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Strolling Down Memory Pain: Oral Histories and the New Zealand Far East Prisoner of War Novel

Speaking in the Christchurch Town Hall during the garden city's annual writers' festival in 2006, Senior Oral Historian Alison Parr exposed potential linkages between her work at the Ministry for Culture and Heritage and those creative writers who shared the stage.¹ The affiliation was not especially challenging to uphold. An ongoing commitment to interviewing New Zealand's veterans of the Second World War had long since alerted her to the likelihood of oral testimonies ending up on the desk of fiction writers, where they would no doubt become 'fodder' to better convey the nitty-gritty particularities of war. As with people, so with their memories, apparently. But what to make of it? Acting the role of gatekeeper to the doors of private knowledge would never do, no matter how tempting it may have been to adopt a protective stance on behalf of her interviewees (and the badge of trust they imagined pinned to her lapel). Neither she nor they could claim invulnerability from the infiltration of 'popular' representations of war, in part because, as her fellow panellists made clear, the best literature was not uninfluenced by veteran testimonies. The enemy wasn't at the gates: there were no gates at all, only a revolving door.² Hence Parr's willingness to lower the drawbridge, rhetorically speaking, between her (already creative) profession and the (historically informed) practice of war fiction. But of course, the interpenetrations were never going to mutually disengage, no matter what her opinion, so where was the use in stating it? Perhaps she banked on a sense

of responsibility common to authors who make it their business to explore war-related topics before writing them up. Perhaps such people might appreciate an endorsement, a complete lifting of the brakes on employing source material drawn from living subjects. Perhaps she thought they might do something interesting if they didn't hold back.³

Perhaps. If so, she was either highly instructive or uncannily prophetic, and did exemplary service as unofficial herald to Peter Wells, an Auckland-based writer and filmmaker who had made his name as one of New Zealand's foremost publicly gay novelists, memoirists, and short story writers. Plainly inspired by Parr's book, *Silent Casualties* (1995), Wells drew upon veteran testimony to produce *Lucky Bastard* (2007), New Zealand's first novel to take the travails of Far East Prisoners of War (hereafter 'FEPOW') as a departure point, even as it questioned whether 'departure' was possible for those who had lived hand-to-mouth under the Japanese. Parr's own research had already illustrated that, as a general rule for POW's, New Zealand's postwar social mandate of 'moving on' was manifestly overoptimistic.⁴ After all, the day-in-day-out routine of a POW typically involved the opposite: 'staying put' within barrack confines, a fact of life that banished mobility to the fantasies of the mind. When mobility finally arrived on the coattails of liberation the response was rapture and an effusive desire to return home—home, which was everything imprisonment wasn't: hugs instead of letters, a bed that was yours and always had been, signs in a language you could read, perhaps a sweetheart waiting for you, but, failing that, decent grub, plenty of pints down the pub, and a change into civvies as minimum. Good for a start. But behind the fulsomeness and platitudes, the mind could prove stubbornly resistant to throwing off its stockade habits, just as a caged bird happily flutters its wings when the door is opened only to feel a bizarre and apparently impossible vertigo. Not every urge returns in the course of time. Where this proved the case, the predictable reaction was pent-up frustration and a punishing drive to match the freedom of body with an unshackled temperament. One tempting solution was to 'cut loose,' as J. G. Ballard does in the serial love affairs and car races that wind their way through his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Kindness of Women* (1991). But 'cutting loose' was not at all the same thing as 'moving on,' entailing as it did a compulsive repetition that suggested obsession over the reverse image of camp conditions. Less Sisyphean but just as headstrong was the urge to 'pull yourself together' and 'settle down,' substituting incarceration with domestication and building for oneself (and one's family) a new prison with its own set of day-in-day-out routines.

The repetitious habits and circumstances of the veteran, and especially the former POW, is a trend picked up on by Parr and elaborated by Wells, who takes it to its socially reproductive conclusion. In his novel, the phenomenon segues into a study of how children may unwittingly shoulder the burden of their father's memories (or their memories of his memories) and how, as adults looking back on their childhood, they confront the daunting task of untangling and retracing the historical moments that have gone into their making, partly with the help of oral testimony. We shall shortly take a close look at how this plays out, but first something more is in order regarding the timeliness of recent oral history projects in New Zealand.

