A Book Review of Beyond Hostile Islands: The Pacific War in American and New Zealand Fiction

William Sumruld

Department of Christian Studies, University of the Southwest

Email: bsumruld@usw.edu

Abstract

Daniel McKay, the author of Beyond Hostile Islands, is an associate professor of English at the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell, New Mexico. His book is a kind of literature review with a twist. It is a comparison of the fictional literature of American and New Zealand authors and their fictional interpretations of World War Two in the Pacific, focused on literary works dealing with combat novels, post-war Japan-bashing, Japanese internment, the memoirs of those who were captives of the Japanese, and novels about the development of the atomic bomb. It is a pioneering effort investigating connections between memory and literary studies. This reviewer finds the study intriguing but not fully convincing, as will be discussed more fully below. The work will be helpful to those already familiar with its themes and literary theories but may be difficult to comprehend for the uninitiated.

When reading the book, the keywords to remember are "fiction writing." As noted, McKay's comparison is between fictional narratives produced in the literary efforts published in the United States and New Zealand. He attempts to assess how these fictional narratives reflect and shape the two nations' cultural identities and historical memories. American fiction extensively explored this conflict more than most other Anglophone literature. However, according to McKay, adequate comparative studies, which include the New Zealand experience, are missing. His work is trying to rectify this deficit. McKay also uses fictional accounts from other countries as part of his analysis.

McKay has examined how the Pacific War has been depicted in the fictional literature of these two English-speaking nations. What the author claims to be doing is seeing how the fictional accounts coped with the unique horrors and peculiarities of the Pacific War and how and why they may have differed in this. In Beyond Hostile Islands, McKay highlights how fictional works reflect and influence national identities and historical understandings. McKay uses the term "ideological coproduction" to explain how the New Zealand writers of a developing national culture might be heavily influenced by the ideology of American authors who reside in a more prominent national culture while still differing in ways that reflect their distinct historical and more insular experiences. His study attempts to enrich the discussion on war literature by incorporating perspectives from this smaller nation. McKay hopes to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural and societal aftermath of major wars. His study explores in some detail how a sense of being on a relatively isolated island far from a more Central Western culture, along with the New Zealanders' encounters with the culture of the native Maoris, may have affected the writing of the New Zealand authors. He also considers how New Zealand's nuclear-free movement in the 1970s and 1980s might have impacted their literature.

The book is divided into 5 chapters and a coda. Chapter one deals with combat fiction. The heyday of combat fiction was identified as the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, so this was the focus period in chapter one. Paramount to McKay's treatment is the consideration that military service is often remembered later in a positive light and not entirely subsumed by the horrors of combat. Another important discovery in the work is the difference that seemed to exist in postwar fiction concerning the view of the Japanese as opposed to the Germans. In chapter one, McKay explores how combat novels portray the brutality and psychological effects of the war in the Pacific on the soldiers involved in the fighting. He notices a tendency to blame individual Japanese rather than their political or societal institutions. McKay probes what he perceives as the more gentle and less vindictive humor about Germans as opposed to the Japanese. He claims there was a pronounced tendency to see the Japanese as fanatical and not as great a tendency to see all Germans that way. However, a weakness of McKay's work in this chapter is the fact that Japan's very racist propaganda induced fear among the Japanese, which produced a desperation that Americans and New Zealanders could only interpret as fanaticism during the war, and memories of those experiences could not help but color their view

of the Japanese. One glaring case in point is the tragedy of civilian losses in the battle for Okinawa. Of 500,000 civilians on the island, 150,000 perished rather than surrender to the Americans. "The civilians were told again and again by Japanese propaganda that the Americans would rape, torture, and kill anyone they could capture, so many Okinawans who did not die in the battle chose to commit suicide rather than be taken alive." (Okinawa: The Final Battle. National Museum of the Pacific War.) Even before the extremes of Okinawa, "Japanese propaganda depicted Americans and Europeans as beasts, vermin, or demons that threatened Japanese civilization and had to be destroyed…. even exterminated." (Race and War in the Pacific. The National World War II Museum.) One problem McKay encountered was a dearth of major characters from the Axis in the fiction, whether German or Japanese. Instead, almost all the major characters are allied personnel of the authors' native lands. He contrasts American fiction's tendency to emphasize heroism with New Zealand stories, which he hopes might offer his readers a different perspective due to New Zealand's unique cultural and historical experiences.

Chapter Two of McKay's book is about postwar Japan-bashing. Though more Japanese characters were given a turn in leading roles in written fiction and on film, they were usually, according to McKay, seen as either less capable than Westerners or as an economic threat to the West. He considers this trend to start in the 1960s with the works of New Zealand author Errol Brathwaite, with its heyday being in the 1980s. McKay is keen to explore how American and New Zealand fiction authors depicted Japan's transformation from their military adversary in World War II to an economic rival and how that played out in cultural perception and anxiety. For McKay, the postwar economic competition involving the rise of Japan, especially in the 1980s, is a major touchstone. McKay suggests there were no genuinely credible studies of this Japan-bashing until the 1990s and bemoans this as a missed opportunity.

McKay's third chapter mainly deals with the fictional treatment of the internment of Japanese civilians during World War II. McKay compares this to fictional treatments in American and New Zealand fiction. He focuses on themes of identity, injustice, and reconciliation. This represents a considerable portion of his book. In New Zealand, the phenomenon was mostly restricted to Japanese civilians who were not citizens or residents of the national territory. Instead, they were residents of Fiji and Tonga who were shipped from those islands to New Zealand. The United States experience was much different. Many Japanese people interned in the U.S. were citizens and long-time residents. For them, there was a sense of betrayal and a feeling they had to prove themselves to be good Americans since many journalists were pushing the narrative that they were spies, planted in the U.S. by Japan, for just such an occasion as the war. McKay also notes how the competing stories of prisoners of war and their mistreatment by their Japanese captors have complicated the issues and coverage of fiction dealing with the experiences of interned Japanese. It often made it unlikely that such works would be truly sympathetic or even gain much attention from the reading public.

