In the year in which the celebrated Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn painted The Night Watch two small, barely seaworthy ships of the Dutch East India Company under the command of Abel Tasman set out from Batavia in search of the fabulous ‘Unknown South-land’. Sailing south-east from Batavia - present-day Jakarta in Indonesia - they arrived in Mauritius, where the ships were refitted and loaded with provisions. The explorers then charted a course to the south-west. On 24 November 1642 the Heemskerck, Tasman’s flagship, and the support vessel Zeehaen, came in sight of a mountainous land-mass which the ships’ officers named ‘Anthonij Van Diemens Landt’ in honour of the governor-general of Batavia. Sailing along the southern coast, the ships paused to allow an investigation on shore during which human voices and the sound of a gong were heard, and other indication of a human presence noted. Following the planting of a company flag on land the two ships set a course east-south-eastwards.

Around midday on 13 December 1642 a ‘large land uplifted high’ was sighted, which the ships’ officers named Staten Landt, under the mistaken impression that it connected with the continent we know as South America. Sometime later the ‘large uplifted land’ was renamed Ze/e/landia Nova - New Zealand - after Zeeland in Holland. Meticulous drawings of the landscape were produced by Isaack Gilsemans, a merchant, and the expedition’s draughtsman, as the ships made their way along the west coast of this ‘large land uplifted high’.

Proceeding north, the ships rounded a long sandspit (now known as Farewell Spit) and sailed into the deeply curved bay known to the indigenous peoples of the region as Taitapu - sacred coast. At sunset on 18 December 1642 the Heemskerck and the Zeehaen anchored in fifteen fathoms of water, about four miles offshore from Wainui [Bay] and Taupo [Point]. The Dutch sailors had earlier seen smoke; now they saw lights on shore. In the darkness two canoes bearing warriors glided up to the ships to inspect them. To the warriors’ challenge of ‘incantations and ritual blasts of their shell trumpets’ the sailors responded with shouts and trumpet calls. This exchange must have been an eerie and mystifying experience for both parties.

The next morning a canoe with thirteen warriors on board came out to the ships but kept its distance while the Dutch sailors unsuccessfully tried to entice the warriors to come nearer. In a marvellously evocative reconstruction of the encounter in Anne Salmond’s new book, Two Worlds; First meetings between Maori and Europeans, 1642-1772, it is clear that the ‘rough calling’ heard by the Dutch sailors was a war chant, and their written and visual descriptions of the warriors’ appearance and demeanour confirm that the warriors were preparing to defend their territory against invasion. Seven more canoes came out from the shore, and it was while the Zeehaen’s cockboat was running between the two ships with messages that it was rammed at high speed by one of the canoes, and three of the sailors were swiftly bludgeoned to death, and another mortally wounded. One of the dead was taken by the warriors, and the canoes sped back to shore out of range of the muskets and cannon which opened fire from both ships. Three of the cockboat’s crew managed to swim to the Heemskerck, and the cockboat with its cargo of one corpse and a dying man were also retrieved. On their return the ships weighed anchor and set sail.

The whole melancholy episode in Murderers Bay (as the Dutch sailors called Taitapu) is documented - in continuous representation, in sequence - in this remarkable drawing by Isaack Gilsemans - the first European depiction of the Polynesian inhabitants of the islands know to them, or at least, to those who lived in the northern and centrals areas, Aotearoa - the land of the long white cloud.

As the ships were sailing away, eleven canoes approached but the Dutch sailors were taking no further chances and fired their cannon, hitting one of the canoes and killing one of its occupants.

The ships remained in the region during the next week, however, tacking around the waters, riding out a storm, and celebrating Christmas with wine and freshly slaughtered pork. On 26 December they sailed north along the west coast of the North Island, reaching Cape Maria van Dieman (named after van Dieman’s wife) on 4 January, and sighting island which the officers were to name the Three Kings Islands. On 5 January, wanting fresh water, they investigated Great Island in the Three Kings group, but were deterred by a rocky shore and heavy surf, and by the 30 to 35 people who seemed like giants, shouted ‘with rough loud voice’, and threw stones from the cliff-tops.

Thus the expedition departed from Aotearoa without any of the Dutch explorers having set foot on land.
further European visits to the region were to occur until the British barque Endeavour under the command of Captain James Cook arrived in October 1769.

