The Pirates of Parihaka: Parody as a Response to Violence [slide]

On October 24 2019 a Crown apology for the invasion and sacking of the pacifist community of Parihaka and the imprisonment of its people passed into law. This came 138 years after 1600 government troops **[slide]** invaded the Taranaki community — where the prophets Te Whiti-o-Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi inspired a campaign of peaceful resistance to the confiscation of Māori land — on 5 November 1881. A scathing 1996 Waitangi Tribunal report critiqued not only Crown action in 1881 but also the subsequent government suppression of the people of Parihaka through its ‘forced removals, pass laws, and other suspensions of civil liberties’.[1]

The events at Parihaka are central to my discussion today, which focuses primarily on a response to the events in the form of a Gilbert and Sullivan parody penned in the late 1880s by a 17-year-old student at Christ’s College in Christchurch. I also explore other creative engagements to Parihaka, probing the appropriateness of the music, verse, and fiction I discuss as a response to violence.

The events at Parihaka have a long and complex history that continues to reverberate. **[slide]** For those seeking a more comprehensive account of this history than I can provide today I recommend the work of Dick Scott, Rachel

Buchanan, and Danny Keenan, and the wonderful 2001 collection *Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance*. From 1866 the non-violent community at Parihaka provided refuge for the war-ravaged Taranaki people. In 1878 the community embarked on a campaign of passive resistance to land confiscation. **[slide]** Hundreds of Te Whiti and Tohu's followers were arrested, the Māori Prisoners' Trials Act in 1879 allowing the indefinite postponement of trials. When the Hall government took office in 1879 John Bryce was appointed Native Minister. Bryce regarded Parihaka as the 'headquarters of fanaticism and disaffection' and gathered a substantial military presence in Taranaki. When this failed to halt Maori resistance, the government tried a more conciliatory approach for much of 1881, replacing Bryce with the more moderate William Rolleston. Negotiations between the leaders of Parihaka and Rolleston reached an impasse and on 14 October 1881 the government issued a proclamation ordering Te Whiti and Tohu to submit to the authority of the Queen or lose everything. Back in charge, on 5 November 1881 Bryce and Colonel John Roberts led 1589 heavily armed soldiers into Parihaka. **[slide]** About 2,000 people, all dressed in their best clothes, sat on the marae waiting for them. The soldiers were met by singing children and women carrying loaves of bread. Rachel Buchanan writes that 'Under the watch of an Armstrong canon mounted on Purepo … the soldiers arrested and exiled Parihaka leaders, they raped women and stole taonga, they evicted most of the 2000 residents and ransacked buildings and crops.'[2]

Bryce claimed that his campaign was a resounding success, but the narrative of triumphant heroism articulated by the constabulary was from the outset challenged by responses that critiqued crown action. **[slide]** The events of 5 November were witnessed by a few intrepid journalists who braved Bryce's embargo on travel to the conflict zone. One of these reporters, S. Croumbie-Brown of the *Lyttleton Times* accused Bryce of 'deliberately trying to provoke Maori' and described 5 November as 'a day of injustice'. Political voices were also raised in protest, Robert Stout framing the events at Parihaka as 'the murder of the Maoris'.[3]

Literary and creative responses to Parihaka, be they penned or painted by Māori or Pakeha, have consistently expressed antagonism towards government action and sympathy for the people of Parihaka. Late nineteenth century poets **[slide]** focused on challenging both the legality and the heroism of Bryce's actions. In 1889 Jessie Mackay used Poet Laureate Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' as the model for her ironic 'The Charge at Parihaka' in ,which as Jane Stafford writes, the armed militia are presented as not only savage and vindictive but also comic and foolish'[4]. Another poet of Scottish origin, John Liddell Kelly, **[slide]** included 'The Saga of Sir John: The Parihaka Raid' in his 1902 collection *Heather and Fern*. This 'fascinating piece of poetic flash has as its target John Bryce whose behaviour at Parihaka is satirised … by parodying a group of [famous] Victorian poems'[5] The first part, 'Skald Scott Sings' is a

version of Sir Walter Scott's 'Lochinvar' that holds up Bryce to contempt and ridicule.

