



NEW ZEALAND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



This document is made available by The New Zealand  
Archaeological Association under the Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

# NOTES OF A SOUTHERN INTERLOPER: AN OTAGO ARCHAEOLOGIST IN THE BAY OF ISLANDS, 1964–1968

Jean Kennedy  
RSPAS, Australian National University

In late 1964 I crossed Cook Strait for the first time, on the way to the Bay of Islands with a group of University of Otago students and others led by Les Groube, under the banner of the Bay of Islands Archaeological Research and Rescue Project (Groube 1964). We stopped off in Auckland on the way. Released from the windowless back of a truck lent to the expedition by the Coal Research Unit of the University of Otago, I was struck by the sheer size of the city, as well as the exotic turmoil of Karangahape Road and Grafton (years later, although I had meanwhile lived in less salubrious quarters of large cities from Bangkok to Boston and gone to many bohemian parties, Randy Newman's song *Mama told me not to come*<sup>1</sup> evoked vivid recollections of that first encounter with Auckland).

---

<sup>1</sup> Will you have whiskey with your water?  
Or sugar with your tea?  
What are these crazy questions  
That they're asking of me?  
This is the wildest party that there ever could be  
Oh, don't turn on the light 'cause I don't want to see  
Mama told me not to come  
Mama told me not to come  
Mama said, "that ain't no way to have fun"  
Open up the window, let some air into this room  
I think I'm almost choking on the smell of stale perfume  
And that cigarette you're smoking 'bout to scare me half to death  
Open up the window, let me catch my breath  
The radio is blasting, someone's beating on the door  
Our hostess is not lasting – she's out on the floor  
I seen so many things here I ain't never seen before  
I don't know what it is – but I don't wanna see no more  
Mama told me not to come  
Mama told me not to come  
Mama said, "that ain't no way to have fun"

In defence of my mother, she told me no such thing.

During our stay Les took us on a tour of the terraced volcanic cones. I knew about these, of course, from reading and from Les's evocative accounts of his Mt Wellington excavations. But confronting their reality, islands above a suburban sea, I suddenly saw a landscape requiring far more complex analysis than my understanding of settlement pattern archaeology could possibly accommodate. As in a figure-ground illusion, I could see the background expanse of urban sprawl, or the array of cones, but not both at once. I kept this disturbing insight to myself, hanging on to the half-comforting thought that the Bay of Islands pā sites, which I had spent the previous year assiduously mapping from aerial photographs, were not strangled by urban spread. But my perception of the Bay of Islands pā as spots on a map had begun to disintegrate as I realized that I had no idea how to think about the landscape I was yet to see. Mapping them, I had given no thought to the nature of the matrix that might give them meaning. The sites had popped out of the photographic ground and were fixed in my mind in the enhanced depth perspective of paired aerial photographs scanned with a pocket stereoscope. The figure/ground tension I saw between Auckland's urban sprawl and the relicts of an earlier peopled landscape made me uncomfortably aware that I knew nothing about the Bay of Islands landscape; I had seen only the figure and not the ground.

Disturbing though this was at the time, I did not understand until much later that the perspective I had developed was entirely explicable given my childhood in southern New Zealand in the 1940s and 1950s. Growing up in Dunedin, I explored the high country of Otago and Westland on family camping trips, and was later encouraged to take off on weekend tramping trips with school friends. We moved through these landscapes with a strong sense of awe, certain that the many others who had preceded us had done so in the same spirit of respectful transit rather than settlement. We disdainfully avoided roads, plantations, pastures and fences: misplaced debris of civilization that we could not clean up. We carried little and were careful about rubbish disposal. My youthful version of *terra nullus*: landscapes through which we walked quietly in small groups, confident that our illusion would not be shattered by settlements, past or present (Park 2002). I glanced sometimes at my brother's copies of the *NZ Alpine Journal*, put off by the emphasis on conquest and uninterested in its technology.

