Tree Sense

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Ways of thinking about trees

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N.M.ADAMS

Introduction

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Some time ago now, a curious event occurred right outside my window. My neighbour fired up his chainsaw and proceeded to trim a young, self-sown pōhutukawa that was growing on the edge of the footpath outside his house and leaning towards nearby power lines. It was, he believed, impeding the performance of his computer by brushing against the wires. Another neighbour, passing by, called out to the tree trimmer, urging him to 'cut the whole thing down' as it was spoiling his otherwise unrestricted view.

Alarmed, I leaned out of the window and spoke up in defence of the tree, which, I reasoned, had a right to live and, besides, provided a welcome green frame for my own view. The tree trimmer, somewhat bemused by the interference of his neighbours but keen to satisfy everyone, opted for a compromise — the branches closest to the wires were cut and the others were left alone. The other neighbour had a view with less greenery, I had a view with a ragged frame, the tree trimmer had newly liberated power wires and the tree was still alive.

That might have been an end to it. However, a few weeks later notices from the local council appeared in our letter boxes, reprimanding whoever was responsible for 'illegally pruning' vegetation on public land under Part 17 of the Public Places bylaw. Once more, that might have concluded the affair. But, no. After several

more weeks, a council truck arrived at the scene, and several men equipped with a chainsaw and brooms got out. They proceeded to cut down most of what was left of the tree, picked up the branches, stowed them on the truck, swept the footpath around the remaining tree stump and drove away.

In view of the fact that we had *all* been told off for vandalising the tree, and because I was intensely interested in matters arboreal, I emailed the signatory of the infringement notice asking for the reasoning behind the council's action. A month went by before I received a reply from the customer liaison arborist, who apologised for the delay in responding. She explained that it was council policy to remove all trees on public property whose roots threatened the structure of nearby crib walls, and thanked me for my interest in public trees.

A little later, I reported all of this to another of my neighbours, who had been away at the time of the events. She was not at all surprised that the council had cut down the tree, she said, because it was threatening the power lines and, anyway, it wasn't a 'real tree', which I took to mean that it hadn't been planted with human intent. Real tree or not, the pōhutukawa has proved to be resilient. A few years on, the fuss has died down and the stocky little stump has put out many very healthy branches.

The point of this story is not to cast blame:

none of the parties — including the tree — was at fault. My interest in the proceedings stems from the fact that each of the protagonists in our small suburban drama — including the tree — was acting from a vastly different viewpoint. All were, as American environmental historian William Cronon puts it, 'defending their corner of Eden'.[1] The differences in our opinions about the fate of the single pōhutukawa clearly show that there was more than one tree at work here, and that the various trees subscribed to were measured by individual people according to idiosyncratic and anthropocentric values. If, as Cronon argues, our views of nature are important factors in defining who we think we are and the kind of lives we wish to lead, this episode was not just about the tree, but was, in fact, also about us — what we individually believe in and stand for.

That is what this book is about. Although only one tree may be visible in the ground, there may be many invisible trees at work within its drip line, all of which are constructed in the minds of observers according to the meanings and values they hold, and consequently impose, upon the blameless tree. We see trees differently. Some of us affectionately consider them to be sentient beings, while others prioritise their practical attributes of shade and shelter, carbon sequestration, timber production, botanical collection and food. Where some people