In researching my current project on Gilbert and Sullivan in Australia and New Zealand the most startling and unexpected archival find **[slide]** I have uncovered is a response to the events at Parihaka called 'The Pirates of Parihaka'. As with Mackay and Lindell Kelly's poems this reworks an existing work, in this instance the hit comic opera *The Pirates of Penzance*. For the uninitiated, the English theatrical duo W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan **[slide]** created 14 comic operas between 1871 and 1896, Gilbert writing the libretto and Sullivan composing the music. Tapping into the popular burlesque and pantomime traditions of their era, Gilbert and Sullivan invented a new kind of stage spectacle which music historians regard as a key prototype of the musical. Audiences enter a topsy turvy universe of absurdity in which flirting is a capital offense, all pirates are orphans, fairies consort with politicians, princesses found universities, and gondoliers become monarchs. This acts as a parody of aspects of Victorian society that Gilbert and Sullivan found ridiculous, from the police force in *The Pirates of Penzance*, to early feminism in *Princess Ida*, to the aesthetic movement in *Patience*, to empire expansion in *Utopia Ltd*.

The Pirates of Penzance was first staged in London in 1879 **[slide]** and had its Australasian debut in Melbourne the following year. The subtitle of the opera

—*The Slave of Duty*—points to the protagonist Frederick's struggle between his allegiance to the infamous Pirates of Penzance, to whom he has been apprenticed, and his desire to protect the woman he loves, Mabel, whose father Major General Stanley has antagonised the pirates by wrongfully claiming to be an orphan (the fearsome pirates are all orphans and incapable of hurting anyone in the same situation). Learning of the Major General's lie the pirates storm his mansion and defeat the timorous police force called in to protect the retired soldier's property and many daughters, only to yield when 'Queen Victoria's name' is evoked.

We are a long way from the tragic events of Parihaka, but it is the lyrics and music of this musical comedy that inspired Frank Rolleston **[slide]**, a young man in his final year at Christ's College in Christchurch. The unlikely convergence between Parihaka and comic opera is, I believe, due to two shaping factors in the young Frank's life.

Firstly, he came from a family who loved music and entertainment. When Frank was eight the whole family were entranced by *The Pirates of Penzance* when J.C. Williamson brought his company to New Zealand in 1881. William and Mary's granddaughter Rosamond writes that the 'the boys not only sang the tunes but also wrote parodies on the Policeman's Chorus'. These early parodies are not to be found in the Rolleston family papers, but after the 1885

Williamson tour of *The Mikado* Mary and her son George composed a parody of one of the hit songs **[slide]** from *The Mikado*—'Three Little Maids from School'—to relieve the suffering of Frank and his brother Hector. The parody was copied neatly in red ink by Frank Rolleston, evidence of his appreciation both of the song and for Gilbert and Sullivan.

The relationship between Frank and Parihaka is just as clear-cut. His politician father William **[slide]** was the Native Minister for much of 1881. This was not a role that he wanted to take on, but he believed in public service. Dick Scott writes that the Cambridge educated William 'wore like a flag the high sense of duty of a mid-Victorian gentleman'.[6] William met Te Whiti on 8 October 1881 in an effort to negotiate the surrender of Parihaka and relinquished the role of Native Minister to Bryce after the 14 October proclamation. Family records highlight that Parihaka was a source of tension in the family, with Mary an admirer of Bryce and an advocate for assertive action against what she termed a 'backward' people.[7] In contrast William believed in Maori self-determinism and worked for a peaceful resolution. However, once the government decided on a military response he believed that it was his duty to accompany Bryce to Parihaka. In responding to the events of 5 November 1881, Frank was thus drawing on a first-hand account.

Written in the late 1880s 'The Pirates of Parihaka' **[slide]** is very much the clever exercise of an intelligent schoolboy showing off both his knowledge of a popular work of the day and his mastery of rhyme and rhythm. There is no evidence that the work was ever performed, either at school or at home, and perhaps it would have been virtually impossible to perform in the environment in which Frank grew up as beneath the clever pastiche and the very imperial view of what he terms 'the natives' there is also a pointed criticism of Bryce and a very sympathetic portrayal of Te Whiti.

