

heartlands

new zealand
historians write
about places where
history happened
edited by kynan gentry
and gavin mclean



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Introduction: Place, Heritage and Identity

KYNAN GENTRY

WE ALL COME from some place, and we all live in some place. Our identity and our very sense of authenticity, it seems, are inextricably bound up with the places we claim as ‘ours’. Perhaps this is because place has a more lasting identity than we have – and because we unswervingly attach ourselves to our identity.¹ The sense of place that comes from defining ourselves in terms of a given piece of land, moreover, seems to transcend time, class and culture. At a time when mass culture and globalisation are blurring the boundaries of place, our sense of it remains unique and may even be intensifying.

Place, of course, is also multifaceted. It exists as both real and imagined, and it lies at the heart of both individual and collective identity. Nowhere is that more obvious as I write than at Kerikeri in the Bay of Islands, where the DoC and the New Zealand Historic Places Trust are consulting about the future conservation and interpretation of this important historic area. The national organisation of ICOMOS (the International Committee on Monuments and Sites) has an international perspective, welcoming Kerikeri’s inclusion on a tentative list of World Heritage sites. Others, such as the local authority, iwi and local property owners, are more narrowly focused. Their attachments range from the collective to the individual, including the memories of the families and the people who owned the buildings or shopped in the Stone Store. This seemingly conflicting

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By the time the Kerikeri Stone Store joined the Historic Places Trust's property portfolio in the mid 1970s, New Zealand had preserved many early missionary and pioneer properties in its 'colonial book of genesis'. This late 1990s photo shows the building after major conservation work done in part to correct some of the errors perpetrated after its purchase 20 years earlier.

– Gavin McLean

and contradictory nature of place, often so frustrating and annoying to planners, developers and politicians, lies at the very heart of its appeal.

We take delight in physically distinctive, recognisable locales and attach feelings and meanings to them. We often personalise places; we delight in 'knowing' a great city or understanding its history. Indeed, a strong sense of place supports our sense of personal and collective identity, which in turn can make us fiercely defend familiar features of our landscape. This sort of relationship to place lies at the heart of Maori identity. For Maori, land is the source of cultural, spiritual, emotional and physical sustenance, and is signified through their identification as tangata whenua (people of the land).

Landscape also acts as a teacher in shaping our perceptions of place. In colonial societies the view was commonly held that a physically and culturally unfamiliar landscape equated to an absence of history. This perception helps explain the nineteenth-century European penchant for renaming the landscape, and transplanting familiar plants and animals – the desire being to identify with the Old World, while civilising the New. In a later twist, from the 1990s onwards intellectual decolonisation saw the New Zealand Geographical Board recognise

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many Maori place names as the official names, peeling back a layer of colonial claims to cultural dominance over the landscape. The cries of outrage from some Pakeha confirmed that place names embodied particular visions of the land and views of history: they were anything but trivial.

Ironically, nineteenth-century appropriation of Maori names had been yet another method of colonial domination. By the closing years of the nineteenth century, as they celebrated fifty years of settlement, Pakeha, by this time increasingly native-born rather than migrants, outnumbering Maori, and having 'tamed' much of the countryside with roads, bridges and rail lines, now looked back and wondered whether the country had achieved a sense of adulthood. Their confidence (though some would call it smugness) allowed them to appropriate some fragments of Maori culture and to use these and indigenous flora and fauna as symbols of their new home. Today the indigenous dominates both local and international representations of New Zealand culture and society, the kiwi, haka and koru being the most obvious examples. Some scholars see the landscape as the dominant factor that shaped New Zealand masculinity.

THE NATURE OF PLACE

The nature of place is complex. Whether a room, a city or a country landscape, any space can carry meaning. The reason we attach to it, argued Martin Heidegger, widely acknowledged as one of the most original and important philosophers of the twentieth century, is because the physical world is an integral part of our existence and the basis of our perceptions.² French Philosopher Gaston achelard took this idea even further, arguing that our childhood homes form a psychological base that we use later in life when we evaluate our place in the world.³ Place provides an important psychological anchor between individuals and the world, and together with social relationships forms the mediating link between them and the outside world.