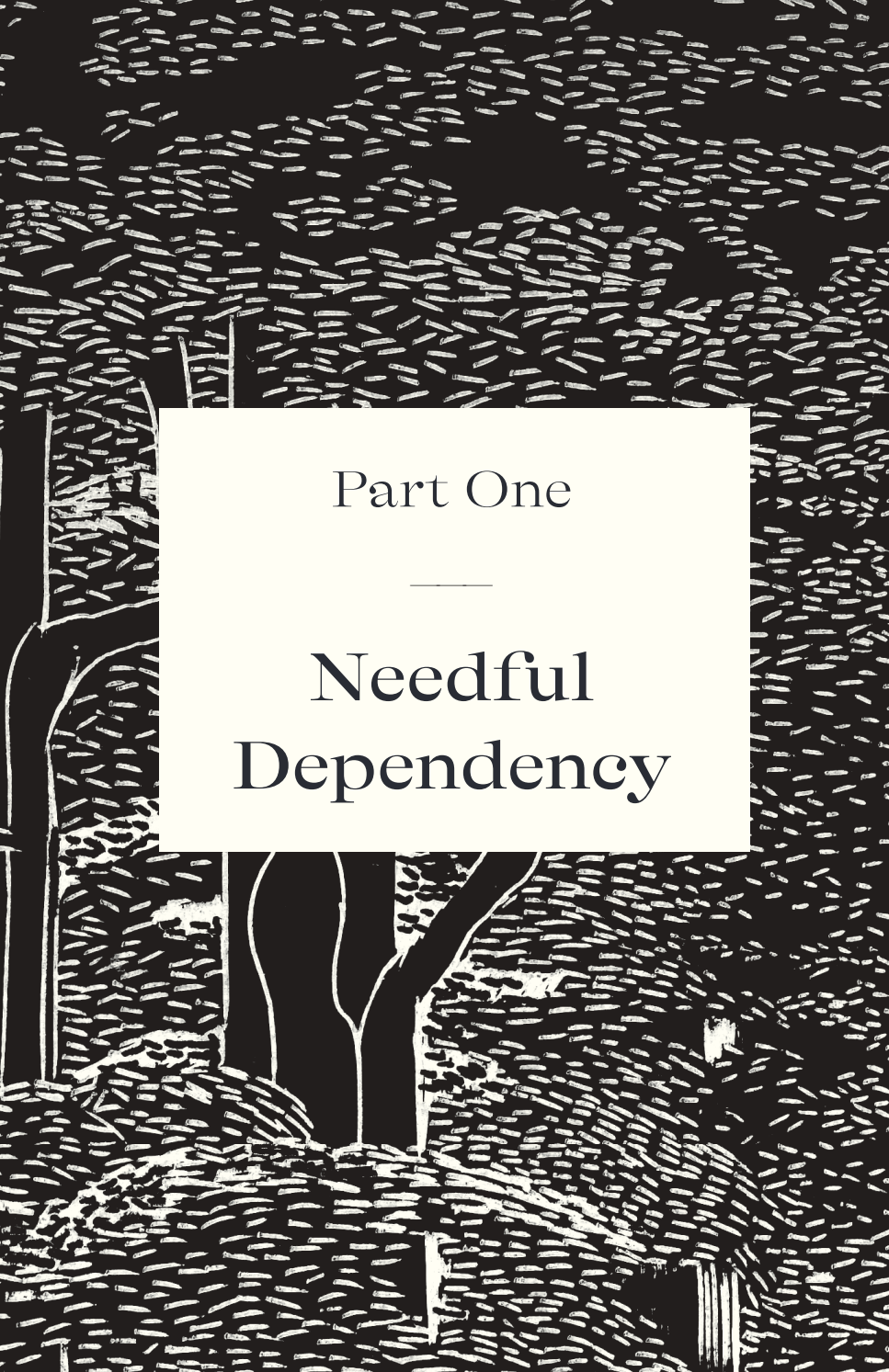
stand back in awe of the beauty of their autumnal colour changes, others grumble at their leaf-fall. While some champion our indigenous trees, others find superior beauty in exotics, and while some work to protect trees, others labour to fell them.

We may regard trees through any one or any combination of these various lenses, and if this book has a predominant purpose it is to demonstrate to you, the reader, that there are other ways of thinking about trees. Of course, the other way recommended by each of this book's contributors is the manner in which they individually appraise trees. And although we may come from a variety of disciplines and experiences, collectively we are biased; each of us has a deep respect for trees.

Probably, you feel the same way. If you were not interested in the environment and its trees, why else would you select this volume from the bookshop table, library shelf or a friend's desk? To a certain extent this book will preach to the converted. But that's all right, because your thoughts, your opinions and your ways of thinking about trees are valuable. And as we all face up to climate change and the ongoing, alarming challenges to our natural world, we need to stick together, draw strength from one another and preach to the unconverted as well.

Each of the contributors to this book responded with enthusiasm to my invitation to take part, and I am exceedingly grateful for their commitment to the project and the wonderfully diverse, informative and eloquent chapters they have provided. From the beginning, I envisaged that the structure of the book would be in two parts. The first, 'Needful Dependency', would sing the praises of the various characteristics of trees and remind us of the supportive network that links people and the arboreal world. The second, 'Greening the Anthropocene', would, I hoped, take a lead from the past and provide some guidelines for the future.