This year we commemorate the three hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Tasman’s momentous visit, when the geographic and political entities we know as New Zealand and Australia were first linked together and drawn into a Eurocentric conceptual framework and time-frame. This, of course, is the conceptual framework and time-frame within whose terms of reference our conference and the historic conservation movement generally operate.

Within those terms the site of initial encounter between the warriors of the Ngati Tumatakokiri tribe and the Dutch sailors must stand as one of crucial cultural significance in the subsequent invention of New Zealand as a political entity. It is at this point, however, that the significance of the event in the western construction of history comes into conflict with the belief system and values of the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand, not least for the grievous sense of loss - of land, of mana (dignity), of self-worth - wrought by the subsequent experience of invasion, occupation and subjugation, which they continue to nurse.

That loss is compounded by the fact that Ngati Tumatakokiri have not survived. As a tribe they were annihilated around 1813 by Maori invaders from the North Island; their oral history and traditions petered out; and their settlements reverted to bush and scrub. Archaeological knowledge of the area is as yet scanty, but a small number of fortified village or pa sites have been identified on coastal headlands, and at least one of these may have been the base from which the warriors who skirmished with Tasman’s sailors operated. Best estimates place it at Wharawharangi Bay, Taupo Point, on the south-east of Golden Bay.

In the light of the Maori experience of disempowerment and dispossession in the colonial and post-colonial era, had the Ngati Tumatakokiri survived they would be honoured today by Maori for their resistance of the first European intruders. In Maori tradition, however, only their descendants have the right to tell their story, but there are no descendants to hold their exploits in memory and pass them on, verbally, to succeeding generations. As the whakatauki or proverb lamens: Rurangi maunga tu te ao, tu te po; rarangi tangata ka ngaro, ka ngaro. A range of mountains stands day in and day out, but a line of people is lost, is lost. Without their story, people and taonga (treasured possessions) cease to have any connection with the living. The Ngati Tumatakokiri have been absorbed into a larger mythical conceptual framework as old as - or even older than - the Polynesian island homelands from which their ancestors first came, and which is the commonality of all the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa, in fact.

The Maori creation myth is comprised of elements which have their origin in the ancient cultures of Polynesia, but translated to and domesticated in Aotearoa. Before creation various states of nothingness and darkness are imagined in which the possibilities of becoming are detailed. In that mythological time Ranginui, the sky father, and Papatuanuku, the earth mother, were prised apart by one of their children, Tane Mahuta, the god of the forest; and their other sons, Tane’s brothers emerged as departmental gods. Tane formed Hineahuone, the first woman, and their children were the first people.

In that mythological time Maui, the Polynesian culture hero, hauled up the land from the sea. Maori legend also locates in the same story the origins of the superior Maori house - the one building type indigenous to Aotearoa, in fact - in the realm of the sea-god, where it existed in a fully realised form.

According to one tradition, Maui went fishing, and cast his magnificent fishhook into the sea - and it sank down, and sank down, till it reached to the small carved figure on the roof at the bottom of the sea; then, passing by the figure, it descended along the outside rafters of the roof, and fell in at the doorway of the house, and the hook...caught first in the sill of the doorway. Then feeling something on his hook, he began to haul in his line.

And with the house Maui hauled up Te Ika-a-Maui - Maui’s fish: the North Island of New Zealand. The South Island - Te Wai Pounamu: the greenstone water, source of the nephrite prized by all the tribes of Aotearoa - is also known as Te Waka-a-Maui - Maui’s canoe.

Archaeology and history construct a different story - one of progressive evolution.

Some forty-five generations ago - during the ninth century, by the western calendar - long distance voyagers from the islands of East Polynesia began to colonise the coastal regions of Aotearoa. The construction of shelters must have been among their earliest priorities, and these would have been pretty makeshift at first. But as the colonists began to establish permanent settlements, they would have planned them according to no other conventions of social organisation than the ones they already knew. Beyond the entrance to the compound, a marae atea - an open space for ritual encounters - was essential. This, together with the principal house - usually the chief’s residence, where the mana of the people was focussed - and the urupa or burial ground, was tapu (sacred).

As the colonists began to erect superior houses framed of timber, it is reasonable to assume that these conformed to East Polynesian types and that traditional technologies were employed in their construction. In time, however, a distinctive type of dwelling - the
wharepuni or sleeping house, or dormitory - evolved as the ancestors of the Maori adapted to environments and climates different from those they had forsaken in their various points of origin.

