Otari-Wilton's Bush

Restoring Plants, Stories and Hope in One New Zealand Valley

Charles Dawson[1]

In less than a generation the status of the hardy native tree in New Zealand has gone from being a commercial oddity to a mainstay in garden centre sales, reshaping the aesthetic of the urban backyard.[2] This is a remarkable shift, often given effect by official conservation efforts and community volunteer groups. Restoration of site and species become healing acts for a growing number of volunteers who plant trees for grandchildren and birds to flock to in the years ahead.

This speaks to something wider about New Zealand's relationship with local places and histories. This relationship has been the subject of extensive scholarship.[3] I do not propose to canvas that corpus in this short research note. Rather, I will introduce you to a valley where the variety of New Zealand's indigenous flora has been laid out over decades to complement the remnant of old-growth bush on site. In doing so, I briefly survey the history of the site, current restoration and educational efforts, and some poetry from Dinah Hawken, who has written about Otari. All this activity composes and connects with a culture of sustainability and restoration focused on sharing the ancient plant forms and their stories with the next generation.

Wellington's Otari-Wilton's Bush was shaped by exceptional people who reserved it from the axe and set about restoring the trees and establishing an open air plant museum. This site of containment bursts at the seams, this place of enclosure sends native birds soaring beyond its damp leafy catchment and across the suburbs, winged markers of (re)growth within the local community. Even market researchers have tuned in to this, shaping consumer and tourism advertisements accordingly:

> The first and most important aspect of New Zealandness, [marketing researchers] Practica found, was our relationship with the land. New Zealanders' sense of self-definition is heavily bound up with love of the natural world. We share this with Australia, but there's a twist. Australia has a strongly physical relationship with the land, needing to have a sense of conquest or control – because their environment can be hostile and can kill them. With New Zealanders' climate and landscape being rather more benign, our view is apparently more spiritual, even soulful.[4]

≈≈≈≈≈

"The wreckage of an avifauna"

> New Zealand is certainly a textbook of costly ecological mistakes in the past, which are relived every day. Fortunately, as a country we are investing enormous energy and capital in trying to move towards becoming a "conserver society".
> Les Molloy, *New Zealand's Wilderness Heritage*[5]

New Zealand's environmental history is one of accelerated human modification; the realities of species loss bear little elation to the "soulful" caricature of market research cited above. The last landmass to see human footfall, New Zealand's landscape was inexorably altered by Māori and later European settlement.[6] The country is regarded as "one of the richest and most threatened reservoirs of plant and animal life on earth".[7] New Zealand's conservation scientists are internationally recognised for

their work in bringing bird populations back from the brink of extinction.[8] Part of this conservation work involves intensive predator management (tens of millions of possums eat bird eggs and thousands of tonnes of vegetation nightly; eggs and chicks also fall victim to mustelids and rats.[9] These predations come on the back of the catastrophic loss of bird species post-settlement. In 1984 Jared Diamond observed that "in New Zealand today we are not studying an avifauna but the wreckage of an avifauna".[10] It is the repair and recovery of the wreckage that captures the imagination of many today, as community groups plant trees and local and central government work alongside community groups to ward off a continuing decline in biodiversity.[11]

Select offshore islands have become havens from rats, stoats and possums: these predators are killed in traps and with poisons, furred carcasses piling up to mark the fragile and tentative return of native birdsong and strong saplings. Onshore, intensively managed "mainland islands" become refuges for the recovery of species.[12] One such site, Wellington's *Zealandia*, is now a major tourist attraction; its predator-proof fence encircles a valley near Otari and has lead to a boom in the capital's bird numbers.[13] Ecologist and landscape historian Geoff Park described these managed fragments as "tiny islands besieged in a sea of new ecosystems with which they are not evolved to co-exist, ever dependent on what humans around them decide to do." Park understood these remnant spaces hold stories of our past: the plants and birds nourish cultural knowledge for Māori (they are part of the genealogical nexus called *whakapapa*) and non-Māori. For Park, these pockets of greenery, these last stands of giant trees sibilant with bird song, are "places we will need if we ever start treating the land as though we intended to stay".[14] This "staying" involves physical and spiritual restoration work, an engagement with Māori based on partnerships, and the practice of attentiveness to historical clues and contemporary remnants.