Happily, the contributors produced essays and artworks that slipped effortlessly into the two sections. However, this is not a book that requires you to read chapters in the order in which they are presented. Each chapter tackles the topic of trees from a different — and often surprising — viewpoint. Some chapters might attract you more than others, but once you've devoured them I hope you will return for a taste of the rest and — enriched — reflect further on your own relationship with the trees of Aotearoa New Zealand.



Part One

Needful Dependency


N.M.A.

Tree breath and human

Elizabeth
Smither

Trees in the garden are expelling
the breath I need. It enters windows
and I breathe out what they breathe in.

How we should love them, never moving
from their posts, withstanding wind,
creaking sometimes, losing limbs

but aiding us with oxygen.
While we climb them to gulp in
the freshest air, the most pure

reason for their being here:
their breath and ours commingling
into needful dependencies.

A Walk in the Bush

Philip Simpson

Let me take you on a walk along the track from Tōtaranui to Goat Bay, in Abel Tasman National Park. As we walk some of us will enjoy the challenge of naming the plants we see, although many will not know any of them. Even so, they are beautiful for their shapes, their colours and their textures. There are the sounds of birds and trickling water and breaking waves. A leaf may fall to the carpet beneath, and we know that this is the cycle of life. This is nature. It is useful to itself and to us, and we can see ourselves as part of it.

We contribute to the latest version of a very long bush history. It evolved without people. We are latecomers, yet we can see the bush as our home, just as other animals do. It wasn't so very long ago that people derived all their requirements from nature. All their food, medicines, building materials, household goods, clothing, minerals, tools and toys came from sources growing, living or located in the immediate surroundings. Despite the beauty inherent in this use, like that in eating a meal from one's own garden, there were ecological repercussions. Fire destroyed forests and hunting caused many species to become extinct almost everywhere in the world, and wherever people migrated they took plants and animals with them, both intentionally and unintentionally. Over time, agriculture and industry replaced our dependence on nature, and

trading changed our perspective from local to global.

In the face of this onslaught, nature shrank away. We lost our home. We forgot where things come from. Yet, nearly all the things we started with are still here, although not quite so well off, and our needs are basically just the same. It may well be that some time soon nature will feed culture and we will come to depend on the bush once again. In fact, that is one of the great values of the bush along the Abel Tasman Coast Track: it reminds us of where we came from and it gives us a sense of respect and place. And it is the home of our future.

The species that make up the bush here have been used in many ways over the centuries. I could recall this anywhere in the country, but it is wonderful to walk along a local track — almost in my backyard — and see species after species that have been significant in our history. Knowledge about this history is available in many books and, increasingly, from digital databases. Books I use constantly are Elsdon Best's *Forest Lore of the Maori*,[1] Murdoch Riley's *Maori Healing and Herbal*,[2] and *New Zealand Medicinal Plants*, by the chemists Stanley Brooker and Conrad Cambie and botanist Robert Cooper.[3] Among the many more modern texts are Andrew Crowe's *A Field Guide to the Edible Plants of New Zealand*[4] and Robert Vennell's *The Meaning of Trees*.[5] Very important online sources are *Ngā Tipu Whakaoranga*

— *Māori Plant Use Database*,[6] managed by Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research, and the New Zealand Plant Conservation Network website.[7]

One of the ways in which people use local resources is by naming places according to distinctive features. These names are local identity tags, acting as reminders of cultural history and flags for visitors to recognise. Local people have names for very local features because these identify where particular resources can be found, as well as identifying the rights of access to them. Today, these rights are enshrined under private or public property protected by legal title, but in former times broader whānau or hapū had naming rights over their local rohe. Often a name changes when the land is settled by a new group of people. Obvious examples occur throughout Aotearoa New Zealand, even in the name of the country itself. For example, Whakatū is now Nelson and Mohua is now Golden Bay, although officially the latter is now called Mohua Golden Bay. There is a strong cultural affinity with these names, and when a name is lost the sense of place, of belonging, is diminished.

Tōtaranui is a fine example of the importance of a place name. Tōtara was the most significant

tree to most iwi because it was used to make waka and for whakairo. Although widely used by Pākehā as a sympathetic descriptive name for their rural properties, 'Tōtaranui' was seldom used by iwi because places with 'many large tōtara' were numerous throughout the country and therefore not especially distinctive. The name is, however, distinctive here at the start of our walk through the bush. It may have been bestowed by Ngāti Tūmatakokiri, who arrived in the area around 1600, although tangata whenua lived here much earlier.

