Whose Stories? Reconciling differences in historic interpretation

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‘Heritage is history’s shady cousin’
W.H. Oliver, eminent New Zealand historian

New Zealand history in brief

New Zealand’s historical sequence begins in about AD1200 with the occupation of the country by Polynesian voyagers who were to become the Maori. Fortifications were built from c. AD1450. European settlement by shore whalers and sealers began in the late 1700s/early 1800s. The first mission settlement was established in the Bay of Islands in 1814. The Treaty of Waitangi was signed between the British Crown and most Maori in 1840. The treaty made Maori British citizens, and guaranteed tino rangatiratanga (Maori control of Maori resources). However, the true meaning of the passing of sovereignty appears to have been contested at the time. The northern phase of the New Zealand Wars began in 1845, and the main phase took place in 1859-71. These have been variously interpreted over time as wars about sovereignty, over land and as civil wars (where one citizen fights another).

Legal decisions of the last decade or two have enumerated the Crown’s duties today as follows: to consult (listen effectively), to maintain active protection of Maori interests, to foster kaitiaki (guardianship) role by Maori and to maintain a partnership with Maori. This may mean doing things differently but with a common goal. In our reading of the notion of partnership, as it relates to historic heritage interpretation, the common goal is history as education, history in community identity, and history as a means of commemoration of the past and its people.

Politisation of interpretation

Inevitably, there has been politisation of interpretation in the heritage industry. Politisation can be acceptable—after all, history matters and it is a part of community identity and formation. However it is not acceptable for a Crown agency to participate in politisation. This can result in a problem for Crown agencies when they attempt to interpret history. At the very least a balance is necessary, where the past can be revealed or made open by showing events and processes as it is seen from the perspective of the participants, both original and current. Use of direct quotes from participants may be appropriate. The public should be left to make up its own mind about the rights and wrongs of the past.

New Zealand agencies and their interpretation role

The New Zealand agencies for managing historic and cultural heritage include:

- Department of Conservation, Te Papa Atawhai (Crown, required by statute to ‘give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi’)
- Historic Places Trust, Pouhere Taonga (Crown)
- Ministry of Culture and Heritage (Crown)
- Local government (city, district and regional councils) (Crown)
- Iwi Maori (non-Crown by definition but they may carry out roles in the wider public interest)

The authorities charged with interpretation have a number of roles. They should present contrasting views honestly; they should consult and work in partnership. They should insist on full documentation of contrasting views. If a view is plainly wrong, they should say so. (In a thoroughly post-modern world, it could be said that the problem arises of who and how to decide what is ‘wrong’.) Finally we suggest they should work incrementally, not trying to achieve big steps in radical reinterpretation but perhaps working just outside a local community consensus. Perhaps the only exception to this rule is Maori, but even then they will have an ambiguous role when administering reserves with an underlying Crown ownership. However, the Crown should be flexible in its view of the delegated management of such lands and well thought-out views contrary to those the Crown might wish to see expressed should be allowed for.

New Zealand examples

Some examples of these roles can be seen at Te Koru pa, Taranaki (a pre-European site), Pukerangi pa, Taranaki (an offensive and defensive earthwork complex incorporating pa and redoubts mainly of the New Zealand Wars), Ruapekapeka pa, Bay of Islands (northern phase of the New Zealand Wars) and Pompallier House, Bay of Islands (French Catholic missions).

