

## ***Utu and the Search for 'Real History'***

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There is no denying the influence of the movies in shaping our views of the past. Frequently, important events and figures of history derive their life in the present from screen images. Such images substantially inform the masses about the facts of history. Because of the nature of the film medium, and perhaps occasionally because of the message, such images also stay in the public mind far longer than those received from the more conventional media of history - magazines, journals, books, even museums. Let's face it, can a formal journal article compete with the fury of *Braveheart*? What solid book can match the solemn *Dances With Wolves*?

So, we all love the movies, historians included. In fact, films are said to be a favourite obsession of historians. "The juxtaposition of real history and 'reel' history," says Doris Kearns Goodwin 'is endlessly fascinating.'<sup>2</sup> However, can film teach history? The answer, says James M. McPherson, is 'yes!'<sup>3</sup> Antonia Fraser is not so sure. The strangeness of the truth, she writes, has not stopped the creation of 'fictional versions of extraordinary melodramas.'<sup>4</sup> Stephan Mintz has agreed. Invariably, films seek for an authority that is more imaginative than historical.<sup>5</sup> And, says James Axtell, it is one thing to make a movie about an historical event. It is much harder to depict a cultural process.<sup>6</sup>

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For most New Zealanders, views of our colonial Māori-Pākehā past are substantially shaped by events in the present, as represented through media like newspapers and television. Films like Geoff Murphy's *Utu* (1983) are too few. As a consequence, the opportunities for such films to provide a context for shaping perceptions of the past are limited. They are certainly not as great as in other countries where the film industry is more established as mediator of popular culture and history.

In New Zealand, race relations issues, past and present, require careful handling. Most historians of nineteenth-century New Zealand still tread warily. Our colonial historiography, within which *Utu* as historical construction can be located, largely remains as a contested terrain. What is generally agreed however is that the imposition of settler rule after 1852<sup>7</sup> substantially exacerbated relations between the Treaty of Waitangi partners, Māori and Pākehā. For Māori, the focus of that belligerence, and focus of the wars within which *Utu* is staged, was the uncertain future of Māori land. The land was the issue; in North Taranaki, you will hear the wars referred to as Ngā Pakanga Whenua O Mua, travails on the land. An alternative issue underlying the wars, according to James Belich, was the uncertain future of Māori sovereignty.<sup>8</sup>

Whichever view you take, land or sovereignty, the fact remained that the wars, and the peace that followed, devastated Māori communities. Deep scars were left traversing a changing landscape, from the historic past, within which *Utu* is staged, to an uneasy present where mainstream Pākehā cultural expressions, such as they are, pass over lightly or largely render silent the histories foregrounded by *Utu*.

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The juxtaposition of real history and 'reel' history makes *Utu* fascinating viewing. The film remains an interesting mix of Māori historic truth and cultural convention, melded with, it is true, 'fictional versions of extraordinary melodramas.' *Utu* is set in the land wars fought between 1844 and about 1872. It deals with a complex set of relationships between Māori and Pakehā, and among Māori themselves, all antagonists bound together by *Utu*, the Māori obligation upon injury to seek revenge and a restoring of social order.

Earlier attempts to represent the colonial wars on film were few. The best known example is Rudall Hayward's celebrated *Rewi's Last Stand*, made in 1940. This film depicts a largely fictionalised account of the days leading to the 1863 Waikato invasion, and moves inexorably with the remnants of the Waikato and Ngāti Maniopotō people who are gathering at Orakau, under Rewi Maniopotō, preparing to meet Duncan Cameron's formidable advancing British forces.

*Utu* is set much later, around 1870. The primary Māori protagonist of the film, Te Wheke, appears as a composite of many prominent Māori figures, perhaps assimilating two, or possibly three, Māori insurgents operating at that time - Te Kooti and Titokowaru, with possibly Kereopa as well. The characterisation of Te Wheke in *Utu*, magnificently played by Anzac Wallace, is fascinating. He is constantly represented as a dark and menacing presence, a brilliant 'reel history' capturing of many real Māori historical figures. Low camera angles accentuate his height, and presence. He frequently appears when the light is poor, and it is often raining. Though frequently shot as a distant figure, always moving, we are equally likely to see many dramatic close and intrusive shots of his grimly expressive face. Te Wheke wonderfully combines the orthodoxy of the old Māori fighting chief with the myth of the savage Māori.

The 1870 setting of this film, in a land wars sense, is relatively late. By 1870, the land wars were substantially over. Only one last Māori protagonist, Te Kooti, remained in the field, following the retreat of Titokowaru from Tauranga-Ika in February, 1869. However, by 1870, Te Kooti's campaigns were also nearing their end. Te Kooti suffered a heavy defeat that year at Maraetahi. More defeats were to follow, at Te Hapua in 1871 and at Mangaone the following year. Te Kooti finally sought refuge in the King Country in 1872.

