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# ERIC PAWSON: THE ULTIMATE CO-AUTHOR

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I first met Eric Pawson in 1998 to see if he was interested in co-editing my rather loose project of an environmental history of New Zealand. I already knew of Eric's work from various articles I had read and thought he had the precise skill set and appropriate networks I was looking for. His articles were perceptive and conceptually sharp and revealed a capacity for playing with big ideas across a wide range of disciplines. I especially liked his work on landscape change and admired his contribution to the *Bateman Historical Atlas of New Zealand*. I also knew that he had much experience in editing diverse collections of essays with likes of my old Geography lecturer at Massey, Richard Le Heron. And the then-editor of Oxford University Press in New Zealand, Linda Cassells, recommended him. He was the obvious choice.

We hit it off immediately. I met him in his office at the University of Canterbury and was impressed not only by his enthusiasm, but also by his clarity of thought. Moreover, he seemed to know exactly how to go about assembling a team of authors and how to structure a book of essays so that it remained cohesive and focussed.

In a remarkably short time we assembled a team of 21 scholars from as far away as Vancouver and Fargo, in addition to New Zealand specialists. The team represented a wide range of disciplines, from archaeology and prehistory through agronomy and ecology to law and politics. We also tried hard to investigate the role played by both Māori and Pākehā in effecting this far reaching and rapid transformation. Where possible, we reported on their experience of the transformation that played such a major part in structuring the history of race relations in this most far-flung of Britain's colonies. The different perspectives of male and female settlers also received attention.

The working relationship that we developed quickly became great fun. We met regularly at Oamaru and Timaru, where we shared our love of good food and classical music, and thrashed out ideas while finding photographs that could be used in the book. The larger team then assembled in South Canterbury, where the late and great botanist Henry Connor put us through our paces. Visits to Samuel Butler's Mesopotamia and the Acland family's Mt Peel Station followed. Sessions at the New Zealand Geographical Conference at Massey provided a forum for working out ideas. We subsequently held team meeting at the University of Otago,

one of which was audited by none other than the leading American environmental historian, William Cronon, lured to New Zealand by his love of the 'Lord of the Rings' movies.

The more arduous task of editing was shared willingly, assisted by the excellent Richard King of Canterbury University Press, who sadly died shortly afterwards. The book came together efficiently and duly appeared, in 2002, thanks to Eric's dexterity with deadlines. Reviews were generally favourable, although a few New Zealand reviewers seemed to be struggling with the emergence of a new approach to New Zealand's past and, potentially, a new subfield of New Zealand history. Australian and British reviewers were uniformly more enthusiastic and another leading American in the field—Richard White of Stanford University—was positively ecstatic in the foreword he wrote for the book. Our central conclusion that the impulse to develop and improve overrode the sometimes discordant desire to conserve surprised few but set some thinking harder about future directions for Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin at The Australian National University were particularly taken with the chapters on the transformation of New Zealand from a land of forest, mountains, tussock and swamps into Britain's far-flung, heavily drained stock farm covered in English grasses. So with their support, as well as that of White and Cronon, we applied for a Marsden grant for a project entitled 'Empires of Grass'. Much to our delight we secured \$606,000 over three years. We hoped that by assembling a team of eight historians and historical geographers, including former farm manager Robert Peden, we would be able to investigate much more carefully the drivers behind the creation of so much pastureland. Peter Holland revelled in his bio-geographer's element as he detailed the many different species trialed by farmers and everyone else seemed suitably excited. Vaughan Wood and Paul Star made the most of their postdoctoral appointments, and Jim McAloon kept a close eye on the economics involved in the transformation. Jim Williams ensured that we conveyed the Māori dimensions of the story. In taking a more critical and objective view of the way in which the remaking was implemented, we suspected that we would end up challenging some rather cosy foundation myths. So it proved with some grassland scientists (agrostologists) not wanting their supposedly heroic contribution criticised in any way whatsoever. Some even tried to shut down our Marsden funding. Soil scientists, ecologists, observers of water quality, and anyone interested in the longer term development of New Zealand agriculture and land use, however, responded rather more favourably to our endeavours.

Eric and I worked out our ideas over many more meetings and even shared some of our thoughts with family and friends on several tramps we made together. Two of these—near Hurunui in North Canterbury and over the Routeburn—revealed that grasses designed for stock feed had found their way into very remote places, far beyond the edges of sustainable agriculture. It soon became clear,

therefore, that the hopes raised by the success of wool, frozen meat and dairy exports were unrealistic and, sometimes, downright destructive of dreams of making a sustainable living.

Two more audits of the team took place: one overseen by the éminence grise of American environmental history, Donald Worster, and the other by Graeme Wynn. Several members of the team also made it to the European Environmental History conference in Amsterdam where the memorable rowing around the canals of Leiden by Professors Pawson, Wynn and Brooking took place (see figure in Wynn's article, in this issue). Truth to tell, Wynn and Pawson were much more competent rowers than the other fellow (me), much to the amusement of Barbara Wynn.

This time we went with an English publisher, I. B. Tauris of London. Eric and I both had meetings and fine lunches with their elegant editor David Stonestreet, who made a tidy job of editing the volume as part of that publisher's series on environmental history. The book duly appeared as *Seeds of Empire: The Environmental Transformation of New Zealand* (see Wynn's article for details) after both Christchurch earthquakes had literally torn the history of Canterbury into two distinct phases. Richard White wrote an enthusiastic endorsement and the book was well reviewed. There things might have stayed but Eric moved onto another Marsden-funded project on 'Biological Futures' with other geographers and sociologists. Eric and I also agreed that the Christchurch earthquakes were so geologically cataclysmic as well as traumatic in human terms that they literally reshaped the history of both Canterbury and New Zealand; we needed, therefore, to produce a new edition of *Environmental Histories of New Zealand*. *Making a New Land: Environmental Histories of New Zealand* appeared in 2013 and duly attempted to trace the impact of the earthquake via a new chapter from Katie Pickles. It also added some new contributors: James Beattie on gardening, with his eye for the special Chinese contribution; Michael Stevens on iwi responses; and Andreas Christensen on ways in which photographic analysis might increase our understanding of landscape change. This time we used a local publisher in the form of Otago University Press, who produced a handsome new volume under the expert guidance of Rachel Scott. The fact that Rachel, before taking up the position at Otago University Press, had earlier replaced Richard King at Canterbury University Press provided a neat continuity between the editions.

In the process of producing these three volumes, Eric and I have become good friends. Eric has also become a favourite with three generations of our family because of his penchant for telling stories with wit and wisdom. My mother-in-law relished his visits to Dunedin and hung on his every word. Trish and I wish him well for his retirement which, we suspect, will be productive in all kinds of ways that might help the nation earn its living in ways that are more in sympathy with the well-being of our environment and, at the same time, are more likely to increase our standard of living than the current obsession with simple commodity production. Thanks to his endeavours and clear thinking, environmental history in New Zealand will continue to develop as something much more interesting than 'history with nature added in'.

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