

James Cowan and the Frontiers of New Zealand History

JAMES COWAN was perhaps the most ambiguous writer in what may be called the Frederick Maning tradition of 'representing' Maori to Pakeha. Like Maning and his epigones, Cowan made much of his privileged knowledge of Maori culture and history; unlike them, however, he combined this position with the devices of 'pioneer' literature. Cowan's combination of these and other traditions problematized the writing of New Zealand history. His favoured subjects were the geographical and racial 'frontiers' of New Zealand in the nineteenth century; his use of various and not entirely compatible traditions of Pakeha writing placed him on a discursive 'frontier' as well. The histories Cowan wrote on this discursive frontier in the first four decades of this century are the subject of this article.¹

My focus here is on the texts and the ways in which they were written, not on the persona of the writer. The self-fashioning aspects of Cowan's writings are fascinating, but I will not discuss them here. An inclination toward biographical interpretation predominates in New Zealand cultural history, and I want to suggest some of the possibilities of alternative approaches. I intend to look first at Cowan's methods as a historian, and the related matters of his style and his narrative structures. I then consider his general narrative of New Zealand history and race relations. I will then discuss the relations between Cowan's texts and their various contexts. Cowan's work was a syncretism of a wide range of contexts. Sometimes he managed to tame the differing voices in the contexts informing his work, and sometimes he failed. The tensions in Cowan's syncretism become most apparent in *Settlers and Pioneers*, the volume he wrote in the series of official histories commemorating the New Zealand Centennial, and I shall conclude with a discussion of that book.

1 An earlier version of this article was delivered as a paper at the New Zealand Historical Association Conference in Wellington in February 1996. I am grateful to Lisa Bailey, David Colquhoun, Raewyn Dalziel, Sarah Graham, Deborah Montgomerie and Damon Salesa for their help. I wish also to thank James Belich for constructive debate. I should make it clear at the outset that I am focusing on Cowan's historical works, not on his ethnological writings, nor the material he wrote for the Department of Tourism and Publicity. Where relevant I bring Cowan's other writings into my discussion of his historical works, but they are sufficiently different to make it misleading to discuss them as if they were of a piece with the histories.

I want to begin with a scene that captures some of the flavour of Cowan's writing. In *Tales of the Maori Coast*, Cowan recounted a visit he made to Maketu in the Bay of Plenty. He described his way around the village, which reeks of history with its old tombs, its 'huge old cabbage trees, each with a name and a story', and its carvings from an age when 'the Maori wood-carving art was . . . in its glory'. One Sunday, he goes to explore 'the tangled old churchyard'. Everything he sees there is 'antique-looking'. He meets an elderly Te Arawa parson. The parson rings the churchbell, and then 'he sat down with me, and we talked of old Maketu, and inevitably about fishing'. Thus begins an idyll about the good old times when there were more fish. Sitting on the bank, the parson and his audience of one drift away into drowsiness and reverie about the past, forgetting that one of them has to give a sermon any minute.²

The portrait of the old minister at Maketu is an appropriate point of entry into Cowan's work with its characteristic emphasis on the act of reminiscing, its dialogue between a Maori informant and the privileged Pakeha interviewer, and the attitude to the past that is implicit in the figure of the parson. The minister is both a relic and a companion, a part of a very different past that stretches into the present. It was not only Maori whom Cowan presented in this way. 'Gilbert Mair,' Cowan wrote in 1923, 'is of a type that never more will be seen in New Zealand, for the conditions that produced and developed his peculiar fancies and the [course] of his life's work are vanished for ever.'³ Cowan persistently noted that the immense changes New Zealand underwent in the nineteenth century were still within the memories of those living in the first decades of the twentieth. The speed of such transformations, he wrote, 'excites wonder among all who give a thought to our history. . . . We who are not yet old have seen blockhouses and redoubts Many a white veteran and many a Maori can still tell of battle adventures, of stormings and defences, of daring scouts and man-huntings, in country that is now disturbed by nothing more alarming than the railway engine's whistle or the motor horn of the well-off dairy farmer'.⁴

Cowan was not the only Pakeha writer of the early twentieth century to say that New Zealand's past was vanishing in an uncanny way.⁵ Another historian spoke of New Zealand's 'fast receding history',⁶ and the Polynesian Society's rhetoric of vanishing knowledge is well known. Like ethnologists and local historians,

2 James Cowan, *Tales of the Maori Coast*, Wellington, 1930, pp.13-17.

3 Cowan, untitled typescript, 1923, Cowan Papers, MSS Papers 39/41E, Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL), Wellington. This piece was to be the preface to Gilbert Mair's *Reminiscences and Maori Stories*, Auckland, 1923, but the increasingly addled Mair lost his copy of the preface: Violet Mair to Cowan, 24 October 1923, Cowan Papers, 39/41E, ATL. The preface that appears in the published book is written by Henry Brett, and is very similar to Cowan's.

4 Cowan, 'Chapter I: The Old Race and the New', n.d., Cowan Papers, 39/42C, ATL. This passage is from a draft of the first chapter of Cowan's *The New Zealand Wars: A History of the Maori Campaigns and the Pioneering Period*, 2 vols, Wellington, 1983 (first published 1922-3). The passage quoted here does not appear in the published version.

5 See H. Guthrie-Smith, *Tutira: The Story of a New Zealand Sheep Station*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh, 1926, p.vii.

