

Straying from Myth

MARIAN MAGUIRE

LET ME BEGIN BY SAYING that I am best known for three sets of prints that combine New Zealand colonial history with Ancient Greek vase painting: *The Odyssey of Captain Cook* (2005), *The Labours of Herakles* (2008) and *Titokowaru's Dilemma* (2011). When asked to speak about my work I almost always start with *Ko wai koe?* (fig. 1), a lithograph from the *Cook* series, and that was my starting place when I gave the 2020 Trendall Lecture of which this article is a later, written up version.

Explaining *Ko wai koe?* isn't straightforward. It was first exhibited in 2005 but came to me many years earlier while making *Southern Myths* (2002), a series of etchings in which I set an adapted plotline from the *Iliad* in the South Island of New Zealand. I had been

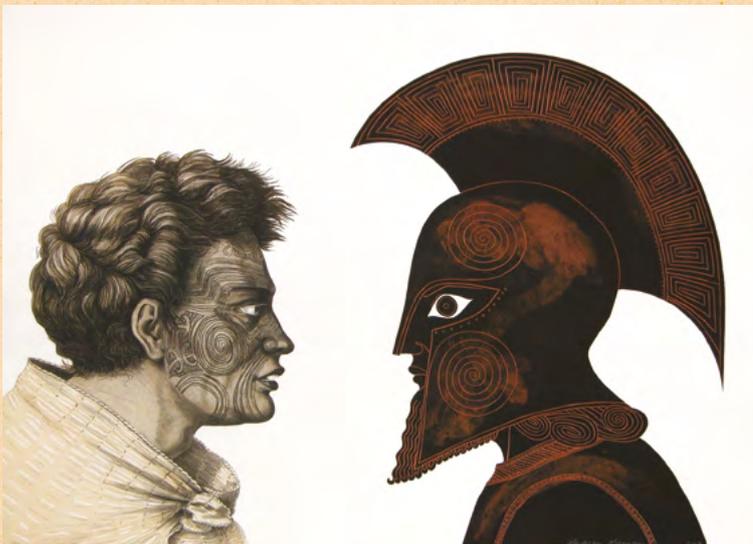
wrestling with whether one could import myth into a land already replete with myth. Can land hold multiple stories or does one displace another? The image doesn't answer this question but it does reflect my conundrum. A related question was: If the Greeks arrived in New Zealand, how did they get here? Captain Cook brought them, I decided. Neo-classicism was in vogue in the late eighteenth century and Ancient Greece had been claimed as the birthplace of European civilisation. It made sense to me that the Greeks might travel as cultural baggage aboard the *Endeavour*. This became the starting point for the series *The Odyssey of Captain Cook*.

A year or more passed before I drew the two facing heads on lithographic stone, thus making the impression in my imagination actual. The Māori head on the left is copied from a French lithograph of a man named Natai. The original drawing was made during the voyage of the *Astrolabe* of 1826–29. On return to France it was redrawn onto lithographic stone then printed. There is no logical sense in using a French source when the overarching series relates to the voyages of Captain Cook, some sixty years earlier. I didn't so much choose the image as seek out a memory. Natai's profile was lodged in my internal image bank and from there it jumped into the initial inspiration. I can see why. It's the naturalism. I could feel his

▼ Fig 1. Marian Maguire, 'Ko wai koe? (who are you?)', lithograph, 2003, 510 x 700mm

IMAGE: MARIAN MAGUIRE

Background: Detail taken from fig. 2, p. 69.





skin, touch that thick mop of hair, imagine his eyes moving, his lips speaking. For me he was a real person not a representative of type. This is in contrast to the stylised Greek on the right. I drew him as a stock figure inspired by Greek vase painting but derived from no particular vase. A warrior. Masked by his helmet, depersonalised, a stranger. Both Māori and Greek carry a spiral; one tattooed into skin, the other decorating bronze.

