
ALAN DUFF'S ONCE WERE WARRIORS

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Duff, Alan 1994 *Once Were Warriors* University of Queensland Press St Lucia (first published 1990)

For many years New Zealand has had an international image as a nation whole and harmonious, with an enviable record of race relations. Maori activism centred on contestation of land ownership through the 'Treaty of Waitangi' has been recast to celebrate New Zealand race relations (thus maintaining 'national' mythologies) or as the irrational actions of radicals, rather than revealing a history of violence, oppression and dispossession. Conversely, when conflict has become visible it has been treated as a moment separated from what Ranginui Walker calls 'the endless struggle of the Maori for social justice, equality and self-determination' (Walker 1990: 10).

Into this endless struggle where 'the Maori is not intimidated by power, just as the fighters of a warrior race were not intimidated by the big guns at Orakau or Gate Pa', comes the novel *Once Were Warriors* by New Zealand writer, Alan Duff. *Once Were Warriors* is a disturbing and unrelentingly violent novel set in small town New Zealand. At the centre of this novel is Pine Block, a State housing area that sits on the margins of Two Lakes, and land owned by the local white Patriarch, Mr Trambert. Here the Heke family exist along with other Maori, caught within a relentless cycle of welfare payments and drunken parties. The decay and hopelessness is overwhelming.

The New Zealand depicted within the novel is one that has undergone a fundamental change from the days of 'applied Christianity' and paternalist welfarism of the 1930s (Consedine 1989: 178). In the new age of economically-rationalised New Zealand, unionism has been all but destroyed, services restructured along user pays lines, and a 'New Zealand' moral landscape, reinscribed. Welfare is no longer a priority.

Overlooked by the Trambert estate with its two-story house surrounded by trees and brick fence (occupied by a nice white middle-class nuclear

family) Pine Block is in the latter stages of decay. The rusting cars, rubbish and dirt is emblematic of a people who are lost within a poverty trap – a cycle of dependence. Violence and abuse are commonplace, as is death, within a community that is utterly marginalised, impoverished, dispossessed. They are ‘victims’ living off the State.

This is the refrain that goes through the first half of the novel. Not only are these people trapped within the lived experience of poverty, but they are trapped, also, within the stereotypes of ethnicity that keep them there. Old rusting cars sitting on overgrown front lawns: ‘Rusting monuments to these people, their apathy, their couldn’t give a fuck bout nuthin or no one attitude’ (12). Duff is evoking the stereotype of ‘dole-bludging, lazy, fornicating, able-bodied New Zealanders living at the expense of the hard-working and moral taxpayer’, overlaid with a sense of cultural determinism (Consedine, 1989: 179).

Beth Heke, Jake Heke and their children share the narrative space of the novel. *Intimate and brutal*, the narrative follows their lives echoing their points of view. The language is clipped and rough, parred back and spare, echoing the vernacular. Expression and content mesh to present a realistic and brutally persuasive account of life in Pine Block, Two Lakes – a place that could be any town or city in New Zealand. Duff sets his political message in the sound and shape of the text itself. The inarticulate speech reminding the reader that these people are not only speaking English ‘as a second language’, but that they have been robbed of their first language.

Beth is a woman who has known hope and love, and has watched it die in the face of a reality, cold and unrelenting. Beaten by her husband for any expression of independence, and slowly losing her children through a culture of violence and oppression, she, when we first meet her, retreats into a fatalism that negates the possibility of change. The process of colonisation where the Pakeha ‘defeated us. Conquered us. Took our land, our *mana*, left us with nothing’ (47), converges with a notion of the ‘laid-back race’ (43), leaving little room for action.

