

## Nature and the Question of Pakeha Turangawaewae

*The hills are alive with the sound of music . . .*  
– Oscar Hammerstein II

NEW ZEALAND'S NUMBER-ONE CLASSIC SONG IS CALLED 'NATURE'.<sup>1</sup> It is not so much the words people remember – 'through falling leaves I pick my way slowly . . .' – as the radiant glory of a chorus that goes 'do-do-do doo doo do-doo, do-do-do doo!' This joyous whoop, this inarticulate refrain, this true national anthem, was recorded by a group aptly known as the Formyula. Whenever Pakeha have rejoiced in their physical presence in these islands, have felt a special sense of dispensation, of simple rightness in being here; whenever it seems the sun shines especially for us; whenever person and place are in propitious alignment, we have reached beyond inarticulateness to the simple formula: feeling good about nature equals belonging. In our holiday snapshots and in our childhood memories, in arts high and low, in all forms of advertising and publicity, and in the chatter of columnists and celebrities, it would seem we are most at home, most ourselves, somewhere outdoors, in one or another of the locations that depict New Zealand as a scenic wonderland.

Almost everything seems questionable about this. In the world of politics and the media, warm fuzzies about nature and nation are as weeds. Not only are we a predominantly suburban people, only intermittently in contact with dreamscapes of bush and beach, but nature itself isn't what it used to be. These days nature is as likely to be virtual as actual, managed rather than wild, and has come to seem more and more something that culture produces than a realm beyond the ideas and frameworks we have of it. Even so, it is by no means contemptible, even now, to count oneself –

A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; . . . well pleased to recognize  
In nature and the language of the sense,  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being.<sup>2</sup>

We may not put it quite like Wordsworth but we have often transplanted the sentiments. In a thousand poems and a thousand paintings, nature is a presence whose people we become.<sup>3</sup> With a sense of intuitive rightness, the children of settlers recognise nature as home.

This gives rise to a syndrome I call Pakeha turangawaewae. I use the word turangawaewae – a place to stand – because our relationship with place, especially with the natural world and with categories derived from nature, is at the heart of the Pakeha New Zealander's sense of belonging. We feel we have a place to stand, and we have that place because we value nature. I am generalising, of course. Not everybody has had the classic New Zealand version of Wordsworth's outdoor childhood (though I did): those barefoot days spent in nature, running like a savage through the bush on manuka-needled trails, looking down through pohutukawa to the green bay below, sand in the togs from body-surfing. I am mythologising, of course. While I necessarily take my own pulses on these issues, and while I cannot write without making assumptions about the feelings of others, it should be understood in what follows that I have polled nobody – my methods are literary, not empirical. I want to untangle some of our dominant meanings of nature, and to consider the cultural work that they do. More particularly, I am interested in why it is difficult to talk about belonging without also talking about nature, and why that might constitute a problem.

Let me come back to that ungainly term: Pakeha turangawaewae. The phrase is an oxymoron. Turangawaewae, understood in the Maori sense of belonging, of having a place to stand, is not the same as the affection for place felt by Pakeha. In addition, Pakeha are not only relative newcomers and strangers but also beneficiaries of the historical marginalisation of Maori. But, just as one can use an oxymoron like

'deafening silence' to describe a particular atmosphere, so too with Pakeha turangawaewae: it is the sort of belonging you have when you don't have turangawaewae. We Pakeha are at home here, we identify as New Zealanders, this is our place, we belong – and yet, without denying any of those things, there is another degree of belonging that we do not have that is available to Maori (or perhaps to the Maori side of you). What I am calling another degree of belonging may well have ontological and epistemological dimensions – what is it to be Maori? how does one know one is? – as well as historical and political ones, but from a Pakeha perspective that extra degree need have very little positive or coherent content at all. Even as a postulated difference, as the mere possibility of a more essential mode of belonging to this place, the prior presence of Maori has shaped the kinds of belonging Pakeha have felt and recorded in their interactions with the world of Nature. The four nature studies that follow take varying notice of the prior presence of Maori, and emphasise in turn processes of domination, rapture, identification and tourism. Any one story is bound to suggest others that might have appeared in its place. The order is chronological, but this is not a sequential history so much as a sorting through of communal memories in and around nature, of old tunes we still have in our heads.

