

Interviewing Hone Tuwhare at Kaka Point

3 December 2007

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I kept putting off interviewing Hone Tuwhare for *No Fretful Sleeper*—my biography of novelist and critic Bill Pearson—because people who had recently seen him talked of how he'd aged and how unreliable his memory seemed. As well, he was living down at Kaka Point on the remote Catlins coast, an hour south of Dunedin. If he took a dislike to me barging in to excavate the past, he might clam up or tell me to bugger off. It would be a long return journey to Christchurch if that happened. But by December 2007 I couldn't procrastinate any longer. In the back of my mind was an email from Tuwhare's publisher, Roger Steele, reminding me a year earlier that Hone had been unwell and he feared the time available to interview him was running out.

Tuwhare and Pearson had known each other since the late fifties, and Pearson, who was dedicated to encouraging Maori writing, had been a friend and long-time supporter. In my conversations with Pearson before he died we'd discussed Hone. He'd been quite guarded, but this didn't surprise me. While Pearson had no problem playing hardball sometimes with fellow Pakeha, he was far more circumspect where there was risk of harm to the mana of a Maori friend he had mentored. I was about to discover that the situation with Hone was not quite so straightforward.

I spent the morning of Monday 3 December reading in the archives of the University of Otago Library's Hocken Collections. I left there around midday to drive from Dunedin to Kaka Point for my meeting with Hone, which I'd arranged through his friends Glennis and Norman Woods. If I hadn't been expecting much from this interview to begin with, after my discovery in a file of old letters I felt certain I was wasting my time. I now knew the reason for Pearson's reticence—Hone Tuwhare had the dubious privilege of having received one of the most severe letters written by Bill Pearson that I have ever discovered. Here it is in full:

1 June 1977.

Dear Hone,

Here is your play with Mervyn Thompson's comments. Also the document. I hope you will have success with the play.

Why all the fulsome letters? You know as well as I do that the friendship died years ago.

Hone, when you gave up your wife and boiler-making, you must have known that you would have no choice but to live by your wits.

But not by mine.

You have no choice, but it was your choice.

Still I can't help wishing you luck.

Aroha

Bill

A lot of things had happened between Pearson and Tuwhare over two decades to arrive at this low point in their relationship. Part of the problem was that they were completely opposite personalities. Pearson, although a man with tremendous sympathy for Maori aspirations, also had certain standards of probity and personal morality, and these had been repeatedly tested to the limits of tolerance by what he regarded as Tuwhare's impulsiveness, grandstanding and irresponsible behaviour. Hone's apparent offhandedness about his marriage was particularly galling. As a homosexual denied the opportunity to live in an approved cooperating relationship by a judgmental society, Pearson tended to idealise the marriages of heterosexual friends, and was saddened when some failed. But regardless of what the letter says, the friendship between Tuwhare and Pearson wasn't quite dead, although its resuscitation would require ten years and a funeral.

In 1987 Pearson wrote again to Tuwhare, alluding to his harsh criticisms of a decade earlier and apologising for them. The apology is characteristic of Pearson: modest words, the deep sincerity of which is underwritten by a gift of great worth.

8 November 1987

Dear Hone,

It was good to see you and Ralph [Hotere] at Colin McCahon's funeral. I have had it in my mind to write to you for years since you sent me a letter away back in 1983 after you returned from Germany. I have been reading and taking pleasure in *Mihi* and it is a credit to you, seeing your life's work collected like this. It all hangs together, with its own shape and dignity and justifies that big step you took years ago when you threw away boiler making and a suburban life. I'm glad you were able to travel a little. When you come through Auckland next give us a ring. I want to give you Ralph's painting of your poem O Africa that he gave me years ago. I am well, pottering about very lazily. I hope you are well.

Arohanui,

Bill

Why, if there had been a rapprochement between Tuwhare and Pearson, was I worried as I drove south that my efforts to interview Hone might be wasted? Primarily, it was because if Hone's scattered memory was as anchored in the distant past as I'd been told, he might recall the anger of Bill's early letter better than the conciliation of the one written ten years later.

On a good day Kaka Point looks like a tropical paradise. That was how I found it; white beaches, a very blue sea, and long even ranks of surf. Apparently in a bracing southerly it shares a lot with the climate of a sub-Antarctic island, but in this ideal weather I could see why Tuwhare might have chosen to end his days in a place of such beauty, for all its distance from his home marae.