In his seminal work, *Imagined Communities*, political scientist Benedict Anderson has argued that this also explains the societal attachment to place.⁴ Maintaining that societies consciously choose and create collective and national identities, he suggests that the collective banners of 'custom' and 'tradition', we try to maintain social and cultural links that support these identities. The cultural baggage brought to new societies such as New Zealand is but one example of this, as we attempt in part literally to 'recreate' our physical pasts. Familiar places are important because they are not only the objects of memory, but also intrinsically memorable as they serve as mnemonic devices. They remain a part of us long after we stop being a part of them, even if our maintenance of them is often merely imagined.

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As adults, how often do we make pilgrimages to the places of our memories – childhood playgrounds or old family homes – only to be surprised at the distance between the real and the remembered or imagined? The landscapes of our childhood form the roots of our memories and any changes to them can be challenging, as I recently discovered when I found the perimeter hedge of my primary school playing field gone, leaving me with a sense of sadness and irrational anger. Yet as I stood there, I also understood that my sadness was rooted not so much in the loss of the trees themselves, but in the loss of them as material links to my memories. They framed my memories every bit as much as they framed that playground, and their physical loss triggered the fear that my memories, too, were threatened. This is the essence of place and landscape –it is built up from layers of rock as well as from layers of memory.

The relationship between memory and place is powerful. Yet as the literature on memory and oral history shows, the landscape of memory is fraught with problems. How the past is packaged and represented is a significant factor, as even recent memories of the past are greatly influenced by the media and by popular opinion, providing us with an attachment to a history not personally experienced. In *The Culture of the Copy*, American cultural historian Hillel Schwartz argues that in modern society, many of the recollections to which we give most credence have been recorded ‘apart’ from us – people do not even need to experience place personally for it to influence them.⁵

In the recreation of place through ‘acts of memory’ transmitted to successive generations, place can be made almost tangible. As the popular fascination with genealogy, for example, draws the lives and places of our ancestors closer into our own, many researchers come to know their ancestral village or home in infinite detail. Nor do these acts of memory have to be based on facts. In England, the myths and stories of Robin Hood have, as J. C. Holt observes, become a significant part of Nottingham and the surrounding shires’ history and identity and have contributed to the preservation of Sherwood Forest.⁶ Fact or fiction, it does not matter.

David Lowenthal calls nostalgia ‘memory with the pain removed’.⁷ Christopher Lasch suggests that nostalgia is the ideological twin of progress – that each generation suffers waves of anguish searching for a past characterised by popular yearnings for the intimate world of early colonial beginnings or for ‘lost’ rural places, and by anxieties about geographical and generational succession.⁸ Others have suggested that nostalgia may depend precisely on the irrecoverable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal –the very ‘pastness’ of the past and its inaccessibility accounts for much of its power. This is an interesting idea, as nostalgia does not simply repeat or duplicate memory, but is ‘experienced’

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The ruins of Kawau Island's copper mine engine house are one of the more romantic settings of historic sites in New Zealand. Built in 1854 in an attempt to keep the mines free of water, the building illustrates the influences of migrants on New Zealand's early architecture, being very similar to engine houses found in Cornwall, the home of many of the Kawau miners.

– LYN GENTRY

as idealised through memory and desire. In her provocative study, *On Longing*, Susan Stewart has called nostalgia a 'social disease'.⁹ Like Lowenthal, she argues that in denying or at least degrading the present, nostalgia makes the idealised and therefore always-absent past into the site of immediacy, presence and authenticity. Nostalgia sanitises as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, and safe from 'the unexpected and the untoward, from accident or betrayal' – in other words, making it so very unlike the present.¹⁰

Where originally nostalgia was seen as a 'disorder of the imagination', the word lost its purely medical meaning to become less a physical than a psychological condition – it had become psychically internalised, going from a curable medical illness to an incurable (indeed unassuageable) condition of the spirit or psyche.¹¹ No longer was nostalgia simply a yearning to return home physically, it was now a longing to return emotionally. Yet as early as 1798, Immanuel Kant had noted that people who did return home were usually disappointed because they did not want to return to a place, but to a time.

