

Grey Interstices: or The Fact of a Doorframe in memory of Adrienne Rich

To quote the last stanza of Adrienne Rich's poem 'The Fact of a Doorframe':

Now again, poetry,
violent, arcane, common,
hewn of the commonest living substance
into archway, portal, frame
I grasp for you, your bloodstained splinters, your
ancient and stubborn poise
--as the earth trembles—
burning out from the grain

Moe mai moe mai moe mai ra e te rangatira. Sleep, sleep, sleep there o leader.

Sir George Grey is best-known in NZ as a former governor of this colony, a rare book collector whose gift of books established the Auckland Public Library, and also as an avid scholar and translator of Maori myths, legends and poetry. This collaborative cut-up between John Adams and me consists of quotes from Grey, extracts of letters by Maori chiefs addressed to him, and also a translation by Margaret Orbell of his most prolific contributor of Maori manuscripts, the author Wiremu Maihi Te Rangikaheke from which most of the standardized versions of Maori myths and legends are derived such as the creation cycle of myths, the legends of Maui and so on . The cut-up was driven in part by the site of this symposium, Old Govt House, Grey's official residence during his second term, and also a desire to present Maori voices here at this rich location. This is a shade haunted space, the site of a threshold god—Grey's imagination and psyche dwelled here. We present texts as varied as possible to show the play of values which built this house.

[Robert] Extract from an 1846 Letter to Grey from Nga Puhi chief Hone Heke:

God made this country for us. It cannot be sliced, if it were a whale it might be sliced. Do you return to your own country, which was made by God for you. God made this land for us; it is not for any stranger or foreign nation to meddle with this sacred country.

[John] Clearly... I could not, as Governor of the country, permit so close a veil to remain drawn between myself and the aged and influential chiefs, whom it was my duty to secure, and with whom it was necessary that I should hold the most unrestricted intercourse. Only one thing could, under such circumstances, be done, and that was to acquaint myself with the ancient language of the country, to collect its traditional poems and legends, to induce their priests to impart to me their mythology, and to study their proverbs.

[Robert] from Nga Pepeha o nga tupuna (proverbs of the ancestors collected by Grey)

Too kahawai ngako nui aroaro tahuri kee.

You take the fat kahawai but turn your face away. This is the complaint of a suitor whose friend accepts his gifts but does not respond to his love.

[John] To General Sir D Cameron, 19 May 1865

“...My opinion is that if you carry out the instructions you inform me you intend to carry out, in the manners you state, that you will plunge New Zealand into greater difficulties than it has....”

[Robert] Whatungarongaro he tangata, toituu he whenua hoki. People disappear, the land remains. The people die, migrate or disappear but the land is a thing of permanence.

[John] Minute: Whanganui, Monday July 17, 1865

“Last night, the 16th inst. I saw with Mr Parris, Hone Pihama Te Rei Hanatana, the Principal Chief of the Ngatiruanui Country. He had been brought here by Mr Parris and came authorised by his people to treat for peace....

I informed him that neither of the things he asked could be done. That it was the intention of the Government to hold permanently the places they occupied. To take possession of and permanently occupy such places as they thought it necessary to hold for the future peace of the Country, and to enable them to protect the settlements at Whanganui and Taranaki, and the Europeans and well-disposed Natives, who might lie between those places, but that ample lands would be left in the district alluded to, for his people, and that such lands, and their remaining lands elsewhere, they might use and deal with just as Europeans used and dealt with their lands, and that the Government would in every way befriend and protect them, and I explained in detail the reasons that rendered this course necessary.

He ...said ... that they feared if they made peace now, they would be enslaved and ill-treated and made serfs of the settlers afterwards.

I showed him the impossibility of this, if they acted well, and asked what made them believe so.

He replied, some of our people have travelled into other lands and what they have observed there and reported has made us believe this....

[Robert] He pukepuke maunga, e pikitia e te tangata, he pukepuke moana e ekengia e te waka, he pukepuke tangata, e kore e pikitia e te tangata.

A mountain summit can be scaled by a man, a heavy sea can be negotiated by a canoe, but a great man cannot be trampled upon. Damage to the mana of a

person, particularly a great person, has consequences much different from those resulting from challenges to the mountains and sea.

[John] from *Amassing Treasures for All Times* (page 140)

I have a magnificent copy of Pynson's Chaucer of 1493 and of the Chaucer of 1532. If you can get me either of Caxton's editions of *The Canterbury Tales* I should be very glad. In fact any Caxtons I should be glad to buy...

