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Reverberating Historical Privilege of a “Middling” Sort of Settler Family

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Abstract: Critical family history illuminates societal relations of inequality through focusing on the experiences and trajectories of particular families. Here, I focus on unequal relations between white settler colonizers and indigenous communities within Aotearoa, New Zealand. I use data gathered from family wills and archival research to sketch aspects of the economic privilege of branches of my own ancestral families in contrast to the economic dispossession and injustices faced by the Māori communities alongside whom they lived. The concept of historical privilege forms the analytic basis of this exploration, beginning with the founding historical windfalls experienced by the Bell and Graham families through their initial acquisition of Māori lands and the parallel historical trauma experienced by Māori at the loss of these lands. I then explore how these windfalls and traumas underpinned the divergent economic trajectories on both sides of this colonial relationship, touching on issues of family inheritance and structural and symbolic privilege. Neither the Bells nor the Grahams accumulated significant wealth, but the stories of such “middling” families are helpful in illuminating mechanisms of historical privilege that we inheritors of such privilege find it difficult to “see” or remember.

Keywords: historical privilege; historical trauma; indigenous-settler relations; structural privilege; symbolic privilege; constitutive forgetting

1. Introduction

The invisibility of conferred privilege supports and perpetuates disparities by allowing those who have advantage to assign their fortune to merit and others’ disadvantage to personal blame, bad luck, or lack of hard work rather than acknowledging and understanding structural forces. (Borell et al. 2009, p. 35)

The notion of “conferred privilege” encourages us to think about how privilege works both spatially and temporally. Spatially, privilege is identifiable in the contrasting social locations of particular social groups. However, as Māori scholar Belinda Borell and her colleagues note, we (particularly the privileged) tend to deny the workings of privilege in favour of discourses of merit and blame. This makes it even more important that we explore the temporal dimension of the way in which privilege is conferred. We can do so by investigating the histories of discriminatory social institutions and systems, and/or by tracing the workings of privilege through the stories of individual families (Sleeter 2015). In this paper, I explore how conferred (or historical) privilege works by contrasting the stories of two branches of my own white settler/Pākehā family in Aotearoa New Zealand with those of the Māori communities amongst whom they lived. I focus mostly on economics and the issue of property in land, the transfer of land from Māori to Pākehā being a key moment of “historical trauma” for Māori and “historical windfall” for Pākehā. This primary focus on economics and land means that analysis of many systems of institutional discrimination and privilege—in education, welfare, health,

and political systems and policies in particular—are outside the frame of this paper.¹ However, I note some of the welfare and health impacts of the economic systems that are at the heart of the paper. In addition to my primary focus on material forms of privilege, this paper also briefly outlines some key symbolic or discursive resources dominant within New Zealand society through the historical periods discussed—symbolic forms of, and justifications for, the privileges my family has experienced and I myself inherited.

I acknowledge that there is an unevenness in this comparison between specific families on the one hand and broader communities on the other. However, I argue that my family story is similar to that of many property-owning Pākehā families of their times. While some financial wealth was accrued and passed down through my family, it was not enough to position us amongst the wealthy of our society. We were and remain a “middling” sort of family. Hence, the story of my family, while unique in its details, would be—in broad terms—similar to that of many others amongst the Pākehā population, and particularly those whose ancestors, like mine, arrived in the early decades of our colonial history. It follows that a contrast between the experience of this family and broad aspects of the experience of their Māori neighbours can usefully highlight the differential working of collective privilege and disadvantage.

