

Jared Davidson, *Blood and Dirt: Prison Labour and the Making of New Zealand* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2023), 304pp. Hardback. NZ\$49.99. ISBN: 978-1-9910-3340-6.

Blood and Dirt, as Jared Davidson explains in the introduction to his excellent book, 'is a story of the making of Aotearoa New Zealand and its Pacific empire told through the prism of prison labour', but a story 'largely unknown, a history hidden in plain sight' (p. 13). Across seven chapters Davidson skilfully leads the reader through an exploration of how capital deployed prison labour in Aotearoa New Zealand in a multiplicity of settings and for a multiplicity of purposes: for agricultural improvement of so-called 'waste land', for building and maintaining roads, to support industry during peace and wartime, and on extensive forestry and agricultural plantations. In other words, Davidson ably demonstrates that convict labour was integral to the colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand and its Pacific empire.

Blood and Dirt opens with an account of the death of Harry Brown, a fifty-one year-old prison labourer, killed on 3 February 1925 by a dislodged lump of clay while he was working on the demolition of Wellington's Terrace Gaol. Davidson's account of Brown's death is an encapsulation of what follows thereafter, as *Blood and Dirt* examines the violence of unfree labour and all that entails: forced work and the enforcement of penal discipline, resistance to that discipline, and the dispossession necessary to acquire land to 'improve'.

A particular strength of the book is the foregrounding of the environment, as the landscape is taken, blasted, planted, replanted, and shaped by the sinews of convict labourers, all in the search of profit. The partial razing, over a period of eighteen years of the enormous Bell Hill at Dunedin which allowed the reclamation of the shoreline, is a story in point, its removal a remarkable inverse monument to the impact of prison labour, emblematic of the hidden story Davidson writes of in the introduction.

To complement the argument, *Blood and Dirt* features a wealth of carefully selected images, particularly in demonstrating how the landscape was bent to capital's will by unfree labour, whether that was by the construction of harbours and breakwaters to facilitate shipping and trade, or twentieth-century forestry and agricultural plantations. A couple of particularly striking examples are the view of the monumental Aramoana breakwater (p. 94), more than a kilometre long, and the before and after views of the now Hanmer Forest (pp. 146–7). As befits a history from below, *Blood and Dirt* does not forget the human face of the story: convict labourers picking away at these landscapes, Māori prisoners-of-war under guard aboard a hulk, and uniformed prisoners staring back in mugshots. Meanwhile, an example of how the bending of the wills of unfree labourers is in the reproduction of the tally of marks earned for good behaviour during 1877 by the embezzler Edwin Wadman—which also serves as a reminder of the transfer of ideas, with the 'mark system' having been pioneered by Alexander Maconochie at Norfolk Island from 1840 to 1844, and later at Birmingham Prison.

Blood and Dirt is a wonderfully written and beautifully presented book. It is lavishly illustrated throughout on high quality paper, has an extensive bibliography, is excellently referenced, and it is always pleasing to see such a thorough and useful index. Bridget Williams Books should be commended for its high production values, particularly when the book retails at a relatively inexpensive price point.

Jared Davidson's *Blood and Dirt* is another (broad arrow-marked) brick in the wall of scholarship that further challenges the 'Great Confinement Thesis', the view

that from the 1770s onwards criminal punishment was supposedly dominated by imprisonment in highly regulated prisons and penitentiaries. Rather, as Clare Anderson has suggested, the history of punishment is instead characterised by the 'ongoing geographical mobilization' of prisoners 'as forced labour, on a global scale'. Jared Davidson's *Blood and Dirt*, and its exploration of how prisoners were put to work across a colony, a nation, and a Pacific empire, is a major contribution, not only to the history of Aotearoa New Zealand, but to the global history of unfree labour.

Tim Causer, University College London