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Formerly confined in time and place, nostalgia today engulfs the past. Where half a century ago New Zealanders left the land in droves, seeking the excitement, opportunity and cosmopolitan life of the city, today brands such as Country Road and Rodd & Gunn market a return to the apparent bliss of the rural lifestyle as the ultimate status symbol. Hand in hand with this, the 'slice of heaven' country hobby farm, vineyard or rural property has become a status symbol for the SUV-ed urban nouveau riche. Nostalgia sells. As real estate agents market old houses as 'historic' and holding 'Old World charm', punters happily spend huge sums of money on antiques imbued with historical associations.

Rational or otherwise, it is our attachment to place as an anchor of identity and moral certitude that lies at the heart of the desire to preserve it. The motivations for preserving some remains of the past over others, however, are as complex as the human spirit itself. Preservation is essentially an autobiographical undertaking, dependent upon the belief that the past has something to offer the present, and that the tangible past is both attractive and desirable.¹² In this respect, preservation says more about the present than it does the past. Yet the undertaking of historic preservation is far from uniform, with preservation taking strikingly different paths in different contexts and cultures.

For those interested in history, the physical traces of the past also have a particular fascination – we believe that sites speak to us. We visit them for different reasons: to see what the places we hear so much about look like; out of personal attachment; and even just to say we have been there. Yet there is little question that we understand history in a different way when we encounter it 'on the ground'. As the perceived importance of historic preservation has grown, it has also got to the point where many believe that the loss of historic icons is not merely an attack on our historical reverence, but is also a more emotional and immediate threat to our sense of place.¹³

We also tie the historical integrity of a building to its fabric, the ultimate aim of site preservation being to maintain as much of the original fabric and form. This is a decidedly western concept. Not everyone thinks that way. In Japan, for example, the ritual of *shikinen sengu* sees sacred shrines rebuilt every twenty years using new materials. During the ritual, all the divine properties are transferred to the new shrine, while sacred vestments and treasures are remade using the highest excellence of craftsmanship in the same style the old one. The significance is not the fabric, but the 'spirit' of place, and the preservation of craft and ancient techniques. The process itself represents rebirth and renewal.

PROTECTING, PRESERVING

While unique instances of preservation date back to at least the fourteenth

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century, legislative protection of the built environment first grew in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, spurred on by the damage being done to antiquities in Europe by treasure hunters and collectors. By the mid-nineteenth century, what was seen as the vulgarisation of the past (centred around the broader growth of interest in popular antiquarianism as reflected in the growing market in books on historical topics, the spread of museums, and the proliferation of historical societies) had also become a significant influence in the preservation cause. In England, Lord Curzon, worried about Stonehenge, warned that 'under our existing law the owner might sell it tomorrow; he might pull it down tomorrow; he might part with it to an American syndicate to be erected in the Central Park in New York'.¹⁴ The historic remnants of the past literally needed protection. By the middle of the nineteenth century, John Ruskin (the father of modern preservation) was also arguing that, as antiques, buildings belonged not to the present, but to the past – that they were important because they were part of history and that the very fabric of their being held inherent meaning. The greatest glory of a building thus lay not in its stones, but in its age and its historical association. While castles and great houses were worthy of preservation and respect, simple villas and recreational buildings were not.

