
4.1 Rural New Zealand

Room 104

Chair: Elizabeth Griffiths

4.1 Tom Brooking and Tom Isern – Learning from the Lindis: toward a new regional history in the New Zealand High Country

The Lindis, a region in Central Otago, is defined by a moment in pastoral history – when the ambitious Scot, Jock McLean, in 1857, stood on the heights surveyed the year previous by John Turnbull Thomson and bounded with his eye the country that would become the great sheep station of Morven Hills. The integrity of this unit defined by a savvy pastoralist poses a perfect opportunity for a regional historian concerned with the interaction of agricultural enterprise and the grassland environment. ‘Learning from the Lindis’ is a long-term exploration of regional history; more than that, it is an attempt to fashion a new sort of regional history that begins with bioregional premises such as those characterizing the best regional history in North America; recognises the venerable tradition of district histories common to the South Island; incorporates the insights of J. William Gardner, New Zealand’s foremost historian of region; and grafts onto these two additional predilections that enrich the study. The first of these is a concern with material culture, informed by experiential knowledge, that makes every structure in the landscape a potential source. The second is a preoccupation with memory and especially collective memory as attached to the structures and landscapes. The result is a place-specific treatment of the interaction of humankind with nature with broad implications for agricultural and environmental history. From the Lindis we learn to eschew both the dialectic of ecology and the ideal of wilderness, to embrace both chaos and complexity, and to enter into the ecology of narrative.

Tom Isern’s academic specialties are the history of the Great Plains of North America, his research and teaching comprising both the American plains and the Canadian prairies, and the history of agriculture and rural life. He is the author or co-author of six books, including, most recently, *Dakota Circle: Excursions on the True Plains*, published by the Institute for Regional Studies. In 1991 Isern, as a Fulbright Scholar, investigated the agricultural history of New Zealand’s tussock grasslands; in 1996 he returned for further work in New Zealand under a grant from the NZ-US Educational Foundation; and he maintains an ongoing program of research in New Zealand grassland studies, traveling yearly to Otago for archival and field research. He is the founder of the New Zealand & Australian Studies Section of the Western Social Science Association, is former coordinator of the WSSA Rural Studies Section, and has just been elected vice president of the WSSA. In 2000 Isern was named NDSU’s Fargo Chamber of Commerce Distinguished Professor. In 2007 he was named both Dale Hogoboom Presidential Professor and University Distinguished Professor, the highest academic distinction conferred by the university.

Tom Brooking MA (Massey) PhD (Otago) is Professor of History at the University of Otago. He trained as a political and agricultural historian at the Universities of Otago and Kent, England. He has published in a wide range of journals on environmental and agricultural history and produced eight books including *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* published by Oxford University press in 2002 co-edited with Eric Pawson. Another, again co-authored with Eric Pawson and entitled *Seeds of Empire: Transforming the New Zealand Environment* will be published by I. B.Tauris of London in September this year. Between 2005 and 2007 Brooking served on a Cabinet advisory panel on walking access in New Zealand and is a member of the Council of the Agricultural History Society based in the USA. Currently he is writing a biography of New Zealand’s longest serving Prime Minister Richard John Seddon and is working in a collaborative project on Scottish migration to New Zealand.

4.12 Tom Brooking and Eric Pawson – Empires of grass: how a reconsideration of the transformation of New Zealand’s grasslands aids our understanding of rural history in Britain’s farthest flung colony

Our book *Seeds of Empire* on the reconstruction of the NZ grasslands, soon to be published by I. B.Tauris in their environmental history series, has much to say about how the rural history of a far

flung colony of the British Empire might be reconsidered as well as illuminating both the agricultural and environmental history of New Zealand. It does this in three main ways:

- First, by helping to explain how, where and why New Zealanders transformed the environment and landscape they found upon arrival more rapidly and to a greater extent than in most other settler colonies. In the process this investigation has also revealed who played the leading role in bringing about that transformation.
- Second, by relating environmental and landscape change to wider global as well as imperial contexts.
- Third, by drawing attention to the significance of grass in bringing about landscape and environmental change in New Zealand and in shaping the development of world trade.

This paper will show how each of these findings has powerful implications for the social and economic history of rural New Zealand as well as for its environmental history. Converting over 20 million acres of rain forest, tussocks and swamps into English style pastures (more than in England itself) brought about significant social as well as environmental and landscape change in terms of class, gender and race relations as well ensuring the survival of an ownership pattern for three generations based around the family farm. The paper will, therefore, try to explain why this regime lasted longer in New Zealand than in most places before eroding since the dairy boom of the 1990s.

Eric Pawson, MA DPhil (Oxford) is Professor of Geography, University of Canterbury. He trained as an historical geographer in Britain and has lived in the South Island of New Zealand since 1976. He chaired the Advisory Committee of the *New Zealand Historical Atlas* from 1990 to 1997, and has been a member of the Advisory Committee for *Te Ara*, the New Zealand on-line encyclopedia, since its inception. He co-edited *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* (2002) with Tom Brooking, and has published in a wide range of journals in geography and environmental history. He received the Distinguished New Zealand Geographer Medal in 2007 and a national tertiary teaching excellence award in 2009.