6 T. Lindsay Buick, *The Treaty of Waitangi, or, How New Zealand Became a British Colony*, Wellington, 1914, p.v.

Cowan expressed concern that those who had experienced New Zealand history first-hand were dying unrecorded.⁷ For Cowan, who believed that personal memories rather than official documents gave 'the real meat of history',⁸ the death of the participants meant the death of the history. These concerns of collection and preservation were the main ground on which Cowan and his supporters managed to talk the wartime government into commissioning his history of the New Zealand Wars.⁹

Cowan constantly collected stories. Some were sent to him.¹⁰ Others he elicited from the mariners, veterans and old settlers whom he met in his travels around the country. When he heard a new story, he would write it down, publish it in a newspaper and later recycle it in a book. Cowan's papers in the Alexander Turnbull Library abound with newspaper cuttings of his work that have been glued onto blank paper, and had their background material crossed out and a chapter heading attached. Scarcely edited, these newspaper stories would appear in a subsequent book.¹¹ Cowan's books on Kimble Bent and Hans Tapsell began as newspaper serials. While Cowan was working on *Settlers and Pioneers*, Oliver Duff, then editor of the Centennial publications, told Cowan that he hoped that none of the anecdotes to be used in the book would appear in newspapers beforehand.¹² Fifteen years earlier, Cowan had felt stung when P.J. Kelleher of the Department of Internal Affairs rejected his request for further payment for personal losses incurred during the editing of the wars book. Kelleher told Cowan that while working on the war history at government expense, he had had the opportunity for collecting material for future books. Cowan's response was not to deny the charge, but to assert that this bonus was 'more than offset by the fact that this History is not merely the product of the short period I was under

7 For a sample of evidence see M.P.K. Sorrenson, *Manifest Duty: The Polynesian Society over 100 Years*, Auckland, 1992, pp.24, 64, 65; Atholl Anderson, 'Introduction: James Herries Beattie and the 1920 Project', in James Herries Beattie, *Traditional Lifeways of the Southern Maori: The Otago University Museum Ethnological Project, 1920*, ed. Anderson, Dunedin, 1994, pp.12, 14; *Records of the Gore and Surrounding Districts' Early Settlers' Association*, Vol. 2, Gore, 1933, p.21; Robert Valpy Fulton, *Medical Practice in Otago and Southland in the Early Days: A Description of the Manner of Life, Trials and Difficulties of Some of the Pioneer Doctors, of the Places in Which, and of the People among Whom They Laboured*, Dunedin, 1922, p.v.

8 Cowan, *Hero Stories of New Zealand*, Wellington, 1935, p.x; Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, pp. v-vi.

9 H. Hill to W. Massey, 1 October 1917; J. Allan Thomson to J.C. Hislop, 1 December 1917; T.W. Leys to G.W. Russell, 1 February 1918, IA1, 4/2/13, National Archives (NA), Wellington; Hislop to R.F. Bollard, 4 January 1924, IA1 126/8/23, NA; *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, H-22, 1918, p.8.

10 Cowan's *A Trader in Cannibal Land: The Life and Adventures of Captain Tapsell*, Dunedin, 1935 is based closely on the manuscript of the autobiography that the dying Tapsell narrated to the local resident magistrate. Tapsell's great-grandson sent the manuscript to Cowan in 1920: John McAlister to Cowan, 13 April 1920, Cowan Papers, 39/32, ATL. Another example is the story of 'Black Tom', a runaway slave from Delaware who became a Pacific whaler: G.E.L. Westbrook to Cowan, 21 May 1926, Cowan Papers, 39/2, ATL.

11 The gratuitous repetitions in Cowan's *The Adventures of Kimble Bent: A Story of Wild Life in the New Zealand Bush*, London, 1911, may be a residue of this process.

12 Cowan to Duff, 1 December 1938, IA1, 62/110/2, NA.

Government engagement on contract; it embodies the result of many years' work, practically a life-time of note-gathering on the subject'.¹³

Cowan got most of the 'real meat' of his histories from interviews, private diaries and autobiographical writings. While he did not rely solely on oral sources, he gave them preference over official documents, and even over written memoirs. On numerous occasions he rejected written accounts as inaccurate in the light of oral accounts. More surprisingly, he sometimes rejected Pakeha writing in the light of Maori oral accounts,¹⁴ or declared that a Maori oral testimony was more accurate than European ones.¹⁵ On occasions where his sources were hopelessly contradictory, he simply juxtaposed the conflicting testimonies.¹⁶

T. Lindsay Buick and most local historians saw value in oral sources, but other historians did not, and at times they crossed swords with Cowan.¹⁷ One of these was the Wellington historian and bibliophile Horace Fildes.¹⁸ He and Cowan had a spirited argument over oral sources and the history of Gate Pa. Cowan appealed to the personal directness of his sources: 'My information came from those who fought in the battle.' Fildes disputed the worth of testimonies made 'about 45 years after Gate Pa'.¹⁹ Neither Fildes nor Cowan budged. Fildes insisted that the mere dust of 'contemporary record' was 'worth 1 oz troy of Reminiscence', and Cowan defiantly asserted the superiority of his oral sources over 'hearsay talk garbled in the newspapers of the day & in books such as [J. E.] Alexander's & repeated by one pseudo-historian after another as in our school histories & mission chronicles'.²⁰

Two years after this argument, S. Barton Babbage, who had just completed an MA at Auckland University College, dismissed Cowan's account of the battle of Moutoa as unfounded. In place of Cowan's alleged flights of fancy, however, Babbage offered only one piece of 'hard evidence': 'A certain amount of information is given on the inscription on the monument erected on Pukename Hill in Wanganui, which I have seen. The inscription reads: "To the memory of those brave men who fell at Moutoa, 14th May, 1864, in defence of law and order

13 Cowan to Kelleher, 16 February 1924, IA1, 4/2/13, NA.

14 Cowan, 'To Add Puke-taukere Chapter: The Swordsman in the Swamp: An Incident of the Waitara War', n.d., Cowan Papers, 39/42F, ATL; Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, II, p.54.

