

Broadening Horizons: Wynn in and about the Antipodes¹

Andrea Gaynor

Department of History

The University of Western Australia

The early 1970s were an exciting time to be a historical geographer. The world was grappling with the consequences of ongoing decolonization; immigration policies had been, or were being, transformed in several nations; new social movements were changing political and intellectual landscapes; and environmental issues were taking on a new, critical urgency. Historians and geographers working in this context were seeking and finding new problems, questions, sources, and approaches. In North American universities, environmental history began to emerge as a field of inquiry and historical geographers were establishing their own journal and regional conferences. Meanwhile, down under, a range of scholars—Les Heathcote, Joe Powell, Jim Cameron, and George Seddon among them—were producing rich studies of historical relationships between people and antipodean environments.

It was in this context, in 1974, that Graeme Wynn completed his PhD at the University of Toronto and moved to New Zealand, where he spent two years as a lecturer at the University of Canterbury. During this relatively short stay Wynn met his wife-to-be Barbara, who would in subsequent years support his academic career; together they would raise two children. The visit also sparked an interest in the historical geography of New Zealand, and to a lesser extent Australia, that has spanned the entirety of Wynn's academic career.

On arriving in Christchurch, one of Wynn's first tasks was to review the local historical geography scene, an exercise that resulted in an article published in the *Journal of Historical Geography* in 1977. Though there had been some uncertainty over the future of historical geography in Australia and New Zealand in the 1960s, Wynn found that much had been accomplished. He also, however, identified "immense possibilities for further work."² There had been much discussion about the need for geographers to adopt more quantitative approaches and produce more theoretically informed studies. The work undertaken in this vein did not impress Wynn, who with the bold vigor of all good early career scholars deemed "the best of it . . . no more than a preliminary to further research" and "the worst of it . . . both precious and pretentious."³ Characteristic of Wynn's scholarship, however, this critique was not mean-spirited, but a steppingstone to broader questions. In this case, the questions were about the purpose of geographical research: "Is it to develop theory . . . or is it to understand particular parts of the earth's surface?" Should geographers prioritize "abstract universals" over the "rich complexity of the local scene"?⁴ He found in favor of the latter. More specifically, Wynn astutely identified the need for more research on Māori and Aboriginal geographies, as well as micro-scale studies of particular areas and examination of the ecological implications of rapid urban growth in the antipodes. He urged geographers to undertake studies of geographic and social mobility, of attitudes to land as reflective of the ethos of Australian and New Zealand societies, and more.

While completing this timely review, Wynn also undertook significant original research, publishing in 1977 an important paper on "Conservation and Society in Late Nineteenth-Century New Zealand" in the *New Zealand Journal of History*.⁵ Here, he used debate around the New Zealand Forests Act of 1874 to explore settler attitudes toward conservation. The paper

exemplifies Wynn's expressed aim of understanding the past by getting under its skin through his sympathetic insight into the settler mindset. In both this and a later piece also looking at the 1874 Act, true to his belief that researchers should always keep the "big picture" in view, Wynn placed these local developments in their broader global context.⁶ He traced the flows of ideas and people within and beyond the British Empire, and how they came together in a particular historical moment to produce "one of the earliest state conservation measures in the British Empire."⁷ These works were groundbreaking at the time, and continue to generate discussion and debate in forest history, historical geography, and environmental history.⁸

In the early 1980s, Wynn again visited Canterbury – this time for five months – and found his intellectual friends living there facing "challenging times."⁹ In response, he published a spirited defense of geography in an anti-intellectual era, emphasizing the continuing significance of the discipline, and the liberal arts more generally, for understanding the contemporary world. He exhorted geographers in particular not to restrict their focus to time and space while sidelining the human element: Wynn encouraged them to "reach unashamedly into the core of human experience to help people understand themselves."¹⁰ This understanding of the essential purpose of geography, one it shares with history, perhaps explains in part why it is that Wynn has so readily straddled the boundaries, such as they are, between the two disciplines.

