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Richard S. Hill

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Reflections on Being ‘Just a Historian’

*Richard S. Hill*¹

I am passionate about history, and had the good fortune to be able to spend the first half of my career in history-related positions in the New Zealand Public Service and the second half in an historical research environment. After brief stints lecturing in history and as an archivist, I became an ‘official historian’, working in the government’s small historical branch. Soon I found that more than a few university-based historians assumed that all scholars working outside ‘academia’ were ‘guns for hire’, employed to produce the results sought by their paymasters. While this may be true in some circumstances, such as with several commissioned biographies it has been my misfortune to come across, it is of course illogical to assume it to be the case across the board. To my mind, I was just a historian, doing what I had been trained to do. It was obvious to me that the worth of historians should be assessed on the professionalism of their outputs, and my position has not changed since then.

The sort of history I have pursued all my career, with or without a paymaster, is often labelled ‘empirical’, although again I just call it ‘history’. It seeks to answer foundational questions, such as what happened and why it happened, by examining all available evidence and drawing conclusions after careful appraisal. While these reflections do not aim to be prescriptive, the evidence-based approach was and is to my mind ‘best practice’ (although of course all historical outputs are contestable). It requires striving for impartial conclusions out of the totality of the evidence rather than squashing often just bits and pieces of evidence into a pre-shaped mould. While

¹ I am extremely thankful to the Editor-in-chief of this journal, Dr. Jatinder Mann for his helpful comments and suggestions on my reflective piece.

absolute objectivity is chimerical, aspiring to it is crucial. I had, and have, little regard for history that sets out to be or ends up being subjective, such as the presentist history which is now quite prevalent in New Zealand.

But the quest for impartiality does not necessarily mean evidence-*driven* history, and for want of a better formulation I will now refer to my kind of evidence-*based* scholarship as ‘empirical-plus’ history. This approach to producing history involves several factors, and I will highlight four. Firstly, avoiding capture by ‘The Archive’, much of which is both incomplete in form and instrumental in purpose. All located evidence, therefore, needs to be triangulated at research, appraisal and analysis stages, and hypotheses (however inchoate they might be) should be tested along the way. Secondly, broad geopolitical or temporal contextualising is often essential. In my own country, the narrow focus of much parochial or nationalist history which followed what was an otherwise very welcome ‘New Zealand turn’ from the 1970s and 1980s has led to some unfortunate historiographical myopia.

Thirdly, the significance of theorising, the main ‘plus’ in ‘empirical-plus’. Unfortunately, empirical history has often been characterised by an aversion to theory, so much so that it often reads (in British historian Arnold Toynbee’s words) as ‘one damned thing after another’. For me, theory holds a high place in empirical-plus methodology, helping make sense of the evidence through a kind of dialogue between theory and the ongoing uncovering of archival or other material. Adopting, adapting or rejecting historical, political, literary, philosophical, anthropological or a host of other theories, for example, can be valuable in interpretational framing. ‘History from below’, subaltern studies, sociology and anthropology, social-control scholarship, crowd-behaviour analysis, interdisciplinary work, surveillance studies, theoreticians ancient and modern (such as Thucydides on power, Gramsci on

hegemony, Marxians on class, Foucault on surveillance, Elias on 'civilising') and many more schools of thought and practice can all be useful in whole or (more often, for me anyway) in part. And fourthly, after exhaustive examination of both evidential and theoretical material, and interweaving them where appropriate, empirical-plus historians will strive to craft their own original theoretical approach to any given project. My own work, for example, has re-formulated ways of periodising and thematising both nineteenth and twentieth century New Zealand, often challenging 'received opinion'.

To sum up so far, if evidence-based history is *the* way to do history, as I firmly believe, it remains to my mind underdeveloped without the 'plus'; that is, if it leaves out historical and geopolitical context and eschews attempts at developing 'new knowledge' with theoretical dimensions. I was lucky to have full rein for empirical-plus history when I took up work as an official historian in the later 1970s. Each historian had a major research project as well as other tasks. Out of several choices, I negotiated for myself a project on the history of policing and 'socio-racial control' in colonial and early Dominion New Zealand. I relished the challenge of exploring how the state had controlled the often turbulent Indigenous and Pākehā population of the first four decades or so after annexation by Britain in 1840; and how, during the following forty years after that, the policing task interacted with hegemonic forces. I was excited at the chance of tackling a subject for which no scholarly publications existed, despite several attempts since 1903. Before I joined, I had been assured that the branch authors had autonomy from external influence, its ethos being the production of evidence-based books whose authors aimed at dispassionate analysis.

