Ghosts Ships: Writing the Chimerical Past in Cilla McQueen’s *Soundings*

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At the turn of the millennium, Cilla McQueen’s *Soundings* (2002) looks back to the past.1 New Zealand poetry has long been preoccupied with the pursuit of the elusive state Ian Wedde describes (recalling Brasch’s lover of the gaunt hills) as ‘consummation in location’.2 This quest for cultural belonging in a place, for both Maori and Pakeha, has always involved adopting, adapting or rejecting imported conceptions of our heritage. McQueen’s poetic career, beginning in the 1980s and culminating in a way with her appointment as New Zealand Poet Laureate in 2009, has coincided with the radical transformation of our literary culture by postmodern and postcolonial practise and theory. It is through the tensions between these two discourses, and particularly through emerging ideas of the ‘settler’ postcolonial, that I wish to read her representations of the past. By appropriating the hallmarks of nonfiction records (names, dates, quotations), by displaying thematic and imagistic coherence, and by tracing connections across space and time, *Soundings*, McQueen’s ninth collection, appears to offer little response to the increasingly ‘a-historical and ungrounded society’ of global late capitalism.3 It is this very groundedness of *Soundings*, however, heightened by the inclusion of McQueen’s sparse pen-and-ink landscape drawings, which engages with questions of the legitimacy of historical knowledge in the local context. The collection represents the poet-subject as a ‘field of historical influences’ and therefore invites a biographical reading.

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that uses genealogy as an allegory for world history. I argue that *Soundings* undermines assertions of definitive historical knowledge by grounding history in place and the personal, and by uncovering the ghostly multiplicity of experiences behind the present. Yet by choosing to use the conventions of lyric poetry to do so, McQueen retains a sense of transcendence and depth, and so resists a narrow definition of ‘postmodern’ that foregrounds innovation or a complete break with what has gone before.

Some key tensions between New Zealand interpretations of postmodernism and postcolonialism emerge in three *Landfall* essays from the mid-1980s. Terry Locke’s ‘Trekking Beyond the Modern’ in part sparked the debate when it credited the fresh, vigorous work of Charles Olson and *The New American Poetry* with healing modernism’s estrangement from nature. Locke praised *Parallax: A Journal of Postmodern Literature and Art*, which featured McQueen’s urgent, breath-borne verse, for bringing this invigorating avant-garde to New Zealand readers. For Leonard Wilcox, however, this tendency towards ‘antimodernism’ was disappointing evidence that the scene in Aotearoa in 1985 had not trekked much beyond 1960s America. Rather than embracing the multiple possibilities of the ‘new depthlessness’, Wilcox’s local variant of postmodernism looked back to a ‘romantic pastoral ideal of original simplicity: immediate experience, transparent language, an aesthetic ideal of unmediated vision’, a description that could also be extended to McQueen’s work in the 2000s. *Soundings* might therefore confirm Wilcox’s diagnosis. Yet his use of the adjective ‘anachronistic’ for such neoromantic poetry reveals how postmodernism remains vulnerable to its own ‘breakthrough’ metanarrative of a radical change replacing modernism with something better. According to Simon During, New Zealand’s resistance to this decentering upheaval emerges in part from a concern with articulating and defining local identities in the wake of imperialism. In this view, postcolonialism applies the postmodern scepticism towards
grand narratives to re-centre postmodernism itself as ‘neo-imperialist’.8

The nineteenth century’s master-narratives have been perhaps the most powerful of these ideological imports, since exposed by postmodern historiographers such as Hayden White as just that: stories, literary modes of constituting the ‘historical field’ and organising its data into progressive plotlines.9 At first sight, some of McQueen’s poems align themselves closely with these narratives. ‘Early Settlers’ ‘gently peel[s] away’ the past of a public park in chronological layers from the present to the subject’s childhood. Time continues to rewind from the settlers’ cemetery that once stood on the site to its closure and the planting of the seed that now flourishes as a ‘tall sequoia’ tree (p. 21). This lyric musing on consistent markers of past reality employs metaphors of rootedness and presence. While lifetime memories accrete like earth or tree rings, the recitation of dates through the rest of the poem locates the subject within an inevitably linear tradition. As at many other points in these poems, the private voice maps onto this national past at a site of collective remembrance: here ‘I find myself’ (p. 21). Orientating oneself by such patriotic milestones as the 1865 New Zealand Exhibition, however, seems to take a traditional view of the progressive spread of Western civilisation predicated upon notions of objective or so-called scientific history. Patrick Evans relates how he once visualised New Zealand literary history: first as a marginal feature of the map of the British Empire, then as a graveyard of dead authors, each tombstone fossilised into place in a canon resistant to change and exclusive of difference.10 We might also imagine McQueen’s settler cemetery as such a place.

