

COME ON SHORE
AND WE WILL KILL
AND EAT YOU ALL

A New Zealand Story

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BLOOMSBURY

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ABOMINABLY SAUCY

I HAVE OFTEN thought of that night as a contact encounter. “Contact” is what we call it when two previously unacquainted groups meet for the very first time. It is what happened when Christopher Columbus reached the Bahamas in 1492 and encountered a tribal people henceforth known as “Indians” from his misconception about where in the world he was. Or when the Leahy brothers, trekking into the interior of Papua New Guinea in search of gold, came upon a group of highlanders who in 1933 still knew nothing about the outside world. It describes a moment of sudden wonder, a tectonic shift, that undermines old certainties and opens up whole new views.

Of course, there have been thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of such moments. Contact, after all, has taken place in all corners of the world between all kinds of people, most of whom have left no written record of the events. Documented instances are comparatively rare and this, perhaps, is why so much glamour attaches to these moments—that and the fact that they no longer happen. *First contact*, unless it is with someone in outer space, is a scenario that will not be repeated on the terrestrial globe, and this naturally adds to its attraction.

But contact, as a generalized concept, is still a very useful idea. In the context of the last five hundred years, the age of

European expansion, contact has often been understood as an asymmetrical event, an act, in which someone *contacts* someone else. But historians and anthropologists tend to speak rather of a “contact period” or “contact zone,” meaning a time and space in which two groups of people come together, part, come together, part, and come together again in a strange, unsettled period of uncertainty, like a dance that none of the performers has had a chance to fully learn.

Because contact, whatever else it is, is a matter of confusion. One side may have technological superiority; the other maybe have numbers on its side. But when they first come together, there is, for a limited time, a kind of parity, the parity of incomprehension. Each side constructs hypotheses, tries to assess the other’s strength, to parse the other’s utterances, to deduce the other’s purpose and intent. Neither fully understands what’s happening and neither can say with confidence what’s going on.

The absolute truth of this, and its applicability even to contemporary situations, was impressed upon me that evening after I left the Kerikeri pub. My bus to Auckland had been scheduled for ten o’clock, but somehow ten had come and gone and, before I knew it, the pub was closing and there I was with all my gear and no place to go. “You can come with us,” said Seven. And so I did.

Our destination, it turned out, was a house that belonged to somebody’s uncle. The owner was away at the time and in his absence the place had become a sort of flophouse for those of his relations who could not be bothered, or were too drunk, to drive back out to Mangonui. You could walk to it from the pub, which is what we’d done, stumbling through the schoolyard and across a lumpy paddock to a surprisingly suburban-looking street at the bottom of a hill.

It was a plain, rectangular timber house, sparsely furnished, with a living room, a kitchen, three small bedrooms, and a bath. Inside, it had a hard-worn, barren feeling, no knick-knacks or decorations, but all the surfaces were immaculately clean. When we arrived, the place was already filled with people, draped in various postures about the room. At one end of the lounge a couple of girls were playing cards at a table, at the other a bunch of guys were sprawled in front of a TV. Between them, Pushed up against the wall, was a sagging couch, which is where, as the evening advanced, I found myself sitting.

Beside me on the sofa was a scruffy-looking guy in his midtwenties whom I'd seen earlier in the pub. He had a surly sort of expression and a handsome mop of curly black hair. He was wearing a singlet and a pair of black jeans and his hands were covered with homemade tattoos.

We'd been sitting there for a while when out of the blue he said, "I've been looking for an earring."

From the kitchen came the smell of frying onions and the sound of the kettle coming to a boil. A lean and wispy character with several missing teeth was strumming a Bob Marley song on the guitar. On the coffee table in front of us stood a half-empty bottle of whisky and an ashtray full of butts.

I fingered the earrings I was wearing, a pair of large engraved silver hoops that I had bought for myself at a shop in Melbourne. I wore them often and considered them my favorite pair. On impulse I took one off and handed it over. "Here," I said. "Have this."

