

The method employed in this intervention is an active performance in writing, using the voice of a docent, who guides a small party of the curious, and possibly bewildered, on a walking tour of Auckland's inner-city monuments. The subject of what gets commissioned, created, and installed under the general heading of a public monument can be placed within the context of the recent and continuing range of disputes and confrontations about monuments—Rhodes in England and South Africa, Civil War statues in the United States, Cook in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article attempts a mediation (not to be misread as a 'meditation') of the messages a selection of Auckland's city monuments send out on a daily basis, subliminal as some of them are. The intention is to carry out a 'close reading' of Auckland's monuments and, hopefully, to alter the wave-length of the light in which the city is bathed.

Watch Them Closely: Auckland's Inner-City Monuments

MURRAY EDMOND

Welcome to the city. I am your docent for today. Welcome aboard. He waka eke noa—at least for the duration of the tour.

Considering what his next move might be . . .

The first person you meet, when you get off the ferry from Devonport, is Captain Cook. Kāpene Kuki. Okay, you don't really *meet* him, you have to turn left, and left again, and head down to the end of Queen's Wharf, to Michael Parekowhai's sculpture, Tū Whenua a Kura or The Lighthouse, inside which you will find Kuki. But meeting him is difficult. He's inside a house and you can look through the windows at him, and there he is, sitting on a bench in front of a fireplace, like Gulliver among the Lilliputians in polished stainless steel. You can knock on the double-glazed windows, but he won't look up. Parekowhai described him as 'pensive . . . thoughtful, considering what his next move might be'.¹ He won't answer the door. Well, the door won't open. The Lighthouse certainly looks like a 1950s state house, but it isn't a house. It's a sculpture of a house. It's a kind of monument. As such, it becomes a text, to be read.

Parekowhai says of his work that it's 'a small house that

1 From the Auckland City Council monthly giveaway publication, *Tō Tātou Tāmaki Makaurau*, 10 February 2017. Further quotations from Parekowhai are from the same article.

holds the cosmos'. A whareniui is the same, from the ridge beam (tāhuhu) down to the floor, te papa, the architecture is an image of the cosmos: Rangi lies above in the heavens, Papa, below in the earth, and the heke, the rafters, are atua, the pou tahu signifying Tāne standing between, while the mortal ancestors, in the form of whakairo, line the pakitara. The house is also an image of the body, the ridge-beam its backbone, rafters the ribs. Parekowhai says further of his sculpture of a house that 'we have the whole world in our house' and that it is 'A house you can look into and see through'. Both 'look into' (= investigate) and 'see through' (= comprehend so as not to be fooled) have figurative (kupu whakarite) meanings in English. The Lighthouse is a mnemonic and a cypher. Robert Leonard has said of Parekowhai's sculpture that it is 'an odd alloy of craftiness and conceptualism'.²

The Lighthouse, when it was installed in 2017, came under fire for being incomprehensible and for being a waste of money (better to build a proper real house for proper poor people who need one), so its craft and concept proved confronting for the public. One might argue that public art needs to be noticed and that The Lighthouse did not fail in that. Other works of public art—monuments—may strike a pose of 'making sense' and 'giving value for money'; however, I don't think this exempts them from containing hidden elements of both 'craft' and of 'concept'. Another Pākehā hero from New Zealand history, Sir George Grey, Hori Kērei, stands in statue-form in Albert Park. Stiff, lifeless, white, and rather boring as that statue is, one feels that initially one can point at it and say: 'That's George Grey'. On Waitangi Day 1987, someone or someones came stealthily by and knocked his block off. The headless man they left behind was intended to tell us: 'And that's what he deserves!' Hori got it in the neck.

This is our land . . .

There's a long trail of obliterated and desecrated monuments. The delight of toppling Uncle Joe after 1956 in a number of countries must have been cherished at the time. Everybody pitched in to wipe out all trace of Saddam

2 Robert Leonard, 'Michael Parekowhai: The Empire of Light,' *Art Monthly Australasia*, no. 299 (2017): 69.

Hussein, so it really was a puzzle how he had managed to subjugate an entire country for so long on his lonesome. The Taliban blew up the Buddhas of Bamyān in 2001. In the mid-16th century those new-born beings the Protestants started smashing up everything in the Papist temples. When their descendants, the Protestant missionaries, reached the Pacific in the 19th century, they made bonfires of the pagan idols and chopped off vivid wooden penises. Images sure get people going.

