Northland Polytechnic

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Distance Lends Enchantment: Research challenges and opportunities in a remote area

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I am a writer who has lived in rural Hokianga in the Far North of New Zealand for over thirty years. My published work ranges from short articles and fiction for children and adults to longer commissioned non-fiction books and junior novels in English as well as collaboration in readers and radio plays in *te reo Maori*.

The following attempts to show how I developed some useful techniques of non-fiction research and writing without access to libraries or other research facilities.

Research is a term that can cover many different ways of finding out what you need to know. These days, students are encouraged to use libraries and, increasingly, the internet, to ferret out facts and support supposition. However, the internet is a comparatively recent phenomenon and, for those who don't live in a city, libraries may still be inaccessible or inadequate.

When I began to write, our family was trying to be self-sufficient on a bush property 20km up a dirt road with three small children, no money, no electricity and unreliable vehicles and phones. A major challenge was the community itself: an interesting mixture of urban refugees like ourselves scattered in the bush valleys, the Maori community and, finally, and for years most unaccepting of us, the traditional Pakeha farmers.

However, this place and the people themselves have been the source of much of the content of my writing, both fiction and non-fiction, over the years. The very challenges of learning to live in this kind of place, distant from the mainstream in every way, have contributed to my development as a writer. Now that I teach creative writing from home over the internet, this knowledge and experience has informed and continues to inform my teaching and course development as well as my own writing.

I will use three major pieces of writing to illustrate what I mean by this: a local history, *Waimamaku: a Very Special Settlement* (1988); a technical manual, *Build Yourself a Low-Cost Quality Home* (1990) and a series of readers in Maori, collectively known as *Nga Pukapuka Whanau* (1991-1995). Each was very different from the other, but the lessons learned were transferred from one to the other.

The first, the local history, taught me these things: not to take the 'accepted' version of events as the only truth; how to find primary sources

quickly; how to approach people from another culture with respect and an open mind; and how to work with people I didn't know very well to achieve a common aim. In 1988 the Pakeha community in the Waimamaku valley decided it would prepare a booklet for the centenary of their ancestors' arrival in 1889. As the only local person they knew of as a writer, I was asked if I would do it: in six months. They formed a centennial committee to which I had to report. I discovered that the Polytechnic (which now employs me) would supervise my work through a scheme that would pay me a minimum wage for the six months to do the job, so off we went. I had no previous experience of writing anything longer than a couple of thousand words, but it quickly became obvious that a centennial history of fourteen families could not be squashed into a small booklet. In fact, it turned out that there was enough anecdotal and archival material for several books, so even confining it to about 80,000 words was going to be difficult.

A hundred years of research - looking back I can't imagine how I thought I was going to find, read, select, write and rewrite such a thing. However, I suggested two things that proved essential: that the local people compile a list of all their relatives and create a network of interested people who would send them photos, diaries and any other relevant material; and that they pre-sell the book to this network for $15 a head to pay the printing costs. (That was not an original idea; I attribute it to Bill Mollison of Permaculture.) I also found a photographer locally to deal with reproducing the photographs. I count that whole experience as a watershed, both as a member of this community, and as a researcher and writer. As the diaries, scrapbooks, photos, letters, family memoirs and other snippets flowed in via the post for six months I became immersed in the colonial history of this one tiny community.

I went back and reread my New Zealand history to put it in its wider context. Several interesting things emerged from that. One was that, unlike some other parts of New Zealand, Pakeha settlement in Waimamaku was at the invitation of the local *hapu*, Te Roroa. Although the general Hokianga area was one of the earliest settled by both Maori (Kupe, the discoverer of Aotearoa) and Pakeha, this particular rich valley was still entirely Maori land nearly fifty years after the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) and over twenty years after the land wars (1850s and 1860s). Then, in 1878, four chiefs decided that they wanted to have a European settlement of their own. They set aside part of their land for that purpose and offered it to the government for a special settlement. The rest was to remain tribal land. Through the Department of Lands and Survey I was able to get copies of those original maps, which clearly showed this land to be sold, and also that retained as 'native reserve'.

One particular piece of history deserves mentioning as having taught me something about research and how not to believe the first piece of printed information you come across. This discovery also affected me and the local community in real time. In 1902, two of the Pakeha settlers discovered some carved chests in a cave on that land reserved by the *hapu* as *wahi tapu* (sacred land). The caves were burial caves. That discovery and the subsequent hearing were part of the first inter-cultural dispute and the first argument over land ownership this community had ever had. Only part of this information came from the Jubilee booklet (published in 1941 and hitherto the main authority on Waimamaku history) and the old diaries and memoirs. The mindset of the time portrayed the finding from a purely Pakeha perspective: the Jubilee publication described the incident as explorers finding carvings in a hitherto undiscovered cave on government