If narrative is history’s dominant literary mode, however, its objectivity may be brought into question without denying that we recite stories to remember where we come from. The penultimate poem in Soundings performs a similar function to that of the historical ‘Great Story’, accumulating fragments that recall other pieces in the collection and organising them into an arc
signalled by the linear image of its title: ‘The Glory Track’. In response to the postmodern ‘crisis of historical narrative’, McQueen does not entirely replace progression and coherence with fragmented images, nostalgia and pastiche. Rather, she creates a cumulative structure as a frame or container for disparate recollections and incidents filtered through subjective memory. The two-line stanzas used here and elsewhere in the collection function as units separated by white space, especially when end-stopped, but also form longer phrases using enjambment. Temporal and spatial leaps of association, as when the St. Kildan poet’s ‘fulmar’ reminds the subject of ‘titi’ (muttonbird), work against and alongside a steady thematic and semantic accumulation (p. 61). ‘The Glory Track’ becomes a private recitation, an oral aide-memoire that revisits the landmarks of the poet’s journey.

McQueen equates history metaphorically with dream and memory, aligning her approach with that of postmodern historians who, following the deconstruction of national narratives, have increasingly looked to anecdote, memoir and witness accounts. ‘If the sea’s deep dance / is memory, its surface is the present’, McQueen writes in ‘The Glory Track’, in which a shape-shifting ghost ship symbolises the ‘voice’ of the past:

Like a voice, a ghost ship comes to me
across the water, a chimerical

encryption that appears and disappears
in passage through the dreaming ocean (p. 61).

This ‘chimerical’ past is pieced together, a mythical beast that proves ultimately illusory, or an ‘encryption’ of old modes of thought and ways of recording. At first, the succession of ships appears to confirm that the sea’s ‘memory’ preserves the recognisable pageant of war and empire. Cook’s Resolution and Endeavour, the ships of Sir Walter Ralegh and Richard Greynvile,
the *Prisilla* transporting Scottish settlers to Australia, a German submarine and the Victorian vessel *England’s Glory* belong to a martial, maritime and masculine past. Yet the scattering of borrowed quotations and the emphasis on the subject’s present-moment perception implies that this school-book history may also be merely what we recall. Placing the ‘clinker-built *If*, in which dad is teaching the kids to sail, among the ghost ships, McQueen argues for the importance of private, domestic histories and exposes public history’s status as what Sunil Khilnani calls ‘regulated collective memory’ (p. 62). In the words of another McQueen poem, ‘Bookworm’, memories can help open ‘blast chamber tunnels’ into the past, a moment of the real outside the ideologies of public accounts.

Part of the power of history as personal memory comes from its perceived authenticity, if only in that memoirs and anecdotes are more obviously unreliable. Facts in ‘The Glory Track’ become spectres, opening the narrative to failures of interpretation, tricks of the light and possible alternative histories. The St Kildan Finlay MacQueen mistakes a German submarine for a ghost, the Germans for allies who might give him tobacco. To observers on shore, Cook’s *Resolution* becomes a ‘floating island’ (p. 61). The image from *Gulliver’s Travels* also struck Allen Curnow as a perfect metaphor to introduce his landmark 1960 anthology: New Zealand as a make-believe nation still deciding its course. Cook’s ship approaching Whitianga looks different again to Te Horeta Te Taniwha, who tells us that ‘when our old men saw the ship they said it was a tupua, a god’, and the men rowing ashore, facing backwards, were clearly ‘goblins’ with eyes in the backs of their heads. Te Horeta Te Taniwha’s account is taken here from Calder’s anthology *The Writing of New Zealand: Inventions and Identities*, which, like *Soundings*, also blurs the line between authoritative accounts and private anecdotes. Although the collection is technically ‘non fiction’, Calder wishes in his introduction for ‘a less dire term’ to describe such recitals of localised experience. For White, the
nineteenth-century historian’s task in conceiving the past is an ‘essentially poetic act’. Works like Soundings and Kendrick Smithyman’s Atua Wera (1997) open opportunities for poems themselves to intervene in history.

