

# Stout Centre forum

BOOK REVIEW

## Landscapes of warning

*Ngā Uruora: The Groves of Life. Ecology and History in a New Zealand Landscape*

Geoff Park, Victoria University Press, 1995.

Commentary by Wendy Pond

Since 1840 an unremitting contest has taken place on New Zealand's swamp plains. Pat White, reviewing *Ngā Uruora* in the *Wairarapa Times-Age*, went straight to the book's main thesis: 'the ecology of the kahikatea forests and lowland swamps was the key to the entire ecosystem that had evolved on the islands of Aotearoa'.<sup>1</sup> Eels, lampreys, whitebait (koaro, kokopu, inanga), smelt, bullies, and other native fish migrating in from the sea depended on forest cover to control conditions of light and water quality, to provide spawning grounds, foraging territory, and nutrients. Kererū and kākā nested and foraged in the lowland forests, shifting camp to the successive crops of kahikatea, totara, miro, tawa berries and re-seeding the forest with the berries they dispersed. Spring eels (hauhau) bred in the swamps and hibernated during drought in the roots of the kahikatea. And so the warm, berry-rich, soil-rich forests which covered the swamp plains supported the sustained hunting, fishing, gathering economy, and the knowledge, technology, festivals, songs, burial grounds, boundaries, lineage identities, and political contests which hapū developed during the centuries of their sustained harvesting of the forests and fisheries lately guaranteed to them by the Treaty. In a review titled "Oh Brave New World" in the Australian journal *Meanjin*, George Seddon wrote:

*Ngā Uruora* is about loss: its 384 pages ache with the sense of it ... What is lost are the lowland forests of the well-watered, fertile plains of New Zealand, 'the Groves of Life'. The narrative sets out to evoke the richness and beauty of what has been lost ... and the banality, poverty and insecurity of the landscapes that have replaced it ... The European settlers took the best lands, as they did elsewhere, displacing those who preceded them. In the case of New Zealand's mountainous islands, these were the coastal plains, which were at once the ecologically richest, the most densely populated and the most limited resource. This is at the heart of contemporary New Zealand's domestic problems.<sup>2</sup>

It was an unequal contest. Michael Roche, a historical geographer, cites a directive from the British Colonial Land and Emigration Office in 1841: 'to reserve the forest is to reserve the land, with whatever object it is made Crown Reserves of land in a new Colony are in our opinion impediments to the progress of settlement.'<sup>3</sup> The colonised lowland vista of 1996 was described by Simon Upton



in a review for *New Zealand Books* titled "Making it all irreversibly ours":

Immediately below my vantage point summer rye-grass shimmers knee-deep in paddocks locked up for hay. At their distant margin runs a ribbon of swamp – pussy willow edged with hawthorn and barberry. Immediately beyond, dominating the near distance, a shapely grassed ridge catches the most intense lighting. Spread at park-like intervals across its flanks are century-old plantings of Asian pines, copses of eucalypt and oak. Beyond lies a seemingly endless succession of ridges, alluvial flats and poplar groves. Slivers of the Waipa river glint momentarily in the dying light ... The closely furled copses of remnant kahikatea acquire a strangely Italianate quality ... With the hill country erosion, scrubby sheds and gorse-covered sidelings subdued in the fading light, it is a Virgilian scene ... But less than 200 years ago a very different pastorate would have greeted the evening stillness ... On the lower hills and ridges, bush; in the wetlands and swamps draining into the Waipa, pure stands of kahikatea. Clumps of kahikatea too on the alluvial flats and river terraces with fern and numerous clearings for kumara cultivation. This was the garden of New Zealand ... Hochstetter came this way in 1859, noting the fertile flats "diligently cultivated by the natives" ... Save for the bush-clad slopes of Pīrongia in the distance, only a vivid act of imaginative recreation can restore the scene. War, confiscation and European settlement saw to that.<sup>4</sup>

The kahikatea forests which had stood in Gondwana landscapes for two hundred million years, supporting a rich flora and fauna, were to be 'a single, valuable crop', exported as timber to finance the new colony.<sup>5</sup> The plains were clear-felled, drained, and surveyed for an agricultural

