



*Ancestors  
of the  
mind*

A PAKEHA WHAKAPAPA

*J. E. Traue*



# Ancestors of the mind

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Wellington  
1973-1990

WELLINGTON  
Gondwanaland Press

1990

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ISBN 9597766-2-1

This is the amended text of a talk  
first delivered at the Rotary Club of  
Wellington on 26 June 1989

Copies are available from the author  
on request to 168 Hadfield Terrace  
Wellington, at \$5 a copy, post free.

Printed by Wright and Carman  
Trentham, and published by  
The Gondwanaland Press  
24 Glasgow Street, Wellington  
New Zealand

A short time ago I spent a weekend on a marae. It was the Ngati Raukawa marae at Otaki and a group of us were there for a two-day seminar to talk about the relationships between our institution and the Maori people and their culture.

On the first night, after the evening meal, we gathered together in the meeting house and one after another we introduced ourselves to the others in a brief speech. My Pakeha colleagues did this by giving their names, sometimes the place where they were born, and their jobs. It almost seemed as if their jobs made them, defined them as individuals. The local Maori introduced themselves by name by place of birth and tribal affiliations. Some went back one or two generations while the more eloquent went back fifty generations. They defined themselves by their ancestral lands and the features of those lands—the rivers and mountains—and their family links to those lands; by their bloodlines, their ancestors.

I thought about the different approaches of the two, Pakeha and Maori, as I waited my turn. I did not believe that my bloodlines were adequate to define me; that my physical ancestors and their relationships to an area of land were that important for me. On the other hand I did not believe that my present job defined me as a person. I think of myself as very much the product of my wider culture.

When my turn came I attempted to place myself within that culture, a culture of the written record and of the individual, just as the Maori had placed themselves within their culture, an oral culture of the closely-knit tribal group with a base in a particular locality.

The next day I wrote down an account of what I had said—it had created quite a stir—and then substantially extended my account

to cover what I really wanted to say to that group, especially to the Maori members, about the cultural heritage of people like me. This is that extended account. It is what I shall say next time I am on a marae and am invited to introduce myself to the group.

My name is Jim Traue. I was born in Auckland; as a child and young man I lived in Palmerston North, Hawera, Rotorua, Frankton Junction and then back in Auckland; but I have lived most of my life in Wellington. By birth, by domicile, by loyalty I am a New Zealander. I have no other home.

My parents were born in New Zealand, and their parents before them. My paternal great-grandfather, the first Traue in New Zealand, was born in Berlin in the Kingdom of Prussia. He came here in the early 1870s and married a Fitzgerald, born in British India of Irish parents. Since then there has been an admixture of Welsh and English blood to this original German-Irish stock.

They, my ancestors, have determined my genetic inheritance. They have determined my height, my shape, the colour of my eyes, the colour of my hair (and, alas, the lack of it). They may well have determined how I react, how I respond, that is my temperament. That strong Celtic strain from my ancestors may explain a certain gift for words. But my great-grandfather also had a love of the English language and wrote it like an angel though he spoke with a German accent.

But others, all of them outside my blood lines, have shaped my ideas, my beliefs, my values; from others I have learned the things I hold dear, the things that identify me as a person, a unique individual, and that have given me my standing, my reputation in the community.

My ancestors of the mind include my teachers; Miss Davidson at the Rotorua Primary School who believed in me and encouraged my development; Mr Taylor, Mr Morton, Mr Gudex, who provided encouragement or models to emulate at secondary school; Professor Musgrove and Professor Airey, Keith Sinclair, John Reid, Allen Curnow, Bob Chapman, M. K. Joseph, Bill Pearson and the other university teachers who opened my mind to exciting new worlds of books and ideas.

My ancestors of the mind include the men and women with whom I studied; the men and women with whom I have worked; the great leaders in librarianship, Geoffrey Alley and Graham Bagnall in New Zealand, who have been my mentors; Lawrence Clark Powell, Archibald MacLeish, Paul Raabe, some of my heroes from overseas.

They include the man whose cloak has been passed down to me, Alexander Turnbull the collector, who built a great library to comprehend the European, Polynesian and Maori inheritances of this country. A man who believed that the writings of the Englishman John Milton in the seventeenth century were as relevant to New Zealanders as the written records of our past in New Zealand; the histories of Maori traditional beliefs, the records of European settlement in New Zealand, our distinctive New Zealand literature and history.

Behind every one of them, and the source of their ideas and their values, is the great culture which belongs to all of us, the culture of the Western European peoples, the culture of what was once called Christendom.

My ancestors of the mind, nay, *our* ancestors of the mind, are all those men and women, most of them long dead, who recorded in their books the ideas and the values of that culture, a culture going back some 3000 years.

