

PAUL MOON

Book Review

A. J. Perry, *The Old People*, London, Thames River Press, 2014, 125pp.

The recovery of 'ancient' knowledge has been a pursuit that in recent decades has involved academics from various disciplines, in addition to the descendants of the relevant cultures, engaging in efforts aimed at cultural reconstruction. The criteria applied to these undertakings vary, as does the success of the outcomes. Part of the reason for this lack of consistency is that perceptions about what aspects of the past are valued, coupled with the limited ability to retrieve elements of earlier cultures (especially those that were predominately oral-based) means that gaps inevitably emerge in how the history of ancient knowledge is rendered.

It is into this diverse field that A. J. Perry's allegorical novel *The Old People* has appeared. Superficially, the work resonates with similar themes that have appeared in (less skilled) attempts at conjuring a moral and social environment, and an atmosphere of a culture that no longer exists. However, in several ways, Perry's efforts are both more sophisticated and more thought-provoking.

What is apparent as one reads through the early stages of the book is that Perry has loosened much of the expected detail from its moorings. The location, period, ethnicity, or culture of the old people is never specified (although there are subtle implications throughout). This ubiquity is thoughtfully managed to avoid any indication that a single group is the basis of the narrative. While at the same time, there is never a

Paul Moon is Professor of History at Te Ara Poutama, the Faculty of Maori Development at Auckland University of Technology, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, University College, London.

sense that the story is overcome by vagueness. Instead, we are delivered an archetype which comfortably fits many forms of indigenous, pre-European cultures.

Perry takes this disassociation with specificity further by removing any suggestion of a particular period in which the account is set. This removal of a succession of the expected parameters of a novel initially seems disorientating, but the author soon allows the purpose behind such an approach to shine through. Perry deliberately has approached the narrative in this way to allow the reader to construct a generic, traditional, pre-European 'other' as a counterpoint to the modern world. At the same time, though, this traditional, indigenous world never even gets close to becoming presented as a binary construct, in which each difference is overarticulated and laboured for emphasis.

Instead, what is offered is a carefully-paced narrative that delves in an out of themes of indigeneity, cultural gaze, notions of sanctity, and the bases – familiar to many cultures – of attachment to place.

Frequently, the pace of events in the book slows to the point where there almost a suspension of any clear concept of the passage of time. This is one of Perry's most significant accomplishments in *The Old People*. Elements of past cultures can and have been collected, categorised, and compartmentalized – all common academic approaches – but the risk in such methods, which Perry implies, is that something is lost in the process. That something is an alternative perception of time. In this indigenous world, time is treated differently, and there are occasions throughout the book which exemplify this. Often, what is happening is more important than how long it takes to happen. The distinction might appear slight, but Perry reveals how it has a bearing on a whole way of living – one that is largely lost in the modern world.

Another achievement of *The Old People* is that Perry's generic 'other' is never romanticized, in the manner that some

other attempts at recapturing pre-European indigeneity have tended towards. There are no noble savages in this work, and consequently, the explicit contrasts with the corruption wrought by the modern world are slight and implied. Indeed, the modern world features predominately in the mind of the reader, prompted intermittently by Perry's careful descriptions of life in the society he describes – descriptions which reveal a world very different from our own.

Hindsight and history are closely connected, and it is with the exercise of hindsight that a premonition builds in the reader as they enter deeper into the world of the old people. That premonition relates to the future of the society. Despite the fact that it is not a specific society in a specific location or time, the inevitability of outside intervention, and the ensuing patterns of colonization and modernization – the sort of history familiar to almost all indigenous peoples – adds a note of poignancy to the novel. It is the unspoken fate of the life described in the book that it will be extinguished one day. Even the work's title is suggestive of the imminent passing of this way of things.

This produces a certain tension in the book. Although the narrative seems to eschew tension on one level, at another level, the certainties of life for the old people exist in contrast to the approaching uncertainty once contact with the wider world is made. This is a parable with a global resonance.

One of the lasting metaphors from the book is that of a knot. It extends to notions of entanglement, security, and connections, particularly in the connections between one aspect of knowledge and another, and to one generation and another. The knot emerges as one of the most important themes of the book, and is where *The Old People* is at its most instructive. Perry offers a range of suggestions about how the world of the old people can be and ought to be connected with the current world in a way that is compelling without being prescriptive or didactic. The result is that readers of this book will be enriched not only by the range of issues Perry has

raised, but also the careful and unobtrusive way in which he presents them.

Details on the book available at:

<http://www.thamesriverpress.com/Book/10548/The-Old-People.html>