### *Climb ev'ry mountain . . .*

In the seventeenth letter of *Station Life in New Zealand*, Mary Anne Barker complains that a lack of opportunity to experience proper hardship makes her feel like 'an impostor'. 'Ever since I came here', she writes, 'I have regretted that the rapid advance of civilisation in New Zealand precludes the possibility of being really uncomfortable.'<sup>4</sup> Back home, in England, her friends are likely to think of her 'with the deepest of pity, as of one cut off from the refinements and comforts of life' (125), yet she has discovered that life on an isolated South Island sheep station in 1867 holds no terrors and few inconveniences. The people she envies are the ones who got here first, in the very early days of the Canterbury colony, in what she calls those 'primitive times' – 'only sixteen years ago' (124) – when new settlers had real adventures and surmounted real challenges. In a time and place

that we, in our turn, might regard as offering ample scope for settler heroism, Lady Barker's relation to official versions of derring-do and colonial resourcefulness often approaches parody. Even though this is the very same woman who sets her own broken shoulder, who digs drowned sheep out of snowdrifts with her bare hands, who says things like, 'it requires a steady head to cross a noisy stream on two slippery round poles' (98), her more characteristic note is a self-deprecating impersonation of settler hardihood. Excited by tales of stranded pioneers and backcountry bivouacs, Lady Barker plots to replicate the experience. 'I have been trying for some time past', she says in her best explorer voice, 'to excite in the breasts of our home party . . . an ardent desire to see the sun rise from the top of "Flagpole", a hill 3,000 feet above the level of the sea' (125).

The expedition to conquer Mt Flagpole begins as an amusement for house guests: Lady Barker and her husband Frederick Broome have 'new chums' to stay, and they head off late one afternoon with a couple of blankets for shelter and, in the 'commissariat department', a cold leg of lamb and a fine pigeon pie, tea, sugar, teaspoons and two bottles of whisky 'for the manufacture of toddy' (127). It is the tail end of an Indian summer but, as night falls, it becomes unseasonably, horribly, cold. No one sleeps, the wind howls, and they pass a night of thorough and intense wretchedness. 'There was no attempt at conviviality', recalls Lady Barker, 'subdued savageness was the prevailing state of mind' (132). But at last, at long last, up comes the sun. Her description of this moment corresponds very closely to a colonial paradigm – the traveller in a new land climbs to a high place and becomes 'monarch of all he surveys'<sup>5</sup> – yet even this very powerful experience of reorientation does not entirely subdue her feeling of displacement, of only impersonating a role.

Presently someone called out 'There's the sea' . . . ; none of us had seen it since we landed; to all of us it is associated with the idea of going home someday: whilst we were feasting our eyes on it a golden line seemed drawn on its horizon; it spread and spread, and as all the water became flooded with a light and glory which hardly seemed to belong to this world, the blessed sun came up to restore us all to life and warmth again. In a moment, in less than a moment, all our little privations and sufferings

vanished as if they had never existed . . . I did not know which side to turn to first. Behind me rose a giant forest in the far hills to the west – a deep shadow for miles, till the dark outline of the pines stood out against the dazzling snow of the mountains behind it . . . ; then I turned round to see before me such a glow of light and beauty! For an immense distance I could see the vast Canterbury plains; to the left the Waimakiriri river, flowing in many streams . . . down to the sea . . . Between us and the coast were green patches and tiny homesteads, but still few and far between; close under our feet, and looking like a thread beneath the shadow of the mountain, ran the Selwyn in a narrow gorge, and on its bank stood the shepherd's hut . . . that once afforded us such a good luncheon; it looked a mere toy, as if it came out of a child's box of playthings, and yet so snug for all its lonely position. On the other hand lay our own little home, with the faint wreath of smoke stealing up through the calm air. (133–35)

As the sun rises, there is a shift in her attention from things that are very big, to things that seem progressively smaller: from an immense view of the mountain ranges, to the patchwork of the plains, to villages and tiny homesteads, to a cottage she describes as 'a mere toy, as if it came from a child's box of playthings' (135). It is as if her eye is unconsciously dominating that space by partitioning it, by seeing bits of it as small and, by implication, of herself as large. In writing about this moment later, there is a tell-tale adjustment in her sense of belonging: early in the passage, the word home refers to England; at its close, as Lady Barker recalls looking down on what has previously been described as a house or a homestead, she is prompted to write of 'her snug little home'. Thus, as savage dark gives way to civilised dawn, it is as if that one night recapitulates the work of sixteen years of settlement, of the transformation of an unfamiliar, dark and unfriendly domain into a landscape they know and can name, and which has for the first time become home.