We may read McQueen’s use of the building blocks of documentary narrative in the light of this subjective past. Rather than being carved in stone, any factual referent is not external to the text but becomes a function of linguistic modes of selection, arrangement and metaphor. A name or date is ‘constituted through the processes of representation’ itself, inseparable from the medium in which it is embedded. So the inscription that opens McQueen’s ‘Tuturau’ neither works as a signifier nor recovers an objective living event: ‘Here in 1836 the last fight took place / between North and South Island Maori’ (p. 33). These words truncate or misquote those of an alternative Tuturau monument, to be found in one form online in the government encyclopaedia Te Ara, which reads ‘the last fight between North and South Island Maoris in which the southerners were victorious took place in this locality in December 1836’. Both versions appear simply to relate facts, and carry the additional presumed assurance that ownership of this land is no longer in dispute. What ‘Tuturau’ then does, however, is to juxtapose this sparse account with a Maori seer’s prophetic dream that retells the story of the victory even before it occurs, incorporating into the lines of the poem a non-linear conceptual model of the past that is given equal status to that of the inscribed record. Here, McQueen is clearly undermining or pluralising historical consciousness rather than entirely denying its power. While both postmodern and postcolonial approaches criticise positivist progressive narratives and nationalist ideologies, postcolonial perspectives are less likely to question the centred subject or to deny altogether the legitimacy of representation. In Soundings, the impulse towards more centred narrative modes emerges from a desire to recover forgotten pasts conceived
differently—for example, the contrast of oral and written records suggested by the pairing of its title with that of McQueen’s earlier collection *Markings* (2000).20

In the opening pieces in the former collection, McQueen explores the experience of her St Kildan ancestors whose way of life was coming under threat from the English at around the same time Cook was charting New Zealand. ‘Savage’ evokes a past remembered communally, outside written time:

Nothing much is lost; when our father’s house falls down
we use his stones to build another.
What stays fallen, turf covers.

When a man falls, a rib is torn from us.
When John went over Oiseval like a starfish, the sea had him (p. 18).

In this ecological ‘dark and simple land’, history appears naturally in embodied metaphors, primitive and Biblical: the death of a man like the loss of a rib. This poetic sense is a product of closeness to the soil: ‘Whoever sleeps the night long on the slopes of Conachair / awakes a poet in the morning’ (p. 19). The chronicler of this community is the archetypal bard, Euphemia McCrimmon, who ‘sang aloud / the ancient pagan songs, lest they be lost’ (p. 61). McQueen translates the imagery of these songs into text if not performance, drawing upon so-called primitive models similar to those that inspired Jerome Rothenberg, whose work might in turn exemplify Wilcox’s anachronistically voice-centred postmodernism.21

Here, McQueen does not address the contradictions inherent in translating oral knowledge into text, nor the implied romanticist assumption that native peoples have privileged access to nature as an organic source of metaphor. At times, for example in ‘Tuturau’, her retellings seem to succumb to nostalgia for an idealised past, using the sonorous qualities of te reo Maori in lines such as ‘the waka came from Ruapuke / and Puoho died
at dawn’ next to the archaic ‘from whence’ and ‘it’s said that this was foretold’ (p. 33). The mystic ‘seer’ belongs to an alternative oral history but also to the exotic other, what Evans calls ‘sublime indigeneity’, a privileging of the indigene’s access to essentialist spiritual values as a counterweight to Western materialism.22

What concerns McQueen here more than representing some approximation of pre-literate knowledge, however, is the process of defining oneself in relation to the other that follows cross-cultural contact and colonisation. She represents the St Kildans within the frame of an epigraph from printed history, a 1799 quotation attributed to Lord Brougham classifying the ‘savages’ by the attributes of laziness, incurious naïveté and greed for alcohol and tobacco. The poem ‘speaks back’ to these words, sometimes humorously: ‘Our life by the natural calendar might be construed as laziness / by the visitor who brings his timepiece with him’ (p. 18). With self-reflective awareness, the post-contact St Kildans distinguish the ‘natural calendar’ from ‘clock time’ and understand how the other ‘might be construed’ by the traveller laden with his own preconceptions. ‘We trust in God and in our fellow man’, they say at another point, ‘Visitors are another matter’ (p. 18). Lord Brougham’s judgements reveal retrospectively that this mistrust may be warranted: having the ability to write, the visitors will set down the way history sees the islanders. By reconstructing their words in terms of the epigraph, McQueen suggests both the need to recover forgotten experience and the impossibility of doing so outside the dominant linguistic modes of the historical record.

