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SPECIAL ISSUE:

The Invisibility of the Realm of New Zealand



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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE: THE INVISIBILITY OF THE REALM OF NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT: The invisibility of the Realm of New Zealand in the historical and contemporary discourses about New Zealand mean there is limited understanding about what the Realm is. This special issue is a timely interrogation of this invisibility and the impacts it has had on Pacific peoples in the Realm, written by Pacific scholars who have ancestral connections to New Zealand's imperial past. It asks, How do we grapple with the Realm of New Zealand as an invisible part of New Zealand's contemporary reality and historical past as a colonial empire? This introduction addresses the contemporary importance of understanding the Realm of New Zealand, in legal and actual terms, laying a foundation for the complex discussions in this special issue.

Keywords: public narratives, national histories, historical absences, Indigenous scholars, Pacific peoples

This special issue was built from shared discussions, connections and frustrations at an aspect of our history that is seemingly invisible in the national narrative and public consciousness. It emerged from a need to critically engage with each other about the absence of the Realm of New Zealand from historical and contemporary discourses, especially in terms of the impacts the Realm has had on those Pacific peoples within it. This special issue is about shedding light on our histories, largely unrecognised in the narrative of New Zealand's past, in order to understand the complexities of the relationships between New Zealand and its previous colonial territories.¹ A number of the authors in this issue have worked on, analysed and discussed the problems that arise from the invisibility of the Realm countries, frustrated not only at this absence but also the lack of concern for the issues faced by people of the Realm that arise from this oversight. A number of this issue's contributors have done so to raise awareness of the impact that these absences have on the Realm countries beyond New Zealand proper, many of which have larger populations in Aotearoa New Zealand than in their home countries. This special issue surfaces some significant concerns faced by people from the Pacific countries of the Realm, such as loss of language and knowledge systems, alongside discussions on New Zealand's carefully

cultivated national and international image as a leader in the Pacific region, determining a somewhat false historical understanding of the relationship between New Zealand and its Realm countries. This special issue deals with the complexities faced by Realm countries as independent sovereign nations (with the exception of Tokelau) within an entity nominally “led” by New Zealand, with implications connected to citizenship and access that determine continued involvement.

Throughout the discussions around and development of this issue, I have grappled with how I fit into the narrative as a New Zealand-born Samoan, the child of a mother born in Sāmoa who migrated to New Zealand after Sāmoa had become independent in 1962. As editor of this special issue, although I am not from a country within the Realm of New Zealand, I am connected to these stories in many ways as a result of the consequences of New Zealand’s imperialism and empire²-building in the Pacific through my ancestral connection to Sāmoa. Part of the power of this issue is that the authors are all personally connected to the topic of their scholarship and are reckoning with the consequences of imperialism as people affected by New Zealand’s imperial legacies. Almost all of the authors include personal anecdotes, stories and statements of connection, demonstrating the importance of this special issue for what it can add to the current discourse (or absence of discourse) on the Realm of New Zealand. The consequences of the absence of the Realm in our national consciousness and histories are felt by many of these authors who are reflecting on their own position and those of their loved ones in writing their articles. This makes this special issue a unique and vital contribution to scholarship on New Zealand’s colonial history and on the impact of invisibilising the Realm and those within it.

Critically, this special issue is timely as questions have arisen recently about the relationship between New Zealand and the Cook Islands in particular, with wider implications for the relationships with the other Pacific Realm countries of Tokelau and Niue. The year 2025 marks 60 years since the Cook Islands became self-governing, although the arrangement of self-government in free association (SGFA) is a complicated one (see Ma’ia’i and Powell this issue). The prime minister of the Cook Islands, Mark Brown, at the end of 2024 proposed that the Cook Islands have its own passport, which could only happen, according to New Zealand foreign minister Winston Peters, if the Cook Islands were fully independent (RNZ, 27 Jan. 2025). With the clear threat of losing New Zealand citizenship due to SFGA and its position as a Realm country, Brown withdrew the proposal, stating that “New Zealand has bared its teeth” (Kumar 2025). While this proposal had been opposed fervently by many in the Cook Islands who wished to retain their access to New Zealand and marched to show their opposition, it raised wider questions about the constitutional arrangement

between the two countries and what seems to be a grey area in terms of expectations between New Zealand and the countries within its Realm. To blur the grey further, the Cook Islands then went on to make a bilateral agreement with China on a range of issues, spanning economic and technical cooperation alongside deep-sea exploration. New Zealand reacted badly to this agreement, predictably, because it was not consulted on it—even though the 2001 Joint Centenary Declaration of the Principles of the Relationship between the Cook Islands and New Zealand states that the Cook Islands “interacts with the international community as a sovereign and independent state” (clause 4.1). In a letter to the editor in the *Cook Islands News*, “An Interested Observer” (2025) wrote that New Zealand had misinterpreted this declaration. They stated:

I am writing as a Cook Islander to express my disappointment with the New Zealand Government, and in particular their Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Minister, for the bellicose statements coming from the Beehive recently in relation to the Cook Islands. I would also note their heavy-handed approach has not been limited to the Cook Islands ... It is common knowledge that these kinds of bullying threats quite often achieve the opposite effect of what they are trying to do, so it is highly regrettable that we are seeing this coming from New Zealand.