Otari: Realising and sustaining foresight

What does it means to arrive, to settle, and then to stay? In 1860, farmers Job Wilton and Ellen Curtis moved with their family into a small cottage above Wellington's Kaiwharawhara Valley. Wilton, already alarmed at the rate of rainforest clearance that had occurred in a few years, preserved one-fifth of his land (some seventeen acres); this was highly unusual at the time. That remnant was to form the nucleus of "Otari-Wilton's Bush", now the sole podocarp forest stand on the Wellington peninsula.

By 1860 Māori who had dominated the area some years before (migrating from their former home due to colonial and inter-tribal pressures), had begun to sell swathes of land. The hills and terraces had been reserved for them in 1847 for their survival as the colonial population expanded.[15] The word Otari can mean "place of snares". But as Māori land holdings, kumara gardens and bush cover dwindled, the tribes were dispersed again. By the time the land was acquired for "scenic" purposes in 1907, the Māori presence at Otari was evanescent and other modes of land and timber utility were locked in. European settlement of Wellington grew apace from 1870. Wilton's Bush was a popular picnic spot for decades.

Acclaimed botanist Leonard Cockayne pioneered plant ecology and the study of New Zealand flora. In 1927 he looked to Wilton's bush for the nucleus of the first native plant garden in New Zealand. His stated aim was "the restoration of the present forest to what it was originally … A garden in an ancient forest habitat."[16] He became internationally recognised for his pioneering work on New Zealand plants; his drive was matched by a string of able successors to the post of Otari curator.

Today Otari-Wilton's Bush has grown from a seven-hectare remnant to a reserve of over one hundred hectares in size; it contains the world's largest collection of native New Zealand plants. There are tracks, an information centre, and over 2000 plant and animal species, from the fierce lancewood (which adapts its youthful form to avoid the predations of the now-extinct giant browsing flightless moa), to new fungi discovered at a "BioBlitz", an annual event that seeks to record as many species as possible in a 24-hour period; last year's Blitz found 1367 species.[17]

Early layout of some of Cockayne's early planting areas at Otari Bush, 1932.
Unidentified photographer. Alexander Turnbull Library, 1/2-088441-G

This photo looks back to the (now re-wooded) hill where the 1932 shot was taken, and features flaxes in the area laid out not far in front of the homestead in the image above.
Photo: Steve Attwood, Flickr.

≈≈≈≈≈

Recent forest restoration work is co-ordinated or overseen by employees on site and by the crucial Otari-Wilton Bush Trust, which runs seminars, community-outreach projects, planting days and forest restoration.

Project Kaiwharawhara is one of Otari's key recent restoration efforts. Otari Wilton's Bus Trust instigated and oversaw a carefully planned project led by Jonathan Kennett and Bronwen Wall to revegetate a kilometre of trackside valley within Otari. 35,000 trees were sourced from the area as seedlings, grown and planted out and tended by volunteers between 2001 and 2006.[18] The dedication is paying off: the images below demonstrate how well a native tree can do when the possums are held at bay.

Otari revegetation site in 2002 and 2004 (right). (Photos by Jonathan Kennett)

Project Kaiwharawhara received a Conservation Award in 2005 and the trees are still thriving today.

This year, landscape architects have prepared a technical assessment of the potential of Otari; they regard the site as replete with special "moments and pauses" where an even more nuanced appreciation of culture, nature, reflection and movement can occur. For the technical planner, and the forest restoration expert, Otari creates an energy that lifts the spirit.[19] The detailed technical plan looks to enhance the opportunity for connection and attentiveness. That quality of connection and attention has already lured one poet to Otari.