Browse in any bookshop (I recommend second-hand backstreet places, but a Whitcoulls retailer will suffice) and you will likely see a growing number of oral history publications, most of them pitched to the general public rather than an academic readership, all of them serving to enlarge our knowledge and imagination of New Zealanders at the time of the Second World War. Various institutions and objectives shape these works, but they invariably share two overarching concerns: most obviously, they are born of the eleventh-hour realisation that, with every passing year, the total number of prospective interviewees steadily declines; less obviously, but implied on every page, is the attendant notion of testimony as something inherently individualised, a close-up perspective that stares over the horizon of the 'grand map' of strategic history. The hope is that we shall find ourselves caught up in these recollections, so that we no longer view New Zealand history as an appendage that is tagged onto other countries' narratives as an afterthought. The historian, and perhaps the veteran too, may feel gratified in *Lucky Bastard*, since, if nothing else, it contains some poignant passages that reveal an appreciation for the power of oral testimony.

And, of course, it *is* a lot else: it's an attempt to depart from the confines of national history. To understand what I mean by this, consider how New Zealanders have typically approached the Pacific War in literary fiction. Before oral histories came on the scene, fiction writers tended to tread rather daintily, not so much unsure of their abilities as of their place in a field of memory already staked out according to what the country did in the war. National history, in other words, was as much a hindrance as a resource, and remaining tied to it left writers and their stories feeling like a bit of a sideshow. Errol Braithwaite's prize-winning novel *An Affair of Men* (1961) is a case in point. Set on Bougainville, an island that the American 3rd Marine Division began retaking from the Japanese in late 1943, the novel studiously avoids any portrayals of American-Japanese combat and focuses instead on an impromptu

debate between a Japanese Marine and an Australian-educated village headman.⁵ Another example, Vincent O'Sullivan's play, *Shuriken* (1985), provides the first literary illustration of Japanese and New Zealand military personnel coming face-to-face, though the story unfolds after the capture of Japanese by American soldiers and is thus at the tail end of a larger (northward) narrative.⁶ Until recently, only Pat Booth's journalistic novel, *Sons of the Sword* (1993), took stock of the range and scale of experiences that the Pacific War brought to (and became for) New Zealanders, skilfully threading tangential historical moments into a whole.

Absent from this roll call is any literary work that takes a solid look at how New Zealanders reflected on the war *after* hostilities ceased. The closest we come to that is Gordon Slatter's profile of a disgruntled, footloose, out-of-pocket veteran of the Italian Campaign in his novel, *A Gun in My Hand* (1959). Here we get a cold, hard look at a character whose vindictive, maladjusted nastiness is redeemed only by a talent for creative insults that borders on genius. On occasion, the socio-cultural mockeries are spot-on and we can only nod our heads in sad, shamefaced agreement, but more often one is struck dumb by the man's calumny. Slatter does not allow us any respite either, and just when we think his creation has bottomed out, he proves us wrong. Mercifully, perhaps, the effect of this onslaught carries with it the suspicion that, so striking is the man's condition, his social isolation must be indicative of exceptionality. Contrast that with James Jones' general valediction to the future of postwar veterans in *Whistle* (1978). Nowhere in New Zealand fiction do we get the barroom brawling, meaningless sexual conquests, unrepentant alcoholism, and dizzy anomie that Jones conjures forth. This is not to imply that Jones is guilty of a gratuitous, bestial indulgence that upright New Zealanders eschewed, since anyone familiar with *Whistle* knows that Jones handles his characters with extraordinary, almost regretful sympathy. But it is likely that the prim and proper New Zealand of the 1950's would not have been receptive to such a work, even had it been published earlier. The aberrancy, even rebelliousness contained in such writing would have spoken to a veteran condition that ran counter to public expectations. It drew the curtain on a taboo subject: the possibility that veterans might not have recovered as they ought to have done, and that sort of grouchy defeatism just wouldn't wash in New Zealand, not when Kiwis had so much to be getting on with. They were busy raising children, playing rugby, culling deer, and generally being content in their 'quarter acre pavlova paradise.'⁷ If someone like Slatter insisted on digging up the past, then so be it. But far better to stick to the war years and ripsnorting tales of daring-do, as Brathwaite did in his first novel, *Fear in the Night* (1959). Pluck, heroism, mateship, that's what people

wanted, not navel-gazing. Admittedly, this route did tend to leave creative writers on a sticky wicket: understandably, they felt the need to write ‘the New Zealand story’ of the Pacific War. But how was that likely to turn out? Nobody had any clear notion of what the New Zealand contribution had been—not, at least, in a way that would command immediate recognition from the reader. So writers nibbled away at the edges of the war, hamstrung by the ‘bittiness’ of the national contribution. In the European theatre, as they well knew, there had been plenty to write home about (and keep on writing about afterwards) but in the Pacific there were only token actions, mainly on Mono Island and Vella Lavella.

