

Book Reviews

Matters of the Heart: A History of Interracial Marriage in New Zealand

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Ever since the first European sailors stepped ashore, interracial marriage has been a constant feature of New Zealand's social landscape. Yet its meanings and practices have not been so stable. Such marriages have been considered both socially progressive and socially reprehensible, occasionally at the same time. Encouraged in the mid-nineteenth century as part of a wider programme of amalgamation, one hundred years later interracial marriage was being discouraged by a magazine agony aunt, who advised 'the racial difference would ever be a fact that time would serve to emphasise rather than diminish.' (p.156). Interracial marriages have been taken as signs of immorality and an unwelcome reminder of the old, uncivilised frontier, and as irrefutable evidence of 'modern' New Zealand's claims to the 'best race relations in the world.' Even when they haven't been accepted as proof of this, these marriages have been considered its portent: Ranginui Walker suggested some of the racial tensions that characterised the 1970s might be solved 'in the bedroom'. (p.167). In her new work, *Matters of the Heart*, New Zealand's leading historian of the subject draws together two centuries of changing attitudes to, and practices of, interracial marriage to provide a compelling and important history of this enduring social phenomenon. It expands on her earlier work on mixed-descent families in southern New Zealand. It also foregrounds her new, Royal Society-sponsored, research into marriage in New Zealand generally (for it is not simply interracial marriage that has lacked a comprehensive history.)

Organised chronologically, the book traces the changing nature and fortunes of mixed-race unions from 1769 to the 1970s. But regardless of the era, Wanhalla argues that whilst marriage can be the product of different circumstances and subject to different social attitudes, it is, at its centre, a matter of the heart. So emotion and affection are the subjects of analysis along with marriage as social practice. This reorientation is revealing. In the first chapter of the book, which focuses on marriage in precolonial New Zealand, Wanhalla is eager to correct interpretations that place too much weight on the transactional nature

of early boundary-crossing relationships. Where such work emphasises marriage's role in gaining access to land, or resources, or mana or sex, Wanhalla argues for the importance of emotional attachment, revealing long and monogamous relationships as the norm for this era. Likewise, she argues that interracial marriage did not fade away entirely as more colonists arrived. Instead, its continued presence, and the affection contained, were obscured by the greater numbers of new migrants who did not practise this form of marriage.

Of course a marriage based on interracial affection may still have had other implications. In subsequent chapters these are teased out in interesting ways, including the role interracial marriage played in contributing to Maori land alienation, as Pakeha men gained title to their wives' lands. Wanhalla also explores the state-sponsored idea of assimilation, in which marriage (at least between an upstanding Pakeha man and a Maori woman) was seen as a useful tool. Later chapters probe state anxiety over other, non-Maori/Pakeha intermarriage ('official tolerance for interracial marriage was limited to Maori-European relationships' p. xvii), and evaluate the changing views on such marriages held by twentieth-century social scientists.

Yet throughout, affective ties remain to the fore. How has Wanhalla approached the problem of uncovering these ties from an archival perspective? As historians and archivists know all too well, it is exactly these parts of our past – often the most personally meaningful – that are hardest to unearth from archival traces. For the most part, it has been achieved through exhaustive archival research. The bibliography reveals work in more than twenty different archives from smaller provincial centres like Gisborne through to larger repositories like the Turnbull. From this base, a wide range of archival materials, including probate records, personal papers, and census returns, have been put to careful and creative use. Notably, Wanhalla has used a mixture of sources to compile a database of 1100 interracial couples up to 1900 in order to interrogate effectively the nature and extent of interracial relationships.

Wanhalla has also made considerable use of photographic archives to reanimate the affective ties of interracial couples. In this respect, she follows the lead set by Chris Brickell, whose book *Mates and Lovers* made extensive use of photography to uncover the intimate relationships of New Zealand men. Much of this work relied on inference; the photographs were 'illustrative rather than indicative'.¹ Given mixed marriages were never subject to the same social sanction as homosexuality, Wanhalla's task is a little easier. Wedding portraits and family photographs need

much less deciphering to read the relationship itself. Nevertheless, as in Brickell's book, they perform a vital role in capturing something of the emotional content of a relationship, which is often missing from other records, however carefully handled. The easy intimacy of the mixed-descent Bevan family is caught as they crowd around their front door, and the tightly clasped hands of James Heberley and Mata Te Naihi signify an enduring partnership of some forty years, while the affection between a father and his mixed race son is clear in the tender portrait of Lawrence Marshall Grace with Lawrence William Te Heu Heu Grace.

These collective archival approaches work together to create a persuasive, engaging, and at times moving portrait of interracial marriage. However, like any history, Wanhalla's story has its limits. The nineteenth century receives more attention than the twentieth. In part this reflects a general emphasis in New Zealand's history on the 'colonial' period. Indeed, though other historical scholarship on cross-cultural intimacy is scarce, what little there is also focuses on this early period, and consequently this provides the parameters for much of book's focus and historiographical argument. Further, whilst the book does consider interracial relationships generally, notably in chapter 6, it is largely a study of Maori/Pakeha relationships. This is less a weakness of the book than a reflection of historical experience: certainly, restrictive immigration practices limited the potential for other forms of what Damon Salesa has termed 'racial crossings' for much of New Zealand's past. But that is not true of the later twentieth century, which, with its much more diverse demography, has great potential as a field of further study. Consequently, this history should spark a great deal of other research. Intimacy can involve all kinds of crossings – religious, ethnic, class, even age – sometimes simultaneously. These crossings can be obscured, or even subsumed, by the idea of racial difference. But, with her careful archival approach and emphasis on the importance of feelings around marriage and not simply its social significance, Wanhalla has provided a model for others interested in some of marriage's other complexities to follow.

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Endnote

1. Chris Brickell, *Mates and Lovers: A History of Gay New Zealand* (Auckland, 2008), p.9.