



Tūrangawaewae

THE TRICK OF STANDING UPRIGHT HERE

After viewing the skeleton of the Great Moa in Canterbury Museum, poet Allen Curnow wrote a sonnet that ends with two memorable and much-quoted lines:

Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year,
Will learn the trick of standing upright here (Curnow 1943: 28).

Though Curnow identified himself with the moa propped up on crutches when he wrote the poem as a young man, his poetry makes it clear that he sought and found his tūrangawaewae, a standing place for his feet, in Aotearoa New Zealand. I have always felt that the word ‘trick’ should be printed in inverted commas. As Curnow knew full well, learning to stand upright here is no ordinary trick but is achieved only through hard work, perseverance and the support of others. If we who come after are to learn this trick, we would (I suggest) do well to explore not one but three bodies of local knowledge, weaving them together like the strands in a taura whiri, the Māori metaphor of the plaited rope.

The first strand is self-knowledge: reflecting on who we are, what we believe and value, and who and what has shaped us. The second is knowledge of the land, not the superficial knowledge gained from holiday tours and television documentaries but the deeper knowledge and attachment that comes from living in or making repeated visits to particular places and spending time to search out their natural and human history. The third is the people of the land – the many different ethnic groups, including the Pākehā, but especially the people who have had their roots deep in the land for centuries – the tāngata whenua.

With regard to self-knowledge, there are two particular points to stress. The first is that we cannot learn to know and value our neighbours' cultures unless we know and value our own. In reflecting on who we are, those of us who are Pākehā often miss the important dimensions of ancestry and culture, partly because we are members of the majority, so surrounded by people like ourselves that we are not conscious of having a culture of our own; and partly because the culture that influences us more powerfully than we recognise stresses individual achievement and places little value on the study of the past. Those of us who identify as Māori or members of other ethnic minorities and those of mixed ancestry sometimes allow ourselves to be defined by the majority, or react against domination by retreating into exclusivity.

Secondly, it often takes the shock of encounter with people who are fundamentally different to reveal us to ourselves. New Zealanders have a history of going overseas in search of this experience but it is time we who are non-Māori in particular learned that we can find it here at home. J. E. Traue's thought-provoking essay *Ancestors of the Mind: A Pakeha Whakapapa* had its genesis in a hui at Ōtaki Marae, where he learned how Māori place themselves in their culture by naming their ancestors, hapū, iwi and home community (Traue 1990). In response to a challenge to his own identity, Traue places himself in *his* culture by naming those who shaped his ideas, beliefs and values. Challenged in my turn by his essay, I compiled my own whakapapa of 'ancestors of the

mind', an exercise I found both revealing and rewarding. My whakapapa has many women on it, including Joan of Arc, after whom my father said I was named, Jane Austen, a superb anthropologist before the discipline was invented, and my mother's mother, who defied a conservative father to train as a nurse in London in the 1890s. It also includes Wiremu Tāmihana, rangatira and kingmaker (Stokes 2002), Rewi Maniapoto who led the Kīngitanga forces at the battle of Ōrākau Pā, Hēni Te Kiri Karamū who gave water to a dying British soldier at the Battle of Gate Pā, and my early mentors Paihana and Bella Taua of Ngāti Kahu, Matiu Te Hau of Whakatōhea and Pei Te Hurinui Jones of Ngāti Maniapoto.

The challenge of difference

The challenge that comes from recognising difference is a good reason for actively seeking out opportunities to encounter Māori and through them their language and culture. There are other even more compelling reasons.

The Māori mastered the trick of standing upright here centuries before the rest of us arrived. They amassed an intimate knowledge of land and sea, plants and animals, and used that knowledge to fuel their imaginations as well as their bodies. They explored the country's remote and wildest corners – few if any European explorers did not have a Māori guide – and developed a culture that was unique, adventurous and adaptable enough not only to survive colonisation but to generate repeated cultural transformations.