At the outset of this paper, I also want to acknowledge two particular limitations of this type of work that seeks to draw attention to the historical privilege accrued in the settler colonial experience. Firstly, by definition, such work privileges capitalist/materialist forms of value. I focus here on economic location and the ownership of land to draw comparisons between the advantaged location of white settlers and the disadvantaged location of indigenous Māori. Alternative Māori measures of wealth, status, well-being, and/or what constitutes a good and successful life are outside this framework. Hence, alongside the story of comparison told below sit diverse stories of Māori realities through this historical period that recount forms of status and well-being from within the framework of Te Ao Māori, the Māori world. In seeking redress and repair for the injustices of colonization, Māori quite rightly seek not only forms of parity in terms of the kinds of economic and other material measures focused on here, but also the re-centring of Te Ao Māori and Māori models of economic value, health, education and so on. Hence, the history I canvas can only be a very limited one. Secondly, it is limited also in the way that centring on the harms done to Māori by the imposition of colonial and capitalist frameworks risks presenting Māori as the passive victims of this history. It is beyond the scope of this paper to include the histories of Māori agency and struggle that also sit alongside the accounts of colonial trauma and harm below, but it is crucial to note the existence and impacts of these ongoing struggles.² More broadly, the paper is not about my ancestors’ agency either, but is focused on the structures that worked to privilege them (beyond their merits) at the expense of their Māori neighbours. Re-reading this paper as I make final revisions, I myself find it painful to be reminded of this history. I acknowledge it may be a painful read for Māori, and unnecessary for those already well-versed in our colonial history. However, to ignore the structural privileging of Pākehā in our colonial history is to support the continuation of the harm. As Borell and her colleagues argue, “If we are serious about addressing the ill effects of colonization on one population [Māori], equitable acknowledgement

¹ The histories of the impacts of these systems on Māori is well documented however, and the following references are only a small sample of this extensive literature. On Maori health impacts, see for example [Durie \(1998\)](#), the special issue on Maori health history in *Health & History* ([Bryder and Dow 2001](#)), and [Wirihana and Smith \(2014\)](#). On impacts of the education system, see for example [Simon and Smith \(2001\)](#) and for personal accounts see, for example, [Edwards \(1990\)](#) and [Ngaamo \(2019\)](#). On Maori and politics, see the collection edited by [Bargh \(2010\)](#) and on the legal system, the work of Ani Mikaere (for example, [Mikaere 2011](#)). Moana Jackson has been a hugely important thinker, writer and speaker on the impacts of colonisation in criminal justice (for an early example, see [Jackson 1988](#)) and on constitutional reform (including his work as part of [Matike Mai 2015](#)).

² And again, there is an extensive literature that centres on Māori agency and resistance throughout our colonial history. Much of the work cited in Note 1 includes discussion of Māori agency and resistance to colonisation. For more general historical overviews, a classic work that centres Māori resistance is [Walker \(2004\)](#) and a more recent example is [Anderson et al. \(2015\)](#).

of the privileging effects consequential to another [Pākehā] must also be part of the conversation” (Borell et al. 2018, p. 31).

In the first section, I begin by exploring some of the reasons that privilege is difficult to “see” and argue for the value of critical family history as a method for making it visible. The following section discusses the academic literature on privilege, identifying the specific concepts that will be used to analyze my own family’s experiences of property and inheritance. The rest of the paper then draws broadly on Borell et al.’s 2018 conceptualization of historical privilege to structure a chronological exploration of the relative positions of my family and the Māori communities amongst whom they lived, from an initial founding of privilege to its renewal through time via mechanisms of inheritance, structural privilege and symbolic privilege. Each section interweaves details of my specific family, of local Māori communities and some discussion of broader national policies that account for their relative situations. In the conclusion, I reflect on the present situation of my family and Māori communities and on the value of critical family history as a method for the exploration of forms of privilege.

2. Invisibilising, Forgetting and Critical Family History

One’s own privilege is extremely difficult to see, especially when you have not inherited wealth. In general, if people have any awareness of injustice in relation to their own social location, it tends to be a matter of feeling disadvantaged in comparison to those with more wealth and status than themselves, rather than feeling the injustice of their own advantage compared to those with less. People tend to look “up”, rather than “down”, and this orientation to feeling your own disadvantage in relation to those better off is encouraged by the aspirational, consumer-driven cultures of our times. Even so, there are moments when we cannot fail to notice our privilege—when we are forced to look “down”. One of these might be passing homeless people in the street. At times we give money to those we pass, at others we do not—we have no cash on us, there are too many of them! We turn away, feeling uncomfortable and complicit, possibly angry with them for somehow being the source of this discomfort. We “blame the victim”. Thus, the disadvantages of groups less well off than ourselves tend to become construed as their insufficiencies and failures in contrast to our normality, rather than as the results of discriminations that privilege the dominant.