New Zealand’s marginal geographical position, initially advantageous to the allies during the war years, had led to correspondingly marginal combat roles, and, in turn, to fiction writers who felt they had little to work with. This plaintive hand-wringing might never have ended had oral history not loosened the fetters somewhat. Having already ventured outside the library, or, more accurately, taken the world of veteran memory *as* a library, oral historians sidestepped the national narrative in favour of individual storytelling on an individual’s terms, leaving nationality and nationalism on the veteran’s doorstep, to be picked up, or not, according to preference.⁸ No longer was it necessary, if creative writers followed this route, to remain ‘attached’ to the grand narratives of British and American origin. Instead, writers became caretakers of testimony and the nuanced meanings drawn from it in everyday life, a project that dovetailed with disclosing the trauma that testimonies may contain or evoke. That is what we see happening in *Lucky Bastard*, a novel that shrugs off the encumbrances of national history like a baggy sweater, favouring instead the nonlinear strings of traumatic memory and testimony. The result is by no means straightforward. Crisscrossing, tangling, hanging threads, and emergency patchwork are all in evidence, along with sudden jolts of cumulative static that remind us not to get too complacent: there is no point of easy release from the pain of memory, and it can return to us (‘upon us’ puts it better) at the most unpredictable moments. Safe to say that this is not a novel that seeks to put history to rest, rather it shows the unrest that takes place when families confront the history within.

None of this is readily apparent, however, at first glance. In fact, the novel’s opening scenes are decidedly unambiguous, with a hardboiled flavour that might remind us of Joseph Kanon’s *The Good German* (2001). Both Kanon and Peter Wells see the bombed-out, sepia-toned urban landscape as a fertile setting for intrigue, murder, betrayal, and moral despair. But whereas Kanon wrote with sympathy of German suffering under the Occupation, Wells has little to say about the character

or plight of individual Japanese. Of much greater interest to him are the struggles and factional disagreements between the Occupation powers in postwar Japan, a topic seldom recalled in American history or literature, and one which has come to light only recently in New Zealand scholarship.⁹ At issue is whether or not leniency ought to prevail during the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, a tricky matter given the need to shore up allies in a Cold War that had already, abruptly arrived.

Wells positions these political squabbles as unfinished business that will cast a baleful shadow over what follows, and, on cue, the Japan-based story truncates and surrenders the stage to contemporary Auckland. There, on the streets of New Zealand's largest city, the significance of the great power politicking of World War II has long since receded into the realms of private memory and, more mysteriously, family secrecy. The hardboiled thriller duly transitions into a slower, more sedate literary form that strolls down memory lane with nary a thought to destinies caught in the balance, unless one counts keeping family tempers in check. Acting as our narrator-guides are Ross and Alison, sibling rivals who make life difficult for one another even as they join forces to re-assemble the fragmented story of Eric, a former war crimes investigator who also happens to be their father. This task, already no small thing, is made harder by their own condition as survivors of Eric's less-than-perfect parenting, a recurrent theme in New Zealand literature, as anyone familiar with Janet Frame's *Intensive Care* (1970) knows well. In Frame's novel, the repressed, coiled spring of a father's war memories impacts upon his family with disfiguring force, and both writers see the mutilation process as irreversible. But whereas Frame treated her characters as manifestations of an abstract self-destructive (latterly apocalyptic) human tendency that enlarges with every passing era, Peter Wells is interested in the counteractive tendencies that impel us to make sense of violence, even where we find in it a history senseless to contemporary minds. The author's exhaustive prewriting mobilised to structure this quest, perhaps overtly so, and the result is a novel that feels at times like an archive narrative as Ross and Alison journey through multiple social and scholarly contexts.¹⁰ There is a quest with a dead-end, however, for whether at meetings, in museums, on television, or on holiday, they never uncover the meaning and origin of the childhood pain they carry. Instead, each context insists upon its own primacy in its own monoglot, and contributes toward a series of contending points of view that serve only to undermine one another, making irresolution a given.

