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The Gilfillan Killings - Narrative, Marginality and the Strangeness of the Colonial Past

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History at Massey University.

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2003.

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The Gilfillan family; John, Sarah, and Mary. Mary is in the centre. Note the blurred features where her scar has been removed from the photo. From the Collection of the Whanganui Regional Museum, Wanganui, New Zealand.

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CHAP. XI.

STARTLING INCIDENT.—SAVAGE MURDER.—DOMESTIC TRAGEDY. — CAPTURE OF THE MURDERERS. — RUSE DE GUERRE.

April 18th.—WE were all startled this evening, while quietly seated at mess, by cries of distress from the opposite bank of the river, and presently by the appearance of Mr. Gilfillan, one of the out-settlers, with a severe tomahawk wound in his neck. He told us that six Maories had come to his house just before dark, and that, while in friendly conversation with them, one of them had suddenly wounded him from behind by a blow of a tomahawk. He immediately rushed into his house and barricaded the door; but having no arms, and seeing that it would be impossible to keep the Maories out, he had, at the entreaty of his wife, escaped by a side window, to make for the town and procure assistance, believing that, finding him gone, they would content themselves with plunder and do no injury to the women and children.

Unluckily for his own sake, he declared to us that the Maories were out in all directions; and this, com-

bined with it being a very dark night and his house at the distance of six miles, prevented any one going out at once, particularly as the road was by an ill-defined track, only known to a few of the settlers, and not easily found even by daylight.

The news of the attack on Gilfillan had reached the natives at Putiki as soon as it did us; and this, combined with the fact of their having threatened us a few days before, made suspicion fall on them.

A canoe pulled by seven of their chief young men came over almost immediately, and stated that the crime had been perpetrated by some young men belonging to a branch of their tribe from up the river, with the belief that our vengeance would fall on them; and they offered immediately to go in pursuit of the murderers, and endeavour to capture them. Their offer was accepted, though very little dependence was placed on it, particularly by the settlers, who, if their advice had been taken, would have seized on as many as possible of the Putiki people at once.

A party of ten of us, well armed and accompanied by twelve of the Putiki people, set out at daylight on the following morning for Gilfillan's farm.

On our way we fell in with two little children, wet through with the heavy dew and shivering with cold;

they confirmed our worst fears by telling us that their mother and all the family, except themselves, had been murdered, and the house plundered and burnt.

From the few hasty questions asked them it appeared, that after the father's escape their mother had taken the opportunity of the Maories' attention being engrossed with their plunder, to put these two children out of a back window, where they had hidden themselves in a neighbouring ravine all night. We continued our journey at a run, anxious to arrive as quickly as possible, and soon reached the brow of a hill commanding the valley of Matarawa, in the centre of which was poor Gilfillan's farm, now a heap of smoking ruins.

A more beautiful spot I never saw in my life, and it was difficult to conceive that it could possibly be the scene of such atrocities. Any doubt, however, was speedily set at rest, when, on entering the enclosure, we came suddenly on a group of mangled corpses, the last that of the poor mother; her head almost cut to pieces by repeated blows with a heavy wood axe: a couple of yards in advance lay the body of the eldest daughter, her skull split nearly in two; and close to her the body of a young child. All of them, from their attitudes, had evidently been struck

down in flight, and the tottering steps of the child appeared to have been retarding the flight of the mother and sister.

We had but a moment to look at this dreadful sight when the cries of a young child were heard from a neighbouring cow-shed: on our way to it we passed the body of a boy, about ten years of age, and near him, lying on its face, with outstretched arms, a baby, which we supposed to be dead, but which we afterwards found was sleeping and unhurt.

On entering the cowshed I was horror-struck by the most dreadful sight my eyes ever beheld. There sat a young girl of about seventeen, a deep tomahawk wound in her forehead, and her fair hair dabbled with blood which flowed even on the poor babe she held in her arms. I shall never forget the fixed look of mute despair depicted on her countenance, while the poor child smiled and crowed with delight through the mask of blood that covered its face.

What a long dreadful night of terror it must have been to that poor girl, the flames of her father's house shining on her, the bodies of her mother and family lying about, and not knowing whether each moment might not bring back the savages to complete their work!

Litters were quickly made, and the poor wounded girl, the two babies, and the four dead bodies carried in. It must have been a melancholy sight as we wound down the hill in sight of the town, and the nature of our burdens could be perceived by the inhabitants, all of whom were grouped along the banks of the river in anxious expectation.

On our return I noticed that scraps of clothing and small articles taken from the house had been dropped at every few hundred yards; and as this path led to Putiki Pa, it convinced me that it had not been done by any of their people, but had been intended to direct suspicion to them.

To the great surprise of every one, we were aroused about midnight by a messenger from Matawa-onga with news that five out of the six murderers were taken, and that the party would be down before daylight.

At break of day a party of the armed police and town's-people proceeded up the bank of the river, and I accompanied H——, in the gun-boat till we arrived opposite Matawa-onga, where several canoes put off to meet us, and in one of them were the prisoners with Mawai, Ori King, and their capturers, all in high glee at their success, and in being thus able to prove that they had neither participation nor sympathy in the murder.

The prisoners stepped into the gun-boat with smiling faces, calling out “ Tena-koe Homya, Tena-koe Ko Power,” and offering to shake hands with us, appearing surprised when we drew back in disgust.

We afterwards heard the particulars of their capture, and the *ruse de guerre* by which they were taken, which was excellent.

The six Putiki natives in pursuit knew that the murderers were armed, and, as they were only equal in point of numbers, the chances were that they might not capture the whole of them, while it was very possible that they might all get away. Our friend E Oni Wiremu, otherwise “ Johnny Williams,” the leader of the party, determined to try to enlist the sympathies of the natives on the river’s bank and procure assistance from them—no easy matter, as they were far more likely to lean to the side of the murderers than to that of the captors. He and his party began a loud “ tangi,” which was immediately answered from both sides of the river, and continued till the subtle Johnny thought that he had sufficiently excited the sensibilities of his audience ; he then got up, and in an eloquent speech described to them the murder of the unoffending woman and children, and added that, in revenge, the

soldiers had surrounded the Pa at Putiki, and had seized every man, woman, and child, so that they were the only individuals who had escaped; all the rest, chiefs, men, women, and children, were prisoners in the hands of the enraged pakeha. He declared that nothing but the capture of the murderers could save their father Ori King, the brave Mawai, and their friends, brothers in arms and relations, who were in our hands; and so artfully worked on the feelings of his audience, that, so far from giving any opposition, they manned a large canoe for him, he and his party lying concealed at the bottom under baskets of potatoes.

The fugitives, who by this time were fifty miles from the settlement, and no longer feared pursuit, were taking it easy, singing songs and bragging of what they had done. They had no suspicion either of a canoe that belonged to that part of the river, and manned from a neighbouring Pa; so they let it come close to them, under the pretence of hearing the particulars. As it came alongside, Pa-tapo, a wild young chief and a great favourite of the officers, who was hidden in the bow, saw that one of the fugitives had a cocked musket beside him, and that the others had arms lying within reach; and, being anxious to take them all alive, he, with a tomahawk between

his teeth, made one spring on the fellow with the musket, seizing it, and at the same moment upsetting the canoe.

In a few minutes the whole party were captured while in the water, without being able to make any effectual resistance; and the captors lost no time in bringing the prisoners to the settlement, fearing a rescue might be attempted if their *ruse* were for a moment suspected.

Strange Stories and Theoretical Tools

This thesis is about the process of telling stories. In particular, a group of stories centred on a disturbing moment in New Zealand history. The killing of the Gilfillan family was a brutal and unprecedented event, shocking the European population of New Zealand in 1847, and maintaining an ability to discomfort even 150 years later. The following pages are not an attempt to write the ‘true’ story of the Gilfillan killings, but rather to consider what made the killings shocking and disturbing in the first instance, and, how that power to shock and disturb can give a greater access to a historical moment. The focus is on how fragments of the past can maintain an aesthetic power in the present, and how an event becomes a cultural object, entangled in context and culture, and constantly renegotiated and re-narrated over time.²

A key assertion is that the story of the Gilfillan killings is marginal; outside the bounds of ‘normal’ experience. The marginal story, uncomfortable, disorientating, or difficult to understand and contextualise, is a way to puncture and break through explanatory meta-narratives which overwrite the particularity and contingency of history. To use a phrase borrowed from the school of literary criticism called Russian Formalism, it can ‘make things strange’, offering a new way of seeing and understanding the world.³

Analysing the marginal, strange-making story as a ‘way in’ to a historical past is a technique that has been used by a number of historians, particularly in the last few decades, as post-modernism and the influence of other disciplines, such as anthropology, began to move historical practice away from broader explanatory meta-narratives towards more historically specific and culturally situated explanations. A famous example is the description of the execution at the beginning of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*.⁴ The image of the pincers tearing flesh from the condemned body of Damien the Regicide is an access point into a different “mentalite”, a different set of cultural conceptions of justice, whose obvious

² The killing of the Gilfillans is normally called the “Gilfillan massacre”, or the “Gilfillan murders”. Both these phrases prejudge their deaths as criminal and ‘savage’ acts - whereas for the Maori involved they were at least partially political. Whatever the judgement of the morality of the killing of the children, I find the phrase “Gilfillan killings”, more neutral, without eliding the violence of the event. One recent writer David Young (Young, David, *Woven by Water: Histories from the Whanganui River*, Wellington: Huia, 1998) has used the phrase the “Gilfillan muru” (killing). While I have avoided the use of the word “massacre”, as it feels so redolent with colonial overtones, I feel no need to place the killings in a solely Maori cultural sphere - although in itself, by bringing a conception of the plurality of cultural responses to the killings, Young’s act of renaming has strong points.

³ Boris Eichenbaum, “The Theory of Formal Method” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, gen. ed., New York, London: Norton Press: 2001, pp. 1062-87. To the Russian formalists the “roughened form” of great literature “defamiliarised” or “made things strange”, breaking through “automatism” - normalised habits of perception.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, translated from the French by Alan Sheridan, New York: Pantheon Books, c1977. pp. 1-3.

distance from more modern understandings leads to the renewed investigation of the underlying precepts of each.

The accounts of the Gilfillan killings have this strange-making capacity. The violent nature of the killings seems to offer a “touch of the real”⁵ to the various stories which cluster round the incident. The aesthetic quality of the texts, and the broader questions the killings raise about narrating violence in the colonial past, make the stories of the killings marginal anecdotes, difficult to think about and narrate, uncomfortable, and yet at the same time horribly fascinating. In the second chapter, I write briefly about the presentation of the axe that killed Mrs. Gilfillan to the jury of the coroner’s inquiry. The day after the killings, the bodies lying in the next door room of Smith’s Commercial Hotel in Wanganui, the inquiry was shown the axe still covered with blood and hair. That axe is metonymic for the strange aesthetic the violence of the killings provides to texts, producing images so vivid that they somehow seem more real, less troped and re-narrated than other stories from the past.

The first chapter is an investigation into one text in which this quality of vividness and reality seems particularly evident - the account of the killings in W. Tyrone Power’s *Sketches of New Zealand*⁶ which prefaces this introduction. Considering the wider discursive contexts in which Tyrone Power’s text is sited, it is an argument for the ability of the aestheticised text, vivid and symbolically powerful, to offer ‘something true’ about the past over and above other texts.

The focus in the first chapter on just one voice is very deliberate. The second chapter’s fragmented approach is equally so. Tyrone Power’s description of the discovery of the Gilfillans, no matter how striking, is only one voice in a multi-vocal past. The fragments which make up the Gilfillan killings - pieces of texts, rewritings, places and contested stories - come together to form a cultural object: a pastiche of the event ‘as it happened’, and, enculturated understandings and discourses which keep ‘happening’, reconstructed in every new narration.

Running through both chapters is an engagement with certain assumptions about the nature of the colonial history. On the first level this represents a critique of the binarising and essentialising tendencies of post-colonial writing which creates a dichotomy between colonised and coloniser. The early colonial history of Wanganui, and the history of the Gilfillan killings, provide an example of a situation that was far more complex and fluid than

⁵ Catherine Gallagher, and, Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2000, chap. 1.

⁶ W. J. T. Power, *Sketches in New Zealand with Pen and Pencil, From a Journal Kept in that Country from July 1846 to June 1848*, London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1849.

can be conceptualised in a binary view of Maori and European relations. Furthermore, the nature of the violence involved - the brutal killing of children in particular - adds an additional complexity to the act of narrating the killings. Writing from an anti-colonial position, I found dealing with the violence of the Gilfillan killings challenged my own assumptions about colonialism. The act of violence of the colonised on the coloniser is in most post-colonial scholarship narrated as resistance, justified by the oppression, exploitation, and racism of the colonial project. While accepting the reality of violence and violent resistance in the world, I still struggle with the idea that the killing of children is at any time justifiable. The tension between this view and the problems of cultural relativism also make this a marginal story, one that problematises the imposition of easy moral judgements. Addressing these tensions is implicit in this thesis, and is explicitly attempted in the epilogue.

Theories to see Wanganui by

Every way of thinking about the past is a theoretical engagement. Maynard Keynes wrote that “common sense is dead theory”. Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, in similar terms, that “...the philosophically most important aspects of things are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity.”⁷ The engagement with theory in this thesis is explicit, but, importantly, conditioned by a belief that theories are tools for making sense of cultural objects, not truth systems in themselves. Indeed, a theory as a truth system is the kind totalising meta-narrative it is so important to avoid. Like anything expressed in language, theories can never be stable seamless realities, but will always be enculturated objects. Theories may be useful for generating meaning, and making sense of a given situation,⁸ but they can provide only one reading of a plurality of possible understandings. With this plurality in mind, there seems no apparent reason in adhering to only one theoretical idea - although internal rationality and a greater understanding of one theoretical system may lead to a more meaningful reading of a certain situation. Richard Rorty talks about “...the old occultist urge to crack codes, to distinguish between reality and appearance, to make an overriding distinction between making it right and making it useful”.⁹ The use of theory in this thesis is, in contrast, focused on the idea of “making it useful”. Those I consider most useful are the ideas of marginality, narrative and dialogue, but there are other theoretical ideas used in the body of the text - notably those of Stephen Greenblatt and Michel Foucault.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “The Nature of Philosophy” in *The Wittgenstein Reader*, Antony Kenny ed, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994, p. 270.

⁸ And when really has this not being the principal criterion for using theory? It’s just that this meaning has at various times masqueraded as truth.

⁹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999. p 146.

Telling stories from the past will always entail interference. What would seem strange to an epistemology that regards the gathering of knowledge as neutral is not at all strange if the mediation of language is seen as fundamental in the process of understanding. Knowledge, formed as language, is renegotiated and altered in every narration.

A model for conceiving this continual renegotiation is Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogue. In any dialogue, person to person, text to reader, meaning does not pass unmediated. In the first instance, meaning is encoded in language; the act of listening/reading is one of decoding into our own understanding of those words heard. This is analogous to the standard post-modernist assertion that every deconstruction equates to another construction. Bakhtin, however, qualifies this process. Instead of arguing that the act of listening/reading is an act of appropriation, and consequently total destruction of the original intended meaning, as asserted by Derrida and other post-modern critics, Bakhtin argued that language has two basic qualities - centrifugal and centripetal. The centripetal quality of language is the homogeneity of meaning which allow a language to exist in any sense at all. It is these centripetal qualities through which we maintain any sense of meaning whatsoever, how we can have a conversation, and indeed, in a broader sense, how any culture can to a greater or lesser extent share a common base. In contrast, the centrifugal qualities are those of misunderstanding, of words half-heard and wrongly contextualised. Centrifugal qualities are dynamic, creating difference and change, and ensure that language and culture will always be heterogeneous.¹⁰

The dialogic conception of language maintains all the deconstructing power of a post-modern critique to overcome the imposition of stable meanings of proper names and cultural practice, the essentialisation of what Derrida has called "the single voice on the line, a continuous speech.....an unconscious plot, an intrigue of hierarchies".¹¹ But by asserting that this constantly changing dialogue still maintains centripetal qualities, it provides a model of language that more accurately accords to our actual engagement with the world on a day-to-day basis. As Wittgenstein said: "Because language takes its mode of meaning from what it names, namely the world, no language is conceivable which does not represent the world."¹²

Dialogics is powerful because it gives a theoretical understanding to what could be called a 'common sense' argument.¹³ There are obviously things that make sense - otherwise we could

¹⁰ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "The Dialogic Imagination" in *The Bakhtin Reader. Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*, Pam Morris ed., London, Arnold: 1994, p. 74.

¹¹ John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: a Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1997, p. 130.

¹² Wittgenstein, p. 279. Note also that Bakhtin's idea of the centripetal qualities of language accords with Wittgenstein's famous attack on the impossibility of a private language.

¹³ Common sense is in quote marks for the reason that as a phrase it is often used to justify a number of actions which by dint of their 'common sense' nature are apparently situated outside of normal

not read, write or indeed exist in a culture at all. But these sense-making objects are not truths. Truth claims to stand outside culture. It is eternal and unchanging. Meaning and sense on the other hand are situated within culture, and like culture, will be always fluid and dynamic. Being meaningful does not overrule the need to accept different enculturated views - they are meaningful in another context - but it also doesn't do away with the need to be rational, because without being rational a text or idea cannot be said to be meaningful in regard to a broader group of individuals who accept the need to be rational. This is a way of looking at the world that implicitly accepts that everything is, in a sense, a construct, and that what matters is what is achieved through that construct.

A dialogic view conceives culture as always changing while still maintaining a greater or lesser sense of identity. It is never a closed whole; rather it is an open-ended discursive field containing a community of individuals, with probably more homogeneity of cultural understanding when geographically bounded and without contact with other groups of people with differing beliefs. The practices and language that comprise and define cultural difference will always be fluid, although to maintain a strong sense of difference there will probably exist certain cultural markers that have stronger homogeneity over time (possessing a greater centripetal tendency) - for instance communal behaviour in Maori society. Change in these cultural markers does not invalidate them, indeed it is to be expected that cultural markers will change. Practice doesn't have to maintain 'traditional' aspects in order to remain an integral part of a culture. What matters is the role these markers play in relation to the rest of culture, and how powerful they remain as ways of generating meaning for those who identify with that culture. The fact that, for instance, Maori society has changed radically over two hundred years doesn't make the Maori experience in the present less 'Maori'.

Take for example the idea of Rongo Maori (Maori healing) as it relates to the use of various plant materials. That the use of plants therapeutically in a systematic way may not have begun until the first missionaries,¹⁴ doesn't mean this practice hasn't become entangled in the ways of seeing and using plants in the Maori world, and, moreover that the modalities of explanation aren't sourced in longer-lasting Maori understandings of healing and the body. A European colonial object doesn't need to stay a 'European object'; rather through a process of dialogue it becomes rearticulated as something new, and no less 'Maori' for its origin. In the end nothing is autochthonous.

boundaries of politicised discourse, although in reality they are articulating a view that is as politicised and reflexive as any other. When I use 'common sense' I mean on the level of everyday engagement with the world around us. In other words, not as Derrida interprets texts, but how he buys his groceries.

¹⁴ Ranginui Walker, *Nga Pepa a Ranginui. The Walker Papers*, Auckland. Penguin Books, 1996, p. 171.

Most importantly, a dialogic conception of culture is not essentialising. The essentialising tendencies of western writing is well known. Writers such as Edward Said have critiqued the way in which the 'west' has overwritten the plurality and heterogeneity of colonised peoples.¹⁵ In the Gilfillan killings this is manifested in the way in which the idea of the Maori as 'savage' and 'uncivilised' has been constantly re-articulated in European histories and re-writings. It is perhaps less often realised that the post-colonial conception of the colonising process as a binary interaction between coloniser and colonised is equally essentialising. Conceiving the past in binary terms is to remove any sense of the fluidness and transculturation that typified colonial contact.¹⁶ Both colonisers and indigenous people become puppets rendered helpless by imperial structures of power.¹⁷ The essentialisations of binary opposites are exacerbated by a fondness for techniques of deconstruction which have at heart the idea that mediating layers of text can be removed to get to the 'true text' underneath - as though there is an essential colonial discourse which can be typified by certain features and structures. The seduction of the ability to bestow proper names, the "occult urge of cracking codes",¹⁸ to announce that something is really Imperial, or Maori, turns cultural objects that are contingent and entangled in broader, more complex processes into wholes themselves. Cultures and events are made static and totalised by names, reifying the actors involved as part of closed discursive structures, unable to change for good or ill, relegated to merely acting out their culturally constituted roles. The heterogeneity and fluidness of the colonising experience is overwritten.

¹⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, c1978.

¹⁶ The fluidity of colonial relations is a feature of a number of more recent texts in post-colonialism. See especially Martha Kaplan, and, John D. Kelly, 'Rethinking Resistance: dialogics of "disaffection" in colonial Fiji', *American Ethnologist* 21(1): 123-151. They use Bakhtin as a way of conceptualising this fluidity:

Where Foucault resists naming any outside field as the terrain of discourse, and the Gramscians privilege as a the context for a hegemony only the class structure supported by it, Bakhtin sees less autonomous and interior power in discourse itself, and purposes that we privilege not the discursive whole, nor some other structures (such as class), but rather the context of dialogue in which, he argues, all discourse must reside. For Foucault, subjectivities, agency, resistance, and dialogue take place inside of a discourse defining a time and place. For Bakhtin, discourse resides inside dialogues. The difference is important. Dialogue is a different kind of residence for form and grammar and power, than "a discourse", a class structure, or a "whole social" anything. If form and grammar reside in dialogue, then they no longer exist in a clean, unified order apart from chaos. Then the power in varieties of incitement and repression flows not from discursively given conditions of possibility (as Foucault would have it) but from the necessities and contingencies of form and order that are made, unmade, and remade dialogically, in social, historical processes that cannot be finally captured in any large structures.