But two rather more curious pieces of behaviour complicate an apparently conventional colonial scene. First, there is a supplementary ritual: 'Our last act was to collect all the stones we could move into a huge cairn, which was built round a tall pole of totara; on the summit of this we tied securely, with flax, the largest and strongest pocket-handkerchief' (136). This ceremony has all the makings of a

parody of real explorer behaviour but, in these circumstances, their mimicry of raising the Union Jack over foreign territory is not without reverence. It is a sign of their silent identification with the movement from savage night to civilised dawn, with the narrative of colonisation as it would appear from the seat of Empire; but their little ritual strikes me as overplayed to a small degree. It is as if the emotional and ideological significance of that sunrise were a little out of kilter, and required this compensating memorial. The ceremony around the cairn then concludes with the exuberance one feels when shedding a more serious role: as the party returns, 'The gentlemen began rolling huge rocks down the sides of the hills and watching them crashing and thundering into the valleys, sometimes striking another rock and then bounding high into the air' (136).

I would certainly enjoy doing that – it is not often one has an opportunity to be a hooligan on such a Herculean scale. Lady Barker does not join in on this occasion – she takes care to keep above the men, so as 'not to be crushed under a small stone of twenty tons or so' – but she understands the regressive appeal of their behaviour. She is like that herself whenever she has an opportunity to indulge 'The Exceeding Joy of Burning' (194). As far as she is concerned, nothing beats dragging a blazing stick along the grass and watching 'a great wall of fire rushing up-hill as straight as a line' (195), or the crack and flare of an exploding flax bush.

In the course of that night and in the sunrise of that splendid morning, a small drama of emplacement and displacement has been enacted. They began as impostors, as people who lack credentials as settlers or pioneers, but are then called back to themselves in an experience whose imperial overtones have prompted a style of belonging. This is something they surely believe in, yet I think they also have an inkling that the role does not quite suit them – at least, not in that place. They have metamorphosed away from metropolitan civility, and even though they try in so many ways to reproduce it, their sympathies have become rather more wild and more primitive. It would be a mistake to say they have 'gone native' – Maori barely register in *Station Life* – but one might say they have kicked over the traces and 'gone settler'. Across the Tasman, a little bit of un-English savagery and much wanton destruction of nature would qualify one as a first

Australian, but the likes of Lady Barker and Frederick Broome are rather more distant as forebears in this genealogy of Pakeha feelings of turangawaewae. This is not simply because the couple had no future here – having made an unwise land purchase, they could not recover from heavy stock losses and returned to England – but because it would take more than running a sheep station to localise in New Zealand. They are my example of a zero degree of belonging, from which other writers begin to register a more local difference by venturing a relation to Maori. But I think of them as ancestors nonetheless, for it is not their burned off and eroded hillsides we relate to, but the separate conservation estate that, as a consequence of their transformation of the environment, becomes Nature for us instead. Without settlers like Lady Barker, there would have been fewer ecological catastrophes – and fewer reserves to run wild in.

### *Ford ev'ry stream . . .*

In the early 1910s, New Zealand's best living poet ventured up the Whanganui River in search of scenery. A nature tourist might well have been tempted to book an overnight berth on the paddle steamer from Taumarunui to Whanganui, but for the traveller interested in beauty 'rather than mere mileage', there was only one way to experience the Whanganui: to hire a native canoe and pole the twenty miles upstream from Pipiriki to Parinui.<sup>6</sup> Blanche Baughan, then in her late thirties, had already written most of the poems – 'The Old Place', 'A Bush Section' – which have become standard inclusions in our anthologies. She had also filed a remarkable photo-essay on the Milford Track for the London *Spectator* in 1908 – 'The Finest Walk in the World' – and followed that success with similar essays on the 'Snow Kings of the Southern Alps' and the 'Uncanny Country' of Rotorua's thermal district.<sup>7</sup> In these pieces, she has already developed the mannerism of taking the reader along with her in her travel writing, but in doing so, and without necessarily paying the matter much attention, she cannot write without revealing the supposed whereabouts of both writer and the person she writes for.