Chief Historian Ian Wards and I came to a joint decision early in the research phase that my brief should include substantive coverage of all discrete

constabularies in the nineteenth century, of which there were an unknown quantity up to the unification of all police in the country in 1886. The 'what happened and why it happened' investigation of each force would in effect form a collective of case studies to feed into an overarching interpretation of the initial imposition of state control over an 'unsettled' settler colony and the transition thereafter to methods of maintaining that control through demilitarised policing. After beginning research, I began to 'discover' police forces entirely absent from the (very scant) record of New Zealand's colonial policing: many dozens of them, often heavily paramilitarised. Because of this, the Chief Historian and I decided that there should be more than one volume allowed for the project. I thus gained the freedom to work through *in detail* what was clear after preliminary work, but which I highly suspected both 'the Establishment' and a great many historians would not want to hear: namely, that the nation's official and unofficial narrative of non-coercive colonial origins (except for a few wars) was wrong; and that its reputation for 'benign policing' was both a late colonial development and in any case rather more complicated than historians had believed (if they had noticed policing at all).

Moreover, I was not only fortunate in terms of employer and location (the bulk of relevant archives were in Wellington) but also in timing. I was one of a handful of scholars globally who were tackling research on historical policing, especially in colonies, the subject having previously been undertaken largely by Whiggish 'celebratory historians'. As the only New Zealander in this research arena, and with no travel budget, I was rather isolated from my colleagues worldwide. There remained a decided lack of interest among New Zealand historians in (especially coercive) social control, despite some research interest overseas, but even this latter was still in its pioneering stage.

Such generalised neglect of a clearly critical subject had partly resulted from a (very long!) global 'historiographical moment' in which the centrality of the state in imposing and maintaining 'law and order' had been downgraded, lost sight of, or denied. This had been exacerbated in recent decades by 'new history' trends. While I had been a strong supporter of some emergent schools of history, especially 'history from below', I had never thought these were incompatible with the history of the state whose laws and controls regulated social behaviour. In the event, I did have some good discussions and debates with a few scholars in Wellington who held similar historiographical and theoretical interests, but seldom got to interact with peers overseas – although I did manage to attend the first conference on policing the British empire, held in London in 1988, after my first volume was published. Not only was I lucky to have had the chance to enter a pioneering academic milieu, but this also ramified into 'membership' of a loose international scholarly movement generally characterised as 'bringing the state back in'. Doing so had become necessary in part because of broad scholarly trends and movements that were contemporaneous with and sometimes linked to 'new history'. The common thread was minimising the role of the state, which I and increasing numbers of others felt to be a wrong turn within otherwise healthy revisionings. Here in New Zealand, while I was far from impressed with many of the claims made for national exceptionalism, I was conscious of the particularly difficult developmental challenges faced by its early colonial state: geopolitical isolation, challenging topography, wild seas and thick forests, labour shortages, shaky economic bases, social turbulence, and 'racial war', challenging inter-provincial communications and so on. Putting the state back into scholarship, especially in terms of its control mechanisms, was needed for rebalancing purposes. After ongoingly comparing and contrasting my archival

findings with evidence and theory from many quarters at home and abroad, and testing my own and others' hypotheses against the extant documentation on state social control in New Zealand (including that held overseas), I formulated themes, theories and periodisations which questioned or overturned many an exceptionalist claim or supposition about state and society but which also found autochthonous developments of great import.

After publishing my works on coercive social control, I was ready to move on. When I was a student or in early career, I would not have felt the need to outline my approach to writing history, but I appreciate that scholarship moves on and what was once par for the course can become controversial or deemed old fashioned. Whatever the case, I have been resistant to several types of historical outputs which have emerged, one of them variously called 'advocacy', 'applied', or 'polemical' history. Although I wrote what used to be called 'curiosity-based history' when I was investigating historical policing, I had hoped that others might be able to use my findings and conclusions in both general circumstances (as offering a more accurate picture of the country's past) and on specific issues (such as policy reform). Some quantifiable and qualitative evidence suggests that this did happen, if only to a degree.

