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Embossed in the land: auto/biography of place

Abstract:

The land sings its history but to hear it, you have to listen. And, like a cypher, it needs decoding. The voices and footsteps of the past are embossed in the landforms; submerged and subsumed, yet never entirely eradicated. Deep in the soils of the past, the seeds of the future are already unfurling. Using psychogeographic motifs, this presentation is an experiment in constructing a biography of place – and through that, an autobiography of people for, as John Steinbeck asked, ‘How will we know it’s us without our past?’ The exploration begins with a mossy bench beneath a tree in a New Zealand bay where the pulse of other times beats strong. This bench serves as a tardis and, using images of the surrounding landforms and manmade features, the journey traverses time in rapid fast-forward, from the instigating stratovolcano through to the present via tales of the creatures and peoples who successively inhabited the land. This telescoping of time reveals how history continually folds back on itself in waves of creation, invasion and extinction. Yet the focus is not only on the past for echoes of the vanished presage what is to come and provide glimpses of futures. And through this excavation of place, the topography of self is revealed.

Biographical note:

Zana Bell has had six novels published internationally across a range of genres. Her short stories and articles have also been published widely and her creative work has won awards and grants. She grew up in Zimbabwe and is currently undertaking a PhD at AUT University to address issues of identity, migration, colonisation and postcolonial fallout from a feminine perspective.

Keywords:

Naming – migration/colonisation – identity – erasure – reparation

Introduction

There is a place not far from my house, a bench under the shade of a pūriri tree. From here you can see the wide embrace of the Whangarei harbour. Across the water is Marsden Point; New Zealand's great fuelling depot. It is an ungainly sprawl of storage tanks and tall chimneys which belch smoke. Yet at night it is a Disney city of fairy lights and towers. In front of the bench is a hill which looks like it was once a pā; now it is speckled with tumbled concrete walls and swamped in kikuyu grass. Behind the bench is Mt. Aubrey, and behind this small mountain is the magnificent Mt. Manaia. Both wear rocky crowns but Manaia's height and powerful flanks are the great voice to Aubrey's echo. They are cloaked with Northland forests which are home to the tui, the kererū wood pigeon and the pīwakawaka fantail. At night the cries of kiwi and ruru owl punctuate the silence.

It is as beautiful here on a pearl grey winter evening as it is on a sun-spangled day. Yet there is more to this place than mere beauty for when I sit here, I feel the pulse of other times. The land sings its history but to hear it, you have to stay still. You must listen. And, like a cypher, it needs decoding. The footsteps of the past are embossed in the landforms; submerged and subsumed, yet never entirely eradicated. For like Russian dolls, we are places within places, times within times. Deep in the soils of the past, the seeds of the future are already unfurling.

So join me on this bench to construct a biography of place – and through that, the New Zealand autobiography for, as John Steinbeck asked, 'How will we know it's us without our past?' (cited in Lippard 1997: 42). Using the trees, the rocks, the ruins, we will turn this spot into a tardis, dissolving time to visit not only that which has vanished but also to pierce the waters of the present, like a periscope, to glimpse the future.

The harbour and mountains

Let us start with the land. It was not, of course, always like this. Seventeen odd million years ago this harbour didn't exist. Instead one huge stratovolcano, fifty kilometres in diameter, bestrode this scene, its summit wreathed in clouds. It is impossible to imagine the mythical proportions of the eruption that blew this mountain to smithereens. It must have blasted the heavens as it literally rent the earth asunder. Today, little remains. Its footprint is drowned in the outer harbour waters. Manaia, Aubrey, Bream Head and the outlying islands are the crusted remains of the wrecked crater.

When our volcano erupted in the Miocene era, New Zealand had already been floating independent of Gondwanaland for forty-five million years. Millennia heaped upon millennia but let us hurry past for it is our own history that preoccupies us. Suffice to say the Triassic Period was overtaken by the Jurassic Period which was swallowed by the Cretaceous Period. Dinosaurs flourished in other parts of the world. Down here, we had dinosaur fish. During this time too, the skeletal fragments of marine organisms were settling and compressing into thick layers that would eventually turn to limestone.