15 Cowan, *Adventures of Kimble Bent*, p.61; Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, II, p.209. In 1922 Cowan remarked in correspondence that he knew that von Tempsky 'was not shot from a tree. There are many versions of his end published, & the pakeha ones are mostly wrong. I obtained good narratives some years ago from two of the six or seven Maoris who fired at him at a few yards['] distance — they were not in a tree but crouching on the ground beside the little watercourse at the pa.' Cowan to Horace Fildes, 16 December 1922, H. Fildes Papers, Box 34, Victoria University of Wellington Library (VUW).

16 Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, pp.392-3; Cowan, *Adventures of Kimble Bent*, ch.15.

17 Buick to W.R.B. Oliver, 20 August 1934, IA1, 1935/187/128, NA.

18 On Fildes see K.A. Coleridge, 'Horace Fildes and His Collection', *New Zealand Libraries*, 38, 5 (October 1975), pp.254-69.

19 Cowan to Fildes, 19 December 1935; annotations to this letter by Fildes, Fildes Papers, Box 34, VUW.

20 Fildes to Cowan, 22 December 1935 (copy by Fildes); Cowan to Fildes, 28 December 1935, Fildes Papers, Box 34, VUW.

against fanaticism and barbarism.”²¹ Cowan took the criticism seriously and defended his oral history work to a friend: ‘My best authorities are — or were, “human documents”, not other people’s books.’²²

Cowan’s interview notes were written up as narratives rather than as question-and-answer sessions. This makes it difficult to explore the dialogics of his interviewing practice. However, some basic points can be made. Cowan was bilingual and claimed some affinity with Maori people. Though his texts are strewn with racist comments, Cowan had sufficient familiarity with and respect for Maori people for his large numbers of Maori informants to trust him enough to share their stories with him.²³ Sometimes, this trust came with time. For instance, when Cowan first talked to him, Peita Kotuku ‘gave, with a little hesitation, something of his life history’. Some years later, when Cowan spoke to him again, Kotuku ‘very frankly narrated his remarkable war-trail adventures, and answered many questions’.²⁴ Kaumatua would take Cowan to old battle sites, which were often unmarked, and tell him how things had been at the time of the battle.²⁵

Cowan’s methods as an oral historian carried over into his texts, many of which read like print analogues of the masculine yarns that flourished in frontier New Zealand.²⁶ Cowan’s penchant for the direct and the personal led him, like local historians, to tell many of his stories by direct quotation, rather than by means of a synthetic narrative written in an indirect style. Instead of breaking up his source-material Cowan strung together large chunks of eye-witness testimonies, with bridging paragraphs of his own to elaborate on some matters, and frames indicating how he came to hear the story now being relayed to the reader. In this respect, and in the yarning narrator-figures who peopled his texts, Cowan shared the oral story-structures of the masculinist short fiction that was common in New Zealand at the time.²⁷ Some other New Zealand historians, such as Robert Gilkison, worked with similar narrative forms.²⁸ The overlap in style between yarning, anecdotal histories and some popular fiction is nicely emblemized by the way the Wellington City Library and the *PEN Gazette* classified separate Cowan collections of historical stories as ‘fiction’, much to the author’s chagrin.²⁹

21 S. Barton Babbage, *Hauhauism: An Episode in the Maori Wars 1863-1866*, Wellington, 1937, p.43n.

22 Cowan to T.W. Downes, 10 November 1937, Cowan Papers, 39/5, ATL. Downes, a Wanganui resident, was an active member of the Polynesian Society and a collector of Maori oral traditions: Sorrenson, *Manifest Duty*, pp.65, 77, 90; T.W. Downes, *Old Whanganui*, Hawera, 1915.

23 James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict*, Auckland, 1986, p.16.

24 Cowan, ‘A Hauhau Warrior’s Story: The Adventures of Peita Kotuku, Last Survivor of the “Rifleman” Escapees (Notes taken by J. Cowan, 23/2/21)’, Cowan Papers, 39/41A, ATL.

25 Cowan to Fildes, 30 July 1935, Fildes Papers, Box 34, VUW.

26 Jock Phillips, *A Man’s Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male — A History*, 2nd ed., Auckland, 1996, pp.32-34.

27 Lydia Wevers, ‘The Short Story’, in Terry Sturm, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Auckland, 1991, p.222.

28 Robert Gilkison, *Early Days in Central Otago: Being Tales of Times Gone By*, Dunedin, 1930.

29 Cowan to Pat Lawlor, 30 October 1934; Cowan to Lawlor, 2 May 1938, Pat Lawlor MSS L418N, folder 1, VUW.

Anecdotes or brief adventures were the building blocks of Cowan's works. 'Adventure' dominates his narrative structures to the point where it becomes a free-floating literary commodity independent of the characters. Cowan's stories give virtually no sustained sense of the personalities of their protagonists. The main characters of *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* and *A Trader in Cannibal Land* exist as locations of adventures rather than personae in their own right: Hans Tapsell and Kimble Bent matter because of the events they were caught up in, rather than for their personalities. There is a considerable irony in this. Ever keen to point out the human essence of history, in his own work Cowan did little justice to the personalities of the people he wrote about. The near absence of what James Clifford has called the 'minimal narrative of identity' essential to biography makes *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* almost as diffuse as Cowan's collections of historical stories: the book is a collection of adventures which have some connection, often only a minimal one, with the titular hero.³⁰

Cowan's poetic of adventure continued to govern the structure of his writings even when stripped of some of its trappings. *The New Zealand Wars* was an official history and contained relatively few of Cowan's usual declarations about how adventurous New Zealand's past was, but it retained his characteristic narrative diffusion. The book was organized more at the level of the chapter than as a whole. It had little overall structure, which hampered the thorough analysis of the inter-relations between the different wars that the book was supposed to provide.³¹ Indeed, *The New Zealand Wars* was even more de-centred than Cowan's other books, because it was so compendious. As the writer of an official record, Cowan was obliged to chronicle every engagement of the wars, right down to the 1863 shoot-out at the Pukekohe East church stockade.³²