There are two statues of Kāpene Kuki in Gisborne. The more recent, erected in 2000, located at the mouth of Tūranganui River is said to be close to where Cook first stepped across the beach, and is also said to bear a resemblance to the Cook Māori would have seen in 1769. In July 2019, he was decorated with the words 'Thief Pakeha' on one side and 'This is our land' on the other side. The other statue stood on Kaiti Hill in Titirangi Reserve, overlooking the town of Gisborne. This statue, in 1990, the sesquicentennial of te Tiriti o Waitangi, was pushed off its pedestal and tumbled down the hill, only to be dusted off, uplifted, repaired, and put back on said pedestal. But now, no more. Kuki has been removed and put in safe-keeping in the Tairāwhiti Museum, until his fate can be decided. In his place, Nick Tupara's sculpture representing Te Maro, who was shot dead by a member of Cook's crew in the first moments of that meeting between Māori and Pākehā, was installed in September 2019, in a changing of the monumental guard.

The most interesting thing about the Kaiti Hill monument is what it is not. In some notable ways it is 'not' Cook. The statue is a figure wearing a late-18th or early 19th century Italian admiral's uniform. Cook would not have been seen dead in such threads and, indeed, he was well dead by the time anyone was wearing such clobber. It is most likely (though not entirely certain) that the bronze casting on Kaiti is a copy of a marble statue carved in Sydney in the 1880s by an Italian professional sculptor named Simonetti at the order of Captain Cook Breweries in Khyber Pass Road in Auckland and shipped across the Tasman to stand for many years as an edifice for that company, which eventually became part of Lion breweries. In fact, this Cook had long been one of Auckland's monuments, before he was shipped

off to Gisborne in 1969. Everybody says its marble face bears little or no resemblance to any contemporary portraits of Cook (which tend to look different from each other anyway).

So, this Cook is surely a fake Cook and his removal is justified on all counts. Not only as the initiator of colonisation, but also as an outrageous fraud. But hang on a minute, mate. Maybe the ex-Kaiti Hill Kuki is an ideal Pākehā representation of Cook? He stands for the bearer of the wai piro, with all that followed therefrom. In 1969, everybody got the job done on the cheap, no artist had to be paid for their services, and nothing could satisfy Pākehā ratepayers more than a council doing something on the cheap. And nobody had a clue about the actual history anyway—18th-century British navy captain, 19th-century Italian admiral, it's all just the olden days, isn't it? And who cares if Kuki never climbed up Kaiti Hill, what does that matter, it's just a hill, isn't it? Yes, the Italian brewery admiral really might have a story to tell about us Pākehā.

It's worth noting that the presence of Kuki in Michael Parekowhai's Lighthouse has not caused any controversy. Even the gods forbore. In August 2019, Tāwhirimātea (in the form of a tornado) ripped the fabric shell of the 2011 Rugby World Cup 'Cloud' entertainment centre to shreds, but that atua did not touch The Lighthouse directly adjacent.

It is the beginning of . . .

Attacks on monuments highlight their ambiguous nature, almost, one might say, their two-faced nature. The good statue hammerers (Ngā Upokohua, they called themselves) know that the day after, when Governor Grey stands headless in the park, the outrage will be substantial, the photo will be in the paper, the case will be before the world. However, the act of hammering a stone object, despite the reasons for it being excellent (for example, Grey's 1863 invasion of the Waikato, the battles that followed, and the subsequent land grab and its effects: land loss, cultural brutalisation, economic marginalisation, corralling of an urban working class, massive over-representation in prisons, and poorer health in the Māori population), is not going to alter the enduring legacies of that period of colonisation.

After the tough battles of protest action, which often take years and decades, change then needs to be installed, and such legislative action can be a tough battle as well—witness, for example, the response in 1985 of the French government to the New Zealand government's ban on nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed ships in 1984.

