Rock College

An unofficial history of Mount Eden Prison

Mark Derby

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Introduction

Bringing up the bodies

'It was midnight — torrential rain, lightning. And all these kaumātua standing in the exercise yard, doing their karakia. A row of coffins on the ground, open. And the prisoners were yelling at us from inside to shut up.'[1]

That eerie, rain-lashed night in 1989 was the first time 23-year-old Te Kahautu Maxwell had been inside Mount Eden Prison's daunting walls. He had travelled there from his home in the Bay of Plenty in a convoy led by elders of the Ringatū faith. They were a solemn, determined, ritualistic group, safeguarded at every stage of the journey with incantations and prayers for their spiritual protection. They bore the weight of their mission's profound cultural and historical significance. More than a century earlier, on a single morning in May 1866, five of their forebears had been hanged in the prison, and now the group had come to exhume the men's bodies and reclaim them.

A row of stone slabs, each incised with a single initial and set into the asphalt along the north wall of the main exercise yard, marked the location of the hanged men's graves. Prison authorities had strung a tarpaulin above the site, placed a wooden coffin beside each of the tombstones and erected floodlights that threw harsh beams through the driving rain. Guards and prison officials looked on uneasily at the chanting elders and younger men, numbering nearly 80 in total, who were disrupting the routine of this circumscribed, enforced community.

Once the old people felt that the preparatory rituals had been appropriately carried out, they withdrew to rest before ordaining the next stage of the arcane practice of hahu, or disinterment. Maxwell and the younger companions remained to carry out the physical side of the work. Each of them was under strict tapu: 'no food, no water — just digging'. They had been selected for this task in part because they shared the same tribal affiliations as the hanged men — Whakatōhea, Ngāti Awa and Tūhoe from the Bay of Plenty. Two others had arrived from Taranaki, on the other side of the island, to exhume the body of Horomona Poropiti, hanged along with Mikaere Kirimangu for the murder of a government agent, James Fulloon. A tōhunga from Parihaka, a sacred settlement for the Taranaki people, had prepared the way for them to do so. A third group were Ngāpuhi from Northland, there to offer guidance, as they had recently recovered the bodies of several of their own ancestors who had been transported in the 1840s to imprisonment in Van Diemen's Land, as Tasmania was then known.

The young men set to work with crowbars and pickaxes. 'The graves were dug up in order,' remembers Maxwell. 'You didn't touch anyone else's — just worked on yours.' The remains of the Taranaki prophet Horomona were the first to emerge from the earth. Maxwell and another Whakatōhea man then began disinterring their chief, Mokomoko, who, on the same day as Horomona and Kirimangu, had been hanged alongside Heremita Kahupaea and Hakaraia Te Rahui for the murder of Carl Völkner, an Ōpōtiki missionary and government spy. Mokomoko had protested his innocence until his last breath, and Maxwell had grown up listening to stories and songs of his wrongful execution. The chief's remains, coated in yellow quicklime to encourage decomposition, were encountered a little more than a metre beneath the surface of the exercise yard. They were reverently lifted and placed in a special coffin, handmade from native timber without the use of nails or screws, supplied by the Ngāpuhi men.[2]

Through the night more bones were uncovered and moved to other waiting coffins. An Auckland archaeologist, Simon Best, was present to witness this seldom-seen procedure. He believes that the five bodies were originally buried in full-sized coffins some 60 metres from the boundary wall, and moved to their new gravesite in the late nineteenth century to make way for rebuilding work. They appeared to have been reburied 'in wooden containers about half the length of a standard coffin'.[3]

The scope of the job suddenly and unexpectedly expanded. 'We'd be digging down,' says Maxwell, 'and the wall of the hole caved in and there was another skull — more bodies in there. And they were, like, "Take me too." So we had to get more coffins for them.'[4]

As the team worked methodically along the line of marker stones, the rocky ground beneath the tarseal proved too much for the hand tools they had brought with them. Jackhammers were ordered but, out of consideration for sleeping inmates, the men waited silently until 7 a.m. before using them.[5]

'Some of our relations were in that jail,' says Maxwell, and in the morning several of these men were permitted to work alongside the diggers. They included the heavily dreadlocked 'Diesel Dick' Maxwell, held for burning down a number of churches around Ruatoria, on the East Coast, in the early 1980s. The enlarged digging party worked on until the early afternoon, watched from behind concrete barriers by dozens of

other inmates. Eleven bodies were eventually recovered, some of them not immediately identifiable. Best believes they had all been relocated from older gravesites around the prison and placed in a common trench.