Glennis and Norman Woods live perched above the sea, the beach and rocky tidal pools. Their view would be worth millions in Auckland. They struck me as heartland New Zealanders of the best possible sort; community minded, entrepreneurial, energetic, hard working, interesting and humorous. An hour in their company passes in minutes. They're not Maori, but their treatment of the old Maori poet in their midst was the definition of aroha. From what others told me, there seems to have been no limit to their patience, even when Hone was at his most cantankerous or childlike; they shopped for him, cleaned for him, helped maintain his home, transported him, made sure he was fed and financially secure, dealt with bureaucracy and caregivers, and hosted a steady stream of visitors. I was disappointed when I arrived to learn I'd just missed meeting filmmaker Gaylene Preston at their home by an hour or so. Roger Steele had stayed there earlier in the week. If I had to propose another reason why Tuwhare loved Kaka Point, it would be Glennis and Norman and people like them.

After Norman had settled me in at Hone's, he left us to it. My recorder picked up their parting banter:

Hone to Norman: Give my regards to family...and the dogs. That's my tribe. In the north you see? Ngati Kuri. That's a North Auckland tribe. Because we like our...we never ate our dogs, other bloody tribes did. [laughs]

Norman: We go shopping tomorrow?

Hone: What time?

Norman: One o'clock.

Hone: Tomorrow morning? [laughs]

Norman: No, afternoon.

Hone: I'd better get up in the morning 'cos I'm slow.

[Norman leaves]

Hone to me: I can replenish my supply of domestic needs.... They're a good couple. They've been very good to me you know. Champion.

Hone's little cabin was on an overgrown section up a steep unsealed drive. His home really only had two rooms, a cluttered bedroom and a lounge/kitchen area. I needn't have feared Hone's reception. He was garrulous and in great spirits, sitting on a chair in his doorway, dressed in pyjamas and an old jersey, bare feet in the sun, throwing crusts to a gang of rowdy seagulls. Norman with the ease of practice made him a huge tin mug of tea; the first part of my interview is accompanied by lusty sipping and screeching gulls.

Because it was 3.00 pm by the time we arrived, Norman had Hone on about not being dressed. He laughed and said he'd had a hard night and needed a lie in. He was delighted with a bottle of single malt I'd brought, thanking me for it again later in our interview: 'What a beautiful gift. It's what the Maori call a koha.'

I'd last met Hone a couple of years earlier at Roger Steele's offices where he was chuckling over the Teutonic nudes in a book of Helmut Newton photographs. It was a shock to see how small he'd become in that short time, as if he'd been deflated. His wide familiar smile and dominating eyes and ears seemed a puckish parody of the robust features of the round-faced poet in his prime. Like an ironic reminder, a picture of the familiar, larger-than-life Hone Tuwhare hung behind him on the wall.

Hone was happy for me to record our conversation, and I left my recorder running for the first 32 minutes of my visit. His deafness meant that I shouted a lot (on the recording I sound like a terrier yapping), while he hived off down whichever path monologue and memory took him. Yet he remembered far more of Pearson than I had expected, and the memories were all good, mostly associated with those early years when Hone was a boilermaker, poet, peace activist and communist. He had a cough that worsened as we spoke, and sometimes he repeated himself and wandered off the topic into a reverie I couldn't follow. But here's a sample of his talk:

PM: Bill wrote the book *Coal Flat*.

Hone: Oh, *Coal Flat*, about the West Coast wasn't it? Oh golly. Yes, yes. Yes, that links him all right. 'Cos I was always interested in books.

PM: He liked your poetry.

Hone: I'll say. By gee, he may have been one of the first to encourage me, you know, a supporter, Bill. I'd had a poem or two out in the *Listener*, you know, and my first book, he was quite rapturous about it, called *No Ordinary Sun*. He wasn't being supercilious either. I felt he was sincere. So I began to trust the man, you know, and I wasn't trusting too many Pakehas those days. I pretty much had a different perspective of Pakeha people, that they were all stupid, you know? And he saw some books [I was reading], mostly written

by overseas people, not many by New Zealanders. So he said, 'Oh, good on you!' you know? He praised me just because I loved books—looked as if I loved books.

[Hone segues into a recollection of his school days]

I have some good memories of good teachers too. In a way sympathetic. I got a slap on the hand once for being stupid. With a three foot ruler. It was a lady teacher that did it. I think she was getting brassed off with me because I was deflecting her teaching from other kids, just joking and so on. So I needed a bit of male discipline...disciplinarians. I wasn't too respectful of women teachers. I like women, girlfriends and so on, but male people I respected a lot.