Art is not meaningless, everybody reads every monument, even if they think they do not. Perhaps the quick meaningless glance of the habituated passer-by could be seen as the most powerful reading, at least in terms of sustaining the status quo—'There it is, it's always been there, I don't know what it's about'. A monument is not just a thing, it's an idea, an abstraction, it's imbued with *ihī* and *wairua*, it's a representation, so it breaks down into parts, the part that points towards what is absent (the idea) and the part that pretends to look like something (the artifice). These double-headed monsters (monstrous monuments!), since they are composed not of flesh and blood, nor really of stone and steel and wood and iron, but of thought and form and memory, are actually much more malleable than they appear at first glance.

Elizabeth Bishop concludes her poem, 'The Monument,' with these lines (the 'it' refers to the monument of the poem's title, which the poem scrutinises):

It is the beginning of a painting,
or a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,
and all of wood. Watch it closely.³

Bishop points to the fact that any monument is constantly *being made into something*. In her poem, Bishop describes a mysterious monument, whose purpose and function are never made clear. First, in great detail, she describes the physical substance of the monument:

3 Elizabeth Bishop, 'The Monument,' in *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983), 23–25.

several boxes in descending sizes
 one above the other.
 Each is turned half-way round so that
 its corners point towards the sides
 of the one below and the angles alternate.

Then she moves to describe the place where the monument stands: ‘one-third set against/a sea; two-thirds against a sky./The view is geared . . .’. A monument needs to be a thing, some kind of object. It needs to be situated in some place. And it needs to serve some purpose, which places it in relation to time (in memory of some figure who died) or event (it was here on this day): an ‘artist-prince/might have wanted to build a monument/to mark a tomb or boundary’. Time, character, and place are configured to perform a dramaturgy as a kind of mapping of the land. Sacred groves, shrines, and wāhi tapu mean that not every step you take on earth is of equal value. Some places you pass by rapidly; others you must not go; at some places you should pause to pray and clap and turn three times and ring the bell. Walking past the monuments becomes your dance—the monuments, taken together are a choreography and a dramaturgy of the city, as well as a history.

Definitely time we moved on . . .

We head for the city now where we shall see our next monument—if only it were there!

In front of the old Chief Post Office building you will see an enormous excavation for the underground rail system. This means that the Māori Chief sculpture, the work of Molly Macalister, that used to stand here, is presently absent. This figure is not a representation of any particular person who lived (though Macalister did draw upon some facial features of Hoani Waititi, the Māori leader and te reo teacher who died tragically young in 1965 and whose name graces the prototype urban marae on West Coast Road). Macalister was commissioned by the Auckland City Council to provide a ‘Māori Warrior’ to crouch in mock defiance at the bottom of

Queen Street. She began with drawings depicting a warrior in piupiu, with bare torso, taiaha in hand, thrusting forward, presenting a wero. But as she worked, dissatisfied with her own vision, and as she consulted extensively with Ngāti Whātua kaumātua (who had to write to the council to remind them of their 'unfortunate breach of Māori etiquette' in not consulting them), the work changed. It became more 'monumental'—the figure stood upright, it was draped in a full-length kaitaka. Over three-metres tall, the bronze expanse of cloth only hinting at the body beneath and the right arm emerging to grip a mere held against his thigh, the sculpture rose like a small mountain to the calm, implacable, and remote head gazing into an inward-looking far distance. When some city councilors saw this enigmatic figure of mana and dignity, they were furious—where was the tourist Māori with his tongue poking out that they had ordered? But it was one of those blessed occasions when art defeated the desire for the self-confirming, self-fulfilling cliché of the coloniser, and Macalister's sculpture was not rejected.

So, who is this? Macalister changed the 'name' of her work from Māori Warrior to Māori Chief. She wanted him to stand on ground level with his back to the post office, but, when he was installed in July 1967, he was stuck up on a plinth close to two-metres high and turned to face out to sea. His brooding mana was forced to assume a rather hollow grandeur on his lonely pedestal. At the beginning of 1969, Hone Tuwhare wrote one of his last poems before departing Auckland as an ode to the chief: 'To a Figure Cast in Bronze Outside the Chief Post Office, Auckland'.⁴ Though the poem seems to be dedicated with that 'To a Figure . . .' title, it is actually the chief, the statue, who speaks in the poem. Speculating that 'Maybe it was a Tory City Council that put me here', and pointing out, with reference to the newly designated Queen Elizabeth II Square, that 'They never consulted me about naming the Square', he declares himself 'all hollow inside with longing for the marae on/the cliff at Kohimarama, where you can watch the ships/come in curling their white moustaches'. By giving the statue a voice, Tuwhare reverses the impetus of the monument's

