Blood and Dirt
Prison Labour and the Making of New Zealand

Jared Davidson

Picture, for a minute, every artwork of colonial New Zealand you can think of. Now add a chain gang. Hard labour men guarded by other men with guns. Men moving heavy metal. Men picking at the earth. Over and over again. This was the reality of nineteenth century New Zealand.

Forced labour haunts the streets we walk today and the spaces we take for granted. The unfree work of prisoners has shaped New Zealand’s urban centres and rural landscapes and Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa – the Pacific – in profound and unsettling ways. Yet these stories are largely unknown: a hidden history in plain sight.

Blood and Dirt explains, for the first time, the making of New Zealand and its Pacific empire through the prism of prison labour. Jared Davidson asks us to look beyond the walls of our nineteenth- and early twentieth-century prisons to see penal practice as playing an active, central role in the creation of modern New Zealand. Journeying from the Hohi mission station in the Bay of Islands through to Milford Sound, vast forest plantations, and on to Parliament itself, this vivid and engaging book will change the way you view New Zealand.

An archivist by day and an author by night, Jared Davidson is an award-winning writer based in Wellington, New Zealand. His books include the acclaimed Dead Letters: Censorship and Subversion in New Zealand 1914–1920 (Otago University Press, 2019), Sewing Freedom (AK Press, 2013), The History of a Riot (BWB Texts, 2021) and the co-authored He Whakaputanga: The Declaration of Independence (Bridget Williams Books, 2017). Through history from below, Jared explores the lives of people often overlooked by traditional histories – from working-class radicals of the early twentieth century to convicts of the nineteenth. He is currently the Research Librarian Manuscripts at the Alexander Turnbull Library.

KEY POINTS

• A readable narrative history, told through the lives of those labouring on the land
• Gives readers the opportunity to look differently at their neighbourhoods and regions, through examples from all across Aotearoa
• Provides a rare perspective on class relationships in the making of modern New Zealand

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