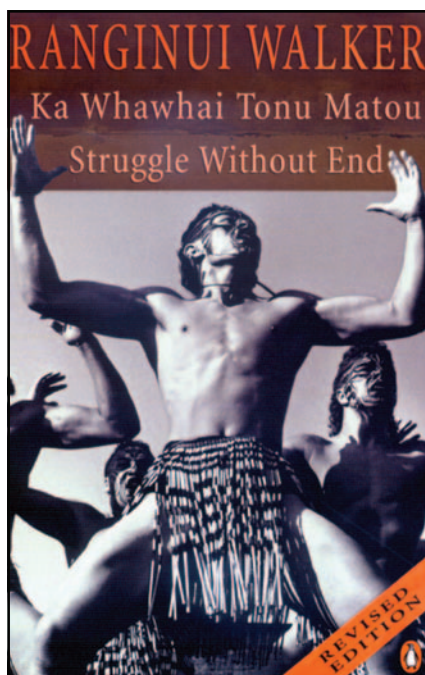




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The veneer is radical, but the substance is not

Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou: Struggle Without End (Revised Edition), by Ranginui Walker. Auckland: Penguin Books, 2004. 462 pp. ISBN 0143019457.



RANGINUI WALKER'S history of the Maori struggles for tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) was first published during New Zealand's sesquicentennial year. The 150th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi provoked intense public debates around issues of nationhood and the place of the Treaty of in managing contemporary relationships between Maori communities and the Crown.

Ka Whawhi Tonu Matou represented a challenge to the more sanitised versions of history that tended to present New Zealand as a harmo-

nious and progressive nation in a world otherwise characterised by incessant ethnic conflict, racism and division. This romanticism, originally encapsulated in Hobson's decree at the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi that New Zealand was 'one nation, one people', had become firmly entrenched in the consciousness of many New Zealanders.

Walker clearly demonstrates that underlying this patriotism and rhetoric of national unity is a more sinister version of our national history, predicated on notions of European superiority, racism and the destruction of the territorial and cultural in-



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tegrity of indigenous communities.

With the proliferation of revisionist histories in the 1980s, there were those who objected to the re-evaluation of New Zealand's past on the basis of contemporary moral standards and political perspectives. These critical histories were depicted by some as 'bullying books...in which the past [was] ransacked to provide illustrations in support of a position in our current debates about either racism or sexism' (Stead, 1989, p. 124). Others argued that racism was no longer a central factor shaping the lives of Maori in contemporary New Zealand society. The violent history of colonisation, the systematic dispossession of Maori land and resources were the product of the 19th century and not the enlightened present.

As the celebratory activities planned by the government-appointed 1990 Commission became a rallying point for both Maori and Pakeha protesters, Maori were often accused of being 'hypersensitive' or of using racism as an 'excuse'. In this way, an ill-informed general public increasingly viewed the upsurge in Maori anger and discontent from the late 1960s onwards as being stirred up by a few Maori extremists on the fringes of an otherwise harmonious society who were simply acting against the 'na-

tional interest'. 'Ordinary New Zealanders' on the other hand, were presented as passive victims whose rights were being trampled on in this process. The popularity of this view demonstrates how a direct appeal to nationalist sentiments is an enduring feature of contemporary public debates that depict Maori claims for greater autonomy as being inherently divisive. Indeed, the infamous shibboleth, 'we're all New Zealanders', has frequently been employed to deny legitimacy to Maori struggles for the return of land, a greater share of society's resources and an active role in formal decision-making.

These political sentiments have been resurrected more recently by the National Party leader, Don Brash. In a move clearly designed to tap into public resentment, Brash has claimed that the Treaty of Waitangi is an archaic relic of the past and on that basis should possess no more than a symbolic role in contemporary society. He has argued that references to the Treaty in government legislation represented 'a dangerous drift to racial separatism' which undermined 'the essential notion of one rule for all in a single nation state' (Brash, 2004).