4 Hone Tuwhare, 'To a Maori Figure Cast in Bronze Outside the Chief Post Office, Auckland,' in *Sap-wood & Milk* (Dunedin: Caveman Press, 1973), 24.

intention. The ‘curling white moustaches’ become an image of colonial arrivals. The land was subject to the decimations of the Native Land Court from 1869 onwards, but the major land grab in relation to Takaparawhā Bastion Point itself occurred in 1886 when the government, fearing an invasion by Russia, seized 13 acres on the point to build a fort. By 1941 it had become clear that the Russians would not invade, but instead of returning the land to Ngāti Whātua, it was given to the Auckland City Council. After the city council had forcibly demolished the kāinga at Okahu Bay in the early 1950s, Ngāti Whātua were moved up to this cliff at Kohimarama. As a young boilermaker apprentice in the 1940s, Tuwhare had been one of a cohort of unionists who helped Te Puea in resisting efforts to ‘get those Maoris out of there’. With that poem now 50 years young, we can look back and remember the 506-day Takaparawhā Bastion Point struggle for mana whenua that eventually reclaimed that kāinga at the end of the 1970s.

In 2018, Ngāti Whātua themselves put forward a proposal for a monument, which is still under consideration, to stand on those cliffs of Takaparawhā a giant image of Papatūānuku. You would be able to see it from The Lighthouse down on Queen’s Wharf. The man considering his next move might look up and notice it.

Who the hell was he anyway? . . .

We arrive at our next monument at the end of a 15-minute stroll up Queen Street, only to find this monument is also absent: *monumentum absconditum*. Lord Auckland used to stand outside what used to be the civic administration building in Aotea Square, but he has recently been carted away because the asbestos-ridden old building is being stripped out and recreated as a tower block of inner-city apartments. The Hurricane fences are up, the lord has gone. On 17 June 2019, the *New Zealand Herald* published a piece in their business section by Anne Gibson, “‘Statue-napped’: The curious disappearance of Lord Auckland”, that told us the lord ‘is currently in storage pending the completion of works’. But who the hell was he anyway?

Auckland's monumental Lord Auckland in flesh-and-blood form was thrice lord of the admiralty and also governor of India from 1836 to 1842, long prior to Queen Victoria proclaiming herself empress of India. He launched and botched completely the first Anglo-Afghan War, suffering humiliating defeat by Dost Mohammed Khan. The statue stood in Calcutta from 1848 to 1969, when it was presented to the city of Auckland by the government of West Bengal, which was doubtless thrilled to be rid of it. Another el cheapo like the Italian brewery Cook. Auckland got it for free. Lord Auckland began life as George Eden. As a navy man it was he who gave William Hobson his commission to sail to the East Indies, thence to Australia and finally to become the first British governor of New Zealand, and to solemnly pronounce 'He iwi tahi tatou' at Waitangi on 6 February 1840, and to name the city that would grow round the Waitematā Harbour after his patron—plus Mount Eden, Hobson Street, Eden Park, Mount Hobson . . .

The situation is clearly incestuous . . .

Let's go and visit Zealandia.

Who she?

She is a 'personification'. One of those 'figures of speech' you were asked to learn by your English teacher. Personification is when an idea turns into a person, a made-up being whose characteristics match the idea's. Macalister's Māori Chief sculpture, as well as identifying itself as a work of art, also comes close to being a personification, a figure of speech. Tuwhare titles his poem 'To a Figure . . .' and when the statue begins to speak, then, indeed, we have a figure of speech, a speaking figure.

