

## Globalisation and New Zealand

*Ralph Pettman (ed.), New Zealand in a Globalising World, Victoria University Press, Wellington, New Zealand, 2005*

*Reviewed by Martin Richardson*

The book is a collection of conference papers edited — and I use the term loosely: collated might be more accurate — by Ralph Pettman, a Professor of International Relations. Professor Pettman was the first person I ever heard deploy — at a conference in the late 90's — the Walt Whitman 'Song of Myself' gambit:

*Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes).*

This book plays this academic 'Get out of Jail Free' card too, but goes one better: it is *small* and it contains contradictions. Granted: different perspectives are generally to be welcomed in a conference volume. But one expects an editor to contribute an essay that highlights these differences, and maybe attempts to synthesise or reconcile them. No such luck here: the collator's sole contribution is a 2-page paean to a retiring colleague. Nor is there much evidence of actual editing. Certainly there's none in the selection of the papers. Neither is there an Index. And the proofreading apparently deemed acceptable such sentences as, 'The Australian environment minister, Senator Robert Hill, was "dead" without the US's agreement'. (p. 59)

This book has fourteen chapters of which, in my judgement, three are worthwhile. The first section on New Zealand in a Globalising World has a good paper by Robert Patman on sovereignty. (A declaration of interest: I was at the same institution as Prof. Patman for eight years, and contributed a paper to a unique volume on Globalisation and New Zealand (Patman and Rudd, 2005) he co-edited recently.) This piece is clear and sensible and the author is seeking not to uncover any global truths but to present balanced evidence on a particular hypothesis. Unfortunately, the hypothesis is pretty uncontroversial — that the impacts of globalisation on sovereignty are neither zero nor large enough to emasculate the state. Still, the chapter is reasoned and convincing.

John Henderson's excellent paper in the second section (on New Zealand's Role in the Pacific) is another highlight that provides a very clear comparison of Australia and New Zealand as Pacific actors, and provides some concrete and sensible proposals for a Pacific Island peacekeeping force. Keith Suter's chapter

in the same section also has its moments, as Rossini said of Wagner. Suter is in the 'globalisation changes everything' camp. He is totally mistaken in that regard; his understanding of economics is non-existent; he blames all of the ills of the Pacific on colonialism (as if the region would be all prosperity and light in some other counterfactual); and his conclusions — of the naïve 'why can't we all just get along?' ilk — ignore the appalling track record of international aid. But, despite disagreeing with almost all of it, I thoroughly enjoyed the chapter, as it is well-structured, provocative and interesting.

But that's it for highlights. I am broadly a fan of globalisation, believing it generally has a positive influence in the world. But it is not always and everywhere a Good Thing and, in Chapter 2 of this volume the reader feels the clammy touch of the dark side of globalisation: French deconstructionism in a book on New Zealand by an Argentinian author. This piece has the lot — verbing (as in 'to free-trade'); nouning (as in a 'global'); even the use of quotation marks as a wink to the reader to indicate his nuanced understanding of meaning. This is captured nicely in the following sentence (p. 32):

A 'global' that excludes the 'local' or any 'local' is not a real global but another 'local', it is a restricted global, a particular and regional global.

This should really be sung aloud by a light opera company to get the full effect and, indeed, the author is the very model of a postmodern social scientist (but, alas and of course, with no facts, cheerful or otherwise). There is a website at Monash University which generates postmodern essays at random — a pomobot, it might be called — and clearly the author knows the URL.

To be fair, this is the worst chapter in the book and perhaps it's churlish to pick on its obscurantism. So let's pick on another. Here's a co-defendant (p. 159):

The ontological and epistemological links between indigenous and migrant cultures and a distinctive primordial conception of legitimacy, is juxtaposed with the competing, and seemingly dominant, constructivist postcolonial antipodean nation-state derived from the enduring legacy of British colonial history.

In contrast to Chapter 2, however, that possibly has some meaning — it's just that the author has laboured hard to conceal it.

The first section of the book plunges through these fables of the deconstruction to a 'Globalisation and me' chapter by a veteran New Zealand economist. It's the sort of self-referential musing you'd expect from a grand old man of the profession but, in the author's defence, two out of three ain't bad and, at least, he's brief. No, the volume's lowlights are really concentrated in the final section, Trans-Tasman Relations. The contributions here range from the ponderous, through idle thoughts over a cup of tea, to the casual aphorism. The

infimum in this set is the contribution of — incredibly — a former New Zealand ambassador to the UN who lays out a worldview so one-eyed it astonished even this fellow Kiwi. Australia shows ‘disdain’ for multilateralism as evidenced by its attitude to the Kyoto Protocol. New Zealand ‘does not seek international prestige as Australia does’ (p. 144) New Zealand has the ‘self-belief to pursue’ the ‘goal of reconciliation’ (p. 146), unlike Australia. While Australia recognises ‘the rule of invincibility and compliance with the paramount power’ (p. 150), New Zealand espouses ‘the rule of law equitably applied by all states’ (although we’re told on the previous page that New Zealand, ‘seemingly accepted’ the Australian view that UN approval was not needed to intervene in the Solomons in 2003. *I am large, I contain multitudes.*) With a breathtaking lack of irony or self-awareness, the author also tells us that Australian attitudes toward New Zealand are ‘disparaging’ (p. 145) ‘trite and facile’ stereotypes (p. 146), while New Zealand’s foreign policy is, ‘non-threatening, with an aptitude for impartiality and problem solving’ (p. 144). I am perfectly happy for an author to present a steaming vat of polemic and opinion if he is explicit about it, but I do resent the deception when it’s served up with a garnish of academic styling to disguise it as analysis.

All up, I’d urge anyone inclined to buy this slim volume to save your money, borrow the book from a library, and photocopy the good chapters with a clear conscience — they are sufficiently few in number that you’ll not violate any *fair use* statutes in doing this. Three worthwhile chapters out of fourteen suggests that publication in the conference volume was a carrot offered to participants. That’s admirably inclusive, I suppose, but the lack of editorial discrimination actually does a disservice to the authors of the weak chapters who are falsely encouraged; to the authors of the good work here who are tainted by association; and, of course, to the reader.

There is one question a reviewer of an academic book must always ask — ‘Have I learned anything from this volume?’ — and one that must be asked of any book — ‘Is it worth buying?’ Well, yes and no. And I don’t mean that in a Whitmanesque way, either.

## Reference

Patman, R. and C. Rudd (2005), *Sovereignty under Siege? Globalization and New Zealand*, Aldershot, Ashgate, UK.

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