

Nicola Gregory

From Sherwood to Valley

My Father was born in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, the heart of Sherwood Forest (Robin Hood country), which makes me the daughter of an Englishman. I have ancestors on my maternal side, one in particular who came to New Zealand with the 65th Regiment in the late 1800s and settled just out of Whanganui as a farmer, which makes me a descendant of a European Settler. I am Partner to a sheep farmer in the Pohangina Valley, whose ancestors were early settlers and were responsible for clearing native bush to make way for farming.

I began researching Sherwood Forest and the affinity I felt for British soil, my heritage and tradition, until I was forced earlier this year to take the road down the valley through the Pohangina Village everyday due to the cyclone washing away our bridge. I really began to pay attention to what early settlers created and realised that as I was longing to 'go home', I was basically driving through it every day anyway. Then I had to grapple with the rabbit hole that is colonisation, similar to a lot of people in our communities today. Our collective history and what went on, is in the spotlight. Being of European descent, born in New Zealand, I am pondering questions of identity here in this place.

Dr Michael King's words, from *Being Pakeha* (p 186), put it nicely for me:

"As I watch this land and seascape, wrapped around by recollections of relationships and remembrances of times past, I find I am Pakeha, I am New Zealander, I am Irish, I am Scottish, I am European; and I am in parts of my spirit, Māori. I am all these things simultaneously. Most of all, though, and most gratefully of all, I am human and I am alive. I rejoice in the gifts that my descendants and associations have bequeathed me. 'Love', says Saul Bellow in his book I have just put down, 'is simply gratitude for being.'"

I have been exploring ideas of identity, by noticing the environment I inhabit. I drive through native bush and farmland every day, I live in a place that saw fighting, I spot pheasants and deer emerging onto the roadside and I sit on my deck watching fantails. At night the puriri moth dances in my torch light and the call of the ruru can be heard in the Old Man Pine. On a cold, misty day I can smell the native bush, and in the Autumn, I revelled in the magic that was the vibrant display of the changing oak trees in the village. But which Robin? I am still unpacking the year that has been so far and the mysteries that have emerged from the forests.

I have had the pleasure of creating this body of work alongside my partner who is a passionate farmer with a love for New Zealand's native bush. As he was working up a paddock, he turned over an ancient piece of Maire root. Maire is endemic to this country and is extremely rare today - due to trees being cut down for firewood by settlers. I have felt humbled to have been able to work on this ancient, unique timber to tell stories of identity, heritage and belonging. Ultimately, I was born in New Zealand and I live rurally, therefore I get to be connected to the land in ways that differ from dwelling in the city. This from Sharon Blackie, *If Women Rose Rooted*, (p 294)

"We spend our lives searching for meaning in ourselves, engaged in deep conversations with our inner child', meditating on a mat indoors, trained to be ever-mindful of what's going on inside us - our breath and our thoughts and our emotions - when so much of the meaning we need is beneath our feet, in the plants and animals around us, in the air we breathe. We swaddle ourselves so tightly in the centrality of our own self-referential humanness that we forget that we are creatures of the Earth and need also to connect with the land."

And from the silent Huia, Who-are-you?