We also utilise strategic “forgetting” to blind ourselves to the workings of historical privilege. For settler peoples such as Pākehā, one form this takes is what Connerton (2008, pp. 62–4) has called “constitutive forgetting”, a kind of forgetting entailed in the creation of a new identity. Constitutive forgetting enables settler peoples to assert their new identities, as New Zealanders or any other settler nationality, while forgetting how they acquired this status. Reflecting on my own family forgetting, I note that I was not raised on tales of migration and “making good”. I do not remember any emphasis being given to the family’s Scottish, Protestant Irish or English roots. I was interested in family history as a young person and did learn something of where my ancestors had come from, but it was never a matter of identity. We were just New Zealanders—and I am struck, looking back, by the fact that the family trees I drew up as a young person all started with the ancestor who first came to New Zealand. My ancestors had migrated, but there were no memories of, or identification with, where they had migrated from, or interest in our earlier ancestors who had lived out their lives in the British Isles. This seems a perfect example of constitutive forgetting. As Connerton (2008, p. 63) says, while we usually think about forgetting as a matter of loss (of memory), the point here is what is *gained* by forgetting:

the gain that accrues to those who know how to discard memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one’s current identity and ongoing purposes. Forgetting then becomes part of the process by which newly shared memories are constructed because a new set of memories are frequently accompanied by a set of tacitly shared silences. Many small acts of forgetting that these silences enable over time are not random but patterned.

In forgetting our prior homelands, my family have been more easily able to claim New Zealand as their/our home. Moreover, in forgetting the details of our migration story, we have been able to forget the processes by which we have become New Zealanders. Even more than that, we have been able to become New Zealanders.³ I cannot go back in time and trace the contours of this forgetting. I do not know if there were deliberate silences around the processes of land acquisition—and particularly the impacts of that acquisition on Māori communities—or if it was more a matter of what Connerton suggests, the discarding of memories “that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one’s current identity and ongoing purposes”. These memories were not useful to remember, and were useful to forget.

Against such forgetting, critical family history is a powerful and personalized tool for excavating the invisibilized and forgotten workings of historical privilege that underpin us becoming settler national subjects. Using a mix of genealogical methods to learn the details of family experience, and historical methods to explore the wider context in which they lived, critical family history involves “situating families within larger contexts that draw attention to unequal relations” (Sleeter 2015, p. 3). Sleeter (2011, 2014, 2015), for example, has drawn on critical theory’s focus on class, critical race theory’s focus on race, and critical feminism’s focus on gender to explore her own family history. Critical family history is a rich method for this kind of intersectional exploration of relations of inequality. Here, my analysis centres on the intersectionality of “race” and class in the story of my own family’s relative privilege.

3. Defining Privilege

Intriguingly, in addition to privilege being difficult for the privileged themselves to “see”, identifying the structures and mechanisms of privilege is not a well-developed theoretical area either.⁴ In the 1980s, Peggy McIntosh (1988)’s probing of her “invisible knapsack” of white privileges was a groundbreaking moment that opened up this area of study. McIntosh’s list of privileges made visible everyday advantages in the experiences of white people, showing us (white folks) that what we took for granted as “normal” were, in fact, forms of privilege. McIntosh’s list of privileges, ranging from the seemingly trivial, such as being able to buy band-aids that match our skin tones, to the more materially significant, such as being able to rent or buy housing in any area without being discriminated against, to the ideologically powerful, such as being sure her children would be exposed to school curricula that would testify to the existence of their “race”, drew her white readers’ attention to the fact that these taken-for-granted everyday expectations were not universally shared.

If McIntosh’s list of white privileges is the (now visible) tip of the iceberg, what is the shape and extent of the forces below the surface that keep this tip afloat? A number of scholars have teased out different forms of privilege and identified a range of discriminatory mechanisms that produce them. I am particularly drawn to the notion of “historical privilege”, as conceptualized by Belinda Borell and colleagues, working in the area of Māori health. Borell, as a Māori researcher, has focused on “researching back” to explore the workings of Pākehā privilege in our society. The resulting concept of historical privilege is useful as a way of identifying the complex of sources of privilege we Pākehā/white people inherit from our familial and societal pasts:

The complex and collective structural advantages experienced over time and across generations by a group of people who share an identity, affiliation, or circumstance. These structured advantages may include financial and economic rewards, as well as legal, social and cultural freedoms that were denied to others. (Borell et al. 2018, p. 26)

³ On the politics and costs of settler forgetting see Lawson (1995), Turner (1999) and Bell (2004).