I kind of think Bill may have been the one that drew attention to books. Some were American writers which I really liked very much—Steinbeck, a whole string of them, Wolfe... so really I got into American writers first before I got into English writers. They seemed to be more accessible to me, I think that's a word, more accessible to my own feeling about people. They seemed to be more down to earth in English.

Hone: How did I meet Bill Pearson? It may have been in connection with some kind of peace movement at the time ... and I was interested in that too. Because there was a lot of talk about war, and an examination of different countries and their reasons for fighting other nations. Some of the books that was put in front of me about those wars, it was quite a learning process for me. I mean I've never gone past standard six in my life. I never got in a high school. I never graduated to that. I did...I was accepted for a apprenticeship in a railway workshop, in a particular trade called boiler making, but it wasn't by any means the highest trade in the country, fitter and turner were...

PM: You were involved in the peace movement?

Hone: Well later, yes, that sort of grabbed me too. I thought, war, war, war. Even books I'd read about Maori wars, killing each other, tribal fights. My God! I thought why? Somebody—I'm not sure whether it was Bill—drew attention to the works of Karl Marx and Engels. ... But then I read that Karl Marx was in England and studied... Well, the leading industrial nation at the time was England. So his works about industrialism and so on...hell! Hell! And I was learning a bit from other people working beside me at the railway workshop. Mainly English—Pakeha you see—there weren't many Maori come into the city in my time. They hadn't flooded the cities yet.

[Hone talks of his childhood in Auckland and then his time as a boy scout]

And I joined the scout movement there, which was another experience. I liked it. It had a bit of discipline. But I became a patrol leader there in the scouts. And at Christmas time there'd be an annual camp, sometimes at Green Bay, sometimes at Waiheke Island... I

liked the kind of principles of the scout movement. I liked them. It drew me. I was attracted to it.

[I ask Hone to talk about the Auckland pubs he used to drink at with Pearson, but childhood was on his mind]

Hone: My first experience of city life was in Ponsonby when my dad married my stepmother. My true mother had died quite early when I was about six or seven. He married somebody from the tribe connected with the Waitemata Coast—Matamata—Waiheke Island as well. You know these areas? And her name happened to be, which attracted my dad, was also called Mihi, which was my true mother's name too. That drew them together. Or drew him to her. But she already had a family. She'd already been married. To someone called Marsh I think. But they separated—but the kids were there, you know—and they loved my dad too you know. They used to push me around. They were bullies. A bit older. And I was cheeky enough to be bullied.

PM: Do you remember the poet R.A.K. Mason?

Hone: I really do. Yes. Yes. I like his writings, you see? Beautiful. Beautiful. Construction...you know. It's not the kind of writing that you would find in mine later, because I was more influenced by American, I think, way of openness...

PM: Did Pearson write to you about poetry?

Hone: He was a proper academic you know. And had his own coterie of academics, with whom he mixed. And they made contact with overseas. ... He was rather interested when he heard I was connected with a branch of the New Zealand Communist Party. He said, 'You know about Karl Marx?' I said, 'Yeah, we're supposed to have study classes on him.' 'Karl Marx and Engels?' he says. 'Yeah. No problem, yeah.' 'Oh, good on ya. You want to learn about the working class people all over the world.'

[Hone talks about being recruited into a communist study group at the railway workshop]

Hone: I'd been sucked in by a small, active branch of the Communist Party at the railway workshop... They even had study classes, mind you. So I had this little sinister sort of thing [laughs]. But they had their own publication, *The People's Voice*. When they recruited me, after I'd accepted it, I was mad enough. They said, 'Oh, Hone. A Maori. We

don't have many Maoris. Come, come in, come in with us. They sucked me in you see?
But then they opened up another world for me with works by Karl Marx and Engels.

....

And when I talked to my own people about [things] they said, 'Oh shut up, Hone! What the hell'r ya talking about?' One or two committed to read outside the Bible. They were all biblically minded, my people. My mother was a Mormon. My dad was C of E., and a graduate of a Maori senior college of the country at the time called Te Aute College, in Hawkes Bay. So he was a graduate there. But he'd always been a labourer...