In his parody, Frank jettisons the love plot and focuses predominantly on three characters and their signature songs. The first of these is the Pirate King **[slide]**. In the Gilbert and Sullivan opera he is a flamboyant, larger than life character, full of braggadocio and swagger. He relishes his buccaneering life but has a sentimental soft spot for orphans and a patriotic love of the Queen. His famous opening song, 'For I am a Pirate King', goes like this. **[play song]**

Frank Rolleston uses the Pirate King as the model for Te Whiti **[slide]**, changing both the song title and the character's role from Pirate King to Maori Chief. Within the restrictions of following the beat and rhyme scheme of Gilbert and Sullivan's original, however, Frank achieves a fairly remarkable shift in character. Gone is the flamboyance of the Pirate King, replaced by a dignified

and heroic figure who uses words to castigate Pākehā greed and articulate the injustice done to his people:

Oh better, far to live and die
Under the rule of prophecy
And play the old obstructive part
Than get a bullet through one's head and heart.
Away to the cheating world go you
Where pakehas are well-to-do
But I'll be true to my own belief
And live and die a Maori chief.

Rolleston emphasises Te Whiti's prophetic and mythic qualities, with the song framing the Maori leader as full of 'mystery'. His example restrains the aggressive impulses of some of his followers. These followers, who appear in the parody as the 'Native Chorus' **[slide]** are full of anger and an overwhelming sense of oppression. They long to 'pot Bryce with impunity' and speak of their desire to 'eat [the invaders] with avidity' but relinquish this through respect for and loyalty to Te Whiti. Here, Frank Rolleston recycles late Victorian clichés of both the cannibalistic ignoble savage (epitomised by the chorus) and the Rousseauean noble savage (embodied by Te Whiti). Yet, the Te Whiti of 'The Pirates of Parihaka' simultaneously shatters the restrictions of these kinds of colonial stereotypes. There is a conscious attempt, I believe, to present Te Whiti

as a leader of great mana, and he presides over 'The Pirates of Parihaka' as the hero. There is no mockery or ridicule in his portrayal, but obvious respect for his restraint, his message, and his ability to hold to his belief in peace in the face of violence.

Te Whiti is also the one character who is multi-dimensional **[slide]**, having a role beyond that of leader. He is presented as a father, whose daughter comforts him when he wakes in the night anxious about the 'darksome dangers' that threaten his people. Unafraid of emotion, Te Whiti weeps 'glistening tears', the personal relationship of father and daughter circling out to encompass all of his people in a bond of connection and love.

The character and purpose of the Major General **[slide]** is also significantly altered in Rolleston's parody, not least because the role of father which humanises him in the opera is shifted to Te Whiti. The Major General belongs to the category of stock characters in the Gilbert and Sullivan operas (like the First Lord of the Admiralty in *HMS Pinafore*) who is typically cast as a smaller man, sprightly, nimble, and a bit effeminate in terms of appearance and movement, but with an over-inflated ego. Absurdity is the key element of the Major General, his signature patter song revealing that while he has been given a classical education and a comprehensive knowledge of military history, he knows nothing of contemporary warfare or military tactics: **[play]**

The gentle mockery meted out to the Major General is replaced in 'The Pirates of Parihaka' with an eviscerating critique of John Bryce **[slide]**, who proclaims himself a 'model Native Minister'. His words reveal him to be opportunistic, devious, and entirely lacking in any kind of moral base. Frank Rolleston's Bryce is the ultimate Hollow Man:

I am the very model of a model Native Minister,
I can be either affable or chaffable or sinister.
I know official dodges and I can be oratorical
And write long memoranda in order categorical.
I am very well acquainted with matters diplomatical
I undertake decisions on some subjects problematical.
About all Maori theories I am teaming with lots o' news,
But if I prove a failure what a devil of a pot I'll lose.

This Bryce speaks openly about his campaign to smear political rival John Sheenan through leaking the record of Sheenan's unpaid bills to the press. He regards 'humbug' as a useful political tool and rejoices that he draws 'official pay' for a very slight political knowledge. For the Bryce of 'The Pirates of Parihaka', Te Whiti represents an enemy whose capture is desired because it will bring Bryce acclaim and, even more importantly, money. There is nothing of Mary Rolleston's admiration for a strong leader in her son's portrayal of Bryce, and Frank's contempt for the Native Minister who replaced his father

goes well beyond William's rather ineffectual unease with Bryce's methods. Frank is full of disdain for Bryce and reduces him through parody and satire to a petty, self-serving bureaucrat.

This is reinforced in the 'Reporter's Song' **[slide]**, which adapts the mischievous spirit of the Major General's daughters sneaking off to dabble their toes in the sea to emphasise the lengths the press went to gain access to Parihaka in order to bear witness to the events. The start of the 'The Pirates of Parihaka' attributes its composition to 'the imprisoned reporters' and when the press get their moment to sing they castigate Bryce's 'autocratic capers' and promise that he and his fellow 'big officials' will get 'pepper from the papers'.

