

**The Scots, the Irish, and a dismissal of The Ideal Society**

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A review of

**Angela McCarthy, *Scottishness and Irishness in New Zealand since 1840*,**

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Since the publication of *The Ideal Society and its Enemies* in 1989, Miles Fairburn's atomisation thesis, arguing that isolation was central to the lives of New Zealand's settlers, has been often disputed.<sup>1</sup> In this latest in the Manchester University Press 'Studies in Imperialism' series, McCarthy offers a comprehensive challenge to Fairburn's thesis, establishing such a strong case for the existence of an ethnic consciousness among New Zealand's Irish and Scots migrants as to dismiss that thesis once and for all, at least as far as these two ethnic groups are concerned. In building this thorough challenge McCarthy seems to use every source imaginable, drawing upon letters and diaries (the traditional mainstays of such studies of migrant identities), contemporary poems, official sources such as the Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives, seldom before used asylum records, and more modern cinematic representations of New Zealand's Irish and Scots. Even putting aside the challenge to Fairburn's thesis, this wide range of sources, combined with her broad historiographical introduction that sets the study within the international literature on the Scots and Irish across the British Empire and the United States, makes the volume an excellent starting point for any readers new to this area of scholarship.

McCarthy begins building her case for the importance of ethnicity among the migrants in earnest in chapter two as she outlines Scottish and Irish identity and affiliation first at national level across multiple sources before refining this analysis to regional, county, then community level, before examining the development of a distinctly New Zealand identity. Although she notes that a more broadly 'British' identity emerged among these migrants 'in relation to specific international events' like war (p. 55), she finds little in the

sources to support the argument that there was a sense of dual identity among the Scots or the Irish in New Zealand. This is in contrast to Canada, for example, where she notes that one 'feature of emigrant letters is how quickly people called themselves Canadians' (p. 56). Beyond the scope of her volume, the question remains as to whether this was distinctive to the Irish and Scots in New Zealand or if it was endemic among New Zealand's white settlers.

While her analysis of language and accent in chapter three is largely speculative, it is nevertheless a valuable contribution to this previously under-examined topic. Rather than setting out to identify the influence of language and local accents in New Zealand, McCarthy instead highlights the range of sources available to us to examine the use of and attitudes towards Irish, Scots and Gaelic language and accents in New Zealand, and makes it clear that this is a preliminary overview and that the subject is worthy of further examination. On the subjects of material tokens of ethnicity, to which she turns in chapter four, and religion, politics and history, the substance of chapter five, much less speculation is required. McCarthy's sources are rich with examples of Irishness and Scottishness with regard to music and dancing, the celebration of festivals with a distinctively Irish or Scottish flavour, the consumption of Scotch and Irish whiskey, oatmeal, oatcakes, porridge and haggis and the wearing of tartan, Tam O'Shanter Bonnets and kilts. Chapter five draws upon shipboard diaries for evidence of Irish and Scottishness with regard to religion on the voyage to New Zealand, while letters and asylum records form the bulk of evidence of religious practices post-arrival. Sources suggest that while political issues motivated many of New Zealand's Irish societies, it was culture that more often brought Scots together.

It is not only how the Scots and Irish in New Zealand saw themselves, but also how others perceived them that is of interest throughout the volume, and this is particularly the case in chapter six. Here McCarthy investigates aspects of Scottish and Irish character as they were perceived through the lens of the outsider, drawing predominantly from personal letters

and diaries. While the Scots were seen to be clannish, thrifty, cautious yet adventurous, bonny and dour, the Irish were perceived on the one hand as industrious, warm and witty, and on the other hand as boastful, superstitious, stubborn, violent, disreputable, unclean, bumbling boozers. The final section of the chapter outlines impressions of other ethnic groups in the colony, and offers examples of individuals being identified with traits usually attributed to a national stereotype other than their own. All told, the chapter leaves the reader with no doubt that both the Irish and the Scots saw themselves and were seen by others as being distinct ethnic groups in the colony.

In chapter seven the Scots and Irish become the outsiders as McCarthy examines the ways in which they interpreted their new environment and the indigenous people they encountered there. While the volume as a whole is a valuable addition, it is this section on impressions of Māori that makes the most significant contribution to the wider historiography. As McCarthy notes, there has been very little study yet of ordinary migrant's views of Māori, so although her examination of this topic should be considered preliminary it nonetheless provides useful insights.

Throughout the volume McCarthy makes it clear that she is not claiming that the Irish or Scots were exceptional among New Zealand's migrants. Nevertheless, while she has closed the door on the argument that for these two groups' bondlessness and isolation was a central factor in their lives, more comparative work, examining other migrant groups, is necessary before we can definitively say that the patterns McCarthy observes with regard to New Zealand's Irish and Scots migrants are particular to Irishness and Scottishness respectively. Given the topic of her recent co-edited collection (*Far From Home: The English in New Zealand*), this is a void in the historiography McCarthy looks set to address herself in future publications.

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<sup>1</sup> Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and Its Enemies. The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society 1850-1900*, (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989)