¹⁷ Note to critique an object or a practice as imbricated in structure of power is not a value judgement on that object or practice. Power is necessary for things to happen. The morality of the imposition of power can be discerned in effects not its status as part of a power equation.

¹⁸ Rorty, p. 146.

This critique of much post-colonial writing is not to make an apology for colonisation. The overwhelming dominance of the European powers led to exploitation and violence on a vast scale, but judging this is to make a statement of values, not one of construction. To reify every European action as imperial overrides the profound differences between different contexts and moments in history, and arguably weakens a critique of the worst acts of empire.

However, more problematically, a (justified) concern with the problems of cultural encounter, conflict, and the overwhelming material dominance of colonisation can often lead to essentialism and an eliding of the complexities of the past. After all, no event, or piece of knowledge, is discrete. It will always be surrounded by an almost endless series of contexts, and entangled in broader systems of knowledge and causation. Any intervention in this endless continuum of knowledge will to some extent be an essentialising act. Naming, by definition, is a way of compartmentalising and understanding, *knowing* something in the past. The giving of name (and consequently meaning) to any object will inevitably be to overwrite and occlude. Yet, without the act of naming, we have no way forward in any dialogue with any claims to rationality. So is it actually possible to overcome and deal with the multi-vocality of the past without imposing the “single voice on the line”? Is essentialisation, despite its pitfalls, and totalising tendencies, the only option we have?

In *Narrative and Time*, Paul Ricoeur argues that narrative is the way through which humans overcome temporality: “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative, narrative in turn is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience.”¹⁹ The nature of time, of an endless number of moments, lived through but gone before we can grasp them, can, like the multi-vocality and reflexivity of the past, seem to problematise any assertions of causation. Ricoeur suggests that this fracturing of the possibility of representation is overcome through a process of narrative. Understanding and experiencing the world is a process to which the best mimetic counterpoint is narrative.

Narrative exists not only on the level of the individual text but also as meta-narrative²⁰ - overriding ways of understanding and emplotting lived experience. The central feature is that they take the individual object - a voice, a moment, an individual event, a person - and narrate them into a broader context. Human experience is fundamentally involved in these meta-narratives of inclusion and community. The way we explain our lives and their relevance is by making use of these meta-narratives of place and meaning. This process is strongly seen in the

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Palmer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1984.

²⁰ Ricoeur is only the starting point for these series of assertions. He is principally concerned with the problem of representation, I have, however, taken his idea and tried to use it as a tool to think about culture and history.

various utopian ideals that have been used in history to give people's lives meaning. Christianity, Buddhism, Marxism, Love, Ethnicity, and History are all examples of meta-narratives that are primarily concerned with rendering the individual meaningful in the context of a broader group.

Meta-narratives are not 'structures', they do not 'contain', rather they inform.²¹ Narratives are constantly changing, renegotiated with every telling. The process of telling a meaningful story dovetails with the broader set of culturally constituted tools and narratives used to tell that story. Simply put, narratives or 'telling stories' is a way of making sense of the world. To do so is to draw ideas and 'ways of saying' from other enculturated 'ways of saying' (discourses) which in any given historical and cultural moment will give ways of explaining, although not always well, or comfortably, the experiences we are dealing with.²²

A focus on 'meaningful stories' is to accept that writing will inevitably involve some degree of essentialisation. Narration is, by definition, an overwriting of a complicated situation, but at the same time it is still the only possible way of saying. In particular regard to history, there seems to have come a moment when the demands of representing the historical object tend to override (perhaps overwrite is a better phrase in this context) the need to modulate the process of representation itself. There are stories that 'need' to be told. In an epistemological version of Pascal's wager, although the 'truth' of the past can never be known there has to be an acceptance of a version that seems less wrong at the culturally and temporally specific moment of writing.

This does not mean narrating these stories is without problems. But is it bad that the shifting nature of the signifiers, the complexities of emplotment, and the reflexive nature of any narrative problematise any statement, or any statement decoded from the past? An awareness of the conditional and fluid nature of any assertion can only be a good thing. It should encourage forms which emphasise the open-ended dialogic nature of any meaningful assertion, allowing claims to be made with regard to meaning without the potential horrors of any totalising meta-narratives.

²¹ See footnote 14 re. Kaplan and Kelly.

²² This idea accords quite strongly with the work of scholars such as Judith Butler and Derrida on performativity. Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York: Routledge, 1993, writes, pace Derrida, that performance is *citational* i.e. It is an act that continually references back to the discursive formations from which it first emerged. These discursive formations are not prescriptive, and moreover the moment of performance is circumscribed by other contingent and temporal factors, but their role can be discerned as an underlying and informing influence. A written text is a performance, and every one is unique, but we can still place them, albeit with care, and always with the awareness that the act of placement owes as much to own cultural circumstances as to those of the text, in a broader context. In other words each text dialogically interacts with broader meta-narratives. For the sake of clearness in the narrative I am performing however, I wish to keep the focus in the main body of text on the idea of dialogue, rather than performance.

But what are these forms? In this thesis they are reflected in certain ways of narrating the Gilfillan killings. A concern with contingency and heterogeneity accords with a focus on the individual voice as a way of accessing a moment in history. This is also reflected in an engagement with the reflexive nature of any text, nominally by the occasional use of the first person in this thesis itself, but more importantly by a recognition that this reflexivity is not a weakness, but one of the most fundamental facts about our experiencing of the world. An engagement with the uniqueness of any individual point of view is a starting point for tolerance and understanding.

The importance of individual voice accords with a belief in letting the voices from the past tell their own stories. Parataxis is the idea that the placement of a story alongside another set of possible meanings is a way of attempting to leave the original text as unalloyed as possible, lessening the act of destruction that occurs in the process of interpretation. Even the choice of text and its placement in a narrative will to some extent be a renegotiation of that original text, but, at the very least, the presence of those past voices problematises the easy imposition of the “single voice on a line”. To this end I have tried to quote the original texts whenever possible.²³ This, in some circumstances, may hinder the easy flow of narrative, but that really is the point. The past is not an easy flowing narrative.

Narrative is, however, still important. The focus on contingency and heterogeneity, the validity of single voices, reflexivity, and the fragmentary nature of accessing the multiple narrations of the past, doesn't have to mean descending into the opacity and contorted nature of some post-modern texts. Telling ‘meaningful stories’ is not added to by an employment of narrative that undermines the process of making sense at all. Not only does this approach in some post-colonial texts²⁴ make reading difficult, but it undermines the often forceful and important arguments these critics have to offer. In this thesis, there is an attempt to tell meaningful stories about the past, while still thinking about, and narrating, this past in a way that more accurately reflects its complexity.

²³ On a practical note this means that on occasion the idiosyncratic punctuation and grammar of the original texts can grate. The reader has to take it on trust (as indeed occurs in any act of reading) that the act of transcribing these quotes is accurate. A further problem is that in the case of some of the diaries in the Alexander Turnbull Library access is through typed transcripts of the originals. While saving literally days of reading (and in the case of Richard Taylor's diaries, for me personally, perhaps even the possibility of reading), there is always the possibility of a punctuation or grammatical error occurring in transcription.

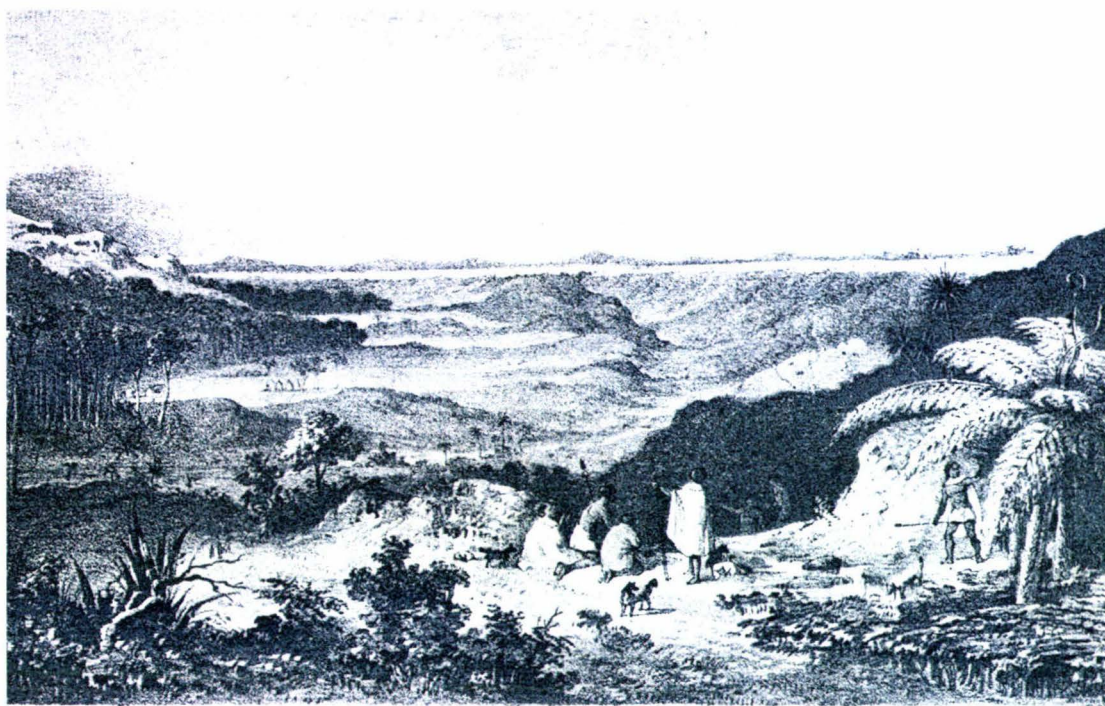
²⁴ For instance Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, whose writing, while it has contained important contributions to post-colonial study, is almost impenetrable at worst, and difficult at best. This is arguably part of a deliberate commitment to overcome the hegemony of normalised narratives, but if it is recognised that any narrative is essentialising to some extent, then ‘sensemaking’ as a criteria would seem equally important.

Lastly, a recognition of the fragmentary nature of access to the past is particularly germane to a discussion that is based on written European sources. Although the Reverend Richard Taylor arguably presents a 'Maori' point of view,²⁵ the history of the Gilfillan killings as told through Maori oral history has not been attempted (indeed only one published historian, David Young, has done so, and his comments are brief and perfunctory²⁶). There are two key issues involved in having chosen to pursue the enquiry without engaging with possibly extant Maori oral traditions. Firstly, the nature of this thesis is as much about the renegotiation of an object textually, and about the reading of those texts, as it is about re-narrating the totality of the Gilfillan incident. The absence of possible Maori oral histories, while interesting, does not directly affect the points I am trying to make in this regard. Secondly, being an interlocutor of Maori stories, particularly if those stories were to be examined and pulled apart in the way in which the European stories have, raises certain problems in regard to access. The issues involved here, while fundamental to NZ history, are not to be resolved in a Masters thesis.²⁷

²⁵ Taylor's relationship to Maori on the river is discussed more fully in the body of the text.

²⁶ There is further discussion of Young's presentation of the Gilfillan incident in Chapter Two.

²⁷ This is not to say that politicised and sensitive stories should be avoided, indeed I would suggest they are the stories that are most in need of explanation. To not do so, is to leave the debate about the issues of our past to be dominated by points of view which have no cognisance of the difficulties and injustice of the colonial legacy.



MR GILFILLAN DELT

W. A. N. HANBART IMPR

MATARAWA, THE FARM OF MR GILFILLAN

Illustration I:

From: W. J. T. Power, *Sketches in New Zealand with Pen and Pencil, From a Journal Kept in that Country from July 1846 to June 1848.*

The Violent Anecdote and Access to the Past

On first reading, William Tyrone Power's account of the Gilfillan killings seemed to offer a vivid and realistic glimpse of a past moment. It possessed a 'strange-making' quality that separated it from other texts; what the New Historicist critic Stephen Greenblatt has called a "touch of the real".²⁸ This chapter is an investigation into that reality effect, and how the aesthetically powerful text can provide an access point into the lived experience of the past.

Stephen Greenblatt has written extensively about these kinds of aestheticised texts,²⁹ the "undisciplined anecdotes"³⁰ which seem to offer a unique access into the experience of the past. He introduces a concept which is useful for understanding how these vivid anecdotes 'work' - "resonance". Resonance is

...the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to invoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and which as metaphor or more simply as metonymy it may be taken by a viewer to stand.³¹

As with the Russian Formalist idea of strangeness, resonance provides a focus on the aesthetic quality of texts. Both concepts emphasise that historical texts and even historical events are cultural objects, entangled in language and cultural forms in the same way as those objects traditionally regarded as art. Texts are generators of meaning as much as they are transmitters of meaning.

Tyrone Power's account of the Gilfillan killings is a text that is both strange and resonant. The disturbing and vivid narration of violence is key to this aesthetic, and consequently central to this chapter, but it is not the only strange-making or resonant quality. Indeed to think about how the violence in the Tyrone Power's account gives a "touch of the real", is to first to think about the broader discursive contexts that influence and constraint his story-telling.³²

²⁸ Catherine Gallagher, and, Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, chap 1.

²⁹ Although in a sense every text is aestheticised, the focus is on those which possess a greater aesthetic power.

³⁰ Gallagher, and, Greenblatt, p. 3.

³¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse. Essays in Early Modern Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 170.

³² Quentin Skinner in *Meaning and Context, Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, James Tully, ed., Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, has written strongly about this relationship of the single voice, or single text, with wider contexts. He critiques the "mythology of coherence" (pp. 38ff.) that texts can be interpreted only with reference to themselves, a result of the "New Criticism" and its attack on the "intentionalist fallacy" (pp. 68ff). Indeed the culturally situated nature of the individual voice is what

In the act of writing the multiplicity and heterogeneity of these influences can never be fully, perhaps even adequately, represented. Accepting this limitation is part of the overall hermeneutic project of this thesis; there cannot be a total understanding of the multiple contexts and influences that exist around a single voice. This doesn't stop, however, at least some level of exegesis. Before thinking about the narration of violence in Power's anecdote, there is an engagement with three contexts that are important for thinking about his text - who he was, how he wrote, and where he was. Power's biographical details, the narrative forms of diary and travel writing, and the nature of narrating in the colonial 'contact zone', all contribute to the strangeness which his anecdote seems to possess, and which, as I intend to argue, produces a real access to a moment in the past.

Biographies

History by its nature deals in fragments; no knowledge of a past life can be complete. The relatively limited amount of information about Tyrone Power removes the temptation to think we can find the 'real' man behind the text.³³ Fragments of information may be suggestive, but they cannot be 'true'.

Richard Rorty has said this about reading texts:

Reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of reading other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you and then seeing what happens....[it] may be exciting and convincing....[it] may be so exciting and convincing that one has the illusion that one now sees what a certain text is *really* about. But what excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited and convinced.³⁴

It is possible to read the fragments of information possessed about Power in a certain way, a way that indeed may seem "exciting and convincing"; for instance asserting that as a British Army officer in the middle of the 19th century he will think and act in certain established modes. It would seem reasonable to consider Power as an Imperial agent, and as such,

makes it worth studying. It dialogically interacts with elements of discourse extant in a culture, which to a certain extent, can then be made explicable.

³³ Unlike, for instance Philip Temple, who in his recent biography of the Wakefields, *A Sort of Conscience: the Wakefields*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002, could comfortably claim, "I did not *fully* [my emphasis] grasp Edward Gibbon's complex personality until I read archived correspondence in Ottawa that suddenly threw into relief the English and New Zealand material." It is doubtful that any amount of information can lead to a 'full' understanding of anybody, or for that matter, that such a thing as a "complex personality" will stay static and explicable over a significant period of time.

³⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999, p. 141

narratives of nationality, Empire, duty and masculinity that can be associated with being a British soldier inform his positioning in, and relationship to, the world he saw around him.³⁵

But what exactly would this mean? For instance, while there were undoubtedly ideas of masculinity that were associated with being a British soldier, these would have varied widely according to family and religious background, attitudes to sex, age, marital status, and career among other possible influencing factors. Attitudes towards duty, empire, and nationality would have been similarly fluid. In discussing the writings of a British soldier, the notion that his status acts as a starting point for interpreting all other information is tempting, but really a delusion - interpretation becomes essentialisation. At the time of writing this thesis, New Zealand has just sent a number of troops to the Solomon Islands. We would not expect that each of those individuals would act and think in a syncopated way; at best we could make a series of generalisations from soldiers we have met. Ways of thinking about the past, which would reify Power as solely imperial, essentialise without enlightening.

This does not mean that Power's occupation and social background should not be considered in assessing his text. Notes can be made about his career and position, and thought can be given in the process of reading his book, about what hints the fragments of his life may give to the interpretation of the texts. There is a difference, however, between thought and concrete conclusion.

This is an outline of his life:

He was of Northern Irish Protestant background. His father was a well-known actor, called by the British *Dictionary of National Biography* the "most notable Irish comedian at the Haymarket".³⁶ Aged 27 when he arrived in New Zealand, he had already served seven years overseas, including time in China, an experience about which he also wrote a book.³⁷ He became a lifetime soldier and a successful one, eventually rising to the position of Commissary-General in Chief in 1864.³⁸ He received a knighthood for his service in 1865.

³⁵ For instance Radhika Mohanram *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space*, St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1999, a recent example of post-colonial critique which takes the essentialised imperial agent as a given. It is a germane example, as a significant section of the book is devoted to New Zealand.

³⁶ *Dictionary of National Biography*, Leslie, Stephen and Lee, ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1921-22, Vol. 16, pp. 260-6

³⁷ W. J. T. Power, *Recollections of a Three Years' Residence in China; Including Peregrinations in Spain Morocco, Egypt, India, Australia and New Zealand*, London, Richard Bentley, 1853.

³⁸ The Commissary-General was responsible for organising supplies and transport; a significant position in an army that was spread across the globe.

Later in life he renewed his contact with New Zealand, briefly becoming the Agent-General in 1876.³⁹

There is a little additional information about Tyrone Power in the sources based around 1840s Wanganui. The diary of the school teacher at Putiki, William Robinson confirms him as part of the rescue party on the morning of the killings,⁴⁰ and a letter later written by his commanding officer Captain Laye, a copy of which is in the Wanganui Regional Museum,⁴¹ notes his near death from drowning a few months later. Power wrote in *Sketches*: “It was almost a miracle that anyone was saved: for my own part I only struggled on from instinctive tenacity with which a drowning man holds out to the last.”⁴² Sarah Gillfillan in her newspaper article of 1888 mentions him as “son of the celebrated tragedian”,⁴³ which probably says more than a little about the petite bourgeoisie aspirations of Victorian small-town New Zealand.

Little is known of Power’s life outside of the army. *Sketches* is dedicated to Sir Charles Trevelyan, a noted figure in the administration of India and a proponent of a classic ‘liberal’ view of Empire, to which some of Power’s statements on the process of settlement conform.

Far and away the most information about Tyrone Power is derived from his own writing. One of the most charming aspects of *Sketches of New Zealand* is the personal anecdotes which fill the text. His notes on the lack of field sports in Sydney, the surprisingly boring Nautch girls of Calcutta, and the loneliness of a beautiful view without anyone to share it, make Tyrone Power himself the most vivid and interesting character in his own text. His comments on New Zealand, Maori, and the events of the day, are leavened by the personal; a style of writing that is at once both intimate and credible. Interpretations of who Power ‘was’ are inevitably subjective - but judging by his writing, I would say he was good humoured, observant, curious of the world around him, self-deprecating (although perhaps rather proud of his rhetorical flights of fancy) and, above all, quite likeable.

³⁹ This information comes from *The Annaghmakerrig Papers*, retrieved 10 April 2003 from the website of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast.

www.proni.gov.uk/records/private/annarig.html.

⁴⁰ William Robinson’s diary is extracted in T.W. Downes *Old Whanganui*, Hawera: W. A. Parkinson, 1915. The references to Robinson’s diary in this thesis are thus mediated through Downes. Strangely, Downes calls him Ronaldson in *Old Whanganui*, but all other facts accord. There was only a William Robinson teaching at Putiki, and no Ronaldson in the rescue party. This mistake aside, Downes other transcriptions ie Sarah Gilfillan’s newspaper article of 1888, are reasonable accurate. The possibility exists however, as with all texts, that it has been corrupted.

⁴¹ General Laye to Stapp, March 1890, Gilfillan file, Wanganui Regional Museum

⁴² W. J. T. Power, *Sketches in New Zealand with Pen and Pencil, From a Journal Kept in that Country from July 1846 to June 1848*, London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1849. p.108.

⁴³ *Wanganui Herald*, 6 January 1888.

The most remarkable thing about these observations is not the characteristics themselves, but rather the fact that they sound so ‘unhistorical’, especially when compared to phrases such as ‘narratives of Empire, duty, and masculinity’. But it is in the context of his good-humoured and vivid personal style that the account of the Gilfillan killings gains such immediacy. Power’s own narrations provide the context for any access to his thoughts and experiences.

