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Stephanie Gibson, Matariki Williams, and Puawai Cairns, *Protest Tautohetohe: Objects of Resistance, Persistence and Defiance – An illustrated history of protest and activism in Aotearoa New Zealand*

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Stephanie Gibson, Matariki Williams, and Puawai Cairns, *Protest Tautohetohe: Objects of Resistance, Persistence and Defiance – An illustrated history of protest and activism in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2019), 416pp. Paperback. NZ$70. ISBN: 978-0-9941-4604-5.

I work in a beautiful wooden building that exemplifies the power of storytelling of colonialism and nation-building; the Old Government Buildings (OGM) in Wellington. The OGB used to be the administrative centre of government, but now houses Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington's Kauhanganui Tātai Ture Faculty of Law. A fitting relationship. Since 1876 this majestic building has remained a powerful symbol of colonial power and mythmaking. Such narratives are ripe for interruption and disruption.

My review copy of *Protest Tautohetohe* arrived in my office in that beautiful building in mid 2021. It remained in my office for a few months while we negotiated living under our new state-mandated pandemic response and our new home-based working lives, to the extent that we could. By the time I turned my mind to the long outstanding review again, my university campus was closed once more. This time the closure was due to an anti-vaccination mandate and citizen sovereignty protests and occupation centred at the Aotearoa New Zealand Parliament across the road from our law school. Within the first couple of days the protest evolved into a blockaded occupation of Parliament grounds, as well as the streets around Parliament, including our campus. Interruption and disruption indeed to the narrative of the Old Government Buildings.

For several weeks those of us who did occasionally venture into the office, walked through the occupation to get into the building and on that journey found ourselves surrounded by the objects and detritus of protest. Tents, largely. But also gazebos, camper vans, cars, creative chalk drawings, clothes draped over bushes to air. Hand-lettered signs welcoming us to the new 'Freedom University' and even a craftily built showerblock on a trailer, pinching council water and discharging into the wastewater system. Despite clashes with police right ouside our windows, stories of abuse and threats of lynching politicians, a few people I knew who spent large amounts of time at the protest spoke wistfully of the small perfect world they believed they had created; a place with an alternative legal reality, a place police prowled the perimeter of, but on the inside was a green and loving space of sovereign freedom and whānau (family connection). This utopian illusion could never last. The protest finally culminated, as it was always destined to do, or so it seemed, in fire and destruction on 2 March, and weeks later the campus reopened. As I write now the Parliamentary grounds remain closed. The ephemeral objects of protest are long gone. Apart from damaged grass at the OGB within a week or so there was little to show that angry people had ever been there. How will these protests be remembered? After all, these February protests were pretty unpopular except among the 5% of so of the population who refused Covid vaccination, and those negatively impacted upon by vaccination mandates. Mainstream attitudes consisted (and continue to consist) mainly of derision and varying degrees of animosity. How will this protest be memorialised in the memories and narratives of Aotearoa New Zealand's protest history?

Protest Tautohetohe gives us some insight into what may happen to the memories of those February protests. This book pulls together a rich collection of images and text commemorating the material record of protest and activism in Aotearoa New Zealand between the early 1840s and mid 2019 that has been found,

preserved, curated, and kept in museums and other institutions. The book does not pretend to be comprehensive. It is neither history lesson (although it reminds us of our history), nor textbook (although there is a wealth of excerpts from important texts of our protest history). Nor is it a biography of the key individuals of Aotearoa New Zealand's protest history (although we are introduced, or reintroduced to several key figures in that history). Those seeking an exhaustive account of activism and protest in Aotearoa New Zealand may be disappointed, or even annoyed if they do not find it here. In fact, I first heard about this book due to a Facebook spat involving more than one high profile activist who decried their own absences in the book. Such gaps are necessarily due to the starting point for the collection: the collation of objects. For inclusion, there needs to be a decision made to remember *and to protect* the objects of that protest moment. Further, to be included, at some subsequent point, that object must also find its way into the hands of an institution such as a museum.

> Museums rely on activists caring about their histories or their colleagues, friends and descendants preserving material for future generations. A protest object may survive simply because someone picked it up from the street and took it home as a souvenir. (p. 8)

It is also true that 'caring about their histories' may remain an intensely private concern that will never take on a public life. At any rate the power of this collection resides, then, in the 350 idiosyncratic and occasionally (but not always) beautiful objects that have ended up in public collections to be profiled in this collection including some objects of art inspired by protest, sitting alongside provocative poetry and prose from some outstanding writers including Tusiata Avia, Ngāhuia Te Awekōtuku, Tama Poata, Sonia Davies, and Archibald Baxter. It groups its material, not around high profile individuals or specific protests, but around themes such as anti-war protest, mana motuhake (Māori insistence on self determination and sovereignty), anti-apartheid, women's activism, LGBTQI+ activism, environmental activism, and class and economic-themed protest.