*Above: A decaying 'grove of life' in a denuded landscape. Is public good found in regenerating forest supporting abundant harvests of fish, birds and berries, or in one man's stock on drought-prone coastland? Forest and Bird Protection Society.*

*Opposite: Gathering kahikatea berries (koroi), early 1840s. Many of Merrett's drawings depict the Waipā plains before they became 'all irreversibly ours'. Drawing by J J Merrett, "A native climbing the kaikatia to gather its fruit". From Ngā Uruora (Mrs Hobson's Album, The British Library).*

economy sustained by overseas investment, overseas markets, and overseas fertiliser.

Colonial society exported the fertility of the plains and halted the processes that had created the fertility. On the drained Waikato plains, farmers now drill so deeply for water that toxins are spread on the soil. That is, the plantation and agricultural economies with which European nations colonised, were unsuitable for the soils, weather patterns, and indigenous lifestyles of these landscapes. Martin Woollacott in the British *Guardian*, in a review titled "Suburbia bites into the sacred groves", commented, 'The European occupation ... brought two different ecologies and two different cultures into collision. One was damaged almost beyond repair and the other is ultimately unsustainable unless massively modified.'<sup>6</sup> Eugene Doyle's review in *Victorious* was titled "Apocalypse New Zealand":

In this hard-hitting, passionate, at times utterly depressing book, Geoff Park kicks the stool out from under Pakeha complacency and self-satisfaction about the New Zealand environment ... taking us on a vivid, personal journey into four surviving forests, into our own grisly history, and into the Pakeha mind that has yet to come to terms with the past, the present or the land ... True 'future eaters', as Tim Flannery calls us, we have exploited these islands' richest ecosystems with all the violence that modern science and technology could summon.<sup>7</sup>

To understand what was lost, Park embarked on an exploration that lasted ten years. The six landscapes visited by the author are the Hauraki plains and the Lower Hutt plains where the kahikatea swamp-forests that had withstood Māori occupation were transformed into the grids of colonial towns and farms. Four remnant forests are windows to the processes of lost ecology: Mokau (North Taranaki), lake Papatitonga (Horowhenua), Whanganui inlet (Te Tai Tapu, Nelson), and Punakaiki (West Coast). The book sets out to solve an ecological mystery. It's enduring quality is its inclusion of the reader in the process of reaching an understanding.

Since 1982 there has been renewed force to the contest for the lowlands as hapū, conservationists, and capital investors compete for the deregulated resource, and as conservationists and Māori argue for different resource management strategies: conservation of biogenetic diversity on offshore refuges ("take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints") versus sustainable harvesting (practised by hapū at 1840) versus ecosystem restora-

tion (a strategy negotiated between ecologists and third world peoples). Simon Upton commented in the *Dominion* and in the *Waikato Times*:

The refreshing thing about both Flannery and Park is their break with the preservationist, glass-cage view of the environment that has driven so much activism ... It's how we live that determines whether others will be able to live here after us.<sup>8</sup>

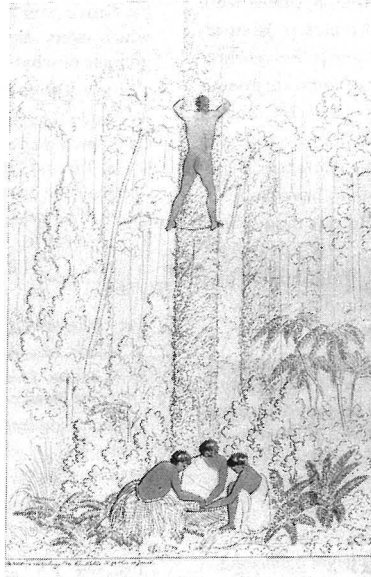
Within a year *Ngā Uruora* had become a recommended