This does not mean that his social position is irrelevant. Being a soldier in the British army does not act as a lens refracting and altering all that he saw, but it still placed him in certain situations and contexts. He was in New Zealand in order to fight a group of Maori who had come into conflict with the expanding colonial government. His regiment, the 56th Rutland, had been brought from Sydney to pacify Te Rauparaha and Te Rangiheata. The subsequent move to Wanganui was specifically to counter the perceived threat from upriver Maori to the nascent settlement. In this sense he was an imperial agent. Moreover, as a soldier, he was only temporarily in New Zealand. Although he repeatedly states his support of colonisation in New Zealand, he had no intentions to stay in the country himself.⁴⁴ Subsequently, his observations are those of a traveller, a position that, in the eyes of the present-day observer at least, gives greater claims of credibility and objectivity.

Most importantly for contextualising Power is the most obvious fact of all - he was European. He perceived Maori as different, and while that perception may have been fluid and changeable, it existed all the same. Setting off on the morning of April 18th 1847 to the burnt-out Gilfillan household, Power was accompanied by nine other Europeans, settlers and police, and twelve Maori from Putiki. There were, he wrote, “ten of us...”.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ He does write at one stage while visiting Kolkata (Calcutta): “It is certainly a fine city, and one feels proud to have such a metropolis in our Eastern dominions; but, for my own part, I would rather live in a reed-hut in the pleasant bracing climate of New Zealand, than call myself master of the finest mansion in the Maidan, with all the luxury and attendance befitting it.” (Power, p. 251). A comment with more than a hint of fantasy and whimsy.

⁴⁵ Power, p. 87.

Narrating Travel/Writing Diaries

Nicholas Thomas in *Colonialism's Culture*, calls travel

....a peculiarly modern activity, in so far as it entails steps away from 'traditional' ties, and - more crucially and distinctively - an attitude of extension and displacement towards those traditions.⁴⁶

It is above all a process of discovery, personal and imperial. The most famous mid-Victorian English traveller, Richard Burton, summarised this attitude in his *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al Madinal and Meccah*:

I afforded my services to the Royal Geographic Society of London, for the purpose of removing that opprobrium to modern adventure, the huge white blot....⁴⁷

The act of writing travel as Tyrone Power does, is to assume a certain physical and discursive relationship with the world. It is an act of domesticating the white blot, turning the foreign Other into a narrative that is redolent with difference, yet still accessible to the domestic audience of his book.⁴⁸ Power writes in his preface (dated "Bath: May 1849"):

I am aware that some apology is necessary for venturing to intrude such slight and incomplete sketches on the public: and the only excuse I can make is, that they are a mere transcript from a journal and sketch-book, kept for my own amusement. The most I can hope is, that, in affording an hour's light reading, I may at the same time convey the impression, so strong in my own mind, of the fitness of this colony for English emigrants of all classes, and perhaps induce a spirit of enquiry, which in better hands, may exhibit all the advantages of this beautiful and promising country.⁴⁹

Power's notes may be "slight and incomplete" but they are written with the awareness that the narrator is involved in something 'interesting'. As well as narrating himself as an 'imperial man' engaged with the broader politics of empire, there is an acknowledgment that he is stepping outside his audience's normal realm of experience. As a *travel* writer he gains credibility through this experience as distinct from a particular talent for representation.⁵⁰ This is not to say he lacks aesthetic talent, but that the ability to represent the world in an aestheticised way is less important than the ability to represent it 'as it is' in a far off and exotic place. Exoticness gives the travel book an aesthetic thrill.

⁴⁶ Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers, 1994, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Richard Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al-Madinah & Meccah*, Edited by his wife, Isabel Burton, London: Tylston and Edwards, 1893. p. 1.

⁴⁸ This idea was suggested by Mary Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London; New York: Routledge, 1992.

⁴⁹ Power, p. vii.

⁵⁰ This idea was derived from Mary Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. The idea of experience as creating validity has arguably lessened in the modern era due to easy accessibility through air travel. The validity of just 'being there' has given way to variants of 'extreme' experience.

As well as the ever-present thrill of the Other, diary accounts and travel writing have certain distinctive features. There is a movement though the narrative chronologically; and the narrator is constantly present as a voice and as an actor in their own text. This gives an impression of being in 'real time', while the first person voice makes the intimate and the personal seem truthful. These techniques give a feel of veracity to the text. For these reasons, the diary technique is often used in fiction to create a sense of immediacy and reality.

Despite this impression, a diary, or travel writing, is entangled as much as any other text in the broader discursive features of writing and seeing. The sentence, 'I believe that writing in the first person gives greater access into the experience of the past', doesn't give any more access to my thoughts than the sentence, 'Writing in the first person gives greater access into the experience of the past'. The 'I' is fictive in the sense that by itself it offers no additional access to an experienced reality, with the exception that if a narrator uses the phrase 'I' or 'we' and that narrator seems believable, then that creates a very powerful truth claim as an eye-witness.⁵¹

The danger is that the feel of veracity, the truth-claim of witnessing, provided by the first person may be conflated with "the touch of the real". Similarly, it has to be considered that act of rewriting a diary for publication could add drama and vividness to a text. In *Sketches* there are changes of tense from the present to the past and occasional distinctions in the text between what was written 'at the time' and what was revised later. There is also an article published in the *Wellington Independent*, anonymous, but matching closely Power's published text, which shows a slight increase in rhetorical and descriptive language, between the earlier newspaper account and that finally published in his book. The influence of the process of writing, the circumstances of writing, and culturally situated position of the author are all significant in the emplotment of any narrative. The vividness of Power's text cannot be separated from the act of rewriting, anymore than it can be separated from the first person narrative style of a diary. This does not invalidate the text in any way. To 'know' how a text works, or to deconstruct how it is troped, does not make it any less effective.⁵² Indeed the first person narration and the touch of the personal that the diary format provides, is a way of emplotting narrative that resonates with an emphasis on the multi-vocality and contingency of the past.

⁵¹ Perhaps also it could be argued that the discursive and narrative features in which the use of the first person is entangled, privilege the narration of the immediate and the personal in a performative way. Using this same argument, the use of the third person, with its strong link to discourses of objectivity, would create a commensurate tendency to distance the narrator from the immediacy of emotional experience. But this at most would be only a tendency.

⁵² Although the constant process of rereading involved in 'knowing' a text, may lessen the initial impact of the text, a process the New Historicists call the 'disappearing sense of the anecdote'.

Narration in the Contact Zone

As the words and symbols of Power's text are entangled in the process of writing a diary, so Power himself was entangled in a new and strange environment. Wanganui in the 1840s was a place where established ways of acting and understanding for both cultures were challenged by the intervention of, and dialogue with, another culture; what historian Mary Louise Pratt, and deriving from her work, anthropologist James Clifford, have described as a "contact zone".⁵³

Wanganui was one of most isolated European settlements in New Zealand. When his regiment, the 56th Rutland, were called up to Wanganui, Power wrote rather cheerily of setting off from Porirua with the local settlers watching from the shore

...perhaps speculating on the probability of a portion of our small party being embowelled and digested by hungry cannibals before we were a week older. Of such a consumption there is no very great improbability, as we shall be landed and left to our own resources in a place that has being the scene of more cannibalism and savage crime than any other spot in New Zealand....⁵⁴

If the risk of being consumed was somewhat remote, Wanganui was still on the frontier of Empire. The journey by ship from Wellington usually took three days, but one trip back down the coast took Power ten, due to unnaturally stormy weather. A trip by land from Wellington took four days. It was, Power wrote:

...tolerably hard journeying, in the course of which we have traversed one hundred and fifty miles of forests, swamps, sand hills and sea beach, to say nothing of crossing about a dozen rivers.⁵⁵

The journey was made more difficult by the constant fear of meeting hostile Maori:

...our reception was anything but flattering and we lost no time in making the best of our way down to the ford, and were greatly relieved when we had put the river between us and the black looking scoundrels.⁵⁶

⁵³ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, and, James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997. Pratt calls the contact zone a temporal and physical space "...characterised by fluidity and transculturation, and, in the colonial situation in which most of these encounters took place, by an overwhelming disparity in power relationships by which the material circumstances of the contact zone are shaped."

⁵⁴ Power p. 41-42. To which he added, rather charmingly:

If we had been inclined to look at the dark side of our prospects we could scarcely have done so on a day such as this, when earth, sea and sky seemed to vie with one and other for the palm of brilliancy and beauty, and the air was so light and elastic that it was a pleasure to inhale it. Such days are almost peculiar to New Zealand, and make one forget and forgive a thousand discomforts.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, p. 127.

⁵⁶ *ibid*.

Wanganui itself was a heavily populated region. An estimated 30,000 Maori lived in the Wanganui River basin, compared to 200 European settlers.⁵⁷ The arrival of the Rutland regiment raised this number to approximately 400.⁵⁸ The opposition of groups of upriver Maori to the Government, the ready access provided by the river to powerful inland tribes such as Tuwharetoa, and above all the legacy of the New Zealand Company's ill executed land purchase,⁵⁹ created real tension in the region. In the midst of the conflict that followed the hanging of the killers of the Gilfillans, Power summarised the problems facing Wanganui:

The settlement, I fear, has received its last blow. The country is beautiful and fertile; the climate perhaps the most equable and temperate in the Northern Island, or in the world; and these advantages have encouraged the settlers to hope on in spite of hope: but the truth is apparent, that it is twenty years, at least, before its time.⁶⁰ It is too isolated, too unprotected; has nothing to fall back upon, but must stand or fall by itself, and is open to the attack of all the worst and strongest tribes of New Zealand.⁶¹

And two pages later:

From all accounts the whole of the Maories along the river are of opinion that we should be driven out of this place: it is only to be hoped that they will not all immediately act upon it, as there are not less than 5,000 fighting men between this point and Taupo. The relations and friends of the men who were hanged are all in the taua, and are infuriated against us; and there is more or less ill-will throughout the country from our daring to carry out such an act of justice on the spot where they had lorded it over the 'pakeha' for so many years.⁶²

For Maori, the local arrival of Europeans was another disruption in a recent history that had been notable for violence and instability. Maori had only recently moved back to live permanently at Putiki-whara-nui in 1840, after the famous marae⁶³ had been virtually wiped out by Te Rauparaha in 1829 - the bones of 400 dead left lying at the base of a hill behind Putiki.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ J. H. Burnet, Preface to T. W. Downes, *History of and Guide to the Wanganui River*, Wanganui: Wanganui Herald, 1921, p. iv. "In Richard Taylor's time a moderate estimate of the population of the Valley was 25,000 to 30,000; today the Maori can barely muster a thousand strong....". I have used this number as an approximation only, but the fact that it comes in Downes' book gives some credibility, as he had an intimate knowledge of the length of the river and the Maori history thereof. More practically, there is an absence of more recent estimates of Maori population in the literature.

⁵⁸ Wards, Ian, *The Shadow of the Land: a Study of British Policy and Racial Conflict in New Zealand 1832-1852*, Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, Dept. of Internal Affairs, 1968, p. 327. With later reinforcements this number rose to nearly 1000 (p. 339.).

⁵⁹ See Wards pp. 303-304, for a fuller description.

⁶⁰ Note the teleology of empire. Wanganui is 'before it's time', but it's time will come.

⁶¹ Power, p. 96. Note that even the idea of weather is enculturated. It is not often claimed that Wanganui has the most temperate climate in the world.

⁶² *ibid*, p. 99.

⁶³ European history in Wanganui starts in 1831. Putiki-whara-nui first enters Maori history, as one of the sites named by Toi, the famous early explorer.

⁶⁴ The missionary Richard Taylor gathered these remains and buried them at the bottom of the hill, renaming it Golgotha. The notable Putiki chief "Johnny Williams" Hipango, who played a featured role

The return of Maori to Putiki was due to the arrival of first missionary in Wanganui, John Mason,⁶⁵ and it is the relationship of Putiki Maori and Europeans in particular which provides the strongest example of the fluidity of the contact zone. Throughout the early colonial period, Putiki Maori fought on the side of the Europeans. It was Putiki Maori who caught the killers of the Gilfillans, and refused to side with Mateku when he made his attack on the town three weeks later. Twenty years later they even fought and died in a well known battle at Motu Island to protect the town from a war party of Hau Hau.⁶⁶

The key to this relationship between Putiki Maori and Europeans was the rapid conversion of many Maori to Christianity, particularly under the auspices of the CMS missionary Richard Taylor. Christmas Day 1846 provided a classic illustration of how relationships in the contact zone could subvert what ostensibly would seem the imposition of a European meta-narrative (ie Christianity). That morning Taylor gave a service to somewhere between 2000-4000 Maori. He wrote in his diary: "I felt my weakness and responsibility, here was this so great a multitude assembled in the wilderness and fainting for the lack of food."⁶⁷ It was the largest gathering of Maori in Wanganui history.⁶⁸

The support of Putiki Maori for the European settlement and the strong uptake of Christianity problematises easy assumptions about the nature of relationships in the contact zone. Despite the obvious ease with which Christianity can be asserted as European imposition, to do this without care is both to critique the validity of the beliefs of those Maori who had converted, as though the 'European' nature of their beliefs somehow invalidated their position as Maori, and also to overwrite how foreign cultural ideas can be articulated in new ways for the 'advantage' of the colonised.⁶⁹ The way Christian beliefs could become more specific 'Maori' statements of identity was exemplified in the later prophetic movements of individuals such

in the Gilfillan incident is buried on the crest of the hill. He died fighting the Hau-Hau at Motu Island in 1863.

⁶⁵ L.J.B Chapple, C. Barton, *Early Missionary Work in Whanganui (1840-1850)*, Wanganui: Jones, 1930, p. 46. Mason was the immediate predecessor of Richard Taylor.

⁶⁶ A monument was raised to these Maori in Moutua Gardens, and afterwards in Wanganui historiography they are often lauded as 'good' Maori. By noting their co-operation I am not trying to suggest either pro- or anti- european Maori were in any way better. Indeed any suggestion of 'better or worse' in either a colonial or post-colonial sense is to be avoided. It was not a binary situation but a complex one. In an interesting aside, Mark Twain attacked this monument vehemently when he visited Wanganui in the 1890s: "Its lesson in frank terms is "Desert your flag, slay your own people, burn their homes, shame your nationality - we honor such", Mark Twain, *Mark Twain in Australia and New Zealand*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973, p. 332.

⁶⁷ Richard Taylor Journal vol 4, mss. Typescript, Alexander Turnbull Library, p. 318

⁶⁸ Chapple, and, Barton, p. 91.

⁶⁹ Ranginui Walker has written on very similar themes in his recent biography of Apirana Ngata, *He Tipua: the Life and Times of Sir Apirana Ngata*, Auckland: Viking, 200, with particular regard to the 'collaboration' of Ngati Porou with government forces against the Hau Hau. He notes that an alliance with another powerful force was a standard and accepted part of maintaining the mana of any tribe, and care should be taken to not dehistoricise the process by seeing it only in terms of Maori and Pakeha.

as Te Whiti and Rua Kenana. They constructed narratives, 'meaningful stories', about the place of Maori with reference to new knowledge gathered from colonisation - in particular The Bible.

The way in which the Maori prophets reinterpreted European stories as Maori stories is an illustration of what happens to all stories, and, which in the contact zone and other 'marginal' situations, happens in a particularly dynamic way. Not every story changes radically, rather they are articulated in new ways, with "alien terms and materials." Narrative is "remade even as it remakes."⁷⁰

One of the strengths of the British Empire, and Western imperialism generally, was that it already possessed ways of explaining the cultures it was to encounter. These meta-narratives of encounter, of 'savages' and 'progress', or alternative meta-narratives such as 'saving souls', provided explanations for the Otherness of Maori and the contact zone. Indeed I would suggest that the sheer strength of these meta-narratives, allied with massive technological advantages, led to the almost incredible self-assurance that so typifies colonial history.

In contrast, it could be argued that Maori possessed no such meta-narratives of the Other which easily narrate and encompass the European presence. This did not mean that individuals weren't able to adapt and succeed as individuals and smaller groups in specific circumstances, but that in a more general sense, the way in which Maori could "tell meaningful stories" was disrupted. Not only did colonisation bring violence, land appropriation, and the ravages of disease, but it also undermined Te Ao Maori - the way of seeing and understanding the world in ways which were culturally unique to Maori, and through which previously they had articulated narratives of place and inclusionment.

In the contact zone the process of telling meaningful stories for both Maori and European meant a process of change and dialogue. This fluidness and contingency inevitably affects the reading of the stories of the Gilfillan killings. The 'strangeness' of the early colonial period is integral in the 'strangeness' provided by the violence of the killing of the Gilfillans.

Narratives that can, and Narratives that can't Contain Violence

In literature and art, the depiction of violence creates some of the most harrowing and powerful works ever produced. Picasso's *Guernica* or the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*

⁷⁰ Martha Kaplan, and, John D. Kelly, 'Rethinking Resistance: dialogics of "disaffection" in colonial Fiji', *American Ethnologist* 21(1): pp. 123-151. They discuss a 'structure of power' rather than a meta-narrative, but the dialogic process of understanding is the same.

are illustrations of the profound marginalising and defamiliarising nature of the representation of violence. Violence has a quality of alterity which can challenge and even rupture the process of narration. The violent act can break our ways of seeing and understanding what we see around us. It is a rupture in the true sense of the word, a breaking of the way things were, of wholeness and lives, replacing them with wounded and dead bodies.

The violent act, however, can be contained. Like any other cultural object it can mean different things in different cultural and temporal situations. A blow with a weapon may be the axe of state power cutting off the head of a traitor or a murderer, or the stab of a knife which kills a tyrant. It may be a societally shunned act of a wife-beater or the celebrated bayonet thrust of a Victoria Cross winner. Context and the narratives which can make sense of that context, can explain and justify violence - containing with sense-making stories.⁷¹

Like all stories, those which contain and make sense of violence are constantly negotiated. What existed as stable and sense-making in a text of another cultural time and place can jar and disorientate modern sensibilities. Foucault's anecdote of Damians cited in the introduction, represented an example of how the need to punish the body contained the violence rendered upon that body. His *Discipline and Punish* documents how this meta-narrative altered in Western-European culture, from a focus on punishment to state-sponsored cure.⁷² The famous lines of the *Old Testament*: "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe..."⁷³, justify violence in terms of reciprocity. Some of the most effective violence containers have already been mentioned in the context of colonial meta-narration, the 'savage', the 'native', the 'barbarian' were ways of containing the injustices of colonisation. The 'degraded' position of another race justified political domination, slavery, violence and in the most extreme cases genocide. Hitler called the Jews 'bacteria'.

In the New Zealand experience, the rhetoric of Duty, King, Country and Empire drew two generations to war, even if on a personal level the actual motivations were confused and amorphous. The virtual lack of choice these young men had in going to war seems commonsensical, imbricated in our culture and the history of the 'sacrifice' (itself a meta-narrative) that we celebrate every year in Anzac Day. We do not celebrate young men who went off to kill and maim strangers with whom they had no personal grievance. We celebrate

⁷¹ The idea of containment was one I came to myself. Subsequently I discovered a virtually identical use of 'containment' in E. Valentine Daniel's excellent *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996.

⁷² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, translated from the French by Alan Sheridan, New York: Pantheon Books, c1977.

⁷³ Exodus 21, 24-25, King James Version.

sacrifice and bravery, even if questioning the underlying motivations of war itself. This meta-narrative of duty is still a strong way of explaining and containing the terrible violence of the past. Similarly the righteousness of the war, especially World War Two, is also a narrative that contains. However, anyone who has friends who are German, or has read into the history of Germany, will recognise the uneasiness and disparity that comes from acknowledging that many Germans' war histories shared similarities with those of New Zealanders, often both are simply stories of everyday experience - and the helplessness of on the individual in the face of larger events. Some others are terribly different, but that in many ways is the point. Perhaps sometimes the focus on the horrors of Hitler and the Nazi is a convenient way of over-writing the recognition of the extent to which humans, seemingly everyday people, are capable of the greatest evil. The encounter with the individual voice can question this meta-narrative.

In regard to the Gilfillan anecdote, the meta-narratives that contain are related to two principal questions - the nature of the killers and the innocence of the victims.

The Killers

Power makes some broad sweeping statements on Maori:

The natives of New Zealand have been so variously described that, for an unbiased (sic) person, it is difficult to speak of them without been charged with exaggeration and falsehood by the one party, who find them all virtues; or by the other, who paint them as black as fiends. Physically they are a fine race of men, straight, well-built, and muscular, with a great deal of animation in their manner. In their conversation they are lively and humorous, and display a great deal of acuteness in their remarks on persons or things. The women are generally not so good-looking as the men; but, when quite young, they are attractive in their manners, and some of them may be called pretty, while their figures are almost invariably good and sometimes beautiful.⁷⁴

But:

They are obscene in their habits, avaricious and grasping in their dealings, bullying or demeaning in their demeanour, as suits their purpose, cruel, treacherous in their wars, and without the remotest sense of decency and decorum in their social habits. Their very children are adepts in obscenity and immorality, uncorrected by example or admonition from their elders. Where, then, it will be asked, are the good qualities of which we have heard so much? They principally consist in their invariable good temper and light-heartedness, the facility with which they receive new impressions, the ready adoption of improvements that are suggested to them, the willingness and facility with which they learn anything that is taught to them, and, above all, a humbugging, wheedling, flattering, and childlike simplicity of manner that takes

⁷⁴ Power, pp. 142-3.

hundreds in, while it covers as much cunning and selfishness as belong to the rudest and most brutal savage.⁷⁵

Like a number of Europeans in the 19th century Power is prepared to make generalisations on racial type, and to attest to race as a primary driver for social behaviour. What is interesting, is that relatively speaking, he doesn't in his narration of the Gilfillan killings.

