

Reviews (History in Other Media)

Watersheds — Ngā Waipupū: A History of Tairāwhiti. Tairāwhiti Museum Te Whare Taonga o te Tairāwhiti, Gisborne. Reviewed on 15 and 17 April 2009. [<http://www.tairawhitimuseum.org.nz/exhibits-galleries/semi-perm-exhibits/Watersheds.asp>].

TAIRĀWHITI MUSEUM'S NEW LONG-TERM EXHIBITION is the anchor stone of its voyage navigating the stories of the Tairāwhiti region and its people. Offering a finely nuanced overview of the complex human history of the area, it presents the sometimes fraught relationships between Māori and Pākehā particularly well, acknowledging complexity and the importance of perspective in our view of past events.

Gisborne, Tūranganui-a-Kiwa, is, after all, where it all began. On 8 October 1769, Lieutenant James Cook made the first confirmed European landfall in Aotearoa. It did not take long for things to go awry for Cook's party, who fared little better in their initial contact with local Māori than Tasman had in Golden Bay in 1642. Māori still remember the deaths of Te Maro and Te Rakau at the hands of Cook's men. European esteem for Cook, the great navigator and 'discoverer', marks a sharp difference in perception that is all too evident in contrasting public memorials around the city.

This exhibition adopts an innovative bicultural approach that treats each major topic as a 'watershed' in the tributaries that flow through the 'river of history', just as rivers have formed the landscape of Tairāwhiti. Watersheds fall away in two directions — Māori and Pākehā — considered separately yet running alongside each other. This works well, for the most part. It offers a corrective to the more common monocultural and Eurocentric approach to New Zealand history in museums. A cross-disciplinary perspective is also evident. The power and beauty of Māori tāonga, particularly whakairo (carving), are juxtaposed with fine arts and crafts in the European tradition and contemporary artists' work fuses the two. This offers a fresh, if occasionally oblique, take on many of the historical themes.

Visitors wend their way along nine separate 'tributaries' — the exhibition's major themes — with intimate nooks and crannies forming eddies, while the main gallery space is dominated by a large case in the form of a boat. The tributaries are a useful device for presenting a large quantity of information within relatively limited spaces. They are also a clever way of maintaining a broadly chronological narrative without being constrained by it. Ambitiously, *Watersheds* attempts to cover the whole history of human settlement in the region. In a few places this exposes weaknesses in the museum collection. Major local industries, like Watties or the freezing works, for example, are not adequately represented by the artefacts and artworks.

There is an intriguingly post-modern openness about narrative authority, or the lack of it, in this exhibition. This 'reflexiveness' comes into its own with two topics. An account of the fateful first encounter is offered, set amidst a range of artworks and artefacts that acknowledge its historical importance: 'The meaning of this encounter is being rethought and rewritten all the time. Pākehā have usually focussed more on the navigation and cartographic skills and arrival of Cook, and less on the impact of his visit. Māori haven't forgotten that their tūpuna, or ancestors, died. But in the present, histories are being written which try to understand what this means for us now, keeping in mind both points of view.'¹

A truly ghastly watercolour and pastel copy of Nathaniel Dance's famous portrait of Cook attests to the importance of this history for Europeans. It was acquired by a local bank in 1969 to mark the Cook bicentenary and passed on to the museum in 1998. More interesting are three items — 'Cook's Relics' — said to be directly connected

with the famous man himself. One at least, the portrait pendant of Rebecca Cook, ‘the great explorer’s daughter-in-law’, is of dubious provenance. No such person is known to have existed; all of Cook’s children died unmarried and without issue.² The label both acknowledges this doubt and puts the attribution in an appropriate museological context: ‘How true is this? We don’t know. What we do know is that these objects are interesting because of their supposed relationship to Cook. They are part of the very human desire to get close to the famous individuals of the past through objects that, unlike people, survive and live on in the present.’

Equally impressive is the account of Te Kooti and the killing of Major Reginald Biggs at Matawhero in 1868. Te Kooti’s position is somewhat analogous to Cook’s, but with the polarity in Māori and Pākehā perspectives reversed. For Māori, Te Kooti is primarily ‘a prophet and healer, founder of the Ringatū faith and a man dedicated to peace in later life’. To many Pākehā, his record is blighted by the murder of dozens of settlers and Māori, including children. The exhibition presents this story unflinchingly. It displays the whalebone kotiate used to kill Biggs alongside one of the major’s meerschaum pipes. The back story — Biggs’s primary role in Te Kooti’s imprisonment on the Chatham Islands, his occupation of land that had belonged to Te Kooti, and his attempts to recapture Te Kooti on his return to Poverty Bay — offers some explanation: ‘If he had been left alone, Te Kooti said, he would not have interfered with anyone.’ The Biggs family, now in the United States, presumably have not forgotten ‘that their tūpuna died’. They donated the pipe for the exhibition.

The artefact labels, though, are difficult to read; the print is too small and some are awkwardly placed (including my favoured Cook ones). I understand that these are to be replaced with more permanent versions. I also struggled with some of the audiovisual material as some of it did not operate according to the instructions provided. This was unfortunate as it forms an important aspect of the display. The design is otherwise impressive. The main text panels in particular provide a visually appealing and coherently framed backdrop for the important stories they tell.

One final impression. The Māori stories are more powerfully served by their associated artefacts than many of the Pākehā ones. There are certainly impressive items of European cultural origin, but some of the Maori ones are simply breathtaking. This may attest to the value of whakapapa as a conceptual framework for material culture. The ihi (power to affect) of many tāonga, presented in the context of a web of physical and spiritual relationships through whakapapa, rather overwhelmed the slender provenance provided for corresponding Pākehā objects. It reaffirms the importance for Māori of reclaiming their whakapapa connections with tāonga held in our museums. Tairāwhiti Museum and the various local iwi have set a standard here that institutions elsewhere would do well to emulate.

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NOTES

1 Quotes are from the exhibition text by Damian Skinner. My thanks to museum staff for providing a digital copy.

2 E-mail communication with Cook genealogy expert Frank Collins and research by Rod Fleck (Australia) and the late Ada Burnicle (UK), confirmed by descendants of the captain’s sister Margaret who have conducted extensive research into the Cook family.