I didn't settle on the title until three years after conceiving the image and it is no surprise that the title forms a question. Who are you? My initial idea was that the Māori man was asking this of the Greek stranger. But curiosity runs both ways. Over the years *Ko wai koe?* has been repeatedly exhibited and I have come to feel that the question is being asked of the viewer—'Who are you? Who are you all?' But lately that has been changing. Now, more often than not, I ask *myself* the question: 'Who am I?'

I am a Pākehā New Zealander, descendant on my mother's side from nineteenth-century arrivals. My father came from England after the Second World War. I was born in Christchurch, raised Catholic and carry an Irish name. Our large family were like migrants in our suburb; we had no blood relatives nearby. My mother is a North Islander and my father sailed from

bombed-out Manchester in the hope of a fresh start. Despite this sense of migrancy I feel very connected to where I live. The South Island, Te Waipounamu, has been my home my whole life. I tell you this because it is part of Māori protocol to declare one's lineage, affiliations and homeplace before naming oneself or entering a discussion. In this way listeners may know where loyalties lie.

During his first exploration of the South Pacific, Captain Cook was advantaged by having Tupaia aboard the *Endeavour*. Tupaia joined following the sojourn in Tahiti where Cook had observed the Transit of Venus. Tahiti was then called the Society Islands, as it was a hospitable refuelling stop for British and French ships. Tupaia was a Ra'iātean priest and navigator who coached Cook on the correct way to make approach within Polynesia. In the engravings of the period we see Captain Cook arriving on freshly discovered lands accompanied in the longboat by sailors and/or armed soldiers. The sailing ship at anchor in the distance is often pictured blasting cannon in a show of power. Though omitted from these scenes, Tupaia was there as well. And for me he still is, implied in Cook's knowing to carry a palm frond when greeting strangers on their own turf.

▲ Fig 2. Marian Maguire, 'Captain Cook makes his Approach from the West', lithograph, 2005, 365 x 600mm
IMAGE: MARIAN MAGUIRE

In my 2005 lithograph *Captain Cook makes his Approach from the West* (fig. 2) Cook is again about to step onto the beach, frond in hand signifying peaceful intent. This time he is without oarsmen or armed soldiers. The longboat holds another vessel; an oversize amphora picturing two warriors in contest. The *Endeavour* in the background blasts cannon in support. Despite this, Cook is disadvantaged. He brings the West with him but makes his approach from the right and, in European pictorial terms, entering a picture from the right is like walking into a strong headwind. On the left side of the picture, the protagonist's side, a Māori chief calmly stands. He wears a dogskin cloak and is armed with mere and tewhatewha. He is tangata whenua, a person of the land, and has turangawaewae, a place to stand. Cook, in making his approach from the right, must ask permission.

I copied the Māori chief from a drawing made by Sydney Parkinson. Parkinson was known to have a copy of Homer's *Iliad* with him aboard the *Endeavour*. I imagine him reading by lantern light of Agamemnon, Achilles and Hector while the ship rocks and creaks, then by day recording the plants, animals and people of exotic lands.

Memory is a vessel just as a boat is. Humans carry ancestral stories wherever they go. To live

without stories strips us of our cultural roots, deprives us of example, makes us lesser human beings. Myths guide through metaphor. I have come to the conclusion that living without myth is impoverishing.

Stories change over time. They are affected by the roll of events and changing environments; but the tracery is still there. My guess is that those stories that don't adapt lose relevance and are forgotten. Perhaps there are forgotten stories which could guide us now, as we face a pandemic? It would not be possible for humanity to remember hundreds, if not thousands, of generations of stories. Like emigration, storytelling involves packing. Some stories we take with us, others we leave behind.

While *The Odyssey of Captain Cook* was about first meeting, *The Labours of Herakles* was about the colonial push. For, having found New Zealand, the ancient Greeks desired to colonise it. It was the pattern of millennia. Who better to do that job than Herakles; my stand-in for the British settler?