The temptation to create binary essentialisations when writing colonial/post-colonial histories is very real. My first readings of Power's text was based on the assumption that his opinions on Maori, expressed in *Sketches* at length, would be reflected in his view of the killing of the Gilfillans. Some later writers blame the killings on the innate violent tendencies of Maori, and indeed, in focusing on the specificities of Power's representation of the killers, I am not trying to absolve him of the typical 19th century views about race. However when compared to later accounts, it seems notable that the killers are mentioned directly in only one sentence of "A Startling Incident":

What a long and dreadful night of terror it must have been to that poor girl, the flames of her father's house shining on her, the bodies of her mother and family lying about, and not knowing whether each moment might not bring back the savages to complete their work!⁷⁶

The key entry point is the word 'savage'. It is a term Power used sparingly. More common are the words 'native', 'the Maori' or 'Maories'; 'anthromorphage' is used twice. The word 'savage' first appears in his introduction, used in an ironic sense in a discussion of the Wellington land deal - "...it was not found easy to make *even a savage* comprehend that it was for his advantage that he should be deprived of nine-tenths of his property."⁷⁷

Later noting the death of the chief Mateku, he wrote:

It is a piece of great luck that Mateku has been shot, as he was one of the greatest chiefs and the most famous warrior on the river - one of the old-fashioned, treacherous, man-eating savages.⁷⁸

The complexities of making sweeping judgements about Maori would have been immediately evident to Power that morning in April 1847. The rescue party included twelve Maori from Putiki, two Maori carried the small Gilfillan children on their backs to the Taylor's house, and most dramatically, the Putiki chief, John Williams Hipango, led the party who captured the killers. Power, unlike some of the townspeople, or later writers, did not immediately blame the Putiki Maori for the killings. The plurality of Maori responses to the Gilfillans' death was

⁷⁵ *ibid*, pp. 144 -145.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, p. 89.

⁷⁷ *ibid*, p. xxviii. Power's italics.

⁷⁸ *ibid*, p. 101. Mateku was shot in the conflict that followed in the immediate aftermath of the hanging of the Gilfillan's killers.

evidence enough that the motivation for violence did not correspond with Maoriness. While those Maori who killed the Gilfillans were “savages”, those who accompanied the rescue party were not.

Power’s recognition of plurality of Maori responses to the killings means that the violence of the attack on the Gilfillans is not contained in his account by an idea of the ‘savage’ Maori; indeed, it could be argued that the fact that Power does not attempt to trope the killings in this way is one of the reasons the anecdote remains so resonant for the modern reader. Despite statements elsewhere in *Sketches*, Power doesn’t rely on racist generalisations to tell a meaningful story about the killings. Indeed the lack of an immediate explanation as to why the killings happened is a strong part of what makes his account so arresting. The violence seems senseless, and the innocence of the victims is foregrounded.

The Victims

Tyrone Power never doubted the validity of the imperial project although he may critique it:

It is common jargon to talk of it being ‘the birthright of Englishmen to govern themselves’; it is also the birthright of Englishmen to pay for themselves, particularly when they want to extend their hereditary faculties to the government of others.⁷⁹

But he was supportive of colonisation in New Zealand:

What a glorious and humanising occupation it would be for many of our large men-of-war, now rotting in dock, to carry shiploads of willing labour to a splendid country like this!....A new England would spring up in the Southern Ocean, a source of wealth in time of peace and in war a strong son to assist. The cool breezes, invigorating climate, and the agricultural pursuits of the children of the soil will produce a race more resembling their progenitors than any of our colonies.⁸⁰

As settlers, the Gillfillans represented the ideal imperial figure, they were the “shiploads of willing labour” that would transform the country. In Wanganui they strongly contrasted with the “set of riff-raff, escaped convicts, vendors of whiskey and rum, and peddling dealers with Maoris”⁸¹ that made up the majority of the town. The attack and murder is thereby symbolic of an attack on the most positive aspect of the process of imperialism.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 157.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 193-4. But the enthusiasm for Empire does not extend to Wanganui itself. Even before the Gilfillan killings, and the subsequent conflict, he called it one of the “...unwholesome, mushroom settlements engendered by the New Zealand Company for the purpose of removing to a distance a portion of the clamorous scrip-holders, who, on arriving from England, looked and looked in vain, for their land.” (p. 81.)

⁸¹ *ibid.* p. 97.

The innocence of the Gilfillans is heightened by their gender and age. The innocence of women and children is an extremely strong narrative, one so strong that it still operates forcefully in the present day. Doubts about the validity of the colonising project, and more specific doubts about the Wanganui settlement, mean it is hard in the present day to be as sympathetic to settlers on Maori land as Power, but the narrative of the innocence of women and children is still affecting. Men are still overwhelmingly the violent members in our society and consequently are more likely to be the object of justified violence. The idea of bludgeoning a four-year-old to death is always abhorrent.

An illustration of the relative emotional effect of different deaths comes in Power's later description of the killing of a soldier. It is notably less resonant than the death of the Gilfillans:

The only damage we have received yet, was the murder of one of the soldiers. He was tomahawked within a quarter of a mile of the stockade, while absent, without leave, in quest of stray fowls. The body was brought in yesterday by some friendly natives dreadfully mangled.⁸²

The death of the soldier is contained by the meta-narrative of duty and conflict which inures the reader to the expectation of casualties in war.

In contrast, the innocence of the Gilfillans creates a greater empathy. It is a tragic event, in the way that the death of the soldier is not. Aristotle's idea of tragedy centred on the *catharsis* of emotions, the fact that by "...re-casting suffering in a hypothetical form it releases our emotions from immediate practical responsibility and by rendering it majestic permits actual enjoyment."⁸³ Tragedy in this sense is, today, rarely encountered in popular media. Catharsis, or the 'proper pleasure' of Tragedy, is replaced by a voyeuristic pleasure of viewing violence. I would argue, however, that the 'proper pleasure' of tragedy is a strong part of the resonance of the Gilfillan killings. The innocence of the Gilfillans, and the 'touch of the real' allowed by a historical, as opposed to a fictional narrative, creates a strong aesthetic effect. The disjunction of time, rather than fictive form, allows us to in some way 'enjoy' it.

The innocence of the Gilfillans as women and children (and, for Power, as ideal imperial agents) is the key to the marginality of the Gilfillan anecdote. Despite the very different attitudes between the present and Power's time in regard to the imperial project, the violence rendered on the body of children breaks both colonial and anti-colonial meta-narratives. The complex nature of the contact zone and the varying and competing narratives of Maoriness, only compound this sense of marginality. But there is something more in Power's story of the

⁸² Power, p. 98.

⁸³ A.D Nuttal, *Why does tragedy give pleasure?* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 85.

Gilfillans than just a story that doesn't quite make sense. The introduction of the idea of a genre (tragedy) highlights the fact there is an aesthetic component to any act of writing and representation. I want to turn now to how the aesthetic component of the Gilfillan anecdote both makes the text resonant and can offer better access to the past.

Aestheticised texts

The most vivid paragraph in Power's text describes the discovery of the 15 year old Mary Gilfillan:

On entering the cowshed I was horror-struck by the most dreadful sight my eyes ever beheld. There sat a young girl of about seventeen, a deep tomahawk wound in her forehead, and her fair hair dabbled with blood which flowed even on the poor babe she held in her arms. I shall never forget the fixed look of mute despair depicted on her countenance, while the poor child smiled and crowed with delight through the mask of blood that covered her face.⁸⁴

"Mute despair", "crowed", "mask of blood", "fair hair dabbled with blood" are all phrases that are strongly imagistic. Compare this to the more 'factual' account in the *Wellington Independent*:

In the stockyard they found the third-eldest daughter sitting upright in a state of insensibility, with a dreadful wound in her face, and the little baby about three months old, alive, unhurt in her lap.⁸⁵

Both accounts tell the 'facts' of the situation, and the images of a wounded girl and a baby are powerful even when unadorned. However, the vividness of the Power's description aids the act of imaginative empathy with the past. The aesthetic of his text seems demonstrably more powerful, and arguably gives a greater sense of being there.

In his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History",⁸⁶ Michel Foucault makes a distinction between what he calls "enlightenment histories" - histories that claim to narrate from a objective standpoint events in which the narrator is not complicit - and "effective" histories which are situated first and foremost in the body, and the genealogy of events and power relations that come from the body.

The idea of "effective histories" helps explain why symbols that start at the level of the body are so strong - sex and violence are the two most obvious examples (clothing, illness and

⁸⁴ Power, p. 89.

⁸⁵ *Wellington Independent*, April 28th 1847.

⁸⁶ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews*, Donald F Bouchard, ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1977, pp. 139-164, esp. p.152 ff.

work are a few examples of others.) It can also explain the aesthetic effect of Power's text. Taking just one description and deconstructing it, provides immediate insight.

The sentence "...we came suddenly on a group of mangled corpses, the last that of the poor mother; her head almost cut to pieces with a heavy wood axe...."⁸⁷ is full of strong images. The qualifying and amplifying phrases - "mangled", "cut to pieces", "heavy" - are words of power and damage. They are also phrases that, like all words and meanings, are complex, contingent and always changing. One sign has multiple signifiers.

The word "mother" for instance is heavily freighted with semiotic meaning - caring, loving, domineering, life-giving, are just a few examples. Above all, I would suggest that the idea of mother is an innocent, caring figure.

The word "head" is also symbolically dense. The head is home to the face, the space of recognition and emotion. It holds the brain, the central point of consciousness and experience. Wounds to different parts of the body mean different things. Wounds to the heart, hands, genitals and face are very different to wounds to the legs, arms and shoulders. This is because each of these parts is arguably a locus for various "effective histories" of self - gender and sexuality, dexterity, creativity among many others. These are histories that start at the body, and which are ruptured by wounding.

The "axe" is an image of damage. It is used for cutting, splitting, rendering, but usually only upon inanimate objects. A "heavy axe" is an amplified axe. If the anecdote had said 'cut to pieces with *light* wood axe' it may not have made a difference to the wounds, but there is a discernible difference in effect on us as witnesses.

When the heavy axe, the renderer, the splitter of inanimate things, meets a mother's head/face, then an image of caring and love is literally ruptured. The effective history which starts at her face is radically changed. Words and symbols of violence are narrative breakers. A story becomes a strange and marginal, a transformation amplified by the fact that the narrative of damage is outside more usual narratives of killing. Compare, for instance, with the phrase: 'a sword thrust to the heart'; a sword is meant to kill; a thrust to the heart is 'clean'. By contrast the axe into the head is profoundly 'dirty'.

This is only one reading, and like all readings it is reflexive and contingent; but at least to some extent it reveals a possible explanation for the strength of the images of the Gilfillan killings. I have no desire to deconstruct this whole passage. But, in regard to the trope of the innocence of the Gilfillans, there could be no stronger or more complex image than a baby

⁸⁷ Power, p. 88.

covered with a mask of blood. The resonance and marginality of the violence in the Gilfillan anecdote becomes self-evident; but can this symbolic power provide more than just an aesthetic thrill? Can the marginal anecdote actually offer greater access to the past?

Metaphors that Matter

On Christmas Day 1846 Tyrone Power wrote

...there is such an utter incongruity in the season: the open doors and windows, the garish brilliancy of the summer sun, the trees and flowers in full blossom, the singing of the birds, and the warm atmosphere seem a mockery of Christmas, - of the old Father Christmas of our youthful reminiscences with his goodly crown of green holly and mistletoe, and his meagre helpmate, Jack Frost, at his side. After all "*coelum non animus mutant qui trans mare currant*;" and I find my heart yearns sadly for things as they were, and cares not for them as they are....In pensive mood I managed to wander away o'er hill and dale, "chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancy"(the poet must have been thinking of manglewurzels), till I found myself too late for dinner; so I had the felicity of eating my Christmas dinner alone - the first time in all my wanderings that such a calamity has befallen me!⁸⁸

The most striking quality of *Sketches of New Zealand* is that it is filled with personal insights and impressions which give a feel for Tyrone Power as a person, as well as a historical figure. There is a sense of sharing his actual thoughts in these private moments. He wrote, as I have said, in a vivid and charming manner. Moreover, he had a real eye for anecdote and a flair for description. The elderly Te Rauparaha, captured by Sir George Grey and held captive on the gunboat *Calliope* was described as follows:

The general expression of his features is placid and thoughtful, but with the least excitement, they assume a malignant, wolfish expression; his small snaky eyes gleam, and his thin lips curl down, showing long yellow fangs that one might suppose belong to a vampire or a wehr-wolf.⁸⁹

He also has a distinct sense of humour. An anecdote headed "Characteristics of well-bred pigs" is principally about the best method of persuading the "Maori pig" into a canoe:

On one occasion, I was standing on the bank of the river, watching a Maori taking across a large pig in a very small canoe, and calculating the probability of his not getting safely to the opposite bank with his cargo. He accomplished half the distance in safety when he was perceived by a mischievous subaltern, who immediately called out "Puaka, Puaka". The pig, hearing itself called in its own language, and perhaps at a moment when it was indulging in dreams of dinner, incautiously started up; and, in one moment, man, pig and canoe were upset into the stream and had to make the best

⁸⁸ *ibid*, pp. 56-57.

⁸⁹ *ibid*, pp. 51-52. This comment has to be contextualised in the sense that it comes under a page heading of "Two Great men" and describes both Te Rauparaha and Te Rangihaeata.

of their way to the shore by swimming, amidst shouts of laughter from the natives, who had seen the whole proceeding, and appeared to enjoy the joke exceedingly.⁹⁰

I find the ‘characteristics of well bred pigs’ funny. Tyrone Power found it funny, the ‘mischievous subaltern’ and the ‘natives’ on the bank definitely did so.

On first impression this may not seem that important. But actually it is quite remarkable. It is difficult enough to claim that the meaning of a single word stays stable over time, but in the “characteristic of well bred pigs” not only do the words that make the narrative remain stable,⁹¹ but the far more complicated aesthetic of humour remains stable too. Tyrone Power has seen something that makes him laugh; he attempts to represent that humorous moment in text; the representation still has the ability to create laughter. Unless what made Power laugh is totally different than what creates laughter in the present, it can legitimately be claimed that the aesthetic of the text gives a greater access to lived experience.

Stephen Greenblatt has written on this same phenomenon but with specific regard to Shakespeare rather than pigs. He uses the concept of social energy which:

...is associated with repeatable forms of pleasure and interest, with the capacity to arouse disquiet, pain, fear, the beating of the heart, pity, laughter, tension, relief, wonder.⁹²

Greenblatt claims for Shakespeare an almost unparalleled continual aesthetic power (that is ‘social energy’), through radically different historical eras. Despite a process of “astructured negotiation and exchange”⁹³ that continually refigures any text, Shakespeare’s writing retains resonance for modern audiences. Like the laughter at the pig upturning the canoe, the tragedies of Elizabethan England are still tragedies today. To some this may point towards the universality of Shakespeare, but a more considered, but hardly less remarkable view is to attest that in our decoding of Shakespeare, or indeed of any text, sometimes we may be decoding them in the same way as other actors in past historical contexts. There is a continuity, and even if we can never access the same emotions that made the groundlings in the front row laugh uproariously at jokes (if they did), we are accessing, or at least moving towards ‘something’.

To put this more tightly, certain textual and cultural artefacts have a resonance or a “social energy”, and the continuation of this social energy, despite the constant process of rereading

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 69.

⁹¹ ‘Native’ however, has obvious pejorative connotations in the modern day.

⁹² Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1988, 1992 ed. p. 6.

⁹³ *ibid.*

and rewriting we put a textual artefact through, leaves lines of continuity⁹⁴ that allow, through a process of shared aesthetic understanding, access to, and empathy with the lived experience of the past.

This means that if symbols make sense, if metaphors seem to matter, if the image of mask of blood on the baby seems to move us as it did Tyrone Power, then we have some link with him over and above his text. Moreover, if claims can be made about the continuity of our understanding and empathy with the symbolic effect of violence, claims can perhaps always be made about how these symbolic forms limit the *representation* of violence. If a text can be resonant, can reach out and affect the process of decoding, shaping us with social energy, can we not also make this claim about the event itself? After all, an event is a cultural object entangled in ways of seeing and understanding in the same way as a text. If a claim could be made that Powers description of the violence of the Gillifan killings deals with symbols and narratives so powerful that they limit his own powers of representation, and it could be established that despite the constant process of rereading and rewriting we put a textual artefact through, we are left with an aesthetic and emotional response that is limited by these *same* symbols and narratives then we really have better access to the past.

⁹⁴ These could also be conceived as Bakhtin's centripetal forces.

Fragments Come Together to Form Larger Fragments

This chapter is about how a historical event becomes a cultural object; articulated through the interweaving of narratives, constantly renegotiated and re-narrated, and situated in the midst of multiple enculturated ways of saying and understanding. It is about accessing the past through multiple voices from the past, through competing texts and fragments, which say as much about the moment of writing as about the moment of happening.

Thinking about an event as an object is an artificial distinction - it is a tool for thinking with. No event can really be separated from any other; but as cultural object, the event is made distinct, prefaced by the definite article, it becomes 'the Gilfillan killings'. Like any act of narration, thinking about an event as a cultural object is an act of taking an object from the context that surrounds it, and to a certain extent places it in another.

This chapter reflects the arbitrary nature of dealing with a cultural object and approaches the Gilfillan incident in a deliberately fragmentary way. It emphasises that history is not a tidy narrative, and although emploting it as such is a powerful sense-making tool, it also overwrites the way in which an event from the past can find expression through different texts, and can be approached in different ways.

The six fragments of the Gilfillan killings which comprise this chapter are not entirely separate. An event can only exist as a cultural object, as an event per se, if a degree of homogeneity exists about what that event is. The various narratives of the killing of the Gilfillan family interweave and resonate in ways that are sometimes different and sometimes similar. Presenting these 'performances' of the Gilfillan killings in a deliberately fragmentary way is an attempt to break free from the imposition of "a single voice on a line". This is not to say that broad statements of how events happened in a more generalised sense are not useful tools, ways of saying and understanding the larger processes in history (in the sense that a historical process represents a number of changes that happen to a group of people which to a greater or lesser degree can be regarded as homogenous, even though the individuals involved may experience them in very different ways), but that ultimately the best that can be achieved in relation to the historical past is to grasp some fragments of the lived experience and put them together to make larger fragments.



Illustration II. The site of the Gillfillan Killings, 2003
The house was situated by the tree in the centre of the photos.
The Author is in the foreground of the lower photo

Fragment One - The Mataraua Valley

The Mataraua Valley⁹⁵ looks like many others in the hill country around Wanganui. Steep-sided hills are covered in scrubby trees, and on the day I visited, the dry grass was tinged green after the first rains of a long dry summer. The centre of the valley is green; a sluggish stream, nearly a ditch, winds through the middle of the fenced paddocks. It is a very domesticated scene, only the outlines of the rugged country of the Whanganui National Park in the distance add any sense of wildness.

The spot where the Gilfillan house stood is in a small hollow at the base of a ridge overlooking the valley. An oak tree and a “historic places” sign mark the spot where the house stood. It was here that the bodies of Mrs. Gilfillan,⁹⁶ Eliza, fourteen years old, and Adam, three and a half, were found “mangled”.⁹⁷ The body of ten-year-old Jack, struck down while trying to escape, was found half way up one of the hills directly above the house. The hills are steep and difficult to run up quickly.

On a grey day the site of the killings feels unsettling. It is disconcerting to stand in the place where the Gilfillans must have been killed. Another visitor, 150 years earlier, felt a similar emotion. Richard Taylor made a day trip to ruins of the Gilfillan house on January 13th 1848. He wrote in his journal:

I saw the spots where the different bodies of the poor victims were found, a site which called up mournful recollections. Poor things, their race is done; their dying cries no longer are heard; the breeze which whistled by seemed to have a solemn sound.⁹⁸

The sense of unease increases walking up the ridge behind the house. The valley looks more picturesque and balanced than from below. Power’s words resonate:

...we continued our journey at a run, anxious to arrive as quickly as possible, and soon reached the brow of a hill commanding the valley of Matarawa, in the centre of which was poor Gilfillan’s farm, now a heap of smoking ruins.

A more beautiful spot I never saw in my life, and it was difficult to conceive it could have been the scene of the such atrocities.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ It is called the Matarawa valley in most sources, and in most quotes in this text. Downes and Young also use the actual Maori name of Mataraua.

⁹⁶ Mrs. Gilfillan full name was also Mary, the same as her step-daughter (and second cousin) who was found wounded in the stockyards. The elder Mary is usually Mrs. Gilfillan in the sources, and I have maintained that practice in order to differentiate between the two women.

⁹⁷ W. J. T. Power, *Sketches in New Zealand with Pen and Pencil, From a Journal Kept in that Country from July 1846 to June 1848*, London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1849, p. 88.

⁹⁸ Richard Taylor, Journals, Jan 13th 1848, vol. 5., mss., typescript, Alexander Turnbull Library, p. 328.

⁹⁹ Power, p. 88.