≈≈≈≈≈

In 2004, a Writer in the Garden's residency gave poet Dinah Hawken the chance to observe Wellington's Botanic Gardens and Otari-Wilton's Bush *in situ*, to follow and learn from the staff, and to write about the minute and particular moments, plants or birdsongs that came to her.

Hawken's *oeuvre* attends to the connection with place through observation, "here forever in the centre of attending".[20] Janet Wilson has described Hawken's poems as "an analogue for her emotional landscape".[21] In the poem "Hope", Hawken takes inspiration from the shelter, presence and defiance of trees.[22] The figure of the outstretched limb, be it human or tree, is an enduring motif in her work:

> It is to do with waiting.
> Shall we wait with trees,
> Shall we wait with,
> For, and under trees
> since of all creatures
> they know the most
> about waiting, and waiting
> and slowly strengthening,
> is the great thing
> in grief we can do?

The garden residency produced a number of small poems now gracing posters at Otari's information centre.[23] These meditations on particular native plants create reflective moments for the reader at the centre or on its paths nearby.

> *Mamaku Fronds and Leaves*
>
> Bending over backwards
> replica after little replica
> you rejuvenate the world

They encourage the attentiveness in anyone visiting the bush, keeping the walker alive to the potential inherent in "moments and pauses".

In a country marked by species extinction, the old forest of Otari offers a fragile hope. Hawken's "The Thought" moves to recall a lifelong attraction to trees. They continue to offer a kind of reassurance:

> In the first garden plants and trees
> gave us almost everything: shapeliness
> shelter, warmth, food, clothing shade and air.
> In return we were to become gardeners
> And to fall for the word restraint.
> …
> I truly love another species.
>
> It is time to admit myself
> to the crowd of human beings
> who know that, strangely,
> in both body and free spirit
> we are inseparable from trees.

One rare New Zealand native tree that stands, that divaricates, that spreads in fractal-like interstices of connectivity is *Muehlenbeckia astonii*. This tree looks somewhat like a collection of springy twiglets composed into a cloud of interstitial nodes. Hawken's celebration of its qualities similarly spreads and springs across the page, typography bounding and elongating to replicate the generous and buoyant form of the plant. This linguistic and botanic investigation ends with a moment of wonder as the minute white flowers are seen as "a windfall a wonder a star".[24] The delight in the sheer botanical oddity of the plant and its existence in the country's most singular "Open-Air Plant Museum" condenses Hawken's appreciation of the particular as a way in to the recognition of the remarkable diversity in Wilton's Bush, and the way the processes of "making the ground work" can lead to such abundant possibilities. After all that has been lost, uprooted or burnt-off, the remnants that endure remain a constant source of wonder, and that, in itself, returns to the source of inspiration, a cycle of gifting "turned into the point | we are circling around".[25]

≈≈≈≈≈

The Wellington region features layers of Māori tribal occupation over generations, layerings and displacement accelerated by colonisation in the nineteenth century.[26] Otari has a long history as Māori tribal territory, and maintains a contemporary relevance to Māori in the city, in part because of its unique collection of the plants so integral to Māori identity and genealogy.

In 2009, members of those tribes who sold land at Otari or had to move concluded their Treaty of Waitangi claims against the government. Pockets of Crown land, a Crown apology and financial and cultural redress (such as a greater say in the management of some natural resources and lands) formed a Treaty settlement package. One hundred and fifty years after dislocation, the work of tribal reconnection continues; in many ways there are new beginnings to strengthen, relationships to heal across land, tribe and city. As in Australia, co-management and co-governance mark a new era in the complex, applied work of cross-cultural reconciliation.

