



***The Settler's Plot* by Alex Calder, Auckland: AUP (2011). RRP NZ \$45. Pb, 312pp. ISBN: 9781869404888. Reviewed by Susan Kornfeld.**

Kudos to whoever came up with the title for Alex Calder's new book, *The Settler's Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand*. The choice

is inspired. With a matrix of meanings that suggest literary and historical twists and turns, issues of ownership and belonging, settler plans and dreams, and most of all the relationships of place and story, the title cleverly encapsulates the author's lines of inquiry.

The book's thematically grouped socio-literary essays feature generous extracts from carefully selected, highly readable classic and modern New Zealand texts. Oh the texts! Readers will want to have Calder's 1993 nonfiction anthology *The Writing of New Zealand* on hand, for in addition to fiction authors such as Sargeson and Frame, *Settler's Plot* whets the appetite for the nonfiction authors included in both books.

Earlier versions of some chapters were published as far back as 1989 as Calder has been interested in settlement issues for decades. This ongoing scholarship as well as Calder's academic tenure teaching literature at the University of Auckland contributes to an easy, confident writing style. Calder's "basic premise...that the foundational problems, injustices and consequences of European settlement of this country will not disappear..." might seem to promise a dreary post-colonial slog, but his commentary is peppered with a bracing mix of wit, optimism and scepticism. Consequently, the book should be enjoyed not just by those familiar with the literature and scholarly debates, but also to those being introduced to the texts for the first time.

The focus throughout is on "the literary concept of setting" which includes social and cultural milieu as well as historical period and location. This sometimes has an international component. He devotes a chapter to John Mulgan's *Man Alone* (1936), for example, as a case study in how and why New Zealand's frontier literature differs from the standard Western genre popular in America and Australia. Calder notes that

"the novel as a whole ... resonates powerfully with the preoccupations of the traditional Western: land, silence, gender, death," and he explores those and other genre elements with great insight. Ultimately, however, he argues that home-grown Westerns never took off because the genre is "set in a mythical past that erases [an] actual past" replete with genocide and systematic land theft, whereas in New Zealand, "intermarriage and an easy fraternisation were indeed more common." Readers may feel like springing into the argument and that is part of the joy of the book, for time and again Calder's close readings and analysis lead to surprising and thought-provoking conclusions.

One recurring theme addressed at length in the first section of the book, "Belonging," is the challenge of "Pākehā tūrangawaewae" – the place where Pākehā can stand – in a land that was Māori first. Calder discusses such works as a travel piece by colonial poet Blanche Baughan, a James K. Baxter sestina and an America's Travel Channel documentary featuring then-Prime Minister Helen Clark as host to a travel journalist. After describing the American's unease at the ritual challenge during a visit to a marae, Calder notes that New Zealanders "know how the challenge works, why it is done and what happens next." And such 'low-key' shared cultural knowledge, he says, rather than the stark, stunning, packaged-for-global-consumption, and previously-occupied New Zealand landscape, "is what I think gives Pākehā tūrangawaewae here." The book itself builds on an assumed level of such shared knowledge (although it is not necessary).

Other sections include "Landing" which uses the beach as a metaphor for the "cross cultural frontier," a contact zone, Calder claims, that sidesteps stark Māori / Pākehā oppositions and is "transactional" and "mutually transformative." "Settling" examines owning and belonging. An extended piece here on Herbert Guthrie-Smith's *Tutira* examines the opposing plots of "ruination" versus "improvement and progress." The role of suburbs and bohemia is also included in this section, the latter featuring an interesting perspective on Frank Sargeson's picaresque novel *Memoirs of a Peon*. The last section, "Looming," is perhaps the weakest thematically yet the individual chapters on Robin Hyde, John Mulgan, Allen Curnow, and Janet Frame are full of fresh insights.

At times Calder indulges in witty but occasionally jarring asides. Following an academic discussion of New Zealand collective identity (influenced

from abroad) versus personal identity (shaped by geography in childhood), he dismisses the very notion of “a ‘New Zealand identity’”: “Perhaps it is a rare and ineffable quality, drawn earthwards through the meditations of our more sensitive artists; perhaps, like the smell of himself that a pig might enjoy, it is more robust, a tang....” This may seem a bit over-colourful from an author who in the Preface hopes to offer “a new way of approaching Pakeha questions of place and identity.” He can be a bit hard on authors as well. In much of *Passport to Hell*, Calder says, author Robin Hyde “plunged into one of her treacle-pit lows.” He begins an otherwise thoughtful discussion of James Baxter by distancing himself from the poet’s “moony, new age twaddle.”

In the chapter discussing Helen Clark’s visit to the mārae, Calder advises the reader that

in this book ... the question of Pākehā tūrangawaewae should remain a dart laid on the paepae. ... there will be no once-and-for-all moment that puts the ceremony of arrival and the problems of settling behind us. We are the Pākehā: the dart of challenge is at our feet. We must pick it up and pick it up time after time.

With his editor’s eye, Calder has chosen and illuminated texts that show how New Zealand authors, whether F.E. Maning writing as a “Pākehā Māori,” Katherine Mansfield exploring suburbia, or poets such as Allen Curnow writing about Italy, have done just that.