Scott Hamilton points to the figure of Zealandia as a being 'conceived by 19th century colonists as the younger sister of Britannia, the female personification of Britain'.⁵ Wikipedia describes Britannia as the 'mother

5 Facebook entry by Scott Hamilton for Artspace Aotearoa event, 'Korero the Symonds Street Memorial Park,' 17 August 2019.

of Zealandia'.⁶ Whichever is correct, the situation is clearly incestuous. Wikipedia suggests that Zealandia's heyday was the first half of the 20th century. She appeared on stamps, posters, in cartoons, on government publications, and, when the country acquired something called 'Dominion status' in 1907, Zealandia got a place on the left-hand side of the New Zealand coat of arms. In the version used from 1911 to 1956, she stands barefoot and in some vaguely Grecian garb, holding the flag on a pole opposite a Māori warrior, also barefoot, with piupiu and tao and cloak. In the version in current use, Zealandia has trimmed down to a long white skirt and blouse tucked in, but with a button missing, barefoot of course and still bearing her flag. The warrior is now updated by looking more 'traditional' (the hair in topknot). But the striking difference between the two versions of the coat of arms is that whereas in the earlier one both the rather wooden figures face the front as if they were good little children sitting up straight on the mat for the teacher, in the presently used version, the two figures stare across at each other, imbuing the relationship with something approaching confrontation.

As you climb up Wakefield Street, leaving behind the vacant plinth of Lord Auckland, you approach the statue of Zealandia from the rear. A square of three sets of marble steps 'in descending sizes' (thank you, Elizabeth) support a stumpy, four-sided obelisk of marble. On one side, there's a bronze plaque on which the older version of the coat of arms has been cast in relief. Around the other side, a second plaque contains the monument's inscription, with its infamous wording: 'IN MEMORY OF THE BRAVE MEN BELONGING TO THE IMPERIAL AND COLONIAL FORCES AND THE FRIENDLY MAORIS WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES FOR THE COUNTRY DURING THE NEW ZEALAND WARS 1845–1872'. A Pākehā soldier is shaking hands with a Māori warrior, and an angel hovers behind and between. In front of this presumptuous and insulting nonsense stands Zealandia in less modest mode than on the coat of arms, for she's having a double Janet Jackson

⁶ 'Zealandia (personification),' *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zealandia_\(personification\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zealandia_(personification))

moment and her right hand is holding up what might be intended as a bronze nīkau frond, as if she is about to lay it on the little ledge above the inscription. I'm sure that frond was not there in 1968 when I came to live as a first-year university student at O'Rorke Hall, which stood across Wakefield Street from this monument. I recall coming back to the hostel at dawn from a student party and noticing that someone had positioned a big brown beer bottle, so the image was of Zealandia reaching up for a swig. The *Auckland Star* newspaper for 22 August 1970 published a photo on its front page of Zealandia being sandblasted by a sinister figure dressed in overalls and full helmet, like a diver's apparatus. The paragraphs that caption the photo are voiced by Zealandia herself, another speaking figure: 'I've been here since 1921 when the Victoria League put me up. . . . I'm getting thoroughly sick and tired of revelers daubing me with paint in all sorts of places after a night on the town'. Interestingly, Zealandia at that time held a flag, pointing towards the ground, in her left hand. That has since disappeared. And the nīkau frond has been added. In 2018, someone put an axe in her head. You have to watch these monuments closely.

Wikitoria replaces rotunda . . .

Albert Park! It didn't take long to walk down Symonds, left into Wellesley Street East, then up into the park and quickly across to where Kuini Wikitoria stands in bronze. This park is named after her husband, Albert, but it didn't start life as a park. It was a military fort, Albert Barracks, built in 1845, using rock quarried from Mount Eden, the handiwork of Māori and Pākehā stonemasons (except the Māori were paid less than half of what the Pākehā received). A piece of the fortress wall still stands by the Auckland University library building. For 25 years this fort dominated the centre of Auckland, a kind of monument in itself to the Pākehā wars from 1845 (Hōne Heke's Tai Tokerau resistance against early breaches of te Tiriti o Waitangi) through the invasion of the Waikato, with George Grey running his war from HQ at Government House, close by, until the departure of imperial troops in 1870. For a short time thereafter, the barracks buildings housed Auckland Grammar School. But in the 1880s, by means of a public

competition, the basic design of Albert Park was installed. At that time, the band rotunda stood where Victoria's statue now stands. This statue of the empress of India, by F. J. Williamson, arrived in 1899, just after Wikitoira's diamond jubilee, when the rotunda was removed and erected in its present location.

Te mātua kua ngaro . . .

With its central city location, Albert Park has accumulated a random set of monuments, from Neil Dawson's teasing 1992 sculpture, *Throwback*, to the enigmatic memorial marble for *Auckland Star* founder and later *Herald* journalist C. M. Reed, the Fishergirl in tam o' shanter and clinging camisole. But such eccentric randomness cannot expunge the park's roots in colonial war. One Helen Boyd's will, at the turn of the 20th century, bequeathed a statue to offset the pervasive presence of war. Andrea Carlo Lucchesi's *Love Breaking the Sword of Hate* once held a marble sword that has appropriately been broken, while the female figure's left hand clutches a dove to her naked left breast; indeed, both breasts, in the manner of Zealandia, are bare. But she is no match for the guns installed during the Russian scare of the 1880s; nor for the South African War memorial statue, from which the sword has been stolen so many times that it is now always replaced by one made with plastic resin dressed to look like marble and held in place with metal screws; nor for the ring of oaks that encircles the setting of the rotunda, planted by members of the US navy on the occasion of their 1908 visit known as Great White Fleet Week, each tree representing 16 battleships! The 3.5-kilometres of tunnels beneath the park were built in 1942 to serve as air raid shelters when the Japanese attacked.

There's something uncanny about the way some of these memorialisations of the past echo in the present. When Lord Auckland launched his disastrous adventure known as the First Anglo-Afghan War, did the good lord anticipate the New Zealand army would still be part of an ongoing disaster in the same place nearly 200 years later? What would sturdy Wikitoria have to say to Boris Johnson smashing up the last remnants of her empire in the name of saving Englishness? Then there's

the Hori Kērei statue (also from the hand of F. S. Williamson): twice governor, once premier, the words on the statue's plinth lament his passing: 'E tangi e te iwi ki te matua kua ngaro, ki a Hori Kerei, te Kai-Hautu o te waka, te whakaruru hau o te iwi . . .'. I guess the right language with which to translate this might sound something like: 'The people mourn their departed father, George Grey, the cox of the canoe, who sheltered his people from the wind's blast. . .'. Okay, language, that's enough! Yet it was Grey's determination to break the Kīngitanga that led to his decision to invade the Waikato. And, before he did, he went to the Waikato Māori living at Ihumātao and growing vegetables for the Auckland market and demanded they swear allegiance to the Crown or else leave and join the Kīngitanga. He was clearing the front line before battle commenced. This was the event, with the subsequent land confiscation and sale, that led to the present (as at June 2020) unresolved confrontation at Ihumātao.

Nothing to see except a bronze plaque . . .

Sometimes only the plaque remains. Leaving Albert Park, we cut through the university, past the standing remnant of the Albert Barracks, cross Symonds Street and head down Grafton Road, where, at no. 8 Grafton Road we stop to read the plaque which says, in plaque language: 'Auckland Museum first opened in October 1852 on this site, in a cottage which was formerly part of the Governor's farm'. Before Auckland had barely come into existence it had a museum with two rooms, one for the exhibits, one for the curator to live in. We only need to walk down Symonds Street, to the space at the rear of the High Court, to find another such plaque without an object: 'This marks the entrance to New Zealand's first Parliament Buildings. . . . In a building on this site at noon on Wednesday 24th May 1854 the First Parliament of New Zealand assembled . . .'. The museum even preceded the parliament. The way this city was born in war feels impossible to avoid, as we trundle further down Grafton and turn into Wynyard, once a public thoroughfare, but now seized by the university. Robert Wynyard was an officer in the attack on Te Ruki Kawiti and Hōne Heke's Ruapekapeka pa in January 1846. In the 1850s, Wynyard became a busy man, author of the

New Zealand Constitution Act of 1852, which led to the first parliament, commander in chief of 1,500 imperial troops, and briefly even governor of the colony. A rather inconsequential figure, who returned to England and died there in 1864, he held his official positions only because of his class. No statues for Wynyard—but recently the new eat-drink-and-be-merry section of the waterfront has been christened Wynyard Quarter.

Installed, vandalised, restored . . .

