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Imagining Decolonisation, Bianca Elkington, Moana Jackson, Rebecca Kiddle, Ocean Ripeka Mercier, Mike Ross, Jennie Smeaton and Amanda Thomas (2020)
Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 184 pp.,
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Decoloniality is an important issue in academic and theoretical terms. Long traditions of postcolonial scholarship have provided viewpoints to possibilities for dismantling colonial structures. Yet, colonial structures are widespread. They reach even fundamental structures such as knowledge, as recent 21st-century scholarly perspectives to knowing have pointed out. *Decolonial* perspectives are required for rectifying the effects of and avoiding further such colonial legacies (see e.g. Santos 2007; Santos 2018). Therefore, decoloniality is much more than an academic matter, it is also related to important questions of ethics and morality. Yet, discussions of decoloniality in various fields of research can also appear somewhat lacking in concreteness and thus difficult to grasp.

Considering the significance of decoloniality to numerous societies at large, one of the contributors of *Imagining Decolonisation* – Ocean Ripeka Mercier – hits the nail on the head with one crucial problem: ‘[A] reader of decolonisation literature is generally assumed to know what is meant by “decolonisation”.’ (p. 46) In all the past theorising of the concept, it can be difficult for a reader not deeply-versed in colonial theory to understand what decolonisation signifies in reality. To such a reader to whom this weighty theoretical background is not clear, all the theorising of the concept might be dismissed out of hand as something not understood or something strange that requires pushback simply due to its apparent unfamiliarity.

To counter this, the contributors’ intention with *Imagining Decolonisation* is to ‘demystify’ decolonisation and show it as something ‘every New Zealander can get on board with and benefit from’ (p. 16–17). Thus, the book approaches the concept of decolonisation from a practical perspective rather than as a concept to be deeply theorised here. In doing so, it also makes this important concept more approachable to wider audiences.

The book sets off with Bianca Elkington and Jennie Smeaton’s introduction. They set forth two very practical, personal examples of how New Zealand’s colonial legacies can have an impact on the everyday life of individuals of Māori heritage. From there, the book carries on coherently from a look into what is meant by decolonisation, to why colonial legacies have been harmful to almost everyone and not only even if disproportionately to Indigenous peoples, what Pākehā (people

primarily of European descent) can do to help in decolonial processes and finally ending by painting a picture of what colonisation took from Māori and what could help restore a fairer society.

The personal approach continues from the introduction throughout the book. Alongside some slightly more theoretical and historical looks into colonisation and decolonisation, the heartfelt personal narratives by the contributors give the book an air of approachability. This benefits the general tenor and objective of the book. This is, however, not to say that *Imagining Decolonisation* were only based on personal experiences and not on the long traditions of postcolonial scholarship. Yet, being a historian of European colonialism, as a reader I look for how the past historical processes are presented as a backdrop to later history and the current world. Although not lacking in historical references, the complexities inherent in all history are generally presented briefly through overarching descriptions or references to individual historical events. This is understandable considering the intended brevity of the book and the significance of the book in looking forward towards decolonisation. For the sake of comprehensiveness, I – specifically as a historian – would have appreciated some more references in the notes to excellent historical research undertaken on New Zealand’s colonial past from the likes of Tony Ballantyne and Zoë Laidlaw.

The chapters do, however, provide comprehensive and well-reasoned arguments for the necessity and practical actionability of decolonisation. *Imagining Decolonisation* has been clearly directed at audiences in New Zealand, along with its deliberate – and well-justified – choice of not translating te reo phrases and words into English. As such, it has its place in working to inform general audiences in New Zealand of the very practical and lingering effects of the nation’s colonial history as well as giving necessary concrete pointers on a road towards decolonisation. However, as a clearly written and easily approachable work, it is also a worthwhile read even outside New Zealand. Through the voices of the six Māori contributors (and one Pākehā) it brings forth valuable perspectives to non-New Zealander readers as well.

The concreteness of how decolonisation is discussed by the contributors is exemplified by occasional practical metaphors and tangible examples that the contributors employ to make the very abstract matter of decolonisation easier to grasp. Mike Ross’s metaphor of a society as a house with foundations, adornments and structures – and European missionaries and settlers having brought their own houses and ‘changed the neighbourhood’ (p. 25), which in turn makes renovation (i.e. decolonisation) necessary – is an example of the demystifying the concept of decolonisation. This practical approach is rounded up by discussions in the later chapters of practical acts that can be undertaken by everyone in order to enact decolonisation which after all ‘is underpinned by a commitment to making cohabitation work’ (p. 41). In the simplest forms, the actions towards

decolonisation include proper pronunciation of te reo and 'everyday signs [being] bilingual or in some way [referencing] Māoriness – thus making Māoriness māori, or normal' (p. 66). In this kind of simplicity, there is very little excuse for individuals not to commit to such acts.

All the while, the contributors do not paint too rosy a picture of how simple decolonisation might be. The practical difficulties and slow pace in effecting large-scale societal change in New Zealand's judicial system, for example, are not discussed in length. However, the complexity of decolonisation is pointed out in how small acts of decolonisation can also run the risk of 'decolonising discourse being appropriated' (p. 52). This entails small acts of decolonisation – while necessary – becoming bumper sticker-ish tokenism, which ends there without further drive for change.

The complexity that is evident here leads to the unfortunate reality that there can be no easy panaceas or all-encompassing answers when it comes to complicated and nuanced matters like decolonisation. A Western, Europe-based reader like myself can come to wonder what is best to do if '[t]he colonial project is so pervasive and subtle that it can sometimes co-opt our decolonisation without our realising it' (p. 43), as Mercier puts it. Amanda Thomas's chapter gives some practical directions for this question such as the practical acts mentioned above, and she also notes that Pākehā should 'take our cue from Māori in the work of decolonisation – that means Māori set the agenda and are leaders in discussions about decolonisation' (p. 108). Mercier further points out that 'reMāorification' is 'something that can best be achieved through Kaupapa Māori or iwi- or hapū-centric approaches' (p. 74).

One central message that can then be gleaned from this book is that while decolonisation is necessary and everyone should take part in it, there can be no clear cut rules to questions such as what action is 'enough' and what is not in specific cases. The contributors, nevertheless, nudge the reader towards such answers. *Imagining Decolonisation* encourages the reader to consider and seek to further educate oneself on colonial legacies, since '[t]here is much to do, but when we *know* more we *do* more. That *knowing* to me is an act of decolonisation' (p. 12), as described by Elkington. In this way, the book provides a view that being mindful, respectful and humble towards those who have suffered from colonial legacies can push decoloniality forward.

With its practical focus, this book might not greatly drive forward theoretical discussions of decoloniality – and this is not its intention either. Instead, it has its role in informing readers of varied experiences of colonial legacies with a low barrier to entry. This makes it a valuable contribution to more widespread understanding of and a push for decolonisation.

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Mikko Myllyntausta received his PhD degree from the University of Turku, where he is affiliated for his postdoctoral work with research interests in the fields of the history of knowledge and global processes of colonialism. His dissertation was published by the University of Turku in the autumn 2022 and he is an editor and contributor in an upcoming work on the history of knowledge.