Above the ridge is a flat, paddock covered plateau, running all the way to Wanganui. The rescue party came this way, up a narrow path over what is now called Durie Hill. The school teacher William Robinson, also in the party, wrote in his diary:

The country looked beautiful, the road leading over fine level tableland, and the valleys sending up quite a hot mist like steam....In a short time we arrived at the house, situated in a most beautiful valley.¹⁰⁰

It is tempting to speculate that the beauty that both Power and Robinson noted came from the way the valley looks from this height - framed by steep-sided hills, backgrounded by hills in the distance, and foregrounded by the drama of the smouldering house, it accords strongly with 19th century ideas of the picturesque. A stronger argument however, is that the beauty of the Mataraua valley on a lovely autumn day, stayed in the memory as a dramatic counterpoint to the emotional dislocation of finding the bodies. Tragedy in paradise is after all a persistent trope in western culture, and one that still affects the viewer today. The sense of peace, and the easy flow of the valley away from the eye, clashes with the images of violence brought to the surface through the historical accounts. There is a disparity between place and text.

The 'sense' of the past that I felt, the beauty that Power and Robinson wrote about, and Taylor's feeling of mourning, are, despite their differences in tone, part of the same process. Memory, landscape and history are entangled. The individual constructs place through a cultural lens of memory which imposes lived events over landscape.

That the past can be accessed through place is a widely accepted idea. Any holy place or pilgrimage centre is made that way by a cultural way of thinking that entangles landscape and history. To the pilgrim, the events of the past have left a palpable resonance in a specific place - a resonance so strong that it can even be physically purifying and healing. In our own culture thousands of young New Zealanders and Australian backpackers have gone to Galipolli with an ill-defined urge to see the steep, sunbitten, dusty cliffs and neatly kept graveyards which have such a special place in our national consciousness. In Maori concepts of Wahi Tapu, Tu Rangawaewawae, and Taniwha there is implicit acceptance that place exists above and through the temporal passage of time. As the historian Simon Schama wrote in *Landscape and Memory*: "Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood, water and rock."¹⁰¹

In the Mataraua Valley the projections of culture onto the landscape have changed over time. The landscape is a text through which very different acts of memory and imagination have been mediated. In one sense they are all fictive, 'constructs of the imagination', in another

¹⁰⁰ T.W. Downes, *Old Whanganui*, Hawera: W. A. Parkinson, 1915. p. 276.

¹⁰¹ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, London: Fontana Press, 1995, p. 61.

they are acts of empathy with the lived experience of others in the past. The landscape becomes part of the process of thinking about the past; we read 'through' the text of the landscape to attempt to reach the external referent of lived experience.

At best this is tangential process. We rely on a vague 'sense' of history that may have little reference to actual events. It is often hard to find traces of past lives, and to bring them into being we are forced to recount other narrations, textual and oral, and layer them over the narrative of the landscape itself. To read the text of landscape is to rewrite it. Even if this the text is dense and layered, where humans have lived for thousands of years, it still requires our knowledge of stories and histories, however fragmentary or 'mythical', to make place more vivid and powerful (but not necessarily historically accurate).

In the Mataraua Vally the association between past and place has been narrated principally in terms of remembrance. Three acres around the site of the homestead were laid aside as a reserve in 1923. The same impulse led the local Historic Places Trust to lead an archaeological dig in the 1960s, finding a succession of small fragments of the Gilfillan's lives and delineating the limits of the Gilfillan house. The dig highlights how place can become entangled in historical narratives. The small objects retrieved from the site were unremarkable fragments of early colonial life. Digging up the foundations of the Gilfillan house could give no evidence that could improve understanding of the killings themselves, but somehow for the members of the Wanganui Historic Places Trust, a fragment of that past still remained in the Mataraua valley, and could be retrieved by the application of archaeological method. The detailed records of the dig now sit in the Gilfillan file in the Wanganui regional museum, notably lacking in resonance compared to the texts and photos beside them, testament to the perceived effect of place, if not to the success of the Historic Places Trust.

A far more powerful access point to the history of the Mataraua valley is a sketch done by John Gilfillan himself, which serves as the frontispiece to Tyrone Power's book. Gilfillan was a notable early colonial artist. Warranting a mention in any of the general surveys of New Zealand painting, in reality he was hardly a 'New Zealand' artist at all. After a career in the navy, he had spent some years as Drawing and Painting Master in Glasgow, before emigrating to Wellington in 1841, aged 48. Moving to Wanganui, he took up land in the Mataraua valley, the most remote 'outsetter' of the new settlement. He moved to Melbourne a few months after the killings, never returning to New Zealand.

As an artist he is associated mainly with a series of sketches, a lithograph of *The Interior of a Maori pa*, probably Putikiwaranui, and a painting completed in Victoria in 1853 called *A*

Native Council of War in which 'savage' Maori leap around in the midst of romanticised classic landscape of misty mountains suffused with a mythical golden light. It would seem he was reasonably generous with his work. Colonel (later General) Laye, the head of the Rutland regiment, wrote to a colleague that he possessed a sketch which Gilfillan had donated to the soldiers. Tyrone Power specifically thanked Gilfillan for the gift of sketches in his preface.¹⁰²

The frontispiece of *Sketches in New Zealand* is one of these drawings. It is a picture of the Mataraua valley drawn from a spur above the house. Excepting the stockyard above the house in the right middle-ground (in which Mary Gilfillan was found with the baby in her arms), and the modern farm buildings, relatively little seems to have changed in 150 years. The knoll in the centre of the valley seems less conspicuous, and the stream has been turned into a drainage ditch, nonetheless the similarity is enough to provide a jolt of recognition. Unlike the recognition which comes from the textual accounts, relying on an act of imagination to link place and narrative, the picture is a more direct medium. The landscape is almost the same as that which Gilfillan saw.

However despite its more direct feel, the sketch, like any text, is entangled in context. The title *Matarawa, The Farm of Mr. Gilfillan*, is a key entry point into a new colonialising discourse centred on the valley. The cultural object that was the Mataraua valley, named by Maori and part of a Maori world, has become in part defined by its ability to be painted as 'belonging to the Gilfillans.' The idea of ownership and imperial appropriation is implicit in the title, and indeed in the view of the invisible painter, who, despite the presence of Maori, is involved in a process of representing space as possessed and domesticated - the smoke from the homestead curling into the air, and 'friendly' Maori providing exotic local colour in the foreground.

The colonised Mataraua valley is, however, not the principal feature of the sketch for a modern viewer. The domestication, peacefulness, and presence of the Maori are all radically refigured by the knowledge of what is to happen there. The rural idyll in Gilfillan's painting has a *fin de siècle* quality. The man sitting behind the easel will get a tomahawk in his neck, the house will burn down, and the 'friendly' Maori turn into the warlike 'savage' depicted in his later work. The violence of the killings makes the unremarkable strange.

¹⁰² Power, pp. vii-viii., "The Sketches by Mr. Dillon Bell and Mr. Gilfillan were given me in New Zealand, at a period when I anticipated, as little as they could have done, that they would be submitted to the public: and I should hesitate in making use of them for such a purpose, were I not sure I can depend of their kindness, to pardon me for trespassing on the ample store of interesting subjects they have collected."

Holding up Gilfillan's sketch in the hand while standing in front of the view that he painted so many years before, is a way of bringing a little bit of that strangeness into the real experienced world, to place another layer of meaning across the landscape. As with the textual narrations of Power and Robinson in the rescue party, the sketch becomes part of the context in which the act of seeing the Mataraua valley is entangled. But without these overlaid narrations, the valley becomes as any other around Wanganui. The reserve is now indistinguishable from the farm around it, and the only real hint of a violent past is in the text of a rarely read blue Historic Places sign:

At this site, the home of John Gilfillan, settler and artist, was attacked by a party of Maori youths in April 1847. Mrs. Gilfillan and three children were killed and another daughter and grandson died later

Fragment Two - Explanations and Violence Containers

In the previous chapter I introduced the idea of narratives acting as containers of violence; how certain kinds of narratives can limit and 'demarginalise' the disturbing nature of the events that in other contexts are both difficult to deal with and make sense of. In the 150 years since the Gilfillan incident, two dominant explanations have been used as a way to contain the violence which makes an initial encounter with the killings so disturbing. The first focuses on utu as a primary cause; a way of making sense of the killings that ties in with broader conceptions of Maori and Maori culture as innately 'savage'. The second narrates the killings as only a minor event in the past, a small detour on the road to progress and civilisation. In this second emplotment the containment of the violence is also achieved by conceptualising the past as 'savage' and remote. Both emplotments elide the complexity of the causes of the killings, and in particular ignore any question of legitimate Maori grievance. Both narratives also overwrite the fact that unprovoked killing of Europeans by Maori, particularly women and children, was extremely rare. A contemporary comment on the Gilfillans from Felton Mathew, the first surveyor-general of New Zealand, is a reflection of the effect the killings had on European communities around the country: "...so atrocious and cold-blooded an act, and so opposed to everything we had hitherto known of the native character, exacted general alarm and horror."¹⁰³

The background to the Gilfillan killings was complex. The historian Ian Wards has written the most comprehensive account of this period. Although published in 1967, *Shadow of the*

¹⁰³ James Rutherford, ed., *The Journals of Felton Mathew. First surveyor-general of NZ and his wife 1840-47*, Auckland: Reed, 1940, p. 234.

*Land*¹⁰⁴ provides an unmatched engagement with the sources and the complexities of the period. Wards places the killings of the Gilfillans in a much broader context, emphasising the relationship between the upriver chiefs Te Mamaku, Nga Para and Te Maketu with the Te Rangihaeata's conflict in Wellington. He makes particular note of the hanging of a close relative of Mamaku, Te Wareaitu, also known as Martin Luther, in Paremata in September 1846 on dubious charges of "open rebellion".¹⁰⁵ Wards meticulously details the growing discontent of some Wanganui Maori, and the increasing split between those who supported the Europeans and those who did not. The arrival of soldiers was a key factor, and he stresses that most hostility was focused on the government and soldiers, not at Europeans in general. In regard to the wounding of Nga Rangi, which until the present day has usually been seen as the principal cause of the killings, he writes:

The incident was important only in that it provided a pretext for what followed, and it is safe to assume that in its absence something would have done equally well while troops remained in Wanganui.¹⁰⁶

An important source for Wards is Richard Taylor, who because of his intimate involvement with local Maori on the river, had a unique credibility. Living at Putiki, he was widely travelled throughout the river region, and had a wide knowledge of Maori politics and custom. He wrote *Te Ika a Maui - New Zealand and Its Inhabitants*, in 1855.¹⁰⁷ Although not in Wanganui at the time of the killings, or during the subsequent court-martial and hangings,¹⁰⁸ he was still well informed about the course of events. The two uninjured Gilfillan children, John and Sarah, both stayed in his house in the immediate aftermath of the killings. The teacher at Putiki, William Robinson, was intimately involved in trial proceedings, and, with the visiting Presbyterian Minister John Inglis, spent some hours with the prisoners before their execution, in an attempt to extract arepentance.¹⁰⁹ Moreover the leader of the Maori who captured the murderers, John Williams Hipango, was also the head catchetist at Putiki, and had a strong relationship with Taylor. When Taylor wrote about the capture of the killers in his journal, it is at a level of detail which could only have been received from conversation

¹⁰⁴ Ian Wards, *The Shadow of the Land: a Study of British Policy and Racial Conflict in New Zealand 1832-1852*, Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, Dept. of Internal Affairs, 1968.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 330.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Richard Taylor, *Te Ika a Maui, or, New Zealand and Its Inhabitants: Illustrating the Origin, Manners, Customs, Mythology, Religion, Rites, Songs, Proverbs, Fables, and Language of the Natives: Together with the Geology, Natural History, Productions, and Climate of the Country, its State as Regards Christianity, Sketches of the Principal Chiefs, and their Present Position: with a Map and Numerous Illustrations*, London: Wertheim and Macintosh, 1855.

¹⁰⁸ Taylor arrived back with Governor Grey on May 24th.

¹⁰⁹ Downes, p. 284, Robinson notes sadly that the prisoners were not in the least repentent, nonetheless he left a Maori New Testament with them.

with the participants - probably with Hipango himself. The journal entry indicates that Taylor would have heard indirectly the story of killers themselves:

....the Putiki natives jumped up and secured 4 of the murderers one jumped into the water but was overtaken and brought back in the scuffle but knowing the man however both canoes upset, but they returned with all their prisoners safe to Parakino. There John Williams had them up in a class and catechised them as to their object in committing the murders and as to their instigators also who were engaged and who not.¹¹⁰

Taylor also had (at least)¹¹¹ one encounter with Rangirirau, the sole killer who escaped capture. He first met him some six months after the murders at an upriver pa. Taylor wrote "...he was a good looking fellow of about 18, but now he is so altered, he has Satan's stamp on him."¹¹² Taylor's access to Maori stories give his account additional credibility. If any European knew the true motivation for the killings, it was Taylor.

In his Journal for 10 June 1847 Taylor, after narrating John Williams' account of the capture of the killers, wrote: "These murders were evidently committed as a declaration of war."¹¹³

In *Te Ika a Maui* published nine years later in 1856 he wrote:

A Chief had been nearly killed by the carelessness of a young midshipman, whose pistol by some means went off; when another heathen and hostile Chief immediately went and murdered the family already alluded to, in order to bring the Christian natives in collision with the military.¹¹⁴

At the very least, a consideration of Wards' and Taylor's texts leads to the conclusion that the killings were situated in terms of the broader relationship between upriver Maori and the European settlement, and tensions between Maori and Europeans in the lower half of the North island more generally. Any explanation would need to include reference to this broader context, including the legitimacy of the colonial project in general and the New Zealand Company settlement in Wanganui in particular. Also, to quote Wards again, there should be cognisance that: "If any one factor had been established it was surely that none of the Maori tribes concerned began fighting without very serious consideration."¹¹⁵ The Gilfillan killings was an extreme act; to say this is not to justify the brutal killing of children, but simply to note that it was an exception. Some Maori groups were strongly aggrieved, and a smaller group of those Maori responded in an extreme way. It was not an accident, nor was it representative of

¹¹⁰ Taylor, Journals, Vol. 5., p. 83.

¹¹¹ According to Downes the death of Rangiraua is mentioned in *Te Ika a Maui*. But it was not in the copy that I have used (1st ed.). Downes's quoted page number is also strangely out by 200 pages.

¹¹² *ibid*, Journals, vol. 5., p. 146.

¹¹³ *ibid*, Journals, vol. 5., p. 84.

¹¹⁴ Taylor, *Te Ika a Maui*..., p. 368.

¹¹⁵ Wards, p. 301.

Maori in general, or even of Maori on the river. Members of Ngati Ruaka committed the killings and were hung, and at least some of those who caught them were Ngati Ruaka as well.

These complexities have not concerned most European narrators. From the very first, the killings have been blamed on what Power called “an unlucky incident”¹¹⁶ when, a few days before the attack on the Gilfillans, a midshipman named Crozier apparently accidentally shot a Maori by the name of Hapurona Nga-Rangi in the face. Immediately the Maori at Putiki called for Crozier to be held hostage as *utu*, “promising no harm should come to him unless their friend died.”¹¹⁷ The local Doctor, Peter Wilson, writing in the *Wellington Independent* described the situation from a settler point of view:

On Friday forenoon, the 16th ult., the natives hereabouts were thrown into great excitement on hearing that one of their people had been shot by a Pakeha (white man). On enquiry, it appeared that Nga Rangi, a minor chief, had been working for the young naval officer attached to the gun-boat stationed here under the command of Lieutenant Holmes, and was within the apartment of the officer receiving his wages, when a loaded pistol, incautiously held by him, went off and severely wounded Nga Rangi. It was in vain to represent to the speedily assembled natives that it was an accident - their passions were aroused and they called loudly for bloody *utu* (payment). The young officer was immediately placed under restraint, and everything else was said and done which seemed calculated to allay the excitement, but their chief wish to obtain possession of the officer, and to take him as a responsible hostage to Putiki.....The Maoris, who, in the first instance, had struck from all work, now returned to their usual employments, and we had every hope that no ill consequences would result from the untoward affair.

On Sunday evening, the 18th ult., we were all greatly disturbed by the intelligence that Mr Gilfillan, our most remote out-settler, had arrived in town, from his farm, severely wounded....¹¹⁸

That the killings were committed immediately in the aftermath of the shooting of Nga-Rangi (who rapidly recovered) meant that suspicion fell on Putiki Maori. William Robinson wrote in his journal:

G. King and all the natives are much cast down. The thoughts which they had for poor Hapurona have given way to this. They dare not go to the settlement for fear they should be insulted and told that they were the instigators of it, and as I have been told they were so, I do not wonder at this feeling among the natives.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Power, p. 84:

An unlucky incident happened here this morning (April 14th), that, in the present juncture, may have a bad effect. A young midshipman of the *Calliope*, who is attached to the gunboat, was paying one of the Putiki natives for some work done in thatching his hut, when a pistol he had in his hand exploded, wounding the native in the head.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 85.

¹¹⁸ *Wellington Independent*, May 12, 1847.

¹¹⁹ Downes, p. 27., George King was the pre-eminent chief at Putiki.

The fear that they would be blamed for the killings was the principal reason that Putiki Maori so quickly launched a canoe to capture the killers. Indeed, there are suggestions in the sources that one of the motivations for the killings was to cause this tension between the township and Putiki. Power wrote:

On our return I noticed that scraps of clothing and small articles taken from the house had been dropped at every few hundred yards; and as this path led to Putiki Pa, it convinced me that it had not been done by any of their people, but had been intended to direct suspicion to them.¹²⁰

The wounding of Hapurona provided an opportunity for upriver Maori¹²¹ to create dissension between the Europeans and Putiki. This is not to rule out the idea of utu as a catalyst. Robinson visited the killers after the capture and wrote in his diary:

We had a long talk with them, in which they told us it was Te Hoko, a chief of Patiarero, who sent them to kill some Europeans as a payment for the man who had been shot by the midshipman.

Downes in *Old Whanganui* mentions that the killers were related to Nga Rangi.¹²² But Taylor also notes that Taka, the eldest of the killers at 22, was the grandson of Nga Para, one of the most vehemently anti-European chiefs on the river.¹²³ The wounding of Nga Rangi is important in the story of the Gilfillan killings, but with Power, Taylor and Wards, I would see utu as a catalyst for the killings, but for which the real explanation is situated in the resistance to colonisation by upriver Maori. Yet in the historiography of Wanganui, this more broad based and complex view is seldom reflected.

Here are three accounts of the killings:

The Wanganui Story published by M.J.G. Smart and A.P. Bates in 1972:

Too much emphasis should not be placed on this affair, for it was but one incident in the first few troublesome years of the settlement of this district. The Maoris had for generations been a primitive race, and it could not be expected that a few short years of European civilisation could have a marked effect of their way of thinking.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Power, p. 90.

¹²¹ When I use the phrase “upriver Maori”, I am not trying to suggest that all Maori who lived up the river were anti-European. There was, for instance, another Christian Pa at Jerusalem, who were supportive of Europeans. “Upriver Maori” is merely a phrase I am using to differentiate Maori hostile to the Government from the Maori at Putiki (with whom, however, a number in the taua were in any case related, see Taylor, *Journals*, vol. 5 p. 86.)

¹²² Downes, p. 268. I have, however, been unable to find mention of this elsewhere in the sources.

¹²³ Taylor, *Journals*, vol. 5., p. 84.

¹²⁴ Smart, M.J.G, and, Bates, A.P, *The Wanganui Story*, Wanganui:Wanganui Newspapers, 1972, p. 73

New Tales of Old Whanganui by Flora Spurdle published in 1959:

Though the wound was not serious and was being cared for, Maori custom demanded that the culprit be handed over to them for punishment. Of course, this was not done, and none of the settlers dreamed that a small party had left the settlement, determined to take revenge for the insult to their race on any white they could find. We must remember that old Maori custom demanded punishment - if not to the person who did the injury, then to one of his people. So as they could not punish the middy, they set off to find a scapegoat and eventually arrived at the Gilfillan homestead.¹²⁵

Old Whanganui by T.W Downes published in 1915:

It should be mentioned that the prisoners were related to the chief Nga Rangi, and in revenge for this, to us, terrible and cold blooded murder, they were only putting into practice the well known and common custom called *utu*, or blood for blood; and, however dreadful it may seem to us, it was nothing more than justice from their standpoint.¹²⁶

In each account the nature of Maori is considered central to the cause of the killings. Smart and Bates in particular, in trying to de-emphasise the importance of the killings, paint Maori as primitive, without agency in the face of their own savage instincts. It is astounding that in the middle of the bloodiest century in world history, brought on by European 'civilisation', that a historian could so unproblematically state the virtues of colonisation.

The second excerpt, from Spurdle's book, is almost equally astonishing; the complexities of the colonial situation have been completely overwritten. Spurdle's book is very anecdotal in tone, and in sections is virtually a rewrite of Downes's earlier history. She, however, completely ignores Downes's doubts, or at least his more nuanced view, of the contexts surrounding the Gilfillan incident. Spurdle even claims that the killers were from Putiki. Equally essentialising is the focus on *utu*. Spurdle sees all Maori as the same, reacting to homogenous racial forces. The Europeans, on the other hand, are blameless. "Of course" the army refused to hand Crozier over, and the moreover the settlers had "no idea" that the treatment of Nga Rangi could cause tension. Although the European treatment of Crozier wasn't necessarily instrumental in the deaths of the Gilfillans, lack of consideration of another enculturated set of views typifies the response of both the soldiers in 1847 and Spurdle writing over a century later.

Downes's account is slightly different. He attempts a form of cultural relativism - "...it was nothing more than justice from their point of view". Downes is an interesting figure in the history of the river. As a member of the Polynesian Society, speaking Maori and with an

¹²⁵ Spurdle, Flora, *New Stories of Old Whanganui*, Wanganui: Willemsen, 1959, p. 70. Spurdle's style is very anecdotal and never mentions sources.

