REVISING REVISIONIST HISTORY: THE ‘MAORI ACHIEVEMENT’ AND RECENT HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEVELOPMENTS ON THE ‘NEW ZEALAND WARS’

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James Belich’s seminal redescription of nineteenth century Maori-Pakeha conflict has recently been the subject of a spate of interpretative challenges. These critiques have focused especially on his notion that the Maori war effort of the 1860s had been the first example of an effective military response to the tactical necessities brought about by modern warfare. Since its publication in 1986 and despite these recent attacks, however, Belich’s theses on the ‘Maori Achievement’ have hegemonised the recurrent debate on the origins of Aotearoa/New Zealand’s exceptionality.

The first part of this paper assesses this recent criticism of Belich’s rendition of the land wars that engulfed Aotearoa/New Zealand during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The second part constitutes - fifteen years after the publication of *The New Zealand Wars* - an analytical reading of the historiographical role played by Belich’s revisionist interpretation.

**a) Revisionist History Revised?**

‘James Belich and the Maori Pa: Revisionist History Revised’, published in the Australian based *War & Society* in 2001, represents, so far, the most articulate challenge to the interpretation espoused in *The New Zealand Wars*. In fact, although it concentrates on military issues, as the title of his article suggests, US academic J. M. Gates’ contribution targets the whole of Belich’s rendition. Insisting that the Maori pa of the 1860s cannot be considered trench warfare because of its relatively small size and because of its tactical expendability - characteristics that would distance Maori fortifications of this period from the classic examples of this type of defensive military design - Gates aims to redress the comprehensive interpretative shift that followed *The New Zealand Wars*. His argument, however, presents a notable series of inconsistencies.

For example, while seemingly challenging Belich’s use of a “trench” terminology, Gates insists on the strategical differences between pas and trenches, and this seems rather to support Belich’s notion of Maori fortifications as both unique and unprecedented. Conversely, Gates’ understanding of 1860s pas as merely derivative or a repetition, albeit adapted, of previous (European) design is denied by his stress on their tactical expendability.

Another account of Gates’ criticism involves his downsizing the effectiveness of British artillery. Whereas Belich had insisted on its efficiency and a flattering assessment of British firepower had been a constituent element of his account of the ‘Maori achievement’, Gates insists on how defective this weapon was in the 1860s in the New Zealand theatre of operation, especially when compared to later improvements. Yet, artillery accuracy is always relative to the task at hand and to the available technology. In the end, while Gates’s argument provides an informed critique of mid-nineteenth century artillery technology, his analysis does not disprove that Maori anti artillery responses was appropriate to the challenge represented by British bombardments at that specific point in time and in the specific conditions of the New Zealand wars. Rather than challenging Belich’s interpretation, Gates’ conclusion that ‘[g]iven the low profile and small size of the Maori works, Gate Pa presented a less than ideal target for the artillery pieces and projectiles the British had at their disposal’ ultimately supports the notion that Maori defensive works may have effectively designed in order to respond to a specific challenge. Maori had the capacity to prepare defenses exhibiting a higher profile, although this was somewhat limited by resource and time constraints: one very plausible explanation would be that they decided to eschew this approach because of the need to minimise the effects of British artillery.

As well, Gates’ criticism of Belich’s comparison between the British bombardment of the Gate Pa and the 1916 bombardment of the Somme - an ‘absurdity’ not even ‘worthy of comment’ - does not take into account the improvement in the defensive technology that had occurred between the two military episodes. Of course,
both artillery accuracy and destructive power would be more effective in the latter episode, but so would the defensive systems that were designed and put in place to deal with them. In fact, Belich’s unit of measurement for the comparison of the two episodes (the weight of shell) may arguably be a more appropriate way to exercise a comparison than Gates’ non-relativistic evaluation.