The fourth chapter of Beyond Hostile Islands deals with how fiction writers have dealt with the stories of the horrors of being prisoners of war held in Japanese prison camps during World War II. The Far East prisoner of war novels would first appear in England, not America or New Zealand. According to McKay, when they did emerge in the United States, they often became apologetics, in the philosophical sense, emotionally justifying the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. McKay argues that American writers ignore the bombings in their accounts of the Manhattan Project because of this emotional and psychological justification of the bombing as a just consequence of Japanese inhumanity. Later, in New Zealand and the United States, he sees prisoner-of-war novels and stories as being grounded in a sense of rising above one's tormentors through the exercise of forgiveness. McKay considers how these narratives differ in the writings of American and New Zealand authors. In this section, he tries to evaluate factors such as national identity and collective memory, as well as the role of wartime propaganda. In New Zealand, he notes, there was less of a justification for the Manhattan Project on the grounds of Japanese brutality.

In Chapter 5, McKay tackles the project novels, referring to the Manhattan Project, which produced the first nuclear bombs. McKay investigates how fiction writers from America and New Zealand have dealt with nuclear warfare's ethical and human implications and how these contribute to the broader discussion about memory and responsibility. He brings to bear the contrast to what he had already noted about the use of prisoner-of-war narratives juxtaposed with the bombings to distract attention from the experiences of the atomic bomb victims. McKay claims that American fiction writers tended to leave out their suffering, while Japanese writers tended to leave out various victims of Japanese aggression. He also notes that until recently, it has been almost exclusively the Americans who have authored project fiction. At the same time, English-speaking writers, in general, have labored on prisoner-of-war fiction from relatively close to the war's end. According to McKay, project fiction avoids comparative historical and cultural themes. Overall, he seems to condemn the tendency to treat the story of the Manhattan Project and the story of the bombing victims and survivors as

distinct and separate stories. One of the most apparent distinctions between New Zealanders and Americans emerges in this chapter. Due to New Zealand's strong anti-nuclear movement, New Zealanders, unlike Americans, tend to have a peaceful self-image permeating their writing on these matters.

In his "Coda: Oceanic Sympathies", which closes Beyond Hostile Islands, McKay regrets the relative lack of interest in the Pacific War compared to the war in Europe. He has a point. For every historical work on the Pacific War, dozens deal with events in Europe during World War II. The same disparity exists in works of fiction set in World War II, films, and even commercially produced wargames. McKay bemoans the comparative dearth of materials and the ideological straitjacket that seems unavoidable in dealing with these materials. After wandering through countless plot lines and evaluations of writers' motives and interpretations, McKay seems overwhelmed by the impossibility of concluding his work definitively. His "Coda" introduces his call for further work in this field.

McKay's perspective is interesting and, to some degree, troubling for this history professor. One of his clear touchstones for critiquing the West is found in the works of Edward Said. While Said had some valid things to say about Western Imperialism, it was certainly not a logically grounded or unbiased approach. The effect of Said's works on American academia has been regrettable. Said's seminal work was Orientalism. Said's works have been important secondary guides for many doing post-colonial culture studies and literary criticism. Sadly, it has often biased their perspectives. However, many scholars have stepped forward to offer criticism of his works and influence. Not the least among these scholars is Bruce Thornton, an American classicist at California State University, Fresno, and a research fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. Thornton, in his review of Ibn Warraq's book Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism, has called Said's Orientalism an "incoherent amalgam of dubious postmodern theory, sentimental Third-Worldism, glaring historical errors, and Western guilt" (Golden Threads, City Journal, August 2007). McKay's work has some of the same issues. This is made apparent in the introduction of his book.

While McKay tries to balance the ideological viewpoints of various writers, including Japanese writers, he still seems to be trapped to a degree by the anti-Western assumptions that haunt so much of Western literary criticism these days. The Americans and New Zealanders are taken to task for their shortcomings and failure to meet standards only adopted recently in American and European academia, standards which almost always wind up condemning the West and mostly exonerating other cultures. This is a chief weakness of his work.

Another weakness of his valiant effort to explore a wide variety of literary works in his comparisons is a lack of clarity of expression that will make the book incomprehensible to the average reader. One must be familiar with many literary assumptions and theories and have a great deal of knowledge of the fictional works analyzed and even of the history of the Pacific War to benefit thoroughly from this book. In the book, there is a tendency to jump from topic to topic and to foreshadow and double-back on materials in a way that means readers must constantly review what they have read before as they progress. The book sometimes seems more like a long, rambling monologue than a well-structured work. Because of this need to backtrack, the experience of reading the book can become tedious.

This book should be recommended only for a specialist who is well-acquainted with literary theories and understands the history of the Pacific War. It can be a good beginning for such a reader to investigate this topic. This is not a book for casual readers.

References

Dudley, M. (2025, April 10). *Okinawa: The Final Battle*. National Museum of the Pacific War. https://www.pacificwarmuseum.org/about/news/okinawa-final-battle

McKay, D. (2024, April 2). *Beyond Hostile Islands: The Pacific War in American and New Zealand Fiction Writing*. Fordham University Press.

National World War II Museum. (n.d.). *Race and War in the Pacific*. National World War II Museum. https://www.ww2classroom.org/system/files/essays/wip019_0.pdf

Thornton, B. (2007, August 17). *Golden Threads: Former Muslim Ibn Warraq stands up for the West*. Manhattan Institute. https://www.city-journal.org/article/golden-threads