Nevertheless, Cowan's works were loosely bound together by an overall narrative, one which acted less as a structural unifier than as a criterion for choosing which stories to tell. This general narrative told how New Zealand was made through racial interaction. Cowan was always keen to show that Maori and Pakeha were one people. In his ethnological writings, he sometimes endorsed the view that Maori were 'a branch, though a distant one, of the Caucasian race'.³³ In his historical works, however, Cowan argued that Maori and Pakeha had become one people through a dialectical process of interaction. The New Zealand wars were central to this process. The wars and the attendant period of settlement, he claimed, 'were the most vital period of [New Zealand's] national existence'.³⁴ In Cowan's schema, the wars fostered mutual respect: Maori and Pakeha came to admire each other's tenacity and chivalry, as enemies or as

30 James Clifford, "'Hanging Up Looking Glasses at Odd Corners': Ethnobiographical Prospects', in Daniel Aaron, ed., *Studies in Biography*, Cambridge, Mass., 1978, p.54.

31 Cowan to G.W. Russell, 28 November 1917, IA1, 4/2/13, NA.

32 Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, ch.30. For small engagements like this, which were not widely known, Cowan had to rely exclusively on oral testimony or records of such gathered by others. For the Pukekohe engagement, his principal sources were narratives collected by a Mauku settler, Mrs B. Crispe: drafts and source notes in Cowan Papers, 39/41B, ATL.

33 Cowan, *The Maoris of New Zealand*, Christchurch, 1910, p.30; Cowan, *The Maori: Yesterday and Today*, Auckland, 1930, p.24. The words quoted appear verbatim in both books.

34 Cowan to G.W. Russell, 28 November 1917, IA1, 4/2/13, NA.

allies.³⁵ Here Cowan diverged from the American Wild West literature he so admired. That literature tended to treat interracial war as a journey into a 'savage' underworld and back, a journey that was redemptive for the white participants only.³⁶ Cowan's argument, in contrast, was summed up in a famous sentence in the first chapter of his war history: 'The wars ended with a strong mutual respect, tinged with a real affection, which would never have existed but for this ordeal by battle.'³⁷

Cowan's story of New Zealand and the role of Maori in that story differed sharply from other contemporary or earlier Pakeha histories of New Zealand. Most historians writing at the same time as Cowan treated New Zealand history as a history of European endeavour, whether it be the pioneering described in local histories, or the establishment of British sovereignty that some academic works dealt with. In these histories, Maori were assistants, impediments, or 'environmental factors'.³⁸ In generic terms, such narratives were comedies. Cowan's racial-harmony-through-war plot was a tragicomedy: the tragic events of war generated a journey from which the protagonists emerged reconciled, and better people. In the work of local historians, academic historians and most of the Centennial writers, Europeans were the actors and Maori were the props. In Cowan's story, not only were both Maori and Europeans actors, but both were also a grateful and inspired audience.

The Maori characters in Cowan's story were stereotypes, but no more so than the Pakeha ones. The conflict-driven nature of Cowan's plot meant that Maori *did* enter the narrative as forces in their own right. Cowan dismissed the notion that Maori defeat in the wars was inevitable,³⁹ and to some extent he recognized Maori agency, autonomy and dynamism. However, his awareness of Maori innovation was largely confined to military technology, and did not extend to political and religious developments.⁴⁰ Pai Marire, for instance, was always 'fanaticism'. Cowan described its incantations and cannibalism in 'exotic' detail, but never gave any sense of why it should inspire fanatical responses. However, even when he found Maori practices objectionable or unfathomable, he often admired the way Maori showed commitment to them. Cowan rejected the charge that Maori were unable to develop new practices,⁴¹ but accepted its

35 Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, pp.2-3.

36 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America*, New York, 1992, p.14.

37 Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, p.3.

38 I discuss these matters in more detail, and elaborate a general interpretative framework for their roles in colonial culture, in 'Island Stories: The Writing of New Zealand History 1920-1940', MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1997.

39 Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, pp.5-6. Cowan often drew attention to contingency, and pointed out how famous events, such as Te Kooti's attack on Matawhero, could have been avoided. *ibid.*, II, pp.242-3.

40 See, for example, *ibid.*, I, pp.54, 390.

41 See, for example, William Baucke, 'Some Reasons for the Decline of the Maori' and 'The Old, Old Plea', in Baucke, *Where the White Man Treads*, Auckland, 1928 (first pub. 1905). An earlier example is William Colenso, 'On the Maori Races of New Zealand', *Transactions and Proceedings of the New Zealand Institute*, 1 (1868; reprint, 1875), p.367. This belief is 'satirised' very ambiguously in 'Kowhai Ngutu Kaka' [Thomas McDonnell], 'A Maori History: Being a Native

rosy cousin, the idea that they were committed and tenacious. Whether contemporary Maori retained this spirit or had gone 'soft' was something he could not decide.⁴²

One of the curiosities of Cowan's work is how he managed to maintain his belief that the wars bred respectful race relations even after he had talked to a lot of veterans who had shot at one another years before. For plenty of the European troops, the wars bred contempt rather than respect.⁴³ Part of the answer may lie with the people Cowan interviewed. Perhaps those who were bitter about the wars did not want to contribute to a project commemorating them. Cowan's informants seldom expressed bitterness or hatred against the people they fought — at least, according to Cowan's interview notes. When his Pakeha informants abused their enemies, they tended at the same time to praise their kupapa allies.⁴⁴ Both Maori and Pakeha informants appear nostalgic and interested rather than angry. Cowan often introduced old enemies to each other for the first time, and they got on. Such intense enactments of Cowan's narrative of racial harmony could only serve to convince him of its general applicability. Thus Cowan often seems to have reiterated the views of a certain kind of old veteran.

