

The normal ones

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If it were possible for subtract the Maori element from New Zealand history then the story would be remarkable only in an entirely unremarkable way, offering yet another illustration of the human capacity for hard work, optimism, endurance, adaptability and (on the whole) triumph against the odds. It's a very British story, though with a slightly larger proportion of Celts than in the United Kingdom. The hard work (principally turning forests into farmland) brought affluence, especially after the invention of refrigeration. It has also been recognized more recently that it did ecological damage. Topsoil is washed away; fertilizers promote weeds which choke lakes and rivers; our grazing herds (Michael King notes) produce animal wastes equivalent to a human population of 150 million, and animal flatulence contributes to global warming on the scale of industrial cities.

But problems of that kind are only a challenge to further adaptation; and Britain did its reluctant-to-cut-loose child a favour when she went into the EEC and forced New Zealand to diversify the uses made of farmland and to discover new markets in unlikely places. For a New Zealander of my generation, who once carried a passport that said "British Subject, New Zealand citizen", there was in the 1980s no more salutary reminder of where we now stood than to wait at Heathrow in the long line of "Others" while former Luftwaffe pilots went straight through on their EC passports. New Zealand was now where, as a young "intellectual" in the 1950s, a descendant of settlers who arrived in the 1830s, I had argued it ought to be – independent and self-directed; yet by education and profession I was culturally much more closely aligned to British ways and mores than those New Zealanders whose mindless loyalty to the British crown I had found embarrassing and demeaning. These were, I suppose, standard ironies and contradictions of a transition from colonial to post-colonial.

That queue at Heathrow also represented what I think was the largest single alteration to New Zealanders' view of themselves. The settlers who travelled three and more months to reach their new home felt they had truly gone to the end of the earth, and for most there was no way back. They had gone to escape poverty, urban squalor, constricted lives and the limitations of the class system. Most had few regrets. But there was, nonetheless, a sense of being cut off, isolated. Our nearest neighbour was 1,200 miles away; and the "real" world, where "important" things happened, was unattainably distant. Many of the men who volunteered for service in one or other of the World Wars did so partly because it was a way of experiencing what was otherwise, for ordinary working people, unreachable. Even as late as the 1950s, when modern liners took almost five weeks to reach the UK, the sense of remoteness persisted. Now one can fly Auckland-Los Angeles-London in just twenty-four hours, and air fares are relatively cheap. This, together with phone and email services, has made a profound difference to the feel of life in New Zealand. It is no longer just the affluent who travel. Most young New Zealanders have their

period of "OE" (overseas experience); none has that sense of appalling distances which sea travel used to instil.

Post-Second World War transitions also meant a switch in defence and foreign policy – from New Zealand as loyal British family member to New Zealand as Uncle Sam's Little Helper in the Pacific. In the War our troops had fought on bravely in Greece, Crete and the Middle East, and then all the way up the Italian peninsula, while the Japanese were inching down the Pacific towards us. New Zealand in those years had been defended, not by the Royal Navy, whose claim to maritime supremacy had proved to be just another empty imperial boast, but by the US Army, Navy and Marines. So when the post-war call came for troops, first to Korea, then to Vietnam, we sent some, but (unlike the Australians who were conscripted in large numbers) only a few regular force volunteers, offered by a government that never sounded entirely convinced of the need.

After Vietnam New Zealand began to show real independence. We declared ourselves "nuclear free", excluding both British and American warships from our waters if they were nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed. In the past two decades we have withstood repeated complaints from Australia at our refusal to arm ourselves in ways that would suit our larger neighbour's defence plans; and, most recently, New Zealand has refused to be part of the "Coalition of the Willing" in Iraq. It is not certain that this degree of independence will be sustained; but there is a reasonable hope that it will. The nuclear-free policy, for example, which came in under a Labour Government, proved so popular that the National (Conservative) Party, which had opposed it, felt unable to remove it when it became the Government in the 1990s. And probably nothing helps to sustain this independence more than to have, as now, a US President manifestly ill-equipped for the job, and a British Prime Minister inexplicably compliant with his whims.

New Zealand has also earned, over the past 150 years, a reputation, partly deserved, for liberal social policies. On the basis that Maori land is held collectively, all Maori men had the vote by 1867 while Pakeha (white New Zealanders) had to qualify by owning land as individuals. The vote became universal in 1893 – the first modern state to give votes to women, as it was among the first in which women graduated from universities. (In recent years, and in varying combinations, our Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, Attorney General, Chief Justice, Governor General and Mayor of the largest city have all been women.) Unionism was encouraged by the Liberal Government as early as the 1890s, and an old age pension introduced. By 1935 Labour was the dominant political force, became the Government, and was able to introduce a full welfare state. This was the period (it didn't last) when New Zealand was called "the social laboratory of the world".

National ruled for most of the 1960s and 70s, but introduced nothing new, and made no radical changes to the order of things established under Labour. By 1984, when a new Labour Government was elected, the country had dropped some way down the OECD economic table and was mired in regulations, controls and subsidies. So it was Labour which turned us back in the opposite direction, towards the then fashionable forms of Friedmanite monetarism. This produced at first a feeling of liberation. The effect, King writes, was "to reduce inflation dramatically, bring down

national debt and increase economic growth". Unfortunately, a great deal of the "family silver" was also sold off, and remains unrecoverably and profitably in private ownership. New Zealand's most remarkable reform of this period, following a referendum, was the change of the electoral system inherited from Britain to a mixed-member proportional system based on the German model. At present, under this system, we have a Labour-dominated coalition led by Helen Clark, a popular leader and I think our most intelligent and capable Prime Minister since the Second World War.

That is how it all seems if you leave out the Maori element which is, however, the most complex, intractable, interesting and enduring part of the story, and the part the late Michael King, a Pakeha, the biographer of two Maori leaders, who had learned Maori language and customs, was well qualified to deal with in *The Penguin History of New Zealand*. King, who was also the biographer of Janet Frame, was killed in a car crash only a few months ago. His book had already sold tens of thousands of copies.

Prior to eighteenth-century European discovery, the country now called New Zealand had been, to its settler occupants, the world, beyond which there were only mythical places and beings. There is no evidence of human habitation earlier than 1350; but where they had come from (eastern Polynesia) had receded into mythology – a homeland called Hawaiiiki, to which the way back, if it had ever been known, was forgotten. Since there was no one else in the world but themselves they had individual and tribal, but no collective, identity. The word Maori meant normal, ordinary, and did not take on its present racial meaning until some time after the arrival of Europeans. Similarly there was no word for the country as a whole (Aotearoa is a recent adoption). There were no native land mammals apart from bats, and the islanders had soon wiped out several species of flightless birds and of seals, and had burned off a great deal of the southern island's forest. They remained quite well supplied with protein (fish and birds), but extremely poor in fruit and vegetables, and in fact could not have survived but for the sweet potato brought from Polynesia which, King says, grew only to the size of a human finger.

The tribes fought wars with one another, had no projectile weapons, only clubs and spears, took no prisoners except as slaves, and usually cooked and ate their enemy dead. At times (King notes) whole tribes were expunged and their oral record died with them. Life was short (few lived beyond their late thirties), ruled by *mana*, *tapu* (sacred proscriptions, taboo) and *utu* – the latter, the restoration of a balance of *mana*, meaning, most often, simply revenge. They had no wheel, no method of casting metals nor even of baking earthenware, no written language; and their inter-tribal meetings were governed by ferocious challenges, of which the *haka* was a part. These ceremonial "welcomes" onto the tribal marae, protracted while the peaceful intent of the visitor is gauged and accepted, are among the torments we inflict on official visitors to New Zealand – necessarily – in the name of good race relations.

There is a present tendency to romanticize pre-European Maori life, but current knowledge as King summarizes it suggests rather (though he doesn't say this) that the Maori were a Polynesian race who were hanging on with some difficulty in

colder latitudes. Their total population at the time of Cook's visits is thought to have been around 100,000, and this number was reduced by at least 20,000 during the "Musket Wars", the inter-tribal slaughter that followed the acquisition of European weapons. In 1840 the British Colonial Office, prompted by concern at the colonizing intentions of Edward Gibbon Wakefield's New Zealand Company, appointed William Hobson Lieutenant-Governor with instructions to negotiate the transfer of sovereignty from Maori, as indigenous owner-occupiers, to the Crown. A treaty was drawn up in English, and Hobson called as many tribal leaders together as it was possible to draw to Waitangi in the Bay of Islands, where there were already European missionaries and settlers. The treaty was hastily and imperfectly translated into Maori, debated throughout one day, and on the next, as rain began to fall and food was running out, was signed by the chiefs, each of whom received a blanket before departing. (It has always seemed to me fitting that the Governor, who had been mistaken about the arrangements and had to arrive in haste for the signings, wore informal clothes but put on his ceremonial hat.) Later the document was hawked around the country for more signatures; and then, before the South Island had been covered, and as the French showed signs of interest in a claim of their own, New Zealand was declared a British colony.

It is not surprising that this ramshackle document, the Treaty of Waitangi, an ambiguous agreement between Maori and the British crown in which European settlers had no role and no voice, was declared by one judge in the late nineteenth century "a legal nullity". It is not surprising either that, by the end of the twentieth century, it had been resurrected as a sacred covenant between Maori and Pakeha, our nation's "founding document", the seal of a "partnership". That the treaty means one thing to Maori (that they have special status and rights) and another to conservative-minded Pakeha (that all New Zealanders have equal rights) rather reduces the force those engaged in this revival process want it to have; but the treaty has become a fact of our lives, a necessary piety to be observed and, more than that, something stitched into recent legislation requiring, often, consultation of "Maori interests" as distinct from simply "public interests".

New Zealand does not have a bad history, as such histories go, in dealings with its indigenous people. But whatever those chiefs understood by the treaty they put their marks to, one thing seems certain: they had welcomed Europeans for their trade, their tools (including guns), and their technology, but surely cannot have envisaged settlement on the scale that was to occur. There was, and there is still, plenty of land (New Zealand is roughly the size of the British Isles and has a population of 4 million); but an invasion on tiptoe was about to happen, and the Maori must soon have felt they were being swamped. By the 1860s, some tribes showed signs of resisting; but there was not a Maori nation that could speak or act with one voice. When one tribe opposed, another took the Pakeha side. They could win battles, but never the war. And in addition, European diseases, to which they had poor resistance, were killing large numbers of Maori. By late in the century the Maori were being described (wrongly) as "a dying race".

King doesn't avert his eyes from the damage, but prefers to emphasize the positives. The Maori population has increased and in recent years there has been what is referred to as a Maori renaissance – a reassertion of pride, language and culture.

But the fact remains that, considered collectively, they have taken a huge blow and are still at the wrong end of most social statistics: health, education, employment, crime. Improvements are being made. The Waitangi Tribunal, set up in 1975, has sat in more or less permanent session, hearing claims (largely unchallenged by the Crown) for compensation for past wrongs. Large payments have been made to individual tribes (\$170 million to Tainui, the same to Ngai Tahu). Maori collectively have been awarded rights to, and returns on, 20 per cent of the country's huge fishing industry. There is acknowledgement of customary rights exclusive to Maori; there are positive discrimination, special scholarships, Maori health initiatives, "cultural safety" courses, re-education programmes for puzzled, uncomprehending or otherwise reluctant Pakeha. Out of all this is emerging a Maori middle class who sometimes seem, however, as indifferent as their Pakeha counterparts to that significant percentage of Maori who remain at the bottom of the heap.

One of the difficulties is simply the question one is not supposed to ask, but which is unavoidable in a society with so much intermarriage: what is a Maori? I have Maori (it is considered insulting to say "part-Maori") nieces who have special rights and no more need of them than my Pakeha nieces. Logically that is wrong, and easy for a politician like the current leader of the National Party, Dr Don Brash, to exploit. Yet the outcome of these policies does, overall and over time, seem to be very slowly correcting imbalances – and in the meantime we are not harming one another or coming to blows. Perhaps Andrew Marvell's wisdom is relevant: "For Men may spare their pains where Nature is at work, / and the world will not go the faster for our driving".