The History of a Riot
Jared Davidson

‘What follows is a microhistory of collective revolt.’

In 1843, the New Zealand Company settlement of Nelson was rocked by the revolt of its emigrant labourers. Over 70 gang-men and their wives collectively resisted their poor working conditions through petitions, strikes and, ultimately, violence. Yet this pivotal struggle went on to be obscured by stories of pioneering men and women ‘made good’.

The History of a Riot uncovers those at the heart of the revolt for the first time. Who were they? Where were they from? And how did their experience of protest before arriving in Nelson influence their struggle? By putting violence and class conflict at the centre, this fascinating microhistory upends the familiar image of colonial New Zealand.

An archivist by day and labour historian by night, Jared Davidson is an award-winning writer based in Wellington, New Zealand. He is the author of the acclaimed Dead Letters: Censorship and Subversion in New Zealand 1914-1920, Remains to Be Seen, and Sewing Freedom, and co-author of He Whakaputanga: The Declaration of Independence (BWB, 2017). Through social biography and history, Jared explores the lives of people often overlooked by traditional histories — from working-class radicals of the early twentieth century to prison convicts and relief workers of the nineteenth.

KEY POINTS

• A rare account of class and conflict in early colonial New Zealand.
• Provides insights into working-class settler life, challenging national myths of settler egalitarianism.
• Addresses the growing appetite for place-based ‘microhistories’, including from the upcoming history curriculum reset.