How to speak when the words themselves are unwanted reminders of past injustices is a familiar dilemma for postcolonial writers. However, unlike Robert Sullivan’s Captain Cook in the Underworld which appeared in the same year and which de-mythologises the English sailor through Greek myth, Soundings is not ‘postcolonised’ poetry, for the reason that McQueen’s
subjects identify most pervasively as settlers rather than members of a minority or displaced community.

McQueen has said that for her, ‘ancestors provide entry points’ into the past, and throughout *soundings* she traces national and global history through her Scottish St Kildan roots and those of her husband and family.23 By doing so, she declares her subjectivity as a participant in history, writing her own identity or identities out of these complex patterns of emigration and adaptation.

*Soundings* can therefore be usefully read in the context of another 2002 publication, a special issue of the *journal of New Zealand Literature* devoted to ‘Settlement Studies’. In case this term should imply that the many tensions arising from emigration and colonisation have been resolved, Alex Calder and Stephen Turner suggest that ‘unsettlement studies would serve equally well’ as a label for their new discipline. International postcolonialism, they argue, relies upon divisions between first and third worlds, ‘West’ and ‘Orient’, ‘self’ and ‘other’, and metropole and colony, that need to be discarded or reconsidered when discussing New Zealand.

They address similar concerns to those McQueen articulates: how can we speak of what is unique to a place without resorting to cultural nationalism? What does the postcolonial moment mean for those who claim the hybrid status of both coloniser and colonised? (un)settlement studies is concerned with ‘the large-scale movement of people to a foreign land, involving a full-scale reconstruction of people and place for both settler and indigene’ and the ‘foundational problems’ arising from these displacements. These problems persist in the difficult task of acknowledging the history within these movements, but McQueen’s continued return to the colonial past suggests how imperative this task remains.24

When McQueen confronts the legacy of colonial guilt in a seven-poem sequence, her figurehead is not Cook but Sir Richard Greynvile, the sixteenth-century English explorer who
attempted to establish the first settlers on Roanoke, Virginia. ‘I felt entitled to speak to Greynvile [...] on the subject of colonization’. So McQueen describes her reconstructed poetical dialogue pitting the mariner against his present-day ancestor. These poems, she explains, emerge from the same preoccupations as her work on St Kilda and Kati Mamoe and Waitaha descendents. Again, autobiography gives her a ‘privileged glimpse’ into the complex encounters and ‘vectors of change’ of colonial history.  

The choice of Greynvile detaches her enquiry somewhat from the conflicted entanglement of Maori and Pakeha, however, reconnecting these local complexities to global migrations and displacements and returning the focus to the settler colonist. In *Replenishing the Earth*, his recent survey of Anglophone geographic expansion, James Belich argues that the nineteenth-century ‘settler revolution’ developed a mythology of its own. An ideology geared towards making emigration attractive as an act of hope rather than a last resort operated alongside the more time-honoured ‘myth of conquest’ which tended to overstate European military and commercial dominance over other peoples as extrapolated into the past.  

Through Greynvile, McQueen explores the geographic and temporal reach of this myth.  

In the Greynvile sequence, the geographical scope expands beyond isolated islands into the spaces of imperial maps and charts, expanses of contested ocean with ‘Terra Nullius’ eternally receding into the horizon. The perspective also changes, moving away from reconstructing colonised experience to confronting the navigators and mapmakers themselves, as Greynvile faces hard questions not from the American Indians, who are never given voices, but from his settled descendant. The accusation, ‘You have a lot to answer for’, placed directly after the identification of Greynvile as ‘my hawkish genetic figment’, might also apply to the lyric subject, who goes on, ‘heavy with his deeds and their reverberations’, to roll a cigarette (p. 54).
Tobacco, symbol of globalised trade and slavery, connects the two figures, as does their shared implication in the displacement of native peoples from their land.