Ngāti Tūmatakokiri may simply have brought the name with them when they migrated west from Tōtaranui in the Marlborough Sounds. However, it is more likely that the name was given because of the distinctive tōtara population in this new area. Although tōtara would have been scattered throughout the granite country here, the species is actually very rare in Abel Tasman National Park. Granite produces an acidic soil, whereas tōtara prefers fertile alluvium or volcanic ash soil.

Today, there are just a handful of tōtara trees along the coast from Mārahau. The huge storm of December 2012, which precipitated 600 millimetres of rain in 48 hours on the area, caused a massive slip that sheared away a section of the track from Tōtaranui. It also exposed a large lone tōtara on the slip edge; sadly, it was undermined and crashed down to the beach a few

months later. However, it was enough to prove that big tōtara were part of the original bush, locally at least. So, the flat where our walk begins is surrounded by country that at one time supported many giant tōtara trees, a locally unusual but extremely valuable resource.

Why were tōtara so important? When the Dutch explorer Abel Janszoon Tasman anchored off Wainui Bay in 1642, he was confronted by a flotilla of more than 20 waka. Each of these was likely carved from a tōtara trunk, although rimu, mataī and kahikatea were all sometimes used for this purpose. Tōtara was favoured because the trees are large, and the wood is straight and soft enough to carve relatively easily. But the most important attribute of tōtara was that it is durable in water — the resin inhibits the growth of fungi and bacteria, as well as burrowing sea animals such as *Teredo* 'shipworms'.

Waka were the means of sea travel between settlements, but more especially were used for accessing marine food resources such as fish and other seafood, wetland resources such as tuna and harakeke, and forest resources. They were constantly being built, fixed up and traded. Pākehā who came and settled with the resident iwi immediately learned of the virtues of tōtara. The first houses they built were from axe-split tōtara planks, the roofs sealed with flattened sheets of tōtara bark. The

farms were fenced using tōtara posts and battens. The nation shaped its wharves, railways and bridges from tōtara; the surveyors, their pegs. Finally, the trees were virtually gone.

The surviving giants became symbols of conservation, and protest put an end to the logging of native forest. Before that, the bush at Tōtaranui was the epicentre of Pérrine Moncrieff's campaign to establish the national park, which she achieved in 1942. More than any other tree, tōtara carries the history of our country, and it is for this reason that I have suggested, in my book *Down the Bay*, that Tōtaranui would be an appropriate name for this national park, perhaps mitigating in part the displacement that the title 'Abel Tasman' makes local iwi feel.[8]

The tī kōuka is one of the conspicuous trees on the coastal flat at Tōtaranui and several large examples are clustered near the mouth of Tōtaranui Stream. It is unclear whether these are actually native to the area or were planted by Māori or farming settlers. One was planted on a pā south of Awaroa Head. Like tōtara, tī kōuka are rare in the national park owing to the dominance of acidic soils derived from granite. However, in at least one place, a wetland bordering the northern side of Awaroa Inlet, a natural stand grows with kahikatea. This same type of vegetation once covered part of Tōtaranui.

Like tōtara, tī kōuka are extremely useful trees. Tī kōuka leaves are exceptionally strong and also durable in seawater, hence they were used in the construction of fishing nets, as well as kete to collect seafood. They were woven whole or as dressed fibre for ropes such as anchor ropes, and were used to construct tough footwear — pāraerae. Some cloaks were woven from the leaves, too, and individual fibres were used as nooses in waka kererū, the tōtara water troughs set in trees to attract and snare the birds.

Tī kōuka was also used as a vegetable, with the growing tips of the branches snapped off, trimmed and steamed. In fact, this use was copied by Captain James Cook and other early European sailors, hence the name 'cabbage' tree. In many places tī was actually cultivated, or at least encouraged to grow by clearing off competing vegetation. The trees were also harvested for the underground stems, which are rich in sugar, a use that ancestral Māori brought with them from Polynesia. A related species, tī ngahere, is common in moist open places, such as former slips, along the tracks in the park. Its leaves are even stronger than tī kōuka leaves. There is a very important sandbank in the park named Onetahuti, literally meaning 'burn tī on the beach' (although usually mispronounced 'One-ta-huti'), where local iwi believe dry tī ngahere leaves were used to make smoke signals.