

ALISON JONES

this
pākehā
life an
unsettled
memoir

Preface

I'm keen on the idea at first. Anywhere has to be better than here. It is a Friday afternoon on a typical wet grey winter's day in Auckland. My friend and academic colleague Te Kawehau and I sit in a steamed-up café discussing the merits of a university teaching job in another country. Australia, perhaps, for warmer weather. Or England, not for the weather, but for a change. Te Kawehau is clear. She says she could not live very long outside Aotearoa New Zealand: 'This is the only place I make sense.'

Her sentiments unexpectedly reflect my own. This country has formed both of us, in different ways. As a Māori woman from the Northland hapū Ngāti Hau, she has roots here that are hundreds of years old. I am the daughter of English immigrants, a child born into this land and haunted by ghosts of foreign hills. I became who I am here. In this café, right now, I realise that I cannot imagine living anywhere else. The needle on my built-in compass would always be swivelling towards home.

This book is about my making sense here, of my becoming and being Pākehā. Every Pākehā becomes a Pākehā in their own way, finding their own meaning for that Māori word. This is the story of what it means to me. I have written this book for Pākehā – and other New Zealanders – curious about their sense of identity and about the ambivalences we Pākehā often experience in our relationships with Māori.

‘Pākehā’ is a complicated and politicised term in modern usage. It is a tuna-term, a slippery eel of a word; it wriggles easily away from one’s grasp. Sometimes it is a general descriptive category to name the white people inhabiting New Zealand; sometimes it refers to an identity, a form of self-understanding that arises from close ongoing engagement with Māori-as-Māori. Sometimes it is used negatively by Māori to name the colonisers. But as Ani Mikaere famously put it: ‘[T]here is nowhere else in the world that one can be Pākehā. Whether the term remains forever linked to the shameful role of the oppressor or whether it can become a positive source of identity and pride is up to Pākehā themselves. All that is required from them is a leap of faith.’¹

Many European New Zealanders have been reluctant to take a leap and adopt this Māori name. Some have even tried to argue, wrongly, that it is a term of abuse. Māori have been calling Europeans ‘Pākehā’ ever since they first encountered strange white beings on Captain James Cook’s ship in 1769, and the scholarly consensus seems to be that it is an ancient Māori term with unclear origins, perhaps referring to pale, super-natural, human-like beings.

It was not until the Pākehā historian Michael King encouraged us in 1985 to identify ourselves as Pākehā rather than European New Zealanders that we have been trying on the term for size.² But it is still not easy to find positive modern Pākehā histories, as the late writer Peter Wells recently pointed out. We once were noble pioneers, settlers and colonists about whom interesting stories could be told. Now that New Zealand pioneers are no longer considered so noble, given their destructive effects on Māori, Wells wrote: ‘[We] have been left singularly naked, stripped of all dignity let alone identity. We

are the silhouette without a face, demoted into non-beings – we are simply “non-Māori”.’³

I am not sure I agree. Although we are now rightly more anxious about the real and symbolic violence of New Zealand settlement, many of us do confidently take up the term Pākehā as an identity – even if its modern meaning cannot be easily pinned down, and its boundaries are unclear. Wells had a point that we rarely write in positive terms about being Pākehā, though that, too, is changing as we begin to face our relationships with Māori.



Michael King’s motivation in 1985 to write *Being Pakeha* was his curiosity, after several years of writing about Māori, about ‘who was I, who was my family, where did we come from and where did we belong?’⁴ King wrote with an historian’s sensibility and a certain masculine detachment: ‘To be Pakeha in the 1940s and 1950s was to enjoy a way of life that changed beyond recognition in the succeeding decades. ... This book is one Pakeha’s eyewitness account ... a view from the high ground of the 1980s.’⁵

My own writing in *This Pākehā Life: An Unsettled Memoir* is not so detached or confident in tone. I am not an eyewitness so much as an uncertain participant in my relationships with Māori. In this book about my becoming Pākehā, I stick close to the contours of a lifetime of personally remembered events and relationships. My modest aim in giving attention to my own everyday engagements with Māori is to give shape to one New Zealand experience of the latter half of the twentieth century.