In 1989 I left the world of 'pure history' when I secured the position of (sole) historian in the newly established Treaty of Waitangi Policy Unit/TOWPU in the Justice Department. I had outlined to the selectors my empirical-plus approach, and this had matched the unit's brief of advising the government on historical issues relating to the Treaty, the nation's 1840 'founding document', and how to implement its promises to Māori in modern times. Almost as soon as I had entered 'the Treaty world', TOWPU was instructed by the government to begin 'scoping' negotiations

with a major tribal confederation over its historical grievances against the Crown. When these interchanges proved promising, and the government realised that Māori claims could potentially be settled, the lens of evidence-based objectivity did come under siege – by Crown lawyers who downplayed Indigenous oral history, for example, or conversely by counsel representing tribes who discounted the importance of archived written documentation.

Nevertheless, in the early negotiating years most parties involved came to see that either purely empirical or empirical-plus history could be a means of making rapid progress towards ‘Treaty settlements’, even if it meant agreeing to disagree on some issues. By the early 1990s I had become Chief Historian in an expanded TOWPU, and my historical staff were instructed to follow empirical-plus methods regardless of their own predispositions or whether their findings might displease state lawyers, government politicians, other public servants or negotiators on either side of the negotiating table. From these and other parties’ research reports, agreed historical positions needed to be worked out between Crown and tribes (iwi) over their past relationships.

I have written elsewhere about the problematic and shifting relationships between law, orality, and the historical profession. But during the pioneering negotiations, the parties discovered that it was possible to find common ground on the essence of such relationships – blood spilt, land confiscated, promises broken etc. – so long as the research platform was sound. This was of high significance because, before it approved a settlement with Māori, Cabinet required assurance that there was an overwhelming research base to support both the claimants’ general case and the proposed reparations package which had been negotiated with their negotiators. The negotiated historical agreements provided the base for the all-

important Crown apologies for past wrongs that had been sought by the tribal negotiators. Queen Elizabeth II as Head of State in New Zealand personally signed into effect the Act that constituted the first major deed of settlement, including her apology, in 1995.

By the later 1990s politics and other factors were intervening in ways which tended to downplay evidence-based history and sideline its proponents. I and some other historians within Crown mechanisms eventually went elsewhere when this seemed to have gone beyond the point of no return. During a stint in the UK for research and reflection, I decided that when I got back home it would be timely to reinforce the case for evidence-plus history in Treaty settlement processes. On my return, I investigated the possibility of an independent research unit that would guarantee an impartial approach to collecting and assessing evidence. Touting the idea around Wellington and further afield, I secured a great deal of support from both relevant government agencies and tribal leaders. Armed with such backing, and a few funding pledges, I persuaded Victoria University of Wellington to set up the Treaty of Waitangi Research Unit/TOWRU, based at the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies. It would produce, on a sub-contractual basis, historical and other reports to feed into Crown-Māori reconciliation procedures, guaranteeing commissioning agencies quality control, impartiality, and timeliness.

The university and its business wing which underwrote an initial experiment measured TOWRU's success in profits as well as public good, and when it passed both tests it gained a longer-term existence. For the host Faculty, it was also evaluated in terms of my own contributions to the interdisciplinary Stout Research Centre, among them thesis supervision, organising seminars and conferences,

mentoring some of the many overseas and domestic scholars that the Centre hosted and gaining external funding for 'blue-skies' research projects.

The external funding allowed me to carry out my own empirical-plus projects and sub-contract another cohort of scholars into what the university called 'new knowledge production'. Between us all, we produced works on such diverse topics as rangatiratanga, land management, 'anti-Treatyist' writers, policing the Indigenous peoples of empires, and (in partnership with a tribal authority) exploring ways of integrating official written and Indigenous oral sources. Perhaps needless to say, all TOWRU scholars, Māori and Pākehā, were committed to evidence-based production, often after scouring disparate types of sources. During the period, I published the first books covering Crown-Māori relations over the twentieth century. These presented a new interpretation of the overarching dynamics in play between the parties – processes of Crown appropriation of Māori organising energies and activities, followed by Māori reappropriation of the appropriations, a cycle which sometimes continued through decades.