He looked at me for a moment and then held the earring up and ripped the silver hoop from the ring that attached it to the wire. Then he tossed the hoop into a corner and put the wire in his ear.

I sat perfectly still, thinking about what had just happened.

I had left the pub in the company of these strangers because I wanted to know more about them and because I trusted the fellow in the bright pink shirt. It was instinct and nothing more, and now I wondered if perhaps I'd misjudged the situation.

Maybe it was because I was a tourist. Maybe it was because I'd come to the party with someone he didn't like. Maybe there was something insulting about my giving him the earring, as though I were making a display of the fact that it was easy for me to give something valuable away. Maybe he thought I was trying to placate him or buy him off. Maybe he just didn't like the hoop. Maybe he thought it looked like something for a girl. I wasn't even all that sure of my own motives, but I had absolutely no idea what was going through his mind. All I knew was that something had gone wrong.

Later the memory of this moment was like a flash going off inside my head. It was exactly the kind of thing, I realized, that had happened over and over in those early years when Maoris and Europeans were first coming into contact with one another. Not that this was anywhere near as serious—it was easy enough for me to get up and walk away, to seek out people in whose company I felt safer, to sneak back later when no one was looking and retrieve my silver hoop. But if you ramped up the risks and the consequences, you could see in this the sort of encounter that had so often been repeated in the history of New Zealand and had so often ended badly for one or the other side.

All the early accounts of contact in New Zealand have an air of peril about them. The Maoris, so numerous and brooding, seem perpetually on the verge of attack. The Europeans, full of

uncertainty, sail in and out in a state of chronic trepidation. Neither side seems clearly in command.

After Tasman's misadventure in Murderers' Bay, no European ship reached New Zealand for 127 years. Then, in rapid succession, came Cook and the Frenchman Jean de Surville, separately but simultaneously in 1769, Marion du Fresne in 1772, Cook again with Tobias Furneaux in 1773-74, and then Cook once more on his third and final voyage in 1777. Of these expeditions, not one escaped New Zealand without confrontation and, in some cases, significant loss of life.

Surville, who reached New Zealand at virtually the same time as Cook, approached New Zealand only with the greatest unease. He had made a long and pointless passage through the Coral Sea with a crew that was dying of scurvy, and he desperately needed someplace where he could go ashore. New Zealand seemed to him the best of bad options. "According to the report of the travellers who have preceded us there," he wrote, "the natives of the country are ferocious and bloodthirsty." But it was the closest known landfall and the one he thought they would be able to find. And, "anyhow," he added, "we have no alternative in the state in which we are."

As it was, the Maoris treated him civilly. They came out in their canoes and traded fish for cloth and knives, led the visitors to a place where they could get water, and even helped them care for their sick on shore. But Surville did not trust them. "They stand close to you with marks of friendship," he wrote, "and if you relax and they think they have time to flee after striking their blow, they will not fail to."

Still, for a week all went well. Then one night a storm arose and a boatload of invalids returning to the ship was forced back to shore. The ship dragged her anchors and had to be moved, leaving behind a yawl that had sunk in shallow water.

When the wind subsided, Surville spotted the yawl, which the Maoris had in the meantime refloated. He set off to retrieve it, but when he arrived, the yawl was gone. Determined to revenge himself for, in his words, “the theft which had just been committed under our very noses,” Surville seized the first Maori he could lay his hands on, confiscated a large canoe, and set fire to some thirty dwellings and storehouses full of food. Then, clapping his captive in irons, he sailed out of the bay. The prisoner, who later died of scurvy at sea, turned out to be none other than Ranginui, a local chief who—in the ultimate proof of the maxim “no good deed goes unpunished”—had fed and sheltered the sick Frenchmen when they were stranded by the storm.