Nonetheless, ‘James Belich and the Maori Pa: Revisionist History Revised’, unearths significant evidence of European acknowledgement of Maori superior capabilities, a type of evidence that the author claims Belich had disregarded in order to highlight British denial in confronting military upsets. Acknowledgement of ability and denial of defeat, however, especially when the exact nature of the events at stake is not fully understood, are not always or necessarily mutually exclusive. At the same time, Gates is referring to sources that appear to have constituted a minority view and did not challenge the then hegemonic assumption that a non-European “race” should not be endowed with superior military preparation when confronting a European one. Moreover, Belich’s narrative should be contextualised against the backdrop of his reconstruction of a wider ‘Victorian interpretation of racial conflict’ - a type of interpretation that necessarily relates to a diversified and sometimes incoherent yet pervasive discursive practice. Rather than disproving Belich’s conclusion on the Victorian interpretation of racial conflict, individual episodes of acknowledgment further substantiates his line of thought. Gates demonstrates how in the 1860s some could “see” Maori capability and comment on their strategic capacities; yet, this is in many ways beside the point. Belich’s detection of a widespread ideological failure to recognise Maori potential, and that this should be related more to the general interpretation of conflict in colonialist milieus than to individual inability, remains convincing despite Gates’ new evidence.

Consistently, Gates’ reconstruction of British activity at Gate Pa is aimed at exposing Belich’s notion that the British had performed to the best of their possibilities. Yet, quite ironically, Gates’ argument on this specific issue is relating on and surprisingly similar to the nineteenth century evidence Belich had comprehensively criticised in the non-military part of The New Zealand Wars. And so is Gates’ claim that Maori could not develop the modern pa without external help, input, or influence (he suggests the role of Pakeha Maori and Maori voyaging as possible sources), which resonates distinctively with nineteenth century evidence. In this respect, as much as Belich’s argument is necessarily speculative, so is Gates’. To this point, he draws attention to Paul D’Arcy’s notion that the modern pa had also been developed in other parts of Polynesia. But this only proves that given the specific circumstances of Maori technological development and the necessities brought about by modern warfare it was possible to autonomously develop this type of response (and that the modern pa was probably within the conceptual technological capabilities of Maori military planners). Gates’ argument ultimately presents a crucial internal contradiction: the Maori pa of the 1860s is presented as unprecedented because of its tactical expendability (and therefore cannot be defined as a trench defensive system), yet it is also seen as preceded by other European systems of trench fortifications. On the other hand, the pa must have been derivative, yet it was in many ways original since it had been developed elsewhere in Polynesia and Maori voyagers must have been interested in the design of European fortifications.

Notwithstanding the efforts in demonstrating that Maori had not been the first in developing trench warfare - that others had already developed and deployed this specific type of defensive design - Belich’s analysis endures despite criticism. Besides, whether Maori trenches had been the first in military history, or whether their response was derivative or autonomous (or whether Belich had the military background to interpret military phenomena), becomes less important if one considers that much of his revisionism was originally built upon the notion of a Maori achievement based on military innovation and strategic preparation, not on discovery. In the final analysis and in relation to Belich’s reconstruction of New Zealand developments, whether other military encounters fall within a specific definition of trench warfare (a description that is necessarily flexible and responds to an arbitrary set of variables) seems therefore less consequential. Nearly two decades after its original publication and despite a spate of historiographical activity challenging his interpretation, Belich’s assessment of Maori rapidity of response and military innovation - autonomous or else - and British ideological deficiency in the interpretation of “racial” warfare, remains practically intact.

b) The Isolation of New Zealand History

Yet, whether the Maori had been uniquely effective in limiting an attempt at colonial dispossession is not a minor interpretative passage in the context of the historiography of Aotearoa/New Zealand. After all, Belich’s notion that it was the military effort of the federated Maori tribes against the Anglo-settler endeavors that had created the conditions for the establishment of a tradition of racial partnership has underpinned the
transformation of tribe-Crown relationship in the last two decades. “Expert” criticism based on military considerations aside, attacks on his interpretation have come from different sectors of the historiographical opinion and have insisted either on the fact that the ‘Maori achievement’ had been superseded in successive phases by a balance of power that privileged the assimilationist and dispossessionary attempts of a colonising project, or on the collaboration of Maori communities with the settler state.

It is not only a matter of emphasis: deciding whether a possibly ethnocidal settler project had been attempted but largely limited by Maori military challenge or whether it was carried out despite Maori resistance amounts in many ways to a reproposition of a debate that in previous decades has seen the notion of a surprisingly “civilisable” people juxtaposed to the concept of a surprisingly “civilised” colonisation. Approaching this state of mind would involve an appraisal of the founding myths of New Zealand – myths that have shown a surprising degree of resilience (Belich himself - ten years after his fundamental contribution to the “unsettling” of New Zealand history - proposed in Making Peoples a narrative that insists on the “exceptionality” of both constituting partners of the New Zealand polity). This tendency may suggest reluctance in accepting the consequences of a historiographical discourse that recognises New Zealand as yet another variation of a common settler-colonial theme more than an intractably exceptional example.