Carbon dating of the earliest building site so far excavated - at Pallister Bay - indicates that the characteristic rectangular plan of the whare, with its low side walls, and gabled roof extending out over the from to form a porch was already established within eight generations - or, reckoning by the western calendar, towards the end of the twelfth century - 1180 A.D.

Reconstructions of later buildings (at Makotukutuku, Pallister Bay, and Mangakaware, Waikato) show that the superior house had evolved into a structure framed of timbers, with a ridgepole supported by posts, and rafter morticed or cradled into, or lashed to, the upright slabs of the walls. The spaces between the slabs would have been filled in with woven reeds and the roof thatched. The structure either rose directly from the ground, or covered a levelled pit, with earth heaped up against the side walls for the purposes of weatherproofing, insulation and defense.

In time, the proportions of the basic form, and the relationship of parts, came to be regarded as fixed, while the structural system was refined. It became an indigenous building just as the descendants of the Polynesian settlers had become indigenous. In many areas an abundance of excellent timber allowed larger houses to be constructed. The further development and refinement of stone tools and adzes - particularly those of greenstone or pounamu, which was able to retain a carving of great expressive power, so that the original wharepuni type evolved into the wharenui, the whare whakairo and the whare tupuna - the house named after 'Tutangimamae' built at Marakapua, Central Kaipara, 'the finest flowering of Maori art' and 'New Zealand's greatest national treasure', it has been called - sits on the ground, or covered a levelled pit, with earth heaped up against the side walls for the purposes of weatherproofing, insulation and defense.

Even after the tapu had been eased ritually, the house remained a highly tapu entity - and parts of it were more tapu than others: the threshold; the door; the window; the roof - which, being the part of the building closest to the sky father, was so tapu that only a person of mana could stand or sit on the ridge; and carved ancestor figures. It was revered as the embodiment of the illustrious ancestor after whom it would probably have been named. The gable-mask, sometimes surmounted by a carved figure representing a descendant, was the head; the bargeboards were the arms, and the ends were the fingers; the window was an eye; the ridgepole was the backbone, and the rafters - often painted with scroll patterns - the ribs, representing the lines of descent, the genealogical framework. The heartpole, with an ancestor figure at its base, was the principal supporting pole. The wall-slabs were often carved as representations of ancestors, separated from each other by patterned lattice-work panels. So that when the extended family entered the house, past and present, ancestors and descendants, were assembled together. And when they slept, they nestled against their primal mother, Papatuanuku.

The oldest surviving carved house, Te Hau-ki-Turanga, - 'the finest flowering of Maori art' and 'New Zealand's greatest national treasure', it has been called - sits on the cusp between the ancient pre-contact world of the Maori and the modern post-contact world. Built in the early 1840s, and thus comparatively recent, it stands at the end of a thousand years of cultural development in Aotearoa, and at the same time marks the advent of a new millennium for Maori, signalled by the Treaty of Waitangi - the contract entered into by representatives of the indigenous people and the European colonists in 1840. Every meeting house erected subsequently stands in the line of descent from Te Hau-ki-Turanga, while the building itself enshrines the conventions of earlier structures which have long since disappeared.

Te Hau-ki-Turanga has survived only because it was acquired by the Colonial Museum of New Zealand, now the National Museum, where it is housed, under cover, of course. Its preservation, however, flies in the face of Maori tradition and convention, and is an outcome of the museum culture introduced by European colonisers - the Pakeha. Professor Hirini Mead has wryly observed:
Thanks to the Western practise of collecting “quaint” works of art and to modern conservation techniques, the art treasures of a nation can now be likened to a range of mountains. They remain long after they were fashioned by artists of another era. [Te Maori, 20]

Acquisition and conservation involve the imposition of a conceptual frame work that is at odds with the manner in which Maori revere their treasures. The museum culture divorces such treasures from their primary, mystical and natural contexts, and desecralizes and reframes them in secular and profane terms; it interferes with, and disrupts, natural processes - the natural order of things as Maori perceive them to be.

