

Becoming Pākehā

John Bluck

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To be Pākehā is to tick a box on the national census. To become Pākehā is a journey. In this memoir commentary, John Bluck confronts the complexity of the bicultural debate within Aotearoa, raising confronting questions for any reader who identifies as Pākehā. The essence of Bluck's position is found on p. 127 where he states simply, "I am a Pākehā because I live in a Māori country." Throughout the pages, Bluck revolves around this central idea: that the essence of Pākehā is, first and foremost, in relation to Māori. As a result, his commentary intertwines the difficulty of understanding what it means to be Pākehā and the history of colonialism perpetuated against Māori.

Bluck, the 14th Anglican Bishop of Waiapu from 2002 to 2008, speaks predominantly from his own experiences of growing up in a Māori village as a Pākehā and his experience as a clergyman. As a result, Bluck speaks from his own religious perspective and the loss of a cultural spirituality within Pākehā identity. Bluck makes time to speak largely on the role of the Anglican Church within Aotearoa and, historically, the mana of Māori within Anglican circles, juxtaposed against the short-sighted failings of Pākehā church leaders in seeking ecumenical unity. Though this rhetoric may not naturally appeal to all audiences, Bluck goes to lengths to link this loss of spirituality with a loss of identity and knowing oneself, ultimately suggesting Pākehā, in general, do not know themselves as well as they think they do. Despite these bold claims, Bluck recognises the limited anecdotal nature of his prose, suggesting it

will become outdated in due course as the bi-cultural conversation evolves.

In the early chapters the book concerns itself with the issues of cultural identity and self-identification. Once Bluck acknowledges that ethnicity is often regionally bound (p. 71) and that ethno-nationalism, the idea that oneself is defined ultimately by race (p. 93), are two key tenets of the bicultural debate, Bluck spends the remainder of the book suggesting, time and again, that Pākehā identity is essentially lost. Bluck posits that what it means to be Pākehā is no longer as easily articulated as it once might have been. This notion threads through many of the ideas connected in the book, drawing on voices, such as the late Archdeacon Hone Kaa, who stated at Waitangi in 2006, "It's good that you Pākehā are who you are, and it's important that you know who you are. But you need to understand how you are and who you are—and how powerfully you are who you are" (p. 125).

Throughout the book, Bluck identifies existing misconceptions in the bicultural environment and turns them on their head. Confronting the excuse that racism did not happen because it was not intended, he writes wittingly, "for Pākehā to argue they didn't mean what they said to be racist is about as helpful as telling the driver of the car you've crashed into that you weren't looking" (p. 126). In other areas, Bluck's reflections challenge deeper fears behind racist rhetoric,

For a culture that has enjoyed privilege and priority, dominated language and cultural

choices for so long, all these fears speak more about projection than real threat. The deepest fear might be that Māori might not be as good to Pākehā as Pākehā think they've been to Māori. (p. 136)

As someone who is (or perhaps, is becoming) Pākehā, I found this book challenging, controversial, and inspiring in equal measures. Challenging for highlighting parts of Aotearoa's history I did not previously know, controversial because the book undermines popular racial rhetoric which continues to remain pervasive in 2024, and inspiring for painting a picture of what a bicultural society in Aotearoa could aspire to be.

Bluck spends the later portions of book reflecting on what this picture of Aotearoa could look like in light of *He Puapua* and the goals within to better improve the New Zealand Government's compliance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of

Indigenous Peoples. Bluck's musings imply what the report's ideas might mean for everyday people seeking to work alongside each other, converse, and seek the betterment of our fellow citizens across culture.

Reflecting back on reading *Becoming Pākehā*, I found that the essence of Bluck's argument lay not at the end, but halfway through when, quoting author Andrew Eruera Vercoe, Bluck shares, "Every time a Māori is locked up in prison, every time a Māori is denied his or her basic rights, every time a Māori assaults someone else we all, yes even Pākehā, lose a little bit of mana" (p. 134). The vision Bluck lays out seeks to portray this very idea—that whenever inequality occurs for Māori, it impacts all of us. As people living in Aotearoa New Zealand, we would do well to remember that and the impact it has on our collective wellbeing as we seek a more culturally conversant Aotearoa in honour of Te Tiriti O Waitangi.

Reviewed by **Blake Gardiner**