Te Kooti's campaign was one of retribution for wrongful arrest, imprisonment and harassment. The campaign waged by Te Wheke in the film follows the wilful destruction of the village to which he belongs. Before the credits roll we see the village destroyed by mounted colonial militia. This seems to be a re-enactment of the earlier destruction of Rangiaowhia in the Waikato by British troops in 1864. However, many such attacks were launched against Māori settlements by the British and colonial Militia, for example, by Chute's forces during their long march around Taranaki in 1865-66. However, unlike the Colonial Defence Force Cavalry which rode into Rangiaowhia, the mounted troops which attack Te Wheke's village in *Utu* are never seen again. *Utu* attaches no responsibility to them for their actions. The officers of the colonial militia who later pursue Te Wheke do not discuss the incident. Nor, strangely enough, do the Māori allies who also participate in the pursuit.

Yet such massacres and indiscriminate killing had severe consequences for Māori, a theme addressed by *Utu*. Kereopa, the primary perpetrator of the 1865 killing of Lutheran Missionary Volkner near Opotiki, is believed to have participated in that incident in order to exact *utu* from the Crown because he had himself lost a daughter at Rangiaowhia.<sup>9</sup> Te Wheke appears, then, after the credits, amongst the burning debris, leading his horse into the destroyed village, surveying the destruction and carnage. His shock is compounded by his realisation that he must avenge the massacre. He then murders an accompanying colonial soldier and releases another to warn the militia superiors that he, Te Wheke, will not rest until all Pakehā are similarly destroyed.

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Te Wheke first appears as a 'friendly' Māori, or kupapa, wearing a Colonial uniform and bearing British arms. The militia company to which he is assigned would have been one of the last in the field last century. By 1869, most of the militia companies, which succeeded the departing British Army after 1864, had themselves been disbanded or merged into largely inert new companies like the 4th Battalion Auckland militia. Te Wheke is clearly working alongside the British and Colonial forces in pursuit of hostile Māori. With his unit, he is operating across a forested and wet terrain over which his people, Ngā Marama, exercise mana whenua; this land is the whenua of his own people. In such circumstances, friendly Māori support for the militia was not uncommon. Te Kooti himself was most vigorously pursued across the Te Arawa estate by the Te Arawa people. He was also pursued by another Māori, Wahawaha Ropata, a man of great ruthlessness later awarded the Highland Claymore by Queen Victoria for his loyalty to the Crown. Despite Te Wheke's pragmatic support of the militia as it operates across his land, the deaths of his people now forces Te Wheke to confront the stark ambivalence of his situation.

Following his execution of the trooper amidst the ruins of his village, Te Wheke deserts from the militia, recruits a small army and thereafter conducts a series of violent raids against settler communities. Before he does so, however, Te Wheke receives an intricate tattoo, a strong facial testament to his return to the status of warrior intent on utu. Prior to this, Te Wheke was not tattooed. Nor were other Māori figures in the film, although Merata Mita wears a moko. Tattooing had largely disappeared from the generation of Māori of whom Te Wheke was a part. This followed their earlier repudiating of such cultural fragments as the tattoo, partly at the urging of Missionary teachers, and partly following the renouncing of internecine war by Māori after the end of the destructive musket wars of the early 1820s.

One of Te Wheke's first crimes is to confront and murder a missionary named Reveran Johns during a rousing service. Johns, who is grimly played by Martyn Sanderson, is beheaded with a tomahawk. His head is displayed to a largely unmoved Māori congregation, seemingly unaffected by the fundamentalist rhetoric, the killing, and Te Wheke's defiant oration which follows. This killing was intended to re-enact the murder of Volkner by Kereopa. Later, a Pākehā homestead belonging to a bilingual settler named Williamson is attacked. Williamson (Bruno Lawrence), has refused a militia call to retire to the safety of a local garrison. Many settlers paid dearly for such refusals during the land wars. Te Wheke's raid against Williamson results in the death of his wife, Emily (Ilona Rogers), who falls from a balcony. Williamson, who survives the attack, thereafter seeks revenge against Te Wheke.

Te Wheke is eventually hunted down after he flees from an unsuccessful midnight attack on a temporary militia holding station. He is defeated in battle, deep in the bush, by the combined Colonial forces. Te Wheke is court-martialled beside a camp fire for his alleged crimes and executed.