'A River of Pictures and Peace' begins with an account of the origins of the Whanganui River. 'Once upon a time, says an old Maori legend,

two brother mountains, whose home was near Lake Taupo, in the centre of the North Island of New Zealand, fell in love with a maiden mountain living near' (157). Old Maori legends do not begin 'Once upon a time' and would not explain the whereabouts of Lake Taupo; the information cues in and points to an overseas reader. The fairy tale formula also establishes a contrast: 'The *pakeha* puts the matter much more prosaically in his geography books', she writes, and goes on to give a geography book account of the river's formation before inviting the reader to 'Choose which explanation you will!' This is not a Pakeha writing. The narrator is un-situated, at a remove from both Maori legend and Pakeha textbooks, and the reader she writes for would seem to be an armchair traveller who is also not from New Zealand. No doubt this is in keeping with the fact that she was initially writing for the readers of a London magazine, but it also signals a curious fault line that runs through her account. On one side, there is an implicit claim to extensive local knowledge; on the other, there is a strong impression that she is a visitor writing for armchair travellers from overseas. Yet in the course of telling her story, this pattern changes considerably: the tension between here and there dissolves in a rapturous merging with the landscape and results in a reorientation of both the writer and her audience as local. 'Do you remember the Maori legend of the mists?' she asks later, talking as one Kiwi to another.

This does not happen when she is writing about other scenic parts of New Zealand. Early in her study of the 'Snow Kings' she observes:

As one stands here upon this rocky-vantage point and sees this mountain-world, Man does not count; one does not think of him. There is no sign of visible habitation; it is the actual presence of these mighty forms that engrosses one's whole attention, not the remembrance of their scanty mortal associations; while, as for the citizen surnames imposed (often with what manifest incongruity!) upon these august majesties, far from their humanizing the landscape, the landscape has de-humanized them; warm meanings of flesh and blood they now connote no more, but stand only for splendid entities, motionless, pure, of silent rock and ice. This ocean of the snows, in brief, is so immense, the barque of human enterprise upon it so small, that the effect upon the mind at gaze is that of a quite shipless sea, a solitude still inviolate. (59)

Perhaps no other New Zealand theme has been so thoroughly mined as the idea that our natural environment – our 'scenery' – is not only splendid and imposing in its pristine isolation, but also that its grandeur inevitably marks how small, how shallow, how transient our footing on this place really is.<sup>8</sup> Baughan's alpine essay starts by acknowledging the lofty indifference of the New Zealand landscape to its human settlers, but unlike the cultural nationalists of the 1930s who made this a sign of an insecure cultural identity, a deficiency to be remedied by a more considered relation to settlement, Baughan develops a more radical Romantic response. The protagonist of her voyages into scenery may initially feel a sense of alienated detachment from nature, but that feeling of being at a remove from our environment, a mere consumer of the scenery we pass through, turns out to be superficial and false. Venture into nature and the haze soon falls away; the traveller is refreshed and overcome by an intense perception that human beings and nature are one: 'that the universe is nowhere dead matter, but everywhere alive and active . . . . In the solitudes of the sea, one sometimes suspects this; in these precincts of Aorangi one is sure of it' (101).

If those precincts were still known by their 'citizen surname', were still plain old Mt Cook, one wonders whether the transcendental moment would have taken hold quite so well. 'Let us allow [Mt Cook] his far more just and melodious native name', she writes earlier. 'See, is he not truly *Aorangi*, *Bright Light in the Sky*, where yonder to the north of our peak, he stands and shines above us?' (60). Where the European word would only name, the Maori word is like a natural sign, a word that names more truly; it is my first, although a relatively thin, example of something Maori mediating a European sense of belonging by being at one with nature. But the place Baughan writes from is not home: she writes this essay throughout as a visiting cosmopolitan romantic, as one who has the opportunity to put a thought experiment of Ruskin's into action – what would the French Alps be like if one could encounter them on their own terms, without the intervening overlay of human history? – and the reader she addresses is always situated elsewhere, is always a reader whose indulgence about local matters is sought in the invitation to imagine oneself at her side.

