The Naturalist

An enthralling story about being an outcast, about searching for a home, about championing equality and about trying to find love in colonial times.

It seems New Zealanders can’t get enough of stories that unlock real events of the past. Jenny Patrnick put Denniston back on the map, Dame Fiona Kidman told Betty Guard’s captive-wife story, Sarah Quigley reimagined the writing of a Shostakovich’s symphony, and Owen Marshall reminded us of the tragic politician William Larnach … all in historical novels that were also cracking reads.

Now Thom Conroy evokes the compelling story of Dr Ernst Dieffenbach — the charismatic and free-spirited German who was appointed as naturalist on the controversial 1839 expedition to New Zealand to buy land from Maori.

Conroy brings this fascinating man to life as well as offering a vivid depiction of a New Zealand on the cusp of widespread colonisation.

*The Naturalist* is an enthralling story about being an outcast, about early interaction between Maori and Pakeha, about searching for a home, about championing equality and about trying to find love.

It’s a sweeping, wonderful story of a remarkable man who was so important in the settler years of this country. Of *The Naturalist*, Conroy says, ‘I wanted to reintroduce readers to a man whose ideas sound closer to ours than those of his own era, and I hoped to contribute to a new way of looking at the history of New Zealand and its connections to the world’.

While Ernst Dieffenbach studied New Zealand’s people, plants and wildlife, Conroy explores Dieffenbach himself: his views, his discoveries and his personal life. The novel features three love interests — one in New Zealand, one in London and one in Germany — and as Ernst contemplates a life with each woman, he is compelled to consider adopting a worldview to match.

Exile and equality are themes that interweave Dieffenbach’s journey from Germany to London to New Zealand, where he learns Maori, investigates the local flora and fauna, ascends Taranaki and advocates equality between Maori and Pakeha, arguing – despite much opposition – that ‘savages’ are of equal intellect and sensibility to ‘civilised’ members of society.

---

**Thom Conroy is available for interview**

For more information or to arrange an interview with Thom Conroy, please contact Jennifer Balle at Random House on 09 984 6174 or jballe@randomhouse.co.nz

---

**For more information about the book:**

*Title:* The Naturalist

*Author:* Thom Conroy

*RRP:* $37.99

*Released:* 1 August 2014

*Imprint:* Vintage

Available in trade paperback & e-book
Dieffenbach had strong views on colonisation, which cut across the thinking at the time and made for heated debate during the gruelling three-month voyage aboard the Tory with the Wakefields and Charles Heaphy. Also on board was Nahiti, a young Maori man, returning home from London after having left on a whaling ship. His friendship with the German naturalist confirmed Dieffenbach’s conviction that ‘man, in his desires, passions, and intellectual faculties, is the same, whatever be the colour of his skin’.

These views were out of favour at the time. In contrast, Darwin — who makes a cameo appearance in The Naturalist — had been of the opinion that the Maori character was of a ‘lower order’ and that one glance was enough to convince anyone they were a race of savages. The general belief was that Maori would die out within fifty years.

Back in London, John Murray published a narrative of Ernst’s findings and extensive travels around New Zealand in two volumes called Travels in New Zealand. The book saw Dieffenbach fall foul of the Wakefields and other members of the New Zealand Company who believed his anti-colonial criticisms struck “at the heart of the Company’s enterprise.”

The Naturalist is a riveting read. It connects New Zealand’s past with world history and brings to life a story that needs to be told.


**ABOUT THOM CONROY**

Thom Conroy is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Massey. His short fiction has appeared in various journals in the US and New Zealand, including Landfall, Sport, New England Review, Alaska Quarterly Review, and Kenyon Review. He has won the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Fiction and his writing has been recognised by Best American Short Stories 2012 as well as the Sunday Star-Times Short Fiction Competition.

For more information or to arrange an interview with Thom Conroy, please contact Jennifer Balle at Random House on 09 984 6174 or jballe@randomhouse.co.nz