¹²⁶ Downes p. 268. Note the syntax in Downes is confusing. The "cold blooded murder" refers to the Gilfillans.

intimate knowledge of the river and of Maori living there he could at least be typified as sympathetic to Maori. His book *Old Whanganui* is a treasure trove of sources and references, and he quotes original documents extensively. Despite having read Taylor¹²⁷ he focuses on the demand for utu by Putiki Maori that arose after the wounding of Nga Rangi, rather than a more broad based act of war. He wrote, that although Nga-Rangi recovered a little over night and had “admitted that the shot had been accidentally fired, and that he did not wish to retaliate in any way , and “the Maoris became quiet again, and it was thought that all had blown over...in reality, however the trouble had only commenced....”¹²⁸

Nonetheless, I am unsure about the effect of this relativism. The violence inflicted on the Gilfillans was considerably greater than the injury received by Nga-Rangi. Moreover, the desire of the Putiki Maori for utu was confined to the “holding” of Crozier as insurance until it was sure that Nga-Rangi had survived. George King, the principal chief at Putiki, and a major figure on the river is recorded by William Robinson as being “nearly crying”¹²⁹ when telling the news of the death of the Gilfillans. Putiki Maori did not in any way condone the killings. By arguing for a non-nuanced relativism, Downes is normalising the brutality of the killings in Maori society, rather than in the actions of smaller groups or individuals. I want to discuss this further in regard to the more modern writings of David Young.

The emphasis on the savagery of Maori society as a violence container is implicit in another kind of narrative that has frequently been used to tell the story of the Gilfillan killings. The containment of the violence of the killings under a trope of progress and civilisation is also prominent. This narration of the killings is evident in the first serious European history of the area, *The Early History of Wanganui* published by A.D Willis in 1887. Relying upon a reprint of Peter Wilson’s account published in the *Wellington Independent*, for the details of the killings, Willis adds a brief preface focused on progress:

In 1843 the European population of Wanganui consisted of 132 males; 78 females; total 210. The disturbances following the Gilfillan tragedy reduced these numbers to 110 in 1847, and the settlement for a time seemed fated to collapse; but there were some sturdy pioneers here in those days, and they bravely held on to their holdings, and had the subsequent satisfaction of seeing the settlement take a fresh start and grow into one of the most important districts of the whole colony. All honour to these brave pioneers; they were the true fathers of Wanganui, and deserve to be remembered gratefully by those who came later on and found the way paved for peaceful and profitable settlement.

¹²⁷ Downes, pp. 268-70, mentions *Te Ika a Maui* twice, but strangely does not quote from it, probably because of the accusations Taylor makes about John Gilfillan’s behaviour. I discuss this further in the section ‘The cowardice of Mr. Gilfillan.’

¹²⁸ *ibid*, p. 255.

¹²⁹ *ibid*, p. 274.

By the foregoing it will be seen that any false steps or accident, might at any time produce a catastrophe. Unfortunately an accident to call it by a mild term, did lead to a dreadful slaughter of the wife and several children of Mr Gilfillan, an outsettler.¹³⁰

The idea of “false steps or accident” essentially makes Maori deterministic actors, implying that the act of violence was inherent in Maori, waiting only for an accident to become manifest. The settlers in contrast, far from being the root cause of the trouble, are guiltless and indeed brave.

Eighty years later nothing had changed. An article published in the *Wanganui Herald* written by M.J.G. Smart to mark the placement of the Historic Places Trust sign at the Mataraua site states this clearly. Firstly using the same phrase as in his book ten years later: “Too much emphasis should not be placed on this affair, for it was but one incident in the first few troublesome years of the settlement of this district.”¹³¹

He then argues that John Gilfillan should not be thought of as a victim, rather: “...we should think of Gilfillan not as a martyr but as one of the pioneer settlers who resolutely faced the dangers and hardships associated with that period.”¹³²

The “dangers and hardships” means the dangers and hardships for Europeans, not for Maori. A history of Wanganui is explicitly that of 200 settlers, not of the thousands of Maori who lived along the river. The process of land appropriation and the tragic spread of disease in the river basin are not part of any meaningful history at all. At best Maori resistance is troped as “troublesome”.

A similar narrative of a brief hindrance to the inevitable march of progress comes in the book published to celebrate the centenary of the Wanganui Police, *Policing the River District*, published in 1986 and written by Charles E. Spicer.¹³³ In the brief earlier history of Wanganui policing, the Gilfillan incident is mentioned:

Henry Nathan, with such a paucity of criminal cases, must have been bored stiff. He was in fact, so under-employed, that he went into the building supply business, milling and selling timber. He later farmed at Goat Valley on land he had cleared of timber. On 18 April 1847, settlers were shocked by the murders of members of the Gilfillan family at their farm in the Mataraua Valley. The following morning Henry Nathan led the expedition to recover the bodies of Mrs. Gilfillan and her children, Elizabeth, Frank, Adam, and Agnes and grandson Alexander Allison. He later arrested the offenders when they were brought in by the local Maori. After a Court Martial by the Military, some were hanged from a yard arm at the top of the Rutland Stockade for all to view. Henry Nathan later became a member of the Town Board,

¹³⁰ Willis, A. D. *The Early History of Wanganui, and Wanganui in 1856*, Wanganui: Caxton. 1887. Preface to the chapter on the Gilfillans.

¹³¹ *Wanganui Chronicle*, September 2nd, 1961.

¹³² *ibid.*

¹³³ Charles E. Spicer, *Policing the River District 1886 - 1986: The First 100 years of the Wanganui Police*, Wanganui: Wanganui Newspapers Ltd., 1988.

then of the Harbour Board and the Borough Council. He was elected Mayor for a year before retiring in December 1890. He died in Wanganui in November 1893.¹³⁴

The death of the Gilfillans disappears into the town board and the other paraphernalia of settler civil society.

An alternative version of the disappearing significance of the killings are in the narratives that seek to explain the incident as mere accident. L.J.B. Chapple and Cranleigh Barton in *Early Missionary Work in Whanganui (1840-1850)*, wrote: "The perpetrators of this deed were but irresponsible youths between the ages of 14 years and 19 years, and the tragedy was deplored by Europeans and Putiki natives alike."¹³⁵

This approach is mirrored in the wording of the Historic Places sign placed at the site of the killings: "At this site, the home of John Gilfillan, settler and artist was attacked by a party of Maori youths in April 1847."

At least Chapple and Barton recognised that Maori were divided over the killings, but on both texts the focus on Maori youths, while accurate, again decontextualises the motivations for the killings. They become solely irresponsible acts, and the legitimate basis of Maori grievance is again elided completely.

Interestingly enough it is Chapple again, writing ten years later, with H.C Vietch., in *Sidelights on Wanganui History* who provides one of the most interesting views of the killings to be published. In a long paragraph, they start with some of the usual themes in the historiography, but then move on to place the killings in a completely different context:

Too much stress has been laid upon the importance of the Gilfillan massacre in the history of Wanganui. There is no doubt that it was an atrocity not to be condoned; but it was in the nature of a revenge which the Maori did not consider to be wrong. With his strong tribal sense, the Maori was not appalled at "utu" being taken from persons other than the guilty party. Guilt attached more to the tribe than to the individual perpetrator of a wrong. The massacre was merely one incident in the troubles of the time, and should not be allowed to assume too much importance. It was not only the Maori who committed such crimes against the European sense of humanity. When the settlers left their sections and moved in to (sic.) the redoubts, two of them mixed arsenic with fifty pounds of flour and sugar, knowing that the natives thoroughly ransacked all abandoned houses. The result of this action is not known but it had the approval of some of the European settlers. A true sense of history requires that these events be placed side by side, so that a more sympathetic attitude may be adopted

¹³⁴ Spicer, p. 16. Henry Nathan plays no such prominent role in any of the other sources.

¹³⁵ L.J.B Chapple, C. Barton, *Early Missionary Work in Whanganui (1840-1850)*, Wanganui: Jones, 1930.

towards those responsible for the Gilfillan massacre. The massacre was an act of war and not of murder.¹³⁶

This is a notably different account than the others discussed previously. Again there is a de-emphasising of the importance of the event, but placing the killings beside the alleged poisonings, and, moreover, denoting the killings as an act of war, places them in a much broader political context. Here is not the place to discuss the alleged poisonings. They were publicised in a very politicised manner during the occupation of the Moutua Gardens, although the actual evidence for the lacing of the flour is anecdotal - stemming from one comment in Taylor's Journals, and another note in the Peter Wilson's diary that the flour was designed for rats and accidentally left behind. There seems to be no evidence for any actual poisoning.¹³⁷ Nonetheless, Chapple and Vietch note for the first time in the historiography, that the presence and actions of the Europeans are formative in the cause of the deaths, and moreover that violence and inhumanity is unfortunately a widely experienced human trait, not culturally specific. Remarkably, it was not until over fifty years later than any other published account of the killing should emerge which was so sympathetic to a Maori understanding of the events.

David Young published *Woven by Water* in 1998, after the profile of Maori issues in Wanganui was dramatically raised by the occupation of Moutua Gardens. He wrote:

In ritual retaliation, six of the chief's young relations (that is Nga Rangi's relations) carried out the "Gilfillan muru" at the farm of artist John Gilfillan about ten kilometres from Wanganui. Mistakenly believing that the Maori were after only him, Gilfillan fled the property, leaving his wife and seven children at the mercy of what was a traditional revenge raid.¹³⁸

Young has replaced the usual word "massacre" with the word "muru" which in translation means 'killing'.¹³⁹ Using a Maori phrase immediately constructs the act in two cultural spheres, highlighting the fact that it generated different meanings, and had different resonance, in alternative cultural lexicons. Young offers a pro-Maori position. A related *Listener* article he published in 1996¹⁴⁰ focused on the first formal return after 150 years of

¹³⁶ Chapple, L.B.J., and, Veitch, H.C., *Sidelights on Wanganui History*, Wanganui: Wanganui Herald Newspaper, 1940, pp. 63-64.

¹³⁷ For a longer discussion of this case see David Young, *Woven by Water: Histories from the Whanganui River*, Wellington: Huia, 1998, chapter 3. There is no evidence in Taylor's journals of any mysterious illness among the Maori after the conflict, and he was closely involved with the communities on the river, and moreover angry with what he hoped were only rumours of poisoning. Of course this does not mean there wasn't any illness, but it is strong evidence nonetheless. Power also notes friendly discussion with those in the taua about how many men were lost on each side, with no mention of illness.

¹³⁸ Young, p. 35.

¹³⁹ H.W. Williams. *Dictionary of Maori Language*, seventh ed., 1971.

¹⁴⁰ *Listener*, October 14th, 1996. Young's account of the Gilfillan killings in this article is more inaccurate than in his book -

members of Ngati Ruaka to Pukunamu, the hill on which the killers were hung by illegal court-martial in 1847.¹⁴¹

Yet, as with Downes' cultural relativism, I am unconvinced by Young's explanation. Young also sites the killings in the context of *utu*, and in doing so is trying to absolve the responsibility from those who killed the Gilfillans. He places the killings in the context of a "bloody moment of tension", which is, to an extent, a recognition of a broader context. But by focusing on *utu*, not only is he drastically simplifying the probable cause of events, but arguably ends up brutalising a whole society. Maori are somehow forced by tradition to commit an extremely unusual act. Moreover by focusing on the idea of tradition, a static entity that somehow transcends circumstance, he is essentialising Ngati Ruaka as presenting a homogenous position, when they were far from doing so. This is not even to mention whether the imposition of 'tradition' as some kind of cultural relativist panacea can justify and contain the brutal killing of children.

Young's account is another renegotiation and renarrating of the past. A focus on a traditional redemptive raid is another way of containing the violence and resonance of the Gilfillan killings, no different in many respects than any of the other narratives of the killings which sought to de-emphasise its significance, or to place the blame on the 'savage' nature of 'uncivilised' Maori. All these 'stories that makes sense' rely on certain assumptions about the past and the actors involved, but, at the same time, this continual process of renegotiation is also a sign that the resonance, and the "social energy", of the killings still remains. They are still disturbing, they still raise questions about dealing with complex issues in the past, and, in doing so, they offer an access point into the fluidity, contingency, and the strangeness, that characterise the colonial contact zone.

Fragment Three - Objective Narrations

Among those who gave evidence to the coroner on April 19th 1847 at the Commercial Hotel, were George Rees, surgeon, and Richard Barry, police sergeant. Their accounts are both notable for the use of relatively 'objective' language; a way of narrating which acts as a container of violence.

...shortly after the stockade was built three young Maori [sic] were summarily hanged for an act of *utu* that had left six of the Gilfillan family dead with a *taua* (war party) bristling on the edge of town. It was a moment of bloody tension that spilled briefly into war.

¹⁴¹ The court-martial enacted by Laye was illegal at the time, but made retroactively legal by George Grey.

Both men were part of the rescue party that had discovered the bodies the previous Monday. It was Rees who gave immediate medical attention to the Gilfillans and in whose house Mary Gilfillan recuperated from her wound. Indeed the inquest moved to Rees' house in order to interview Mary, who was however too ill to speak properly. Both Rees' and Barry's testimony was recorded in the *Wellington Independent*:

George Rees surgeon, accompanied the police to Mr. Gilfillan's section on Monday morning, and saw the bodies now lying in an adjoining room, then on the ground where probably they were killed. Could only identify Frank Gilfillan, the others being too much disfigured; the elder, and younger, female, and little boy lay near to one another. Frank was little further off. The eldest female had her head almost encircled by cuts from a tomahawk or other instrument of like description, - the skull was severed, and in many places the brain protruded; the face was much mutilated, the left cheek was entirely cut out. The girl had a severe wound on the back of her head, and a deep flesh wound on her left wrist; the wound on the head must have caused instantaneous death. The little boy had a large part of the occipital (sic) bone, with the integuments severed from the head; it was about eight inches in diameter and lay on the ground. The brain was exposed and immediate death must have resulted. Frank Gilfillan's skull was completely cut through, and he must have died very speedily. Dr. Rees produced a sketch of the ground showing the relative position of the bodies when they were first discovered.¹⁴²

The narration of events in scientific, 'objective' language both distances and makes more accurate the description of the discovery of the bodies. The fact that Rees was able to identify Frank indicates that he probably also knew the rest of the family; in addition the disparate ages of the other victims meant that each was easily identified despite their disfigurement. By turning the bodies into nouns - "the eldest female", "the little boy" - rather than using the names he would have known, Rees was fulfilling a fantasy of objectivity, maintaining the decorum of a deductive empiricism which privileged only what Rees could see, not what he knew.

The use of medical terminology to describe the wounds - "a large piece of the occipital bone" - and a more accurate rendering of the wounds than in other accounts - "her head almost encircled by cuts" (compared to Barry who described the family as "all very cut around the head") gives the reader a more direct idea of the actual wounding (especially if we are accustomed to dealing with wounding and injuries through the mediation of specific medical language). In another sense, however, medical language acts as a way to distance the wounds from the horror of wounding - removing the act and the pain of the act from the result of the act. Medical and objective language acts as a container of violence.

Richard Barry the police sergeant also uses distancing language:

¹⁴² *Wellington Independent*, 12 May, 1847.

Proceeding onwards he reached where the house had been - it was burned down, the clay walls alone standing. Remnants of clothes, broken crockery, dead fowls, and a variety of articles strewed the ground. Looking around he saw the bodies of a women, young girl and boy-child, they were lying near to one another, just at the corner of the fence and within a few yards of house. They were all very much cut around the head, and quite dead. Hearing the cry of an infant, he went in the direction, and in the stockyard saw a young girl very severely wounded in the forehead and greatly exhausted, in her lap was the infant covered in blood but uninjured. Outside the fence he found the dead body of a boy, about 12 years old - likewise much cut about the head. After a little further search he discovered another infant asleep in the fern, uninjured. The bodies were placed on biers, and brought into town into the Commercial Hotel, where they now lie. The wounded girl was taken to Dr. Rees' house, and the two infants given to their friends. Found an axe which he produced to the jury, it was smeared with blood, and on it some human hair. Also on the path, leading to town some bits of calico, corresponding in pattern with some of the bodies of the deceased; and very nigh to the hill overlooking the town a silk handkerchief.¹⁴³

The narrative detail: "proceeding onwards", "just at the corner of the fence", stating that the bodies were lying in the Commercial Hotel, although the jury had just viewed them lying in an adjacent room, and his use of impersonal terms such as "the deceased" are part of Barry's objective 'practical' voice. It is the rationality and practicality of his narrative which is intended to contain and distance the *act* of violence-making (which is being investigated) from the *result* of that making. However, like the way in which 'effective' histories always refigure 'enlightenment histories', the power of the symbols of violence in the account, still manages to break through. The production of the axe, marked with blood and human hair, is as a symbol rather than as evidence. It had no function in proving the culpability of the arrested men. There was no fingerprinting, and as the axe had belonged to the Gilfillans it could not be used to identify a culprit. Instead the axe is presented as a horrible artefact, a carrier of the strange-making effect of violence.

Both of these accounts, tending to the objective, illustrate the way in which narrative forms are placed upon events, shaping them in that context. They also show how forms of narratives can be used as ways to contain violence and the meaning of images and symbols. Conversely the way in which the blood and hair on the axe, or the visual image created by Rees' description of Mrs. Gilfillan's mangled head, break through those containing forms, is an illustration of how the fluidness and continual resonance of these same images and symbols are powerful enough to break through this act of containment and make things 'strange'.

Fragment Four - The Cowardice of Mr. Gilfillan

¹⁴³ *ibid.* The particular mention of the silk handkerchief is interesting. It could be read as projection of metropolitan, feminine values; a symbolic object made tragic by the deaths.

In 1855 the missionary Richard Taylor published his book *Te Ika a Maui - New Zealand and Its Inhabitants*. In the middle of a broad, rambling, 19th century exposition of Maori culture, whakatauki (proverbs), flora and fauna, and short character sketches of leading Maori figures, Taylor devotes two paragraphs to the Gilfillan killings. Most notably, and unlike any other account, he places the blame, not on 'savage' Maori, but on the behaviour of John Gilfillan. He writes in scathing terms:

On the evening of 18 April, 1846,¹⁴⁴ a party of six young men, or rather boys, the eldest not eighteen, the youngest only twelve years old, relations of the wounded Chief, in order to have payment for blood, and bring on a war, went to the house of an out-settler, and struck at him behind the neck with a tomahawk. The wound was not very severe, the man being tall, his young assailant could not reach him. He went into his house, and the miscreants were on the point of fleeing, when they beheld their intended victim running away, having escaped from a back window, and abandoning his wife and six or seven children to certain death; had he possessed a grain of courage or feeling, he might have driven them away, or defended his house until help arrived, for he possessed a double-barrelled gun. No sooner did he abandon his helpless family, then the fellows began to assault the house.

A page later he wrote:

The timid man stated, it was at his wife's request he left her to seek aid, as she had no fears of their injuring her, but this was contradicted by the daughter, who said, her poor mother entreated him with tears not to abandon them.¹⁴⁵

Three years after the publication of *Te Ika a Maui*, John Gilfillan published a pamphlet in Victoria, Australia.¹⁴⁶ The pamphlet was in direct response to Richard Taylor's accusations. Gilfillan wrote:

I take the liberty of forwarding the enclosed communication; not only as an act of justice to myself, a maligned fellow-colonist, but to expose the disingenuous means adopted by the abettors of Maori rebellion, to bring the PAKEHA into contempt with the natives and to hoodwink the more credulous of those that frequent Exeter Hall.

The compilation from which I borrow the following quotations purports to be from the pen of the Rev. Richard Taylor, Episcopal minister of Wanganui, which book though some years published I never heard of until two days ago.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Note Taylor has the year, but not the day wrong. Although how much can be inferred from this is questionable, apart from perhaps a comment on his editing.

¹⁴⁵ Taylor, *Te Ika a Maui*, pp. 353-4.

¹⁴⁶ Gilfillan, J.A, Pamphlet Aug. 10th, 1861, Collingwood, Australia. Original not traced but text substantially reproduced in *Wanganui Chronicle*, June 16th, 1949. Typescript copy AC 5993/3 Anon 8 September, 1965 in Gilfillan File, Wanganui Regional Museum. There would seem no reason to doubt that it is actually written by John Gilfillan. The only other individuals who perhaps could have been motivated to write such a text were his surviving children - and Sarah wrote her own defence of her father in any case.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid*.