*Utu* substantially draws on the events of the later land wars. The Māori losses experienced in the Waikato basin were followed by an unexpected resurgence of small tribal pockets of resistance. After the loss of Gate Pa and Te Ranga, near Tauranga, in 1864, Māori tactics changed, generally reflecting tribes now retreating into the bush. Earlier, Māori had successfully (and tactically) defended strong pa like Rangiriri.<sup>10</sup> After 1864, tribal conflicts reverted to the earlier, more aggressive forms of traditional warfare. Now, small taua raided quickly across familiar terrains. Such forms of prosecuting war, seen by settlers as barbaric, emerged during the insurrections of the Hau Hau in Taranaki after 1864, and were employed with stunning success by Titokowaru at battles like Te Ngutu O Te Manu in 1868. In *Utu*, Te Wheke is depicted throughout as a barbaric figure who wavers between brutality and dignity, especially given his frequent predilection for quoting Shakespeare. Though he does have some comic moments in the film, the depiction of Te Wheke is relentlessly dominated by his acts of ferocity and cruelty, perhaps manifesting, among other things, the inspiration he

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draws from Macbeth. However, this tragic element of his character, which Japanese film maker Kurosawa would have much admired, does not emerge from the later Director's cut of the film, especially prepared for international release.

As a consequence of the string of murders which he commits, all of which he justifies by his reference to *utu*, Te Wheke is marked out as an outsider, acting beyond the new civilising norms of European rationality and justice. This is no more evident is the way Te Wheke kills, and kills relentlessly. As he kills, he is filmed with a close camera, filling the screen with a terrible presence. He shoots a uniformed trooper, and we follow the camera down the barrel of a shotgun as he confronts another. As the confronted trooper stands, the camera lowers; the trooper starkly looms above us with Te Wheke's shotgun wedged beneath his chin. He hangs an old church bellringer, and, in another low angled shot for heightened effect, beheads the hapless Rev. Johns. But Te Wheke does not end there; he later shoots his comrade Puni (Tom Poata); because of Puni's debilitating wounds. He also savagely beats Kura (Tania Bristowe) whom he charges with treachery. We see this only in a brief flashback, however, spared a graphic depiction of her violent and unnecessary death.

Such is the somewhat relentless rendering of Māori atrocity and violence. Te Wheke's murder of Kura is swift and brutal. Emily Williamson dies after having been stalked around her palatial house by Te Wheke. Thereafter, his men destroy everything, rejecting the refined intrusions of unwanted materialism. This destruction is performed with high energy, and some humour. It includes a capturing in slow-motion of a grand piano hurled over a balcony. (The slow falling piano, also used by Jane Campion, is becoming something of a New Zealand cinematic icon.) Such mayhem and violence are not without their consequences, however, as Te Wheke has discovered when finding his own people massacred. Now, the tables are turned. Because of the death of his wife, Williamson now seeks revenge; and thereafter, dressed like a Sergio Leone extra, he hunts Te Wheke.

In this film, Te Wheke carries more personal responsibility for his deeds than do the perpetrators of the massacre of his Ngā Marama kaianga. A major focus of the film is the inherent savagery of the Māori antagonist and the necessity for new settlers to confront and destroy it and to destroy reversions to such savagery. These were strong and common settler sentiments heard last century. Such sentiments, or fears, strongly moved settlers to wage war against Māori. Director Geoff Murphy strives hard to capture the strength of this new-settler sentiment. In so doing, he locates *Utu* within an historiography which seeks to explain the causes of the land wars. Murphy substantially presents a widespread fear and loathing of Māori malevolence as the motive for the determined pursuit of Te Wheke, and for the ongoing prosecution of war against Māori. We see this as a personal malevolence, malevolence visited upon Te Wheke (or brought on himself) that is detached from validations like birthright, history and defence of land which drove Māori to war. With vestiges remaining today, it is a malevolence with deep roots in the past, expressed in *Utu* through Te Wheke's explicit savagery.

However, Te Wheke, the warrior, is juxtaposed throughout the film with the retiring Wiremu, wonderfully played by the understated Wi Kuki Kaa. Wiremu appears as a quietly spoken uniformed militia Māori who has absorbed much of the new Pākehā culture. He speaks English and some French, plays chess, and confidently yet carefully banters with militia officers, showing himself to be both astute and shrewd. Wiremu sees the ways of the old-time Māori as vanishing, in appropriateness if not in reality. He views the immense British and colonial armies and colonisation with a tired resignation, and with a deferential personal nature that is misleading. He is also concerned that his son cannot read. Wiremu seldom occupies the screen alone. He is invariably caught in conversation with army colleagues who substantially define his presence in the film. Through Wiremu, the film depicts some of the respect shown to Māori by British troops. Such esteem is even accorded to Te Wheke by

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Lieutenant Scott when Te Wheke is later encountered at a burial. Te Wheke, however, ever defiant, rejects Scott's warning that he will be hunted until captured.