Baughan believed that Maori regarded the Southern Alps 'always with veneration and awe, and, fearing to profane, avoided them'

(58). She was wrong. The mountains had been extensively mapped, explored and traversed by Maori, but their maps, as Wystan Curnow has explained, were oral and imperceptible to Europeans who had ‘lost their ear for cartography’.<sup>9</sup> The Whanganui River, on the other hand, is unmistakably linked with ‘the history of both the brown man and the white’; it is ‘a furrow of former violence that has brought forth peace, an old road of ruin that has become a highway of beauty’ (158). The obvious historical dimension of this landscape not only helps distinguish this essay from Baughan’s other studies in scenery, it also gives rise to many passages in praise of what she calls blending. A fellow passenger, for example, is described this way:

*Pakeha* is the cut, Maori the amplitude, of that moss-green velvet coat and skirt! The lady’s blouse, of Tussock silk, hangs beltless; her hat is an erection, in the latest style, of milliner’s roses; she wears one earring, composed of a large shark’s tooth . . . and at her neck there dangles a magnificent pendant of greenstone, probably a very ancient and valuable heirloom. What is she pulling out now from those rich recesses of her coat? A little black pipe! which she fills, with aplomb, and smokes with enjoyment; and then, putting it carefully back, she draws out a little beautifully-embroidered white handkerchief, and wipes her beautifully-tattooed mouth. There is a real ‘Maori lady of the transition period’ for you, if you like!

And really, the river itself shows something of the same racial blend; for poplars mingle with cabbage trees and karakas on its banks, and willows, we shall find, fringe it all the way up. (165)

The Maori woman and the river are figurative as well as literal illustrations of a process of ‘blending’. Both the woman and the river relate to New Zealand’s ‘racial’ history by synecdoche, as parts standing for the whole, and each part can suggest the other through the type of blending we call metonymy, for Baughan relates the natural world to the Maori world by propinquity, and vice versa. This laceration of figurative interconnections helps give the ‘blending’ of Maori and European worlds, evident even in the names of the kainga on the river, a warm and positive image. At Jerusalem – ‘melodised into Hiruharama’ (169) – features of an older Maori world appear to

combine with European constructions as if by an enchanter’s wand, without edges, strain or incongruity.

And now, fifty miles up river, set upon a hill, above a glassy bend, is Jerusalem – the largest *pa* on the river, and the picture of pleasantness. The hill is crowned by the pale-painted buildings of church and convent, standing clear against the tree-dark ranges beyond; beneath them spreads the *pa*, with its gay *whares* and *wharepunis*, yellow and red and green, its long-legged storehouses, its tall trees, fruit-groves and gardens. Men sit about on the *wharepuni* verandahs, women play with their babies, coloured clothing hangs among the trees, blue smoke rises for the evening meal; at the landing-place children and the river complete the picture. (172)

The word picture Baughan paints is remarkably still. The *pa*, with its harmonious mix of church and *wharepuni*, convent and gay *whares*, is seen from the middle distance, and in terms that remind me of the romanticised unreality of a *pa* scene painted by Lindauer. Yet Baughan is writing for people who might not be disposed to see a contemporary Maori *pa* in anything like so positive a light, who might well need all her adjectival nudging in order to regard this backwater as a harmonious blend of Maori and European worlds. In the 1910s Baughan is moving cultural boundaries and formulating new habits of thought and perception that our settler ancestors would need to learn, normalise and ultimately forget as obvious in a country that prided itself on having the best scenery and the best race relations in the world.<sup>10</sup>

As we leave the steamer for the native canoe, and as we slip further and further up the river, we are gradually invited into a space that takes the tranquillity of Hiruharama to a higher order still. ‘The river is silent in its flowing, the men fall silent also. You sit poised and stirless; the notebook lies unopened on my knee. The spell of the river has fallen upon us, and our eyes are opened’ (176). The power of that spell is conveyed in two phases. The first involves a multiplication of detail, of very minute detail, closely observed over several pages of her text. Each bend in the river brings a new delight: the ‘cliff with all its laces and embroideries of green’ (178); a pool where ‘every grass-blade, every moss-coat, verdant or ruddy, of the banks, every fern frond, glint