

Janet Davidson, *The Prehistory of New Zealand*. Auckland: Longman Paul, 1984. Pp. iv, 270, illustrations, maps, glossary, index. \$39.95.

*Reviewed by Peter Bellwood, Australian National University*

This is a well-designed and readable book that fills a rather surprising gap in Pacific archaeological literature. It is the first volume devoted entirely to an integrated account of New Zealand prehistory (excluding the Chatham Islands) written by one author and not restricted to a particular theme or region. Successive chapters deal with Maori origins in tropical Polynesia, the New Zealand environment, biological anthropology, prehistoric material culture, economy, social life and settlements, conflict and communication, and art. The conclusion focuses on the question of prehistoric culture change, and a very useful list of excavated sites is included in an appendix.

The author, Janet Davidson, has been involved in research in New Zealand prehistory for the past twenty years and has spent much of her career as an archaeologist at the Auckland Museum until moving to join her husband, Foss Leach, at the University of Otago in Dunedin. She has therefore acquired firsthand knowledge of most of the major recent developments in New Zealand prehistory and has the knowledge and maturity of style to produce what is without doubt a book of historical significance.

The contents of the book are basically descriptive and very detailed in places with respect to the archaeological record. Polemic, invective, and jargon are mercifully lacking, and the author discusses the opinions of other scholars very fairly. The basic philosophy of the book, with respect to the evolution of New Zealand Maori society over the thousand years or so of its prehistory, may best be described as “gradualist”—the author does not subscribe to the recently dominant view that the record can usefully be divided into two successive and polarized phases (here termed East Polynesian and Maori but also referred to as Archaic and Classic Maori by other authors), and she stresses cultural continuity and gradual change through time. The major dimension of cultural variation is in fact regarded as space rather than time; in 1769 the differences between the prehistoric cultures of areas as far apart as Auckland and Otago were, for environmental reasons, greater than those between either area and its regional founding ancestor. Davidson also rejects the idea that aspects of Classic Maori culture were spread by tribal migrations from a single northern region of origin, and likewise the assumption that tribal traditions can usefully be equated with aspects of the archaeological record. However, the significance of localized population expansion (and occasionally retraction) is recognized, especially with respect to the spread of ideas and techniques via the movements of high-ranking or skilled personages.

The end result is a prehistory with no assumptions about progress or directionality of culture change in the New Zealand record. This is perhaps less stirring than previous theories of *patu*—wielding, fort-building Classic Maoris thrusting down the coasts of the North Island between 1350 and 1500, but it may also be the correct interpretation for current archaeological knowledge. The author still favors a periodization of the archaeological record, but now in three rather than two periods: Settlement (to A.D. 1200), Expansion and Rapid Change (1200-1500), and Traditional (1500-1769).

In a concluding section the author stresses the need for more detailed regional studies in New Zealand prehistory, pointing to biological anthropology, art, and warfare as major aspects requiring more investigation. The highly successful archaeological project focused on Palliser Bay in the southern North Island during the 1970s must surely serve as an excellent model for future regional studies, and the influence of this project on current interpretations of New Zealand prehistory is evident at many points in the book.

Coming some thirty years after the beginning of the modern phase of New Zealand archaeology in the 1950s, Janet Davidson’s book is a welcome documentation of the breadth of the data base and demonstrates

the maturity being applied to its interpretation in the 1980s. New Zealand is a country with a brief but intriguing prehistory. Perhaps we are no longer entitled to regard this prehistory as a record of rapid evolution from hunter-gatherer bands to horticultural chiefdoms; indeed, current research appears to document almost as much devolution as evolution in certain aspects of cultural complexity. But the moas and their necklace-clad hunters are still there, as are the fortified *pa* and the *patu*—wielding warriors. Indeed, the superb illustrations in this book show how far basic factual knowledge of New Zealand prehistory has advanced in the past twenty years.

I hope this book will be read by many people (not just prehistorians) with an interest in Pacific peoples and their past. It is an account of one of the most interesting and adventurous episodes of recent, non-Western human colonization and as such is of Pan-Pacific significance.