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This is an impressive book based on a recent PhD thesis. All too often thesis writers struggle to free themselves of an overtly academic approach but this book is free of jargon and relates to broader historiographical matters without disrupting the narrative flow. As a result it is interesting and a good read, as well as being a work of impressive scholarship.

Ashton begins with an introduction that ties her subject to broader New Zealand British Imperial themes such as mobility, long-term “collaborative” relations with indigenous people and success in amassing a small fortune through exploitation of the new colony’s timber resources, all in a balanced and deft manner. She promises to “re-create the experience of the type of individual who made empire happen on the ground in a settler society”. Ashton succeeds in that aim while recounting “the story of empire in Hokianga”.

Webster was a Scot born in Montrose (located between Aberdeen and Dundee) in 1818. He came from a comfortably-off merchant family. Despite some setbacks in dealings with the West Indies, his father Andrew managed to send his four sons to the Montrose Academy where they received solid educations suited to a commercial or military career. From age 14 Webster worked for a time in his maternal uncle’s muslin manufacturing business in bustling Glasgow which traded directly with the West Indies. Like many migrants Webster lost his father soon after joining the work force and was persuaded by his mother to go to healthier and more respectable Australia rather than the disease-ridden West Indies, which was suffering decline with the abolition of slavery. Soon after his arrival in Sydney, Webster joined an expedition that drove a mob of cattle and explored the country between New South Wales and Adelaide on a quest to discover country suited to pastoral farming. Webster enjoyed the harsh outdoor life and dismissed Aboriginals he encountered as inferior human beings who were “ultimately unknowable.” Not long after arriving in Adelaide Webster learned that his eldest brother William had set up a sawmill in the Hokianga. He sailed to meet him via Melbourne and arrived in the locality where he would spend most of his life in May 1841.

By the mid-1840s Webster acted as timber agent for George Russell at Kohukohu, befriended the so-called “Pākehā–Māori” Frederick Maning and had liaisons with at least two Māori women, although he did not take on responsibility for the children that resulted like Maning or Russell, who both married local Māori wāhine ‘women’. Webster also befriended the missionary William White Junior and his ethnographer
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brother John, and became a lifelong friend of the Auckland entrepreneur John Logan Campbell. He supported the so-called Scotch clique and shared Campbell’s conservative and pro-business philosophy. Webster also separated himself from the rough sawyers and labourers, and lived in a virtual middle class enclave with the Russells and Whites.

Elevating himself above the local Māori rangatira ‘Māori leaders’, however, proved more difficult because he still depended on them for protection, land, trees and labour. Chiefs like Papahurihia and Tamiti Waka Nene treated Webster as an equal whether he liked it or not and he ended up assisting the Māhurehure Federation during the Northern War of 1845–46. Webster soon became fluent in te reo ‘Māori language’ and acquainted with Māori protocol, knowledge that assisted his trading considerably as he learnt to navigate between two worlds.

Ashton provides an excellent critique of Webster’s account of his involvement in fighting against Hone Keke and Kawiti by showing that he greatly exaggerated his contribution given he was always a low level ally who had little choice but to fight with the powerful local rangatira. Once peace was secured, Webster undertook an extraordinary seven-year journey to sell timber and prefabricated houses in San Francisco on behalf of Brown and Campbell, before returning through the Pacific where he became embroiled in some extraordinary incidents. Even though the Californian gold rush should have provided plenty of opportunity, the venture soon turned sour. Webster abandoned Brown’s ship Noble in San Francisco and sailed in 1851 to Hawai’i on The Wanderer with the Scottish born Australian pastoral magnate Benjamin Boyd. They sailed back through modern-day Kiribati and on to the Solomon Islands. The “natives” at Guadalcanal attacked the boat and Boyd disappeared. Webster sailed back to San Cristobal, or Makira, and somewhat ludicrously tried to claim it for Charles St. Julian, a Sydney journalist. Later efforts in the 1850s to establish an empire in the Solomons came to nought, despite Webster publishing a sensational account of his exotic adventures and travelling to England to promote the book which featured competent paintings of birds observed in his travels.

Once he returned to the Hokianga in 1855, Webster settled into his role as the Hokianga’s “timber baron”. In 1856 he, like many white men throughout the Empire, distanced himself from the local indigenous people by marrying a white woman—Russell’s eldest daughter, Emily. As he disentangled himself from Māori, Webster became a hard racist like Maning. While romanticising the old Māori as noble savages, he condemned the younger generation as a bar to progress, doomed to soon die out. Webster’s letters on this subject make for unpleasant reading to the modern citizen but Ashton handles them in a remarkably balanced way, noting that emerging pseudo-scientific justifications linked to “social Darwinism” entrenched Webster in his views. As he settled into the role of white patriarch, Webster’s political views became more rigidly conservative and he opposed the democratic impulse of George Grey and Richard Seddon.

Webster went on to live to the remarkable age of 93, enjoying his elaborate garden at Opononi. His business continued to flourish down to the 1890s, but he achieved little else of note despite his bragging over suppression of the Dog Tax Rebellion in 1898, which had much more to do with Northern Māori MHR Hone Heke Ngapua than Webster. He died a few months before the even more venerable John Logan
Campbell in 1912, but despite some increase in the local European population the Hokianga remained an essentially Māori space.

Ashton succeeds admirably in achieving her other stated goal of expanding “our understanding of colonialism and how it was inscribed on the lives of those who lived it” (in the Hokianga). My only quibbles are very minor, relating mainly to clumping the illustrations together rather than spreading them throughout the text and the absence of helpful maps. She could also have strengthened her arguments regarding the Dog Tax Rebellion by referencing the surprisingly liberal *Northern Advocate*, but such things fail to prevent this excellent book from being an important contribution to New Zealand historiography. Thanks to Ashton’s endeavours and perceptive observations we now know much more about one of the most beautiful but least understood parts of the country, especially in comparison with the Bay of Islands only a few kilometres away. This book comes with my fulsome recommendation to anyone interested in race relations and Imperial history.


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When I was invited to firstly launch, and then review this collection I felt very honoured for several reasons. Firstly, the lead author and editor, Professor Judith Bennett, is a researcher of the Pacific beyond compare, well recognised for her scholarship and innovative projects on environmental and Pacific war history, and also for her humility and mentoring of young academics. Secondly, when I found that the collection was dedicated to Professor Murray Chapman, a New Zealand geographer and long-time resident of Hawai‘i, I was pleased to see his career so resoundingly honoured. Murray is feted here for his inspiring way of looking at the world of population movement and mobility, and especially for his enduring relationship with the peoples of Solomon Islands. But he has also been a constant mentor to young scholars, including myself starting 40 years ago, and continues to inspire and support Pacific academics wherever they may be. As Bennett says (p. 24) each author has a thread connected to Murray Chapman in a wide network spanning the Oceanian world. He is part of all he has met. This collection with its beautiful cover with the aptly named “Genealogy Ties”, a 2010 print given freely by Leanne Joy Lupelele Clayton, and its excellent illustrations (including a colour photograph of Murray Chapman as a young researcher in 1972), is dedicated to Judy Bennett’s “teacher, mentor and friend”. No better tribute could be made.

Judith Bennett, in coordinating ten people, half of whom are from Solomon Islands, or deeply connected in some way, has produced what is one of the most important reflections on mobility that I have read in a very long time. After I finished reading this beautifully produced volume I wondered to myself how it compared with earlier