Te Koru pa is in Taranaki. The site was gifted by Maori to the Crown in the 1930s. It has a long history of consultation with, and interest of, the local Maori community. It is a place of innovative management of forest to reveal the site and reduce erosion. Te Koru’s interpretation programme was agreed to in the management/consultation plan. Tangata whenua were consulted step by step. A painting of the overall view (commissioned by DoC) was rejected, on the archaeological grounds that it showed too many houses. A carved gateway was erected, and a safety message (don’t fall into the storage pits) was developed. Interpretation of individual features was agreed, resulting in a kumara (sweet potato) storage scene and a house interior scene. These are peaceful images of what is clearly a defended place. Although the defensive arrangements of pa are presented in interpretative signs elsewhere in New Zealand, the question might be asked of this particular site, ‘What happened to the wars?’ This is a question that local Maori communities may be ambiguous about. We can offer no complete solution to this problem. However, we do note the Historic Scotland formulation, seen by one of us on a hillfort in Dumfriesshire, where the warriors are depicted and described as a ‘warlike but not intrinsically evil people’.
Ruapekapeka is the site of the last battle of the Northern Wars, fought out 1844-1845. The British troops plus Maori allies fought against Maori. This is the quintessential site for revealing the ambiguities of the New Zealand Wars. Various interpretations of this battle have arisen. Was it a battle about sovereignty? Was it Maori rebelling against Crown? Or was it a civil war? Maori were engaged in wars with each other, which could be viewed as a civil war. The Crown allied itself with one of the Maori forces, so how would the opposing Maori forces view that alliance? How could they see it as other than the Crown taking a partisan view?

Pukerangiora is a pa site, in Taranaki. It was built in the pre-European period, and was subsequently occupied in the musket wars (1820s to 1830s). It is the site of the commencement (1859) of the main phase of the New Zealand Wars (1859-1872). It has been described as the ‘main cause of the later campaigns, for… it confirmed the Maoris in their worst fears’ (Keith Sinclair, The Origins of the New Zealand Wars, 1961).

The interpretation of Pukerangiora was anticipated in the conservation plan and agreed with the local Maori community. There was concerted action on practical conservation problems. There was consultation on the proposed interpretation with local community elders, and it was provisionally agreed to. However the interpretation was suddenly rejected at a marae AGM. The reserve has now been proposed to be vested in Te Atiawa (the local Maori tribe or iwi) as part of a Treaty settlement. The future of the interpretation is unclear but it will be very interesting to see how it might develop. Hopefully, assistance in the process might be sought from Crown agencies such as the Ministry of Culture and Heritage.

Pompallier House, in the Bay of Islands, was built in 1842 for Bishop Pompallier, and was used as a printery and tannery. It is two-storied: pisé de terre (rammed earth) for the lower storey and pan de bois (pisé panels and timber framework) for the upper. Later it became a family home, and was modified into ‘French Provincial’ style, by the addition of a two-story verandah. A local urban myth developed, that it was the ‘bishop’s palace’. The Government purchased the building in 1943, and at this time the building looked nothing like the original. It was extensively (and expensively!) restored in the 1990s to its 1842 form. This conservation programme was hugely unpopular—the community had grown used to how it looked, and rejected the ‘true’ story. It is an example of how a professional judgment (conservation plan) may be in conflict with community sentiment.

Summary

In summary, we consider that cultural ownership should be given expression in interpretation, e.g. through the construction of gateways in traditional Maori forms and with appropriate referents such as ancestors. This has been done at both Te Koru and Ruapekapeka. This has parallels with practice on Aboriginal sites in Australia where a sign will welcome visitors on behalf of the traditional owners. The cultural context of a place is appropriately defined and should in practice become a timeless and uncontested element. The details and interpretations may be contested. Experience shows that a well consulted conservation plan which proposes interpretation is a key slip. The constructive engagement of the local community, especially iwi, in devising the messages is essential. The process will add value for owners, iwi and visitors.

Interpretation often deals with historical conflict, but also, the process of interpretation can cause conflict. Contemporary conflict may reflect elements of the past. Interpretation by public agencies needs to deal with these issues ethically. The agencies need to balance viewpoints, they need to say no to misinformation, and they need to let the public form its own view of rights and wrongs. Our role as heritage professionals in this process may be better envisaged as facilitators of community opinion formation and values, since the issues are bigger than any one of us. As the history of conservation planning again shows, there is nothing new in that.

‘On a good day, heritage studies [are] where all interpretations of the past ultimately meet and are tested, the place where the future of the subject is negotiated’ (Martin Carver, editor of Antiquity).