In advocating a return to the 'one nation, one people' paradigm for 'managing' national issues in New



Zealand, Brash has articulated, 'a prevailing view, and one that is still widely held ... that majority groups conduct their public and private lives according to universally held and superior systems and values. The institutions of which they are part, what they believe, and how they act are not culturally bound, but are viewed as natural, normal, and necessary' (Fleras & Spoonley, 1999, p. 81). Walker has clearly demonstrated throughout his book, however, that New Zealand's societal institutions are not culturally or politically neutral with respect to iwi, hapu and urban Maori communities. Indeed, New Zealand society is inescapably rooted in Eurocentric, capitalist values that are reflected in, and perpetuated through, the major institutions of the state.

Significantly, Walker's book did not represent a new history of New Zealand. Its initial success lay in the way it collated a disparate series of historical events that had shaped Maori communities into an assessable, thematically coherent, single volume. Up to that point the struggles of indigenous communities were largely confined to the margins – either in oral histories that were inaccessible for a wider public audience or in relatively obscure publications for small, academic readerships –

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rather than the general, popular histories of New Zealand that make the best sellers' lists.

Like many of the Maori students mentioned in Walker's preface to the revised edition, I navigated the turbulence of my undergraduate years at university eagerly clutching my copy of *Ka whawhai tonu matou* as if it were a kind of literary antidote to the pervasive Eurocentrism that characterised campus life and wider society! The overwhelming strength of Walker's account lay in its emphasis on the rediscovery of the role of Maori in history, not just as victims but as active agents who consciously contributed to the making of New Zealand history – even if they did so in circumstances not of their own choosing. For those of us who had spent our secondary school history classes in a quest for a deeper understanding of Elizabethan England or the Battle of Britain – this was a refreshing, exciting and even subversive history. It was our own history of struggle and resistance.

While Walker successfully shatters the assimilative ideologies that have underpinned government policy with respect to Maori for well over a century, he has constructed his own mythology in its place. This is particularly apparent in the revised edition which includes two additional



chapters that extend the coverage of events beyond 1990 to the present day. Although it appears as a simple (at times disorganised) narrative of key events, the focus of the additional chapters has been clearly constrained by the analytical assumptions and ideological values of ‘cultural nationalism’ – one of the competing factions that exists within the broader Maori political milieu.

The notion that all Maori share an overpowering and innate attachment based on blood, culture and language, is a critical ingredient in ‘cultural nationalist’ political ideology and practice, which emphasises the fundamental commonality of Maori interests in contemporary capitalist society. Throughout his book, Walker tends to present the political interests of Maori as if they are unitary despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. For instance, Walker has claimed that essentially both ‘radical’ and ‘conservative’ elements of the Maori protest movement pursued the same objectives although the methods they used differed (Walker, 2004, p. 243).

This interpretation, however, simply ignores the political realities that continue to shape contemporary Maori communities. In fact, Maori protest politics embraces a range of conflicting political ideologies, which

are informed by radically different assumptions about the causes of racism and Maori inequality in wider society, and in turn, different sets of strategies for ameliorating and transcending that inequality. Far from being the subject of political unanimity then, tino rangatiratanga is a fundamentally contested concept. Who exercises this power and to what end?

While it is certainly an expression of pride and revolt against society’s assimilative pressures, it is significant that tino rangatiratanga has meant quite different things to different people. While some have drawn radical Maori nationalist conclusions, others have interpreted the idea quite differently. Indeed, the slogan as it evolved over the last two decades has become the catalyst for both a move to the left and a sharp move to the right. In the period from the early 1970s onwards, four interconnected interpretations were to emerge: tino rangatiratanga as Maori capitalism (in tribal or individual form), tino rangatiratanga as Maori electoral power (primarily through the orthodox parliamentary system), tino rangatiratanga as cultural nationalism, and tino rangatiratanga as involving more radical far-reaching strategies for change.

Throughout Walker’s historical narrative, the existence of the con-



flicting political ideologies, contradictory class interests and the inequalities of wealth and political power that are entrenched within and across iwi, hapu and urban Maori communities have been conveniently disregarded in favour of an approach that emphasises the primacy of cultural conflict between Maori and Pakeha. Maori communities have, therefore, been typically portrayed as cultural communities united in their resistance to hostile 'Pakeha' values or 'Pakeha society' (Greenland, 1991).