It is important to reflect on the nature of Belich’s revisionism vis a vis Aotearoa/New Zealand’s historiographical tradition of exceptionalism. The reference to the unique “quality” of the Maori people, specifically their warlike capabilities, had been one of the two tenets of what Belich identified as ‘the New Zealand ideology’ of exceptionality - at least as important as the reference to “unique” Pakeha humanitariannism and fairness. While this nationalistic discourse and representation of indigenous peoples (and Pakeha) had survived unchallenged for more than a century, a crucial crisis in the definition of national identity during the 1980s prompted the establishment of a radically revisionist tradition. For example, at the end of the 1970s, in a Russian doll-like fashion, nineteenth-century racial conflict could still be depicted as it had been during the 1930s and as, in turn, it had been represented in the 1860s:

[t]he Maori was one of the most redoubtable fighting men ever encountered by the Victorian Army and, for a tribute to his prowess, whether as friend or foe, the judgment of the historian of the British Army, Sir John Fortescue, cannot be bettered:

The Maori had his own code of war, the essence of which was a fair fight on a day and place fixed by appointment, when the best and bravest man should win. The British soldier upset his traditions, but could not touch his proud courage nor degrade his proud honour. A Maori was capable of slaughtering wounded and prisoners and perhaps eating them afterwards, but he could also leap down into the fire of both sides to save the life of a fallen foe. The British soldier, therefore, held him in the deepest respect, not resenting his own little defeats but recognizing the noble side of the Maori and forgetting his savagery.

This passage provides an inventory of the ideological “ingredients” that constituted what had been the orthodox depiction of nineteenth-century Maori-Pakeha struggle: Maori “nobility”, Maori “savagery”, how insignificant British upsets in the battlefield had been, how forgetful of the struggle everybody had been once it was concluded. The mythology of the “one people” had been sustained also through this interpretative pattern, which has been brilliantly defined as ‘the ‘Boys’ Own’ adventure story account of the wars. Thus, all existing ethnic divisions had been covered under the official layer of nationalistic rhetoric about how excellent (i.e.: how close to white standards) the achievements of the Maori had been (after all, Maori soldiers had also died on the slopes of Gallipoli and shared hardships with their Pakeha counterparts). (One should also note that a demand for similar images has never fully disappeared: for example, Eldson Best’s work on Maori warfare, originally published in The Journal of the Polynesian Society between 1902 and 1904 has been recently republished almost untouched - not as a relevant source for an ethnography of a Pakeha gaze, but as a valid interpretation in its own right.)

While contributing decisively to reframing them, Belich recognised these themes as the “founding” elements of a New Zealand consciousness: ‘from the outset, European New Zealandness consisted partly in having the ‘best blacks’ and in treating them best’. However, although revisionist on many accounts, his interpretative approach in the New Zealand Wars was consistent with an exceptionalist approach - adding a corollary to the
traditional postulate (the “treating them best because of their military capacity” rather than as a result of an extraordinary generosity). While the military factor was one crucial tenet of his interpretation, it should not be surprising that the challenges to Belich’s redescription have focussed especially on this aspect.

Yet, more importantly, the notion of Pakeha generosity - ‘Better Britonism’ - does not ultimately disappear from Belich’s narrative (even if the accent is placed more on Maori military achievement than on the influence of British humanitarianism):

[w]hile assimilation was formal policy to the 1960s, in practice Aryanism also generated potential levers for the maintenance of Maori identity. When superior natives, and the superior treatment of natives, were key ways in which you portrayed New Zealand to the world, and told the difference between Australian Britons and New Zealand ones, living proof was useful. Despite persistent racial prejudice and discrimination that varied regionally and according to other factors, New Zealand did deliver this proof: Maori had been guaranteed four seats in the colonial parliament in 1867, a century before Aboriginal Australians achieved full citizenship. There were Maori members of the executive from the 1870s, and acting Prime Ministers from 1909. Conservative governments of the 1920s and 1930s, even in the midst of economic depression, were persuaded to pump hundreds of thousands of pounds into Maori rural development, and to make at least nominal reparation for unjust land dealings in the previous century.19

While undoubtedly suggestive, Belich’s rendition is ambivalent on the origin of (relative) Maori success. Listings of Maori successes have numerous precedents in the New Zealand historiography of race relations, beginning with William Pember Reeves’ *The Long White Cloud* - it is a feature that has been constantly reproposed in renditions of the country’s history.20 In this respect, Belich’s reflection is only partially new. He does acknowledge the role played by Maori strength, yet he does not discard Pakeha contributions to a better state of race relations (although it is admitted that this is a behavior brought about not by generosity, but by the needs of Pakeha self-representation).