When no further bones or other human remains could be found, the kaumātua returned to oversee their removal. Their karakia resounded down the prison's stone corridors as Te Kahautu Maxwell and others carried the first of the fully loaded coffins. 'They were heavy,' he says. 'We walked them out through the prison to the front entrance, back and forth . . . And all the Black Powers and them trying to touch the coffins. All those hands reaching out from those pens. Some were crying.'

The coffins were loaded 'into a big truck, like a furniture truck, all stacked on racks'. Only the remains of the Taranaki prophet Horomona were placed in a separate vehicle, since he would be taken to an entirely different final destination. The first stop after the vehicles left the prison gates was the suburb of Panmure, where a Māori-owned firm of undertakers had hosted and supported the hahu party since it arrived in Auckland. Wailing, prayer and tears filled the air as the truck's roller door rose to reveal the stacked coffins. 'They were welcoming them back into the tribe,' says Maxwell. 'Those old people — my grandmother was doing the karanga — they were wailing and collapsing. The emotion, eh. Because they had grown up with the story, and now they were seeing the return of Mokomoko.'[6]

The return journey to the Bay of Plenty next morning was protracted and indirect. The midnight exhumations had become a nationwide news story and the Māori Queen, Dame Te Atairangikaahu, sent a request for the coffins to lie on her principal marae of Tūrangawaewae in the Waikato. After mourning ceremonies there, a roundabout route was taken, bypassing other marae that might also choose to welcome them, to avoid further delays. The truck was eventually unloaded at the Ngāti Awa marae of Taiwhakaea in Whakatāne.

In a striking example of cultural reconciliation, all the bodies carried to the Bay of Plenty, with the exception of Mokomoko's, were reburied together, even though some were almost certainly Pākehā. They had lain alongside each other in death for the past century, and the Ngāti Awa felt they should not now be separated. In the cemetery alongside the meeting house, the coffins were lowered into 'one huge trench like they bury whales', with a single rope to bind them together.

It was two in the morning when the last coffin, containing the Whakatōhea chief Mokomoko, was unloaded onto the marae at Waiaua, overlooking the Bay of Plenty. For the local people who received his remains, feelings of joy and propitiation were mingled with mourning and anger. Their chief had gone to the scaffold at Mount Eden expecting his body to be returned home immediately after death, but the prison authorities had refused to release it to his relatives. Generation after generation of his descendants took on the duty of honouring his final wish, a grim obligation they carried for 123 years. For the same length of time they wore the stigma of his alleged leading role in the ceremonial execution of the missionary Völkner. That stain was not erased for several more years, until in 1993 Justice Minister Doug Graham apologised in person to Whakatōhea, and to the descendants of Mokomoko in particular, for his wrongful conviction and execution.

III

The sombre exhumation in Mount Eden's main exercise yard was the first of its kind, but it may not be the last. According to former prison officer Phil Lister, the bodies of other inmates, including those who died there by suicide, illness or violence as well as by execution, may lie in the same northeast corner of the prison grounds, a spot chosen because under ancient Christian tradition it was the least sanctified and therefore the most suitable resting place for evildoers.[7]

There can be little doubt that a penal institution that has occupied the same site for over 150 years, for much of that time with limited official oversight or regard for the rights of its inmates, must hold many strange secrets. The tight-lipped old establishment itself, at the foot of Mount Eden's volcanic cone, is not altogether to blame for the atmosphere of mystery that cloaks it. Thousands of Aucklanders drive past its walled-in buildings every day, yet few seem to know that the prison has lain empty and unused since 2011, and almost none are aware of the influential role it has played in forming, and perhaps deforming, New Zealand's colonial history.

A prison first opened on the present site in 1856, and for more than a century it served as the country's highest-security penal institution, holding the longest-serving and most demonstrably violent and escape-

prone criminals. From its first years, women, young children and those convicted of minor offences such as public drunkenness were also held there.

This book records the history of each of the prisons at Mount Eden, and also of Auckland's first jail, in Queen Street, which dates from 15 years earlier. It predated and therefore served some of the functions of the town's first mental hospital. The later prisons continued to confine the mentally ill, and by the 1980s Mount Eden Prison was notorious for its horrifying rate of suicides, predominantly by young Polynesian males.