Such ideas had a significant influence on English preservation, which well into the twentieth century was criticised for focusing on the historical remnants of the elite. Only in recent decades has preservation in England shifted away from buildings, sites and monuments representative of the rich. The original (1908) remit of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments ended at 1700, excluding all Victorian and Georgian buildings, reflecting a presumption that the really significant sites were medieval churches, castles and early specimens of vernacular architecture. In the 1930s and 1940s many Georgian buildings were listed; a general prejudice against Victorian buildings has only more recently been overcome.

Others have argued that the rise of European preservation at the end of the nineteenth century reflected a malaise, a loss of confidence after the heroic optimism of the high Victorian period, involving a retreat to a nostalgic, anti-industrial rural ethos.¹⁵ An alternative suggestion has been that it reflected an understandable anxiety about the destructive side effects of the rush to improvement of the previous decades, a belief that national heritage was under unprecedented pressure, and that unless something was done to protect it, it would be irreparably harmed.¹⁶ Certainly, a sense that the English countryside needed protection from industrial progress had led to the formation of the National Trust in 1895, and before that, the Commons Preservation Society, which since the 1860s had sought to safeguard open space from urban sprawl by

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The old British Residency, gifted by the Governor-General Lord Bledisloe in 1932, typified the first buildings preserved as monuments in New Zealand. Most had associations with the early contact era, with the missions and colonisation. In thanking Bledisloe for buying the building, the *Dominion* said that ‘the pioneer stage has been passed. Fire and sword have left their scars upon the landscape. We are now in a state of civilisation, which, for want of a better description, is “half-baked”. In building for the future we have also to rescue from oblivion the relics of the past, for these relics are our history.’ Unfortunately, the restoration was half-baked too, transforming the old Residency into the grand, nationalistic Treaty House. –

JOHN WILSON

stressing the need to protect the unspoilt countryside as a national asset.¹⁷

New Zealand, like other Victorian colonies, was initially more concerned with preserving associations with Britain, transplanting familiar place names, flora and fauna, and traditions than in preserving what was here. The very idea of physical preservation would have conflicted with the ethos of the colonial settlement which celebrated a progression from whare and wattle and daub cottages through to wooden buildings and masonry structures. If any thought was given to retaining vestiges of ‘primitive’ places, it would be principally to show how far we had progressed.

While the period before the First World War saw the explosion of ethnological interest in recording and preserving New Zealand’s Maori past, it struck few chords with most New Zealanders, many of whom might have agreed with Mme de Staël’s *Corinne*; that ‘the most beautiful landscapes of the world, if they evoke no memory, if they bear the mark of no notable event, are destitute of interest compared to historic lands’.¹⁸ Most settlers associated historic sites with

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European dynasties and with human antiquity.

When interest in historic sites did emerge fitfully in parts of New Zealand in the closing years of the nineteenth century, the emphasis was on aspects of the past of wide-ranging significance. From the 1880s, individuals such as antiquarians Alexander Turnbull and Thomas Hocken, and amateur historian and photographer Russell Duncan sought to visit and record the sites associated with the early history of the colony. The focus was on the footprints of explorers, missionaries and the earliest settler endeavours as heroes of national stature. Generally, the Maori sites of interest were those associated with the 'key' battles of the New Zealand Wars.¹⁹ A handful of Maori sites were preserved because of their perceived historical significance, prompted by local rather than national interest. Similarly, the popular growth of interest in historic sites from the 1920s focused on places and buildings associated with pioneer settlers, military heroes and exemplary architecture from the earlier settler and provincial periods. As well as adding an antiquity in the new land, these early sites were seen as beacons of inspiration to newcomers, immigrants and locally born children, reminding them how to behave and what to believe. The suggestion was that places of historic significance contributed to the image of a single cultural norm; they reflected a particular image of the nation's history and its struggles to carve out a life of taste and culture in a new land.