[Robert] August 27, 1850 *A Dream of Te Rangikaheke*

On the night of the 27th August I lay on my bed thinking about the things which I would be visiting the Governor to discuss; I was pondering these matters so that I might have much to tell him when he questioned me. After a while my eyes closed.

I saw some men walking along with a dog. I could not clearly distinguish whether these people were Pakeha or Maori. They said to me, [John] 'Let us fight!'

[Robert] I said, 'No, those evil customs of former days are ended. Let us instead carefully discuss the matter. We can fight later.'

They said, [John] 'Let a document be written; afterwards we will fight.'

[Robert] And so it was written, and was finished. Then we fought. They said to me, [John] 'If three of us die, we will straight away let loose our dog to attack you.'

[Robert] I said, 'Very well. Let us fight!'

One of them sprang at me, swinging his axe at my head. I dodged the blow and disarmed him—he died! Another one leapt forward; I disarmed him, and he died. The other man leapt at me, and so did the dog—the dog was almost upon me! I dodged the man, but then the dog flew at me again and seized my left hand in its jaws. Then my axe smashed down on the dog's head, and the battle was over.

After this we came together at the edge of the ocean; some were on a bridge, and some were below it. I saw tables standing there, with paper and pens and inkwells. One of them said, [John] 'My friend Maihi, go to that table and write your views on the battle that has just finished, and this other battle that is about to begin.'

[Robert] I asked, 'What will be the cause of this next battle?'

He said, [John] 'It will be fought over those whom you killed, together with the dog. The relatives of those men will arise to destroy you, in revenge for their death.'

[Robert] I said, 'Very well.'

These things were done; I wrote, and so did they. Then I said, 'How many of you will be fighting me this time?'

They said, 'If you kill four of us, another dog, a different one from that which died, will be let loose to attack you. Come on, write it down!'

Then the writing was finished. Another man leapt towards me, swinging his club. I dodged the blow, and he died—my axe came down, and he was dead! Another came at me; I jumped aside, and his weapon missed me. Then I swung my weapon, and it found its mark.

This is a vision of the future which came to me from the spirit world, in the form of a dream.

As for the dog that I killed, it had been commanded to attack me. The Pakehas whom I killed in the first battle had not been commanded to attack me: they were killed unnecessarily.

O Governor
It is not my doing,
It is both of us

Who took it into the wilderness
There to drag it about—
Kii ki-a-a!

This visionary song is by Wiremu Maihi.

It may be that soon the Maori will be attacking the Pakeha, or else the Pakeha will be attacking the Maori; either may be considered the aggressor, according to which side is interpreting the matter.

This is what lies ahead. Soon, this dream may become a reality.

[John] Many of the manuscripts were written by natives from the dictation of the most celebrated chiefs, such as Rangihaeata, Te Rauparaha, Potatau, Te Heuheu, Patuone, Te Taniwha...

I regret to say that most of their old chiefs, and even some of the middle-aged ones who aided me in my researches, have already passed to the tomb.

[John] *To General Sir D Cameron, 22 May 1867*

“Govt House, Auckland

Sir,

I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of this day’s date in reply to mine of the 19th inst.

It was with pleasure that I read the commencement of the 2nd paragraph of your letter, in which you say “It is not true that I have traduced you to the authorities at home, behind your back.”

But this pleasure was allayed by my finding that in the 10th paragraph of your letter, you stateYou will, I am sure, excuse me for saying that I find present difficulties in reconciling these two statements.”

[Robert] A quote from “The Sons of Heaven and Earth” (from the creation cycle, which is the longest poem of them all), Grey’s translation of Wiremu Maihi Te Rangikaheke’s writing which Grey never attributed despite naming many others:

At last the beings who had been begotten by Heaven and Earth, worn out by the continued darkness, consulted amongst themselves, saying, “Let us now determine what we should do with Rangi [heaven] and Papa [earth], whether it would be better to slay them or to rend them apart.” Then spoke Tumatauenga, god of war, the fiercest of the children of Heaven and Earth, “It is well, let us slay them.”

Then spoke Tane-mahuta, the father of forests and of all things that inhabit them, or that are constructed of trees, “Nay, not so. It is better to rend them apart, and to let the heaven stand far above us, and the earth lie beneath our feet. Let the sky become as a stranger to us, but the earth remain close to us as a nursing mother.”

(That’s from Grey’s *Polynesian Mythology and Ancient Traditional History of the New Zealand Race*, 1885).

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