

Meihana, P. (2023). *Privilege in Perpetuity: Exploding a Pākehā Myth*. Bridget Williams Books, 145 pages, ISBN 9781990046346

Reviewed by Matthew Wynyard*

It is perhaps not often that an historical work can be considered a timely intervention into contemporary debate, but this is very much the case with Peter Meihana's elegant new book *Privilege in perpetuity: Exploding a Pākehā myth*. Meihana seeks to offer a sustained analysis of what he calls "Māori privilege discourse" and in so doing gives the reader a comprehensive history of the myth of Māori privilege that will be of interest not only to students of history but also to anyone wanting to make sense of the current versions of this myth, including the so-called anti co-governance roadshow led by evangelical Christian preacher and former real estate agent Julian Batchelor (see Quill, 2023). Co-governance is likely to be a central issue in this year's election and Meihana's book is a crucial resource for anyone wanting to make sense of the latest iteration of this weirdly persistent myth.

Meihana starts with the publication of Stuart C. Scott's anti-Treaty diatribe *The travesty of Waitangi: Towards anarchy* in 1995. Scott's book was just one among a number of similar works that began to emerge in the mid-1990s as the Treaty settlement process began to take meaningful shape and the then National Government sought to circumscribe redress for historical Crown breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi through the so-called Fiscal Envelope. National's fiscal cap of \$1 billion for all settlements was met with widespread protest by Māori, who had waited 150 years for justice only to be told that there was a very strict limit on the Crown's supposed magnanimity. Scott's book, and several others like it, emerged in this context and all rehearsed some version of what we might today call colourblind racism, that is, the political act of dismissing or downplaying race and ethnicity as categories of inequality (see Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Burke, 2018). It is worth noting at this point that the Fiscal Envelope was later scrapped and between 1993 and 2018 the Crown paid out some \$2.2 billion in settlement redress, which might seem a lot, but represents just a tiny fraction of both the value of lands and taonga lost to Māori and of total Crown spending, estimated at \$1322 billion over the same period (Fyers, 2018; Wynyard, 2019, p. 9).

Other similar books soon followed, including Scott's 1996 follow-up *Travesty after travesty*, as well as *Treaty issues* by Walter Christie in 1997 and *Truth or Treaty: Commonsense questions about the Treaty of Waitangi* by David Round in 1998. That particular round of anti-Māori and anti-Te Tiriti rhetoric probably reached its crescendo in 2004 with then-leader of the National Party, Don Brash's infamous 'Nationhood' speech delivered at the Orewa Rotary Club on 27 January, 2004. Brash's speech, like Scott's book before it, took aim at some sort of imagined Māori privilege and claimed that Māori had, by birth, been given 'the upper hand' (Brash, 2004). For Brash, Scott, Christie and Round, the Treaty Settlement process was setting Aotearoa New Zealand on a dangerous path toward separatism, or, in the characteristically hyperbolic

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words of David Round: “it encourages divisiveness, bitterness and hatred” and the Treaty of Waitangi is “if we are not careful, a recipe for anarchy and civil war” (Round, 1998, p. 25).

Sustaining the myth of Māori privilege is, of course, incredibly difficult if not impossible for anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Aotearoa’s grubby colonial past or any understanding of the perilous position too many Māori continue to occupy in contemporary Aotearoa. Yet, Meihana demonstrates with patience and clarity just how persistent this myth has become. For Meihana, the anti-Tiriti and anti-Māori rhetoric of the 1990s and early 2000s was nothing new but merely the latest manifestation of a long tradition of “stubbornly persistent prejudice” that surfaces with alarming regularity and has done since the eighteenth century. Meihana notes that Māori were supposedly privileged to “make the acquaintance of the British Empire in the person of Captain James Cook” (p. 34) and were later privileged to be comparatively well regarded in racial (and racist) typologies that were being developed by European scientists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (pp. 35–36). Māori were privileged with the status of ‘superior savages’ in the minds of key figures in the Scottish Enlightenment who pointed to their comparative intelligence and acumen for commerce as evidence of their “potential for progress” (p. 38). As such, Meihana argues, Māori would, in time, “be privileged with a Treaty”, with “royal protection” and with all the “rights and privileges of British Subjects” (p. 38).

Meihana goes on to argue that, at the heart of the myth of Māori privilege, lies the erroneous idea that the colonisation of Aotearoa was somehow ‘fair and just’, or, at least, comparatively benign when considered against, say, the experience of settler colonialism in Australia or North America. The presence of a Treaty is often touted as an advantage that Māori enjoy over Indigenous peoples elsewhere yet Meihana notes an important paradox of Māori privilege—that is, the royal protection and rights and privileges extended to Māori through the Treaty of Waitangi would soon become “the most effective means of separating them from their lands and resources” (p.38). Meihana goes on to note, for example, that the promise of royal protection in article 3 of Te Tiriti, often held up as one of the main privileges extended to Māori, was, in fact, interpreted in a paternalistic way that only served to undermine existing leadership structures and “rangatira decision-making” (p. 57).

Crucially, Meihana demonstrates how Māori were apparently privileged by being accorded individualised private property rights to erstwhile communally held lands. Private property was touted by many Pākehā politicians as the basis of European civilisation and any attempt to spread that venerable institution to Māori could only be seen as “a liberal and generous policy” (Williams, as cited in Meihana, p. 78). However, much has since been written about the actions of New Zealand’s Native Land Court and the forced individualisation of title to Māori land, which led to the dispossession of millions of acres of Māori land in the latter half of the nineteenth century. For Hugh Kawharu, the Court was “a veritable engine of destruction” (as cited in Meihana, p.78), for Judith Binney it was an “act of war” (as cited in Meihana, p.78). Tony Simpson (1986, p. 168) refers to the Native Land Court as “one of the most pernicious measures ever enacted by a settler community to get its hands on the estate of the native inhabitants” and Alan Ward (1974, p. 267) notes that it was “the sordid and demoralising system of land purchasing, not war and confiscation, that really brought the Māori people low”.

The final substantive chapter in Meihana’s book deals with the supposed citizenship privileges accorded to Māori through enfranchisement, through representation via Māori electorates, through the right to petition, through the appointment of commissions of inquiry into Māori affairs and so on. Here too, Meihana offers a critical lens with which to view these apparent privileges, arguing that these citizenship privileges did little, if anything, to prevent the “continued dispossession and marginalisation of Māori” (p. 103). If the privilege of private property was weaponised against Māori and contributed to the systematic dispossession of their lands, then the privilege of citizenship was only ever illusory (p. 114) and offered a veneer of benevolence that served as a useful distraction to the ongoing injustices of settler colonisation.

In summary, Meihana delivers a sustained critical engagement with the oddly enduring myth of Māori privilege. His elegant, succinct book traces the myth from its inception in the eighteenth century through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but very much speaks to our present where this myth stubbornly continues to hold some sway, particularly among those on the political right. That today, some continue to rehearse the myth of Māori privilege in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary requires almost heroic ignorance and Meihana presents a compelling, sustained argument against the idea that Māori have somehow been advantaged by the processes of settler colonisation. It is, depressingly, a very timely read.

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