The author's unwillingness to fixate upon a single moment of violence, historically speaking, represents a distinct break in the traditional structure of FEPOW narratives, which have tended to revel in the binary opposition of captor

and captive and the intercultural wrangling that follows.¹¹ Wells' novel steers clear of this paradigm, offering only backward glances toward imprisonments and deliberately eschewing any notion of a reliable, 'original' standpoint. In this relativistic knowledge landscape, only one thing remains sacrosanct: the fact of wartime atrocities as an experience that defies comparison. Wells treats this topic with corresponding delicacy and perhaps a little uncertainty, an inevitable, indeed wholly necessary attribute to the writing of atrocity. The few clues we receive that atrocities did occur are shrouded in a mixture of stylistic hesitancy and narrative mystery, as we see when Ross recalls a childhood conversation with his father's mistress. Though he is the son of a traumatised veteran, Ross is full of youthful inquisitiveness, particularly around the matter of what lies within a box of documents:

'Is it something to do with eating humans?'

She looked at me sharply. Then her face creased into amusement. She ashed the sagging end of her cigarette, brought it to her mouth, sucked in with a thorough sense of enjoyment. As she breathed out a warm fug of smoke, she said, half laughingly, 'You've been reading too many war comics, love!'¹²

This passage reflects the tenor of the novel as a whole in its tendency to withhold information, even (perhaps especially) when readers feel they would lose nothing by learning of it sooner. Later, we learn that Eric did in fact encounter stories of cannibalism in his capacity as war crimes investigator, but the novel shies from disclosing this immediately and thereby complicates our sense of who or what is being protected: is it the child from the story or the story from the reader? Wells assumes in each case that the recipient has an overfull stock of images and source material, such that the testimonial risks what Jenny Edkins terms the 'gentrification' of trauma.¹³ To prevent the FEPOW experience from seeming everyday, Wells edges around or otherwise 'encircles' it, imparting a sense of significance through this act of hesitancy.

The tactic may at first glance seem obtuse, but its very necessity intersects with ongoing scholarly discussions over the need to maintain and / or recover value in stories of traumatic experience that are likely to disseminate among the general public. In his discussion regarding the necessity of 'empathic unsettlement,' theorist Dominick LeCapra has noted that the "post-traumatic response of unsettlement becomes questionable when it is routinized in a methodology or style that enacts

compulsive repetition, including the compulsively repetitive turn to the aporia, paradox, or impasse.²¹⁴ Historians and novelists must take care, in this respect, that admissions to the inadequacy of language, apropos the traumatic experience and the traumatised condition, do not become part of a reflexive dismissal or trope of the unspeakable. Since *Lucky Bastard* takes on a position of silence regarding Eric's experiences, this tendency is a present danger. Yet Wells never says that Eric's trauma is unspeakable, nor does he let the matter rest at silence. At its heart, the novel contains a lacuna, for what happened to Eric remains largely closed to us apart from what his children glean from their sometimes delicate, sometimes blunt-edged rummaging. In short, it is through the investigatory mode rather than an internment narrative that we acquire a sense, if not an understanding, of what Eric's experiences have meant for him and his family. The investigations take us away from 'comic book' pastiche, in which 'what actually happened' unfolds as smoothly as the classic filmic depictions of FEPOW internment. What we glean instead is trauma's capacity to cross generational boundaries, its location within sites of official memory, and a sense, though never a full disclosure, of the nature of that trauma.

The bulk of the story, then, is preoccupied with the siblings' reconsideration of what Eric means and has meant to them. Sites of public memory facilitate this re-examination, albeit frequently through antithetical provocations against which the characters' own feelings become alternately reinforced and weakened. As Ross and Alison negotiate these sites, the novel reaches for a resounding sense of trauma's influence upon the family unit even as it disturbs any possibility of 'truth' in an absolute sense. These two projects, as we shall see, are not wholly complementary and the challenge of achieving a balanced attention between trauma recovery and historical discovery remains central throughout. It is essential to realise here that the recovery *of* trauma, in the sense of a recovered topic of interest, becomes bound to the recovery *from* trauma, in the psychiatric sense of a subject who suffers the debilitating symptoms associated with the condition. As Ross and Alison navigate the sites in which remembrance takes place, so they unveil the meaningfulness of the FEPOW experience not just to the reader but also to themselves. In the process, they come to realise that trauma is a condition they carry as well as investigate.