Surville’s behavior, which seems not only wicked but bizarre, cannot possibly have made sense to the Maoris. But they themselves were often just as baffling: witness the story of Marion du Fresne. Marion’s view of the Maoris was exactly the opposite of Surville’s. An idealist and a romantic who had come under the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Marion believed that the Maoris were nature’s children. “As I do only good to them,” he told his lieutenant, “assuredly they will do me no evil.”

Marion spent five weeks in the Bay of Islands in May and June of 1772. Relations there were quickly established, the local people expressing great interest in and apparent friendliness toward the French, who, in turn, described the Maoris as “a fine, courageous, industrious, and very intelligent race.” Both Marion’s lieutenant and the commander of his storeship, however, felt that their captain placed too much confidence in the Maoris’ goodwill. The lieutenant, particularly, thought he detected “a species of underlying ferocity” in their behavior. They “treated us to a great many endearments,” he wrote, but

“when we permitted them to place their lips, either upon our hands or our faces, they sucked the flesh with a surprising greediness.”

One day, when the French had been in the bay for about a month, two chiefs took Marion to the top of a hill where a great many people were gathered. There, they embraced him and placed a crown of greenery upon his head. Marion understood these gestures to mean that they acknowledged him as their sovereign, but this is patently not what was going on. “Whatever these ceremonies may have meant,” writes the anthropologist Anne Salmond, “they sealed his death warrant.”

The next day Marion went on shore in the company of several Maoris. He told his lieutenant that he was going fishing in a nearby cove and that none of his soldiers need accompany him, since they would just be in the way. And that was last that anyone ever saw of Marion du Fresne.

When the full scale of the tragedy became apparent—a reconnaissance mission to the cove reported that both Marion’s cutter and the longboat that had been sent after him were on the beach, that all but one of the longboat’s crew had been massacred, and that one of the chiefs had been seen wearing Marion’s velvet waistcoat and carrying his silver-mounted gun—the lieutenant led a punitive expedition against the local Maoris. Three hundred or more were killed, including women and children, some of whom were shot in their canoes as they tried to escape. The Frenchmen then set fire to three, perhaps four villages and, naming the spot “Treachery Bay,” sailed for Île-de-France.

Many years later, in the late 1820s, a traveling Englishman reported that he had met a Maori in the Bay of Islands who claimed to have been among the party that murdered Marion.

“They were all brave men,” the Maori said, “but they were killed and eaten.”

Even Cook, undoubtedly the most experienced and capable navigator to visit New Zealand in these years, found relations with the Maoris tricky. Cook spent a full six months circumnavigating New Zealand in the course of his first voyage round the world. He had the distinct advantage over other commanders, not only of this cumulative experience but of having a Tahitian on board who was able to serve as a translator. And even so there was confusion, misunderstanding, even death.

In their very first encounter at a place called Poverty Bay, Cook’s men, perceiving that they were about to be attacked, shot and killed a Maori, one of the very first they had met. A similar altercation the next day left three Maoris wounded, one mortally, and a fracas at sea that same afternoon resulted in four deaths, all Maori, and the capture of three adolescent Maori boys. Cook and his officers were not happy. “Black be the mark” for this day, wrote the young gentleman Joseph Banks, who sailed with Cook as an observer, “and heaven send that such may never return to embitter future reflection.”

All up and down the coast, whenever the *Endeavour* was sighted, Maoris would set off in canoes, sometimes no more than two or three, sometimes as many as fifty at a time. Paddling as fast as they could, they would come to within earshot of the ship and cry out, “Come here, come ashore, and we will kill you!” waving their weapons in the air and hurling stones at the vessel. The British replied by firing small shot over the Maoris’ heads. Sometimes the Maoris turned around and paddled back to shore. Sometimes they put down their weapons, entered into conversation, and began to trade: fish and *kumara* (sweet potatoes) for nails and cloth, weapons and

cloaks for paper and hatchets. The daring and distinguished among them went aboard and examined everything in the ship, tasting the food, trying on the clothes, inspecting such novel instruments as telescopes and compasses. Cook, who became quite fond of the Maoris during his long circumnavigation, found their behavior remarkable.

