

A Fraction Too Much Friction

Heritage Dissonance and the Whiteley Memorial

Paulette Wallace teases out the issues that surfaced in an instance of contested heritage in Taranaki, offering us an object lesson in the value of openness to multiple perspectives and inclusive discussion.

A TOUCHY SUBJECT

'Heritage' is a slippery term to define. Historically it has been associated with inheritance and private heirlooms, but more recently the term has been connected with notions of collective identity. In the acclaimed book that examines the rise of a crusade-like obsession with tradition and inheritance, David Lowenthal observes that, Heritage more and more denotes what we jointly hold with others – the blessings (and curses) that belong to and largely define a group (1998, p. 60). Yet what happens around the edges of this group, where there is conflict between those who do, and do not, conform to this joint relationship? My dissertation for my Masterate in Museum and Heritage Studies at Victoria University focussed on this grey area, on the ambivalence of heritage, particularly on the idea that heritage is frequently contested. My research considered how we might understand the contested values that lie behind the loss of historic heritage in post-colonial New Zealand, with a focus on the Whiteley Memorial in North Taranaki. The research moved beyond circular debates about inheritance and exclusion, to draw attention to the plurality of historic heritage in New Zealand today.

THE WHITELEY MEMORIAL

The source of friction at the centre of my study was a large stone cairn - the Whiteley Memorial, erected in 1923 to honour Methodist Missionary John Whiteley. Whiteley was killed in an incident in the final stages of the Taranaki Wars, when he chanced upon a Ngati Maniopoto taua plundering the remote Pukearuhe redoubt in February 1869 (Wallace, 2008, pp. 24-25). Whiteley and seven others were killed, and a memorial was erected by Trustees of the Methodist Church near the site of Whiteley's death. However, the location of the memorial on a former Ngati Tama pa site, which had been occupied by British troops since 1865 and then confiscated from Ngati Tama for the purposes of a scenic and then historic reserve, helps to explain how the memorial became the focus of such intense feeling. The return of the land on which the memorial sat to tangata whenua, as part of the Ngati Tama Claims Settlement Act 2003, spurred a rigorous re-evaluation of the significance of the memorial, and prompted intense debate about different notions of the past and the ways



Figure 1: The Whiteley Memorial, before its destruction. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: RON LAMBERT, COLLECTION PUKE ARIKI, NEW PLYMOUTH

in which it is presented in the present (Wallace, 2008, pp. 21-25). Different groups – Maori and Pakeha, the church and the local community – made claims for and against the memorial. The conflicting perspectives on the significance of the memorial projected Whiteley in various guises: pious missionary, government spy, and simply a man of his time (Wallace, 2008, p. 21). For many, the memorial was a site of commemoration of the deeds of Reverend John Whiteley, to others, the historic reserve and memorial were central to their understanding of the Pukearuhe landscape. While it was also believed that the site of the Whiteley Memorial was a place of grievance for Ngati Tama, who felt that their heritage was being obscured by a memorial to a man whose Character seems to have changed over time, especially when it comes to things Maori and the Treaty...Maori of that time obviously thought he didn't deserve to live' (Wallace, 2008, p.38).

The Methodist Church was aware of Ngati Tama's antipathy towards the memorial and approached the Department of Conservation (DOC) for advice back in May 1995. DOC administered the Pukearuhe Historic Reserve on behalf of the Crown, but staff were unsure of how to proceed, and did not want to pre-empt any Waitangi Tribunal decisions (Wallace, 2008, p. 26). This lack of guidance left the Superintendent of the New Plymouth Methodist Parish to conclude that consistent with the spirit of the bi-cultural journey commenced by the Methodist Church of New Zealand in 1983, that the memorial be either removed or dismantled (Wallace, 2008, p. 26).

Another 10 years of simmering discontent passed before the Church decided to act. During this time the *Taranaki Report: Kaupapa Tuatahi* released in 1996, found that there was no evidence that Ngati Tama had been involved in any part of the Taranaki Wars, and that the confiscation of the whole of North Taranaki was not only contrary to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, but unlawful in terms of the confiscation legislation itself. The report even mentioned Reverend John Whiteley, associating his role in the Waitara purchase with the misdoings of the Governor Thomas Gore Brown and Robert Reid Parris, Civil Commissioner in charge of Native Affairs (Wallace, 2008, p. 34). Interestingly, only a year after the release of the *Taranaki Report*, the 'Whiteley Memorial Church' became the 'New Plymouth Methodist Centre', and in 2004 Reverend Alan Upson was quoted in the *Taranaki Daily News* as saying that 'the church acknowledged Ngati Tama's right to receive the land [Pukearuhe Historic Reserve] free of any

encumbrance' and that 'the iwi could have just toppled it [the memorial] but they consulted us' (Wallace, 2008, p.27).