One of the first lithographs was *Herakles signs the Treaty of Waitangi* (fig. 3), the founding document of our nation. Queen Victoria backs a lion-skin-clad Herakles while the Union Jack flaps above. They are on the left. The pictorial flow is with them. The Māori chief in the dogskin cloak, supported by carved ancestors,

► Fig 3. Marian Maguire, 'Herakles signs the Treaty of Waitangi'. lithograph, 2006/7, 394 x 614mm

IMAGE: MARIAN MAGUIRE



is now pushed to the right; the receiving end of the picture. The Treaty *will* be signed, colonisation is coming. In other lithographs Herakles proceeds to survey the land, clear it, establish farming, introduce plants and animals. He meets the neighbours and fights them. He exploits whatever resources he finds. I remember, during the lecture, saying: 'Don't be a Herakles.' I think of the word 'herakles' as more of a verb than a noun. For without action, what is he?

Herakles was no thinker. He achieved his objectives but did not set them. It was King Eurystheus who directed his initial twelve labours and his continuing exploits were at the behest of others. It was not in his nature to consider the wisdom of what he was doing; success was his goal, strength and perseverance his attributes. There is virtue in determination but Herakles' drive was excessive; he was unstoppable. He could not see the wood for the trees and look what happened to the trees. Being good at doing something is not the same thing as it being a good thing to do.

My protagonist in *The Labours of Herakles* sometimes failed. At times he was despondent or lonely or on the back foot. He doubted. And this reflects settler experience. Within accounts and letters one finds sadness at the disappearance of the forest and birdsong. Or recognition that land sales were shonky and that Māori in the neighbouring village were being disenfranchised. For most settlers, however, returning to England simply wasn't an option, so neither was giving up. In any case, there existed an underlying conviction that the spread of European civilisation was a good thing, bringing the benefits of Christianity, technology and the rule of law to 'savage races' who would thus emerge from darkness to light. Mythical Herakles succeeded through strength and determination. Settlers succeeded through shared vision and force of numbers.

The machinery of colonisation is huge. What colonists wanted was: the arable land, British-style government with the associated rule of law. In fairly quick time, and in contravention to the Treaty of Waitangi, these were largely achieved. The Treaty had, in its Māori translation, guaranteed Māori sovereignty—

tino rangatiratanga—but this was never honoured by the Crown. Although they were now British subjects, the rule of law offered little protection, indeed laws were frequently manipulated to wrest land and rights from them. When territory could not be acquired legally, other means were found. The above is a summary all New Zealanders are by now familiar with.

Shame, guilt, defensiveness: the reactions of descendants on both sides. For Pākehā, pride in our great-grandparents' well-intentioned exertions is now mixed with feelings of guilt. Māori struggled for more than a century to have the Treaty honoured but the system was stacked against them from the start. Fighting an unjust system must have been deeply fatiguing. Parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were repeatedly told to be quiet and get used to it, to give in. Generations of demoralisation, of being history's losers, take their toll and those victimised often feel shame. Shame and frustration can be inherited. Māori are frequently blamed for their current position. As soon as we start talking about blame, positions polarise. Defensiveness leads to closed ears. Without listening there can be no healing.

I wrote the phrase 'the machinery of colonisation is huge' in the present tense because colonisation is still in action. We see it in the felling of the Amazon, mining through fragile ecosystems, depriving orangutans of their habitat for palm oil, converting village-based diverse farming into genetically modified monocultures. I think of the people on the ground as the 'herakles': road workers, crane operators, miners, loggers, farm workers. Individually, as moral as the rest of us, most just trying to survive. Behind the 'herakles' are multi-national companies. Behind them are investors and consumers, the enablers who provide the means and the motive. We all know it. We need to touch the Earth more lightly. Consume mindfully and consume less.