In my recollections of becoming Pākehā I have made nothing up – at least, not knowingly – though I have discovered that some memories exist only because I want them to be true. My account of childhood relies on at least one memory that has proved ghostly – a memory that, despite being false, remains vivid, and continues to haunt me. I have changed a few names, but most people in my story have allowed me to name them, even if my memories do not always match theirs. So, inevitably, this book is also about memory, its unreliability, and how it is important to who we are.

Mine is not a redemptive story of good feelings and togetherness; I try to show that Māori–Pākehā relationships are difficult and wonderful all at once, and that such complexities are not only exciting but also make us who we are as quirkily unique New Zealanders.

Now, after more than sixty-five years of becoming Pākehā – having accepted the inevitable Pākehā state of permanent lively discomfort, and eschewing a single resolution of our relationship with Māori – I feel strangely liberated. Being Pākehā, having daily engagements with Māori-as-Māori, may not be entirely comfortable, but nor is it ever boring. For all the complexities, such relationships have given me a deeply rich sense of myself and the place I live.



Throughout this book I use Māori words, sometimes with a translation, sometimes allowing the context to provide meaning, though there is a glossary at the end of the book. These days it can reasonably be assumed that most New Zealanders understand the many Māori terms now used

regularly in popular media such as newspapers and the radio. I like the apparently easy flow between the use of English and te reo Māori in New Zealand. At the same time, I'm cautious of depicting the casual mix of languages as unproblematic. Te reo Māori and English describe deeply different worlds. It is not a matter of simply using different words to say the same things. The fact is, key Māori words cannot be translated into a precisely equivalent English word. For instance, commonly used terms such as 'whānau' and 'whenua' are used routinely in English-language sentences to refer to 'family' and 'land' respectively. Yet to grasp their meaning in te reo Māori is to feel and understand the living links with ancestors, to recall past events, to speak of birth and death – in ways that are not at all represented by those two English words.

I could explain it another way. You get an everyday sense of different worlds when you happen upon a mundane sentence in a New Zealand short story: 'We entered the silent whare on a cold winter's night.' Whare. The word seems to arrive in the sentence from another planet. The English vowels through which you are reading are shaken up, the flow interrupted. You pause a moment and rearrange your mouth (even in your mind, with silent reading, your mind-mouth has to get itself around the words). *Whare*. The *a* is an open, short sound, you have to stretch your mouth away from the usual flat tongue of the New Zealand English speaker. Air enters the mouth, even only in the mind; you are more alert for a moment. Then the final *e* demands to be heard, and it is an odd 'e'. Not an 'ee' out of bared fangs, but a soft light sound that floats off, like the 'e' in 'egg'. The sound floats, but not vaguely – it is insistent as it rolls off the hard 'r' that sounds like a 'd', finishing the word nicely. Whare.

It's not only the sudden change in register demanded by the whare that unsettles the reader; it is not merely a matter of the strange sound of a word. The strangeness goes much further than that. If you had read 'We entered the silent hut on a cold winter's night' you would have read on, barely noticing anything except perhaps a shiver and a sense of desolation. But a whare's desolation is so much sadder and more mysterious than that of a silent room. I would barely hesitate to enter a deserted hut on a cold winter night, but a whare? Even at the doorway of a very small whare, I'd be looking out for ghosts and spirits, straight away. I'd at least peer in from the door contemplating whether to enter at all, and whether to remove my shoes as is customary for entering a whare. I would not simply walk right in.

There is something about both that shift of vowel sound and the caution at the imagined whare door that captures the disjuncture between Pākehā and Māori worlds. Some Pākehā can read the sentence, or encounter the silent whare, and make the adjustment with barely any effort. Even so, there is always some pause: the reader recognises that the word and its shape is outside of English; she feels the forces of another reality. She makes an adjustment; she cannot merely sail straight on. So, although I use Māori terms here and there in this text, I want to sound a warning against a complacent assumption of simple translations.

It is unfashionable to point to differences between humans in a modern world that aches for the basic, shared values of being (a good) human: kindness, generosity, acceptance, respect. It goes without saying, I hope, that even as cultures can and do inhabit different worlds, we are all human and we all share the higher human values. The joy of becoming Pākehā is that it requires and nurtures a *doubled being*: a sense of shared

humanity with Māori as well as a deep sense of otherness, of the unknown and the unknowable. For me, it is within that fundamental tension – it's like the positive tension in a firm handshake, or a kind steady gaze between two people – that I feel truly alive, and where I make sense.