This pākehā life: an unsettled memoir

Kaaren Mathias

This pākehā life: an unsettled memoir is a candid memoir by Alison Jones, who currently is a Professor in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Auckland in the school of Māori and Indigenous Education, Te Puna Wānanga. She reflects on her identity as a pākehā (she uses lower case for pākehā throughout the book), privilege, belonging and not belonging, and race relations in New Zealand.

This book opens with a description of the place of her birth, in the shadow of One Tree Hill Maungakiekie. Jones reflects on how this volcano in Auckland Tāmaki Makaurau is emblematic of two stories: one with a Māori lens, where Maungakiekie was a large and active Māori pa with strategic location and views of the isthmus which commemorates Chief Tāmaki; the another with a pākehā lens and a focus on the grave of John Logan Campbell. Perhaps every place in Aotearoa has “another name, another history, another identity.” Throughout the book, Jones invites pākehā to engage with our identity and our relationship with Māori as an ongoing journey rather than a one-off fix-it: “to engage with the inevitable pākehā state of permanent lively discomfort, eschewing a single resolution of our relationship with Māori.”

This pākehā life was shortlisted for the General Non-Fiction Award at the 2021 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards and selected by New Zealand Listener as one of the best books of 2020. The title references Michael King’s acclaimed Being Pākehā, although this book is more personal and less confident. Jones tells of her own halting professional and personal engagement with te ao Māori across decades: from taking her son to kōhanga reo, to learning te reo Māori in the 1980s, joining activist groups and working professionally as an academic at the University of Auckland in education for Māori. As well as discussing ancestral connection, Jones engages with intersectional identities, with a focus on feminism and gender relations in New Zealand. I appreciated the perspectives of Jones as an active participant in the national feminist movement while also affirming mana wāhine and leadership by Māori women.

This is an important book for readers of the New Zealand Medical Journal. It promotes critical reflection on our own intersectional identity. Noticing our own privilege and participation as white settlers can be (rightfully) uncomfortable, and this is an example of how one person has engaged with this mahi. Jones says, “it is in the space between us where everything happens,” and further:

“Relationships seemed always to be at the heart of all my engagements with Māori and Māori things, and at the heart of Māori understandings of the world. I thought about how Māori profoundly understood and understand the world as a series of never-ending, never-resolved relationships- between people, objects, time, space and on and on... The complex, fluid, shifting site occupied by the hyphen in Māori-Pākehā engagements.”
This pākehā life is also a thoughtful and well-told story of race relations in Aotearoa New Zealand that traces the author’s experiences and those of her own ancestors (nineteenth-century colonists). Many pākehā senior medical specialists, myself included, learned far too little about race relations in Aotearoa in formal education. Reading books such as this is critical to being informed and to acknowledging more of the casual and wilful racism that is part of the history and current experience for people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Jones helped me recognise that my identity as a pākehā is tightly tied up with Te Tiriti, which provides lawful authority for me to belong to this land by right. I resonated with Jones’ accounts of feelings of awkwardness and not belonging as she tried to engage with te ao Māori. She moved with more doubt than certainty while recognising the need to find her place and responsibilities among te tangata Tiriti.

White settlers will find Jones pointing to ways they can “do pākehā.” In this land where there is indisputable evidence that health services and health policy continue to be racist, perhaps junior and, even more so, senior pākehā doctors can consider how to start to decolonise our own professional practice. Jones provides some signposts on the path she has walked in her efforts to decolonise her practice as an educator: through building professional and personal relationships with Māori, inviting others to share in her privilege, learning and using te reo and advocating for equity in education for Māori through her academic writing. This pākehā life would work well as a springboard for discussion in a peer review or other professional group. Reassuringly, this book doesn’t provide definite answers but promotes the value of exploring pākehā identity as a complex, important journey: “In the end, the most important things are ineffable, unexplainable, difficult and sometimes even contradictory.”
BOOK REVIEW

COMPETING INTERESTS
Nil.

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