The end result of this interpretation is that the Maori would still have to be somewhat appreciative of having been colonised by a very specific type of colonialism - the Pakeha type, colonialist of course, but also convinced of ‘having the best blacks and treating them best’ - and for having been subjected to a process of colonial expansion which happened at a very special time (i.e.: the humanitarian heyday). In Belich’s later work, the two tenets of what could be defined as the “New Zealand ideology” - “Better Britonism” and “Maori Aryanism” - two faces of the same coin, are transformed and reinterpreted as “Maori military achievement” and “Pakeha humanitarianism”. Belich inverts the logical order and strongly qualifies it, yet, despite obvious departures, the permanence of a traditionally exceptionalist framework is confirmed (albeit modernised).

Donald Denoon’s comparative note on the uniqueness of the New Zealand case in the context of settler societies remains relevant even after the emergence of the “new” New Zealand historiography of the 1980s:

Only in New Zealand [as opposed to other settler societies] were indigenous people transmogrified into precocious European navigators and colonists, co-opted into settler history rather than expunged from its records. Only in New Zealand was it conceded that history had occurred before Europeans trod the stage. However, this is one of those exceptions which proves a rule. By insisting that Maoris were long-lost cousins, the settlers were still able to believe that history began with European colonization, which made a qualitative change in the nature of change itself.21

While highlighting intrinsic commonality and parallel development Belich’s *Making Peoples* ultimately supports this interpretative position:

[f]our centuries after the death of Jesus Christ, two migrant ships pushed through dangerous seas. Strong men and women tended oars and sails; children crouched amidst livestock and households goods. Each crew valued kin above all, walked with live gods - Tu and Thor, Woden and Tane - and lived and died for weregild and utu. Each crew headed for a place of which little was known, and a great deal hoped. Too much can be made of their similarities, but they did have one thing in common: both were forebears of the New Zealanders.22

Belich perceives two very different peoples as having much in common. In Belich’s work the mythology of the
“Aryan Maori” has obviously disappeared and so have its more modern variations: its major replacement, however, serves a surprisingly similar interpretative function. Instead of projecting a perceived contemporary amalgamation onto a mythological past (for example, the common Aryan origin), the replacement myth projects the perception of a “shared” past onto the projection of a fully bicultural Aotearoa/New Zealand. Representational needs of this kind have a tendency to persist, even if in a transformed way. The historiographical shifts initiated during the 1970s, realised during the 1980s and consolidated during the following decade remain a momentous effort in historical revision, yet, no matter how radical, this redescriptions may have not fully liberated New Zealand history from a tendency to represent itself as irreducibly exceptional. Nothing necessarily wrong with this, yet, it is a need to highlight an irreducible uniqueness and its consequences (the Treaty and its constitutional history, and a propensity to fulfill the mythology of the exceptionally positive race relations) that Gates and others are finding most perplexing.

Notes:

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[11] Gates also attacks Belich by noting how the reference to trench warfare in relation to Maori pas had been already suggested in an unpublished 1975 paper, and therefore suggesting that Belich’s terminological choice had not been original (he also noted how Belich had failed to refer to this paper in his 1986 book). Ultimately, more than the interpretation of European-Maori conflict, Gates seems interested in discrediting Belich’s reliability as an historian, military or else. See Gates, p. 67-68.


[17] J. Evans, editing this new edition and apparently forgetful of Belich’s *The New Zealand Wars*, positively affirms that ‘the Majority of Best’s ethnographic work stood the test of time’ and that this is ‘the most in-depth look at Maori attitudes and concepts of war yet published’. See E. Best, *Notes on the Art of War*, Reed: Auckland, 2001, p. ix.


Bibliography:


