

SPRING 2018

Arts Insider

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A framework for the history of Auckland

On Friday 4 May 2018, Ports of Auckland and Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei unveiled Te Toka o Apihai Te Kawau, a memorial situated along the port's iconic red fence on Quay Street, near the former tip of Rerenga Ora Iti (Britomart Point).

After signing the Treaty of Waitangi, Ngāti Whātua, under Apihai Te Kawau, made land available for British settlement on the Waitematā Harbour. On 18 September 1840, Crown representatives landed at Rerenga Ora Iti, where the British flag was raised and a gun salute fired, marking the founding of Auckland.

The unveiling of the memorial stimulated a brief debate over whether Sir John Logan Campbell should be replaced by the chief who invited the British to settle in the area as the 'Father of Auckland'.

Dr Hirini Kaa cites the debate surrounding this memorial as an example of the constant discussion that goes on about "what is Auckland?" and "who is Auckland?"

Hirini is part of the Auckland History Initiative (AHI), which plans to engage with the historical and cultural development of Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland and its importance to life in New Zealand and beyond.

The team of four behind the initiative, Professor Linda Bryder, Dr Aroha Harris, Dr Hirini Kaa and Dr Debbie Dunsford, aim to reach beyond the University of Auckland to build strong and enduring connections with Auckland's many history and heritage institutions, and to put Auckland's history at the heart of an energetic conversation about our city.

Linda explains that "there's a little bit of a disconnect at the moment between academic history and heritage work, and yet history matters and feeds into our city's present day problems."

The idea for the initiative grew from a conversation that she had with Hirini, during which he mentioned reaching out to the community. Linda says that she had a "kind of lightbulb moment" that this was the way that they could address the dearth of academic history about Auckland.

Hirini says that they want to "use our academic perch in the ivory tower to start a discussion that will lead towards a framework of Auckland history. Because there's a lot of activity – heritage work and community groups are huge. Everyone's doing history – it's very popular."



Professor Linda Bryder and Dr Hirini Kaa.

Hirini points out that Ngāti Whātua already have a strong, Government-mandated framework for their history through the Waitangi Tribunal.

“For Aroha and I, our experience is a bit different, because the Māori history of Auckland is quite different. It’s about Treaty of Waitangi settlements. The history of Auckland’s been thrashed out really well for Māori. There’s a clear demarcation and there are frameworks, and it’s being worked on. There’s Tainui working on its history, Ngāti Whātua – all the seventeen mana whenua iwi. So we’re more like ‘that’s cool – so why don’t non-Māori have some way of thinking about their history as well, because Māori have a clear framework’.”

Hirini wants to develop a framework to find a way of thinking in common between mana whenua and everyone else about Auckland’s history. “We would facilitate the discussion, working particularly with Auckland Council, the GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) sector, and collections where Auckland’s history is deposited. We wouldn’t want to say that we want to shape Auckland’s history – that’s a bit arrogant of us. We just want to help have the conversation about it.”

Linda’s vision is to have “undergraduate students engaging with local archives and sources within their communities. So they are actually the ones who are taking it forward, and they will be doing research projects as part of a course engaging with some aspect of their local community.

“We’re starting from the bottom. We’re going to try and work out what resources are actually out there in these various places, like our own Special Collections, and the Auckland War Memorial Museum, Auckland Council and various other archival repositories.”

Debbie has already begun work on investigating these resources and building up a database, and Linda will have some Summer Research Scholarship students working this summer to scope out the resources that are available.

The initiative made a modest public start in 2017 with the launch of Emeritus Professor Russell Stone’s memoir *As It Was: Growing up in Grey Lynn and Ponsonby Between the Wars*.

Russell himself noted in 2007



Dr Aroha Harris.

that “Auckland has not been well served by historians. What makes this neglect anomalous is that Auckland has grown into the largest by far of the New Zealand cities.”

The initiative’s next public event will be a two-day symposium in April 2019, which will be open to the public, to make a start to their aim of facilitating a wider discussion about Auckland history.

A keynote speaker at this symposium will be Professor Grace Karskens of the University of New South Wales, who will discuss the practical side of using archival sources to understand Auckland’s history. Grace’s particular interest is in connecting students’ scholarly learning and research with real world contexts such as heritage sites and museums. She has successfully trained a generation of students through hands-on research, original projects and internships.

Hirini explains that the events around Grace’s visit will be about “the technicians and the practitioners coming together to talk about how we might carry this through.”

Times have changed for universities, and Hirini says that History at the University of Auckland has to think about its contribution to Auckland. “Communities have changed and institutions have changed, and want to collaborate more. There are some pretty cool opportunities there, particularly for postgraduate students.

“That sense of finding our contribution, that’s important – and to Auckland in particular. We don’t want to be the empire. There are other universities in New Zealand, and we can work collaboratively. That’s part of AHI too, facilitating that ability to contribute. We’ve got good networks but we

haven’t needed to activate them that much. AHI gives us a reason to get out there.”

Linda agrees, saying that “there’s a lot of enthusiasm for it around the community from professional archivists and museum curators and others. We really need to marshal all of that energy and enthusiasm and make something of it, and engage.”

Hirini says that the initiative will dovetail perfectly with the work that is being done to prepare Arts students for fulfilling careers.

“There’s a big push for employability in Arts courses at the moment, and that’s actually really useful. But I’ve always thought that History really undersells itself in terms of the skills you get.



What makes us appealing is us working with councils, with GLAM, with communities, with iwi, to really build those connections. That’s employability, that’s what kids get jobs from.

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