Wynyard Street meets Alten Street on the slope of Constitution Hill (ah, that 1852 act!). Turn left, uphill, and there a large stone sits on the grass outside St Andrew's Church. It's big, heavy, immovable—and that was the whole idea. I was present at the meeting when plans were made to install the stone: make sure it's so heavy no one can move it! The stone itself was generously donated by an Auckland quarry. This Henry Moore-like lump is one of the very few remaining memorials of the massacre in Tiananmen Square, Beijing on 4 June 1989. All others have been removed, trashed, obliterated by the People's Republic government. It was put in place on the morning of 17 September 1989. Chinese poet Yang Lian read out his words (in Mandarin) engraved on the plaque, translated by John Minford: 'This stone stands as witness for those who can no longer speak and all those who have given their lives for the ideal of freedom in China'. The afternoon of the same day I organised a concert of readings and music in the Maidment Theatre (now also trashed by the University of Auckland itself!) to protest what had been done in Tiananmen.

The original plaque was ripped off. Now the stone has two plaques, the original one restored, and another that records the history of its vandalism: 'Installed 17th Sept 1989, vandalised on 1st Oct 2007, restored on 4th June 2008'. The vandalism date of 1 October, the date of the founding of the People's Republic of China, points towards this act being far from arbitrary. In 1989, the University of Auckland were asked if they would place the stone on their land, but the university declined (I guess future potential grants from certain sources were at stake), so the stone stands in the grounds of St Andrew's Church. The church was happy

to have it there. On a recent Sunday morning, I took a friend to see the stone; church had just finished, the congregation was gathering in the hall next door for morning tea. As the adults took their tea and scones, the children played on the stone—a diverse bunch of kids, Indonesian, Korean, Chinese, Pasifika, using the stone as a ‘base’ in a game where one played at being blind and tried to catch the others. They scrambled over the stone, jumped off it, hid behind it, and made it the centre of their joyful play.

Across the road, among the grander trees that stand on Constitution Hill, we can find a smaller, more recent planting, a humble but healthy oak, its roots tucked in under a warming circle of wood chips. See, if I take this stick and scrape away the chips and the soil, underneath there’s a hidden plaque: ‘Remember those who have died of Aids, Auckland Community Aids Services 1991’. As with the Tiananmen stone, the Aids Tree (and we might also include the Women’s Suffrage steps below Albert Park, between Kitchener and Lorne streets) belongs to that set of monuments that do not reference the good, the great, and the truly ghastly. These monuments are neither personifications nor allegories. They remember the nameless, those who left no tag or mark or stain upon the world, but who had more effect for good than those who held power for a brief interlude. As with the speaker in Brecht’s poem, ‘A Worker Reads History’, these are the innumerable dead, who look at monuments and wonder: ‘Caesar beat the Gauls./Was there not even a cook in his army?’

In the Elizabeth Bishop poem, ‘The Monument’, there is a line: ‘I am tired of breathing this eroded air’. Too much time spent round monuments can bring on such a feeling of staleness. Perhaps that is why Mayor Robbie down in Aotea Square, cast in bronze by Toby Twiss (defying monument practice by being an uncanny life-size), is shaking a raised fist—the only sign of animation from any of our varied monuments. On the other hand, maybe those kids at the Tiananmen stone knew what to do: keep the world alive in the present!

Oh, before you go, one last thing . . .

See, look there! You see it?

Cross Anzac Avenue, over the site of the first parliament, and to the top of that steep little rollercoaster of a street, Eden Crescent (ah, Eden again!). At the top, on the right, Quest Apartment Hotel. A set of modest steps leads inside directly off the street. On either side of the steps there's a clunky concrete planter. Back in 2011, when I had an office close by, I used to pass these steps each day. And then—and this is true—there was a small plaque there on the ledge below the right-hand planter, and written on the plaque was: 'On this day [and an actual date was provided] nothing much happened'. That was what it said. Except now, that plaque has gone. But it was there. If you don't believe me, then look closely at the place where the plaque used to be—there's still a faint rectangular rusty stain on the concrete. You see it? No, look, there! You see it?

Okay, so some people see it and some don't.

Ah, well, at least I've written it down. And writing is remembering, so they say.

And thank you for coming—but that's the end of today's tour.

This 'mediation' was written while staying in residence at the Michael King Writers Centre on Takarunga Mount Victoria in Devonport, September 2019.

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