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Constructing New Zealand's Landscape

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Abstract

This study considers some of the ways European visitors to New Zealand, prior to 1840, constructed the New Zealand landscape through their published accounts. In examining what was written about the New Zealand landscape, a number of questions arise: How did these early writers construct the New Zealand landscape? To what extent were their prior understandings and knowledge modified or simply confirmed by their new experiences? What are the implications for interpretation, given the derived nature of the published accounts? To what extent do the accounts allow for multiple readings over time? Finally, given hindsight, is it possible to read these texts as anything other than appropriative? It attempts to deal with these large questions by focusing on four roles of the published accounts: naming and associating, resource inventorying, locating Maori within the landscape, and 'aestheticising' the landscape through the use of convention and vivid prose.

The process of 'deconstruction' yields good returns, especially in tracing ways in which European presence, activity and writing inscribed European values onto a new landscape. The study questions whether, individually and collectively, the accounts are more complex than might be suggested by a straightforward reading of them as foreshadowing colonisation. It takes the view that the landscapes, constructed by the account writers, do not fit any single construct easily. Other preoccupations and obsessions surface in the texts that, in combination, destabilise a single interpretative model. In examining what others have made of these earlier landscape constructions, the study also considers present day preoccupations. The sub-text, then, is about how these landscapes continue to be constructed for present day purposes.

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