In 1966 the International Charter for the Conservation of Monuments and Sites was promulgated in Venice, the marine city whose precarious existence had become the focus of international concern and calls for action. Jan Morris in the 1974 edition of her book on Venice (first published in 1960) observed:

Venice has captured the concern of the world, and the possibility of extinction beneath the waters, which has moved artists and writers for generations, is not seen as a romantic vision, but as an international catastrophe. A new Venice is being born, protected, restored, no longer sufficient to itself, but adopted by the world at large as a universal heritage. While I acknowledge the excitement of this new fulfillment, I cannot share it. For one thing I believe the idea of Venice to be irreconcilable with the modern world. For another, selfishly perhaps, foolishly even, I miss the tristesse. The sad magic has gone for me. Incomparable though Venice remains, I miss the pathos of her decline. I wish her well, admire her always, hope on the whole they keep her standing: but I am out of love with her. Sometimes in the mid-seventies, I was startled to read in one of the London daily newspapers, an article by Jan Morris in which (in so many words) she had clearly had second thoughts on the subject: ‘Venice is sinking? Let her sink! Let her die with dignity.’ That declaration accords with Maori attitudes to sacred sites - let them return to the elements!

The traditional Maori house was regarded as a living, organic being with a life-span comparable with that of humans - in pre-contact times, about thirty-six years. It had its own mauri - life-force; wairua - spirit or soul; and mana - high standing. When a tribal house had ceased to be functional - when its life-force was spent - it was abandoned to the elements, and its wairua - spirit or soul - often transferred to a replacement building. There was no tradition of maintenance. An abandoned house was still regarded as highly tapu because of its association with the ancestors, and the lives and deaths of the extended family to which it, as a member of that family, had been a witness. To preserve a whare tupuna in a museum, far away from the people for whom it had originally been carved and built, was tantamount to keeping a brain-dead body artificially alive on a life-support system; tantamount to freezing the corpse; tantamount to placing one’s dead grandmother’s body on permanent exhibition. Archaeological investigation of house sites in abandoned settlements seems like sifting through the graves of ancestors.

Thus for Maori the concept of historic conservation is problematic, particularly with regard to wahi tapu (sacred sites). By definition, a sacred site is one whose significance is only fully apprehended by a community steeped in its own system of mystical or metaphysical belief. Within a functional tribal settlement - a kainga or pa, places of ritual encounter - the marae-atea, the paepae or threshold of the tribal house, the tribal house itself, the whare karakia or Christian church of the post-contact era, and the urupa or cemetery are, in varying degrees, tapu. The local landmarks of tribal identity - e.g. Ko Hikurangi Te Maungau, Ko Waiapu Te Awa, Ko Porourangi Te Tūpuna, Ko Ngāti Porou Te Iwi - are also highly tapu. Indeed, Maori conceive the whole of existence as tapu - as sacred, as bound by ritual prohibitions. Humans operate only within that narrow space between the two primal parents, and only by means of special dispensations called whakanoa - making safe, making ordinary. Violations of tapu - desecrations - may give rise to personal or tribal misfortune, and are therefore to be avoided. Abandoned and overgrown sites - and there are thousands of them in Aotearoa - will have had wahi tapu - sacred sites - which were culturally significant to the original inhabitants. We can be reasonably confident that the wahi tapu - the sacred places - of the Ngāti Tumatakokiri were grounded in a belief system similar to that of our own ancestors. But should we search them out, excavate or in any way disturb them? To the living they are still vibrant with dangers, knowable and unknowable, and are best left untrodden. The neglect of sites and buildings may appear culpable but may be, in fact, purposeful.

Information concerning the cultural significance of sacred material is, by definition, privileged to the kaitiaki - the guardians or custodians in whose care it is entrusted, and tribal secrets may not be divulged to all and sundry. It is considered disrespectful and sometimes dangerous to reveal arcane knowledge.

cf. Mandawuy Yunupingu, lead singer of the Aboriginal political rock band, Yothu Yindi, whose members are from Arnhem Land is punctilious in this regard:

We’ve always been careful about dealing with sacred material. We’re only able to perform it at a community level. It’s restricted knowledge that can’t be passed on to other people who are uninitiated. We’re always careful not to expose sensitive issues. That’s why we’ve developed a way we can negotiate with the elders, who we come to for guidance and wisdom. On the acknowledgements page of her definitive book on Maori weaving, Erenora Puketapu-Hetet declares:

This book is merely a glimpse into the Maori world of weaving. To write about everything would be demeaning to the knowledge that is protected. The Aotearoa Charter adopted in 1991 does something that the rigidly Eurocentric and monocultural Burra
Charter (1979; revised 1981 and 1988), framed entirely in the colonisers’ terms, does not - it recognises the indigenous culture as a distinctive entity within the larger national framework. It has to: the situation in New Zealand differs from that in Australia in that it is governed by the existence of a treaty - the Treaty of Waitangi.