This visit to Canterbury also gave rise to a wide-ranging essay on "Settler Societies in Geographical Focus," published in Australia's leading historical journal.¹¹ Reviewing recent historical-geographical research, Wynn synthesized a range of studies to produce some general conclusions about settler societies. In particular, he emphasized the significance of local structural factors over imported ethnic traditions, as well as the terms under which land was accessed, and the structure of local labor markets. It is a work that continues to be cited, most recently in 2015.¹²

Narrowing the focus just a little, Wynn also at this time produced some reflections on the writing of New Zealand history in response to the recent publication of the *Oxford History of New Zealand* (1981). Here he addressed the relationship between historians and the public, and once again asserted the necessity for historians and historical geographers undertaking studies of New Zealand to "consider their subjects in the wider context of European settlement overseas."¹³ Wynn also discussed how experiences in other settler societies might provide useful starting points from which to examine problems in New Zealand history. This was followed by a deft sketch of some of the key historical features of New Zealand society in which Wynn connected political philosophy, *mentalité*, and relationship to the environment within a comparative framework. He concluded that:

In the most general terms, it would seem that the opportunity of New Zealand has reinforced a basic faith in the small man, a belief in the competence of the individual, and a sense of the importance of private property among most of its people, for whom home, family, independence, prosperity – the leitmotifs of middle class life – are pervasive values.¹⁴

Even thirty-odd years later, this remains a sharp perspective, at least for Pākehā society.

In this essay, Wynn also advocated an approach to research and writing involving zooming in and out, between rich detail and broad analytical synthesis. He himself deployed this strategy to good effect, for example in a plate produced for *The New Zealand Historical Atlas* on faunal and floral colonization, and an article arising out of that project, "Remapping Tutira."¹⁵ Published in the *Journal of Historical Geography* in 1997, this paper examines the bio-geographical transformation of New Zealand, with specific reference to Herbert Guthrie-Smith's classic work of New Zealand natural history.¹⁶ Wynn uses Guthrie-Smith's book empirically, to identify patterns

in the arrival of new species into New Zealand. However, as he puts it, *Tutira* is more than an environmental impact statement; it is a work that “demands engagement with questions of how humans have used, and interpreted their interactions with, nature.”¹⁷ As well as enabling detailed analysis of when and how various unintended introductions transformed the New Zealand landscape, Guthrie-Smith’s book provides further evidence supporting Wynn’s earlier sketch of New Zealand society, in particular the preeminent “drive for profit, progress, and material improvement.”¹⁸ Ultimately, for Wynn, *Tutira* is an environmental history with “lasting relevance to understanding the choices that face humankind and the world they inhabit.”¹⁹

Wynn’s continuing engagement and fascination with the historical geography of New Zealand is reflected in his contribution of a chapter on forests to *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* (2002), revised for the new edition *Making a New Land* (2013).²⁰ Drawing on recent research as well as his earlier work, Wynn provides abundant and well-marshalled local detail while still maintaining an international outlook. Here New Zealand is insular but not isolated; rather it exemplifies the processes that shaped the modern world, including “exploration, encounter, exploitation, adaptation and transformation” as well as disquiet and reflection.²¹