In itself, such a realisation is quite enough to be going on with. But Wells adds a combative dimension to the siblings' journey, born of the unpleasant knowledge that institutions devoted to public history, though stimulating and, in fact, indispensable to their purpose, may inadvertently complicate and even detract from the value that is placed on private memories. The private memories

'in question' are, by their nature, dear to Ross and Alison, remaining, in a sense, sacrosanct to the individual and decidedly not open to criticism. But sites of public memory, to the contrary, are, by their profusion, inherently pluralistic in their approach to specific events, which may include particular perspectives akin to the visitor's, but only as part of a larger collective that decentralises any one point of view. In short, the act of historical discovery promoted through such places comes to both inform (via prompts) and disrupt (via counter narrative) the meaning attached to individual memory. Thus, even as the novel reaches for a realisation of trauma's meaningfulness, that same meaning becomes destabilised within a social and critical milieu unreceptive to any master narrative.

Before we examine this tension more closely, we first need to pay close attention to those scenarios in which memories return seamlessly, without any sense of contestation. The author is clearly drawn to the power of such moments, among the most arresting of which takes place when Alison, nominally a London business executive, visits the War Memorial Museum in Auckland and experiences the power of recorded testimony:

Inward she went, disappearing like a spot of light on a computer shutting down. Only the old bloke's voice existed. And she was surprised to find her face damp. She was betrayed. She was crying silently.

It was the modesty of the man's voice. He was talking about the most devastating pain and fright a human was capable of sustaining while staying alive. But with a asthmatic draw-in of breath, the old codger would only allow such modest phrases as, 'Yes, well, it got a bit rough around there' (his mates killed) and, for what sounded like a life ruined by post-traumatic stress syndrome, 'I don't know. I couldn't get it out of my head, you see. Silly what you think of. What you can't stop thinking about.' Long pause. 'But that's life, isn't it?'⁵

The disembodied voice comes through the headphones and into the novel as if from nowhere, striking a chord in Alison whose responsiveness entails a 'shutdown' of mental resistance, in large part because the man is fundamentally unassertive. Such a person, coherent but self-effacing, is beyond her reckoning. In more typical situations, Alison prefers statements that set her up for a snappy, high-toned riposte, but here all she gets is the bashfulness of an 'old codger' holding forth in his own way. A partly self-administered *coup de grâce* of this sort is an unwelcome, perhaps even shameful moment of human weakness for a corporate jetsetter like her, but

it is understandable.¹⁶ So marked is the old man's restraint that he barely registers the enormity of what he has gone through, and almost appears to be speaking of another person's life. Holocaust trauma psychiatrist Dori Laub makes clear how survivors reach this state, and the implications for the listener:

Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction. The victim's narrative—the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma—does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence. [...]

By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. He has to address all these, if he is to carry out his function as listener...¹⁷

As the listener in this case, Alison bears witness to events *reflected in* but not *known to* the testifier, and her tears manifest symptoms that, by all rights, ought to be the old man's but, because of his emotional disconnection, become hers to cry on his behalf. Hereafter, she herself bears witness to what others cannot, although, interestingly enough, she cannot articulate or express the meaning of her own childhood trauma. To get a sense of what that involved, her character becomes part of a still larger project that invites the reader to do as she did in the museum—for just as the recorded testimony touches off emotions within her, so Alison begins to recall memories that she has never fully registered. Thus some of the novel's most disturbing scenes leave it to the reader to perform an act of witnessing that the characters cannot.

This dynamic comes into play most obviously when Alison hazily recalls a childhood game she played with her brother after they ransacked Eric's box of war crimes documents. As attentive readers, we know that they have subjected themselves to information about the massacre of Australians at Six Mile Road, but their awareness is at the level of play and therefore incomplete. Just as the old man's audio recording feels peculiarly detached from the core of his experience, so

Alison's memory is shocking in its deadpan narration of the re-enactment she and Ross undertook:

I poured the petrol on (cold water from our hose). He screamed like a girl. I grinned as I watered him all over. He was meant to be dead, anyway, but being Ross he managed to stay alive, to enjoy the pain more deeply. He groaned and moaned, his lids half open, begging me to finish him off. But it was my delight to imagine striking a match.

'BOOM!' I yelled as the flames flickered all over his body. I watched, between half-closed lids, as his flesh fell off, in flakes, straight from the bone. And it was me who ate him. He was tasty, that kid.¹⁸