Cowan acted this way most of all for a small group of European veterans: Gilbert Mair, Thomas Porter and, to a lesser extent, G.A. Preece. Cowan quoted these people again and again.⁴⁵ Mair and Porter lobbied the government to commission his war history. Preece and Mair read the page proofs of *The New Zealand Wars* and brought about many amendments.⁴⁶ After their war service these men retained an involvement with Maori people, as resident magistrates, Native Land Court judges, or tourist guides. Porter married a Ngati Porou woman. It would be too much to say that they *lived* Cowan's myth, but their lives and their interests certainly made it an ideal. They wrote about their war experiences, dabbled in history-writing, and wrote articles and books which combined reminiscences with syrupy treatments of Maori mythology.⁴⁷ Porter

Account of the Pakeha-Maori Wars in New Zealand', in Thomas Wayth Gudgeon [W. E. Gudgeon], *The Defenders of New Zealand: Being a Short Biography of Colonists Who Distinguished Themselves in Upholding Her Majesty's Supremacy in These Islands*, Auckland, 1887, p.554.

42 Compare Cowan, *Maori: Yesterday and Today*, pp.10-12, and Cowan, 'Te Araki te Pahu: Warrior of the Arawa', 1908, Cowan Papers, 39/53A, ATL: 'He was an old, old man . . . a product of the days when every Maori was a trained soldier . . . long before the flabby days of peace had taken the tang of life from the warrior race'.

43 Belich, *New Zealand Wars*, pp.329-30; N.A.C. McMillan, 'Gustavus Ferdinand von Tempsky', in *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Vol. One, 1769-1869, Wellington, 1990, p.530.

44 For an example from one of Cowan's regular informants, see G.A. Preece, 'Pursuit of Te Kooti through the Urewera Country', in F.J.W. Gascoyne, *Soldiering in New Zealand: Being Reminiscences of a Veteran*, London, 1916. Cowan, however, does not appear to have used this particular piece in writing *The New Zealand Wars*.

45 See J.C. Andersen and G.C. Petersen, *The Mair Family*, Wellington, 1956, pp.9-10.

46 Proofs in Cowan Papers, 39/43B-C, ATL.

47 Mair, *Reminiscences and Maori Stories*; Mair, *The Story of Gate Pa: April 29th, 1864*, Tauranga, 1937 (first pub. 1926); T.W. Porter, *Legends of the Maori and Personal Reminiscences of the East Coast of New Zealand*, Christchurch, 1925; Porter, *History of the Early Days of Poverty Bay: Major Ropata Wahawaha N.Z.C., M.L.C.: The Story of His Life and Times*, Gisborne, 1923.

and Mair observed that one of the perks of being on the Native Land Court was the stories one got to collect.⁴⁸ They were collectors of culture. Their values and even their phrasing percolated through Cowan's texts.⁴⁹ The immediacy and intensity of Cowan's familiarity with them and their texts goes some way toward accounting for his account of Maori-Pakeha relations.⁵⁰

At this point I would like to shift to a more detailed examination of some of Cowan's writings, and to suggest a method of reading texts that does more justice to matters of textuality than is usually the case in New Zealand historiography, which often proceeds from the assumption that 'the context explains' a text (and vice versa, 'in a process that seems more circular than dialectical').⁵¹ One of the many problems with this position is that there is no such thing as 'the' context, which exists outside the text and which in some way 'produces' the text. Contexts are themselves heterogeneous. Texts are created through the combination of different contextual elements, such as authors' life experiences and intentions, other writing, ideology, the publishing market, current events, and, for historians, 'primary sources'. A text is a permutation of contexts, and very different texts can be created within similar contextual frameworks.⁵²

This theoretical position has two immediate consequences: first, that one should not assume any one context to be determinative; and secondly, that general contextual discussions may fruitfully be supplemented by analysis — on a local, detailed level — of how different contextual elements rub up against each other within texts. I propose to do this with reference to Cowan's account of the Northern War of 1845–6. Cowan's treatment of this war can be seen as an encounter principally between his race-relations myth, ideas associated with World War I, and divergent voices in his primary sources.

Cowan began his account of the War in the North with a scene-setting chapter on Kororareka in the early 1840s. He acknowledged its 'all pervading flavour of licence and lawlessness' but unlike some of his contemporaries he deemed this state of affairs 'red-blooded', not requiring self-righteous condemnation.⁵³ The

48 Mair, *Reminiscences and Maori Stories*, p.54; Porter, *Legends of the Maori and Personal Reminiscences*, p.61. See also Thomas Wayth Gudgeon [W.E. Gudgeon], *The History and Doings of the Maoris, from the Year 1820 to the Signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840*, Auckland, 1885, p.94.

49 For clear examples, see Mair, *Story of Gate Pa*, pp.10, 16, 19, 30.

50 Cowan also drew heavily on writing by and advice from another veteran, Native Land Court judge and writer, W.E. Gudgeon, but the treatment of Maori in Gudgeon's works was seldom replicated in Cowan's texts. See, for instance, Gudgeon, *Reminiscences of the War in New Zealand*, London, 1879, pp.v-vii.

51 P.J. Gibbons, 'A Note on Writing, Identity, and Colonisation in Aotearoa', *Sites*, 13 (Spring 1986), p.32. Gibbons is referring to a different problem, though a related one.

52 This argument draws heavily (though obliquely and selectively) on the work of a number of writers, in particular Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*, Ithaca and London, 1983; Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, Ithaca and London, 1988; and Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988.