⁴ But economic analyses can point to the differential opportunities experienced on the basis of class and wealth (e.g., Rashbrooke 2013).

Borell and her colleagues have turned to previous definitions of historical trauma—so much easier to “see”—to tease out the intergenerational sources and dynamics of historical privilege on the other side of the disadvantage–privilege relationship. From that starting point, they identify five “key elements” of historical privilege—1. founding/initiating act(s) of windfall, 2. ongoing acts of historical renewal, 3. experienced by collectives, 4. across multiple generations, and 5. involving a mix of remembrance and forgetting (with an emphasis on forgetting).⁵

The notion of a “windfall” immediately signifies the accumulation of wealth, power and status beyond what might be expected by an individual or family in the normal course of events. Like windfall fruit, these are benefits accrued without the same effort as those that must be picked or cut from the trees. Labour is expended, for sure, but accumulation/harvesting is made easier by forces beyond the individuals’ efforts. Historical acts of windfall are then moments and processes in the past that shifted the trajectory of an individual and family “upwards”, offering novel opportunities for their advancement. Thinking purely about land, if we trace the historical mechanisms of the enclosure and privatization of common lands in European societies, of indigenous land dispossession in settler colonial societies and of slavery in the Americas, we are identifying founding windfalls that resulted in the privileging of some social classes and “races” over others.

The gains made via such windfalls are then able to be consolidated and built upon by what Borell and her colleagues call “ongoing renewal” (Borell et al. 2018, p. 26). They describe this as the “naturalisation of group superiority through structural, institutional and cultural favouritism” (Borell et al. 2018, p. 31), a description encompassing a number of societal processes by which wealth, power and status are reproduced across time. Two of the important dimensions of these processes of renewal are what Sandra Harding (1989, cited in (Collins 2014, p. 244)) identified as structural and symbolic privilege. Privilege is upheld and reproduced via discriminatory social structures/institutions and by sets of ideas or discourses (symbolic systems) that naturalize and normalize these discriminations. Key institutions in the reproduction of discrimination and privilege are legal systems upholding private property rights, discriminatory financial institutions, political systems embedding advantage to some over others, education systems reproducing class distinctions and cultural favouritism, and health systems that reproduce inequalities in morbidity and mortality. The discriminatory processes and outcomes of these institutions are, in turn, supported by discourses that either deny or justify them.

Crucially, these windfalls and processes of renewal are not isolated individual experiences, but collectively felt and experienced across multiple generations. Borell and her colleagues point to “individual and familial wealth acquisition supported by government action” and the ways that windfalls in “wealth, power and social status are passed on and added to by subsequent generations” (Borell et al. 2018, p. 31). These are key outcomes of the processes of renewal, the consolidation and amplification of privilege across time, evident within family histories, and group histories more broadly, and supported and enabled by government policies.

The intergenerational renewal of privilege may be evident at a familial level in the form of wealth and inheritance, and/or at a societal level in social statistics that point to the existence of structural/institutional biases and discrimination. Hence, intergenerational historical privilege operates even in the absence of any highly visible inheritance of wealth, while the absence of significant wealth contributes to our difficulty in seeing and acknowledging this. Christine Sleeter and Michael Kimmel have developed apt and illuminating metaphors to help us think about the workings of these less visible aspects of privilege. Sleeter (2014) identifies the specific transfer of family wealth, in the forms of inheritance and/or financial aid from living relatives, as operating as “footholds” that “enable opportunity” and “cushions” that “protect from misfortune”. Even small transfers of such wealth can make a crucial difference, boosting the efforts of individuals to get onto and to scale the career and property ladders that secure their financial and status positions. Kimmel (2014, p. 1)

⁵ Extracted from Table 1 in Borell et al. (2018, p. 31).

contrasts walking into the wind (disadvantage) and walking with the wind at your back (privilege). Walking into the wind requires extra effort to get anywhere, while the wind at your back propels you along, supporting and amplifying the energy and effort you expend yourself. While “footholds and cushions” refer to the transfer of resources within a family, Kimmel’s “warm tailwind” points to the external supports that the privileged benefit from—forms of social structure (legal, financial, political) that operate in concert with, and even in the absence of, familial wealth.