Providing a refracted glimpse of the atrocity, the sensory imagery draws us into the text and encourages us to speculate as to what it is the children imitate. Certainly we are unlikely to pass off their behaviour as the product of a healthy, albeit ghoulish childhood imagination. Much more is at work here, traceable to Eric's box, the contents of which remain closed to us, though its effect upon the inquisitive young explorers gives us a nasty suspicion. Textually speaking, the box is no longer simply a box, but symbolic of the traumatised mind—locked away, hidden, carefully approached, destructive once opened, and shattering in the long term. Naturally, the children open the box, as children must always do if they wish to go through the wardrobe, down the rabbit hole, or on the yellow brick road, but instead of a fantasyland what lies in wait is an unnameable 'something' that impresses them with the image of atrocity. Afterwards, like an organ grinder's monkey, they follow a routine that has all the appearance of recreation, but is, in fact, a literal 're-creation.' As witnesses to this horrendous spectacle, we see the impossibility of disentangling a present-day adult subjectivity from a childhood experience, the traumatic nature of which defies containment, challenge, or transcendence.¹⁹ To 'think outside the box' is impossible, even retrospectively, and the temptation is to grant ourselves a position of lofty detachment, having surmised Alison's condition based on nothing more complex than a 'cause-effect' conjunction. But we need to take a humble step back and realise that, of course, we only ever observe her memories through speculative, fragmentary guesswork. More importantly still, memories of trauma never proceed in the linear fashion of an unsolved mathematical equation. On the contrary, the bearer most often remains in a state of suspension, and to reduce that condition to 'cause' is to dissociate ourselves from that ongoing disconnection. If we wish to participate fully in the meaning-generating process, we need to respect

and take account of the disconnection itself, as well as its abstract origins, a process that allows us to perceive the past events—receive them, in fact—on behalf of the testifier. The shared nature of this enterprise is what Dori Laub identifies when he states that, “It is the encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener, which makes possible something like a repossession of the act of witnessing. This joint responsibility is the source of the re-emerging truth.”²⁰

Were *Lucky Bastard* solely about witnessing, Wells would have depicted a society gradually coming to terms with veterans, the forms of imprisonment they endured, and those family members who endure on their behalf. These facets are readily discernible, provided that characters and readers listen carefully to what is said. However, Peter Wells is just as interested in the conflicts that take place when testimony and listening take place under less favourable, even hostile conditions. A seminal example of the damage this does to the testifier comes across when Ross agrees to a televised interview, knowing that the show addresses his father’s role as a Tokyo war crimes investigator, but not knowing that the show’s host, Rebecca Bright, is decidedly interrogatory. As the interview progresses, Rebecca unleashes broadsides of background information before asking whether Eric ever talked about his past. Ross’ answer is terse and defensive:

‘No, he didn’t. And he’s not in a fit state any more to answer questions. I don’t see your point.’

‘My point, Ross, is this: an innocent man may have been sent to his death by your father as an act of revenge. Your father won a medal and has been praised as a hero. War is messy, we know that, but we have to fight through the murk of the past—to find the truth.’ She left an eloquent silence for a moment, then turned straight to the camera. ‘Never forget this, folks. *If there’s a story, we’ll find it!*’

‘I understand that,’ I said, furious. ‘But maybe you—’

The cameraman took his head away from the camera.

‘—maybe you should think of doing a programme on the psychological and physical after-effects of imprisonment by the Japanese on prisoners of war.’

‘Oh we did that ages ago. Didn’t we, Anne?’²¹

Finding that the FEPOW story is done and dusted, so to speak, Ross backs into a corner and responds with a hostility that comes naturally to the situation. But he fights a losing battle. Rather than facilitating testimony, the entertainment

community manufactures it through a process of interrogation that is tantamount to non-listening or outright silencing. Crushingly determined to get to the bottom of Eric's past behaviour, Rebecca increasingly marginalises Ross' testimony in pursuit of her ends. This 'truth,' as she terms it, is very different from the 're-emerging truth' that Dori Laub considered so essential to the process of hearing testimony, and that he had in mind when noting that it can be more useful, on occasion, not to know too much when receiving the message of the trauma victim.²² Facts can prove harmful to trauma testimonies, which demand that they be heard on their own terms, and Wells' portrayal of the predatory interviewer dismissing her subject for want of confirmatory information is a case in point. Sometimes history is forged by wringing out the very people who have struggled to survive it.