53 Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, p.7. Compare Eric Ramsden, *Marsden and the Missions: Prelude to Waitangi*, Dunedin, 1936, pp.45, 55, 60, 66-68, 74, 150-1.

chapter was conscientiously picturesque, inviting the reader to 'picture something of the aspect of Kororareka Beach in the war-brewing "forties"',⁵⁴ The narrative shifted into the present tense and led the reader around on a tour: 'Follow the stores-buying captain or chief officer . . . into one of the weather-board trading-houses, blue with strong tobacco smoke'; 'Now board one of those whaleships lying out yonder at an easy anchor'.⁵⁵ Peter Gibbons has written: 'Cowan's evocation of a concealed assault party and the unsuspecting defenders at Kororareka during the night before the early morning attack in March 1845 is probably inspired by [the American historian Francis] Parkman's account of the attack on Deerfield' in north-west Massachusetts by a party of French Canadians and native Americans in 1704.⁵⁶ Cowan's description of Kororareka itself recalls Parkman's chapter on Deerfield, which also took the reader through the layout of its village, and described what its inhabitants were 'no doubt' doing before the attack.⁵⁷ Though his accounts of battle are spiced with statements about heroism and danger, Cowan's prose, unlike Parkman's, becomes much more mechanical in the battle-scenes.

Many Pakeha writing during and after the war blamed British failings in the war on the British commanders, especially Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Despard. The assumption was that Maori would not be able to fight in a tactically and technologically credible way — that a British commander would have to be an idiot to fail. Cowan took notes on contemporary denunciations of Despard by settlers who got their news second-hand,⁵⁸ and he was told by a nonagenarian veteran that Despard 'did not know his business'.⁵⁹ Cowan himself portrayed Despard as impatient and reckless with his men's lives,⁶⁰ but in Cowan's view, Despard's failings were not the most important factor in the war.

For Cowan the course of the war had more to do with the Maori tactics and fortifications than it did with Despard's competence. In public Despard complained about a lack of equipment at Ohaeawai; Cowan said that he would still have failed even if he had had such equipment.⁶¹ Cowan devoted considerable space to the construction and workings of the pa at Ohaeawai and Ruapekapeka.⁶² The commanding position of the pa, the strength of the outer fortifications, and the safety of the inner bunkers, explained the British defeat at Ohaeawai for Cowan. In his account, the fall of Ruapekapeka comes about only by a surprise attack when the defenders are praying on a Sunday morning, and it is Nga Puhī

54 Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, p.7.

55 *ibid.*, p.10.

56 Peter Gibbons, 'Non-fiction', *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, p.62.

57 Francis Parkman, 'The Sack of Deerfield', in *The Parkman Reader*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison, Boston, 1955, pp.372-4.

58 H.S. Chapman to Henry Chapman, 30 September 1845, transcript in Cowan Papers, 39/42E, ATL.

59 Testimony of W.H. Free, Cowan Papers, 39/41D, ATL, quoted in Belich, *New Zealand Wars*, p.48. I have been unable to find this document in Cowan's papers in the Alexander Turnbull Library, though I have read a different account by Free in those papers.

60 Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, pp.61, 82.

61 *ibid.*, p.70.

62 *ibid.*, pp.51-55, 76-79.

scouts, not Despard's men, who are responsible for the victory. The main evidence upon which Cowan based this account consists of contemporary British survey plans of the different pa,⁶³ personal visits to the battle sites, and interviews and correspondence with elderly Maori and Pakeha veterans.⁶⁴ He also drew upon Despard's description of Ruapekapeka to Governor Grey and Despard's comment that '[t]he extraordinary defence of this place [Ruapekapeka], particularly in its interior defence, far exceeded any idea [that] could have been formed of it'.⁶⁵

Cowan's treatment of the War in the North shows how misleading it can be to assume that historians in the past 'found what they were looking for'. With the evidence he had, Cowan could have written another account which would have fitted in with his overall story just as well. He was not above extravagant criticism of imperial commanders on other occasions. He could have saved face for the British by scapegoating Despard. He could have lauded Nga Puhi enough by emphasizing only their valour, without praising their 'soldierly genius' as well.⁶⁶ Maori courage and tenacity were essential to Cowan's story; Maori intelligence was not. In these chapters, however, evidence of Maori innovation displaced any ideological inclination to shortchange that innovation.

Elsewhere in Cowan's account of the War in the North, contemporary ideological currents and his own metanarrative *do* drown out primary sources. In the diary of the missionary Robert Burrows, Cowan had come across some post-war episodes that complicated an assured view of the peace. One was the icy meeting of Heke and Grey at breakfast at Burrows' house after the war. Another was the time when Captain Everard Home of the *Calliope* met Kawiti soon after the war. When Home said, 'Well, Kawiti, it is peace now,' Kawiti replied, 'It is for you to say if you have had enough, then we will say we have had enough.'⁶⁷

Later, Home visited Ohaeawai, and was introduced to Pene Tau. Burrows wrote:

'... Oh,' said Pene to me, aside, 'this is the captain who supplied the shot we have lying about here;' and giving a hint to a youth standing by, the lad started off and in a few minutes returned with a bag on his shoulders holding something of considerable weight. At a nod from Pene he rolled some half dozen 9lb shot at Sir Everard's feet, the chief

63 *ibid.*, p.77; description of Ohaeawai pa by Sergeant R. Hattaway, Cowan Papers, 39/41B, ATL.

64 Cowan, 'Ohaeawai', Cowan Papers, 39/42D, ATL; 'The Ohaeawai Battlefield: Rihara [K]ou's Narrative', Cowan Papers, 39/41, ATL; 'The Forlorn Hope at Ohaeawai: Corpl. Free's Experience (Additional)', Cowan Papers, 39/41, ATL; 'Ruapekapeka Pa: Colonel Mundy's Description', Cowan Papers, 39/42D, ATL.

65 Despard to Grey, 12 January 1846, transcript in Cowan Papers, 39/41, ATL; Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, p.86. In the book the quotation was amended to 'the extraordinary strength of this place, particularly in the interior defence, far exceeded any idea that could have been formed of it'.

66 Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, p.76. The context of the sentence makes it clear that 'genius' here means great intelligence, rather than nature or character.