Distinguished Professor Steven Ratuva (2025) reiterates these sentiments, stating that New Zealand’s position is “reeking of neocolonial paternalism”. And it is. New Zealand is not used to challenges from the countries within their Realm and has been increasingly concerned about regional encroachment by other foreign powers, but as Ratuva states in the same piece, “Pacific countries and territories trying to assert their sense of autonomy need to be treated with respect and mana, and not be growled at in a paternalistic way, as if they’re delinquent juveniles”. New Zealand has often treated its partners in the Pacific in paternalistic ways that have echoes of colonial ideology whereby New Zealand knows better and reprimands (as “children”) those who do not align with their wishes; and while there is a plethora of historical examples of this, we do not need to turn to history to see such instances.³

These recent events have pushed the Realm of New Zealand into the spotlight, but only in terms of current diplomatic issues. There is still a large hole in understanding the impacts of the invisibility of the Realm of New Zealand and the responsibility New Zealand proper has toward the Realm countries. The New Zealand made up of Te Ika-a-Māui (North Island), Te Waipounamu (South Island), Rakiura (Stewart Island) and Rēkohu (Chatham Islands) is what I refer to as New Zealand proper, but there is territory beyond this that constitutes the legal Realm of New Zealand, based on countries

that had—prior to the legal allocation of Realm—been brought within the boundaries of New Zealand: the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau and the Ross Dependency.⁴ The Realm of New Zealand does not take away the sovereignty of any of the Realm countries, but there are complications here based on the constitutional arrangements each has with New Zealand as former colonies.

From 1907 New Zealand was a dominion, but this designation was considered subservient to the British Crown, and so after World War II New Zealand ceased use of this term, referring to itself simply as New Zealand even though it still technically constituted a dominion. This can be seen in 1945 when the country joined the United Nations simply as New Zealand. The Queen's 1952 Accession Proclamation and the 1953 Royal Titles Act (sec. 2) were the first to refer to New Zealand as a realm, and this was in reference to more than just New Zealand proper, since at this point there were a number of territories in the Pacific that had been brought within the boundaries of New Zealand through colonisation. While the roots of the Realm are in the colonial empire New Zealand amassed in the Pacific, its development into what we recognise (or don't recognise) today are in the processes of "decolonisation" that the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau went through between 1962 and 1974 redefining their relationships with New Zealand and within the Realm. These first royal references to the realm in 1952/53 are to New Zealand as a realm, not to the Realm of New Zealand, a clarification not seen until the 1983 Letters Patent.

The 1983 Letters Patent determined the legal Realm of New Zealand, developed on the advice of constitutional lawyer Alison Quentin-Baker and considering the new status of the Cook Islands and Niue. It stated:

We do hereby constitute, order, and declare that there shall be, in and over
Our Realm of New Zealand, which comprises—

- (a) New Zealand; and
- (b) The self-governing state of the Cook Islands; and
- (c) The self-governing state of Niue; and
- (d) Tokelau; and
- (e) The Ross Dependency,—
a Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief who shall be Our
representative in Our Realm of New Zealand.

This indicates New Zealand proper is a separate entity within the Realm, just as it does the other territories. However, this separation is structural, while conceptually each of the countries in the Realm is entwined with New Zealand (even those that are sovereign states) based on its individual constitutional arrangements with New Zealand, shared colonial connections, issues of access and shared citizenship. What the 1983 Letters Patent did was to group these countries within the Realm under the authority of the head of

state (the Sovereign) and their representative in the governor general, and while subsequent legal definitions of “New Zealand” make clear it is only in reference to New Zealand proper, the entwined constitutional connections New Zealand has with each country and the existence of New Zealand citizenship throughout the Realm speaks to a more unified state than was legally defined in 1983.⁵

That the Realm of New Zealand as a concept and in practice is *more* is recognised by Quentin-Baxter:

To some extent ... the concept of the Realm of New Zealand has taken on a life of its own. The role of the Sovereign in right of New Zealand as the head of state of all parts of the Realm can be seen as more than the recognition of a distant monarch. The common Sovereign symbolises the shared experiences and continuing status of the peoples of the Realm. Its populated parts are the homes of Polynesian peoples of the South Pacific. All were affected, in greater or lesser measure, by the explorers, traders and settlers from Europe and elsewhere that arrived on their shores. All parts of the Realm were annexed by the British monarch, colonised under the New Zealand flag, and affected by the received English law as well as that originating in New Zealand. Everyone who now belongs to any part of the Realm has, as of right, the status of a New Zealand citizen. Those factors give the Realm of New Zealand a reality going well beyond the words of the Letters Patent which gave it birth. (Quentin-Baxter 2021: 586)

This reality, and the complications of these relationships between New Zealand and the Realm countries, are entwined with their status as former colonies with varied constitutional connections. New Zealand’s responsibility to the Pacific countries within the Realm, as recognised by Quentin-Baxter, is beyond the reality prescribed legally. This begs wider questions about New Zealand’s role and responsibility, especially in light of recent controversies that indicate, in the words of Steven Ratuva, a position “reeking of neocolonial paternalism” (2025).

