

## [Smith on McAloon, 'No Idle Rich: The Wealthy in Canterbury and Otago, 1840-1914'](#)

Review published on Saturday, March 1, 2003

**Jim McAloon.** *No Idle Rich: The Wealthy in Canterbury and Otago, 1840-1914*. Otago: University of Otago Press, 2002. 224 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-877276-23-1.

**Reviewed by** Philippa Mein Smith (University of Canterbury) **Published on** H-ANZAU (March, 2003)

This welcome book explores and explains the nature of wealth, class, and power in the colonial context of New Zealand. Its subjects are the richest settlers in the South Island, in Canterbury and Otago, who were the first to make their fortunes. Who were New Zealand's colonial wealthy? Jim McAloon shows that they were not born gentlemen, but shrewd and enterprising capitalists, with relatively humble origins; hence the title "no idle rich," which captures this group's work ethic and adherence to the values of respectability. This is an important book because it offers a detailed case study of settler capitalism and makes a significant contribution to, and expands, debate in this field. It also fills a gap in New Zealand's strangely sparse economic history.

In the introductory chapter, McAloon observes that the wealthy in his case study ranked far behind levels of wealth in the United States, Britain, and colonial New South Wales. In effect, the colonial upper class were a stratum of the British middle classes. His evidence centers on a database drawn from the wills and probate records of over 1,000 rich settlers (the top 5 percent of the population who left wills), and company records. Through quantitative analysis he shows that Canterbury wealth was primarily agricultural and pastoral, whereas in gold-rush Otago commercial and financial wealth was more dominant. The wealthy were not a "gentry," as Steven Eldred-Grigg maintained, but part of the "colonial capitalist class" (p. 23).

McAloon defines concepts clearly--including power--in order to negotiate chapters that range from how settler capitalists maintained and extended their wealth, to household and family wealth, the politics of property, local power, and what all this meant for building a New World. He concludes that landed wealth was accumulated by farmers supplying exports for Britain. His is a structural interpretation: farmers made fortunes within limits set by New Zealand's location within a world system. Rich farmers did do better by emigration, fulfilling the myth that the settler colonies offered opportunities to "get on." Most had lower-middle-class or working-class origins. And most had arrived early, almost all before the third major immigration wave in the 1870s, when the New Zealand government imported 100,000 of the laboring classes from Europe (mainly Britain) to boost economic development. Because New Zealand was settled late, the "early" arrival defined by McAloon is late globally, even relative to the Australian colonies, between 1840 and 1870; the significant point is that they arrived early relative to subsequent Pakeha New Zealand migrants. This, then, is a colonial capitalist case of first-in first-served, or first-up best-dressed.

Recent regional studies of the lower North Island, for example, on the first pastoralists who settled in the Wairarapa, north of Wellington, suggest that McAloon's findings hold nationally. A key finding is that a substantial section of colonial "rich" were modestly wealthy family farmers. While the wealthy

subscribed to an ideology of advancement on merit, the lesser wealthy in particular owed their start to social relationships, and had worked in partnerships to accumulate their initial capital. Notably, these winners benefited from state power. As McAloon rightly points out, it was state power in the first place that created the space for these settler capitalists to make good through dispossession of the indigenous people. He also highlights the role played by the relationship between the state and business that Noel Butlin identified for Australia, and that scholars have termed variously "colonial socialism," the "entrepreneurial state," or, to use James Belich's term, state-boosted "progressive colonisation."

At the household level, McAloon reveals the crucial role played by the work and judgment of other family members. A shared concern for family security and comfort, he suggests, explains why widows' entitlements lasted for their lifetimes or widowhood rather than wives inheriting property absolutely. This finding itself invites more research in women's history.

This book advances the New Zealand historiography because McAloon argues, counter to Eldred-Grigg, that no landowning "southern gentry" wielded political power. Yet he discerns a shift to the right in his subjects' political leanings from 1890, under a Liberal government, as the propertied classes became concerned about the rise of democracy and early universal suffrage. Their anxiety was that workers might not vote for their betters, but for worker representatives. Thus McAloon's class analysis provides the background to the rise of a two-party political system, from the viewpoint of the non-labor wing, who reflected and shaped the values--and experience--of what became termed a property-owning democracy in the twentieth century.

I have one minor quibble, relating to the discussion about the concept of settler capitalism. McAloon does not do justice to Donald Denoon's argument (1983) when he claims that this had, by the time of Denoon's reflections on "Settler Capitalism Unsettled" (*New Zealand Journal of History*, 1995), "become largely a matter of the impact of colonialism upon indigenous societies" (p. 178). Rather, Denoon was referring to features to which he would now give greater emphasis in the settler capitalism paradigm (and this he has since done).

Nonetheless, McAloon deftly undermines the "gentlemanly capitalism" of Cain and Hopkins, concluding that the "advance guard of empire" in the South Island comprised hard-working pastoralists. New Zealand historians, it seems, have too readily believed the local version of the Wakefieldian myth about planned settlement: that Canterbury and Otago colonists were superior specimens, selected to include people of station and character. Character, perhaps (we can believe); but it is striking how, even for the rich, the New Zealand experience was from the start shaped by shortage of money. McAloon ends on a positive note: that, for a developing bourgeoisie as for laborers, migrating to this settler society presented more opportunities than staying at home. This study in economic and social history, then, shows that the rising middle classes, at least, did well out of empire--provided they had an early start--and fulfilled the migrant aspiration, to lead a better life. For its contribution to New Zealand history, and to comparative histories of settler societies, this book deserves a wide readership.

**Printable Version:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=7357>

**Citation:** Philippa Mein Smith. Review of McAloon, Jim, *No Idle Rich: The Wealthy in Canterbury and*

*Otago, 1840-1914*. H-ANZAU, H-Net Reviews. March, 2003. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7357>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net and the Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History, all rights reserved. Permission is granted for the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use contact Paul Turnbull <[paul.turnbull@anu.edu.au](mailto:paul.turnbull@anu.edu.au)> or the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).