I come back to the usefulness of myths and how they guide us. Ancient Herakles slew monsters and controlled wild animals, making land safe for human habitation. Through the Hellenistic period, his exploits spread



▲ Fig 4. Marian Maguire, 'Herakles surprised by Maoris who were driven off with Heavy Losses', lithograph, 2007, 405 x 580mm

IMAGE: MARIAN MAGUIRE

throughout the Mediterranean along with the Greek colonial push. Mythical Herakles has repeatedly provided a useful model when endurance brings rewards. Times have changed and the guidance we find in the Herakles myth must change with it. This doesn't make it irrelevant. We just need to learn something different from it.

I hit upon something early on: triangulation. Including three factors in the pictorial narrative keeps it flowing. What was a dialogue becomes a trialogue and the conversation has more movement. I've also come to realise that oppositional adjectives cause problems. Light/dark, good/bad, weak/strong, dominant/submissive, flourishing/declining, civilised/uncivilised can lead to simplistic thinking. For example: 'I am civilised, I am good, I am right. They are different from me, "other", therefore, they must be uncivilised, bad and wrong.' Though we know this to be faulty logic, thoughts such as these may still lurk in the subconscious. A sliding scale between two extremes doesn't always make sense either.

Using black-to-white as a metaphor, one could completely immerse oneself in shades of grey, totally fill one's vision with the luxury of infinite variation. In doing so one completely forgets colour. Or texture. Or wetness, dryness, heat, taste, smell, sound. Simplification may be satisfying but seldom reflects reality. History is not simple, many factors are at play, and often when I am reading I find myself thinking 'yes, but' or 'what about...?' Bringing the ancient Greeks into an imagined New Zealand cultural narrative was something I stumbled upon and I am lucky. My thoughts are slowed by the complication. For me, the ancient Greeks have been the lever that has kept the lid off quick conclusions.

Colonisation in New Zealand was ultimately driven through by force, yet I only referred to the Land Wars once in the *Labours of Herakles* series. My lithograph *Herakles surprised by Maoris who are driven off with Heavy Losses* (fig. 4) is based on a watercolour by Gustavus von Tempsky, a soldiering adventurer who died in 1867 at the battle of Te Ngutu-o-te-Manu

in South Taranaki. The Māori victory that day was remarkable. It was one of several led and won by Riwha Titokowaru, prophet and skilled military strategist from Ngāruahine (which during the nineteenth century was a sub-tribe of Ngāti Ruanui and has since become its own iwi.) By 1867, armed conflict had erupted through several tribal territories across the North Island. What drew me to Titokowaru was the tension between making peace and waging war. I called the series *Titokowaru's Dilemma*.

Some historical background. Following the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, most Māori accepted the Pākehā newcomers. Many had adopted Christianity and were participating in the new economy. However, increasing pressure came upon them to sell land, whenua, the loss of which was costing them dearly. Apart from supplying the basics of life, the whenua connected them with their ancestors, their history, their roots. They felt themselves part of the whenua, integral to it. Māori identity was, and for many still is, tied to land. In 1858 the King Movement formed. It was a coalition of central North Island iwi who resolved to sell no more. With migrants arriving by the boatload, this was causing problems.

Migrants had been sold an idea. Expectant that an acreage would be forthcoming, would-be farmers milled frustratedly in the towns, on dwindling resources. Season followed season. The term 'land hunger' is repeatedly used during this period. Some gave up and went home and the whole colonial project appeared under threat. Settlers hadn't come all this way to live in a Māori land, something incomprehensible to them. Their aspiration was to build the Britain of the South, a recognisable version of Home.

I don't have room here to describe the lead-up to the Waikato Invasion and am mindful that in condensing history it is impossible not to create distortions. Brevity has its price. Nonetheless, I continue. In 1860 a massive British Imperial force was mobilised. Infantry advanced south from Auckland on a road built for the purpose. Navy, meantime, sailed heavily gunned warships up the Waikato River.