The power of place is one of the key reasons for the following that historic preservation has developed. Written history demarcates the past from the present, but buildings and places bridge both simultaneously – they capture the past while being used in the present. Tangible relics easily become symbols of identity – they are enduring emblems of history and memory. As protectors of George Washington's headquarters at Newburge argued in 1850, 'if our love of country is excited when we read the biography of our revolutionary heroes . . . how much more will the flame of patriotism burn in our bosoms when we tread the ground where was shed the blood of our fathers, or when we move among the scenes where were conceived and consummated their noble achievements'.²⁰ Thomas Hocken said much the same thing to the Otago Society in 1881:

I have visited many of these old [mission] stations, now deserted or desolate spots, or else converted to purposes of a far different character. Nothing brought back to me so vividly the bygone past of New Zealand as wandering through these ruined remains. The once pretty garden – record of the missionary's taste and solace – choked with weeds and undergrowth; the fences and hedges destroyed; the quaint little church, with small overhanging belfry, locked, silent, and rapidly going to decay

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– the house silent, too, damp and mouldy, overrun and darkened with vines and creepers, now disorderly, once trim and well cared for as they clustered round the low verandah – the author and occupant of all this himself laying somewhere near, dear, and perhaps forgotten.²¹

Place, more than anything, it was argued, brought the past alive. In the early twentieth century, Pakeha increasingly sought traces of their own past within the landscape, and it was with the things of yesteryear that they identified – tombstones, cottages and churches, names and legends, old roads and the ruins of whaling and missionary days. Such physical reminders brought them closer both to the past and the present.

Identity dominated the early years of preservation in New Zealand. The Canterbury Provincial Chambers, completed in 1859, are a prime example. The buildings were protected by a preservation order in 1928, marking a milestone in the history of preservation practice in New Zealand. The motivation was threefold. First, to acknowledge the buildings' aesthetic qualities as an example of the 'finest English architecture'.²² Second, to champion them as a powerful



The Canterbury Provincial Chambers were a landmark in preservation in New Zealand. Cantabrians had first called for their protection in 1906, but it took another 22 years for the government to hand over control (and then only partially) of the site. Nine years later new legislation protected the rest of the complex. For many Cantabrians the buildings exemplified Canterbury at its greatest, capturing the Englishness of the settlement's origins.

– GAVIN MCLEAN

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symbol of pioneering sacrifice. 'To walk through the buildings to-day,' reflected a writer in the *Christchurch Sun* in 1934, 'gives one the sense of moving in historic scenes, getting glimpses now and then of the Fathers who moved there long ago.'²³ Thirdly, and most importantly, however, they were also a symbol of provincial pride at a time when Canterbury had staked its claim for provincial pre-eminence. They underpinned provincial identity.

Yet the power of places as tools to foster nationalism and identity can be tricky. When Lord and Lady Bledisloe gifted Busby's residence at Waitangi to the nation in 1932, they did so for what they perceived as its significance as the birthplace of nationhood, the place where the Treaty of Waitangi was signed. Bledisloe, an enthusiastic supporter of archaeology and local history in his native Gloucestershire, believed that nationhood and national identity could co-exist within an imperial framework.²⁴ A nationalised Waitangi might, therefore, help instil a greater sense of solidarity and a deeper spirit of nationhood, based on pride in its beginnings.²⁵ History, he believed, could heal long-standing traditional differences or suspicions. Almost a hundred years after Hobson had said, 'Now we are one people,' Bledisloe said, 'Two peoples, one land.' He also hoped to unite opposing pioneering views of New Zealand's settlement, namely the missionaries of the North, and the New Zealand Company.²⁶ In doing so, he was sustaining the widespread conceit that New Zealanders had created a harmonious society. Sustained opposition to this belief only began in the early 1960s in works such as David Ausubel's *Fern and the Tiki* and from educated urban political activists.²⁷

Bledisloe's beliefs informed Waitangi's conservation and interpretation. Visualised as the centrepiece of a national shrine, the dilapidated former British Residency had by 1934 been transformed into the Treaty House and made physically grander than Busby's old digs. The addition of the Whare Runanga in 1940 further consolidated Bledisloe's interpretation, the two buildings, Maori and Pakeha, standing side by side, symbolising the apparent strength of New Zealand's race relations.

