



***New Hokkaido* by James McNaughton.** Wellington: VUP (2015). RRP: \$30. Pb, 224pp. ISBN: 9780864739766. Reviewed by Erik Kennedy.

Many fairly ordinary books have come from far-fetched premises. And few premises are more far-fetched than that of James McNaughton's

debut novel *New Hokkaido*. The night before the Pearl Harbour attack in 1941, Emperor Hirohito has a disturbing vision and recalls the battle fleet. The United States never enters the Second World War. The USSR defeats the Nazis alone. Europe is eventually liberated, but is pinned under the Soviet jackboot. The Japanese, unopposed, steam into the South Pacific. Australia is strategically bypassed, but New Zealand is invaded in 1942. Sad times.

We join the alternate-historical action in 1987. Occupation has done little to diminish the pluck of the Kiwis of Imperial New Zealand (now called New Hokkaido), though most are materially degraded, living as common labourers, discriminated against by law, forced to speak Japanese in public. To resist or not to resist – and how? – this is the question that animates all the novel's characters, and their entire society.

Our antihero, ex-rugby player, Chris Ipswitch, lives a life of uneasy compromise. As a teacher of business English to the Japanese, he has earned the trust of the government. Additionally, as his brother Patrick, the first and only white Pan-Asian sumo champion, is a celebrity. Chris is often able to drop his name to dazzling effect but he is anxious not to feel like a collaborator. This is how he finds himself involved in the underground Free New Zealand movement.

The movement sits precisely in the centre of the Venn diagram of rugby players, patriots, and psychos. Athletes, not aesthetes, are the source of action in this New Zealand. A bluff vigour is implicitly identified as the essential Kiwi virtue. The men of the resistance wear 'thick woollen bush shirts, shorts, and gumboots' as a *de facto uniform*. 'A trestle table covered with an old New Zealand flag, and bearing a pavlova, saveloys and sausage

rolls,' serves them well enough as a symbol of what they are fighting for.

Violence, or the threat of violence, is the source of virtually all of the novel's tension.

The main plot concerns Chris's attempt to solve the murders of Patrick's daughter and wife. His rugby mates hatch a scheme to hijack a ferry, with brutal precision. (This subplot, like an ambitious house extension, doesn't join cleanly with the main structure.) Various skinheads, road-raging bogans, cold-blooded apparatchiks, and back-room-dwelling scumbags populate the book. Every stranger must be assumed to be an enemy.

Love, of course, is the one thing that can redeem a man like Chris out of the bonds of barbarity. This is not a great insight, but this is not an insightful novel. It is a page-turner. Chris gives his heart to resettled criminal Hitomi Kurosawa, and their passion is by turns tender and tawdry. It is a love affair that combines the wanton disregard of stony-hearted noir protagonists and Western fantasies of Asian submissiveness. Hitomi 'fucked around and didn't respect institutions' which, in Chris's book, makes her an 'honorary Kiwi.' High praise, indeed.

Identity is the currency by which all interactions in *New Hokkaido* can be reckoned. Progress depends on occupier and occupied joining together to create a third category of New Zealand personhood. Denizen, perhaps. It will not be easy. As the novel ends, Chris and Hitomi trek to join the Māori guerrillas of Te Urewara, the only unconquered part of the country:

Now they must walk all night into the unknown and not fall into a trap, get stuck on some bluff, or blunder around in circles. The approaching dark and her hand's tender warmth shoulder him a vast responsibility.

These characters would almost certainly benefit from inhabiting a larger fictional world, viz., more books. Fortunately, enough is left unsaid about the geopolitics of this alternative civilisation (even Britain's condition is unclear) for McNaughton to have plenty of space to move his characters into.