In 2008, I was appointed a part time Member of the Waitangi Tribunal, the independent standing commission of enquiry into Māori claims against the Crown, whose reports fed into the negotiating processes. In my Tribunal panel hearing 145 Te Raki o Te Paparoa (Northland) claims, grouped under Tribunal number Wai 1040, the Crown's case on the key issue was the polar opposite to that of the tribes, they were adamant that the chiefs who had signed Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Māori text of the Treaty) in 1840 were not handing over their sovereignty, at least not in the British meaning of that word. In finding for the claimants on this issue in 2014, the panel both challenged a key aspect of New Zealand's national mythology and overturned previous Tribunal interpretations of the meaning of the historical Treaty/Tiriti – which

had hitherto been seen as a tribal relinquishment of sovereignty in return for Crown promises.

The government was not alone in its anger, and we had anticipated this, but such factors did not bother us. Tribunal Members were obliged to weigh up all the evidence presented at hearings, written and oral, and make findings on that evidence with neither fear nor favour. While there were, of course, vigorous debates within Tribunal walls about aspects of the final 574-page report while it was under preparation, the panel could come to no other conclusion on the central issue of sovereignty because this reflected the totality of the presented evidence. It was, in short, fulfilling its mandate (and, it should be noted, Crown Law called only a handful of historians to present evidence on its behalf).

Towards the end of my paid career, seeded by a large grant, I was fortunate enough to be able to return to research on state surveillance, a topic which had pervaded my police histories. This time, I and a small team began to tackle the almost totally unknown history of security intelligence in New Zealand. While several academic historians had started research on the topic in the past, all had given up for various reasons, although a couple of journalists had written uncritical, 'cold-warrior' books. It took a long time to secure information from and about agencies whose very *raison d'être* was posited on keeping secrets. Eventually, however, well after my retirement, my colleague Steven Loveridge (also at the Stout Research Centre) and I published *Secret History* in 2023, the first in a two-volume coverage of state surveillance in twentieth century New Zealand. We are now well advanced on the next volume.

Looking back, it almost seems as if my stock in trade has been seeking out difficult and/or controversial projects that previous scholars had given up on. It would

perhaps be more accurate to say, though, that when chances came along to investigate problematic and neglected subjects which were both important and fascinating, I seized the opportunities with scarcely a second thought. Moreover, while I have never wanted to write advocacy, presentist, 'special pleading', post-modern, or other types of non-empirically-based history, I have always hoped – as I mentioned above – that my various quests for impartial results might indirectly or directly contribute to policymaking (in a good way!).

But back in 1990 I was reminded of the difficulties historians face in such arenas. I was trying to persuade a Cabinet Committee to endorse a tentative offer negotiated with a Māori grouping. As I started to speak, committee chair (and former Prime Minister) David Lange snapped: 'I don't want to hear from you. You're just a historian. Where's the Treasury man?' The committee decided to ignore the historical rationale for the proposed compensation package and offered a much lower figure. 'I'm just a historian', I had to tell the claimant negotiators when apologetically passing on the revised offer. On the other hand, since that time almost all iwi have settled with the Crown, and this could not have happened without a large mix of historians underpinning the Crown-Māori reconciliation processes over the last four decades. As a result, significant resources and cultural redress have been vested in tribal polities at a world-leading pace by comparison with equivalent developments elsewhere.

I appreciate that my career experience has not been typical, even in New Zealand, so I hesitate to give advice to upcoming historians. But I would say that if you love history, seize the moment when opportunities arise (although forget about making a fortune), ground your finished outputs in as wide and extensive an evidence base as possible, and be eclectic and inventive in both utilising and

creating theory that best fits the evidence that has been marshalled. Historians committed to the public good (and in my experience, most are) can be content that by mere dint of creating history they are making a positive contribution to society, even if it might seem an amorphous or phantom one in the short or even medium term. I firmly believe that societies and their governments can only plan wisely for the future if they know how the present came about. The Māori proverb 'kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua' refers to the wisdom of walking backwards into the future with eyes fixed on the past. The current devastation of life and property around the world is but the latest of multitudinous examples of what can happen when history is unknown or its lessons ignored.