In 2010, the Wilton Foundation helped deliver an inaugural programme of environmental education to students aged 8–15 years. The Trust's aim is to foster appreciation of Otari-Wilton's Bush, New Zealand plants and birds, and Māori knowledge of the forest as a site of spiritual and physical sustenance and genealogical connection.[27] Over 1400 students have been through the bush with a dedicated environmental interpreter. The programme aims to reach urban Māori and Pacific Island youth, local school children and migrant and refugee families keen to learn about their new home. One of Job Wilton's descendants (with Te Āti Awa ancestry), was a driving force behind the Trust's establishment: continuities matter in a place that is restoring itself in the minds of its people. Although funding for the programme is uncertain, its beginnings are very promising. In one recent visit, a group of students from a Māori-language immersion school sat beneath Otari Bush's 800-year-old rimu tree, re-cultivating connection.

≈≈≈≈≈

In the twenty years to 2004, the distribution of threatened New Zealand birds remained (fittingly, for the reader of Hawken's work) in the balance. Although 28% of the more common species had increased in distribution, 28% of the less-common species had declining distribution.[28] Yet Geoff Park notes that modified or degraded landscapes are "always restorable". For the impetus to blossom, "Rediscovery will need to turn into re-enchantment".[29] Hawken's attentiveness, Otari Bush's bounties and the energy of children and adults' learning of the tangle of plants and stories there, help to attend to the "real work" of re-enchantment.

≈≈≈≈≈

Sitting at the viewing platform built right amongst Job Wilton's old remnant podocarps, their strong limbs above and around us, my young son and I listen, as seeds from the tawa tree fall from the sky. I am bemused: the seeds are still warm from the bodies of birds perched in the branches above us; the birds are feasting while we listened. I picked up the seeds and dropped them into the loamy humus below the platform, and looked across the valley to where an 800-year-old rimu tree torqued its way out of the earth. The song of tui and cicadas filled the air. As my son spoke in his gentle voice of the birdsong, and his wonder as to the origins of the warm seeds, I felt graced by this remnant patch of forest, its future looking strong because of the work of sustainable remembrance across generations. In this work of restoration, many people are beginning to attend to place and story with the intention of staying, nourished anew by the valley and its fragile plenty.

Goliath Flax and Rata at Otari

our city a city of valleys
Otari our host blooming
a valley the only way home[30]

Notes

1. Charles Dawson completed a doctorate at UBC called "Writing the Memory of Rivers" (1999) after earlier training in literature, history, Māori language and cultural geography. He is Vice-President (New Zealand) of the Association for the Study of Literature, Environment and Culture (Australia–New Zealand), a co-editor of the environmental history journal *Environment and Nature in New Zealand* and a trustee of the Wilton Foundation-Tiaki Taiao, which supports environmental education regarding biodiversity and mātauranga Māori at Otari-Wilton's Bush. He provides this paper in a personal capacity.
2. M. Wassilieff (2009), "Horticultural Use of Native Plants: The Native Garden", *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/horticultural-use-of-native-plants/2.
3. Leads into this rich seam include E. Pawson and T. Brooking, eds (2002), *Oxford Environmental Histories of New Zealand* , Oxford University Press, Melbourne; the online encyclopaedia www.teara.govt.nz; David Young (2003), *Our Islands, Our Selves: A History of Conservation in New Zealand*, Otago University Press, Dunedin; Geoff Park (1995), *Ngā Uruora: The Groves of Life. History and Ecology in a New Zealand Landscape*, Victoria University Press, Wellington; Geoff Park (2006), *Theatre Country: Essays on Landscape and Whenua*, Victoria University Press, Wellington.
4. J. Clifton (2010), "Choice, Bro", *New Zealand Listener*, 224 (3660), http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3660/features/15713/choice_bro.html.
5. L. Molloy and C. Potton (2007*), New Zealand's Wilderness Heritage*, Craig Potton Publishing, Nelson, p. 5.
6. E. Pawson and T. Brooking, eds (2007), *Oxford Environmental Histories of New Zealand*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
7. Ministry for the Environment (2007), *State of the Environment 2007*, Ministry for the Environment, Wellington, www.mfe.govt.nz, p. 351.
8. Sirocco, one of only 123 kakapo birds alive, is now the world's most famous nocturnal parrot, having shot to fame in the New Zealand episode of Stephen Fry's 2009 BBC documentary series *Last Chance to See*. Large, green and flightless, his famous tryst with Fry's producer were caught on screen, leading to international interest and a Sirocco Facebook profile (http://www.doc.govt.nz/conservation/native-animals/birds/land-birds/kakapo/).
9. J. Duckworth and P. Cowan, "Possums," Landcare Research Fact Sheet. Landcare CRI, Lincoln; T. D. Isern (2002), "Companions, Stowaways, Imperialists, Invaders: Pests and Weeds in New Zealand", in T. Brooking and Pawson, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-45; J. Drummond (1906), "On Introduced Birds", *Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 39, pp. 227-52; J Druett (1983), *Exotic Intruders: The Introduction of Plants and Animals into New Zealand*, Heinemann, Auckland, is an accessible account of introduced plants and animals in New Zealand.