Perhaps the most beloved group of characters in the Gilbert and Sullivan canon are the inept constabulary **[slide]** in *The Pirates of Penzance*. The audience warms to the Sergeant who views the criminal as a fellow man who just wants to be at home by the fireside sipping tea, but also ridicules these representatives of law and order who should be manly and brave but who are prone to crying and want to run away when danger approaches: **[play]**

Rather than a police sergeant, 'Tarantara' is sung by Colonel Roberts **[slide]**, the real-life army officer who led the troops at Parihaka. Like their counterparts in *The Pirates of Penzance*, the constabulary forces in 'The Pirates of Parihaka'

would rather be away from the action, watching nurses 'air their little babies in the sun'. They rally themselves with their marching song, congratulating themselves that they will 'make a splendid show' as they approach Parihaka. Yet they are also fearful, Roberts singing:

For I've learned in many a brush

Tarantara! Tarantara!

That a nigger in the bush

Tarantara!

Is as good as three of us.

Once again Frank Rolleston's language betrays a nineteenth-century European patronage and bigotry towards Maori, yet Maori are also positioned as fundamentally superior to Roberts and his men in their valour, bravery, and military skill.

At this point, just as the actual encounter between Bryce and Roberts and Te Whiti and his people is about to begin, Frank Rolleston reaches an impasse. He doesn't know what to do next, or how to use Gilbert and Sullivan to recount the events of 5 November 1881. **[slide]** Skipping over the invasion and its aftermath, the lyrics skip forward to the end of the opera. Recycling exactly words from *The Pirates of Penzance* we suddenly read:

We yield with humble mien

Because with all our faults, we love our Queen.

Who speaks these words? In Gilbert and Sullivan's original they are sung by the Pirates and if the narrative structure of *The Pirates of Penzance* is followed it could be argued that at one stroke Frank Rolleston undoes all of his potentially subversive work in building up Te Whiti as the prophet hero with a legitimate and powerful cause through having Maori yield to the Crown. The way that the words are laid out on the page, however, allow for a more radical interpretation. The final lines come on a page headed 'Colonel Robert's Song' and seem to be the conclusion to this song. Having built up Te Whiti as a righteous hero, Bryce as a devious bureaucrat, and the armed forces as timid family men, is Frank Rolleston suggesting that it is the Pakeha troops who lay down their weapons, recognising that to invade Parihaka is wrong and in contravention of the Queen's law and the Queen's will? There are certainly the seeds of this interpretation in the work itself, with Rolleston giving Te Whiti and his people both voice and presence in a way that the ironic parodies of Jessie Mackay and John Liddell Kelly failed to do. There is also ambiguity in the title – structurally the Pirates become the people of Parihaka, but thematically the pirates are Bryce and the constabulary, motivated by greed and self-interest.

Tellingly, both ways of reading the ending involve a rewrite of history, conveniently avoiding the invasion of Parihaka and its aftermath with a rhyming couplet. **[slide]** Regardless of which interpretation is followed, the desire to avoid, indeed to excise, the invasion of Parihaka suggests that for Frank

Rolleston the government action in Taranaki was shameful and unjust. But the failure to engage with actual events also speaks to the kind of Pākehā cultural forgetting that has plagued Parihaka and its legacy.

I also think that Frank Rolleston's avoidance of the actual conflict at Parihaka points to another vital question: Is comedy an appropriate response to violence? Ultimately, I believe that 'The Pirates of Parihaka' reveals that Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera form is an inappropriate vehicle to capture the meaning and significance of the historical event. The use of satire, particularly the Major-General's song, does expose injustice and hypocrisy but, ultimately, comic opera is too light, too trivial, too neat to come close to conveying the tragedy and horror of the events of Parihaka, **[slide]** what Tonga Awikau, one of the imprisoned ploughmen and a close advisor to Tohu describes in a waita as 'Kōharihari /deep pain'. The prophetic and hopeful force of Te Whiti and Tohu's vision, what Tohu described in a speech as a 'foundation of Peace' that 'transcends' and 'inspires', is also absent, the themes too weighty for the medium.