This book offers a tactile experience. The cover is made of a stiff kind of cardboard that looks like butcher paper, with pages that feel like sturdy newsprint to the touch. It is a book made to be leafed through, with images to be traced with fingertips. Perhaps the oldest item dates from 1845 thought to be the remains of the flagpole cut down at Kororāreka by northern rangatira Hone Heke in protest against the failure by the British Crown to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi/the Treaty of Waitangi. The most recent objects include a placard from the School Strike for Climate Action held on 15 March 2019, the same day of the mass shooting carried out against Muslim worshippers in Christchurch mosques in which 51 people died. A photo of a wall covered in words and pictures of grief, compassion, and anger created after the shootings by students at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington is also featured.

There were pages that held me. I stopped and looked for a long time at the remains of a plough used by unarmed Māori ploughmen in the 1870s who ploughed the lands of European settlers as a response to the confiscation and occupation of Taranaki Māori land. That picture that enabled me to imagine engaging in such non-

violent yet mundane actions that claim sovereignty even as it was being stolen from under their feet. As the prophet Te Whiti o Rongomai instructed the ploughmen:[1]

'Go, put your hands to the plough. Look not back. If any come with guns and swords, be not afraid. If they smite you, smite not in return. If they rend you, be not discouraged. Another will take up the good work.'

Many of the objects captured in this book tell very different stories. Many were mass produced: buttons, t-shirts, flags, posters, pamphlets, and the like. They created the possibility of shared experience between viewer and object. A button reading "HUG: Heterosexuals Unafraid of Gays", from the mid 1980s arrested me because I had one myself and wore it in the late 1980s. The album cover from Upper Hutt hip hop/rap crew Upper Hutt Posse, is one I, like others, have handled many times, the Steve Biko poster I saw in public toilets in Christchurch and Wellington. I had wanted a 'By-Pass my Ass' t-shirt in the early 2000s (opposing the creation of a motorway bypass in Wellington), and never got one. For me these are intimate moments in exploring the book because it called upon experiences in my own life and my own pretty modest protest involvement.

Protest: Tautohetohe raises questions about the creation of Aotearoa New Zealand's national identity. As the writers note, many if not most of the objects included in this book come from progressive social movements, far less from socially conservative movements. Protest and civil disruption provide the chance to put a stake in the ground and declare to society at large, 'we are not you'. Yet many a reader will affirm a sense of connection to time, to place, and to people as they peruse the pages of this book. What we fight against is a marker of what we stand for collectively. Sometimes societal shifts allow us to look back on moments of protest and activism that only decades later might be seen to underpin a new sense of national identity as older more socially conservative attitudes lose traction, if not presence. What starts as protest ends as social shift in how we perceive Aotearoa New Zealand. Opposition to nuclear testing in Mururoa in the 1970s and 1980s; demonstrating against the Springbok Tour of 1981, the fight for homosexual law reform and same sex marriage all serve to allow New Zealanders to think of ourselves as a socially progressive nation, even across political allegiances.

That sense of collective identity may often be incomplete, however, and even illusory. The mainstream of the Aotearoa New Zealand population was generally thought to have developed a distinctive sense of national identity as early as the end of the 19th century[2] but has usually lacked any connection to Māori issues, causes, and people. For most of the 19th and 20th centuries New Zealand Europeans, or Pākehā, have not apeared to consider Māori protest action and activism, to comprise a *shared* aspect of national identity. That may change in years to come. The ploughing of the 1870s; the Land March of 1975 (and its petition), and the tino rangatiratanga movement (and its flag) may all yet become markers of a shared national identity, but that time has not yet come.

Which leaves an interesting question. When it comes time for those involved in the anti-mandate protests of February and March 2022 to decide what to do with the objects that survived the burning and chaos of 2022; where will they go? Who

[1] 'Te Whiti o Rongomai' cited in Dick Scott, *Ask that Mountain: the Story of Parihaka* (Reed/Southern Cross, 1975), 59.
[2] Keith Sinclair, 'The Native Born: The Origins of New Zealand Nationalism', Massey University Occasional Publication No. 8, 1986: 6; Ron Palenski, *The Making of New Zealanders* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2012), 2.

will value them? Will anyone safeguard them? Should they even do so? What story will they tell later generations about this society we now live in? How might our understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand be shaped by such objects, if at all? Time, it seems, will tell, as the intrepid authors of *Protest: Tautohetohe* well understand. Ka nui te mihi ki a rātou mā.

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