



Hard by the Cloud House

PETER WALKER



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AN EAGLE, AND ITS PLACE IN OUR HISTORY

The legend of Pouakai, aka the extinct Haast's Eagle, takes Peter Walker on a journey from an 1860s Canterbury sheep run to a deep cave near Karamea as he learns the story of the mighty hunter that inhabited a peak in the foothills of the Southern Alps. Was it the same creature as The Rukh of Arabic legends? And, if so, was that evidence that in the twelfth century Arabic and Chinese explorers ventured as far as the South Pacific, saw Pouakai, and traded with Māori?

From Kāi Tahu's fatal encounter with colonisation to the glories of tenth-century Baghdad and ceremonies at the great Tahitian marae Taputapuātea, *Hard by the Cloud House* is a heady, powerful and seductive mix of history, memoir, science and myth, crafted by an esteemed writer. Creative non-fiction at its best.

'There is much to love about this book . . . it is a poetic ramble, beautifully written, wildly speculative — at its best, revealing and laugh-out-loud funny' — Jenny Nicholls, *Waiheke Weekender*

'This might be a heady, occasionally breathless ride, but by the book's final paragraph, you are also left slightly breathless, exhilarated and ultimately beguiled by what you have discovered in this cabinet of curiosities' — Chris Moore, *New Zealand Listener*


'In testing each fantastical account against the hard facts of geography, oceanography, maritime history and linguistics, Walker wrenches these huge-winged predators out of myth and brings them closer to the flight path of the mighty Pouākai. He does so with a sense of wonder and acuity, building his own, at times conjectural path out of scholarly research and scientific evidence, but also with a deep appreciation of landscape and the people involved in the story of a fabulous bird re-created from fantastic stories and found bones.' — Sally Blundell, *Aotearoa New Zealand Review of Books*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Walker is a New Zealand journalist. He grew up in Christchurch and began work at *The Dominion* in 1976 before leaving Wellington to work in Australia. He then moved to the UK in 1986 to work for newspapers including *The Independent* and *Independent on Sunday*, where he was foreign editor. He has also written for the *Financial Times* and *Granta*. He is the author of the acclaimed historical memoir *The Fox Boy* (Bloomsbury 2001) set in Taranaki, and a novel, *The Courier's Tale* (Bloomsbury 2010), set in the court of King Henry VIII, and *Some Here Among Us* (Bloomsbury, 2015), set in Wellington. In 2011 he was the Randell Cottage fellow. He now lives in the Far North.

SALES POINTS

- Gripping, fascinating book by an esteemed writer
- Ranges from Aotearoa to China and the Middle East
- Creative non-fiction at its best

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To Honeycomb Hill


In 1866 Moore invited the government geologist in Canterbury, Julius Haast, to come and see the aggregation. At the time, Haast was planning a museum for Christchurch. He drove away from Glenmark that day with a large American four-horned stag full of antlers. This was a gift of enormous value. By then museums around the world all wanted a specimen of the 'wonderful, struthious bird', as it was called by Richard Owen, the famous naturalist who identified it in 1843 from a section of leg bone sent to England. (Everyone else thought the fragment must belong to a horse or an ox.) Haast began a brisk trade in his bevy from Glenmark.

There was not much room in his workshop in the tower of the Provincial chambers in Christchurch, so Haast and his assistant, a tinsmith named Frederick Fuller, laid out their bony leg bones on the grass between the Clutcheres and the Acheron River, which slid gently, genteelly almost, through the centre of Christchurch, the pious if rather tipsy little town whose spires, turrets and lychgates, along with 34 pubs, had sprung up a few years before on the southern marches of Polynesia. Arranged into sub-species and individual specimens, the skeletons were packed up and shipped to the museums of Europe, which in return sent items from their own holdings. Animals too poor in as they did for Noah, Haast's son wrote: 'Birds of every hue, insects of every dimension, stone implements of the vanished races grouped themselves in historical train.' Plaster casts of famous classical statues arrived as well — *Venus de Medici*, *Diana Roving*, *The Dying Gladiator*, *De Witt Gouse*, *Capit and Psyche*. Within a few years Haast had a magnificent museum in the middle of town. Meanwhile the wagons kept arriving from Glenmark.

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Moore even put a team of workers at Haast's disposal to excavate the swamps, the 'precious bog' as it came to be called, and Haast's assistant, Fuller, was often on hand to supervise the proceedings.

One day in March 1871 Fuller, who with his 'flowing hair and beard looked like some figure of the Ober-Amunzgam paston play', looked into the bog and saw, lying there among the moss bones, a single huge claw, like a dagger at a jamaica party. He realised it had belonged to a rapor of immense size.



