waka kuaka

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kahakō	macron
ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi	Hawaiian language
ʻōlelo noʻeau	poetic proverb
wai	fresh water

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DAVIDSON, Jared: *Blood and Dirt: Prison Labour and the Making of New Zealand.* Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2023. 296 pp., ack., bib., ed. note, images, index, notes, prologue. NZ$50.00 (hardcover), EPUB, PDF.

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The title of Jared Davidson's book *Blood and Dirt*, taken from the well-known Marxist quote that capital "comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (p. 34), tells us from the outset that this history of prison labour is about class, capital, labour, power and violence in the making of Aotearoa New Zealand. Beginning with the first permanent Pākehā (New Zealand European) settlement in New Zealand, Davidson retells the recent history of New Zealand through the prism of prison labour, leaving the reader with new perspectives on the colonisation of New Zealand and the ways that unfree labour has shaped this country's human and physical environment.

Davidson argues that unfree labour has been core to the colonial project from the very beginning of European settlement, in ways that have not always been recognised. Historians have largely focused on the work of the missionaries at Hohi mission station, established by Samuel Marsden in 1814, but Davidson recentres the narrative around the convict labourers who helped build the mission station and the detained offenders who were used for ongoing labour. Davidson places the origins of prison labour in New Zealand within the context of capitalist imperatives of improvement, or making profit from the land, a concept that was central to the economic and social changes in Britain from the sixteenth century. While the links between work and the concept of improvement on mission stations have been discussed before, notably by Tony Ballantyne in his 2015 work *Entanglements of Empire*, Davidson expands the discussion into the origins of incarceration and forced labour in Britain, linking the genealogy of prisons with the origins of capitalism and documenting how prisons, as both places and a set of social relations, arrived in New Zealand with the first missionaries. "Hohi was more than a state-sanctioned religious settlement", writes Davidson. "It was a prison wing of New South Wales, a local lockup and a house of correction all in one" (p. 38).

When New Zealand became a colony following the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) in 1840, the British Government decided, after some consideration, not to make New Zealand a penal colony. Instead, Davidson argues, the state used prison labour to help build the basic infrastructure required for the new colony. He documents the work of prisoners in building many of the roads, bridges, retaining walls and buildings in our cities, as well as their work in some of New Zealand's more remote and picturesque settings such as Milford Sound and National Park. All the while, he keeps the focus on the stories of the prisoners, the power relationships of class, gender and race at play, and the environments in which they worked. "In a workscape such as Milford Sound", he writes, for instance, "the class antagonism and different interests of prisoners and warders increased with each violent storm" (p. 60).

In a chapter on industry, Davidson outlines the collective experience of incarceration in the nineteenth century, in which prisoners slept, worked and resisted authority by escaping, striking or mutinying together. Most prisoners were working class, and Davidson argues that their histories are important for understanding colonisation and its progress industry. In later chapters, Davidson documents the replacement of the hard-labour gang working on infrastructure with remote forest plantations, road camps and prison farms, all of which were forerunners of prison work today.

Davidson points out that while Māori used captive labour within the context of Māori law, prisons were completely alien to Māori, and they preferred to be judged by their own people and according to their own tikanga (protocols). While Māori imprisonment rates were initially very low, many were imprisoned during the New Zealand Wars, and put to work across the country or exiled to places like the Chatham Islands. Davidson outlines the harrowing experiences of many who were sent to prison or incarcerated on hulks for many months and either died on board, attempted to escape or were transferred to different parts of the country to undertake forced work on the schools, gardens and roads in the developing towns. In the twentieth century, Māori imprisonment increased dramatically, which Davidson links to Māori dispossession and land enclosures.

Blood and Dirt also considers the role of forced labour in what Davidson describes as "the penal triangle of New Zealand's Pacific" (p. 170). Davidson argues that "imprisoned workers were essential to creating the basic infrastructure of New Zealand's Pacific empire" (p. 174). On the islands of Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (the Pacific Ocean), free and unfree labour mined phosphate-rich guano for New Zealand and Australian farms, built roads, maintained government properties and worked on plantations. His archival research in this chapter surfaces the individual hardships of prisoners on these islands, but he also describes instances of resistance to prison labour regimes and recounts, as other historians have, the messiness of empire on the ground.

Davidson's storytelling capabilities are evident from his opening words: "It wasn't by choice that Harry Brown was up and working so early" (p. 12). Throughout the book, he skilfully weaves personal stories through the facts and figures, and his punchy, confident writing style deftly handles weighty methodological topics. "Yes, manure has agency" (p. 168), he writes at one point, commenting on the mining of guano at Malden Island. "Never judge a prison by its annual report" (p. 150), he writes on another occasion, taking issue with the official records of one of the prisons in New Zealand. His writing style makes for a lively, vivid and dynamic read, something that can't always be said about New Zealand histories. Davidson sometimes turns the lens on himself, reflecting on his own interactions with the archives and the places he writes about. "As an archivist", he writes, "I am forever wondering if the register I am flicking through was printed or bound by a prisoner, adding further meaning to the idea that the marginalised suffer the violence of archives" (p. 84). This first-person narrative, which is being increasingly used by historians, creates a more personal and contemporary history, one in which the author's own reactions to and interpretations of the sources, and their complicated relationship with the past and the present, becomes part of the story. The book has been beautifully produced, illustrated and designed by Bridget Williams Books, which, along with the engaging writing, makes it accessible and appealing to a general audience as well as a specialist reader.

Blood and Dirt provides a fascinating insight into New Zealand's history, shining a new light onto familiar events and places throughout the country by making visible the extent to which forced labour has been part of, and shaped, almost every aspect of New Zealand's recent history. By focusing on prison labour, Davidson brings the stories of the poor, dispossessed and incarcerated into view, particularly those of Māori, who are disproportionately represented in our prisons. Further, he places these histories into the longer and wider context of empire, capitalism, progress and improvement. There is the question of whether the book overstates the significance of prison labour in New Zealand's history, a question which Davidson himself raises at one point, "Prison land? A fair description or hyperbole?" (p. 221), and leaves it for the reader to decide the answer. But he leaves us in no doubt about the impact that forced and unpaid labour has had, and continues to have, on our country. Davidson himself says it best: "The more I thought about these spaces, the more connections I was able to draw between unfree labour and the places I take for granted. That is a heavy inheritance" (p. 228).

References Cited

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