Yet Greynville is an apparition, ‘insubstantial as the cobwebs on the window’, and as with the ghost ships of ‘The Glory Track’, the subject’s fallible vision suggests the difficulty of mentally reinhabiting the past or of grasping its essence. The challenges of imaginative time-travel, as the subject attempts a face-to-face encounter with the manifested past, also mirror those of cultural transposition and demonstrate the unsatisfactory transience of any knowledge of the other. Preoccupied by his ambitions, Greynville fails to perceive Chief Wingina and his fellow Indians as anything more than ‘mere copper gleams among the leaves’, and their presence remains shadowy and indistinct (p. 57).

Of the historically-themed poems in the collection, this sequence most obviously concerns both what apparently happened and what might have happened, as uncertainty over the fate of the lost colony exposes the false confidence of Greynville’s assertions of control. McQueen wittily critiques another form of poetic chronicle, ‘The Ballad of the Revenge’, by exposing Tennyson’s patriotic hero as a caricature of strutting Elizabethan machismo misguided and inwardly torn by doubt.

‘My authority was plain’, her Greynville proclaims, ‘[t]he flag was planted’, but as the people transplanted upon this new soil slowly starve and vanish, their absence from the land and the historical record renders this symbolic founding gesture meaningless (p. 57). The aristocratic Vice-admiral is left with authority over no-one. In ‘Questions’ the ghost anachronistically describes his ‘programmes / of imperial expansion in Virginia / equivalent to putting men on the moon’, the lunar metaphor evoking ‘Terra Nullius’, an uninhabited alien land waiting to receive the first footprint, but also the flag-planting ceremony of the modern global superpower that grew out of the Virginian colonies (p. 56). The settlement collapses not only because
Virginia is already inhabited, but because of the failures of Elizabethan visions of rich foreign utopias and the migrants’ confusion of ‘overseas’ with ‘heaven’ (p. 19). The real failure of vision here ultimately belongs to the horizon-gazing sagas of imperialist expansion.

II

Like Allen Curnow’s nationalist poetry of the 1930s and 1940s, *Soundings* is concerned with isolated islands, metaphoric spaces of sea-bound land. If locating oneself amid shifting seas establishes self- and nationhood, McQueen—like Curnow—also traces the uneasy shadow of unsettlement alongside that of establishing oneself in a place. While Curnow and Brasch experience a lack of belonging as emphatic dislocation, however, McQueen sees her internationalised Pakeha perspective as a more positive blending that is open to uncertainty and difference. Themes of migration and settlement begin to pervade her poetry in the *fin de siècle* 1990s, a time Homi Bhabha characterises as a ‘moment of transit’, a time of restlessness and disorientation and of intensified debate over the heritage of colonisation. The Greynville sequence and the St Kildan poems indicate how thoroughly the ancestries of explorers, settlers and natives are intertwined. After Michael King’s *Being Pakeha* Now claimed that Pakeha could be as ‘indigenous’ as Maori, McQueen suggests that any shared indigienity arises less from generations of possession of the soil and more from successive upheavals: emigration, the ravages of imported diseases, and irrecoverable homelands. For Bhabha, the symbolic concept of nation derives its very strength from such patterns of uprooting, displacement and hybridity even as they may leave its borders indistinct and permeable. *Markings* centres upon the image of the autoclave, the painful yet purifying threshold between one
state and another, and the act of cremating the past to enter the future. The uprooting is literal—the poet’s Ōtākou house has burned to the ground—but when McQueen parallels her subsequent relocation to Bluff with her ancestors’ journeys south she moves into the liminal space ‘at the edge of the land, at the edge of the world’ where much of *Soundings* unfolds (p. 30).

Along this dynamic edge, cultural contact blurs boundaries, as it did during the early interactions of sealers and whalers with local Māori along the New Zealand coastline. On the periphery, Doreen B. Massey claims, space and time may remain politicised despite the homogenising pressures of postmodern cultures in metropolitan centres. Simon During agrees that New Zealand’s geographical distance, and its related economic and cultural isolation, are a source of resistance to these pressures. No land or language today can exist in isolation from global interrelationships of cultural exchange and political and social structures. At the same time, the task of ‘writing the place’ demands a feeling for location that remains strong in McQueen’s work.

The land has its own voices that can only partially be transcribed. Whereas ‘the coloniser seizes space, rather than being seized by it’, imagining territory as the blank paper upon which history is written, McQueen seems to describe the latter process; in ‘The Glory Track’, for example: ‘[t]he landscape takes the electric reins / that drive my hand’ (p. 61). Cassie Ringland-Stewart describes the tension between McQueen’s use of the conventions of lyric landscape poetry and ‘the desire for a reciprocal dialogue with the land beyond the text’, and this ‘dialogic mode’ might also describe how McQueen writes the past. While some poems read as aesthetic responses to a ‘prehistoric’ landscape that ‘reverts / to undisturbed tussock, flax, toetoe, fern’, many others seek to represent the land primarily as the repository of human history and in doing so deny a conception of the spatial as entirely depthless or dynamic (p. 45). These poems acknowledge that the relation between
language and location is central to settler literature’s attempts to articulate a sense of what Calder terms ‘Pakeha turangawaewae’ on ground saturated with Maori and immigrant histories.36

In ‘Fuse’, the most politically-charged poem in Soundings, McQueen engages directly with a New Zealand historical landscape whose features have been illuminated or obliterated by successive generations of chroniclers and myth-makers. In doing so, she abandons the elusive prism of personal memory for a sharper focus on the root problems of contemporary biculturalism. The visit to the Otago Peninsula in ‘Fuse’ begins as ‘a kind of unveiling’ similar to the moments of personal revelation described elsewhere, but the verb suggests both the Maori custom of unveiling the headstone at a grave site and the opening ceremony of a public monument (p. 22). ‘The road winds back in time’, triggering a memory of a previous dwelling lost to fire: ‘there is no house / and in the ground no trace of ash’ (p. 23). The removal of all traces of the subject’s presence re-inscribes the land as publicly significant and emphasises the demarcation between settler colonist and indigenous native which, as Stephen Turner points out, is ultimately a break with the continuity of the past of a place.37 For Pakeha in late capitalist society ‘[l]oss of possessions is a kind of freedom’, but for Maori ‘loss of the land is exile’, leaving them in effect inhabiting a foreign country (p. 23).

‘Fuse’ evinces a strong sense of historical event and is dated ‘May, 2000’, suggesting an act of memorial in a time of renewal. It is a response to ‘what has become known in the culture simply as “Parihaka”’, the place name a metonym for both the armed suppression by colonial authorities of Maori land protests in Taranaki and a localised tradition of non-violent activism.38 A reference to the past, Parihaka has also come to symbolise potential futures. In his exploration of national selfhood ‘Being Colonial/Colonial Being’, Stephen Turner invokes Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities and asks why a Maori nation should be the ‘intolerable alternative’ among possible Aotearoa
(even without considering whether we now inhabit a ‘post-nationalist’ globe). Revisionist historians like Belich and King have been concerned for some time with creating openings in which to reinsert the idea of continuous Maori sovereignty into the New Zealand story. They place Parihaka at the centre of several independent Maori states, and describe the passive resistance of the community against Pakeha settlers as not only an event of ‘national consequence’ but of world significance, decades ahead of the similar programmes of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. ‘Fuse’ appears on the CD Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance (2000), and therefore helps reposition Parihaka as a counterweight to previous (mis-) representations of Maori violence. McQueen’s exiled Maori are Taranaki prisoners road-building on the Otago Peninsula. ‘Te Whiti’s words, white feathers’, remind the workers of the prophet’s Christian morality, and McQueen strengthens the ironic parallels with hermits when she describes them sleeping in ‘stone cells cut in the cliff’ and dispelling darkness with ‘a candle, a murmur of prayer’ (p. 22). Emphasising the historical importance of Christianity for Maori offers another challenge to myths of official biculturalism that enforce artificially exclusive and essentialist cultural identities.

If it is necessary, as Evans claims, to ‘get history wrong to get nation right’, ‘Fuse’ might be read as wrong history of a positive kind. Although records cannot confirm whether the ‘blue-black drystone wall’ running along the Peninsula was in fact ‘built by Maori prisoners from Parihaka’, the metaphor of a national infrastructure founded upon unresolved grievances holds. This linear imagery of road and wall may employ a Western European consciousness of time in which cause follows effect, but its continuity emphasises the instability the past bequeaths to the present moment:

The wall runs back towards the city,
a fuse slow-burning through the generations
ready to flare; past time nearly visible
behind the surface of this sunny day,
the harbour sparkling—on the car radio, news
of an unarmed Maori man
shot dead by the police last night, in Waitara (p. 22).