There is also an implicit tendency throughout the book to assume the existence of a unitary, homogeneous Pakeha society that confronts Maori and in doing so is fundamentally hostile to what is rather loosely framed 'Maori interests'. For Walker, the organisational policies and practices of the state operate in the interests of Pakeha in the struggle against Maori for control over social, economic and cultural resources because, 'Pakeha values and assumptions underlie all procedures and practices' (Nairn & Nairn, 1981, p. 117).

The insistence that Maori are a culture, united in their resistance against Pakeha, ignores the critical divisions that have arisen within and between iwi, hapu and urban Maori communities over the allocation and

distribution of the benefits of the Treaty of Waitangi settlement process, a process that has resulted in a substantial shift in resources and compensation to those sections of Maori society already wealthy and powerful.

While Walker is correct to assert that successive governments have been responsible for establishing a settlement framework that locks Maori self-determination into a free-market, capitalist economic framework, he fails to recognise that this strategy has been effective precisely because it has appealed to the material interests of those representing tribal corporations and Maori businesses whose profitability has been enhanced by such reforms.

The book tends to be uncritical, therefore, of the neo-traditionalist ideologies that present these developments as reviving traditional, non-exploitative communal relations of production within iwi and hapu (see Rata, 2000). This ignores the way the Treaty settlement process has concealed the underlying exploitative class character of tribal capitalism and institutionalised the inequalities of wealth and political power that exist within and across contemporary Maori society.

Unfortunately, the conflicting interests that exist within contemporary



Maori communities and the radically different ways Maori life experiences have been shaped through the complex articulations of racism, colonialism, ethnicity, class, and gender vanish from Walker's narrative. In his discussion of the government's 'Closing the Gaps' initiative for instance (pp. 319-321), Walker either ignores, or is unwilling to acknowledge, the fact that the neo-liberal reforms and the growing social inequalities in New Zealand society have not affected all Maori equally. Those Maori representing tribal corporations and commercial interests have directly benefited from the pro-business, neo-liberal agenda that was implemented to restore the conditions for profitable capital accumulation in the New Zealand economy from 1984 onwards. They have benefited from the reduction in corporate taxation levels that was achieved through large cuts in welfare expenditure, the commercialisation of health, housing and education.

On the other hand, the dismantling of the welfare state, the cuts to benefit levels and the introduction of market rents for state housing in the 1990s brought increasing hardship and poverty for many New Zealanders. Working class Maori have had to face the prospects of increased poverty, falling real incomes, unemploy-

ment, deteriorating employment conditions and job security, social welfare cuts and user-charges for education and health services. So, while those Maori representing tribal corporations and commercial interests have directly benefited from the economic policies of successive governments, the over-representation of Maori in the working class has meant that the vast majority of Maori families have borne the brunt of the economic restructuring.

With the growth of inequality and social polarisation within Maori communities it is increasingly difficult to sustain this notion that Maori communities are classless communities that share the same sets of experiences of inequality and the same political aspirations. Nevertheless, Walker presents the interests of wealthy Maori entrepreneurs, private businesses and tribal corporations on the one hand, and the interests of Maori beneficiaries and unemployed on the other hand, as if they are politically, philosophically and culturally the same. He does not seem to appreciate that while the compensation provided as part of the settlement process and the state's patronage of Maori capitalism resulted in an expansion of opportunities for middle-class Maori professionals and entrepreneurs, for the vast majority of



Maori families these concessions have never compensated for the repressive anti-working class policies of governments since 1984 that have dramatically widened the social and economic inequalities in New Zealand society.

It is critical to acknowledge that Maori struggles over the past 15 years have not simply been directed against Pakeha and the state, but have involved the struggles of ordinary Maori families for a greater degree of control over resources within iwi, hapu and urban Maori communities.

Indeed, the revitalisation of militant Maori struggles in the 1990s represented a direct challenge to the Treaty settlement framework and the narrow commercial interests of tribal authorities. It revealed profound levels of discontent with the adoption of corporate models for the management and distribution of settlement assets and exposed the failure of cultural nationalist strategies to provide a real solution to historical grievances and Maori inequality in wider society.

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