I felt no contradiction between my schoolgirl illusion of wilderness and growing curiosity about New Zealand archaeology and anthropology. Encouraged by my father I read whatever I could find, including *NZAA Newsletters* from the beginning, and we both joined the small group of active excavators organised by Peter Gathercole through the Otago Anthropological Society (Gathercole 2000). The sites we worked on were almost all coastal. As I became aware of

prehistoric Māori presence, this posed no more threat to my notion of high country wilderness than coastal cities did. The few pā sites were too dispersed to force recognition of a once-peopled landscape in between. That most of the archaeological sites were cryptic—buried Archaic middens—added to the fascination of learning how and why to excavate. The emphasis was very much on the site rather than its locational context. Head down in the minutiae of excavation, I had no cause to wonder about the spatial relation of one site to another, much less their meshing in a social landscape. Like many southern New Zealanders, I had almost no direct experience of Māori communities, and few Māori friends.

I came out of that coal research truck like a crumpled damp moth from a chrysalis, to be dazzled by the multicultural lights of Auckland. It was a relief to leave for the Bay of Islands after a few days. Travelling north, my uncomfortable sense that I had misunderstood something receded somewhat.

There were two seasons of excavation with Les and the Otago crew in the Bay of Islands (Kennedy 1966). These were intense and convivial expeditions, and many northern-based members of NZAA joined us. We concentrated on examining the internal arrangements of the sites under investigation. It was not until 1967, when I returned alone to finish mapping pā sites (with a small grant from the Skinner Fund) that I began to think seriously about how to people that beautiful archaeological landscape. Perhaps solitary plane-tableing focuses the mind. Walking to Rawhiti to introduce myself to the community, who were somewhat puzzled but very kind, strengthened my realisation that I needed to rethink the site distribution in terms of the social relations that the short distances and intervisibility between sites suggested.

It is probably significant that between the earlier excavations and this last trip to the Bay of Islands, I had been in Tonga with Les and more or less the same crew. Maureen Hitchings and I seceded from the house in town to stay in the village near the site. There I had my first serious lesson in trying to explain to village people, whose assumptions I recognised were quite different from mine, just what we were doing. They were very polite and attentive but I knew I had failed to communicate anything remotely comprehensible.

My thesis (Kennedy 1969) completed, I left New Zealand for further study. All my subsequent work in archaeology has been done as a foreign visitor to countries in which careful diplomacy at both national and local level has been critical to getting permission and co-operation for research (Golson and Kennedy n.d.). Living in rural villages, often very isolated, has been a necessity, and learning how to negotiate this always crucial. These conditions, I think, profoundly and subtly alter one's assumptions. It becomes impossible to ignore

the present-day social contexts in which one's archaeological sites are, or are not, recognised and valued.

Of course, the way archaeology is practised in New Zealand has changed profoundly since I left. In the transition from freebooting, largely amateur enthusiasm to professional maturity and serious efforts to engage the Māori community, the NZAA has played a critical role. Let us celebrate the fact that these vital changes have come about without loss of the old sense of fellowship among NZAA members.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Bill Clarke, Jack Golson and Matiu Prebble for comments and encouragement.

### **References**

- Gathercole, P., 2000. Otago 1958–1968 (Part 1). *Archaeology in New Zealand*, 43(3): 206–219.
- Golson, J. and J. Kennedy, n.d. Hail to the Chief: A tribute to Bill Solheim. To appear in *Southeast Asian Archaeology. Wilhelm G. Solheim II Festschrift*, edited by Victor Paz, University of the Philippines Press.
- Groube, L. M., 1964. *Archaeology in the Bay of Islands 1964-65*. Cyclostyled booklet, Anthropology Department, University of Otago.
- Kennedy, J., 1966. Archaeological research in the Bay of Islands. *Science Record*, 16: 85–87.
- Kennedy, J., 1969. *Settlement in the South East Bay of Islands, 1772: A study in text-aided field archaeology*. Studies in Prehistoric Anthropology 3, Anthropology Department, University of Otago, Dunedin.
- Park, G., 2002. Our Terra Nullus. *Landfall*, 204: 53-67.