We will likewise fast forward through the Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Stone and Bronze ages. Chinese dynasties, Egyptian Pyramids, and Aztec civilisations have no part in this story. Yet, over this time the forests of New Zealand were growing lush and deep, the colossus kauri dominating the landscape. Birds ruled the land and grew cocky, some even forgetting how to fly. Moa were as confident of their place in the world as any dinosaur had been and the giant moa was remarkable, the females growing to twelve feet in height and 250 kg in weight. Happily for the moa that once feasted here they had no natural enemies for the gigantic Haast eagle patrolled southern skies.

Did their heads lift in surprise when, one day, two-legged creatures such as they had never seen before, arrived seemingly out of the sea? There was no time for fear or cunning to become imprinted in their DNA. Within a comparatively short time, moa were wiped from the world. But nothing ever completely disappears and these days you can see moa skeletons at the Whangarei Museum.

The pā

The Māori settled into Aotearoa, christening the landforms. The commanding mountain became Manaia, the bays granted such names as Taurikura and Parua. The Māori cleared the land and tucked kūmara into blankets of earth. They fished the waters and dug mussels from the rocks. They fashioned their lives out of the land itself; in the cabbage trees they saw homes, in the flax they saw baskets, skirts, and mats. The unfamiliar sounds of waiata, karakia and haka mingled in the winds with the birdsong. The elders told stories about the land, making sense of the strange, making familiar the unfamiliar. In particular, they wove myths about Mt Manaia. In this way, the Māori put their roots deep into the soil; their tales tethering them to the land. Time was measured in the wheeling of the stars, the phases of the moon, in the seasons and in their whakapapa.

Birds were plentiful so the Māori feasted well. But these new arrivals were not the only predators: they also brought rats and dogs. Between them all, they succeeded in putting a dent into the birdlife. Let us therefore pause for a roll call of a few of the departed in Aotearoa:

Adzebill

Bush, coastal and giant moa

Haast Eagle

New Zealand geese

Waitaka penguin

Then, one day, a waka such as they'd never seen before sailed into the harbour. James Cook recorded the moment in his diary.

25 November 1769. We had no sooner come to an anchor, than we caught between 90 and 100 Bream (a fish so called). This occasioned my giving this place the name of Bream Bay (Cook, 1893 cited in McManaway 1983: 5).

What did the Māori make of these strange arrivals whose eyes could be the colour of sky or leaves, whose hair could be the colour of the sun? No doubt they were also considerably shorter and smellier. These curious fellows did not linger and very soon the bellied sails of their ship dissolved into the horizon. Their visit must have seemed as ephemeral as their wake. But though the tangata whenua did not know it, Aotearoa had another name now and the thin markings on paper were sufficient to bring adventurers, whalers and sealers from all over the world.

The inhabitants of the pā become accustomed to these incomers and on the whole dealings appear amicable, trade benefiting both. Yet there were threats to the pā that came from within Aotearoa itself. Samuel Marsden describes a scene on 1 November 1820.

The inhabitants at Wangaree are very numerous at present. The harbour abounds with the finest fish of various kinds, which were hung up in all directions upon the shores. Some of the natives appeared to be drying for future use. They were all in a state of alarm on account of the fighting parties who were outraging the country in different directions. (Elder 1932: 309).

It appears their fears were not unfounded for a few years later, Dumont d'Urville wrote,

While I was admiring the beauty of the scene all round us, and its flourishing vegetation, I was astonished by the silence that reigned on all sides and the absence of any human being on such fertile soil. But I recalled the war-like habits of Zealanders and particularly the wars of extermination that the peoples of the North wage every year....In fact, while prowling about in the neighbourhood, I soon discovered, under the rough growth that covered the soil, the scattered remains of many huts. A village had once stood on this hill and its inhabitants had been wiped out or had fled into the interior. (cited in McManaway 1983: 6)

It is hard to imagine the terror of those massacres. In the end the area was deemed tapu and no Māori would live within the shadow of Manaia.

