Book and Media Reviews

On 15 October 2007, three hundred New Zealand police, including the Armed Offenders Squad and the Special Tactics Group, invaded the small town of Ruatoki (population 600). Their purpose was to execute a warrant issued under the New Zealand Summary Proceedings Act 1957 to search for evidence of a paramilitary training camp in the nearby Urewera mountain ranges. The police commissioner and the New Zealand Government believed that the alleged camp was in breach of the New Zealand Terrorism Suppression Act 2002.

I was in New Zealand when the raids took place. I remember judging the Primary School National Kapa Haka (Māori Performing Arts) Competitions in Auckland when news reached us of “the raids.” A couple of weeks later, I remember sitting with some friends from Ruatoki and listening to their kids speak of their experience: “Yea, the ninjas came to get us. They were dressed all in black, they had weapons and they jumped on our bus on our way to school and started yelling at us and telling us to get off the bus. I was really scared and started to cry.”

The documentary The Price of Peace takes a huge spotlight and shines it on the events that took place before, during, and after those raids and how they affected the people, families, and community of Ruatoki. It highlights the processes of a hypocritical national government that, in the guise of preventing terrorism, perpetrated terrorist acts against a defenseless community, including infiltrating a school bus filled with elementary to high school aged children.

The primary target of the raids, and star of the film, is Tame Iti. Tame Iti was born to my grandaunt, Mākere Iti. Mākere is the youngest sister of my grandmothers, Te Hariru Penetito and Anne Clark. Anne married Charlie and they had Robyn Clark. Robyn married Thomas Roa and I am their firstborn. Iti was raised in Ruatoki under the shelter of the Urewera ranges by his whāngai (adoptive) parents among the proud tribe of Tūhoe, although his mother, Aunty Mākere, hails from Ngāti Hauā and Ngāti Wairere, the kingmakers of the Tainui people.

This film is predominantly centered on Iti and the role that he played, and continues to play, as a staunch Māori activist. He was targeted and labeled as the ringleader of the now famous “Urewera Four” who, five years after the police raids, were convicted of firearms charges. Iti and Te Rangikaiwhiria Kemara were each sentenced to two and a half years in jail. Emily Bailey and Urs Signer were sentenced to nine months home detention.

The film is titled The Price of Peace, a reference to the price Māori pay for peace in New Zealand, but it might have been more aptly titled “The Tame Iti Show” since the film is really about him. While the documentary takes up some historical discussion of the turbulent history of the
Tūhoe people and their dealings with the New Zealand Government, it is clear from the outset that this is Iti’s story. There is a scene in the film, for example, in which he exits the courthouse and is immediately swarmed by the media. His response is a Māori version of a children’s nursery rhyme, “Hey Diddle Diddle”: “Hei tiritira, te ngeru me te whira, te kau peke runga te marama. Ka kata te kuri ki ēna mahi pai. Ka oma te rihi me te pūne.” I believe his use of this nursery rhyme was his way of subverting, defusing, and making visible the irony of the state’s actions. He then remarks, “Welcome to the circus folks, welcome to the show.” And what a show it was. The New Zealand media loved him, plastering his image on front pages of newspapers and magazines all over the country. This documentary does a great job of capturing the circus-like media frenzy of the time, with Tame Iti playing the trickster whose provocations illuminated the ongoing tensions and structures of (in)justice operating between the government and the community and ultimately among community members themselves.

The New Zealand media also centered their stories on the cultural tensions between Māori and Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent), and the judge presiding over the case noted that although there are “two peoples in this country, there is only one law.” Indeed, there is only one law in the nation-state of New Zealand, and it is not Māori law. But The Price of Peace delves much deeper, stressing the cost that Māori have had to bear, and continue to bear, to live under that law—a law administered by a colonial government that was established under the fraudulent English-language translation of the Treaty of Waitangi.

Kim Webby, the director and one of the producers of the film, is of Pākehā and Chinese descent and was raised in New Zealand and schooled in Ōpōtiki on the east coast. She studied journalism at the Auckland Institute of Technology. Although she is not of Māori descent, she has known Tame Iti and his family for more than twenty years. Her relationship with him and his family fueled her desire to document his journey, starting with his early years as a Māori schoolboy-turned-activist to the police raids of 15 October and then his release from prison six years later, in 2013. The film concludes with a reconciliation between Iti, his family, and the New Zealand police commissioner. This reconciliation was seen as an apology from the New Zealand Police to Iti and his family. The police commissioner also apologized to the Ruatoki community at their marae.

While the film is a wonderful portrayal of Tame Iti as a very strong and independent Māori leader and activist, it also unduly aggrandizes Iti and his role in the raids and their aftermath. There is little to nothing said about Te Rangikaiwhiria Kemara, also of Tūhoe, or Emily Bailey and Urs Signer, who were both from Taranaki. The film treats these little-acknowledged members of the Urewera Four as extras in the media circus featuring Tame Iti. In one of his courtroom testimonies, Iti stated, “We were just playing, you know. It was like a game.” Well, this game, played with real guns and real bullets, resulted in raids that terrorized a whole community, includ-
ing his own relatives and the children of his iwi (nation). The film is largely silent about the community’s anger toward Iti and his “games” in the mountain, which put them all at risk.

Despite this critique, I believe The Price of Peace to be an important film with a powerful message that resonates with indigenous people around the world. In Hawai‘i, where I have lived for the past five years, the Kū Kia‘i Mauna (guardians of the mountain) are struggling to protect Mauna Kea against the Thirty Meter Telescope development. As these protector ‘a‘ahu (clothe) themselves in the sacred mists of the kupua (goddess) Poli‘ahu and her sisters in the name of kapu aloha (an order of restraint to show only kindness and empathy), the state government responds by arresting them. Similarly, in North Dakota, the Standing Rock Sioux tribes struggle to protect sacred water and land threatened by the Dakota Access Pipeline in whose defense the fossil fuel industry has deployed militarized law enforcement against nonviolent water protectors.

These unconscionable costs are part of the price meted out to indigenous peoples around the world for the kuleana (responsibility) of protecting our sacred lands, waters, and ways of being that is borne of the belief that “ko ahau ko te whenua, ko te whenua ko ahau”—I am the land and the land is me.

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