About this time Hone had a bad coughing fit. I suggested he drink some more of his tea, but he said Hell he wasn't drinking a cuppa if I wasn't. Earlier I'd declined a cup of tea, having just had coffee with Glennis and Norman. Now I stopped the recorder and stepped two paces into the kitchen to put on the kettle. I wondered just how bad Hone's hearing was when he had no problem cheerfully following my swearing after I scalded my hand pouring boiling water. When I returned with my tea I didn't start the recorder again; Hone seemed tired and I thought I'd probably exhausted all he could usefully tell me about Pearson. I expected to leave soon.

Now I regret not re-starting the recorder. Hone's energy picked up and he began talking again. It wasn't a conversation, more like an impromptu composition in words. His talk spiralled in all directions, but the common thread was language, a fascination with words—how they sounded, what they meant, which tongue they came from. He christened me Paora: 'Are you coming back, Paora? Where are you staying? Don't stay at a motel, they're thieves. You can always stay here. I'll sleep on the spare bed and you can have my bed.' Then he'd start talking about Maori place names in the area, or old friends and lovers, or his children. He talked about places he'd been, things he'd seen, and he kept returning to childhood: Beresford school, his time in the scouts, his father, and the death of his mother. And every so often a roguish gleam would enter his eye and he'd say:

'Can you lend me ten dollars?'

'I can give you ten dollars, Hone.'

'Oh no, just a loan,' he'd say. Then he'd look stricken. 'Oh, but bloody hell Paora, I can't pay you back. I haven't got my pension. I need to go to Dunedin for it. Can you take me? I'll give you money for petrol.'

And when I'd remind him that Norman was taking him shopping tomorrow, he'd grin and switch to talking about something else.

Eventually I finished my tea and Hone fell silent. But the moment I indicated I should probably go, he brightened and said I didn't need to leave yet, we should go and have a beer.

'There's a really nice pub down the road,' he said.

My error was to agree—although in my defence it didn't seem like a mistake at first. This was Hone Tuwhare, and he was famous for enjoying his beer. And he proposed the trip to the pub with such conviction it sounded like something he did regularly.

But he was still in his pyjamas. Under instruction, I found clothes in his bedroom and he dressed slowly—bending was an effort. When it came to his socks I thought it might be helpful if I offered to put them on for him while he was sitting down. He let me, but under protest ('Geez Paora! I can put my own bloody socks on').

The second problem was getting him into my car. He blithely assured me I'd have no problem getting it up to his front door, because Norman's car could. But Norman had a working SUV—no Remuera tractor, but a serious off-road machine. I was driving a family-sized people mover, and in three alarming, fish-tailing attempts I couldn't get it up Hone's steep, gravelled and gullied drive. Defeated, I parked on the flat and walked back up to suggest we call it off. But Hone wasn't having that and told me he'd walk down. Halfway through our descent, somewhere past the point of no return, I think we both realised we'd made a mistake. Hone was wearing thin-soled slippers and twice he almost slipped. I was supporting most of his weight as we inched down one shuffle at a time, but my feet were slipping also. Lurid headlines plagued me—'Academic Kills Living Taonga', 'Tuwhare Dies on Drive, Questions Asked.' We were both relieved to reach level ground.

The Point Café and Bar at Kaka Point lived up to Hone's recommendation, offering excellent fare and spectacular views. When I helped Hone inside, my folly was fully revealed by the proprietor behind the bar, who remarked in surprise the moment he spotted Hone: 'How did you get him here? We haven't seen him for about a year.'

I bought us a Speights each and ordered two bowls of fries. Over forty minutes, Hone sipped about half an inch of his beer and didn't touch the fries. Instead he talked, loudly and repetitively, about what a lovely day it was, how great the view was, what various local Maori place names meant, what a nice pub this was, and a few carrying remarks about the people coming in and going out. And what struck me was how pleased everyone seemed to be to have him there. Other patrons would observe him without trying to look as if they were staring, they'd smile indulgently and nod whenever he made a comment, and they'd chuckle when his vernacular became more colourful. He was a local celebrity—and I think he knew it. Hone also told me about the great little shop next door, and then talked me into popping over there and buying him some fish fillets and eggs for a feed. I ate his fries.

Abruptly, Hone drooped. He stopped talking and slumped down in his chair. When I asked him if he wanted to go home, he just nodded. I was worried how I'd get him back up his drive, so on the way back to his house I stopped in at Glennis and Norman's to see if one of them might be able to come and help me steady him. Glennis met me at the door looking very anxious. 'Where have you been?' she said. 'His caregiver has just rung in a panic because Hone's not there. He's

supposed to be having his five o'clock meds.' She was more forgiving than I deserved, and accepted my apologies and explanations with good grace.