A few weeks later Haast held up the claw (above) at a meeting of the Philosophical Institute. There were gasps from the audience. 'Only the lion and tiger perhaps have larger ungual phalanges than this extinct raporial bird,' said Haast, who had to assure one anxious member of the audience that its owner really had been an extinct bird and not some unknown giant feline still living in the mountains.

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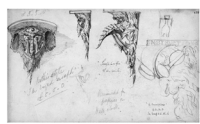
but the word is thrown around so readily today as a term of abuse it has lost all power to enlighten. In any case race relations are so complex and dynamic that the same one-word answer is not sufficient to diagnose the many causes of their breakdown. It was the French writer André Gléze, visiting Africa in the 1920s, who noticed that the lower and worse the character of the white colonists, the lower and worse the Africans were in his or her judgement. In other words, another race is like a mirror which reflects your own character more clearly than anything else. And the mirror-image is inherently unstable, changing all the time as either party changes.

'Transformations of this kind can be seen again and again in nineteenth-century New Zealand, where Europeans and Māori met more or less as strangers. When Walter Mantell, for instance, was engaged by the governor to rob Ngāi Tahu, he could find no words too strong to defame them in his diaries and letters — they were a *contingent*, *insolent*, *landlessly ignorant*, *turbulent*, *disobedient*, *unfit*, *evilly disposed* people who lived 'amidst spread straw, pigs, ducks, painless boats and all imagined fifth ad libitum'.

Yet when he completed his task of extinguishing, almost to the hove, he completely changed his view. He fled Ngāi Tahu people. He admitted them. He was sorry for what he had done. By the late 1850s he was writing to his former victims in tearful mood, signing himself 'your affectionate' or even 'your depressed brother'. There is no need to assume he was insincere. He spent the rest of his life making vague attempts to redress the wrongs he had done. He admitted that he had participated in 'a deplorable fraud' in 1848 in order to further his own career. He intended to put things right later.

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On the cover of the sketchbook he took with him on his journey of Extinguishing, he wrote: *Non si male nunc et olim sic erit nosse semper* ... (If things are bad now, they won't always be). But Mantell could not put things right later. We are changed by our deeds. He defrauded Māori, trapping them in tiny reserves surrounded by Pākehā-owned land and laws, then he found he was trapped himself. 'I had no idea in those days,' he said once, 'when I was sent for and requested to compel the natives ... to come under a deed from which they derived no benefit ... I had no idea of the great amount of self-reproach I was laying in store for myself.'⁷⁰ Perhaps, though, he did have some idea.



In the same sketchbook there is a page with a self-portrait made during the journey, grinning in the lower right-hand corner, and three peculiar grassgusks which depict a kind of wall-bracker or capital which is also alive, a demon — the '3-eyed seraph' he calls it — with pouring tears and a drooping

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In 1920 a strange, archaic carving was found when a swamp was drained near Kaihia in the far north of New Zealand. It is described as a lance or roof-corn or a threshold ornament and shows a small human figure with two creatures, birds or lizards, one on each side. Now known to Te Rarawa as 'Tāngone Wāhara', it is quite unlike any later Māori carving.



The central figure, however, has very close relatives in the sculpture of Tahiti and the Austral Islands, south of Tahiti, but this sculpture is made of wood of the tōkara, a tree which grows only in New Zealand, so it hasn't come from abroad. It must be the work of an early visitor or settler who brought with him the sculptural style of eastern Polynesia and, presumably, legends from the same place.

So who is the little figure in the middle? Māori in Kaihia today will say only that he is an ancestor whose identity is now forgotten. It is very likely that whoever made the sculpture was indeed one of their ancestors, but what is his subject matter? And who or what are the two demon carving the air behind them in elegant chevrons? Could the sculpture be read as a depiction of the goblin king Puna and his servants Maruki-tangorango and Pō-a-hao-kai, which guard the legendary country of Hīni Marama, where settlers from

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eastern Polynesia, including the carver himself, now found themselves living? If that is the case, there is an element of genius in the work. There are limits to the powers of sculpture. You cannot, for instance, carve a sound. Did this artist working centuries ago somewhere near modern Kaihia find a way, through those lethal chevrons, to suggest the fearful sound of fast-approaching wingbeats?

In another Māori story about the demon-bird, the hero is not named Rata but Pungarua, who lives in Howāhā in this case probably Tahiti. He and a companion are blown out to sea in a storm and arrive on an unknown shore. They meet a primitive people, the Naka-mai-toi, who live in trees and do not know how to make fire and cook food. One of the Naka-mai-toi warns the visitors: 'If any of you half-witted people come to meet and dance to us, and you laugh at them, they will kill you.'