Jake ‘the Muss’ Heke, too, takes refuge in an attitude of nonchalance and fatalism. He is man filled with anger – his muscled and powerful body his only site for expression of injustice and oppression. But Jake is lost within the brutal history of colonisation (invasion), unable to locate the reason for his anger, unable to change his circumstances. Instead he exercises his muscle in the local pub and in his home, his reputation passing for identity. Jake justifies his own violence through cultural essentialism: “Us Maoris, man, we used to be warriors” (54). But his construction of ‘Warrior’ has more to do with American boxing heroes and comic book ‘Red Indians’, than any ‘real’ identification with Maori culture. The irony of his mis-identification and retreat into stereotypical and racist identities underlines his

own occupation of a stereotypical 'Maori', a stereotype that maintains oppression and victimization.

From such a beginning can only come pain and misery, and at the centre of this novel that is what you find. A shocking betrayal resulting in tragedy provides a platform with which to reassert Maori culture, through the rich, vibrant and moving ritual grieving of a tangi (funeral). This death is by no means the last within the novel, or within the lives of the people, but it does provide a turning point. A choice has to be made.

It is here that the established rhetoric of powerlessness and victimisation is challenged. The strength of Maori culture is introduced into the novel, primarily through the Marae, the elders, and the paramount chief of Beth's 'iwi'. This a community aware of itself in stark contrast to the (self)destructive and fragmented residents of Pine Block. It is through Te Tupaea (the paramount chief) that the message of redemption and hope is articulated. He offers the possibility of empowerment, identity and hope through his embodiment of Maoriness, through a re-appropriation of power and strength – the political mobilisation of the 'Warrior'. But redemption is there, only, for those who choose it.

The latter half of *Once Were Warriors* allows a spark of hope into the battered and bruised world of Pine Block, and that of the Maori people. There is a resurgence of Maori consciousness, and an articulation of culture through music and meetings, with the onus firmly on the people to help themselves. Beth deals with grief and pain by turning outward to the community of lost souls, especially street kids, offering them what she had been unable to give her own children – food, security and love. She empowers her self, inspired by the well mannered, cultured and intelligent 'Chief'. 'Self-help' replaces shrugging fatalism.

This hope, however, is set against the all too real violence and sense of cultural decay – not every one is saved. Not everyone chooses to save themselves. The Brown Fists, the local Maori gang, groups who, according to Ranganui Walker are "the nightmare incarnation of the Pakeha New Zealander's worst fears" (Walker 1990: 222) remain 'staunch' in their alienation and (almost sadistic) violence. Jake, too, is finally left stranded in his own mythology.

This is a novel filled with mythological allusion, allegory and significance, despite its air of realism. The apparent lack of subtlety (and implicit air of 'reality') masks the construction of the text, and the deliberate discursive gestures within it. Duff has written a powerful and thought-provoking novel to say the least. He has written of a marginality, a poverty and a brutality that will certainly shock many readers, but the notions of 'self-help' imbuing the text need critical attention, along with the fatalism that preceded it. 'Self-help' is mobilised not so much against a State that

perpetuates inequality, but against an image of the apathy of the (Maori) people themselves. Such a vision needs to be treated with caution, especially within the frame of an economic rationalism that seeks to shift the 'burden of responsibility' – moral or financial.

The image of 'decay' offered by the novel is ultimately a problematic one in its finality and universality. A history of diverse responses to colonisation is elided within a Darwinian sense of cultural decay. The choice that Duff offers between self-destruction and a (conservative) self-determinism is premised upon the inevitable destruction of Maori culture if present patterns are not changed. Such a conclusion needs to be contextualised within a history of the survival of Maori in the face of racial oppression.

Similarly, the valorisation of the 'warrior', even redefined as articulate strength rather than brute force, obscures a history of a dynamic culture. Questions need to be asked, for example, about the role of Maori women within such a cultural frame. While it is a resonant and powerful image, the symbol of the 'warrior' within the novel needs critical attention. Work by such people as Ripeka Evans, Judith Binney, and Ranginui Walker, among others, reveal the contested nature of Maori culture, and the many and varied positions of cultural expression within it.

Finally, Duff has produced a provocative novel of power and skill. *Once Were Warriors* is an important text, but at the same time the discourses within it require careful consideration.

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