

White Flight: Escaping the Illegitimate and Inauthentic City in Ian Wedde's *Symmes Hole*

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The antipathy toward the city of Wellington in Ian Wedde's 1986 novel *Symmes Hole* can be understood in relation to a complex affinity for the land that has long shaped New Zealand culture. The trope of city versus country, which was a defining feature of the literary renaissance of the 1930s, has been revitalized by the social upheavals since the 1960s. A crisis of conscience occasioned by the revival of Maori land protests has seen many Pakeha embrace a Maori model of identity based on connection to the land as a means of retrospectively legitimizing their own claim to occupancy. Furthermore, the weakening of traditional colonial ties following Britain's entry to the EEC, and the emergence of new forms of imperialism in the Pacific—particularly corporate globalization and nuclear testing—have heightened this awareness of location on the part of New Zealanders. Accordingly, the land has come to embody all that is original, pure, and innocent, while the city signifies the artificial, the heterogeneous, and the displaced. Although Wedde's dystopian vision of Wellington encourages a situated reading of history by tracing the city's decline into superficial consumerism back to the Great Age of European exploration, his conception of urban space is premised on an opposition with 'the natural,' which is problematically associated with 'the native' and thus serves, paradoxically, to reinforce the essentializing rationales of imperialism. A critical excavation of the monuments to national

(and multinational) history in the novel further reveals how the task of recuperating New Zealand's cultural identity by valorizing indigenous customs over imposed or imported ones is compromised by a covert desire to break free from the colonial past. This approach, which draws on Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the monumental and critical species of history, brings together and develops prior interpretations of *Symmes Hole*, notably Linda Hardy's influential account of the natural settlement syndrome and David Dowling's analysis of Wedde's turn from a satirical to a romantic mode. The city/country split thus highlights the contradictions inherent in the novel's dual attempt to expose the folly and vice of history while seeking absolution in myth.

The elaborate double narrative of *Symmes Hole* spans more than two centuries of foreign influence in the Pacific. The novel's chief historical protagonist is James 'Worser' Heberley, who sailed into Te Awaiti channel on April Fool's Day, 1830. Like a number of his fellow whalers, Heberley married into the local Maori community, forming what colonial promoter Edward Gibbon Wakefield called 'a new people.' As noted, however, in Wedde's pseudonymous introduction to the novel, the history of these new people 'was to go underground before the advancing wave of organized colonization' (8). Drawing on Heberley's journal and an array of other texts relating to the Pacific, the authorial figure of 'the researcher' imaginatively recuperates the fragments of this buried history as he wanders around modern-day Wellington.

The twin threads of the narrative are held together by a number of spatio-temporal and ideological relations between Heberley and the researcher, both of whom are 'trying to get home' (11). Most obviously, their respective stories are set on opposite sides of Cook Strait, thereby creating a divide between late twentieth-century Wellington—the official centre of commerce, politics and culture, built on the foundations of the original Wakefieldian settlement—and the site of Heberley's putatively natural landfall in the Sounds.¹ Wellington is also

portrayed as a city that has succumbed to the spread of global capital, further distancing it from the local culture that Heberley's Te Awaiti life once seemed to promise. Hence, Wellington is doubly tainted as illegitimate in terms of its colonial origins and inauthentic in terms of its neo-colonial condition. Despite the researcher's best efforts to deconstruct the enduring European myth of a Pacific paradise by uncovering Wellington's past, his eventual retreat from the 'fallen' city into the mythical realm of the 'native' community ironically restages Heberley's escape from the corruption of Western civilisation. The conclusion to the novel can thus be read as an attempt to regain paradise lost or what Hardy terms 'the settler dream of an originary innocence' (223).

The alternative version of European settlement represented by Heberley necessitates other narrative bifurcations. When it comes to Heberley's involvement in the struggle for territorial control, Wedde is careful to distance his protagonist from the official colonial agents by contrasting his 'symbiotic relationship' (8) with the land and its people with Colonel Wakefield's discordant and 'unnatural' presence. Yet, as a matter of historical fact, shortly after settling in Te Awaiti Heberley was hired by the Colonel to pilot the *Tory* across the Straits to Port Nicholson, the future site of the New Zealand Company settlement of Wellington. In her study of Wedde's adaptation of the source material in Heberley's journal, Hardy demonstrates that the 'sentimental alliance between indigenous Maori and "old settler"' that makes them share, in Wedde's novel, a natural aversion to Wakefield's scheme of importing an entire culture, intact, rewrites the competitive *alliance* between Heberley and Wakefield we can trace in the *Journal* (220). In *Symmes Hole*, then, Heberley is a suspicious yet passive observer of Wakefield and his party:

...he felt contempt for them. The Colonel's vision of an English lawn and a drooping elm and labourers' housing with allotment gardens was just plain daft—didn't he

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know that the ground he walked on was steeped in human blood? And that the land he bought didn't belong to anyone in a way that meant they could do that? (191–92)

Wedde strategically dissociates Heberley from his English origins in order to cast him as a new Father of the Nation. Given Wedde's preoccupation with the constitutive power of language, it is appropriate that Heberley's rebirth in this role should be marked by an act of renaming. As it is related in the novel, Heberley is instinctively drawn ashore by the homely smell of what he believes to be pigeon pie, just like he used to have back in Weymouth, but which turns out to be the local equivalent, weka. He takes shelter in a food-storage house, and the next morning a bemused Maori woman greets him, 'Ai tangata whata haeremai mou te kai...!' (137). Although Heberley does not understand the appellation 'tangata whata,' he accepts the name, shortening and anglicizing it to 'Worser.'

The element of "natural" chance and the authenticity of place' (Prentice 1998: 93) that apparently underpin Heberley's fresh identity and acceptance into the community are, however, belied by Wedde's more strained attempts to redeem his protagonist from the taint of Englishness. Heberley recalls a moment of epiphany when he witnessed a war party returning from a raid. Overwhelmed by the fierce dignity of the spectacle, he feels that he has been 'washed clear of everything he'd known—righted, dripping into this new world: he, *Worser!*' (219). Reincarnated as Worser, he now sees this place with the eyes of a native and would have us believe that his 'life before the beach' (223) and the '*John* that he was then' (221) have vanished. This rupture is presented even more explicitly in the following passage:

To Worser ... it now seemed that his life had had two parts—there was the part before April Fool's Day in 1830, and there was the time since. And now it began to look to him as though a third part was spars-up at some point on the horizon—couldn't tell how it bore, but he had the certainty it was in the direction of Colonel Wakefield. (229–30)

By dividing Heberley's life into discrete parts and downplaying his role as Wakefield's pilot, Wedde is able to isolate his protagonist from the official history of colonization. Wedde's treatment of Heberley would seem, however, to run counter to the professed methodology of *Symmes Hole* as espoused by the researcher, namely to seek out patterns of causality and accountability. This temporal severance and revision of origins are problematic in that, as Mark Williams notes, they offer European New Zealanders 'the prospect of remaking themselves by deliberately forgetting their own history' (212).

The contradiction in *Symmes Hole* between the imperative to remember and the secret desire to forget helps to explain the final, uneasy turn of the narrative when the researcher abandons his on-site research in Wellington and seeks out the old whalers who are the source of the history he has been investigating. This search for origins is complicated, it should be acknowledged, by the researcher's realisation of the impossibility of getting at the truth. Thus, the final sections of the novel oscillate between allusions to authenticity and ironic undercutting of any claim to reliability, such as the warnings that Paddy Brown, one of the researcher's informants, is 'a bull-artist' (306). A number of critics have expressed misgivings about the way in which Wedde ends *Symmes Hole*. Dowling, for instance, argues that, 'Unwilling to rest with the central *aporia* his satirical method has uncovered—the "Symmes Hole" of mixed motives in the colonisation of the South Pacific—Wedde fills it in, in the last moments of the novel' (47).

The function of monuments in the narrative as identity-affirming symbols of continuity, and the associated concept of monumental history provide a means of assessing this shift in the researcher's historiographic method from a deconstructive mode, which is essentially 'negative' and destabilizing, to a constructive, mythical mode of (re)writing the past. This shift relates, of course, to the researcher's personal quest for fulfilment and plenitude. More generally, though, it can be understood as an attempt to redeem the postmodern, postcolonial present by finding a positive basis for Pakeha identity (one that is not defined in terms of displacement and lack), rather than relying on the imaginative recovery of an 'authentic' pre-colonial past that is lost to us in the present, as represented by Heberley. The notion of humankind's need for symbols of transcendence and permanence is famously expressed in Nietzsche's theory of monumental history. Initially, Wedde's researcher opposes a monumentalist conception of the past by producing what Nietzsche would call a critical history of the Pacific. This latter species of history, which is employed by 'he who is oppressed by a present need, and who wants to throw off this burden at any cost,' demands a willingness to scrupulously examine the past and condemn its injustices (Nietzsche [1874] 1997: 72). Nietzsche's warning against trying to wholly disassociate ourselves from the past that we condemn is, however, particularly pertinent to *Symmes Hole*: 'It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were *a posteriori*, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate:—always a dangerous attempt because it is so hard to know the limit to denial of the past and because second natures are usually weaker than first' (Nietzsche 76).

Tellingly, the critical phase of the researcher's history is characterized by a number of ritual defilements of official monuments. His first target is the nationalistic, authoritarian statue of Richard John Seddon in Parliament grounds. As the researcher leaves the literary reception at the start of the novel,

he lurches to where King Dick stands on his plinth, ‘one hand raised in an imperial gesture of exhortation’ (46), and loses his ‘Beehive supper’ all over Seddon’s shoes. This ritual purging of official culture is re-enacted in the third section of the novel as the researcher makes his exit from that ubiquitous monument to neo-colonial capitalism—the Golden Arches. The researcher, we are earlier informed, recalls that what is now the McDonald’s Restaurant in Courtenay Place ‘was once the Popular Milkbar, a favourite haunt with a proletarian history embedded in its name, but now overmantled by the “official history” of a McDonald’s franchise’ (13). After a scathing critique of the alienation and artifice associated with McDonald’s, the researcher stuffs his mouth full of hamburger and mock-barfs in the centre of the restaurant as a protest in the name of ‘the Popular Milkbar and all it stood for’ (266).

As *Symmes Hole* draws to a close, however, the researcher’s investigative approach shifts from reading official culture and history ‘against the grain’ to the monumental mode of asserting the validity of certain submerged cultural signs as guarantors of an ‘authentic’ personal and collective identity. It is as if the project of deconstructing identity eventually becomes untenable and the need to assert a sense of self prevails. In other words, the researcher becomes a myth-maker instead of a myth-breaker. It could be argued, of course, that this narrative move constitutes not so much an ideological u-turn as a manifestation of the desire to establish a myth of origins that was already latent in Heberley’s story. Thus, as the researcher tries to get closer to the wellspring of the unofficial history that he has been constructing, he also begins to seek out monuments to that history. His journey to the East Coast takes the form of a spiritual quest for the legendary whale-shaped stone mauri or talisman, which has a spring of pure water where its blowhole would be. As the researcher recounts it, knowledge of the Ika Whenua is prehistorical, mythological in fact, since it is older than the priest Ruawhero of the Takitimu canoe, who arrived at Mahia from

eastern Polynesia in the fourteenth century. According to Maori folklore, this mauri has the power to attract whales to the shore, and the researcher speculates that it may have brought people to Mahia along the whale migration routes. Accordingly, the Ika Whenua conveniently furnishes the researcher with a common founding myth for the history of Maori migration *and* the unofficial history of European settlement that he has traced back to the early whalers.

The goal of seeking out this monument to a preordained landfall is communicated to the researcher through the conventional mythological device of a dream vision. For two consecutive nights the researcher feels that his sleep has been ‘just a repeat’ and ‘a fading duplication’; then, on the third night, in a ‘spermy bunk’ at the Opoutama motor camp, ‘his sleep is authentic’ (307–08). As he drifts into unconsciousness he has the revelation that ‘[t]his *endless* hunt for meaning, [is] just another kind of greed,’ and he has ‘an exquisite dream’ in which he finds the stone whale (308). This marks the researcher’s ultimate rejection of the historian’s critical quest—framed as a renunciation of Enlightenment acquisitiveness—and his accompanying longing for an instinctual union with the land and its mythology. After searching in vain for positive evidence of the Ika Whenua, the researcher learns from Old Greening that it is buried under the reclaimed land of the motor camp. This (non-)discovery allows Wedde to have his cake and eat it too. On the one hand, the mauri fits the pattern of an alternative history that has (literally) been forced underground as capital advances into new territory, in this case turning a small fishing community into prime holiday real estate, while the fact that the mauri is hidden allows it to retain its subversive value, preventing it from being co-opted as a monument to official culture. On the other hand, the mauri’s existence is nevertheless affirmed as the secret guarantor of an authentic connection to the land, its ‘depth’ providing an antidote to the perceived superficiality of the postmodern condition. Dowling represents this double move

thus: 'Although he does not literally dive for the buried whale icon (this would result in one more hole), Wedde asserts its presence and provides the mythic view of history that his satire has been deconstructing' (47). The extent to which Wedde's appeal to the Ika Whenua represents an appropriation of Maori mythology as the basis of Pakeha legitimacy is, of course, a crucial question. The mauri would appear to function as a source of spiritual rejuvenation after an exhaustive and exhausting excavation of Pakeha postcolonial identity. In this respect, the end of the novel is haunted by an unintended echo of the reproof that the Melvillian Dr Long Ghost directs at Enlightenment Europe and 'the exhausted leer' it 'has fixed upon the savage world, the sick hope of refreshment': 'Let man live with his history, I say!—and not try to use another's' (182–83).

Wedde's commitment to examining Pacific history on its own ground has produced an exceptionally rich and incisive account of the legacy of exploration and exploitation. As a product of its time, *Symmes Hole* reflects the anxieties that this legacy provoked for New Zealanders in the latter half of the twentieth century, specifically with respect to race relations and the perceived threat to local economies, ecosystems and customs posed by cosmopolitan culture. The portrait of the city in the novel is intimately connected, I have argued, to the search for a sense of legitimacy and belonging on the part of European New Zealanders. This image of urban culture is, however, premised on a reductive opposition between 'nature' and 'the native.' Wedde's reliance on Maori culture as the marker of authenticity, which denotes the limits of his satire, is particularly problematic in that it confines Maoridom to the romanticized, pastoral domain of a prelapsarian past and thereby implicitly confirms the sort of imperialist myths that the novel otherwise seeks to dispel. Nearly twenty years after its publication, *Symmes Hole* still invites the question of what place there can be in our national mythology for a figure such as Worser, Wedde's prototype of the pre-colonial Pakeha who represents the troubling temptation to

flee the ruins of history and start anew. In weighing that question and accounting for the errors of the past, Nietzsche's caution to the critical historian still bears consideration: 'If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them' (76).

Notes

- ¹ Compare the essay 'Translation and Representation: A History of Ferries' in which Wedde observes that Cook's emphatic (re)naming of his 'discovery' of Raukawamoana as a *strait* had the effect of reinscribing 'as binary or divisive what another culture saw quite otherwise; and what even the ecological facts of the area see otherwise' (192).

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