67 Cowan, 'Heke and the Governor (Rev. R. Burrows' Diary)', n.d., Cowan Papers, 39/41E, ATL. The translation of Kawiti's reply is by Burrows.

asking him at the same time if he had seen them before. Sir Everard was greatly amused, and much pleased with his visit. He asked Pene if he felt the place to be his home again. Pene replied, 'It is only now you have paid me this visit that I begin to feel I am on my own land . . .'⁶⁸

These three episodes from Burrows' diary make the conclusion of the War in the North look either tense or unsettlingly comic. Cowan, however, concludes his account of the War in the North by praising Grey's decision not to confiscate land, and by pointing out that the flagstaff did not go back up. Everybody won. Moreover, Cowan wrote, 'Ngapuhi have ever since 1846 been loyal friends of the whites', and later sent hundreds of their young men to fight at Gallipoli.⁶⁹ Thus the story finishes with a synthesis of Cowan's line on racial harmony and the then-nascent myth that tensions between Maori and Pakeha dissolved as '[t]heir blood . . . commingled in the trenches of Gallipoli'.⁷⁰

In this section of *The New Zealand Wars*, then, Cowan managed to discipline the stories he told. This was not always the case. Cowan's admiration of the European invaders sat uneasily with his admiration of the tangata whenua. *Settlers and Pioneers*, Cowan's volume in the series of 'Centennial surveys', is one work where the conflict between contexts is *not* resolved. The book was supposed to be a history of rural settlement in New Zealand by Europeans. Cowan wrote a nostalgic book that depicted settler farm plenty in rich, sensual detail. But the book was overwritten and even more diffuse than his other works. D.O.W. Hall of the Centennial staff described it memorably as a 'wickedly episodic bundle of papers'.⁷¹

For the Centennial staff, though, the biggest problem with the book was its chapter on the Waikato War, which, Cowan pointed out, was a precondition of the European settlement of much of the Waikato. This chapter was removed by the editorial staff and the under-secretary for Internal Affairs. However, a fragmentary draft of the chapter exists in the 'Miscellaneous Typescripts' section of Cowan's papers in the Alexander Turnbull Library.⁷² It makes for incendiary reading.

68 *ibid.* The punctuation given above is as in Cowan's notes.

69 Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, p.87.

70 Maui Pomare, *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, 1916, 177, p.942.

71 D.O.W. Hall, 'Mr Cowan's Survey', 8 September 1939, IA1 62/110/2, NA.

72 Cowan, 'The Settlement of the Waikato', unpaginated typescript, 1939, Cowan Papers, 39/54D, ATL. The cutting of this chapter has been discussed before, most notably by Denis McEldowney in 'Publishing, Patronage, Literary Magazines', in *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, p.571, and Antony James Booker, 'The Centennial Surveys of New Zealand, 1936-41', BA (Hons) research exercise, Massey University, 1983, pp.35-36. As neither of these works discusses this draft of the chapter, I should explain why I think this is indeed a fragmentary draft of the missing chapter. The manuscript of *Settlers and Pioneers* (Wellington, 1940) is scattered through folders 53C, 53D, 54A, 54B, and 55B of the Cowan Papers. First, the chapter typescripts in these folders are all typed on the same size paper in the same format (title in capitals underlined in red) — a format not used by Cowan on any other drafts that I have seen. Secondly, the typescript fits neatly into the structure of the rest of the book (between chapters three and four). Thirdly, the draft was filed away in October 1939. Fourthly, the typescript has a handwritten note at the end saying 'rest of chapter is typed', indicating that this typescript is part of a book, not a stand-alone newspaper piece.

Cowan started by observing that 'Waikato's story began in a series of errors of judgement — to put it very mildly — and developed into a tragedy, the ruin of a people'. Then he moved away from this position and came close to breaking with the prevailing tradition of explaining the evils of colonization by referring to the misdeeds of individual Europeans (the Waitara 'blunder' being a classic example). Cowan damned the whole conduct of the war and its aftermath, and brought in individual European participants only to show that they too recognized its injustices:

The New Zealand Government of the early 'sixties — one administration after another — treated the Maoris of Waikato more cynically and brusquely than the Italians treated the Abyssinians. Italy at least left their surviving opponents on the land. But the revenge for acts of so-called rebellion in Waikato was wholesale dispossession and eviction. There is no denying the basic facts; they have been acknowledged officially in recent years, but even more than sixty years ago they were admitted by that fair-minded Native Minister Sir Donald Maclean, and by Sir George Grey, who had been one of the prime war-makers himself.⁷³

In September 1939, comparing previous New Zealand governments to Italian ones was staggeringly provocative, especially in a book written for an official series. Furthermore, in the formative stages of the Centennial historical project, Joseph Heenan, its director, had urged that the New Zealand Wars 'should not be stressed'.⁷⁴ It was therefore hardly surprising that the chapter was removed. Cowan told E.H. McCormick, by then the editor of the Centennial surveys, that he wanted to discuss the Waikato war 'forcibly in order to bring the facts of history home to the readers — & especially Waikato pakehas who are an ignorant lot; like most farmers they don't read anything but the newspapers. This book being a centennial occasion, they might read this.'⁷⁵ I.L.G. Sutherland commiserated with Cowan: 'I think it is disgraceful that you were not permitted to tell the truth about Waikato. How can good relations between two peoples be maintained on the basis of falsehoods, or the suppression of the truth?'⁷⁶

Cowan's insistence on recalling 'the whole truth' of 'a country's past' reveals another dimension of his conception of the past as persisting into the present. He pointed to the consequences of the raupatu or confiscation in the Waikato of the 1930s: 'There are Maori men and women and children working in Chinese gardens to-day whose immediate ancestors were stripped of their homes and land

73 Cowan, 'Settlement of the Waikato'. Cowan spelt McLean's name Maclean because that was the way McLean's son spelt it: Cowan, *Sir Donald Maclean: The Story of a New Zealand Statesman*, Dunedin, 1940, p.viii.