10. J. Diamond (1984), "Distributions of New Zealand Birds on Real and Virtual Islands", *New Zealand Journal of Ecology*, 7, pp. 37-55.
11. Ministry for the Environment, *op. cit.*, p. 402.
12. Department of Conservation, "Mainland Islands", http://www.doc.govt.nz/conservation/land-and-freshwater/land/mainland-islands-a-z/mainland-island-information/.
13. H. Bain (2006), "Natural Capital," *Forest and Bird*, March 2006, pp. 13-14.
14. Park, *Ngā Uruora: The Groves of Life* (*op. cit.*), p. 330.
15. M. Love (2009), "Te Āti Awa of Wellington", *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/te-ati-awa-of-wellington.
16. L. Cockayne (1932), "A Scheme for the Development and Arrangement of the Otari Open-Air Native Plant Museum. And Other Matters Connected Therewith", cited in Wraight + Associates Ltd (2008), "Otari-Wilton's Bush Draft Landscape Development Plan", prepared for the Wellington City Council, , Wellington, p. 14.
17. S. Hartley (2007), "BioBlitz 2007 at Otari-Wilton's Bush, Wellington", *Ecological Society Newsletter*, 121, pp. 10-11.
18. J. Kennett (2006), "Forest Restoration", Otari-Wilton's Bush website, http://www.kennett.co.nz/otariwiltonsbush2/index.php?page=forest-restoration.
19. Wraight + Associates Ltd (2008), "Otari-Wilton's Bush Draft Landscape Development Plan" (*op. cit.*).
20. D. Hawken (2001), "Service", in *Oh There You Are Tui! New and Selected Poems*, Victoria University Press, Wellington.
21. J. Wilson (2002), "To Sing the Last Word," rev. of D. Hawken, *Oh There You Are Tui! New and Selected Poems*, *New Zealand Books*, June 2002, p. 16.
22. Hawken, *Oh There You Are Tui! (op. cit.*). Hawken's "The Tethering of Trees" closes thus: "You could never still | this foliage with words. | It just reminds me | to speak about the trees | from which we have come | and continue to come | without knowledge | of our true bearing." In *Sport*, 30, Autumn 2002, p. 26.
23. D. Hawken (2005), *Garden Poems: Poems from the Poet in the Gardens Residency 2004*, Wellington City Council, Wellington.
24. D. Hawken (2007), *One Shapely Thing: Poems and Journals*, Victoria University Press: Wellington, p. 128.
25. *Ibid.*, "Winter Solstice Light", p. 142.
26. Love (2009), *(op. cit.).*
27. C. Te Ahukaramū Royal (2009), "Te Waonui a Tāne – Forest Mythology", *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/te-waonui-a-tane-forest-mythology. See also Park (*Ngā Uruora*), Brooking and Pawson (*op. cit.*) and the Wilton Foundation: www.taiao.org.nz.
28. Ministry for the Environment, *op. cit.*, p. 392.
29. Park, *Ngā Uruora: The Groves of Life* (*op. cit.*), p. 332.
30. D. Hawken, *Garden Poems* (*op. cit.*).