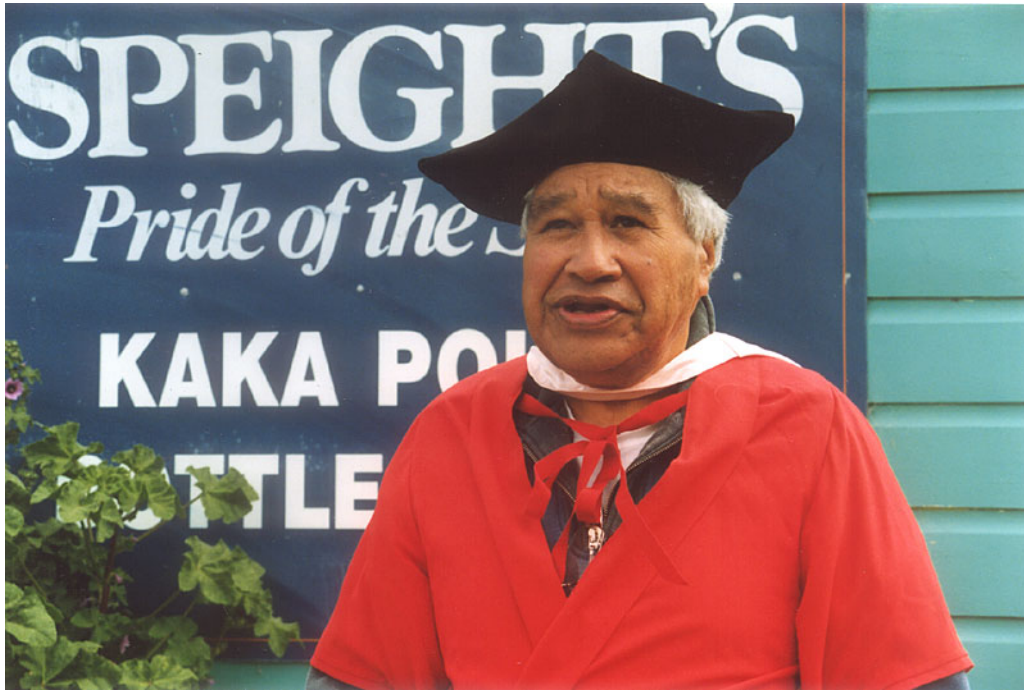
Back at Hone's his caregiver helped me walk him up the drive. She was lovely, and equally forgiving—'A trip to the pub would be good for him.' To Hone's credit he made a valiant effort to play the roué when he saw her. But it was brief; he was exhausted and glad to be home. This time he didn't mind me leaving. 'Thank you, Paora. That was bloody good. Don't forget next time save your money and stay here.' As I left he was discussing a feed of fish fillets and eggs with his caregiver. I swung back to Glennis and Norman's to make one final apology then took the road to Dunedin.

As I was leaving Kaka Point I realised that I'd taken my camera to get a photo of Hone, and perhaps one of the two of us together, and I'd completely forgotten to. I have the interview to remind me, but I'm sorry there aren't some photos as well. I was shocked a few weeks later when a report came on the news that he'd died. It was clear he was failing; yet even so there seemed something vital and indestructible about him.

It seems to me that Hone Tuwhare managed to live a good life and die pretty well, largely on his own terms. I admire that; it takes courage and a certain self-regard. I don't know if I'm the last person to have recorded an interview with him. If I am one of Hone's 'lasts', my preference is to have been the last person to take him to the pub and shout him a beer.

What a bittersweet privilege.

Paul Millar is a lecturer in English Literature at the University of Canterbury. His book *No Fretful Sleeper: A Life of Bill Pearson* is forthcoming from Auckland University Press in 2009.



Hone outside Glennis and Norman Woods' Kaka Point Wine and Café Bar, wearing academic regalia for the conferment in 1998 of his Otago University Honorary Doctorate. Photo: Glennis and Norman Woods.



Hone seated in the garden bar of Glennis and Norman Woods' Kaka Point Wine and Café Bar, 1998. Photo: Glennis and Norman Woods.



Hone playing guitar and singing in 2002 at his 80th birthday party, held at the Kaka Point home of Glennis and Norman Woods. Photo: Glennis and Norman Woods.



Bill Pearson and Hone Tuwhare in 1995 at the opening of the National Library Gallery exhibition "Landmarks in New Zealand publishing : Blackwood & Janet Paul, 1945 -1968." Photo: Roger Steele.