Us and Them: Museums and Minorities

Kaikohe is a township in New Zealand’s Far North and lies at the heart of the Ngapuhi tribe’s ancestral homeland. The town was the centre of the kauri gum trade and of Northland’s sawmilling industry; and when the gum and the native timber dried up, it became a profitable farming community. In the past 30 years, however, it has been hit hard by economic recession. To most people, it’s the place with the prison up the road; a community blighted by crime and abject poverty.

The museum covers 5 hectares on a back street. When I began working there, it was characterised by unkempt lawns, piles of rusting machinery and derelict vehicles left out in all weathers. Inside the buildings, things were just as daunting. It’s typical of many small town museums – it began with a lot of community support, then became a dumping ground as people grew old and the task too much. Yet if one took the time to dig through the piles of rust and mould, the collection held objects of pure treasure: items of clothing worn by early missionaries and specimens of extinct birds are just some that spring to mind.

However; the treatment of some of the Maori pieces was cause for concern. Of course, this could be due to ignorance, but it was also symptomatic of a disturbing mind-set held by some on the governing committee.
Despite the area’s strong Maori history and equally high Maori population, certain committee members were vocal in disparaging Maori; an attitude that wasn’t confined to the museum. When talking to the business community, one found the same viewpoint; sometimes tacit and often openly expressed. Yet when a high profile local politician lost her driver’s license on a drink-driving charge, the town closed ranks. Her politics didn’t matter. It was about us and them. She was given an old car and the police turned a blind eye as she drove through the backstreets to civic functions wearing a headscarf and dark glasses.

Large chunks of my career have been spent working alongside communities holding an ‘us-and-them’ attitude to the wider world. It’s not unusual. We all do it. However; in the communities I’m talking about it’s taken to another level, usually for historical and/or cultural reasons. They share a deep mistrust of professionals who descend on them from the cities and tell them what to do, often with little understanding of local culture. They hold their sense of history and heritage very dear, and take umbrage when they feel they are losing control of it.

So how were these issues resolved in Kaikohe? I had two things in my favour. I have a basic training in Maori protocol, and I was prepared to listen. The only way to make progress was to express an interest in all who came through the door – their occupation, their family history, their hobbies and interests, their wishes for the town, etc. This gave me insight into community dynamics and the intricacies of the town’s social history. Another issue was addressing the lack of support from the Maori community. In the photos from the Museum’s heyday, Maori are everywhere; raising the question, “Where have they all gone?” Over 40 years they had been made to feel the Museum was not for them. Changing this attitude took time. From the outset, I made a point of hiring young Maori women as guides. If they questioned their ability to do the job, I showed that it was no different from the hospitality given on their home marae. Visitors were treated as guests and offered a hot drink and a chance to chat; and if they wished, they could have a personalised tour through the Museum. When they couldn’t pay the entry fee or were elderly, they were quietly ushered past the front desk and into the grounds. On weekends, I would use the museum archives to assist people with Treaty of Waitangi land claims. All Maori exhibits were redone.
so that objects were treated with respect and according to protocol. I knew I was making headway when I was invited to a marae to work on feather cloaks up to 200 years old. The Museum was opened to the community in other ways. We hosted community events, such as free concerts; and gave space to a community arts project. Members of service clubs and workers sent by the Department of Corrections landscaped the grounds. A blanket rule was set in place; that all personal baggage was left at the gate. As a result, we had tattooed gang members working alongside white conservative businessmen, and committed Christians working hand in hand with equally committed communists. It was fantastic. All of this had a negative impact on revenue. What it did do, however, was generate the beginnings of a sense of community ownership; so much so that the same political powerbrokers who had expressed negativity about the Museum had no hesitation in setting in place a sizable annual grant for core funding. People began to feel good about the place and were proud to tell tourists to visit. When I left, the visitor numbers were beginning to climb and the account books were starting to show a profit. The next step would have been to introduce bilingual signage.

In my previous role as Director of the Waikato Coalfields Museum in Huntly, I was the 4th Director in three years. I suspect I had been given the job because they were running out of candidates. Huntly sits on the banks of the Waikato River in the North Waikato swamplands, and has been a coalmining town for more than 120 years. Just as Kaikohe is Ngapuhi heartland, the Huntly area is home to those of the Tainui tribe who identify as Pare Waikato, living under the protective mantle of their sacred river; while the marae along the riverbanks are the powerbase for the Kingitanga, the Maori philosophy encompassing self-determination, politics and spirituality. Huntly grew up around the coalmines and has seen of some of the worst mining disasters this country has witnessed and bitter industrial action. In addition, the town is divided by the river. The divide is more than physical. It’s also social and ethnic – white collar on one side, blue collar on the other; Pakeha (non-Maori) on one side; Maori on the other. This then, was the backdrop against which the Coalfields Museum was set; a mixture of bone-chilling fogs, industrial heritage, deprivation, politics, coal and spirituality.
A key task at the Coalfields was to oversee a $62M relocation project. It was contentious from the outset. The existing museum is in an old mine manager’s residence on the affluent side of town; whereas the relocation project will see it moved across the river to a poor neighbourhood. Even by today’s standards, $62M is a vast amount of money to spend on a small museum. Once I understood the politics, it was apparent that the project wasn’t supported by the wider community. Some were put off by the price tag; others decided that the museum was relocating to the bad side of town. Careful analysis showed that the lack of community support was due to two reasons in addition to the high cost. The wider mining community felt that their social history was being ignored, while many in the Maori community felt they hadn’t been consulted at all. This wasn’t helped by certain local politicians disliking the museum and using the project as an opportunity to discredit the institution. Addressing this dilemma meant achieving community buy-in. To begin the process, we staged an exhibition on rugby league. In Huntly the game is almost a religion and the local football ground was once an international venue.

