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Living with our history

We are frequently reminded that history is not a collection of dusty, blurry moments in time, snap-frozen in sepia-hued time capsules and isolated from other airless periods of infamy and triumph.

It is a living, breathing, ongoing human story that helps to establish the context within which the future unfolds and the rest of us live our lives.

And like many things we are involved in or come up against, that context and the history that helped form it can change depending on the set of eyes gazing upon it.

So it is that in Northern Ireland one set of eyes can admire the colour, pomp and pageantry of a march by the Orange Order, while another sees a glorious, rousing celebration of an historic victory, and yet another view is that it is a gloating, triumphalist symbol of religious and secular oppression.

So it is that the memorial at Pukearuhe dedicated to the slain missionary Reverend John Whiteley is not just another plaque on another stone to mark some far-distant corner of what, for many, is our long-forgotten history.

Some will see it as a way to mark a man who played an important role in Taranaki's history before his savage killing, along with seven other settlers, on February 13, 1869.

Others may see it as an insensitive symbol of a dark time in their own history, a time of oppression and land confiscations. And for many that history is not as time-ravaged and sepia-tinted as others may think.

It is barely 140 years since the last shots were fired in the Taranaki wars, a reminder of how young our nation is (the contentious Orange marches commemorate victory in Battle of the Boyne in 1690).

Our history is still young, fresh and sometimes raw, and hints and memorials are everywhere, from the graves of settlers and infantry killed during the land wars to the statue of a soldier on New Plymouth's Marsland Hill (destroyed by Maori protesters in the early 90s), to street names of our major city and the region's towns.

Carrington, Richmond, Parris, Whiteley and Von Tempsky are Taranaki street and place names that for some people simply recall significant players in our region's history; for others they represent our region's violent birth, our plundering past, a culture and way of life gone.

Sometimes those who should know better are blind to those painful periods of history that are, for others, just a few family generations old and still very much alive in the retelling.

So it is remarkable that the spokesmen for the Waitara Leaseholders Association, angry at losing their legal battle with the New Plymouth District Council, has accused the local body of "taking away the opportunity for self-determination and governance" and implementing a "form of slavery".

That's an interesting way to look at things given that history suggests the land they are arguing over was illegally taken from Maori in the first place.

Part: 0

Section: FEATURES

Sub-Section: EDITORIAL

Topics: LAND ; HISTORY

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