The wall, a static, time-bound monument, transforms into an explosive fuse. The poem breaks off in the midst of a living, local issue, the death of Stephen Wallace, on the site of the outbreak of the 1860 Taranaki War. History in the guise of news interrupts the scenic beauty of the harbour—while the undated ‘last night’ suggests that it will continue to do so. Paralleling images of peaceful religion with ‘pickaxes strik[ing] fire’, McQueen describes how ‘anger drives deep’ into the wall and leaves a mingled legacy of non-violence and conflict (pp. 22–23). As ‘Authority’ begins, the subject introduces the Elizabethan colonist Greynvile to her Maori husband:

If you had come to claim this land instead
his archaic people might have been as docile
as the Croatoan Indians were at first—

I think more likely they’d have eaten you (p. 57).

Not only cultural difference but violence complicates from the outset the imagined New Zealand encounter.

While the personal element remains, a critical, even didactic, strain pulls poems like ‘Fuse’ towards ideals of authentic representation and narrative in order to assert the contemporary relevance of past oppression. More broadly, McQueen’s engagement with the great stories of Western European history highlights how those stories persist as monuments to be reinscribed or fractured by personal memory or glimpses of the other, even as they remain central to shaping settler cultural identity. Therefore, she explores New Zealand’s past through its own inherited stories but also those of St Kilda and North America in early colonial times. McQueen evokes this
metaphorical ‘deep dance’ of history through lyric expressions of voice and presence in the landscape. Turning away from the playfulness of her earlier work, she challenges the idea that no coherence can be salvaged from the debris of the past in the contemporary context of late capitalism. While During could argue in 1985 that New Zealand’s ‘residual forms of economic life’ and trade protectionism provided a ‘cultural sanctuary’ from the full force of postmodern ideology, this is less the case today in a globalised cultural marketplace.\textsuperscript{44} As the emergence of Settlement Studies shows, however, one reaction to totalising economies and ideologies may be an increased localism. As McQueen said in a 2004 interview, ‘It’s going to be important to know where the ground is’ to avoid becoming ‘completely globalised’, and this ground may be temporal as well as geographical.\textsuperscript{45} By engaging in historical storytelling, McQueen’s poetry exposes representations of the past as fictions but also acknowledges a continuing need to locate notions of self and place in relation to an imagination of what has gone before.\textsuperscript{46}

Notes

1 Soundings: Poems and Drawings by Cilla McQueen (Dunedin: University of Otago P, 2002). Page references appear in brackets in the text.
The term ‘postmodernism’ obviously brings with it problems of definition and of historical periodisation, and has become increasingly historicised itself in recent criticism. I am concerned here with the 1980s and 1990s when the term became associated, via Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard, with a mistrust of metanarratives and a split from the past. Jameson proposes in ‘Theories of the Postmodern’, in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), that ‘an acceptance of the new term [...] is tantamount to an agreement on the fundamental nature of some decisive break between the modern and the postmodern moments, however these are evaluated’ (p. 26). His influential chapter ‘The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), includes among the postmodern’s ‘constitutive features’ a ‘new depthlessness’ and ‘a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relation to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality’ (p. 6). Marjorie Perloff has criticised this analysis for being in ‘itself a metanarrative’ that excludes difference, an objection particularly relevant to the New Zealand context. See ‘Postmodernism / Fin de Siècle: Defining “Difference” in Late Twentieth-Century Poetics’, in *Poetry On & Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1998), pp. 8-9; see also McHale, below.


8 During, p. 369.
17 White, p. x.
20 Markings: Poems and Drawings by Cilia McQueen (Dunedin: University of Otago P, 2000).
23 Cilla McQueen, ‘Interview’, para. 6.
31 Doreen Massey, Space, Place, and Gender (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1994), p. 251.
32 During, p. 369.
33 Calder and Turner, p. 13.
38 Evans, The Long Forgetting, p. 216.


Maori prisoners from Taranaki did participate in road-building along the Otago Peninsula, but no surviving records specify which work in particular they carried out. See Jane Reeves, ‘Maori Prisoners in Dunedin, 1869-1872 and 1879-1881: Exiled for a Cause’. Unpublished Honours thesis, University of Otago, Dunedin, 1989, pp. 43-44.

During, p. 369.

‘Interview’, para. 5.

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