Rebecca is at once distasteful and painfully familiar, a mass-produced personality for a mass-produced television show, and someone whose razzmatazz is guaranteed to get good ratings. Yet Wells does not, indeed cannot dismiss her out of hand, for she is a sign of the times, an outgrowth of a generalised social malaise that precludes any one particular narrative pride of place. Positioned alongside her are historical perspectives too numerous to order, all of which serve to shake the foundations of truth as an absolute. Across this harsh and unforgiving terrain, the trauma survivor wanders, like Diogenes looking for an honest man—looking, that is, for anyone or anything that can marry the truth of the survivor's condition to a sympathetic discourse. It is a wrenching process. On occasion, to be sure, Ross and Alison encounter sites of memory that facilitate their own (as in the museum) but then there are those situations that contest or ignore their condition (as in the television programme). Paradoxically though, the sheer multiplicity of discourses serves to provide the characters a better comprehension of the value they attach to their condition. In other words, even as Ross and Alison inhabit a social world that frustrates their efforts to reassemble their fragmented pasts, so the dichotomy reinforces their resolve (though it does not speed its resolution). By the end of the novel, they need all the resolve they can get, particularly since, in an ironic twist, the siblings start questioning each other's position as well. Alison has particular reason to take umbrage, having discovered that Ross is the author of a book manuscript sent to her anonymously, the title of which is *Lucky Bastard*.²³ The hardboiled rendition of Eric's time in Japan is not to her liking, mostly because Ross saucily portrays his father as bisexual, but their quarrel has wider ramifications than policing sexual boundaries. Up until this point, the reader can look back on the novel's first section as a reference point, but the revelation that a character authored it disturbs this reliance and deprives us of privileged knowledge.

Characters, locations, author, and the novel's opening all exist in relation to one another, but devoid of hierarchical standards of knowledge value, meaning that no one picture of the past can predominate. Though we might expect that everything will 'slot into place,' the revelation that the novel's beginning is 'fictional' means that there is no absolute truth to recover. All that remains is for Alison and Ross to reconcile their need for trauma recovery with the impossibility of true knowledge in a world of competing discourses.

During the Christchurch Writers Festival, Alison Parr noted that recorded testimonies are complete resources in themselves, meaning that they require no augmentation to achieve their effect. Indeed, the capacity of testimony to draw out an emotive response from the listener is intrinsic, unpredictable, and as often as not concealed within oneself, making it hard to pin down what has occurred and where. Those researchers who take interest in testimony, either for its content or as a process or theme, must therefore guard against thinking of it as awaiting integration into a more 'complete' form of narrative, for such a remit risks doing violence to the dignity of the human subject from whose memory the phenomenon may be said to emerge. But by the same token, the selfsame quality of empathy held out to the listener invites, or at least enables, participation in the truth-making process through imagination, and such a process provides heady material for creative writers to work with. In this article, we have seen how Peter Wells exploited the potential built into testimony, as a writer's resource and as a structuring theme, while remaining cognisant of the author's role in managing the responsibility contained in that arrangement. The literary model is certainly replicable, though recently the convergence of fiction and testimony has been more evident in New Zealand radio and film than anywhere else, perhaps because audio-visual media have inherent advantages over purely textual sources.²⁴ The newest venture comes from film director Gaylene Preston, whose film memoir, *Home by Christmas* (2010), is carefully built around scenes in which the director interviews her elderly father, a hitherto intractable man who agrees, rather late in the day, to provide a better picture of his wartime experiences. As the interviews proceed, his memories 'appear' before us as a combination of archival film footage and photographs interspersed within historical drama. This type of multilayered reconstruction calls attention to the sources filmmakers have turned to, offering a convincing version (or several) of events while pointedly avoiding claims to infallibility or completeness. What we take away is an impression, no more (it cannot be more than that), of the power of testimony in the hands of the artist.

Notes

A draft version of this paper was presented at the Contact Conference, University of Western Sydney, 25-26th September 2008.