Dramatic and disruptive events such as suicides, executions, escapes and riots drew nationwide attention to the prison and its inmates, but for those imprisoned there, they occurred amid the curious combination of tedium and camaraderie common to other enforced communities. For most of its long life, Mount Eden was simultaneously the country's toughest prison and also Auckland's all-purpose lockup, taking in drunkards, debtors, 'disorderly' women, and other short-term and first-time offenders. It acquired a unique and contradictory character, simultaneously forbidding and familiar, punitive and parochial.

Over its 150-year lifespan the changes to Mount Eden Prison's facilities, regulations, customs and inmate population have reflected the country's responses to criminality, and to changing social patterns more generally. The proportion of Māori, for example, was at first very small, and the most prominent among them were those such as Mokomoko, sentenced for essentially political offences. That composition changed markedly during the twentieth century as the number of Māori inmates increased in line with the urbanisation of the wider Māori population, until they comprised an overall majority.

Regardless of race, inmates have always been drawn overwhelmingly from the poorest sections of the community, with notable exceptions such as the draft resisters and conscientious objectors who were incarcerated during wartime in the twentieth century. The administration of the prison dutifully followed national penal policies that have fluctuated between retribution and rehabilitation, between simply containing prisoners and also aiming to change their behaviour.

Even as the society surrounding it altered fundamentally, the stone prison's dour contours remained almost unchanged. The Rock, or Rock College, or the Stone Jug, or Mautini has been a remarkably resilient and

immutable feature of Auckland and national life, and the exterior of the main buildings still looks much as it did when completed in 1917. Until its closure, no matter whether penological theories favoured the harshly punitive or the optimistically rehabilitative, every cell in this impractical, intractable institution was usually fully occupied.

The prison survived numerous calls for its demolition, the first of them when it was barely finished, and has been reviled as unsightly and dehumanising not only by prisoners but also by its neighbours and by political leaders of all shades. A frenzied riot in 1965 gutted the interior but failed to permanently shut down what remained. Yet when the prison was finally decommissioned in 2011, the closing ceremony was an occasion for nostalgic regret by its staff and also, apparently, for many of its last remaining inmates, who had come to regard it with the affection shown towards a tough, irascible but irreplaceable old identity. While researching this book, both Corrections staff and ex-inmates typically said they agreed to talk to me primarily because the remarkable stories that Mount Eden holds deserve to be recorded and better known.

The Department of Corrections now finds itself responsible for maintaining an abandoned and echoing relic occupying a large area of the most valuable real estate in the country. The prison's battlemented towers and cruciform wings have the highest possible heritage classification, ensuring that the department's options for repurposing the buildings are strictly limited; they now stand empty and decaying as they await a new long-term use. It was this indeterminate, limbo state that, above all, convinced me that the long and harrowing history of the prison, and of the two less durable institutions that preceded it, would be worth telling.

III

That project has turned out to be more prolonged and complex than originally expected, even though I quickly decided that the circumstances of individual prisoners, and especially the actions that led to their imprisonment, would not be my primary focus. Rather, I have chosen to trace the lifespan of the prison itself — a peculiar walled community with its own culture, traditions, eccentrics and shameful secrets, a rough-hewn hostelry shaping and shaped by the lives of the tens of thousands of men and women, and some children, who lay in its cells and walked its corridors.

Mount Eden Prison in the 1950s.
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I have drawn heavily on published first-person accounts of prison life, especially by Mount Eden's first psychologist, Donald McKenzie, and by ex-inmate and later sociologist Greg Newbold. Interviews with former inmates and staff have been invaluable for describing the later years of the institution. The Department of Corrections has cooperated generously by giving me access to the prison and to members of its staff but has not funded this publication, nor has any such funding been sought. The findings and conclusions given here, and any inadvertent errors, are all my own.

I cannot claim direct personal experience of the inside of Mount Eden, either as an inmate or an officer, but I have aimed to do justice to the experiences and memories of those who lived or worked there, while giving others some understanding of one of Auckland's most prominent, recognisable, historically formative, yet least-known institutions (as well as its two long-vanished predecessors). Since no one now faces the possibility of enforced familiarity with the interior of Mount Eden Prison, I hope this book provides a less harrowing experience of passing through its towering, iron-bound wooden gates, under the carved stone portal above the main entrance, and into its sunless and austere back corridors to do some time.