New Zealand’s Maori and Pakeha heritage, its archaeological and traditional sites, its historic areas, landscapes and features and its historic buildings, structures and gardens are taonga and national treasures. Whether Pakeha are entitled to describe their heritage as taonga, since the world has mystical significance for Maori, is a moot point. However, the tone of the charter is conciliatory, concessionary and accommodating.

Conservation acknowledges the importance of Maori cultural precepts, including wairua, mana and tapu. Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the treaty of Waitangi, recognises Maori as rightful custodians of their taonga, buildings and sites. The conservation of, and access to, Maori cultural heritage should acknowledge and provide for Maori conservation values, methodology and protocol.

Even so, the concessions operate within a larger conceptual framework which is almost entirely under the control of the power culture. And for whose benefit? Nor for the benefit of Maori, surely? For the belief system which gave meaning to their sites and buildings has been fatally damaged, and their cultural heritage value, as the Aotearoa charter puts it, has largely to be defined in the power culture’s degrading terms. Hal Foster’s observations on the hypocritical European obsession with so-called primitive art in the twentieth-century equally apply to the heritage conservation movement’s dealings with the sacred sites of tribal cultures:

To value as art what is now a ruin; to locate what one lacks in what one has destroyed: more is at work here than compensation. Like fetishism, primitivism is a system of multiple beliefs, an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction: a representation of the fact that a breakthrough in our art, indeed a regeneration of our culture, is based in part on the breakup and decay of other societies, that the modernist discovery of the primitive is not only in part its oblivion but its death. And the final contradiction or aporia is this: no anthropological remorse, aesthetic evaluation or redemptive exhibition can correct or compensate this loss because they are all implicated in it. [Recodings, p. 199]

But conservation in the Aotearoa and Burra Charters alike is ultimately supra-national in its objectives: it links into the western conceptual framework’s agenda of a ‘universal heritage’ - cf. the Aotearoa Charter:

New Zealand shares a responsibility with the rest of humanity to safeguard cultural heritage for present and future generations.

And ‘future generations’? cf. the Burra Charter:

Cultural significance means aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations.

Whose values does this represent? We cannot answer for past generations; we cannot determine the cultural significance of their sites and buildings for them; the cultural significance they attached to their sites and buildings cannot be the same for us. And what will the cultural significance of any site be for ‘future generations’? Do we have a mandate to answer to the future? What is the time-frame for posterity? In the rueful experience of the indigenous peoples of New Zealand - and, I daresay, Australia - the future holds no certainties. Current patterns of immigration and investment, and political indicators, suggest - at least to my untrained eye - that Australia will have become an Asian country sometime during the next century. New Zealand, likewise. Demographic redistribution of the world’s population and natural disasters will have completely altered the balance of history. What we cling to as heritage the people who inhabit a world in which the population will have doubled may well discard as irrelevant to their purposes - to their struggle for survival. Their values will be as different from ours as ours are from our ancestors.

So to the tribal peoples of the South Pacific, heritage conservation can seem like the power culture’s determination to legitimate and consolidate its presence in the region. Thus it can seem immoral. It can also seem futile. What is the power culture’s three hundred-and-fifty year old association with Aotearoa beside a Maori presence of eleven or twelve hundred years, and in the Pacific, four or five thousand years. Without presuming to speak for the indigenous peoples of Australia, what is the power culture’s two centuries of history beside forty to fifty thousand years of aboriginal presence? What traces of western civilisation will have survived forty thousand years from now?

Only fifty to twenty generations hence - taking into account the vastly increased average life-span of the Maori - Lord Macaulay’s sublime vision of a time when London, once the hub of Empire, would be reduced to a wasteland - ‘When some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St Paul’s’ - may well have been realised. [cf. Gustave Doré’s illustration of ‘Macaulay’s dream of the far future, with the tourist New Zealander upon the broken parapets, contemplating something matching -

The glory that was Greece -

The grandeur that was Rome.’]

The ‘tourist New Zealander’ - conceived of (in nineteenth century terms) as a Maori - faces a conservation challenge of massive proportions. Between now and then, however, the settler populations of Australia and New Zealand and elsewhere in the South Pacific will have become indigenised - Australianised and Aotearoaised; their cultures will have melded with those of the ancient people of the region to create an ethnocentric conceptual framework to replace Eurocentrism. A more powerful regional perspective would then operate in determining the cultural significance of sites, both sacred and secular, both ancient and recent.