

BOOK REVIEW

Island notes: Finding my place on Aotea Great Barrier Island

Tim Higham

The Cuba Press, Wellington, 2021. 162 pp., ISBN 978-1-98-859540-5

The cover image of this modest book is striking: a white house with a sky-blue roof nestled in a heavily bush-clad hillside. What lies within is an engaging compendium of recollections and speculations spring-boarded by the author's relationship to Aotea, New Zealand's fourth-largest island. Tim Higham has been a science writer and was living in Thailand with his family at the time the opportunity to purchase this property on Aotea arose. This book, which speaks to both personal and universal themes, finds him living there. Although family members come and go from the narrative, the author is firmly central in reflecting on finding his place on the island. There are echoes of classics such as John Mulgan's *Man Alone* or Tom Neale's *An Island to Oneself*. Along the way, the emotion associated with this quest is raw: we encounter the ambivalences of a marriage, the wistfulness of watching a parent become increasingly frail and remembrance of the death of a brother.

The off-the-grid house that is central to this beautifully crafted volume is at once a portal to island experience as well as a ball-and-chain to which the owner is tied. The dwelling is in one sense the 'my place' of the book's title but, as geographers well know, there is more to place than somewhere to be housed; 'our place' is also about identity and deeper questions of being-in-the-world. Attuned to this nuance, the author moves between engaging autobiographical and philosophical reflections, yet always returns to Aotea, the island that he has increasingly called home. While academics have invoked both social theory and continental philosophers to anchor their concepts of place, home and being-in-the-world, Higham simply writes—and writes beautifully. Authors are name-dropped along the way, but more as companions on the journey than foundations to his thinking. Hence, writers as diverse as Annie Dillard, Thomas Merton, Robert Macfarlane and Bill McKibben are mentioned as something of a secular communion of saints supporting the author develop his sense of place.

The prose is sparkling. Rarely have I re-read a book in its entirety so soon after completion. Higham's observations are deeply philosophical. Take his reflection on fishing: 'having a line in the water permits the atoms of the body to organise themselves with just enough purpose – expectancy, poise – to hang' (p. 122). When has the act of slowing down, rod in hand, been so eloquently described? Time and again, the author's keen eye for detail leads to observations in the landscape that serve to trigger wider reflections. Vulnerability and raw honesty are pervasive. Early on he notes that 'owning a property has been a drawn-out lesson in entropy and a testing of the bounds of marriage' (p. 16). Here, I am reminded of James K. Baxter, another New Zealander who crafted richly evocative accounts of relationship with place, who wrote of being stuck in 'the ditch of ownership'. Indeed, *Island Notes* is loosely reminiscent of Baxter's *Jerusalem Daybook* for its anecdotal style, spiritual undercurrent and deep appreciation of place.

Mid-way through, one of the book's most potent questions is posed: 'what are you doing with all that running around in the world?'. Two years into a global pandemic with the climate crisis nipping at humanity's heels, that question is significant. Exhortations to limit flying and re-appreciate the local are unlikely in themselves to gain traction. But impassioned accounts of singular commitment to places such as that offered by this modest book may well offer inspiration.

I read (and re-read) this book for the pure pleasure of its writing, for its resonance with my own visits to Aotea, and for its advocacy of simpler living with a contemplative disposition. It could also, however, find its place on the reading list of a course concerned with place or landscape in the spirit of the emergent field of geohumanities. But to search for instrumental purposes for a book like this, just because we are professional geographers, would be unfortunate. This book deserves to be savoured for what it is: an account of one man's deepening connection

to place and place-in-the-world—on Aotea and in contemporary Aotearoa.

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