Our ancestors of the mind include the great thinkers of Ancient Greece. The dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; the poet Homer; the scientists Archimedes and Ptolemy; the mathematicians Euclid and Pythagoras; the historians Herodotus and Thucydides; the philosophers and moralists Socrates and Plato and Aristotle. All believed in the importance of ideas, the power of ideas; all believed that the highest purpose of humanity was to define the nature of truth, beauty, and justice.

Our ancestors of the mind include the poets and essayists, historians, political philosophers, architects, engineers of Ancient Rome; Terence, Horace, Livy, Cicero, Vergil, Ovid, Seneca, Catullus, Plutarch, Lucretius, Pliny, Tacitus; and the jurists of Rome who attempted to lay the basis for laws to guarantee justice, fairness and equality of treatment for all.

Our ancestors of the mind include too the scribes and prophets of the books of the Hebrews we call the Old Testament; Moses, Joshua, Job, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, men who sought a meaning in history and who believed that humanity had enough of the divine to uncover the secrets of God's creation. The great king Solomon said 'The glory of God is to conceal a thing, but the glory of the king is to find it out'.

Our ancestors of the mind number also Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Paul and Peter, and the others who record in the New Testament the new covenant of God with his creation; St Jerome and St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus and Luther, Wycliffe, Calvin and John Knox and John Wesley who helped define the new religion of Christendom and create its rich tradition and literature, a tradition which still permeates our society and affects our everyday lives in countless ways. A tradition which has reinforced the ideas we inherited from the Greeks the Romans and the Hebrews about the importance of the individual, which emphasises the equality of humankind and the rights of the individual conscience.

Our ancestors of the mind include the great army of thinkers and writers of the new societies created within the last 1000 years in Europe and beyond in the Americas and Africa and the Pacific, the 'tribes' of the Western tradition, as it were, who drew on the ideas and values of Greece, Rome, the Hebrews and the Christians, and on each other, to develop their own cultures and values.

We may of course be grievously mistaken, but those of us who belong to the western tradition believe that reason and natural justice are the right tools to deal with the world; we see the human condition in terms of problems to be tackled; we believe that wrongs should be put right; that progress is always worth the struggle. Mysticism and resignation leave us puzzled. But this concept of duty coexists with the conviction that the interests of the individual must be protected, even against the state itself. We believe that the life of the mind and the need for action have equal claims; we like to think we are tolerant of the views of others.

Ours is a written tradition, and because it has been a written



culture for 3,000 years the knowledge and the wisdom of 3,000 years of experience has accumulated in our libraries and our archives and our books; and it belongs to everyone of us. As the inheritors of a written culture we can wear it lightly because we no longer need to depend on memory. We may not be able to recite our genealogies, or all of Shakespeare or Milton or the Bible, but nevertheless they are there, indestructible, immutable, always there when we need them, safe in the storehouses outside of our minds which our culture has created.

Just as agricultural societies could store their surplus food, so literate societies could store their intellectual surplus, their experience, to call on in the future when it was needed.

Our ancestors of the mind come from all languages and civilizations that have left written records. We are all part of the international community of the book, the library, the archive.

The Frenchmen Montaigne and Moliere and Voltaire and Rousseau; the Germans Goethe and Herder and Lessing; the Russians Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are just as much our ancestors of the mind as Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton, Defoe, Dryden and Dickens, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Walt Whitman and T. S. Eliot, Allen Curnow, Frank Sargeson, A. R. D. Fairburn, R. A. K. Mason, Janet Frame and Karl Stead.

Our ancestors of the mind include Aristotle, Plato, Bacon, Descartes, Leibnitz, Hume, Kant and Wittgenstein; Locke and Rousseau, Tom Paine and Robert Owen and Karl Marx; they include Adam Smith and J. M. Keynes and Milton Friedman; Voltaire and Gibbon and Ranke and Keith Sinclair and Bill Oliver; Coke and Montesquieu and Blackstone; Kepler, Copernicus and Galileo and Newton, Linnaeus and Darwin and Einstein, Marie Curie and Rutherford.

Our ancestors of the mind are innumerable, encompassing many races and religions and times and places; and their ideas, their creations, are available to me and to you, to everyone, in the millions of books that fill our libraries.

Who am I? I am one of the heirs to all this. Every one of us, whether we wished it or not, whether we deserved it or not, have been given this same inheritance of the written and printed words

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of our culture. You must not suppose I am claiming close personal acquaintance with all these writers. A written culture does not work like that. We do not have to memorise it to make it our own, or call on someone else to recite it to us. It is always there and we can go directly to it and read it and interpret it for ourselves. It is the most democratic of cultures because it belongs to everyone. Most of us do not need to read more than a fraction of the original works. The ideas they contain are always present, are never lost or forgotten. Our ancestors of the mind are immortal on the printed page.

I am proud of my ancestors, my ancestors of the mind, as proud as any Maori is of his ancestors. I have listed only a tiny fraction of them by name. There are countless millions who, by recording their experience in some permanent form, have become my ancestors of the mind, who have in some way contributed to making me what I am.

That is my genealogy, that is my whakapapa.