Reviewing Wynn’s scholarship on the antipodes, one is struck first and foremost by his commitment to encouraging scholars in the region to undertake comparative studies, or at least situate their work in a broader context. The early 1970s were a time of heightened national reflection in Australia and New Zealand: as Britain turned to the EEC and withdrew troops from “east of Suez,” and long-standing immigration policies were overhauled, antipodean Labour governments fostered a new nationalism that prioritized national and local identities over an older pan-British one.²² In this context, much antipodean scholarly research and writing focused on national or regional distinctiveness rather than connection and similarity, which was perhaps too readily associated with the old imperial regime. In doing so, however, they lost sight of the bigger picture. In 1984, Wynn complained, quite fairly, that “a good deal of recent writing about New Zealand [and he might have added Australia] ignores the wider horizon . . . the consequence is work that is often rich in contextual detail but which lacks the analytical bite to render its findings of compelling significance to those interested in societies beyond those islands.”²³ Now, a few decades later, the political and social context in both nations has changed. Against populist and conservative governments many academics have eschewed the national in favor of analyses connecting local events and places with global networks and contexts. While some antipodean studies remain essentially parochial, it is now common for historians and geographers, working for example within the frameworks of transnational history or settler colonialism, to explicitly draw connections between their histories and the bigger picture. In this context Wynn’s antipodean explorations have stood well the test of time.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank James Beattie and Graeme Wynn for feedback on earlier drafts of this essay.
- 2 Graeme Wynn, “Discovering the Antipodes: A Review of Historical Geography in Australia and New Zealand 1969-1975, With a Bibliography,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 3 (1977): 251.
- 3 Wynn, “Discovering the Antipodes,” 252.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Graeme Wynn, “Conservation and Society in Late Nineteenth Century New Zealand,” *New Zealand Journal of History*, 11 (1977): 124-36.
- 6 Graeme Wynn, “Pioneers, politicians and the conservation of forests in early New Zealand,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 5, no. 2 (1979): 171-88.

- 7 Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking, "Introduction," in *Making a New Land: Environmental Histories of New Zealand*, eds. Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2013), 26
- 8 See Paul Star, "Thomas Potts and the Forest Question: Conservation and Development in New Zealand in the 1860s," *International Review of Environmental History* 1 (2015): 338-405; and Michael Roche, "(Re)interpreting Exotic Plantation Forestry in 1920s New Zealand," *International Review of Environmental History* 1 (2015): 286-337.
- 9 Graeme Wynn, "Human Geography in a Changing World," *New Zealand Geographer* 39 (1983): 64.
- 10 Wynn, "Human Geography in a Changing World," 68.
- 11 Graeme Wynn, "Settler Societies in Geographical Focus," *Historical Studies* 20 (1983): 353-366.
- 12 C.S. Monaco, "Red Devil or Tragic Hero?: Osceola as Settler-Colonial Icon," *The American Indian Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2015): 180-212.
- 13 Graeme Wynn, "Reflections on the Writing of New Zealand History," *New Zealand Journal of History* 18 (1984): 109.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 15 Graeme Wynn, "The Introduction of Species: Faunal and Floral Colonisation," in *The New Zealand Historical Atlas*, ed. M. McKinnon (Auckland: Bateman, 1997), Plate 42. This was one of two plates that Wynn contributed to the Atlas; the other ("The Wheat Boom: Grain on the Canterbury Plains, 1860s to 1910s", Plate 46) led to his involvement in another project and a subsequent essay "The Bonanza Wheat Boom," (with G. Cant), in *Rural Canterbury*, eds. G. Cant and R. Kirkpatrick (Wellington and Christchurch: Daphne Brasell Associates and Lincoln University Press, 2001), 61-79.
- 16 W.H. Guthrie-Smith, *Tutira: The Story of a New Zealand Sheep Station* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1921).
- 17 Graeme Wynn, "Remapping Tutira: Contours in the Environmental History of New Zealand," *Journal of Historical Geography* 23, no. 4 (1997): 438.
- 18 Wynn, "Remapping Tutira," 440.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 438.
- 20 Graeme Wynn, "Destruction Under the Guise of Improvement? The Forest, 1840-1920," in *Making a New Land: Environmental Histories of New Zealand*, eds. Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2013): 122-138.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 123.
- 22 Jack Doig, "New Nationalism in Australia and New Zealand: The Construction of National Identities by Two Labo(u)r Governments in the Early 1970s," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 59, no. 4 (2013): 559-575.
- 23 Wynn, "Reflections on the Writing of New Zealand History," 108.