Clarion Review

General

The Blossom and the Musket
Andrew Earl
Xlibris
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Three Stars (out of Five)

The Blossom and the Musket is a traditional Western, although it is set in New Zealand and the battle is between militia and Maoris in the mid-nineteenth century. While a bit more exotic than the Great Plains of the United States, the themes, pacing, characters, and plot are familiar. For fans of the Western genre, this will be a comfortable and satisfying read, albeit with a "down under" twist. Those who devour historical fiction will also find much to like here in this story about frontier life in old New Zealand.

Andrew Earl's novel has a solid, believable, and authentic feel. While it lacks a central antagonist, *The Blossom and the Musket* does have a solid hero in the commander of a local militia, John Tripp, the sole survivor of a massacre as a young teen. This is a story told many times and in many eras, but the twist here is that instead of being consumed with vengeance, the hero devotes himself to making the world a safer place.

He has his job cut out for him, as there are renegade aborigines, cattle rustlers, "ship jumpers," "land-grabbers and no-gooders," and all other manner of "hawkers of rum, murderers, ranters and drinkers."

Tripp is the good-guy cowboy type, but he is not the best character in the novel. That honor goes to Tarata, a native Maori trader and scout who is mentor, guide, and guardian to Tripp and wields a tomahawk with all the deadly grace of a light saber. Tarata also carries a double-barreled musket, which he uses to save the day on more than one occasion.

There is a love interest, the (mostly) chaste Victoria Lynn, who plays the “schoolmarm” role. There are many other recognizable supporting roles, from the stoic father figure who takes in the lost lad (young Tripp) to the hunchback half-wit native who putters around town. This is all pretty standard 1950s-era B-movie Western put in print, dressed up with a British Empire accent, and staged in a South Pacific location.

The Blossom and the Musket is entertaining, but it is also predictable and never startling or shocking. There is plenty of violence and a bit of sex, but it is all PG-rated family fare. A strong villain, some cliff-hangers, and a hero with a few tragic flaws and failings would have made it more engaging.

Readers who prefer their Westerns to be more like a shot of rotgut than a cup of tea may want to look elsewhere, but for those seeking an old-fashioned cowboy story with a little foreign flair, they need look no farther than *The Blossom and the Musket*.

Mark McLaughlin