text in New Zealand history and conservation courses, and had reached a world audience where it found good companions amongst writers in social and historical ecology.<sup>9</sup> *New Zealand Journal of History* and *Quote Unquote* suggest the book has a New Zealand precursor in *Tutira*.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, New Zealand history will no longer be tenable without an ecological accounting, as Ben White commented in the *PSA Journal/Poutu-te-rangi*: 'Generally our histories have been described and interpreted as if they took place in a featureless landscape ... [Park] seeks a plural perspective, making connections between history, sociology, and ecology.'<sup>11</sup> Simon Smale in *Landscape New Zealand* concurs: 'It is a story that

has not been told before, and as an amalgam of ecology and history it has established a genre of its own in New Zealand literature'.<sup>12</sup> The *Greymouth Evening Star* described *Ngā Uruora* as 'a publication which is closer to educational poetry than an academic study.'<sup>13</sup> *Quote Unquote* suffered an overlong but 'lyrical and fascinating lamentation',<sup>14</sup> and the *Wanganui Chronicle* decided, 'New Zealand literature has come of age with this book'.<sup>15</sup>

'Some readers may find the book too personal, too discursive, too idiosyncratic', Janet Davidson stated in a review for *Archaeology in New Zealand*.<sup>16</sup> This has indeed been a problem for some, and some reviewers were blunt: 'This is a repetitious book, but partly because it describes endlessly repeated actions and responses, by accumulation gaining some of the intensity of nightmare'.<sup>17</sup> Some ruminated: 'We are dealing here with a book that is not an "instant read", we are dealing with assimilation rather than consumption.'<sup>18</sup> Some were problem-solvers: 'Park demonstrates formidable skill in weaving together a coherent text ... the book's readability in my view owes much to its format of literary counterpoint.'<sup>19</sup> And some took pleasure in the journey:

Like the forests it is about, the book is rich and diverse, incorporating personal observations, ecological notes, historical and literary references, interpretations of Māori



and colonial history, and spiritual insight. It meanders like the lowland rivers before their stopbanks were built; sometimes being bound up in back eddies, slipping quickly from one channel to another ...<sup>20</sup>

The author spent ten years researching and writing, the designer has complimented his work, the book is gentle to read and accommodatingly held in the hand. But the publisher did not come to the party. In the first printing the list of figures did not correspond with the plates, words were misspelt and repeated, hyphens were misplaced, endnote references did not match page numbers, a paragraph or two did not make sense: 'For a scholarly book, by a reputable press, there are some surprising slips'.<sup>21</sup> There is also a vexed problem that the margin images are small and dark; strenuously documenting the thesis, their detail is obscure. At least the *Wairarapa Times-Age* was forthcoming: 'We are fortunate to have publishers in this country who are prepared to put money into work of the quality of *Ngā Uruora*.'<sup>22</sup>

While reviewers accommodated the nightmares and legal histories of the book, New Zealanders wrote directly to the author:

'My environmental awareness began around the age of 10 with wondering why the amazing birds I saw on my school pads (Buller's Birds) couldn't be found in our local patch of bush in the middle Waikato ... I'm fighting for Christchurch's last significant patch of wetland, Travis Swamp. Against us are people straight out of your book with attitudes that were found in Wakefield.'

'I really enjoyed your ability to project from your own thinking and living, and also your willingness to get passionate ... My grandfather farmed at Ohau, cutting his farm out of the bush there in the early 1900s, and I have very strong memories of my mother mailing off a letter each Sunday to the grandparents just addressed to "Tawanui, Ohau". The name Tawanui meant little to me in those days ... all the big tawa had gone ... I think too that [your book] provides a very useful account of interactions between Māori and colonist that you don't gather from Anne Salmon's much more clinical and academic *Two Worlds*.'

'The way that you portrayed your entry to some of the more remote areas by canoe and the mysterious almost ghostly effects that it had on my imagination made me quite nostalgic right from the beginning ... Out of all the gazetted [swamp maire] trees in the Waikato area we have over half the total ... 15 healthy trees and in their natural environment. We have decided to close off the swamp area to all but selected visitors in order to protect the root systems ... we may have a national treasure here in this stand.'

