James Cowan and the Legacies of Late Colonial Culture in Aotearoa New Zealand

James Cowan at his desk, writing
Ivan Ruscoe Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, PAColl-5877-5

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INTRODUCTION

Born to a soldier-settler family at the end of a decade of colonial conflict, James Cowan grew up on the site of the Battle of Ōrākau. In the anxious years after the Waikato War, he learned the language and the stories of people on both sides. He went on to become a journalist and a historian of colonial New Zealand, and perhaps the most widely-read interpreter between Māori and Pākehā cultures in the first half of the twentieth century. Today, colonial relations between Māori and Pākehā attract a great deal of scholarly interest. Yet Cowan, who placed so much Māori oral history on record, and whose work was so central in making te ao Māori known to an increasingly urbanised Pākehā population, has attracted relatively little attention. With some important exceptions (work by Christopher Hilliard, Alex Calder, and Greg Wood), Cowan seldom features in anthologies or discussions of New Zealand writing, and never to an extent that reflects the scale of his contemporary readership. Nor is his work often addressed in discussions of colonial culture and interracial relations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[1] This is a surprising, and perhaps telling, lacuna in the scholarship which we hope to address in this special issue.

We wish to record our thanks to Lynn Jenner, who in 2013 learned from Ariana that she was planning an exhibition of materials relating to Cowan, and from Annabel that she had been writing about Cowan, and introduced us to each other. The Borderland exhibition, as it was to become, arose out of the Turnbull Library's acquisition of a significant new purchase of James Cowan's papers, and Ariana wished to highlight aspects of this collection. We both saw the potential of a symposium that might link the exhibition and the Turnbull's Cowan collections with the research focus of the Centre for Research on Colonial Culture, and bring together researchers from a variety of fields who had an interest in Cowan's work.

The timing of Borderland meant that it would coincide with the later phase of the 150th anniversaries of the Waikato War, including the Battles of Rangiaowhia and Ōrākau, in early 2014. In general, there seemed to be very little national acknowledgement of these and other anniversaries of the New Zealand Wars. As Cowan had such a vital role in documenting these wars in his two-volume official history, *The New Zealand Wars* (1922-23), we saw the symposium and this special issue as helping to redress this neglect.

Between them, the exhibition and symposium brought a variety of interests in Cowan into dialogue. Contributions came from many directions: historians, but also members of iwi for whom Cowan's work has been significant; specialists in art history, heritage, literary and film cultures; teachers, librarians and archivists; and members of Cowan's extended family. We were surprised and very pleased to see the level and variety of interest, and the productive exchange of the specialist knowledge that symposium participants, both speakers and audience members, brought to the day's events.

The articles in this special issue, taken together, contend for the value of detailed and multi-faceted studies of work that operates at the juncture of Māori and Pākehā worlds. It is not difficult to find examples, in Cowan's writing, of terms or views that would be understood as racist today. But it does not take much longer to recognise the significance of a body of work such as Cowan's, which has proven to be of such value across a range of domains: the recording of iwi knowledge and history; the support for protection of historic places and names; the contributions to Pākehā understanding of Māori; the respect for Māori knowledge and prowess; recognition of the justice of indigenous resistance; and the value placed on the history of

Aotearoa New Zealand. Cowan was not the only writer who took such stances, but he was the most widely circulated and best-known, especially because he was known primarily through the daily medium of the newspaper. And, as Benedict Anderson has reminded us, the newspaper was a key medium of nation-formation. In itself, the fact that Cowan's work was so widely published and read raises compelling questions about what New Zealanders, both Pākehā and Māori, were interested in reading, in the first half of the twentieth century. As a number of authors observe, Cowan offers a particularly valuable entrée into the nuances of late colonial culture.