'That night, the dancers come to entertain the strangers. In their hands they hold primitive weapons made of flint or of sharks' teeth lashed to a wooden handle. As they dance, they sing:


Now you laugh,
Now you don't,
Now you laugh,
Now you don't.

Sensibly, Pungarua and his companion do not laugh. Instead, they light a fire and cook a meal of whale meat.

'When the flames of the smoke got into the nostrils of the people they exclaimed:

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directions it appears to emerge from the sea. The perception that a mountain has risen into the air can be caused by refraction of light from the sea surface. If the mountain is also almost symmetrical, and white, then mariners who are already frightened and disposed to think about the demons and thin known to live far out in the Great Encircling Ocean might well turn to the Bahk, or perhaps even its egg — and the Bahk's egg was said to be as large as a mountain — as the shape appears to rise slowly into the air.



I hit about now, late in the thirteenth century, that the iconography of the Bahk approaches its final form. In the *Book of Marvell*, al-Qarimī tells another tale with strong echoes of the Second Voyage of Sindbad: 'A certain man of Isfahan got into debt, left his home and went to sea on a trading vessel which got caught in a great whirlpool in the Persian Sea. A wise man on board said that if one man gave up his life for the others they might be saved. The man from Isfahan asked

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a group of merchants on board whether they would pay his debts and look after his family if he gave up his life. To this they assented. The wise man explained they should sacrifice the man from Isfahan by abandoning him on a desert island nearby. Left on the island, the Isfahani saw a great bird perched in a tree. He watched it carefully for a few days and saw that every morning it flew away over the sea and returned at night. One morning, summoning his courage, he caught hold of the bird's tail and was carried aloft and over the water to the mainland where he dropped himself off and landed on the village by the beach. The villagers were amazed at the visitation from the sky and the headman gave the man from Isfahan a great sum of money and he returned home rich and happy ever after.

In the oldest surviving copy of the *Marvell*, printed not long after 1500, the man in horse above ranges of watery hills by a kind of great white parent with a tail, related to the Anqa, and not unlike the ancient image of Garuda carved at Sanchi in central India.



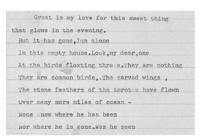
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Courtesy Place and Cuba Street when, by four in the afternoon, the bookers were starting to squall with the sailors. One afternoon I walked across town in the rain to the old Dominion Museum on Buckle Street and on the first landing of the stairs saw a single object in its own glass case: a bird of dark green stone, head bent low as if bowed over its secrets. This was the Kororangi.

It was a winter's day — a cold blank light filled the staircase window. The staircase, I suppose, was a sign of embarrassment. A museum is fundamentally classificatory, and the Kororangi, alone in its waist-high glass case on the landing, was a problem. It clearly did not belong in the elaborate gloom — as it seemed that afternoon — of the Māori collection with its great canoes and carved whare behind me. But no one knew where it did belong, and that was what I liked most about it. Over how many miles of ocean have the carved wings flown? Here was something worth thinking about, far more interesting to me than the problems of forts and contracts, which in any case had already been answered by long-lead law lords, if only you could track them down.

I did not, as far as I remember, stumble on the Kororangi by chance: I already knew it was in Buckle Street and went over in the rain that day to look for it. Forty years later, when I was thinking about Professor Ewart and the value he placed on archaeology in oroblasting historical forces, I thought of the Kororangi and opened an old notebook I had kept as a sort of diary when I was student and, to my surprise — for this is rare in any research — immediately found what I was looking for.

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I was a terrible typist — I can count eight errors, mostly involving the space-bar, in the first four lines. I didn't own a typewriter and must have borrowed one to type out this translation of the song to the Kororangi which I had found in an anthology of Māori verse, although which machine it was and who it belonged to — I remember a portable Olympia in a smart green case, and an old ex-office machine with a deep black well out of which the keys sprang up to hit the paper with heavy pecks like the first drops of rain before a downpour — those details have now gone, but standing on the staircase in the museum looking down at the carved feathers in the cold winter light, I already knew the questions the Kororangi raised. ... None know where he has been nor where he is gone. The song had been composed during the period when the carving was missing, and was therefore out of date. We now knew where he had been. He had been under the roots of a mānuka tree somewhere near Kaihia. But where had he come from in the first place? How and why had he been brought to Aotearoa? Those questions were still resistant to enquiry

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