



Puna Wai Kōrero: An Anthology of Māori Poetry in English
edited by **Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan**. Auckland: AUP (2014). RRP: \$49.99. Pb, 420pp. ISBN: 9781869408176.
Reviewed by **Sue Wootton**.

Co-edited by **Reina Whaitiri and Robert**

Sullivan, this anthology collates poems written in English by nearly 80 poets with Māori whakapapa. It is, surprisingly, the first anthology with that dedicated aim, and follows by a decade the publication of *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English* (also co-edited by Whaitiri and Sullivan, with Albert Wendt).¹

Well-designed, with an informative introduction and a useful glossary, *Puna Wai Kōrero* is presented as a tribute to Hone Tuwhare, who is acknowledged in the introduction as “Aotearoa’s poet laureate”. Tuwhare’s oeuvre is generously represented here, with eighteen poems that span the decades from the 1964 publication of *No Ordinary Sun* to 2005’s ‘laconically iconic’ poem, “On becoming an icon (!).” But Tuwhare’s distinctive voice (that rich oratory-literary mix of the colloquial and the classical, of high and low rhetoric, the reverent and the irreverent, of no-bullshit elegance) infiltrates the anthology well beyond his own poems. He informs and inspires, whether directly or indirectly, the work of many of the poets gathered here. His liberating spirit is celebrated, even revered, for what Ben Brown, in his poem “Chur Bro”, calls Tuwhare’s ‘neat trick’ of ‘Turning the Pākehā’s / English into a / Reo all your own.’ Brian Potiki’s “hone” reprises Tuwhare’s “Rain” and speaks to Tuwhare’s deep influence on subsequent poem-makers with ‘I can hear you making holes / in my brain, hone.’ Jacq Carter’s “To the statue of Wairaka at the mouth of Ōhinemataroa”, calls to mind Tuwhare’s “To a Māori figure cast in bronze...”, and Tuwhare sings up through Carter’s opening line: ‘Girl / they made you a bit skinny didn’t they?’ Other poems for or about Tuwhare include elegies by Tania Hinehou Butcher and Tru Paraha.

Sir Apirana Ngata’s 1892 poem, “A scene from the past,” offers a formal welcome to the anthology.

Above and beyond its literal poetic interpretation, the poem’s title and language is a comment (ironic or hopeful, according to your stance) on just how far Māori writing in English has travelled in the process of reclaiming ‘a Reo all your own.’ ‘Language doth but / Clothe in artifice our passion,’ writes Ngata, and also:

There the old pa stands to-day
Where the mountain, clad in koukas,
Bends with gentle slope and fondly
Show’rs kisses on the stream.
Rippling, laughing, winding, moaning,
Hies she on to join the ocean,
Emblem of a race that’s speeding
Sadly onwards to oblivion.

After Ngata, *Puna Wai Kōrero* is arranged by alphabetical order of the contributing poets. Major and well-established writers include Tuwhare, Sullivan, Keri Hulme, Apirana Taylor, Rangi Faith, Hinemoana Baker, Phil Kanawa, Bub Bridger, J. C. Sturm, Trixie Te Arama Menzies, Roma Pōtiki, Paula Morris, Kelly Ana Morey and Witi Ihimaera. But this is a democratic anthology, inclusive also of less well-known writers in a selection of voices the editors describe as ‘many and diverse: confident, angry, passionate, respectful, proud, despairing and full of hope, expressing the full scope of what it is to be human, and especially, to be Māori.’ The collection successfully presents this wide diversity, and at the same time, by compressing these voices between the same covers, energises and deepens a particular quality of the anthology as a whole.

The work canvasses all the usual poetic themes – love, death, family, home, Nature – but there is a consistent theme of working out identity, both personal and public. Related to this, *Puna Wai Kōrero* has a political intensity rarely found in ‘mainstream’ anthologies of New Zealand poetry. Those other tomes are complacent in comparison. The common concerns that impassion the writing in *Puna Wai Kōrero* are injustice, inequality and loss. Unresolved historic issues burn from the page. Several poems stress their message at the expense of their medium, but this in itself is important as a marker of the forces influencing the work. Turning English into ‘a Reo all your own’ is a deeply personal project for each writer.

Puna Wai Kōrero is an important foundational anthology of Māori poets writing in English. It is at one level a reference volume which records for posterity a historical record of this tradition.



But the poems collected here will provoke inspiration, debate, reflection and response from New Zealanders of all backgrounds, and thus *Puna Wai Kōrero* also makes a serious contribution to the future development of poetry in Aotearoa New Zealand.

- 1 Robert Sullivan (Ngāpuhi) is the author of many award-winning volumes of poetry. He currently heads the Creative Writing programme at Manukau Institute of Technology. Reina Whaitiri (Kāi Tahu) is a scholar, editor and researcher on Māori and Pacific literature. Sullivan and Whaitiri are the editors of *Homeland: New Writing from America, the Pacific, and Asia* (University of Hawai'i Press) and, with Albert Wendt, the award-winning *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English* and *Mauri Ola: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English II* (both published by Auckland University Press and the University of Hawai'i Press).
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