A final support to the reproduction of privilege are the discursive formations that naturalize differential privilege and disadvantage, explaining the situation away as not one of injustice, but of relative merits and efforts. These symbolic resources, themselves a form of “cushion” shielding the privileged from the truth of their social location, are bolstered by a careful mix of remembering and forgetting. Memories of violent usurpation and unfair advantage are forgotten, while those of “pluck” (courage), talent, effort and luck are remembered. In these ways, the structural advantages of individuals, families and collectives can be ignored and denied.

4. Historical Windfalls and Trauma

Within settler societies, the founding historical windfall for the settler community is taking possession of indigenous land. This entailed a colonial form of enclosure, as what had been communal land became privatized (Wynyard 2017). Land became a commodity in a capitalist market and a source of private (rather than community) wealth. Privately owned land was farmed to provide family income and sustenance, and speculated on by “landgrabbers” looking to rent or make a quick return by re-selling land shortly after their initial purchase—a successful strategy in areas where towns were being established and suburban-sized sections were on sale. While I do not know the histories of every branch of my ancestral family, for those I do know about (the Bells and the Grahams), the acquisition, renting and sale of land were fundamental means of wealth creation.

In Aotearoa New Zealand there were three main mechanisms by which this transfer of land occurred—sales, government confiscations, and the workings of the Native Land Court. My own family’s fortunes are clearly traceable to the first two of these. Firstly, settlers acquired land by purchase, with many Māori being willing sellers in the early years of contact and settlement.⁶ At the same time, the British government was a somewhat reluctant colonizer of New Zealand and keen to establish the colony on a shoestring budget. This meant that the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, by which it was agreed that the British could establish a government in New Zealand, also included agreement that Māori could only sell land to the government rather than private individuals.⁷ From the point of view of the British, this served a number of purposes—profits from land sales could partially fund the colony, and the government could control the price of land (buying cheaply from Māori who had no alternative buyers).

George Graham, and his wife, Jane, (with their (then) three children) were amongst the earliest of my ancestors to arrive in New Zealand, landing in Auckland with the early governmental forces in 1840. George was employed as a Foreman of Works for the Royal Engineers, the branch of the British Army responsible for the building of infrastructure that supported military operations. Thus George arrived with a job and an income, although not an overly generous one, and like many government officials he supplemented this income buying and selling land. When the first town sections were auctioned in the new settlement of Auckland by the colonial government in April 1841, speculators were present in abundance and prices were the highest in the British Empire at the time (Stone 2001, pp. 296–97). George Graham was amongst those speculating on these sales, writing in his diary, “I purchased No. 8

⁶ At this stage (roughly the 1830s to 1850s), while the balance of political power was still in their favour and numbers of settlers were low, Māori were often keen to establish relationships with Pākehā, who were a source of new crops, technologies and trading opportunities (for example, see (Binney et al. 2015)).

⁷ This government right of pre-emption, as it was known, lasted until 1865 apart from a period from 1844–1846 when it was waived.

Allotment, Section 4 for 270£ and sold half the Same day for 180£ to a Mr. Stone the land sold the first day fetched upwards of 24,000£".⁸ Thus began a long period of land buying and selling for George, which I am still researching. To date, I have identified around 30 purchases or land claims by George Graham, totaling over 2000 acres. For a man who began his working life as a carpenter, this land acquisition formed the economic foundation (supplemented by his second wife's own wealth) that ultimately enabled him to live out his final years in gentility in Hove, Brighton, England.