The desire to capture something of the meaning and emotion of Parihaka through the medium of music is a consistent one. Mervyn Thompson and William Dart, in their 1983 *Songs to the Judges* **[slide]** also draw on the spirit of Gilbert and Sullivan in the song relating to Parihaka, 'We Got it all Together

Just for You'. The song begins with what Thomson describes as 'the Gilbert-and-Sullivan' approach. The Judge 'does a little skipping dance' and sings in 'patter' as he congratulates the government for passing legislation to deal with Te Whiti, Tohu, and Rua Kenna, and for providing Maori protestors with 'biscuits with their tea'.[8] The stage directions demand that as the song progresses the 'tone of the song hardens …the comic mask … removed'. The bitter and ironic ending, which exposes the perception of the law as a 'receptacle' of justice as empty, is designed to 'prevent applause'. The tensions in this song, with its oscillations between madcap capers and pointed satire, reinforce for me the inadequacy of comedy as a response to Parihaka.

So what musical register might be appropriate? **[slide]** Tim Finn's 1989 lament 'Parihaka' and the many waita composed to commemorate and reflect on Parihaka and its legacy provide powerful, concentrated moments of intense emotion. In terms of a more sustained response, Harry Dansey's play *Te Rakura: The Feathers of the Albatross* draws extensively on waitata to convey both profound loss and enduring hope for a better world. Witi Ihimaera's 2011 novel *The Parihaka Women* **[slide]** suggests that grand opera may also provide an answer. Like Frank Rolleston, Ihimaera turns to a pre-existing work as a model, in this case Beethoven's 1805 *Fidelio*, which Ihimaera describes as 'political opera'[9] and which conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler believes contains a 'flaming message' for liberty and humanity.[10]

Ihimaera's narrative captures the two dominant emotions expressed through Beethoven's music: anger and hope. In tapping in to these emotions he is able to provide a meditation on Parihaka that is layered and poignant. As with all of his works, there is much anger against colonial oppression **[slide]** in *The Parihaka Woman*, perhaps most clearly articulated when he meditates on the Waitangi Tribunal's 1996 Taranaki Report which described the confiscation of land and obliteration of culture in Taranaki as 'holocaust' and 'denigration'. For Ihimaera the lower case 'holocaust' is an appropriate term, writing that 'the word describes what the survivors of any great injustice and plundering of land, treasures, bodies and souls have had to endure … the crimes in Taranaki were justified for very similar reasons [to the Jewish Holocaust] – the superiority of one race over another.'[11]

Yet, in tracing the history of Parihaka from the nineteenth century to the present day, Ihimaera also looks forward to **[slide]** 'the arrival of Aranga, the day of resurrection and harvest' promised by Te Whiti and Tohu [12]. Ihimaera's narrator believes that this day has finally arrived and the novel thus ends on a note of optimism and hope.

The genesis of this paper can be found in the thrill I experienced, in my archival explorations of Gilbert and Sullivan **[slide]**, in discovering Frank Rolleston's reworking of the famous *Pirates of Penzance*. Just what I needed for my chapter

on Gilbert and Sullivan in colonial New Zealand. However, this discovery caused me to broaden the scope of my enquiry and reflect on other literary and musical responses to Parihaka and to the question of the appropriateness as writers and musicians seek to capture the essence, the significance of what took place here. I reach the conclusion, particularly from the perspective of 2019 and the point we have reached in our national journey, that Ihimaera gets its right: yes, the anger at the injustice of it all, but also the final note of optimism and hope – a new dawn after the dark night, following death, resurrection and new life.

Ko te poo e teiwi te kai hari te raa (The night O people is the bringer of the day)

Ko te mate te kai hari i te orange e au (Death is the bringer of life. I AM)

[1] Waitangi Tribunal Report.
[2] Buchanan, p. 24
[3] All from *Lyttleton Times*
[4] Stafford
[5] Jane Stafford, '"To Sing this Bryce and Bunkum Age": Colonial Poetry and Parihaka, in *Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance* (Wellington: City Gallery, 2001), p. 182.
[6] Scott
[7] Rolleston
[8] Thomson, pp. 11-12
[9] Witi Ihimaera, 'Author's Note,' *The Parihaka Woman* (Auckland: Vintage, 2011), p. 299.
[10] Khpye, Eonikoe, "Estate and Collection of George and Ursula Andreas", The National Herald, 13 November 2010, accessed 17 April 2011
[11] Ihimaera, p. 144 – quote from Waitangi Tribunal, Taranaki Report, 1996, o. 312, cited Buchanan, *Parihaka Album*, p. 176
[12] Ihimaera, pp. 291-2