To get an impression of the scale, imagine Armstrong guns like those in the American Civil War being blasted at wooden pā, Māori fortifications. Imperial forces were victorious and, although the King Movement was not broken by this assault, Māori lost a great deal of territory. Large swathes of the arable land colonists had been after were confiscated.

The seaward land around Mount Taranaki formed part of the confiscations. Even at the time this was deemed illegal. Piece by piece the land was surveyed. In order to ready it for settlers, inhabitants were cleared off. This was done through 'bush scouring', which was understood by townsfolk as the rooting out of rebels in their forest strongholds. In reality it was systematic raiding of soft targets: villages were burnt, crops trampled, people killed. Starvation, illness and grief followed these raids, and with kin in neighbouring villages also affected, there was a limit to how much Māori could do to support each other. They were forced closer to the mountain and their situation was becoming increasingly untenable. I made a lithograph called *Cause and Effect* (fig. 5) that describes this but does scant justice to the injustice. There are four vase shapes. The top two show flip sides of a vase I called 'Neck Amphora by the Confiscation Painter, 1865-66'. On one side a settler family sit down to roast mutton in their newly built wooden house, through the window we view the lower slopes of Taranaki. On the reverse side soldiers on horseback trample Māori cultivations having triumphantly burned the village and chased off the people. Settlers get to eat because Māori go hungry. Below is another vase. This one I called 'Belly Amphora by the Provocation Painter, 1868-69' and here I come again to the battle at Te Ngutu-o-te-Manu and Titokowaru. He orchestrated his victory by provoking a fight on a prepared position. On one side of the vase I pictured a settler's house burned and a man killed. On the flip side, sirens, like those who lured Greek sailors to rocks and shipwreck, beckon colonial soldiers towards palisades and rifle pits. It is a trap. The sirens used song. Titokowaru used propaganda.

While researching towards *Titokowaru's Dilemma*, I looked for parallels in Homer's *Iliad*,

and found some, but to think seriously about war I needed a philosopher. Socrates has been my guide.

Socrates brought philosophy to the agora, the marketplace. Philosophy, the love of wisdom, was, he argued, for everyone. He would ask Athenians questions like ‘What is virtue?’, ‘What is justice?’ or ‘What is love?’

and they, assuming they knew the answer, started confidently but then struggled to form definitions that survived his further probing. Though ‘virtue’, ‘justice’ and ‘love’ are commonplace terms, central to the ethos of society, they aren’t easy to pin down. Socrates encouraged people to think harder, to question more and to discuss. ‘Virtue is knowledge’, he

► Fig 5. Marian Maguire, ‘Cause and Effect’ lithograph, 2010, 765 x 570mm
IMAGE: MARIAN MAGUIRE





is quoted as saying. I take that to mean the *pursuit* of knowledge, for he also tells us true wisdom involves recognising we may be wrong.

I think Socrates and Titokowaru would have enjoyed a conversation if they had had the opportunity. Titokowaru was not just a clever military strategist; he was a spiritual leader, a thoughtful man. Before making the decision to fight he hosted a series of hui, meetings, promoting peace and adaptation. He also led a peace hikoi, a march from Taranaki to Whanganui in an attempt to persuade other tribes to build a workable relationship with the settlers despite the pain of recent war and confiscation. Unfortunately, the bush scouring continued and survival was threatened. The decision to take up arms would not have been made lightly as there was much at stake. Titokowaru led Ngāti Ruanui and allies to several victories but ultimately they lost their war. Later, he and many of his followers joined

the passive resistance campaign at Parihaka, which was led by Te Whiti and Tohu, spiritual men who had always been devoted to pacifism. Passive resistance didn't work either. In fact, resistance of any kind proved unacceptable to colonial authorities. The peaceful, self-sufficient village of Parihaka was invaded in 1881. Its men were taken as prisoners and shipped to the South Island, where they were used as slave labourers. The women were raped. It is only in the last few years that this painful history has come more fully to the surface. Both sides had buried their shame.