Unlike George and Jane Graham, Allen and Mary Bell came from labouring backgrounds in Northern Ireland, meeting and marrying in the 1860s in the Canterbury region of the South Island where they bought their first farm. The depression of the 1880s meant they could not keep up their mortgage payments and had to walk off that farm with nothing. They then moved to Taranaki on the North Island's west coast and took up Māori leasehold land at Puniho, near Parihaka, where they raised their nine children. This leasehold land was amongst the most infamous examples of unjustly confiscated Māori land within New Zealand history. Such land confiscations came about as a result of the rapacious desire of settlers for Māori land and consequent growing Māori resistance to land sales and encroachments on their political and economic power. These pressures ultimately led to hostilities breaking out between Māori and colonial forces, the conflicts themselves providing an excuse for the second mechanism of land alienation—the confiscation of Māori lands as a punishment for "rebellion"⁹ (Ward 1973; Walker 2004; Wynyard 2017). According to Wynyard (2017, p. 19) over 3,230,000 acres of Māori land in the North Island were acquired via confiscation. Amongst the most notorious of these confiscations was that of Taranaki lands around the small settlement of Parihaka from which Te Whiti-o-Rongomai and Tohu Tākahi led a campaign of peaceful resistance to colonial government attempts to survey these confiscated lands for sale. As surveyors laid lines and set out surveying pegs, from 1879 to 1881 the followers of these leaders ploughed up the lands and pulled out the pegs, until colonial forces invaded Parihaka and arrested Te Whiti, Tohu and other leaders on 5 November 1881 (Scott 1975; Buchanan 2009; Keenan 2012). Resistance to the surveying, enclosure and privatization of these confiscated lands continued on into the late 1890s, beyond the passing of the West Coast Settlement Reserves Act of 1892, which "instituted a system of renewable leases to settlers of over 200,000 acres" of these lands (Keenan 2012), with my great-grandparents, Allen and Mary Bell being amongst the beneficiaries of this huge injustice.

Both my Graham and Bell ancestors accrued wealth and improved their social status as a result of these historical windfalls. George Graham became wealthy enough to live the life of a gentleman in his later years, while Allen Bell was able to make a comfortable living from his leasehold farm. Both also experienced some social mobility, George from borderline working class/middle class to a firmly middle class position, Allen from working class to petit bourgeois farmer. Both, I have no reason to doubt, worked hard, and George at least, as I have learnt from my research, was entrepreneurial and enterprising in seeking opportunities to build wealth and provide for his family of eight.

While the economic gains of these families were relatively modest, they must be set against the fates of the Māori communities on whose lands they settled—the Ngāti Whātua, Hauraki and Waikato tribes of the Auckland area in the case of George Graham, and Taranaki in the case of Allen Bell. I cannot do justice within the scope of this paper to the story of the impacts of these originating acts of historical trauma on these tribes but, drawing in particular on relevant reports of the Waitangi Tribunal, I focus on general points that would have affected Māori communities nationwide and on the specific cases of Ngāti Whātua, Taranaki (and later Muriwhenua in the Far North), where my Bell and Graham ancestors settled.

⁸ Graham, George. Papers, 1837–1902. Auckland War Memorial Museum Library. MS-90-22. I have kept the punctuation and grammar as used in the typed transcript of the diary quoted.

⁹ Māori were deemed "rebels" even though conflict was provoked by the settler government itself. It is significant that even Māori allies of the colonial government had land confiscated, demonstrating the primary interest in acquiring land rather than quelling "rebellion".

The early land sales themselves, even with Māori as willing sellers, involved injustices. George Graham, for example, bought his first New Zealand land at the first public auction in Auckland. The colonial government had paid Ngāti Whātua £341 for 3000 acres of land to create the settlement of Auckland and made £24,275 from this first auction of a mere 44 acres of that block. Thus, the government's plan to buy cheap and make a profit from land sales immediately disadvantaged Ngāti Whātua's position within a monetary economy (Tribunal 1987, pp. 22–23). Even so, Māori communities were extremely successful producers and traders (in capitalist terms) in the early years of colonization, literally feeding settler communities such as Auckland. The Tribunal (1987, p. 25) reports that Ngāti Whātua were market gardeners, traders and merchants, ship builders and owners, and worked as builders and in the Auckland police force in the 1850s.¹⁰ However, the initial injustices created by Crown land purchasing policy were hugely compounded over time as the impacts of the conversion of land into property to be bought and sold rippled through Māori society.

In addition to Crown purchasing of Māori lands, Māori individuals and tribes sold land directly to settlers—both before the 1840 Treaty established the Crown right of pre-emption and afterwards when, as a result of pressure from both Māori and settlers, that right was waived from 1844 to 1846 (during which time George Graham was one of many who took the opportunity to buy land directly from Māori individuals). Then, from 1865, the Native Land Court was set up to bring Māori lands into a western legal framework with devastating consequences, the work of the Court individualizing Māori land titles and accelerating the loss of land (Williams 1999).¹¹ These land sales by Māori individuals, with or without the authority of tribal leadership, were a huge factor in the erosion of Māori society.