'I've never read anything like it about this country ... I've found people, the apparently intelligent, who haven't been able to make head or tail of it ... So it doesn't reach all. But for those of us it does reach it's ... a grove of life itself. I put it with Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines*, Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*, Tim Flannery's *The Future Eaters*.'

'A work of watershed proportions for this country. Your combination of geological, biotic and human histories; your thorough truthful accounting of both Māori and

pakeha spiritualities ... enmeshed with your own personal experience of these places is a quantum leap in our 'nature' literature ... I too was a child in the Hutt valley ... The river was just a drain and a plain, a wasteland for me then. So much loss, so much grief ... Tautuku is still threatened. There is still an almost complete ignorance of the importance of such a place - where forest rules from the lap of the waves to the mountain peak.'

'As a sea kayak guide out of Picton, I am lucky enough to spend my days paddling the Queen Charlotte sound. In the Grove Arm is a Bay I known only as Flipper Bay, in which every day I am filled with awe at the almost-glimpse of what this place once was / could be.'

And the author's reply to his shy correspondent:

'We sat in the middle of Ship Cove thinking about James Cook and company, and the canoes that came from between Taranaki and Kaiapoi to trade, and watching the rain over the forest. Do you know about Glynn Barratt's *Queen Charlotte Sound: The Traditional and European Records, 1820* (Carleton University Press, Ottawa, 1987)?'

## NOTES

- 1 Pat White, *Wairarapa Times-Age*, 29 March 1996.
- 2 G Seddon, *Meanjin*, v 55, no 3, 1996, p 395.
- 3 M M Roche, *Forest Policy in New Zealand*, Palmerston North, Dunmore Press, p 21.
- 4 S Upton, *New Zealand Books*, v 6, no 5, 1996, p 15.
- 5 Roche, p 23.
- 6 M Woollacott, *The Guardian*, 26 October 1996
- 7 E Doyle, *Victorious: magazine for friends and alumni of Victoria University*, Summer 1995-96, pp 12-13.
- 8 *The Dominion*, 15 January 1996, p 10; *Waikato Times*, 15 January 1996, p 6.
- 9 Aldo Leopold, *Round River*, New York, OUP, 1953; Aldo Leopold, *A Sand Country Almanac; and sketches here and there*, (1949), OUP, 1968; Donald Worster, 'Transformations of the earth: toward an agroecological perspective in history', *Journal of American History*, v 76, March 1990, pp 1087-1106; Ross Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise: changing literary perceptions of Australia*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1984; Ross Gibson, *South of the West: postcolonialism and the narrative construction of Australia*, Indiana University Press, 1992; D Maybury-Lewis, *Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*, New York, 1992; E Kernf, *Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas: The Law of Mother Earth*, London, 1993; Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An ecological history of the Australasian lands and people*, Sydney, Reed Books, 1994; George Seddon, *Searching for Snowy*, Allen & Unwin, 1994; Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: the Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- 10 B Turner, *Quote Unquote*, May 1996, p 29; G M Byrnes, *New Zealand Journal of History*, v 30, no 2, 1996 pp 183-184, citing Herbert Guthrie-Smith, *Tutira: the story of a New Zealand Sheep Station*, 1921.
- 11 Ben White, *PSA Journal/Poutu-te-rangi*, March 1996, p 14.
- 12 S Smale, *Landscape New Zealand*, September /October 1996, p 40.
- 13 C Lucas, *Greymouth Evening Star*, 26 January 1996.
- 14 Turner, p 29.
- 15 P Neilson, *Wanganui Chronicle*, 24 January 1996.
- 16 J Davidson, *Archaeology in New Zealand*, v 39 no 4, 1996, p 308.
- 17 Seddon, p 400.
- 18 Pat White, *Wairarapa Times-Age*, 29 March 1996.
- 19 Smale, p 41.
- 20 T Higham, *Forest & Bird*, February 1996, p 45.
- 21 Davidson, p 308.
- 22 Pat White, *Wairarapa Times-Age*, 29 March 1996.