

Ancestry and Colonisation

Reflections

BY HEATHER DENNY

My interest in Treaty issues started in 2004 when the foreshore and seabed controversy was raging. As Māori have become more willing to share their experiences, I have become acutely aware of the long-lasting intergenerational trauma and disadvantage that they have suffered and the degree of my inherited privilege.

At Easter 2018 I attended a family reunion in New Plymouth, during and after which my father's family history was fleshed out and circulated. I had grown up believing there was so much to be proud of: the ancestral settler coming from lowland Scotland as a carpenter, working hard, developing a farm, becoming a public figure and eventually the grandfather to my grandfather who was a lawyer, a magistrate, the Mayor of New Plymouth during World War I, and, for a short while, the Chief Justice of Western Samoa.

Then I began to read the history through the lens of Māori dispossession and see the key achievements of this branch of my family in a very different light.

The ancestral settler was from lowland Scotland and acquired land in what is now central Wellington which had been 'bought' in an extremely dubious way from local iwi. Everything about the purchase was suspect and controversial, and the story is riddled with misunderstanding about whether the land had been bought at all and who it was bought from. But the settlers prevailed.

He later bought a farm near Turakina. This land was, according to the relevant Waitangi Tribunal Report, bought fairly from Ngāti Apa who were keen to have these Scottish settlers in their neighbourhood, though I understand that later there were issues about promises about the 'reserves' set aside for them not being fully honoured, leading to subsequent land loss.

Even if it was all above board when James bought the land and his farm didn't include some of the land set aside for reserves, the fact remained that the money he used to buy that land came from the sale of his allotment in Wellington. He and his descendants benefitted considerably from this and became part of the Pākehā middle class, with power, status and property.

What happened to the descendants of the original owners of that Wellington land? I have heard that some of them migrated to Parihaka.

Two of James's sons who were born in lowland Scotland in the 1830s were, according to my proud family history – and I quote, '[officers] in the Māori Wars'. One, with his family, were victims of a Te Kooti-led raid and murder at Matawhero.

This was seen as an unprovoked act by a group of Māori in spite of the fact that 'his relationship with Māori was good'. It was a terrible tragedy, but so were the reprisals against Māori that took place afterwards and, presumably, what led to the attack.

What did the reports of his 'having a good relationship with Māori' mean? At best, attitudes to Māori were incredibly paternalistic at the time and long afterwards. The other, who was a Captain, was based in New Plymouth. What if he was part of the armed constabulary that invaded Parihaka? So far the information I have is too sketchy to know.

And now to consider his son, my grandfather, who by all accounts was a conscientious and dedicated mayor and magistrate and was briefly Chief Justice of Western Samoa post World War I.

The family were very proud of his achievement, but it was interesting to read in my father's memoir that his father was appointed to Western Samoa because of his knowledge of NZ land law.

He was, no doubt, therefore tasked with imposing a European concept of land ownership on a Polynesian people. It is on record that later that decade there was a rebellion against the injustices of that regime.

The point of all this is not to vilify my forebears, who were no doubt (with the exception of any involvement in the Parihaka atrocities) doing what they were brought up to do: serve King and country, work hard to support family, and obey superiors, but to recognise that I and my family have prospered on the back of land loss and trauma that has had severe intergenerational consequences for Māori and the people of Western Samoa.

What can I do about it? I can't turn the clock back, but I can acknowledge the reality and implications of this history and support any moves by tangata whenua to seek redress.