How then do we reckon with the Realm of New Zealand as an invisible part of New Zealand’s contemporary reality and historical past as a colonial empire? This special issue begins these discussions in the hope that they will be taken up by others and pushed further to make the Realm more visible to both those in New Zealand and from the countries in the Realm. The issue’s first two articles grapple with the absence of the Realm and New Zealand’s colonial past in the public consciousness and within scholarship on New Zealand. Emma Ngakuravaru Powell opens this issue by discussing the cost of the continued national disavowal of New Zealand’s imperial legacy in the Pacific, reflecting on its impacts in terms of both her teaching and research. Powerfully, Powell envisions a future beyond these historical absences rooted in connections between place, peoples, community and

family. T. Melanie Puka Bean writes on the need for genuine engagement with the Realm of New Zealand as part of New Zealand's imperial history, highlighting Pacific studies and Indigenous studies as sites of potential (and of responsibility) for these explorations. Bean proposes using the critical frameworks of indigeneities and indigenous feminisms to move beyond New Zealand proper to understand the history and contemporary realities of the Realm. Subsequently, the next two articles confront real-world impacts faced by the peoples of the Realm of New Zealand, impacts seeded in colonisation and colonial ideology. Sally Akevai Nicholas and Jesse Koka'ua point to the continued linguicide effected by the settler government of New Zealand on the Pacific Realm countries, advocating for language revitalisation efforts to be targeted at the community level and not the individual, and for trans-Indigenous whakapapa (ancestry)-based collaborations as reclamation. In their article, they speak directly to the reader through their "Message for the Descendants", a powerful message on language learning without whakamā (shame). In a collective article, Jess Pasisi, Lisimoni Birtha Togahai, Ioane Aleke Fa'avae, Inangaro Vakaafi, Rennie Jonathan Unimotu Atfield-Douglas, and Cora-Allan Lafaiki Twiss highlight the power and vibrancy of Indigenous knowledges marginalised by colonisation, specifically referencing the complexities of knowledge reclamation within the Realm. In personal narratives, each author connects to how they have learnt what Niue knowledge is, alongside efforts by tau tangata Niue (people ancestrally connected to Niue) to build connections by promoting knowledge sharing and awareness. The final two articles focus on the arrangement of SGFA between New Zealand and the Cook Islands and Niue, respectively, within the Realm of New Zealand. Rennie Jonathan Unimotu Atfield-Douglas discusses the reasons Niue chose SGFA with New Zealand through reference to a speech by the first premier of Niue, Robert Rex, to the United Nations in 1973. He discusses whether this outcome really was a choice for Niue, arguing now in the contemporary moment that the benefit of this arrangement must be reassessed. Finally, KDee Aimiti Ma'ia'i analyses the benefits of SGFA between the Cook Islands and New Zealand, pointing to the false dichotomy that has characterised New Zealand as benevolent benefactor and the Cook Islands as beholden beneficiary. In reality, she argues that the benefits for New Zealand have been vast, while the Cook Islands has not benefitted as anticipated from this arrangement.

As a whole, this issue is about promoting conversation about New Zealand's imperial past, the Realm of New Zealand and the realities of absent histories and their impact on contemporary peoples. This is done, powerfully, through the voices of Pacific scholars connected to the Realm and to New Zealand's colonial history to shed light on aspects of the past and present that are, largely, invisible. It is also timely that the Realm of New Zealand

become part of New Zealand's public discourses. With Tokelau marking 100 years since it was colonised by New Zealand and Niue and the Cook Islands recognising 50 years and 60 years respectively of SGFA, it is time for us to make the Realm of New Zealand—its history, consequences and future possibilities—visible.

NOTES

1. New Zealand's colonies included the Cook Islands (as of 1901), Niue (1901), Sāmoa (1914 under military occupation, 1920 as a trust territory), Nauru (1919, held jointly with Australia and Britain) and Tokelau (1925).
2. Empire is a word used throughout this special issue to refer to New Zealand's empire in the Pacific. It is a word that provokes emotion and denial—New Zealand did not have an empire!—but is one consciously used by authors (see Salesa 2009).
3. See, for example, the directive to remove aid to Kiribati made in February by Winston Peters following a cancelled diplomatic meeting: <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/09/asia/new-zealand-kiribati-us-china-pacific-intl-hnk/index.html>
4. The Ross Dependency in Antarctica, despite being part of the Realm, is largely absent from this discussion as it is uninhabited. It became territory of New Zealand in 1923.
5. Section 29 of the Interpretation Act 1999 states: "New Zealand or similar words referring to New Zealand, when used as a territorial description, mean the islands and territories within the Realm of New Zealand; but do not include the self-governing State of the Cook Islands, the self-governing State of Niue, Tokelau, or the Ross Dependency."

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