At times they would dance the war dance, and at other times they would trade with and talk to us and answer such questions as were put to them with all the calmness imaginable, and then again begin the war dance, shaking their paddles, patoo patoos, etc., and make strange contortions at the same time. And as soon as they had worked themselves up to a proper pitch, they would begin to attack us with stones and darts and oblige us whether we would or no to fire upon them.

Cook had been coasting New Zealand for about a month when he reached the Bay of Islands on a fine spring day in late November. It was immediately apparent to everyone on board that this was no ordinary inlet. There were signs of occupation everywhere: plantations on all the larger islands, houses, villages, fortifications all along the shore. The people seemed in every respect more prosperous than any they had yet encountered. Their chiefs were better dressed and carried more weapons; their skins were darker and differently tattooed; their canoes were bigger and more elaborately carved; and they came out to the ship in great fleets numbering hundreds of men. The bay itself was safer, deeper, better protected than any Cook had yet seen in New Zealand, with sheltered anchorages and harbors "as smooth as mill pools." Even the fish were unusually plentiful: the men caught sharks, stingrays, bream,

and mullet, while the mackerel, wrote Cook, “are larger than any I ever saw in any other part of the world.”

It was, in fact, no ordinary place. The Bay of Islands at the end of the eighteenth century was a hotly contested region in political flux. The *hapu*, or subtribes, of Ngati Awa, Ngati Pou, and Ngati Wai were under pressure from Ngapuhi, a tribal grouping from the Hokianga and inland regions, whose rise to supremacy in the area coincided with the arrival of the Europeans. It was Ngapuhi who would later use the Bay of Islands as its base of operations for the first major war of the colonial period—a war fought by Maori against Maori with the use of the Pakeha’s guns. It was Ngapuhi who would initiate the trade in timber, flax, and tattooed heads, who would sell the first land and build the first churches. It was a Ngapuhi chief who began the revolt against the Pakeha in 1844, and it was Ngapuhi who now confronted a European ship with European weapons in their bay for the very first time.

As soon as the *Endeavour* rounded the entrance to the bay, several large canoes set out from shore and quickly surrounding the ship. Some of the Maoris came on board but there was tension and misunderstanding. The Maoris seemed unfriendly, tempers began to rise. Sydney Parkinson, the ship’s artist, described them as unruly, and complained that while he was greeting one of them in the local manner—by gently pressing noses—the Maori picked his pocket. Joseph Banks pronounced them “most abominably saucy.”

Over the course of the day, no fewer than four or five hundred Maoris came out to the ship, their numbers and behavior such that Cook decided to take the *Endeavour* out of the bay before nightfall. They sailed north to the Cavalle Islands, where they bought fish and again were pelted with stones. But with the wind in their teeth they could make no

progress and so back they went, determined so long as the wind was contrary to make a closer inspection of the bay.

The next day it was raining. No sooner had the ship come to anchor than three or four hundred Maoris assembled near it in their canoes. At first, wrote Cook, they behaved "tollerable well," but soon a group of youths tried to steal the buoy from the anchor. Nothing would make them stop but musket fire, and one of the boys, reported Cook, was hit. The captain then ordered a great gun fired over their heads, frightening them "not a little," and moved the ship to deeper water.

And then an incident occurred that nearly spelled the end of things for Cook. Cook, Banks, and the *Endeavour's* naturalist, Dr. Daniel Solander, accompanied by an escort of marines, set off in the pinnace and the yawl to investigate one of the islands in the outer bay. They had only just landed when they discovered that all the canoes that had been gathered about the ship had followed them to the island, landing at different points along the shore. Within minutes they were surrounded by an unruly crowd of two or three hundred people. "Notwithstanding that they were all armed," wrote Cook,

they came upon us in such a confused straggling manner that we hardly suspected that they meant us any harm. But in this we were very soon undeceived, for upon our endeavouring to draw a line of the sand between us and them, they set up the war dance and immediately some of them attempted to seize the two boats.