74 Minutes of a meeting of the Standing Committee of the National Historical Committee, 13 April 1938, IA1, 62/8/1, part 1, NA. The previous year, when Guy Scholefield had suggested a Centennial survey on 'Native Affairs', Heenan had replied that this was a 'delicate' matter, and deferred it. Minutes of Standing Committee meeting, 21 June 1937, IA1, 62/8, part 1, NA.

75 Cowan to McCormick, 24 October 1939, IA1, 62/110/2, NA.

76 Sutherland to Cowan, 2 September 1940, Cowan Papers, 39/3, ATL. Compare Cowan: 'it is impossible to reconcile the two races completely . . . until the old crime of "muru-whenua" . . . is atoned for.' Cowan, 'Settlement of the Waikato'.

seventy-five years ago.⁷⁷ Most of the time in Cowan's work, the past lingered on to offer lessons or food for inspiration.⁷⁸ But the past also created obligations, which could be evaded only with grotesque hypocrisy. As Cowan put it in a wry passage:

I wish the insensitive Englishman of Waikato could have heard the views of a certain Maori friend of mine on the subject of the raupatu. The good old man had a sense of humour strongly developed for a Maori; he thought it was a beautiful joke asking the evicted tribes to come back and sing jubilee hymns of praise in a Church built with the timber that they had freely given for it, with their labour, in the district that had been seized from them. 'The pakeha,' he said, 'is willing to let bygones be bygones, but does he offer to give me back my potato ground?'"⁷⁹

In its final form, *Settlers and Pioneers* offered only two oblique paragraphs on the Waikato war.⁸⁰ One of them read in part: 'The tragedy of war, like so many far greater wars before and since, could have been avoided. At any rate, the frontier settlers and the Maori farmers were not the war-makers.'⁸¹ Rather than making colonization troublingly ambiguous, these comments partially exonerate 'the pioneers'. This way, the book reads like a slightly more magnanimous version of the standard pioneer tribute. It makes a token acknowledgement of the suffering caused by colonization, but does so without enough detail or emotion to call into question the valorization of 'the pioneers'.

In the draft chapter, Cowan had written: 'in the process of glorifying the hard-toiling pioneers who made the way easy for the present generation, some of the most important facts of the pioneers' beginnings are apt to be overlooked, not to say ignored.' But, of course, Cowan himself participated in 'the process of glorifying the hard-toiling pioneers'. And although Cowan now said that while Maori remained dispossessed it was 'idle to say that pakeha and Maori are one people', he himself had made such idle claims often. In *Settlers and Pioneers*, as in his other books, the authorial voice seems unaware of the incompatibility of the two stories, Maori and Pakeha, it tells so passionately. But in *Settlers and Pioneers*, the conflict between the two is acted out more explicitly than elsewhere. Cowan felt violated by the excision of the Waikato chapter, but the act of censorship did him the service of obscuring the tensions at the heart of his work. Cowan's texts came closer than any other Pakeha writings to collapsing Pakeha ideology in on itself, but he did not invent any coherent means of writing outside the frames of that ideology, of crossing the discursive frontier.

77 Cowan, 'Settlement of the Waikato'. Cowan voiced anti-Chinese sentiments forcefully in *The Maori: Yesterday and Today*, pp.251-2.

78 Cowan, *Hero Stories*, p. ix; Cowan, *New Zealand Wars*, I, p.3.

79 Cowan, 'Settlement of the Waikato'. For similar protests by Cowan, see 'Memento M(a)ori', *Auckland Star*, 16 October 1937, and 'The Facts about Te Kooti: How Injustice Made a Rebel', in Cowan, *Tales of the Maori Border*, Wellington, 1944.

80 After Cowan had removed the offending chapter from the proofs, McCormick wrote to him saying that the 'connecting link' that Cowan had just written for 'the Waikato section . . . is very impartial'. This seems to refer to the paragraph quoted here. McCormick to Cowan, 26 October 1939; Cowan to McCormick, 24 October 1939, IA1, 62/110/2, NA.

81 Cowan, *Settlers and Pioneers*, p.21.

Ultimately, Cowan's importance lies more in these tensions *within* his texts than in the influence of his work on others. His metanarrative does not seem to have become a lived-in national mythology. However, I am not convinced that Cowan was as far out on a limb as James Belich argues in his discussion of the 'suppressive reflex' that edited the New Zealand Wars from Pakeha memory.⁸² Belich's argument about this 'suppressive reflex' is largely undocumented. As such it is an instance of a wider problem in New Zealand historiography, namely that many assumptions about New Zealand cultural history — such as Pakeha pride in the social laboratory or their 'good' relations with Maori — have yet to be examined in convincing detail. In lieu of such examination, books by more or less famous writers are made to serve as indices of Pakeha thinking generally. In many cases, these works — those by S. Percy Smith and William Pember Reeves are prominent examples — are non-fiction. If my study of Cowan has a general 'moral', it is that non-fiction texts cannot simply be taken as middens of popular belief, from which one may pluck unproblematic evidence of 'attitudes to' this or 'perceptions of' that. Such works are not just signs of the times, but exist also through engagements with texts (first) created in other times or other places, ranging, in Cowan's case, from soldiers' testimonies to Francis Parkman's books. Thus, like all works of history, Cowan's writings traversed the boundaries between past and present, a point which complicates the bromide that every 'generation' writes its own history. Related problems occur in other kinds of non-fiction. The networks of appropriation and combination that constitute non-fiction and other texts need to be traced before those texts are used as evidence in the study of ideology and culture. In texts, ideology and culture are not so much exemplified as maintained, contested and reformulated.

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82 Belich, *New Zealand Wars*, pp.320-1.