He then proceeds to quote the above passage from Taylor (excepting the second paragraph starting "The timid man..." which is mentioned in the body of the text) and then rebuts each assertion point by point. The key paragraph is:

This passage down to "abandoning his family to certain death" is a series of falsehoods. Immediately upon feeling the blow I called to my wife, "barricade the front door quick." I ran round to the back and when inside fastened it, by this time the miscreants were with their tomahawks cutting downwards the sashes of the windows and hurling into the house lengths of quartering that lay outside ready for building. My wife earnestly entreated me to escape, urging that it was only my life they aimed at, reminding me that only recently in a similar attack in the valley of the Hutt, a short time before, the Maoris had sent the children out of the way before murdering the husband. This for a time I refused to do, desiring my eldest boy eleven years old to run towards town eight miles distant, calling on the settlers on his way, the nearest resident one (McGregor) being five miles distant, and send aid. He did not however obey; whether enervated by terror or struck by one of the missiles I could not tell, for it was too dark to see. At last yielding to my wife's urgent entreaties, and hopeless by any other means of gaining succour I passed through an end window, we had no back ones. As to the Maoris seeing me escape, which had it been the case must have inevitably sealed my doom, they were too busy in their ferocious work of havoc to see, and their savage yells to permit them to hear anything at the end from which I escaped.¹⁴⁸

Some twenty-nine years after John Gilfillan's pamphlet was published, continual rumours of her father's cowardice moved Sarah Gilfillan, aged only six at the time of killings, to publish an article in the *Wanganui Herald* on January 6th 1888.¹⁴⁹ She wrote:

It has lately come to my knowledge that a very false and cruel impression is abroad concerning the part acted by my late father in that terrible affair. Only a few days ago I happened to see an account written by an "Army Chaplain" which purports to give all the details. These are almost all completely false, a perfect romance in part; with a running commentary throughout on the conduct of my father.¹⁵⁰

This, she said, was the true story:

...my father went out to meet the Maoris who seemed quite friendly, and to talk to them outside. John went with him. All the rest of us were inside, with my mother and I watching through the window what was going on. My father was walking up and down soldier fashion, which was a habit of his till the day of his death. John was beside him, walking up and down. The natives, some of whom were also smoking, and my father were talking quite amicably, without any appearance of anger or ill feeling, when suddenly when his back was turned in his walk, one of them struck my father on the head with a long handled tomahawk. He staggered round the end of the house, to the door, which my mother at once shut, leaving John out. He called out, and my mother let him in, and refastened the door. The blood was streaming from my father's head. My mother bound it up, wrapping it up very thickly to try and staunch the bleeding. Over all I remember she wrapped a sky blue pelisse belonging to the

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ In the text, however, she mentions she wrote her account on 18 April of the previous year - the fortieth anniversary of the killings.

¹⁵⁰ *Wanganui Herald*, 6 January, 1888.

baby. While doing all this she was urging him to go away for help as she was sure that he was the only one the Maoris wanted: she said they had never been known to attack women and children. At last her arguments prevailed and she let him out quietly by the door.¹⁵¹

Sarah's elder sister, Mary, badly wounded in the attack, added a single paragraph at the end of the article. She wrote:

I saw mother binding father's head up. I was sitting in the kitchen close to the window, feeding the elder baby, when mother almost threw the little one into my arms as father rushed in. Mother begged him earnestly to save himself. As I neither saw nor heard distinctly, I did not know exactly what had happened outside. The Maoris slashed in the window with a tomahawk, as I have good reason to know for the same tomahawk came dangerously near to my right shoulder. Mother called me to run, which I did with the two babies, and rushed under Eliza's bed. In the meantime Agnes fell asleep, and as Alexander continue to fret I asked Eliza to take him, which she did, the little one being still asleep, and not stirring even when I received my blow. The Maori boy who was standing close to me aimed his hatchet at Frank, who gave a fearful scream, and ran away. I saw no more, for almost at the same moment I was struck down myself.¹⁵²

The question of Mr Gilfillan's cowardice, and what 'really happened' on that night in 1847 is, contrary to first impressions, not clarified by the existence of these eye-witness accounts; rather it is confused. Each of the four texts is problematised by both the circumstances in which they were written and by a series of contradictions with other evidence. Access to the past is always mediated and altered through text; in this instance, when the event itself is contested, the fragility of the access becomes highlighted. Instead of thinking about these accounts as competing truths, alternative realities of which one has to be chosen as part of the 'actual' narrative of the Gilfillan killings, I want to think about them as performances - textual acts reflective as much of the needs of the moment of writing, as they are of the circumstances of the event itself. The uncertainty and contradictions in these accounts represent the problems inherent in understanding almost any historical text. These problems are often overwritten, constrained into a single narrative, when perhaps a plurality of narratives would reflect a better understanding of the past, leaving at least some of ambiguity. The problem of Mr. Gilfillan's cowardice is one of these ambiguous moments, when the cultural significance of his supposed actions are at least as important as the course of his actual behaviour. What is important in this discussion is less the possibility (or impossibility) of truth-finding, than the process of myth-making.

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*

¹⁵² *ibid.*

Richard Taylor:

Taylor's accusation of cowardice is striking simply because almost no other source mentions it. The most usual story of Gilfillan's behaviour in Power and other accounts is a paraphrase of John Gilfillan's own account of the events, queried at most with "he said...", or, "he declared..."¹⁵³, before the key assertion that Mrs. Gilfillan begged him to go for help. The fact that Taylor's account is so very different than any other would initially seem to raise questions about its authenticity. Richard Taylor, however, holds a unique position in Wanganui history. His relationship with Maori gives him unusual credibility. This access to Maori stories of the killings has been ignored by the other narrators, as statements in both John and Sarah Gilfillan's respective accounts attest. John wrote:

Thus "the tears and entreaties etc." he so glibly and minutely details, and of which obviously my daughter and I only could have been cognisant is but a heartless invention - a lie with a circumstance.¹⁵⁴

And Sarah wrote:

When I state that two people of six and seven years old respectively were the only people from whom he could have got any account whatever giving details, it is plain that he must have a wonderful imagination.¹⁵⁵

The Gilfillans forgot that direct reports of John Gilfillan's behaviour would have circulated among Maori, through the mediation of John Williams Hipango who questioned the killers on capture, and through the survival of one of the killers - Rangirirau. Taylor had access to both these figures, as well as his contact with William Robinson, and even the small Gilfillan children themselves. It is difficult to discount Taylor's account on evidential grounds. He was very involved with events preceding the conflict in Wanganui, and knew the combatants on both sides personally. Taylor's Journals in general provide an invaluable perspective on Wanganui history. He provides a strong voice from the past, and one that is difficult to ignore.

This is not say that Taylor's account isn't as sensitive to the political needs of the environment in which it is told as any other. Maori stories are culturally situated and contingent too. It is conceivable that a Maori story emphasising John Gilfillan's cowardice was a way of limiting the pre-meditated nature of the killings, highlighting the opportunist nature of the more extreme violence. Moreover, in thinking along these lines there has to be care taken not to say there is a homogenous 'Maori' side of the story. Putiki Maori and some upriver Maori had very different responses to the killing. Nonetheless, Taylor's claims must

¹⁵³ Power, p. 86.

¹⁵⁴ Gilfillan Pamphlet.

¹⁵⁵ *Wanganui Herald*, 6 January, 1888.

be considered significant and difficult to deal with; a fact reflected in the vehemence of the responses his accusations brought.

Sarah Gilfillan:

Sarah Gilfillan's account is profoundly problematised by one simple thing - her age. Sarah was only six at the time of the killings, and, was writing as a 46 year old. She recognised this problem, but considered it surmountable:

Though only a few weeks past my 6th birthday at the time, I have a perfectly vivid and distinct recollection of all that happened that dreadful night so far as it relates to what I personally witnessed¹⁵⁶.

But the memories of a six year old are very different than those of a 46 year old.

William Robinson in his diary narrates a picture of the six year old Sarah:

After walking about five and a half miles, we came up to two of Mr. Gilfillan's little children, who were completely wet through, having slept in a swamp all night, and being then on a road to town, having walked about two miles. The poor little things were very cold and hungry, and one had no bonnet or shoes. Mr. Nixon gave them some bread. They told us their eldest sister was alive, but that she had told them she was too weak from loss of blood to walk with them, and that their mother and sister and two brothers were dead and the house pulled down. The poor little things, one a boy eight years old and the other a girl six years old, were utterly unconscious of the loss they had sustained, telling us the particulars with a smile.¹⁵⁷

Two days later:

When I reached Mrs. Taylor's I found the two children so altered by being comfortably dressed in clean clothes and running about seemingly so happy, that had I been a stranger I might have taken them for a part of the family.¹⁵⁸

Sarah also gave testimony at the coroner's inquest the day after the killings, along with her eight year old brother John. The *Wellington Independent* said "The testimony of these little children gave the greatest satisfaction to all who heard them. Their replies were prompt and direct to the questions put to them and evinced intelligence beyond their years."¹⁵⁹ This was Sarah's testimony:

Sarah Gilfillan, after a gentle admonition by the Coroner to speak the truth, said she was six years old; she corroborated much of what John had said; mother told me there were six Maoris; could not see them myself; after getting out of the window, a Maori ran after me and knocked me down with a ricker [sic], he hurt me very much. I got up

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Downes, p. 276.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 277.

¹⁵⁹ *Wellington Independent*, 12 May, 1847.

and ran away, it was getting dark; saw sister Eliza lying dead on the path, when I was leaving the house.¹⁶⁰

The account of Sarah at six is very different than that of forty years later. Robinson's accounts of her behaviour, so ill-fitting with her memories of a "dreadful night" while not invalidating those memories, are a reminder to what extent experience and memory of that experience can be very different things.

Nonetheless Sarah's article does have elements which are credible. It is full of details and also various lacunae and admitted forgetfulness that are notable for their vividness and distinctness:

The blood was streaming from my father's head. My mother bound it up and wrapped up his neck very thickly to staunch the bleeding. Over all I remember seeing her wrap a sky blue pelisse belonging to the baby,...I cannot tell how soon it was after this, but think it was not very many minutes, my mother told us all to go to our bedroom at the other end of the house...when we had gone a mile or two (I have very little idea of direct distance).¹⁶¹

Other details seem more received. Sarah wrote about the state of her father's gun with a level of detail that would seem unusual for a six year old to note, and which in any case clashed with John Gilfillan's original account at the coroner's enquiry:

The double-barrelled gun on which the reverend gentlemen lays great stress was undoubtably in the house, but only a few days previously, my father had discovered it was rusty, and therefore unfit for use for the time being.¹⁶²

That Sarah had later been told details of the killings while living with her father is not unexpected, nor does this necessarily make them invalid. Indeed dissimilar accounts would seem unusual, as Sarah lived with her father for a number of years. "The wound extended along the base of his skull almost from ear to ear. I have many times seen and felt the scar",¹⁶³ she wrote, and touch must have been accompanied with re-narration. She also wrote of direct conversations about the killings - "...had he had any idea of how matters were to end, he would have acted differently, indeed I have more than once heard him say so." Moreover, she lived for some years in Wanganui with her older sister, Mary. It is reasonable to assert that the memories of a six year old must have been overlaid by the re-narrations of both these individuals.

These issues aside, there is one other significant consideration in regard to the Sarah's account, and that is what motivated her to write so long after the event itself. I have been

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Wanganui Herald*, 6 January, 1888.

¹⁶² John Gilfillan said at the coroners inquest that the caps were damp.

¹⁶³ *Wanganui Herald*, 6 January, 1888.

unable to find any other reference to the “Army Chaplain” whose comments on her father’s behaviour ostensibly moved her to write, but the “very false and cruel impression abroad” regarding her father surely had its source in Taylor. He was, after all, so well known in Wanganui, and his book must have had a significant readership. Indeed it seems strange that Sarah does not mention Taylor at all. In his *Old Whanganui*, T.W Downes, a personal acquaintance of Sarah, makes specific mention of Taylor’s account, even noting Mary Gilfillan’s personal memories of Taylor himself. I suspect that Taylor’s name has been avoided as he was too well respected. Downes, well aware of Taylor’s historical importance, has perhaps omitted discussion of his claims out of respect to Sarah. Indeed the start of his chapter on the killings in *Old Whanganui* is a panegyric on John Gilfillan’s artistic ability and talent, and he gives personal thanks to Sarah in his preface for the loan of her father’s sketch book. The strange absence of any discussion of Taylor in Sarah’s or Downes’ accounts is arguably a sign of how strongly Sarah felt the need to clear her father’s name.

The social needs of a 46 year Sarah are very different than those of a six year old. The need to clear her father’s name, the distance between the time of writing and events narrated, and above all her age at the date of the killings, mean that Sarah’s account, no matter how vivid, cannot be regarded as completely reliable. It is, however, informative and revealing as a cultural artefact, one that combines memory with its various overwritings and renegotiations.

Mary Gilfillan

There is very little information on Mary. Her paragraph at the end of Sarah’s account is her only intervention into the written history of the killings, with the exception of one quote in Downes (she was dead by the time the book was published). Interestingly enough, she spoke of the Taylors:

She also remembered Missionary Taylor, whose book, “Te Ika a Maui,” gives an account of the massacre on page 555. She spoke very highly of Mrs. Taylor, who, she said, was the daughter of an archdeacon, and a splendid women in every way.¹⁶⁴

It is a little strange that Mary, who was aged fifteen at the time of the killings, should write so little, while Sarah who was six at the time wrote so much. There are a number of possible explanations for this, perhaps answerable with a greater knowledge of the respective characters of the two sisters, but it is a question that can’t be accurately be addressed. Not least, it is impossible to know to what extent Mary was affected by her wound. Moreover, Sarah wrote that Mary was not a completely reliable narrator:

¹⁶⁴ Downes, p. 253. Note that, as mentioned above, the page reference to *Te Ika a Maui* is spurious.

My sister Mary was, at the time lying at the point of death, beside having always been very deaf, and unable to hear anything that was said by my father and mother on the occasion. She lay for some months hanging, as it were, between life and death, and but for her youth, and the skill and kindness of Dr. George Rees, his wife and other kind friends, must surely have died.¹⁶⁵

Her deafness and incapacity after the event may to an extent explain her reticence to write, but also it problematises some of John Gilfillan's claims. Her ill health also raises questions about Taylor's claims that Mary refuted her father's story. This is a story obviously directly contradicted by her own story in the *Herald*, but also the extent of her injury renders whatever she had to say in the aftermath of the killing somewhat suspect.

Mary's brief account seems to raise as many questions as it answers. It possesses a slightly awkward quality, and is problematised by her dubious reliability, due in part to the sheer extent of her injuries received that night, and her deafness. But nonetheless it is a voice from the past that has to be considered.

John Gilfillan

It is on the response of John Gilfillan to Taylor's claims that the chief weight of evidence falls. The vehemence of his attack on Taylor is understandable. If innocent as claimed, he would have felt greatly aggrieved. His attack on the "...more credulous of those that frequent Exeter Hall" should be sited in terms of personal anger rather than a more sweeping condemnation of missionaries. It could be imagined also, having been subject to a such a brutal attack, that Gilfillan would be strongly anti-Maori ("...a brave and misguided race of savages") and consequently antipathetical to those who would support Maori claims at the expense of settlers. However, there are a number of inconsistencies in Gilfillan's account, starting with Gilfillan's assertion in regard to his own wounding.

Taylor claimed: "The wound was not very severe. The man being tall his young assailant could not reach him."¹⁶⁶

Gilfillan responded:

On the contrary the muscles of the neck were completely cut through, and the wound was deemed by my medical attendant on first examination to be of so serious a nature as to excite a strong doubt about whether I could survive it....This fable of giant and pygmy is sufficiently disproved by the fact of my standing but 5 feet ten and a half and the cut being exactly horizontal.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ *Wanganui Herald*, 6 January, 1888.

¹⁶⁶ Taylor, p. 353.

¹⁶⁷ Gilfillan Pamphlet.

Yet this is directly contradicted by another source - a single letter written by General Laye (who as Colonel Laye commanded the Rutland regiment):

I have the identical tomahawk that struck Gilfillan, I forget the Maori's name but I have it among my papers, told me he struck him and being a short man and Gilfillan being tall, he could not reach his skull, hence was only wounded in the back of the neck.¹⁶⁸

In regard to Taylor's accusation that Mary had stated "...her poor mother entreated him with tears not to abandon them",¹⁶⁹ Gilfillan wrote:

This the Revd. Narrator affirms my daughter contradicts. So far from this being the truth, she indignantly denounces his statement as foul and gratuitous falsehood; her accounts of the facts have always been consistent as can be vouched for by Mrs. Rees, widow of my daughter's medical attendant, and whose affectionate care of my suffering and mother-less child was such as we can never forget. Thus "the tears and entreaties etc." he so glibly and minutely details, and of which obviously my daughter and I only could have been cognisant is but a heartless invention - a lie with a circumstance. He might have obtained the truth by applying to the only quarter from which he was likely to get it; but no, neither he, my own minister, his substitute nor any one of his family ever came near me from first to last....My daughter's account may be better relied on, as even in childhood she was never known to scream nor up to the present moment to faint or become hysterical at sight of danger or other exciting causes which are apt so powerfully to affect the majority of her sex.¹⁷⁰

Further on he wrote:

My Rev. defamer will perhaps be startled at the fact related by my daughter, who wounded and bleeding still retained her usual self-possession. She witnessed by the light of my burning house the murder of her brother. The poor boy was making for the high ferns in order to effect his escape. He was pursued by the reverend's pet innocent of tender age who, not being able to overtake my poor child, hurled at him his tomahawk, with such force and precision that uttering a shriek his victim fell and his sister never saw him again.¹⁷¹

There are a number of inconsistencies in these two paragraphs. His claim that none of Taylor's close associates came near is directly contradicted by the Willian Robinson's journal entry:

Then I took the two children across [the river from the Taylor's] to attend the inquest, and everyone noticed them as I went along and seemed to feel much pity for them. I took them to the jury and went to see poor Mr. Gilfillan. His children were brought in to him, and he caressed them much. They gave great satisfaction to the jury for their very clear and concise accounts, each being examined apart from the other. Soon after

¹⁶⁸ General Laye to Stapp. 1890. London. Gilfillan File. Wanganui Regional Museum.

¹⁶⁹ Taylor, p. 354.

¹⁷⁰ Gilfillan Pamphlet.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*

the prisoners were brought to Mr. Gilfillan for identification, who sat up in his bed leaning upon me....¹⁷²

His claims of his daughter's reliability are also difficult. Not only does Sarah say that Mary was "always very deaf"¹⁷³ but Mary herself wrote that she never saw Frank's death. Far from maintaining "her usual self-possession", she wrote: "The Maori boy who was standing close to me aimed his hatchet at Frank who gave a fearful scream, and as I thought, ran away. I saw no more for at almost the same moment I was struck down myself."¹⁷⁴

Another direct contradiction with other evidence comes in his statement:

I served many years during the hottest of the revolutionary wars in the Royal Navy where cowardice was sure to be detected.....Her Majesty's gallant 58th and the Grenadiers of the 65th, were likewise no mean judge in such a matter, and as proof that my conduct was by them considered irreproachable. I was, after the murder of my family, received at their mess table with sympathy and cordial hospitality.¹⁷⁵

But in his 1890 letter General Laye, in command of the "gallant 58th" and one of those "no mean judges", wrote damningly:

No one thought the better of him in leaving his family, and the murderers told me that even if he had kept in his house and pointed an old gun he had at them they would have gone off.¹⁷⁶

And in regard to Gilfillan: "...he did not like me after as I suppose I spoke what I thought."¹⁷⁷ Indicating that, at the very least, the "sympathy and cordial hospitality" was not universal.

There are also internal contradictions in John Gilfillan's account. Gilfillan wrote that he had first attempted to send his son Frank to get help, rather than flee himself as urged by his wife:

This for a time I refused to do, desiring my eldest boy eleven years old to run towards town eight miles distant, calling on the settlers on his way, the nearest resident one (Macgregor) being five miles distant, and send aid. He did not however obey; whether enervated by terror or struck by one of the missiles I could not tell, for it was too dark to see.¹⁷⁸

The Gilfillan house was very small, perhaps five metres by four metres, divided into two rooms. We know Frank (the eleven year old) wasn't struck by "one of the missiles". He was killed while running up the hill trying to escape after John Gilfillan's departure. It seems hard

¹⁷² Downes, p. 278.

¹⁷³ *Wanganui Herald*, 6 January, 1888.

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Gilfillan Pamphlet.

¹⁷⁶ Laye.

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Gilfillan Pamphlet.

to imagine that it would have taken any time to ascertain Frank's state in a situation when he was at most only a few metres away. Even considering the darkness and the situation, his wife was perfectly able to gather the children together after his departure.

His statement that in a "similar attack in the valley of the Hutt, a short time before, the Maoris had sent the children out of the way before murdering the husband" also raises questions. The only attacks that had happened recently in the Hutt were the killing of Rush and the Gillespies, but women and children had not been involved in either. General Laye mentions an incident with Page and Naughton in which Naughton's wife was left untouched. I can only assume this is referring to the attack on Boulcott's farm in which at least Lieutenant Page played a notable part. There is no reference in any other sources to another attack. The fact that an incident did not occur as Gilfillan stated, does not mean he is lying, indeed there could have been an exaggeration of the circumstances of various instances circulating in popular discourse; but, as with some of his other statements, there is a tension between Gilfillan's version and other accounts that raises questions about veracity.

Lastly his actions on the night of the killings itself are questionable. The coroner's report in the *Wellington Independent* reports John Gilfillan's words, narrated to the jury while sitting up in bed:

Mrs. Gilfillan then exhorted him to make his escape by a small window, which being under the eaves had escaped the notice of the Maories. She represented to him that it was his life they aimed at, she did not fear for herself or the children, and that he must immediately obtain medical aid. He did so, crawled up the hill, and as best as he could made his way to McGregor's and Bell's houses by whom he was assisted into town....¹⁷⁹

It is hard to conceive why Gilfillan did not head back to his house with McGregor and Bell, who were only a few kilometres from his house. It is also difficult to know why he claimed that "Maories were out in all directions",¹⁸⁰ when they weren't, and especially when such a statement meant no attempt was made to rescue his family before the morning.

The problems in Gilfillan's account could result from a number of circumstances, not least, that the need to clear his name overwrote the need to be completely accurate. Indeed the guilt that Gilfillan faced when he discovered that his family had been killed in his absence must have, in the very least, placed a heavy strain on his own memories of the event. A strong need to justify his actions, even to himself, could over time change his story of how events unfolded. Equally, however, the inconsistencies Gilfillan's account presents mean that Taylor's charges are not effectively repudiated.