In September 2006, the Methodist Church surreptitiously removed the Whiteley Memorial's plaque. The Church felt harassed by the local newspaper, and wanted to decommission the memorial away from public scrutiny. They did not have the funds to remove the whole memorial, and after removing the plaque, gave permission to Ngati Tama to dismantle the stone memorial as they saw fit. From here a group associated with Ngati Tama demolished the Whiteley Memorial with sledgehammers (Wallace, 2008, pp. 27-28). The



Figure 2: The Whiteley Memorial, as a 'sorry pile of rubble'. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: KAREN ASTWOOD, JANUARY 2007

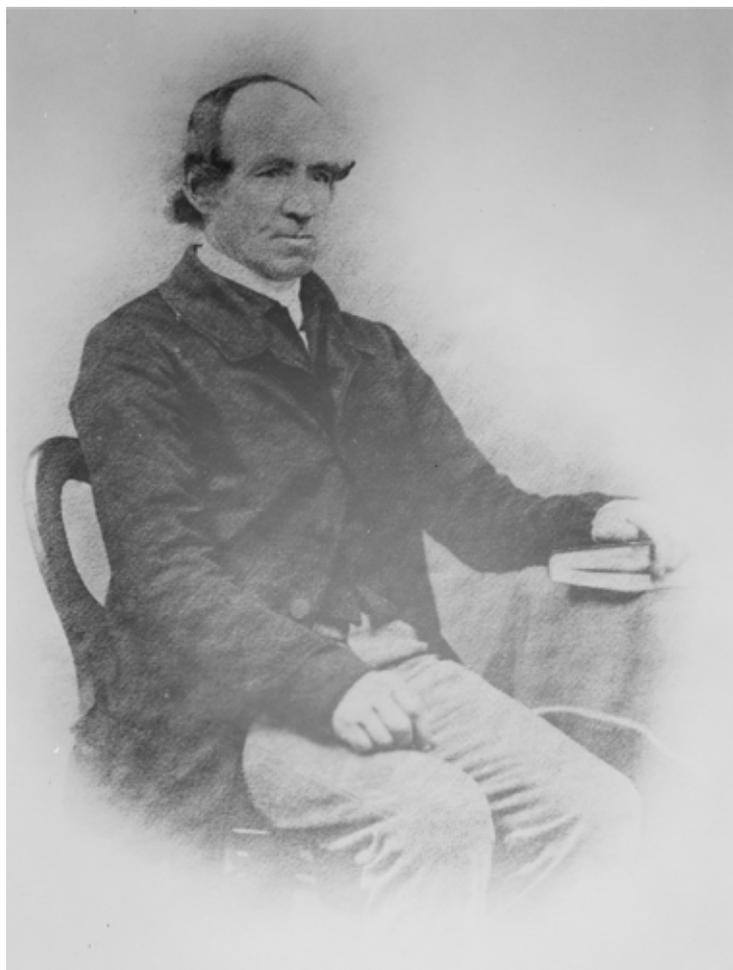


Figure 3: Reverend John Whiteley. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: COLLECTION PUKE ARIKI, NEW PLYMOUTH

Church's decision to keep the whole affair quiet only fuelled the hyped-up headlines of the *Taranaki Daily News* which in turn intensified the friction amongst people of north Taranaki.

TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

A broad understanding of what constitutes historic heritage, taking into account both the tangible and intangible, assisted me to unpack the contested values behind the loss of the Whiteley Memorial. Formal definitions and ideas of heritage have tended to focus on material culture, on the buildings, the archives, monuments and landscapes. However, Gerard Corsane suggests that more recently, the museum and heritage sector is being encouraged to expand its notion of what heritage is in order to take account of intangible cultural heritage (2005, p. 6). At the 32nd of the UNESCO General Conference in 2003 the *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* was adopted that defined intangible cultural heritage as:

the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity... (Corsane, 2005, p. 6).

Implicit throughout my study were the interconnections between the intangible – *practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills* – and the tangible – *instruments, objects and artefacts and cultural spaces*. Through key informant interviews, I examined the strongly held conflicting views that surfaced in a very tangible way – in the destruction of the Whiteley Memorial.

HERITAGE DISSONANCE

In considering the ambivalence of intangible cultural heritage, the most sustained attempt to conceptualise the contestation of heritage and its repercussions is to be found in Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge's examination of what they term 'heritage dissonance'. Heritage dissonance refers to, 'the discordance or lack of agreement and consistency as to the meaning of

heritage' (2005, p. 34). It is a condition in which there is a lack of congruence at a particular time or place between people and the heritage with which they identify. Graham et al. continue by noting that, 'the creation of any heritage actively or potentially disinherits or excludes those who do not subscribe to, or are embraced within, the terms of meaning defining that heritage' (2005, p. 34). The idea of heritage dissonance suggests that heritage can fulfil several inherently opposing uses at once and can carry conflicting meanings simultaneously. Ashworth and Hartmann warn against concluding that dissonance is an inevitable condition whose consequences must be passively borne rather than actively avoided. 'If all heritage is created by deliberate action, they write, then impacts are not only in principle manageable, there is an implicit responsibility to engage in such management' (Ashworth & Hartman, 2005, p. 254).