land. The authorities must be told. Some of the natives were angry but they got over it. The magistrate ruled the chests should be sent to the Auckland Museum, which duly happened. End of story. A darker side emerged from diary entries and a memoir: settlers' children went up and played in the caves, throwing bones around and taking away souvenirs. In one instance, the mother threw the items in the fire and swore the child to secrecy. In another, a local tribal leader, who had a business relationship with the man who found the chests and called in the government agent, remonstrated with his business partner for not telling him. It almost came to blows. None of this was mentioned in the official history. Then a friend doing family research in Lands and Survey archives came across some original correspondence from the discoverer of the caves. One letter was a list of exactly what he had packed up to send, which included a number of bones and a complete skeleton. Another Maori friend of mine had copies of papers from the Justice Department his father had left him, which gave a little of the Maori evidence at the magistrate's hearing in Rawene and therefore their perspective on the issue. I say 'a little' because the magistrate at the hearing cut short the evidence of the *kaumatua*. I found I had to give this story a whole chapter to itself because it was so complex and sensitive. I decided I had to approach the local *marae* and show them my first draft. So began a whole new research experience for me.

Of course others before me had had to develop appropriate methods for researching material concerning Maori, especially anthropologists and historians. Not all of it was Eurocentric in its approach either. But in the 1970s Maori began to be more assertive - not just about how their history was approached, but about who was going to be allowed to write it. Michael King's book on Te Puea (1977) was the best that had been done and was written with the full support of the Tainui people. However in the 1980s King himself stepped back from writing about Maori in acknowledgement of the fact that Maori were reclaiming that right for themselves.

So I was nervous. I couldn't leave the burial chest story out. It was a story with two sides, only one of which had been told in the 1941 history. I needed the approval of Te Roroa to use it. Or one of them would have to write their side of it.

I made copies of my draft and gave them to those who wanted to read and comment. I showed them the Lands and Survey documents (carefully copied in handwriting by my friend) and the faded copies of the Justice Department documents. We sat for a whole morning there on the verandah of the *marae*, talking about an incident that they all knew as part of their own story and that I knew only through the dry accounts written by officials and the diary entries of settlers. One of them commented that they knew of the Justice Department accounts of the hearing, but no one knew of the Lands and Survey letters and their precise descriptions of exactly what was found and what was sent. The Auckland Museum had denied having the bones for 85 years. Now they were an issue again.

The *hapu*, the local sub-tribe, instructed me to deal with their *kaumatua*, Piri Iraia. Whatever he decided would be the right thing to do. A week later, Piri approached me in the garage and told me to go ahead with what I had written. I had done the right thing and that was the most important thing to them. I learnt from this experience that not only is it important to look beyond the obvious sources for information, but that the process of dealing with people, particularly if they are from a different culture, is just

as important as finding out the facts. Indeed, the facts by themselves can be interpreted quite wrongly if the cultural background is ignored.

Later, during a visit to Auckland to interview a former Waimamaku resident, his wife gave me an envelope and said, 'This has been in the family since Mum was a girl. I hate it and I don't want it. Find someone who should have it.' It was a photo of a group of young people in turn-of-the-century clothing standing in a cave with bones scattered on the ground. One or two were holding bones. I gave it to the *kaumatua* who was giving evidence in the Waitangi Tribunal hearings at Whakamaharatanga Marae. It turned out to be proof of the disturbance of those bones. They were subsequently returned to the community and buried. I was invited to both hearing and funeral. It was a tremendous privilege to be so included.

Out of this particular incident came a number of other lessons and opportunities, even a direction for my writing. What had started as a commissioned task for a small community turned into a life-long fascination with the history and culture of my country as expressed through the stories of this small distant place. Meanwhile, the committee had pre-sold enough copies for the printing to go ahead. In 1989 the centennial happened and it was a wild success. Two thousand people flooded in and a great time was had by all. Everyone bought the book, Maori and Pakeha alike. The burial chest chapter was the most talked-about part and corrected a lot of erroneous assumptions that had been held for 85 years.

I wanted to carry on with this kind of research, but the next large project was quite different. My Polytech supervisor asked me to research and write a book about building a low-cost home. This was to accompany a new course that was being introduced at the local campus. The research and writing techniques gained from this exercise were different again. In addition to the gathering and reading of relevant texts and interviewing people, techniques that I'd used for the history book, I now had to understand mathematical and construction concepts; use drawings and photographs as informational material that illuminated the text and, most crucially, present the written material in a form that was accurate yet readable, precise and easy to refer to.

By now we'd built our own house with recycled materials and I knew a number of others who'd done this as well. I thought it would be a straightforward matter to get hold of the building code and the plumbing code, talk to a few builders, engineers and my handy husband, and get it done. This book took me all over the North eventually, being shown every kind of owner-built home you can imagine: recycled, home-milled, soil cement brick, rammed earth, logs. I asked a friend who could draw to do the diagrams showing how things were done. It was a fascinating project. Another aspect of this remote, relatively poor community is its incredible self-reliance and creativity. And the stories! Except for the officials, practically everyone was self-taught and they came from all over the place to make a life here. The way they told how they went about things was in sharp contrast to the way the textbooks described the same processes. This had a direct effect on the style I used for the text.