¹⁷⁹ *Wellington Independent*, 12 May, 1847.

¹⁸⁰ Power, p. 86.



Illustration III

The Gillfillan family: John, Sarah and Mary.

Mary is in the Centre. Note the blurred features where her scar has been removed from the photo.

From the Collection of the Whanganui Regional Museum, Wanganui, New Zealand.

The charges of Gilfillan's cowardice can never be verified or repudiated. The intertwining narratives of these clashing accounts of one event do not come together to provide a better and clearer knowledge of the past - rather they confuse, and in this confusion underline the paucity of our knowledge about any event, and the difficulty there can be in 'understanding' it. The four accounts that comment on John Gilfillan's behaviour are performances that reflect the circumstances and needs of the narrators as much as they do the event that they are narrating.

Fragment Five - Savage Wounds

The body of Mary Gilfillan is at the centre of Tyrone Power's account of the Gilfillan killings. Her wounding was the act which symbolised the horror of the incident, and of the scene the rescue party discovered. It was Mary's experience, not the other deaths, which bring him to comment in a sentence I have already quoted:

What a long dreadful night of terror it must have been to that poor girl, the flames of her father's house shining on her, the bodies of her mother and family lying about, and not knowing whether each moment might not bring back the savages to complete their work!¹⁸¹

Mary's wounding is central to other contemporary accounts as well. The *Wellington Independent* described her as "sadly mangled".¹⁸² William Robinson wrote:

...we found his eldest daughter with a horrible gash in her forehead about six inches long and passing between the left eye and the nose, and through which the brain protruded.¹⁸³

Sarah Gilfillan's account published in the *Wanganui Herald* in 1888 gave additional detail:

The wound my sister Mary received was inflicted with a blunt, rusty bill-hook, and extended from the top of her head where the hook went deep, down the forehead to the lower part of the nose, just missing her eye.¹⁸⁴

Richard Taylor, writing 8 years after the event, in *Te Ika a Maui* described the lasting scar:

...she afterwards recovered but had a fearful red seam, nearly a third of an inch wide: a lasting remembrance of that dreadful night.¹⁸⁵

Mary's wounding obviously had a very powerful effect, especially on eyewitnesses, whose accounts place greater attention on it, than later histories.¹⁸⁶ So why was the wound so

¹⁸¹ Power, p. 89.

¹⁸² *Wellington Independent*, 5 May, 1847.

¹⁸³ Downes, p. 276.

¹⁸⁴ *Wanganui Herald*, 6 January, 1888.

¹⁸⁵ Taylor, *Te Ika a Maui*, p. 354.

powerful? The discovery of the bodies of the young children, or the discovery of Mrs. Gilfillan - "...her head almost encircled by cuts from a tomahawk or other instrument of like description - the skull was severed, and in many places the brain protruded; the face was much mutilated, the left cheek being entirely cut out"¹⁸⁷ - would seem equally disturbing.

The scene which greeted the rescue party when they discovered Mary was shocking. Here are the eyewitness accounts:

Power:

On entering the cowshed I was horror-struck by the most dreadful sight my eyes ever beheld. There sat a young girl of about seventeen, a deep tomahawk wound in her forehead, and her fair hair dabbled with blood which flowed even on the babe she held in her arms. I shall never forget the fixed look of mute despair depicted on her countenance, while the poor child smiled and crowed with delight through the mask of blood that covered its face.¹⁸⁸

Robinson:

The poor girl was sitting down with a little baby in her lap aged four months, whose clothes were drenched in the blood of its poor sister.¹⁸⁹

Wellington Independent:

In the stockyard they found the third eldest daughter sitting upright in a state of insensibility, with a dreadful wound in her face, and the little baby about three months, alive, unhurt in her lap. Dr. Rees instantly went down. The unfortunate girl's wound was washed and dressed. Her hair was clotted and her mouth filled with blood which was removed with difficulty.¹⁹⁰

The image of Mary with a blood-covered baby in her arms was entangled in cultural views that saw her wound as damage in ways that exceeded the purely physiological injury she had suffered. The images of innocence presented by the young girl and the baby she held, and the pollutant of blood, both add symbolic resonance to the scene discovered by the rescue party. The innocence of Mary and the baby is the most powerful trope in the narratives of the Gilfillan killing. The white, "fair-haired", female on the frontier was the most vulnerable extension of Empire, and at the same time the most guiltless. Narratives of violence and conflict are almost always male narratives, hence the still deep-seated aversion in our culture to the killing of females and children. Mary's wounding, amplified by the presence of the

¹⁸⁶ It is noticeable that later histories such as Chapple and Barton, or, Smart and Bates, only mention Mary's wounding in passing, giving greater attention to the deaths.

¹⁸⁷ Dr Rees at the coroners inquiry reported in the *Wellington Independent*, 12 May, 1847.

¹⁸⁸ Power, p. 89. I have already quoted this text before, it is, however, central.

¹⁸⁹ Downes, p. 276.

¹⁹⁰ *Wellington Independent*, April 28th, 1847.

baby, who although unhurt¹⁹¹ was also polluted by blood, was a crime in the way that an attack on a male could never be. Mary's vulnerability is realised in the texts through her status as the "poor girl" and the "unfortunate girl". Unlike the aspersions cast upon the wounded John Gilfillan, Mary is regarded as a passive, helpless victim.

Contrasting with the innocence of Mary and the baby is the pollutant of blood. One of the most potent symbols in culture, the idea of blood is deeply entangled in a number of discourses. Blood symbolises the damage done to the bodies, it results from acts of violence and its presence maintains the original strange-making power of those acts. Blood is a signifier of violence and damage, even horror, and the juxtaposition of blood on the figures of the innocents, is bringing those figures into pain. The dialectic tension between innocence and pollution is arguably the central signifier in these narratives of Mary and the baby; the blood marks her as a figure of sacrifice.

The site of her wounding was also significant. In discussing violence in Tyrone Power's chapter, I introduced Foucault's idea of effective histories, meaningful narratives which start at the body. Like the heavy axe crushing Mrs. Gilfillan's head, the billhook that slashed Mary's face is a rupture of meaning-making space. The slash in Mary's forehead/face damages part of the body central to identity. In a culture that emphasised physical attractiveness in young females, the slash in Mary's face affected both her present and future hopes - with a scar she would stay forever disfigured.

The symbolic power of Mary's innocence, and the damage to Mary's face, go some way towards explaining the resonance of her wounding. She is symbolically as well as literally injured. They don't explain, however, why Mary's wounding was so powerful for eyewitnesses, but relatively less so for later historians. A fact which is also revealing about the nature of Mary's wounding itself.

The wounded Mary Gilfillan was such a powerful image for the eyewitnesses simply because she was still alive. Her visible pain provided a symbol of the suffering of those who had died, and moreover, her 'aliveness' demanded attention. This is reflected in the hierarchical difference accorded to the treatment of the dead and the wounded. Mary was carried back to town by the police and townspeople, the bodies were carried by Putiki Maori.¹⁹² Mary needed to be dealt with in the immediate present; in contrast, the treatment of bodies was governed by broader meta-narratives concerning the dead.

¹⁹¹ The baby, Agnes Gilfillan, Mary's niece, died a month later. Taylor writes in his diary that this was from lack of food (Taylor, Journals, Vol. 5, p 82.). In a time of high infant mortality it is impossible to know if the events of the night had played any part in the child's death.

¹⁹² This is in Downes, p. 276, among other sources.

After being brought back to the township on biers, the bodies of the Gilfillan's were placed in a room of Smith's Commercial Hotel to be viewed as part of the inquest which took place on Monday the 19th. They remained lying in the hotel until the 21st, when they were taken to be buried. The bodies of the Gilfillans were treated in certain structured ways. Firstly they were subjective to narratives of legality, something which has precedence over narratives of burial and remembrance. Even though the viewing of the bodies as part of the coroner's inquest could have added little to the adjudication of guilt, it was still considered culturally appropriate and necessary. Once the legal rites had been completed then the bodies were reclaimed by rites of religion. Wrote Robinson:

When all was in order, we started along the beach. Captain Laye, Lieutenant Holmes, and many of the officers joined the procession. On arriving at the churchyard the coffins were placed round the grave, and the Rev. Mr Inglis officiated, reading some very appropriate passages from Scripture, and then he gave a very solemn and affecting discourse to us all and closed with a prayer, after which the bodies were lowered into hole, which was dug 8 ft. by 6 ft., and covered up.¹⁹³

These meta-narratives for treating dead were deeply imbricated in culture. Maori death was seen as very different. Power records the aftermath of the death of Mateku, shot in the conflict brought on by the hangings:

All last night the Maories were screaming, firing their muskets, and dancing war-dances, evidently in an ecstasy of rage at their defeat and loss: to-day we have heard nothing of them but the loud "tangi" for the dead.¹⁹⁴

Robinson's and Power's accounts belong to different types of discourse on the dead body as text. The idea of loss of control, 'savagery' and 'otherness' inherent in an "ecstasy of rage", contrasts with the adjectives of 'appropriateness' and 'solemnity' which mark Robinson's text.

The fact that the treatment of the dead is so strongly culturally situated, signified by how strange the Maori treatment of bodies seems to Europeans,¹⁹⁵ is a hint of how the meta-

¹⁹³ Downes, p. 280.

¹⁹⁴ Power, p. 101.

¹⁹⁵ Richard Taylor's Journals providing another striking example of the tension between culturally situated views of remains. In October 1843 he travelled with a group of Maori to Waitotara, where a battle had taken place with Tuwharetoa 3 years previously:

...the natives who accompanied me laughed as they pointed out the bones of their enemies, saying that god had punished them and they deserved it....their bones yet covered the ground and skulls split open with a tomahawk. The sight to me was very sickening, the sun shone brightly and the soft breeze fanned the cheek just as it did this very day three years ago when my dear child was taken away....O Lord God Almighty what worms of the dust are we how soon is the pride and hautiness of man brought down and his lofty looks laid low.

narratives of death can contain the violence done to the dead bodies. However for the eyewitnesses, the suffering of Mary was not so easily contained. Not only was she a body in pain, but the nature of her wound means that even recovered, she would still remain damaged. For later writers, after Mary's death, her scar is unseen and her wound is less dramatic and horrifying than the deaths themselves. The normal hierarchal distinction of life over death reasserts itself strongly. Her wound is contained by the narrative of the overriding value of life.

Mary's wounding and subsequent scarring has a symbolic resonance that cannot be easily summarised. The possible ways in which Mary herself may have understood and conceptualised her own wounding, which left her significantly scarred for life, are so myriad as to undermine any claim of complete understanding. For the outsider and the historian, Mary's wounding has become the defining moment of her life. Her actual voice, with the exception of one paragraph in much longer newspaper article written by her sister and two quotes in Downes, disappears, to be replaced instead by a narrative of her wound.

This life-long scarring is most poignantly reflected in original photos of the Gilfillan family kept in the Wanganui Museum. One is a picture of Mary as an elderly women, carefully turned to the left so as to hide the 70 year old scar. The other is a picture of John Gilfillan and his two daughters, Mary and Sarah. It was taken perhaps 10 years after the killings, as Sarah is at least a teenager. In a reprint of the photo printed in T.W Downes *Old Whanganui*, Mary looks slightly disfigured, the area around her nose and forehead is blurred. The original in the museum provides an explanation for the lack of detail - her scar has been removed by a series of fine scratches. Insisting that her scar be removed from photographs,¹⁹⁶ these marks provide an access point into a tragic life. Mary's wound was social as well as physical, scarring her history as well as her face.

Taylor narrates the presence of Maori bodies in terms of a Christian meta-narrative of death and the temporality of human experience. Although the Maori he accompanies to the site see the bodies as symbols of victory and martial glory, Taylor finds them saddening, creating access to other solemn thoughts more poignant in contrast to the beauty of the day (as with Power's and Robinson's description of the Mataraua Valley).

¹⁹⁶ Spurdle, p. 71. wrote: "She was very sensitive about the disfigurement and always insisted that it be removed from her photographs". I have not been able to find any other evidence for this, and Spurdle is perhaps a little casual with sources, but at the same time the story matches the evidence of the photographs. Moreover in her piece on the Gilfillans, she mentions two other anecdotal stories which have ring of personal communication, perhaps intimating that there was a personal link between Flora Spurdle and Sarah (who after all only died in 1921).

Fragment Six - Texts Over Bodies

The last fragment I want to write about is very small. The gravestone of the Gilfillans stands in the old cemetery in Wanganui. It reads:

Sacred to the memory of
Mary 40 years
Elizabeth aged 14
Francis Lafroy aged 12
Adam Campbell aged 3
who were barbarously murdered by the natives 18 April 1847
Alexander Gilfillan age 1 year
Agnes Gilfillan 5 months
who died in consequence of injuries
received on the night on which the murders were
perpetuated

The placing of texts over dead bodies generally tells us less about the lives of those buried beneath the stone, than it tells us about dominant religious discourses of the time. The epitaph is a form of symbolic remembering, placed in the context of another form of symbolic remembering - the cemetery. Both act together as a way of containing the individual death within a meta-narrative of salvation.

But occasionally there are epitaphs that differ from the norm - small evocative fragments which allow access to lives through their metonymic nature, entering our narration of our existence through cryptic summaries of acts of death; a palimpsest - like "barbarously murdered by the natives"- which give a hint of past events, and the values and stories that have been imposed upon them. Every historical text resonates in different ways; every voice and every text has different meaning in different times. The epitaph on the Gilfillan's grave represents another voice from the past; one of the multiple stories that compose any history.

Epilogue: Violence, Post-Colonialism, and Judging Historical Injustice

It is difficult to discuss colonial violence without giving some thought to Frantz Fanon. His books, written in the middle of last century, are seminal to the discussion of violence and resistance among colonised peoples. Fanon advocated in his "Concerning Violence"¹⁹⁷ that: "The colonized man finds freedom in and through violence", and that: "The naked truth of Decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives that emanate from it." He argues that "'The last shall be first and the first last.' Decolonization is the putting into practice of this sentence".¹⁹⁸

He goes on to say:

You do not turn any society, however primitive it may be, upside-down with such a programme if you are not decided from the very beginning, that is to say from the actual formulation of that programme, to overcome all the obstacles that you will come across in so doing. The native who decides to put the programme into practice, and to become its moving force, is ready for violence at all times. From birth it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called into question by absolute violence.¹⁹⁹

For Fanon the colonial world is one of pure force; colonialism was implicitly predicated on violence, and the only way to challenge that violent hegemony was by violent resistance. Violent resistance ruptured the meta-narrative of colonisation, made explicit the violence of imperialism which previously had been suppressed, and re-opened the colonial space to be reconstituted with new narratives.

These are powerful words, written in a clear and concise polemic, and they come from a corpus which are foundational texts in the field of post-colonial criticism. But in light of historical developments they represent a point of view which to me has become untenable. A series of events, the fall of the Soviet Union in particular, have undermined the radical Left's claims for a viable alternative to a capitalist society of some form, and, moreover, that violence was a legitimate and useful way of effecting that change. The remarkably peaceful nature of the 'revolutions' of 1989 in Eastern Europe, in particular, undermined the left-wing tradition of radical violence which found most notable expression in the ideas of the Jacobins and Leninism.

In Africa itself the continual failure of some post-colonial nations to break free from problems of violence and poverty has problematised easy assertions of the success of decolonisation.

¹⁹⁷ in Frantz Fanon *The wretched of the Earth*, Penguin Classics reprint: 2001. (1st ed. 1961)

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.* p 28.

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.* pp. 28-29.

Harold Macmillan's wind of change has not meant a change for the good for significant numbers of Africans. Civil war in the Congo alone has killed millions of people in the last six years, and the horrors of genocide in Rwanda and the continued violence in even relatively prosperous countries such as Nigeria are signs that violence is not as unproblematic as Fanon would so strongly assert. This is not to say that colonisation wasn't formative in creating the circumstances for these problems, nor that the West hasn't played a culpable role in supporting, or ignoring, the excesses of various regimes in more recent times, but simply that Fanon's binary view of decolonisation as a radical and violent overthrow of established order is problematic.

This may seem a long way from Wanganui in the 1840s but this critique of Fanon is central to my concern with the 'problems' of cultural relativism and violence. Colonisation, in general terms, created massive injustice, was exploitative, and imposed a cultural hegemony backed by overwhelming material force over the greater part of the world's population. A commensurate focus on rights and cultures of indigenous people is, at the very least, a starting point, for alleviating some of the injustice of colonisation.

In Fanon's terms this injustice is best remedied by violence. This is essentially the same point of view that sees any act of violence by indigenous peoples as resistance. The Gilfillan killings, as I have argued in this thesis, problematise this kind of binary assertion. Their marginality, both as a result of the nature of violence portrayed, but also because of the difficulty that arises from narrating the incident in "post-colonial terms". An act of violence by Maori on Europeans is a difficult area to discuss, and indeed this difficulty is one of the reasons the stories of the Gilfillan killings have a certain resonance - they have a broader relevance than just the issues at stake in Wanganui.

The principal reason this difficulty arises is that a focus on indigenous violence is normally couched in the rhetoric of a political point of view which seeks to deny indigenous rights, and enforce an idea of progress and 'civilisation'. This point of view is illustrated in some of the texts I discussed in Chapter Two. If a critic has no desire to support this point of view and wishes to encourage instead an understanding of diversity and plurality in society then, ironically, violence such as the Gilfillan killings becomes 'difficult'. To state this more directly; if a critic was happy to narrate the Maoris as savage and brutal, due to the 'innate' violent nature of Maori society, then the Gilfillan killings is a story that makes sense. But if the critic refuses to view Maori as savage, has a strong belief in the need to engage and have tolerance of different cultural values, then what is to be done with the Gilfillans? Can cultural relativism justify the killing of children?

A further difficulty arises with the concern that making judgements about events such as the Gilfillan killings is committing the historian's worst sin of projecting present-day values into this past. This, however, is an objectivist fantasy. Every act of narration is an act of judgement, every narration subjective. This is not to overwrite the need to consider that different ways of viewing and understanding certain events existed in different cultural and temporal periods, but to say that, if we cannot help subjectivity, then that subjectivity should be recognised.

The problem is that to advocate cultural relativism is to advocate acceptance of behaviours and points of view that one does not agree with. This is all very well as far as it goes, but what if this behaviour exceeds certain boundaries - for instance slavery, the oppression of women and minorities, or even torture and genocide? No one would accept this, and I am sure that those advocating cultural relativism are not advocating this either.

Nonetheless it is still a very present contradiction. Much post-colonial criticism seems to advocate an unregarding cultural relativism, while still making a moral judgement on colonialism. I prefer to make that moral judgement explicit and, while still advocating cultural tolerance, am quite happy to say that the actions of colonisation, for example, create limits to my relativism. Another powerful argument for this anti-relativism, topical in current political discourse, relates to the degradation of the environment. The environment is shared by all humans; one cultural point of view may advocate the wholesale use of that environment for profit, for instance, in a general sense, strong free-market liberalism. I feel no need to accept this point of view, I would prefer to maintain the environment in a regulated and sustainable way.²⁰⁰ To advocate that the need to be tolerant to another cultural point of view means letting the environment be destroyed is a nonsense.

²⁰⁰ See Richard Rorty "On Ethnocentrism" in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. pp. 203- 210, for a extended, and considerably more sophisticated argument along these lines.

Turning again to the Gilfillan killings, it is strange that the need to say the killing of children is wrong feels like an act of political intolerance. This says something rather profound about a certain kind of political discourse in New Zealand; not to say that there is a surfeit of 'political correctness', a term too loose to be used with any cogency,²⁰¹ but rather that argument for cultural relativism is too broadly stated among some in the academia and public life without proper consideration. Yet, advocating cultural relativism unproblematically *is* to condone the killing of children. Moreover, to justify something as representative of a certain culture is both to essentialise that culture, representing it as a static entity, and eliding the broader range of experiences that members of that culture undergo. In historical terms, to argue that the Gilfillan killings solely represent 'resistance' is to overwrite the complexity of the Wanganui situation. In particular, it denies the validity of the experience of Putiki Maori, essentialising the response of Maori to colonisation as one of simply violent resistance. To reject this is not to remove the killings from the context of political resistance to European colonisation, nor to claim that this resistance was unjustified - indeed it is particularly understandable. Rather it is just an argument for looking at particularities not essentialisations, for focusing, in a broad sense, on histories over philosophies.

A focus on specific situations and moments in time can break through essentialising meta-narratives. It also represents an acceptance that everything is culturally situated, and that, consequently, there will be heterogeneity of experiences and a wide variety of moral goods, all of which will seem equally valid to different individuals. Any imposition of moral value will be culturally relative, the important thing is to recognise that this imposition will be, and indeed should be, open to change and renegotiation. If there is an awareness that any statement is problematised, and that an open-endedness of saying is a good thing, then hopefully there will be a backing away from totalising narratives. The act of making a statement or a judgement is itself not problematic, but a refusal to see that position change is. This is why marginal and difficult moments in history, such as the killings of the Gilfillans, are so worthwhile investigating - they make difficult the imposition of easy judgements.

²⁰¹ And, moreover, like 'common sense', is more a statement of the political point of view of those making the allegations than of an intrinsic nature of an act or political statement. This does not mean that 'political correctness' has no meaning in a political sense, as it could be used as a critique of a specific initiative, or set of initiatives, but it is an adjective, no different than 'good' or 'bad'.

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