In the first instance, the notion of land as alienable property was completely foreign to Māori systems for determining interest in land, and it is now well understood that Māori would have approached these early land transactions through their own understanding, in which agreements made with settler “purchasers” were viewed as agreements to share the land and as establishing long-term relationships of mutual obligation and reciprocity between the Māori community and settlers.¹² The concept of individual ownership of land viewed as alienable property was in stark contrast to this Māori relationship with the land. The imposition of western property law was then, in itself, a move to destroy Māori tribal society, as became particularly evident with the establishment of the Native Land Court:

The critical damage was done [to Ngāti Whātua] as a result of the provisions of the Native Lands Acts of 1865 and 1867 and the 1869 order of the Native Land Court vesting the whole of the land then in communal ownership in thirteen members only of the tribe as legal and beneficial owners, to the complete exclusion of the great majority. This necessarily destroyed the mana or authority of the tribe in and over their land. (Tribunal 1987, p. 253)

The privatization of collectively held lands thus caused division within Māori communities, between those who wanted to sell and who profited from sales, and those who did not and were dispossessed by sales, and undermined the authority of tribal leaders who traditionally led decision-making in relation to lands.

The amplification of this founding trauma or rupture in the way of life of those tribes whose lands were “simply” confiscated is difficult to imagine. In Taranaki, where the Bell family ultimately settled, there were tensions between Māori and settlers and resistance to settler land-buying from the 1840s. The situation worsened after war broke out in 1860 and continued intermittently throughout the decade, with it now being accepted that the colonial government was the aggressor. From 1863,

¹⁰ See Petrie (2006) on Māori economic enterprise more generally in the early decades of colonization.

¹¹ The 1887 General Allotment Act served a very similar function in the USA (see, for example, (Garrouette 2003, pp. 21–22, 52–53)).

¹² See Healy (2009) for an overview of evidence for and against the continuation of this understanding in the early decades of colonial contact.

the government adopted a policy of “creeping confiscation”, by which military settlers were settled on Māori lands in return for military service (Tribunal 1996, p. 92). An uneasy peace was established in 1869, with large areas of central Taranaki still in Māori possession at this time. Taranaki then suffered over an extended period of war and conflict, compounded by the injustice of extensive confiscations and a “show of justice” when confiscated land was “returned” only to be leased to settlers, such as the Bell family, on perpetual leases with minimal rents (Tribunal 1996, pp. 262–63). As the Tribunal (1996, p. 13) concludes, “all were affected, even non-combatants, because everyone’s land was taken, people were relocated, land tenure was changed, and a whole new social order was imposed. The losses were physical, cultural and spiritual”. Furthermore, these losses were compounded over time, massively disadvantaging local Māori economically, and leaving a legacy of unending spiritual and psychological impacts of festering injustice (Tribunal 1996, pp. 13–14).

Thus, by the late 1800s, the Bells and the Grahams were well-established land-holding families, able to provide some financial help to their children as they grew up. Equally significantly, they lived within communities in which their cultural norms and values were privileged and the political and economic system operated in their group’s interests. The Māori communities of Auckland and Taranaki, in contrast, had been dispossessed of almost all of their land,¹³ had extremely limited political influence, and suffered economic impoverishment and cultural dislocation, some of the details of which will be outlined below.

5. Collective and Intergenerational Renewal of Historical Privilege

5.1. Inheritance

From the founding nineteenth century windfalls of the Bells and Grahams, I can broadly trace the transfers of modest wealth down the generations of the twentieth century to my own generation.¹⁴ On the Graham side, my great-grandfather (the next generation of the Graham line) inherited a share of his father’s land and was an affluent property owner in Auckland, able to raise his own eight children in comfort. I have been unable to identify what my Graham grandmother inherited from her family, but assume it was something. Similarly, I am not sure if my mother, her daughter, inherited anything from her parents. If she did, it was the very modest sum of £50 (approximately NZ\$2500 in 2019).¹⁵ Thus, George Graham’s initial acquisition of wealth was not added to over subsequent generations in my own family line—although other Graham descendants may well have been more financially successful. On the Bell side, my grandfather inherited £250 (approximately NZ\$44,500 in 2019) from his father in 1903. Ultimately, he bought a small and economically marginal dairy farm in Kaitaia (on land bought by earlier settlers from Muriwhenua tribes, probably Te Rarawa), which was left to his sons, including my father. I, in turn, inherited a share of my parents’ house when they died, enabling me to pay off some of my own mortgage and that of my daughter. Looking at this picture as a whole, over time my family has not so much built as maintained a small foundation of wealth.