One of the lithographs in the *Titokowaru's Dilemma* series is *Te Whiti and Titokowaru discuss the question, 'What is Peace?'* (fig. 6). Surely it is more than the absence of war.

It is impossible to work on a long-running series of projects about colonisation (it has been nearly twenty years now) and not be fundamentally challenged and changed. In 2018

▲ Fig 6. Marian Maguire, 'Titokowaru and Te Whiti discuss the question, 'What is Peace?', lithograph, 2010/11, 460 x 655mm

IMAGE: MARIAN MAGUIRE

I was honoured to be formally adopted by Ngāti Hāua hapu of Ngaruahinerangi, South Taranaki. This expands my loyalties and responsibilities. I didn't declare my adoption earlier when I wrote of my lineage and holding back in this way reminds me of Odysseus, the man of twists and turns, who didn't always reveal his identity. This takes me to deception, and I ask a question Socrates may have put if he were here: 'What is a Treaty?' Is it an agreement made in good faith that should be honoured? Or is it a wedge, a ruse, a way in, like Odysseus's wooden horse? My friends in Taranaki say the Treaty is a covenant, a promise yet to be fulfilled. It is a relationship that must be perpetually built and built over again. To me, this seems like wisdom.

I can't remember how I ended the Trendall Lecture but doubt it was with a conclusion. I've come to think of my images as steps on an ongoing journey. The lecture was a step on that path, this piece of writing, another. My thinking has developed along the way and I am glad of that. Surely the point of learning is to expand one's mind. I have decided to finish on a new quandary.

While writing, I have been reflecting on Captain Cook and his crew arriving on islands in the Pacific. They were compelled to approach inhabitants—strangers who spoke different languages and had different manners—and request from them food and water. This brought to mind Odysseus's voyaging. He likewise sought hospitality, *xenia*, without which he could not have survived. I've been thinking about greetings, first meetings and declarations of self. About what it means to be a resident or a visitor, host or guest. To be of-the-land or just passing through.

Many indigenous traditions claim Earth, Sea and Sky as ancestors. So too in the Māori creation story, where the union between the Sky Father Ranginui and the Earth Mother Papatūānuku brought forth life. The sea,

Tangaroa, is an uncle; also kin. Being revered ancestors, Rangi, Papa and Tangaroa are accorded the respect that befits their status.

This leads me to think about our relationship with the planet as we face climate change. Earth gives substance, air gives breath. The sea: a body of water. By giving and taking of its body through the weather cycle it waters our crops and sustains us; in our veins blood flows slightly salty. The relationship between earth, sea and sky is a dynamic one and provides us the environment in which we live. I wonder whether, fundamentally, deep in our subconscious, we see ourselves as people-of-the-land or as guests. If people-of-the-land, we would understand profoundly we are inseparable from the world in which we live. If we are guests, the question must be asked: Are we like the suitors who plagued Penelope as she awaited Odysseus's return—too many, too greedy and without shame? Or are we honourable guests, accepting Earth's bounteous hospitality and showing the respect our generous host deserves? ¶

This is a written up version of the 2020 Trendall Lecture which was given on 28 January at the 41st Australasian Society for Classical Studies at the University of Otago. As such it is not a transcript of the original lecture but rather a new version based on it. Anyone who attended the Lecture is asked to forgive omissions and diversions.



MARIAN MAGUIRE is a New Zealand artist best known for her lithographs and etchings which combine ancient Greek vase painting with New Zealand colonial history. Her print series have been exhibited widely throughout New Zealand and in the UK, Germany, Belgium and Australia. Her recent series, *Goddesses*, departs from the colonial theme. Alongside figurative imagery, Maguire has produced many exhibitions of abstract geometric paintings or invented plant drawings in which her interest in patterns, and the disruption of patterns, becomes evident.