Finding themselves cornered and seeing the Maoris advance with what was now plainly hostile intent, Cook, Banks, Solander, and two of the marines fired into the crowd. This gave the attackers pause, but only for a moment, and the Maoris

quickly rallied, shouting and waving their weapons in the air. Luckily for the men on the island, the officer in charge of the *Endeavour* had been keeping a close eye on things and he brought the ship's cannons to bear on the island and fired a series of four-pounders over the Maoris' heads. This time they retreated, but it was a dangerous skirmish for the British, and a foreshadowing of the way in which Cook, ten years later in Hawaii, would meet his death at the hands of a different group of Polynesians.

When I say that I thought of that night as a contact encounter, what I mean is that this is what it felt like to me. No doubt it had elements of oddness for the Maoris—they may have wondered what I was doing, going home with a bunch of people I didn't know—but at least I was recognizably a tourist, someone who had appeared on the periphery of their consciousness and would just as certainly disappear. For me, it was different. Seven was almost the first Maori I'd ever met, certainly the first I'd ever talked to, and the situation in which I found myself had all the hallmarks of a contact encounter: the excitement, the anxiety, the bafflement, the humor, the humility that ultimately comes from realizing *you've gotten it all wrong*.

What I thought I'd witnessed that night in the pub was nothing less than the unbridgeable gulf between Maori and Pakeha—a gulf no narrower for all the years that had elapsed since the two first faced each other across a narrow strip of beach. Had not Tasman sailed away leaving behind the name Murderers' Bay and the bodies of four of his men? Were not Cook's first days in New Zealand filled with death on the Maori side and dismay on the part of the Europeans? And what of Surville's irrational reprisals and the death of Marion

du Fresne? Were not Maori and Pakeha from the very beginning locked in a belligerent embrace: no justice for Maori in a Pakeha world, no mercy for Pakeha among Maori?

“Nah,” said Seven later. “That’s not how it was. The Pakeha’s a local lad—most of the fellas have known him for years. It was the other ones that caused all the trouble. I told you, they’re not from around here.”

The real fault lines, it seemed, lay that night between Maori and Maori and not between Maori and Pakeha, as I had assumed. I had been primed to see the incident in terms of a conflict between natives and colonizers, that is, between a fair, freckled Maori boy and a white guy in a red shirt. But, of course, that was far too simple.

The Pakeha who was involved in the fight, and who discreetly disappeared before the arrival of the police, was actually on the home team. He was the manager of an orchard outside town and was well known to most of the Maoris in the pub. The young Maori fighter and his two friends, on the other hand, had come from somewhere down the North Island and had no ties to the area. They were interlopers, “trouble-makers,” from the local point of view. Their manners were bad and they deserved to be punished. It was fine for the police to take them away. It was even fine for the police to harass them. In a certain, albeit ambiguous, sense, the police were on the home team too.

It was a while, though, before I really understood this. No Maori will tell you everything all at once and Seven was no exception to this rule. And even when I thought I had some of the answers, I was aware that there were things I didn’t understand. This feeling of not quite getting what was going on would dog me whenever I was in New Zealand. Indeed, it seemed only to grow stronger with each visit. I like to think this

is how astronomers feel: with each new discovery of something curious—quasars, black holes, dark matter—the universe grows not more comprehensible but less, though the hope endures of a simple, unifying explanatory narrative.

But back in the beginning, in the pub, I had only the merest signs to go on: the offer of a light, the flicker of a smile. It was like a code that needed cracking, a language that with effort one might finally comprehend. I was a tourist who should have been on a bus back to where I came from. Instead I found myself in a house long after midnight with a bunch of Maoris I didn't know. That was the night I missed my bus and then I missed my plane.