At one level, *Wiremu* represents the dilemmas faced by many Māori when coming to terms with the British and colonial armies last century. Bearing arms against the Crown, for example, led to certain confiscation of land. *Utu* shows many Māori on the army payroll, performing haka and firing their muskets, or sitting silently, watching the action. Māori who observe the action again represent the 'reel history' and 'real history' crossover; the orthodoxy of passive Māori and the myth of Māori participating in their own subjugation. Yet, *Utu* is an important film because it starkly reveals the dilemmas faced by many Māori communities in dealing with such a formidable adversary as the British Army, which so powerfully ranged across tapu Māori soil.

At another level, *Wiremu* represents the extreme ambivalence faced by Māori in the face of such an overwhelming force for change. The British and settlers dominate the action in this movie, as they dominated the events of the last century, and as they have long dominated the histories. By his general demeanour, in the end, *Wiremu* tacitly acknowledges this domination. Though he does not disparage or belittle his Māori self, *Wiremu* sees little choice but to mediate his sense of being Māori through the new realities of English settlement and domination. For his part, Te Wheke and his Māori supporters, and the issues that move them, remain out of reach and unresolved. In the end, Te Wheke feels compelled to confront the new ways with the same level of violence that has been visited upon him and his people. In so doing, Te Wheke creates a circle of death, harnessing a violence which gathers its own momentum, finally turning back on him. It is up to *Wiremu* to break the circle.

The death of Te Wheke resolves the issues of *Utu*, and for Māori invokes a particular sadness. *Wiremu*, long resigned to the new realities which face his people, is the one who must fire the gun that kills the Māori who stands against those realities, his ferocious and savage brother, Te Wheke.

Now, some fifteen years after its release, *Utu* can be seen as an interesting and important juxtaposing of 'reel history' against 'real history'. 'Reel history' sits better, and longer, in the public memory. It suggests certain filmic representations of the past heavily framed by script, visuals, sound and dramatic device. *Utu* had all of these; they worked well together to present a vivid context within which an important story could be told. In this sense, this story generally related well to 'real history'. 'Real history' however implies a more complex tension between context, evidence, literature and argument. Its important dimensions and details are generally less accessible to most film audiences and film makers. 'Real history' is necessarily more intricate and organic. What survives of 'real history' in the public mind, and what stays in the public mind far longer, is not necessarily the historical detail. What substantially remains is the orthodoxy and myth, the images of history. And there is orthodoxy and myth aplenty in *Utu*.

*Utu* provides a filmic representation of New Zealand's history last century that reaches across orthodoxy, myth, image and detail to present a story of conflict and ambivalence, themes of our shared past with firm roots in the present. The strangeness of the truth has melded well with a fictional version of an extraordinary melodrama. The result is a film which has acquired an authority that is both imaginative and historical, an authority deriving from a satisfying juxtaposing of 'reel history' and 'real history'.



'Reel History'  
Te Wheke of *Utu* - c1870

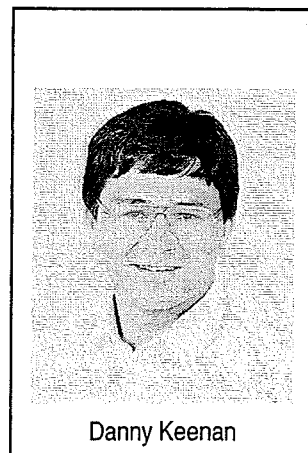


'Real History'  
Kereopa Te Rau - c1870

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Dr Danny Keenan lectures in New Zealand history at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.
- <sup>2</sup> Doris Goodwin, review of Carnes, Mark C. et al (eds.), in *Past Imperfect. History According to the Movies* (New York, 1995), end piece.
- <sup>3</sup> James M. McPherson, 'Glory', in *ibid*, p. 128.
- <sup>4</sup> Antonia Fraser 'Anne of a Thousand Days', in *ibid*, p. 66.
- <sup>5</sup> Stephan Minta, 'Aguirre, The Wrath of God', in *ibid*, p. 74.
- <sup>6</sup> James Axtell, 'Black Robe', in *ibid*, p. 78.
- <sup>7</sup> *New Zealand Constitution Act, 1852*, passed by the British Parliament, granted representative government to New Zealand.
- <sup>8</sup> James Belich, 'A Question of Sovereignty' in *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (Auckland, 1986), pp. 73-88.
- <sup>9</sup> Volkner was accused of being a spy for the Government.
- <sup>10</sup> Rangiriri, 1863, where three British assaults were repulsed.

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