Our ruined pā fell silent. It drowned in the sun as palisades and homes returned to the earth, the pits filling in with progressive winter rains. Ships from across the world still dropped by. Charles Heaphy painted Manaia during his sojourn 1855-60 and I like to imagine the artist nibbling on the end of his paintbrush as he hesitated over his palette. It is hard now to separate the mountain from its myths.

McLeod Bay.

In 1858, a new invasion began. It had its roots in the land clearances of Scotland earlier in the century when a firebrand minister, Norman McLeod, was driven out of his homeland along with his followers. They sought peace in Nova Scotia and where they lived for thirty years until a devastating potato famine forced them out. In six ships they traversed the world, coming finally to find sanctuary on these shores. They had written to the New Zealand Governor to ask for land where their Gaelic

community could stay together. It is also said they especially requested vacant land, having felt the pain of eviction themselves.

And so the land played host to a new people and they too began naming so these days Urquhart Bay and McLeod Bay bookend Taurikura and Reotahi. Manaia's smaller companion became known as Mt. Aubrey.

The sunny flats and lower slopes were cleared for farming and once again, foreign crops took root and flourished. Wharves protruded into the harbour. The Gaelic settlers saw the forests with different eyes. In the towering kauri they saw spars and masts, houses and furniture. The beaches became filled with the immense trees, toppled from the mountains above and dragged down onto the flats which they had overlooked for centuries. Here the logs were bound together, slaves to commerce, and towed away. Fortunately, parts of the mountains proved too steep and nowadays when you look up at Manaia you will still see the plumages of kauri which escaped this purge.

Cows, horses, sheep and cats arrived. Over time, stoats, ferrets, and possums also made their way to these forests and began their devastation of both birds and trees. Yet the past gave to the present for the Nova Scotians dug deep for the kauri gum buried in the remnants of ghost forests. They also quarried the limestone created so long ago. A god-fearing, education-loving people, they built a tiny church and school. Gaelic was the *lingua franca* and the sounds of bagpipes, hymns and folk songs filled the air.

Time was corralled in a different way in New Zealand. Days divided into hours and minutes, cycles into weeks, months and years. And so we come to the twentieth century but before we continue, let us bend our heads in remembrance of just some of the birds that have disappeared subsequent to the arrival of Europeans.

Huia

Laughing owl

Bush wren

Piopio

North Island takahe

The freezing works

It's hard to imagine but one hundred years ago this quiet corner was a thriving freezing works, built on the ruins of the pā. Those broken concrete walls over there, swallowed by kikuyu, once stood tall and were roofed in steel, seemingly invincible. Ships tied up at that wharf, now broken-backed and gap-toothed. The carpark was once a community with a street of tidy homes, a boarding house and tennis courts.

The air must have vibrated with noise in those days. There would have been the lowing of cows, the shouts of men, the clank and whine of early twentieth century machinery. The waters ran red with the blood and offal and became a favourite haunt

for sharks. The stench must have been appalling but good livelihoods were being made. Then, unexpectedly, one hot summer's day in 1921 the freezing works burnt down.

There was nothing to stay for. Families packed up and moved out. The houses were removed, the roads disappeared and kikuyu, that newly introduced immigrant from Africa, moved in to swamp the remains in the dense shaggy pelt. The waters began clearing and the sharks returned to their old haunts. Birdsong (though vastly diminished) could once again be heard. But again, the past murmurs to us. Just beyond these ruined works there is a tiny plateau of grassland – garden sized. A lone peach tree, bearded in moss, stands in what surely must have been a kitchen garden.

The gun emplacement.

It is quaint these days, to see the gun emplacement over in Urquhart Bay, built in the early days of the war. It seems fanciful now yet the Germans were down here. On 19 June 1940 there was a muffled boom just out beyond Bream Head, as a German sea-mine tore the bottom out of the *RMS Niagara*. The *Niagara*, a fabulous luxury liner, had been launched in 1912 and originally nicknamed the *Titanic of the Pacific*. After April 1912 it was quickly changed to the less ominous *Queen of the Pacific*. The name change did not save the ill-fated ship. Fortunately, there was no loss of life but the huge ship was sent to the ocean floor, loaded with gold bullion en route to Canada to help fund the war.

A salvage operation was set up and a New Zealand/Australian team of divers fought cold, ripping currents and cloying silt in the deepest diving ever attempted in the world. They risked their lives many days and eventually salvaged 555 gold bars, finishing up on 7 December 1941 – the day Pearl Harbour was bombed. It is believed there are still five more down there. Fishermen say on calm days the waters above *Niagara's* grave have an oily aspect from the ghost particles of her leaked fuel.

The present

The second half of the century unravelled at a great rate. Aeroplanes began to streak the sky and the world moved closer. Rock 'n' roll invaded the airways. Suddenly coastal property became desirable, prices rocketed and huge houses began replacing tiny cottages. Fields have been replaced by subdivisions with names like *Neptune's Way* and houses are beginning to creep up the lower slopes of Manaia and Aubrey. The school continues to do well. Congregation numbers have dwindled but the church is used for many weddings, many funerals. Bagpipes are sometimes brought in for these occasions and they sound like they belong here.

And the plunder of the lands and water has continued. Dredging ripped up ancient scallop beds and even though it has now banned, old-timers shake their heads and say the beds are not what they once were. It is also possible to go out fishing and return empty-handed. Yet so many moves to restrict or to preserve are met with violent

opposition and angry declarations of loss of rights. It may be that extinction is a part and parcel of existence but we have already seen the devastation humans can wreck.

On the pristine beaches of Ruakaka, Marsden Point – that ugly fuelling depot - was opened in 1964. Little did Reverend Marsden know, as he travelled by waka down these waters, how his name would one day be appropriated. A forestry port has gone in beside Marsden Point and it is worked night and day. The rumble of logs tumbling into steel hulls carries across the harbour and the port's huge lights dim the brilliance of the stars.

There are twenty-one birds are on the country's critical list including the fairy tern which nests just across the harbour and the kākāpō which used to populate our forests so plentifully. The fates of the Hector and Maui dolphin seem almost sealed.

Reparation

This is not an unmitigated tale of plunder and loss however; there are heartening initiatives. The reserve we are sitting in is one of them. The forests on the mountain slopes are finally protected. Bream Head was classified as a mainland island and has become a successful area for kiwi release. It is estimated there must be over 500 kiwi in the area now. In 1990, there were fewer than 100. A marine reserve has been established just around the corner and the world famous Poor Knight Islands are only just up the coast.

So is it possible to roll back the damage, so much of which was done in the past two centuries? It is hoped so. Science fiction – that precursor to so much of what finally comes to pass – begins to creep in. Scientists are confident that we will soon be able to clone extinct species from fragments of DNA. Those moa bones in the museum may be the cradle of new life. Will scientists play God: will there be a Lazarus rising of extinct species? Will my children – might I! – ever see the huia in the skies above? But would farmers curse marauding giant moa for stealing precious pasture? Can moa eat kikuyu? And surely no-one would be foolhardy enough to raise the Haast eagle from its coffin, glorious sight though it would be. It may all sound fanciful but the technology is within reach and time and time again, we have seen the ramifications of meddling with nature.

Which brings us to global warming. Will coconut trees flourish among the pōhutukawa? Will the seas rise to drown this area? Years ago I worked on a Greek archaeological site. Half the village was submerged beneath the Mediterranean. Then it seemed fantastical, peering into the watery depths, to think of drowned houses and streets. But this afternoon we have already witnessed the eradication of several communities. If we could spiral up from our bench, rise high like kites to look down on the future, would we see the chimneys of Marsden poking out of the water, as forlorn as the posts of the abandoned wharf in front of us?

My garden

This morning I went outside and perched on the steps of the deck. Mist draped Manaia's dragon-jagged ridge. The garden is like a screen print made up of a myriad of layers, folding one upon the other, the exotic bedding down with the native. The olives are beginning to purple, the lavender is past its prime. The cabbage trees and nikau rear high. Sitting in the jacaranda is a tui with its tumbling song. The mynah's harsh cry sets up in opposition. I don't know when the mynah was introduced or when the first jacaranda tree was planted. All I know is that they are here to stay.

I am not tangata whenua nor am I descended from the Nova Scotian settlers. I'm a johnny-come-lately, hailing from the same country as the kikuyu and I'm alive to the irony. Yet I am pleased that Manaia is the mountain of my children and that the Whangarei harbour is their water. For over twenty-five years I have swum and kayaked in the bays, and explored the forests. I know this place better than anywhere else I've lived. And this reserve, with this particular bench, is especially precious to me for it is here that I find the story of the land onto which I graft myself. Just as the Māori used myth to meld themselves into their new world, I use stories to crochet myself into the earth. I acknowledge my cuckoo status but for me, home is not where I've come from but where I've come to. In this wide tapestry of history, I'm content to be a loose thread.

Our relationship to land is complex. It shapes us even as we are shaping it. To be considered indigenous, says writer and activist Lucy Lippard (1997: 33), a people have to have been inhabitants for thousands of years. You need to have been in a place a few centuries to be considered a native. Twenty-five years qualifies me as a mere local. However, stewardship of the land and the water belongs to us all. Each of us has a responsibility to protect for we have seen how quickly things are lost. Yet I know too my life will soon blow away, as unremarkable as the autumn leaves in my garden. We come, then simply vanish. It is what we leave behind as a people that finally counts.

Long after we have gone, Manaia will continue to preside and the tides will rise and fall. But what, we must ask ourselves, will remain?

Glossary of Māori terms.

(Adapted from the Māori Dictionary: <http://maoridictionary.co.nz/>)

Aotearoa: Māori name for New Zealand. Popularly translated as land of the long white cloud

Haka: vigorous dances with actions and rhythmically shouted words. A general term for several types of such dances.

karakia: incantation, ritual chant, chant, intoned incantation, - a set form of words to state or make effective a ritual activity.

kūmara: sweet potato

manaia: a mythical creature and is a common motif in Māori carving. According to some accounts, the manaia is a guardian because it is able to cross from the spiritual world to the human world.

pā fortified village, fort

tangata whenua local people, hosts, indigenous people

tapu: sacred, prohibited, restricted, set apart, forbidden

taurikura: prosperous, at peace, undisturbed

waiata: song

waka: canoe, boat

whakapapa: genealogy, genealogical table, lineage, descent

whare: house, dwelling

Research Statement

Research Background

The research focuses on a small, sparsely populated locale, sprinkled with natural and historical markers, and explores the symbiosis of the land and its history in shaping, and being shaped by, its inhabitants. Drawing on Foucault's archaeological discourse (1969) and Benjamin's 'scavenger' (1999), this microhistory stitches together scattered historical fragments to discover not only a biography of country but also an autobiography of people (Lippard 1997).

Research Contribution

The psychogeographic approach is transferred to a rural setting to discover meaning within landforms, flora and fauna, and remnants of past communities. The arbitrariness of these markers challenges traditional, macro-historical approaches as does the tone which draws upon mythic and elegiac cadences. The 'telescoping' of millennia reveals successive waves of creation, invasion and extinction which, in turn, create resonant ripples that amplify individual tales, linking them not only to each other but also to national and global contexts. Minor players are centre stage and the construct of autobiography is a means of bringing these peoples close to discover commonalities which can inform a personal understanding of identity.

Research Significance

While the issues of identity and belonging reside at the heart of the microhistory, a core purpose of the research is to posit the notion of individual responsibility; both in the local participation of past events and in the collective shaping of varying, possible global futures.

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