But the Whare Runanga was more complicated than many thought. As a building of essentially Maori design, it was recognised by many Pakeha as a classic example of their craft and a testimony of their restored culture.²⁸ The fact that it was a building for all Maori was evidence for Bledisloe that the Treaty had united the Maori people. He took it as testimony on the part of Maori to the sincerity of British honour and integrity.²⁹ But Maori saw the Whare Runanga more as a reminder to Pakeha of the agreement they had entered into and that had conspicuously not been honoured. So, ironically, while Bledisloe conceived of the memorial as a demonstration of racial unity, Maori increasingly came to see

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The Elms mission station is a private preservation success story. Viewing the house and its grounds as a sacred trust, successive owners have since at least the early 1930s opened the house to the public, voluntarily carrying much of the cost of preserving and protecting the place (though with some public support in more recent times). – GAVIN MCLEAN

Waitangi as a powerful symbol of discontent and broken Pakeha promises.

Historic places can have several sometimes conflicting meanings for individuals and groups, perhaps even more so than other places. Historic preservation is in itself an act of interpretation and community intervention in property rights, and can quickly become a complex ground for debate. Cultural historians may argue, for example, that the historical importance or association of a place should direct our interpretation of its significance, whereas architectural historians may champion the built form. To complicate matters even more, sometimes as new facts are uncovered and details reordered, previously accepted narratives often become destabilised.³⁰

Nowhere was this more obvious than at Waitangi. By the late 1950s, some people were complaining that the pre-Treaty history of the site, principally to do with Busby, had been stripped away; the journalist and historian Eric Ramsden called the name change from the British Residency to the Treaty House a mistake.³¹ However, by this stage, most people still saw Waitangi as a national shrine and place of pilgrimage, as Bledisloe had hoped.³²

Following a confused reinterpretation in the 1970s, in 1988 the Waitangi Trust Board finally commissioned conservation architect Clive Lucas to prepare

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a conservation plan. Lucas recommended presenting the Treaty House as it appeared during the Busby family period between 1840 and 1860, offering several reasons for this. Firstly, no one knew for certain about the pre-1840 form of the house. Secondly, the 1840–60 form of the house was well balanced and had strong aesthetic qualities, and it was still possible to present and display the original Sydney house within this model. Finally, there had developed a strong public association with what was now regarded as iconographic fraud created during the 1930s, which had come to assume some historical significance for what it said about the aspirations of New Zealand society in that period. As Lucas expressed it, ‘The house was to be put in touch with 1840, yet the words of 1933 would not be eaten’.³³ Such debate lies at the heart of heritage.

David Lowenthal does not think that heritage is history at all. While it borrows from and enlivens historical study, he notes heritage is not an inquiry into the past, but a celebration of it, not an effort to know what actually happened but a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes.³⁴ History and heritage, he argues, transmit different things to different audiences. History tells what has happened and how things came to be as they are. Heritage passes on exclusive myths or origin and continuance, endowing a select group with prestige and common purpose. ‘History,’ he concludes, ‘is enlarged by being disseminated; heritage is diminished and despoiled by export.’³⁵ This, his critics argue, goes too far. After all, no aspect of heritage is wholly devoid of historical reality, and no historian’s view is wholly free of bias.

In a sense it does not matter who is right. Absolute historical ‘truth’ is that distant Shangri La, which even if we reached it, we would find irrelevant. Not that history is unimportant – far from it. But it is important to understand that what we read from the past, how we interpret it, and what elements of it we preserve, often says more about us *now* – collectively and as individuals – than it does about the past. Nor need history be measured in millennia, the familiar streets. As the stories that follow show, the parks, buildings, fields and hills of our own lives are often perceived as the most valuable. These, after all, are also the building blocks of wider landscapes. Whatever you have, it is worth fighting for and, as our historians prove, can be worth talking about.

FURTHER READING

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