets, however, insisted that they were at home and the voyage was no longer a problem; though a cynic might observe that having proclaimed themselves at home, they lost no time in telling us how satisfactorily alienated, modern and in due course post-modern they were in that condition. Curnow, after a period of silence, moved into a poetic mode sharply different from, though not discontinuous with, his earlier verse, and went on writing poems of great clarity and authority until he died at the age of 90, having outlived nearly all his enemies and not a few of his friends. I am proud to have been one of the latter, but unlike many New Zealand historians, I am not a poet.

I am, however, concerned to show how the poetry of the 1940s interacted with the growth of a New Zealand historiography. The latter encountered a double problem, whose two faces affected one another: how to write a history of the people – perhaps the nation – we were making of ourselves, and how to rewrite the history from which we had come, but which we had brought with us and had not left behind. Given that the latter history was economically, politically, militarily, culturally and historiographically powerful in ways that we were not, it was natural that the effort to create the former should appear a contest for power, a struggle against hegemony; New Zealanders trying not to be 'colonials', in the sense of cultural dependants, might be tempted to accuse the metropolitans of the empire of cultural hegemony and repression, and the discovery that the metropolitans were hardly aware that they existed, still less that they had a history, might appear one more instrument of that repression. A culture of

[20] Curnow, 'House and Land' (Curnow, 1941; 1997, p. 234). See Murray, 1998.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org