Old time players told me of playing on grounds where the only washing facility was a cow trough, and where the contour of the ground meant that you could kick the ball and have no idea where it landed. At one important match, the game was halted because one of the players lost his glass eye. One summer, a herd of cattle were used to mow the grass at the Huntly rugby league grounds. When one beast went down, the local boy scout troop were used to carry the animal on a stretcher into the grandstand kitchen, where it was nursed for a week before it finally died. Incidentally, the first professional player from Huntly played in Auckland for a fee of a return train fare and 5 meat pies. The rugby league exhibition brought a subculture to the surface and gave a voice to those who thought their social values weren’t important. Why? Because they were working class. This paradigm holds true for many communities that I have worked in. It’s as if there was an unwritten rule that recorded history is only for the affluent; and yet if you dig deep enough, there is often a wealth of fascinating stories to be brought to the surface. Once people saw their sport
treated with respect, they started to trust the museum. Miners began to share stories not told to outsiders. Our efforts to gather these stories were boosted when we held a reunion for retired miners and made sure the beer was flowing. Over 30 attended, ranging from those who had worked in the mines during the Depression, and could remember working with pit ponies, to those who began work during the late 1960s. One gentleman had worked in the mines for over 60 years. When I expressed amazement at this, his reply was, ‘Strange as it may seem, I’ve always enjoyed hard work!’

Just as it was important to gain the trust of the mining community, so too, without Maori involvement the redeveloped museum was not going to happen. The rugby league exhibition was a significant step towards building bridges with the Maori community. The next logical move was to take the Museum staff and governors onto a local marae, where we pleaded our case and offered full partnership in the new Museum. As a result, over the next few months I was a guest at tribal council meetings, where I was given the opportunity to promote the project and negotiate the tikanga; the cultural protocols under which it would operate. Sadly, the redevelopment project has stalled. If it ever reaches fruition it will probably be the first fully bicultural industrial museum. I suspect it was crippled by two factors: the plummeting price of coal on the world markets, and politics. Shortly after I left to take up the Manager’s role in Kaikohe, the Museum lost its core funding and the Museum Committee imploded, riven by factions. It’s a great pity, because the old mining culture that I was lucky to witness has almost completely disappeared.

When I left Kaikohe, it was to work as one of two Collections Care Coordinators in Western Australia. The other Coordinator looked after the urban centres on the Pacific and southern coasts, while I covered the gold mining towns in the Western Desert. In addition to being a curator and collections manager, I had to be an object conservator and advise Shires and local government organisations on the operation of museums, art galleries and heritage precincts; and on policy writing and tourism strategies. This was museum work at its most primitive. I soon learnt to look behind an object before I picked it up – you never knew what was lurking there; anything from snakes to lizards to scorpions. Museum displays were frequently covered in a layer of red dust and salt from the surrounding desert, and a good workshop was one with air conditioning. One building that I worked in had snakes living underneath. The snakes preyed on the pigeons living up in the ceiling space. Every so often, a cloud of feathers and droppings would rain gently across the museum floor. Any preconceptions I had were soon discarded. The underlying issues arising from inequality were the same that I had met with in New Zealand – individuals erased from history, histories being sanitised and cultural paradigms ignored. With this in mind, it was gratifying and very humbling to facilitate the repatriation of almost 200 objects that had been looted from the sacred sites of the Tjuntjuntjara people; an Aboriginal tribe forcibly removed from their ancestral ground so that nuclear bomb tests could take place. I spent the winter in a cold and dusty room, recording each piece and preparing it for travel. To ensure open dialogue, I tracked down an anthropologist who knew the Tjuntjuntjara, and used him as the liaison between all concerned. The handover took place at dawn in early October. The repatriation seems to have triggered a paradigm shift for the Shire that owns the museum. Watering programmes in parks were changed to arrest stone cancer in heritage buildings, work was begun on a safety plan for a collection of rusting machinery in a park, and I was called in again to remove explosives and poisons from a pharmacy museum.
The ongoing challenge I faced in the Goldfields was to instil an awareness of heritage and what it can do for communities; especially those that are in some way disadvantaged. This wasn’t easy when dealing with a Shire where the CEO drives the road scraper, or where heritage funding is rated beneath that for traffic islands on a seldom-used backroad in a community of 13 people. Despite this, heritage structures, sites, artefacts and of course, their stories litter the landscape. I know of a site where a town of 9000 people left in the early 1950s, taking their houses with them. The town cricket pitch and tennis courts are still there, along with household items, bicycles and children’s toys, streets and concrete pads where the houses stood; all being slowly consumed by the encroaching desert. At another site that comes to mind, Italian miners lived in shanties scattered in a loose horseshoe formation across the desert. On a still night, when the homemade grappa and homesickness took effect, one would begin singing an operatic aria; and one by one, each would pick up the tune; no-one able to see their neighbour, who could be up to ¼ a kilometre away.

These stories aren’t unusual. I have heard similar from other minority communities. However; because they preserve a sense of identity, they are often kept hidden. To hear the subtext they contain takes a lot of patience, a lot of listening; and represents an act of trust on the part of the narrator. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the curator to treat them with respect. Museums are about stories, and at the heart of stories are people. Unbridled museology becomes ideology; at which point the depth, the richness and even the beauty that keeps a museum valid becomes a once over lightly, one size fits all discourse. As curators and as historians and museologists we must remember that minority communities are not always those that shout in the loudest voice.

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