By history's own standards as a discipline, histories of Aotearoa New Zealand remain incomplete and one dimensional unless they tap the information and insights held by Māori in their own language and oral archives. Attending Waitangi Tribunal hearings, I have been struck by the discrepancy between the evidence presented by Māori witnesses and that of Pākehā historians and lawyers using only English documentary sources and interpreting them within a Pākehā frame of

reference. Undertaking some historical delving of my own, I found that my knowledge of Māori language and culture enhanced not only my understanding of what happened between Māori and Pākehā but also my interest in the Pākehā personalities involved.

But the most compelling reason of all is that through their unique relationship with this land Māori have built up a storehouse of treasures that will enrich us all, individually and as a nation, and render distinctive our contribution to world affairs, if we have the wisdom to recognise their value and the will to access them.

Within this storehouse is a rich and sophisticated treasury of literary metaphors that use Māori knowledge of landscape, flora and fauna to convey abstract ideas, evoke emotion and stimulate action. At Auckland University in the early 1960s I heard Pei Te Hurinui Jones, translator and editor of three volumes of *Nga Moteatea*, give a lecture on 'The Maori as Poet'. More than 40 years on, I can vividly recall an evening of revelation and enchantment. Among the images that have stayed with me are the description of chiefs as 'ngā rātā whakaruruhau ki te muri' (rātā trees which shelter from the north wind) and the asthmatic who lamented 'he hūroto au kei rō repo . . . he rimu puka kei te aka' (I am a bittern in the midst of the swamp . . . seaweed on the shore, honeycombed with emptiness). That night Pei paid tribute to Allen Curnow for his re-creations of waiata in English (Curnow 1960: 79–86), saying that he surpassed previous translators (including Pei himself) in capturing their poetic essence. For those who need encouragement to learn Māori, the chapter on Māori proverbs in John Patterson's book *Exploring Maori Values* provides a good introduction to Māori poetry, dealing with literary form as well as content.

These powerful images are used in oratory (whaikōrero) directed to socially useful ends, such as conflict resolution, healing trauma and comforting the bereaved at tangihanga. In his eulogy for Sir Apirana Ngata broadcast on Radio New Zealand National, Wiremu Parker of Ngāti Porou told Ngata's family and iwi that Ngata had 'the gifts of

the gods . . . as tempestuous as Tāwhirimātea, as tireless and bold as Tūmataunga, as benevolent as Ngātiriao' and lamented that 'the great tōtara tree has fallen, the lofty peak of the mountain has been levelled, the horn of the crescent moon has been severed' (Parker n.d.).

The practice of giving valued goods, taonga, such as greenstone weapons and ornaments, fine cloaks and carvings, in symbolic exchange is itself one of the treasures within this cultural storehouse. Exchanges of this sort are governed by rules (tikanga) that direct that every gift should be reciprocated by one of similar but never identical value, and that the taonga should eventually return to the original giver. More important still is the underlying purpose: to establish and maintain an ongoing reciprocal relationship that binds the parties to each other (tuituia) in much the same way as the topstrakes of a canoe are bound to the hull by lashing. Pākehā have typically failed to recognise this principle and, by applying their own frame of reference to such gifts, have repeatedly offended Māori by returning only words and disposing of the gifts to third parties.

The Treaty of Waitangi

If Māori symbolism, oratory and gift-giving were understood by non-Māori, especially in the halls of power, we could avoid repeated misunderstandings. This is especially true with regard to the Treaty of Waitangi. Many Pākehā historians and linguists study the Treaty as a historical and legal document, trying to uncover its meaning by analysing it clause by clause and phrase by phrase. Māori approach the Treaty quite differently. They identify it, first, as a taonga, a treasure to be valued as an undivided whole. They also refer to it as a kawenata, a covenant in which two peoples committed themselves to each other in the presence of God. The main meaning for Māori of this taonga or kawenata – the Treaty – is that, like gift exchange, it established a relationship that was intended to be ongoing, reciprocal, based on trust