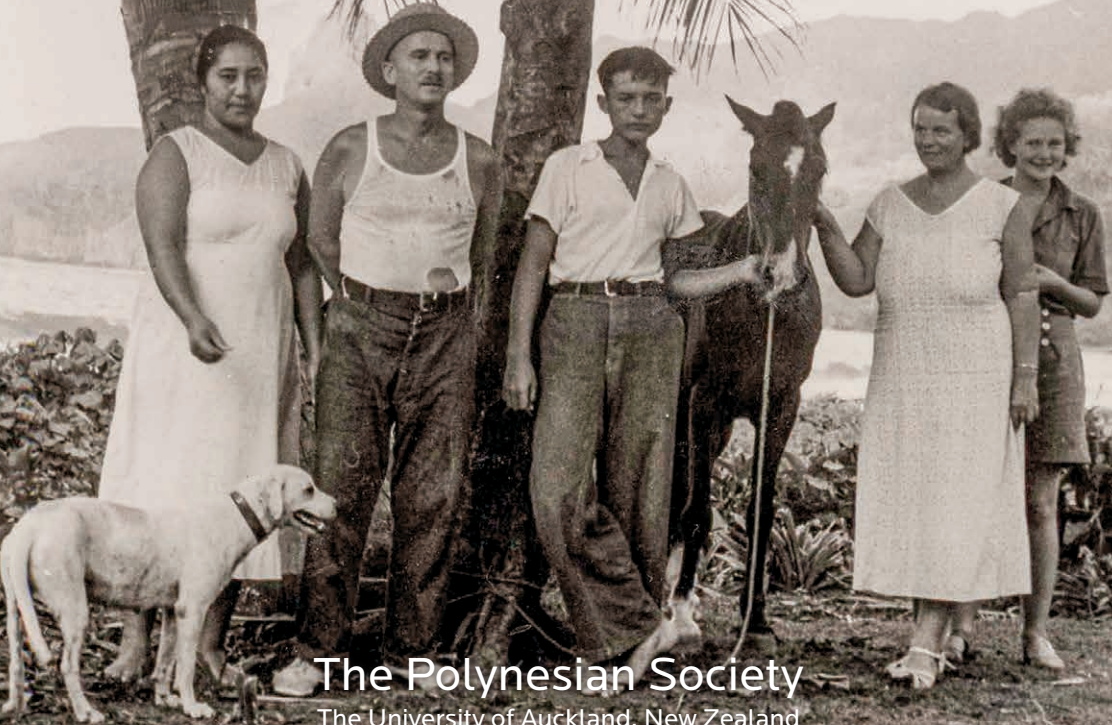


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ATTWOOD, Bain: *“A Bloody Difficult Subject”*: Ruth Ross, *te Tiriti o Waitangi and the Making of History*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2023. 288 pp., abbr., ack., appendix, author bio., biblio., illus., index., map, notes. NZ\$59.99 (hardcover).

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What is the role of history-writing in our contested uses of the past? This is the simple question that underpins Bain Attwood’s *“A Bloody Difficult Subject”*: Ruth Ross, *te Tiriti o Waitangi and the Making of History*. The answer, as Attwood shows, is complicated. His response is threefold, indicated in the book’s title, which relates three interlocking sections. First, history is personal, as demonstrated through the career of historian Ruth Ross and her seminal article on the texts and translations of *te Tiriti o Waitangi* (the Treaty of Waitangi), published in 1972 in the *New Zealand Journal of History* (Ross 1972). Second, the impact of Ross’s article on New Zealanders’ debates about the colonial past in the late 1970s and 1980s evokes the *public* life of history. The personal and political are drawn together in the final section, which theorises explicitly about the discipline of history as a driving force for national mythmaking and “sharing histories”.

Although a leading trans-Tasman historian of colonialism, Attwood has written *“A Bloody Difficult Subject”* for a general audience. This makes sense. Ross’s article is one of the most famous ever published by the *New Zealand Journal of History* (and a key reading moment for many an undergraduate history student, myself included), in which she advanced a now familiar textual analysis: *te Tiriti*, signed by the overwhelming majority of rangatira (chiefs) in 1840, should be taken as the primary text, with the English treaty as a secondary translation. Attwood traces Ross’s personal travails in researching, presenting and, ultimately, publishing her argument. He shows that Ross did not simply give a new public emphasis to the Māori text but that, in her personal commitment to the rules of the historical discipline, she disavowed the possibility of any definitive meaning or interpretation being drawn from the chaotic and muddled documents. On the one hand, Ross’s article was like dynamite that exploded encrusted mythologies of the Treaty as a romantic token of ideal race relations, a boon to a new generation of Māori activists such as Ngā Tamatoa (Attwood shows how the meanings of the Treaty reflect political and cultural needs). Conversely, in reviewing revisionist trends in New Zealand history-writing—revisiting arguments by legal historian Andrew Sharp, for example—Attwood, ultimately, sees Ross’s legacy as having been overtaken by new forms of public mythologising and her key arguments ignored or warped by later historians.

Attwood's various lines of argument land with mixed effect. One suspects the sections may each have originated as respective journal articles that, in a book publication, begin to appear a bit stretched. While he offers insights into the experience of women historians in the postwar university, and we learn something of the character of Ross, or the attributes Attwood most admires in her, the narrative lacks the finesse of a fully fleshed biography. Although he shows a deft understanding of the public currents of te Tiriti, he fails to do justice to the work of Māori scholarship (Nepia Mahuika and Sir Tipene O'Regan are the only Māori historians who feature in the book's extensive bibliography). In this way, he risks downplaying Māori historical consciousness about te Tiriti. Did Māori really not appreciate the Māori language version of the Treaty until Ross's intervention, as Attwood seems to suggest?

In the book's wider schema, Ross becomes an object of ventriloquism, as Attwood advances pointed critiques of Treaty historians such as Claudia Orange, Michael Belgrave and Ned Fletcher. The testiness of these latter sections also blunt Attwood's constructive input (one of the ironies here is that Attwood, in seeking to come to Ross's defence, has simply co-opted her for his own argument in much the way he charges his professional adversaries).

Histories of te Tiriti and the Treaty, thanks to the political process of the Waitangi Tribunal, have centred 1840 (and thus Ross's work) as a kind of foundational hinge of New Zealand's national mythology. In many ways, this has narrowed the field of historical inquiry into a more legalistic forum than Ross might have envisioned in 1972. Yet, most New Zealand-based academics would recognise that history-writing now contends with the post-settlement landscape and its vast archive of tribal memories, evoking stories of grief and survival. The crisis of narratives, of which Ross was a harbinger, has hardly been solved, but scholars must contend with the relationships of interpretation offered in the collective worlds of hapū (subtribes) and iwi (tribes).

Although these flaws do not negate the important contribution of this book, especially when taken as part of the cut-and-thrust of academic history, it is worth emphasising that a degree of intellectual humility is necessary for constructive public debate. This isn't easy; the contested past is, indeed, bloody difficult. Historians need to resist the temptation, in tearing down one golden calf, to propel New Zealanders towards *another* national resolution *through* another kind of history-writing. Instead, we need to become comfortable with sitting across a plurality of interpretations of the past, in the gaps between histories and memories, between texts and translations, as we head into shared and uncertain futures.

References Cited:

Ross, R.M., 1972. Te Tiriti o Waitangi: Texts and translations. *New Zealand Journal of History* 6 (2): 129–57.