1. The talk is freely accessible as a podcast, courtesy of Radio New Zealand. See <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/lecturesandforums/writers/20070228>
2. On a related topic, the circulation of myths and their influence upon both wars and official histories is something Kevin Foster explores. See Kevin Foster, *Fighting Fictions: War, Narrative and National Identity* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), p. 2.
3. In her published study, *Silent Casualties*, Alison Parr suggests that war fiction may perform a public service by anticipating the issues and concerns of returning servicemen in advance of (or perhaps instead of) the veterans' own efforts in this regard. By implication, writers of war fiction ought to avail themselves of the testimonies of those veterans whose experiences they purport to represent. See Alison Parr, *Silent Casualties: New Zealand's Unspoken Legacy of the Second World War* (North Shore City: Tandem Press, 1995), p. 21.
4. Just as Peter Wells is indebted to Alison Parr's work, so she benefits, in turn, from Jock Phillips' study of masculinity in New Zealand society, in which he cites war as a celebrated test of a (culturally constructed) manhood that exacts a price by narrowing the scope of permissible forms of public bereavement. Where returned servicemen are concerned, both researchers see a mutually reinforcing confluence between the inexpressible (in psychological terms, where individual veterans are concerned) and the impermissible (in socio-cultural terms, as regards public attitudes toward the expression of private injury). The upshot of this unfortunate arrangement is that veterans' families have sometimes shared and accommodated a form of suffering that has no sanctioned outlet elsewhere, which is one of the principal topics that concerns Peter Wells. See Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country?: The Image of the Pakeha Male – A History* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 192-98.
5. Incidentally and more recently, the brutality endured by Bougainvillean villagers during their struggle for independence has been recalled in an acclaimed New Zealand novel, Lloyd Jones' *Mr Pip* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2006).
6. The Japanese were kept at the Featherston prisoner of war camp following their capture during the Guadalcanal Campaign. Mike Nicolaidi and Eric Thompson provide a study of the Japanese experience of imprisonment in their book, *The Featherston Chronicles: a legacy of war* (Auckland: HarperCollins, 1999).
7. The phrase 'quarter acre pavlova paradise' was introduced by British writer Austin Mitchell in his light-hearted take on New Zealand life and culture, *The Half Gallon Quarter Acre Pavlova Paradise* (Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1972).
8. Alison Parr's project fits within an established canon of World War II oral histories, the public recognition of which began in the United States with Studs Terkel's landmark compilation, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (1984). The phenomenon soon spread across the Pacific when New Zealand journalist David McGill published *P.O.W. The Untold Stories of New Zealanders as Prisoners of War* (1987). More recently, Megan Hutching has edited a series of oral history collections (with approving forewords by Helen Clark), including *Inside Stories: New Zealand POW's Remember* (2002) and *Against the Rising Sun: New Zealanders Remember the Pacific War* (2006).

9. For a published study of New Zealand's role in the Occupation, see Laurie W. Brocklebank, *Jayforce: New Zealand and the Military Occupation of Japan, 1945-48* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1997).
10. As most war fiction writers are wont to do, Peter Wells draws upon a wealth of research undertaken prior to writing, and the investment in this process exercised a strong influence upon the novel. In an article, Wells reveals that he examined books, official records, and photographs, and also visited former camp sites in Borneo. See Peter Wells, "Unravelling the Atrocities of War," *Sunday Star Times*, 28 October 2007.
11. Thus far, academic studies of the literature and filmic depictions of the FEPOW experience are thin on the ground, but in the first book-length study, Australian researcher Roger Bourke cites David Lean's film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) as an iconic view of the FEPOW experience that encapsulated the experience for a good many people. To those who are familiar with the film, the premise of a binary cultural opposition hardly needs explicating. See Roger Bourke, *Prisoners of the Japanese: Literary imagination and the prisoner-of-war experience* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2006), p. xiii.
12. Peter Wells, *Lucky Bastard* (Auckland: Vintage, 2007), p. 168.
13. Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 15.
14. Dominick LeCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 47.
15. Peter Wells, *Lucky Bastard*, p. 230.
16. Researching this novel contained similar moments of realisation for Wells, though he made his ambivalence clear in an interview: "Now one appreciates [the war generation's] stoicism and modesty and civility. But actually growing up with them – with someone who doesn't talk, finds difficulty in expressing emotions – isn't necessarily an easy experience." See Philip Matthews, "A Visitor from Hawke's Bay," *New Zealand Listener*, 5 October 2007, p. 36.
17. Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, edited by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, 57-74. New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 57.
18. Peter Wells, *Lucky Bastard*, p. 373-74.
19. As trauma theorist Cathy Caruth puts it, "The flashback or traumatic re-enactment conveys, that is, both *the truth of an event*, and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*." See Cathy Caruth, "Introduction." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, 151-7. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 153.
20. Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, 61-75. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 69.
21. Peter Wells, *Lucky Bastard*, p. 319-20.
22. Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," p. 61.

23. Peter Wells, *Lucky Bastard*, p. 417.

24. Radio New Zealand's drama department recently adapted *Lucky Bastard* for national broadcast, which, when we recall the linkages between Wells' work and Parr's, is surely the most logical point of evolution for a creative phenomenon inspired by a purely aural experience. In fact, one could argue that the dramatised version provides one of very few opportunities for the general public to experience the power of testimony for themselves, since access restrictions mean that most people are unlikely to hear the taped records of Parr and other oral historians (stalwarts who are willing to go the extra mile are referred to the refrigerated subconscious of the National Library of New Zealand).

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