MANAGING HERITAGE DISSONANCE

Interviews with five North Taranaki locals involved in the Whiteley Memorial conflict underlined the need for broad discussions early on, and for effective open communication to be integral in historic heritage management. David Musker is a member of Save Our Sites (SOS), a local group established in response to the threat to the Whiteley Memorial, and he is also a life long member of the Methodist Church (Wallace, 2008, p.33). In interview discussions with the author, Musker suggested the efforts made by SOS were too late. In dismay he noted:

I think it was just an unfortunate chain of events... I was vaguely aware this was in the pipeline, but I didn't do anything soon enough... It would have had to have gone right back to the discussions with Ngati Tama in the Treaty settlements for it to have been effective (Wallace, 2008, p. 43).

If attempts to manage the Whiteley Memorial conflict had been initiated at the first sign of friction, then perhaps there would have been greater opportunities for the people with contested values to meet and reason with each other in order to reach a mutually agreeable solution. The interview discussions showed that in the intense climate of opposition between those who wanted the Whiteley Memorial removed and those who wanted it to remain, two of the interviewees wished they had taken the time for earlier discussions. Musker mentioned that he, 'became aware there was something afoot about the Whiteley memorial...' He recalls:

I had some inkling but I can't remember, just when it was. That's when I said earlier that in hindsight I'm sorry that I didn't have a talk with Steve White because I haven't got much contact with Maori, and you know, Maori perspective – that would have been valuable (Wallace, 2008, p. 43).

Interestingly, Greg White, spokesperson for Ngati Tama, also noted:

Probably the only thing I would do differently would be that I would go and talk to people like – I heard David Musker's name mentioned and I have read a couple of his articles in the paper and I respect his view on the world, I don't think he had anything vindictive in his opposition in terms of the removal (Wallace, 2008, p. 43).

Both Musker and White said that they wished that they had made more of an effort to discuss the issues early on with those who had differing opinions about the future of the Whiteley Memorial. It is not to say that this dialogue would have solved everything, or that the Whiteley Memorial would be still standing today, yet this interaction between the groups may have generated more understanding, as the various groups would have been aware of the reasoning behind the positions of others (Wallace, 2008, pp.64-65).

AFTER THE DUST HAD SETTLED

In a letter of response to my dissertation, Musker considered the divergent stances by my interviewees, and noted:

that had the Methodist Church considered its wider responsibilities to the whole parish and district, and to the early supporters countrywide who supported the erection of the memorial in the first place, rather than the somewhat narrow and perhaps doctrinaire adherence to its 'Bicultural Journey' a compromise could without too much difficulty been achieved.

Apart from Murray and Pat Wells [neighbours of the former Pukearuhe historic reserve], I doubt that there were many people in north Taranaki who were aware that Ngati Tama, at least the White family, found “cultural offence”. Earlier, I was not aware that the memorial was on an historical pa site (D. Musker, personal communication, August, 2008).

This is further indication that dialogue at an early stage in the Whiteley Memorial conflict would have given the interested parties an avenue in which to engage constructively before their positions became too deeply entrenched.

What is explicit about the Whiteley Memorial case study is that this kind of conflict does not have clear right/wrong, good/bad answers. Instead it is a matter of finding balance between conflicting yet legitimate values. The research highlighted the significance of taking into

account the special meanings that people attach to heritage places and suggests that these meanings should be taken into account and engaged with in the early stages of historic heritage management in New Zealand.

Musker also suggested in his letter that, ‘wrecking the monument neither alters history nor obliterates the injustices of the earlier land confiscation’ (D. Musker, personal communication, August, 2008), which brings us back to the tangible and intangible. While the Whiteley Memorial has been reduced to a ‘sorry pile of rubble’, the case study clearly demonstrates that a tangible expression of heritage, like the memorial, is valued because of its intangible associations. The worth attributed to historic heritage rests less in its intrinsic merit than in a complex array of contemporary values. Therefore it is the ‘complex array of contemporary values’ that needs closer examination. If we do not take the time to engage with these values, there is the risk that New Zealand will lose even more of the tangible remnants of its past. Musker concluded his letter by noting:

Times and people change, but it is essential that markers such as the Whiteley Memorial be preserved. The people’s history and events can subsequently be debated and dissected until kingdom come, but the memorial is an essential marker of its time (D. Musker, personal communication, August, 2008).

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