I wrote it for Northland people. It had to be easy to use, easy to read and make sense. As an exercise in organising information, being precise and clear about exactly what to do and why, it was hugely educational for me. For example, I had to learn how to calculate the volume of a water tank or septic tank and the quantity of materials needed to make it, so that I could

make the same exercise intelligible to the lay reader. I learnt how to calculate the number of nails in a bag and the amount of timber in a standing tree. Having a husband who is a mathematician helped greatly, but I still had to do the workings myself in order to write about it. Most of all, for people with little money I showed exactly how to make comparative costings for the different materials and methods of building. Costing involved thinking about design. The draughtsman was a great help here. Between us we developed a process of self-designing a simple dwelling and used that as the basis for the comparative costings. Through that interaction I added some tools of visual appreciation to my list of writing skills and techniques. For non-fiction, illustration is a vital element, but up till now I'd concentrated on the textual aspects only, leaving the illustration to others. Even with the history book I'd left much of the photographic selection and layout to the photographer, though I did get involved in the final design. Now I was learning how to think in this way. I even used some of my own photographs. The Housing Corporation picked up the publishing of the building book and it was used throughout the North for their clients. Although the costings and the building codes are now out of date, that book still sells. People tell me that they find the water tank and septic tank designs in particular extremely useful.

The third major research and writing project was the series of readers, *Nga Pukapuka Whanau*, which was written and published in collaboration with three local Maori women. This came about through both the previous commissions: firstly because of the connections made with the Maori community and my subsequent involvement with and interest in Maori language and culture; secondly, because I wanted to improve my photographic techniques.

The research and writing skills learnt on this project included developing a much deeper awareness of Maori language, writing for young children and the educational market generally and the Maori market in particular. Not least was the involvement with local people, who modelled for our photographic stories, and the teachers who were always willing to talk about what they needed and to offer ideas. My fellow writers and I met on a local photography course, discovered a mutual interest in education and writing, and decided to write and photograph a story in *te reo Maori* together. We couldn't find a publisher, so decided to do it ourselves. We set out to produce good quality books for Kohanga Reo, the Maori-language immersion pre-schools.

Te Hi Ika (Fishing) was our first effort. It looked simple, but the research was complex: the needs of Kohanga in terms of content, approach, language level, size and shape and quality of the book and so on. For all of us, getting the language right alone was a major piece of research as none of us was a fluent speaker or an academic. How correct should you be? How simple can you be without being ungrammatical? Whom do you ask? Writing in a second language raises all sorts of questions, not least that of who has a right to do so.

Finding a printer who would take us seriously was also a major achievement. Funding wasn't so difficult, oddly. We marketed by finding the address lists of pre-schools and schools and sending them all a letter. Over the next few years we refined our systems, found reliable local language sources to proofread our efforts and improved our photographic skills. From the beginning we chose to write the texts directly in *te reo Maori* and that proved to be the best way to do it. We devised a method of layout using a photographic enlarger and making mockups to show the

printer. It was truly homegrown publishing. In all, we published and sold ten books in *te reo Maori*, two of which went into second editions.

Looking back on the kind of research and writing I've done I conclude that no matter where you live there are fascinating stories. In fact, living in a small, remote community can present opportunities for research in its most intimate form that would be hard for the most sophisticated library to match. Nowadays, I do also use the internet for research but for me there is nothing like the delight of hearing the story handed down through the family and told by the descendant of a chief, or the account of construction details of a house by its builder. Perhaps the most poignant example of how intimate and affecting local research can be is that of the reader we did called *Rapu Kai Moana* (Gathering Sea Food) which featured nine-year-old twin girls. Both had cystic fibrosis and died in their mid-teens. That little book is a precious *taonga* for their family, part of their history and also of mine.

In the end, research is simply finding out what you want to know. The examples above may be particular in some to respects to a time and place, but they can be applied universally by anyone who wishes to write about their society.

Glossary

Aotearoa: Maori name for New Zealand return to text
hapu: sub-tribe, in this case Te Roroa return to text
kaumatua: tribal elder return to text
Kohanga Reo: literally 'language nest', Maori-immersion pre-school return to text
marae: meeting ground in front of the meetinghouse return to text
Pakeha: New Zealander of European descent return to text
taonga: treasure; precious thing return to text
te reo: language return to text
wahi tapu: sacred place return to text

Ten years ago, with one of the Maori women involved in the publishing venture, Janine McVeagh developed the Diploma of Applied Writing at Northland Polytechnic (New Zealand). Four years ago, the course was redeveloped for online delivery. It continues as a fully online course with the opportunity for students to write in English or te reo Maori. *Many of the students for this diploma live in remote places. Janine and her colleagues encourage them to draw on their own communities and resources for their writing. This article is an adaptation of a presentation made at* Alchemy: Blending Research and Creativity, the Tenth Annual Conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, *Curtin University of Technology, Perth, 25-27 November 2005.*

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