The first article is Paul Meredith's mihi to Cowan from a very specific location: his own childhood in Kihikihi, his descent from both sides of the colonial conflicts, and his work on Ngāti Maniapoto history and the Rohe Pōtae claims inquiry. Ariana Tikao's article is also personal as well as professional. She explains how the idea of the exhibition grew out of her work in documenting and arranging a large new acquisition of Cowan papers for the Alexander Turnbull Library, but also out of her own whānau's connection with Cowan and his work in recording histories and waiata. Christopher Hilliard offers both a broad introduction to Cowan's work and the context of its publication, and a thoughtful reflection on the article which was instrumental in resituating Cowan's work as a historical artefact: his "James Cowan and the Frontiers of New Zealand History" (1997). Here he turns also to discuss publication of a book which has received little attention to date, *Suwarrow Gold*.

The following four essays all take up questions of memory, time and place from differing perspectives, and together point to the depth and complexity of these themes in Cowan's work. Lydia Wevers tracks some examples of Cowan's voluminous travel writing, following the railway south and showing how to do so is to trace a path back in time. Michael Belgrave and Annabel Cooper both focus on Cowan's childhood and youth on the border of the Rohe Pōtae and its ongoing significance for the course of his work. Michael situates Cowan within the history of the Rohe Pōtae and the border during his adolescence, showing how contemporaries experienced time moving quite differently on each side of the border until the end of the aukati, when it moved very fast indeed. In a discussion of Cowan's sensitivity to the deep past of landscapes and particularly the landscape of home, Annabel contends that Cowan's work invites critique of some current orthodoxies about settler writing. Vincent O'Malley's article charts successive commemorations of Ōrākau and the Waikato War in their contemporary contexts, and situates Cowan's historical work within this broader history of contested memory.

Kathryn Parsons, Roger Blackley and Michael Brown between them reveal that Cowan was much more than a historian of the Wars, and that in fact he pioneered other fields. Kathryn Parsons discusses his turn to a new, young audience in the *Enzed Junior*, late in life when travel had become difficult for him: her study offers an insight into his prolonged productivity and the broad reach of his journalism. Roger Blackley's article discusses Cowan's biographies of the Māori subjects of Lindauer's portraits, investigating Cowan's sources and revealing the extent to which the essays enriched the painter's work. He points out that *Pictures of Old New Zealand* (1930) can claim to be New Zealand's first art historical monograph. Michael Brown's discussion of a group of feature articles on vernacular song taps into Cowan's affection for the cultures of the sea and the bush, and also points out that these are the earliest studies we have of this kind of local music.

There is substantial room for further research on Cowan. Those areas which perhaps most clearly invite further work include Cowan's writing about Māori life, history and mythologies, especially his collaboration with Maui Pōmare; and his history of *The Maoris in the Great War* (1926). There is rich material for a study of Cowan's interviewing and fieldwork, in the collection of his field notebooks in the Alexander Turnbull Library. And there

is scope for a great deal more consideration of Cowan's work in Māori, Pākehā and cross-cultural histories of the early twentieth century. Readers will be pleased to know that there is a new collection of Cowan papers currently being processed at the Turnbull, which will no doubt make a significant contribution to these fields of research in the future.[2]

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[1] Hilliard, "James Cowan and the Frontiers of New Zealand History," *New Zealand Journal of History* 31, no. 2 (1997): 219-33, and *The Bookmen's Dominion: Cultural Life in New Zealand 1920-1950* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006); James Cowan, *Tales of the Maori Bush* (with an introduction by Alex Calder, Auckland: Reed, 2006); Gregory Wood, "Revisiting James Cowan: A Reassessment of The New Zealand Wars (1922-23)" (master's thesis, Massey University, Albany, 2010). For discussion of Cowan and interracial relations, Annabel Cooper, "'Our Old Friend and Recent Foes': James Cowan, Rudall Hayward and Memories of Natural Affections in the New Zealand Wars," *Journal of New Zealand Studies* 14 (2013): 152-70.

[2] Cowan family – Papers: MS-Group-2378, Alexander Turnbull Library.