Reflecting on the impacts of even such modest wealth, Sleeter’s “footholds” and “cushions” are very helpful. In addition to inheritance, I do not know if or how my parents and grandparents may have been helped out financially by their own parents while they were still alive, but thinking back over my own life I can see small ways in which my parents supported me financially—buying my first car, buying me a clothes dryer when I had a small child, giving me “petrol money” every time I went home to visit. These myriad small “footholds and cushions” of wealth supplemented my own hard work, supporting my financial opportunities and helping buffer me against misfortune. All this is on

¹³ By 1900 less than 10% of the landmass of Aotearoa New Zealand remained in Māori hands (Anderson et al. 2015, p. 424).

¹⁴ I have done this by researching the wills of my Bell and Graham ancestors, some of which I could find in the New Zealand National Archives, and others were accessible digitally through the FamilySearch website run by the Mormon Church (<https://www.familysearch.org/en/>).

¹⁵ Current values were estimated using the Inflation Calculator of the Reserve Bank of New Zealand, <https://www.rbnz.govt.nz/monetary-policy/inflation-calculator>.

top of having enough financial resources to raise their children in a warm house, with good food and adequate clothing, as well as the considerable benefits of being a white, middle class (and therefore “respectable”) family in our small-town community.

5.2. Structural Privilege

The financial and class standing of my family, described above, has been supported by the “warm tailwind” (Kimmel 2014) of social structures—legal, financial and political—set up to advantage the white/Pākehā middle class over other New Zealanders. Over at least the first half of the twentieth century, a number of laws and policies continued to pursue the acquisition of Māori lands and to discriminate further against a Māori population already largely dispossessed of their lands, political autonomy and way of life. The Native Land Act of 1909 was a significant policy aiming to acquire more of the remaining Māori land. This act created a Land Purchase Board with an annual budget of \$1,000,000 to buy land, and between 1911 and 1920 reduced the number of acres remaining in Māori ownership from 7,137,205 to 4,787,686 (Tribunal 1987, p. 76).¹⁶ From 1890 to 1920, Atholl Anderson and Judith Binney (Anderson et al. 2015, p. 298) describe “a spiral of [Māori] underdevelopment (poverty giving rise to poor health and poor educational achievement, affecting the potential of the next generation to earn an adequate income)”.

The Māori population was still largely rural in the first half of the twentieth-century, and what little Māori lands were left when the century began were often extremely difficult to develop economically. Banks would not lend money on collectively owned land, where responsibility for mortgage repayments would be difficult to enforce. While the Bell family farm was close to town, Māori lands were generally remote and poorly served by roads and other infrastructure that enabled farmers to get goods in and out. Binney and O’Malley (2015, p. 299) describe the “dual economy” of the early twentieth century:

On the one hand, Pākehā farmers had ready access to mortgages and development loans, and hence the opportunity to acquire stock and farm machinery and improve pastures. The Māori rural economy, by contrast, struggled. Lower standards of living for Māori were ignored [. . .] It was assumed that Māori farming would largely take the form of subsistence agriculture. [. . .] Predominantly Māori communities tended to miss out on key infrastructure like roads and bridges that were built to connect Pākehā farmers to their markets. [. . .] Even today, many Māori-owned lands are still effectively land-locked, and without legal access.

Writing about the situation of the tribes in the Far North from 1880 to 1940, where my grandfather Allen Bell bought his farm around 1920, John Koning and Bill Oliver paint a distressing picture of the consequences of the impoverishment and neglect of the dual economy at that time. As elsewhere, what land remained in Māori hands largely ended up leased to Pākehā farmers, and Pākehā communities were supported with infrastructure development and the ability to raise loans while Māori were not (Koning and Oliver 1993, pp. 15–18). The economic impoverishment Māori families then faced resulted in an extreme level of deprivation for some, leading to epidemics of communicable diseases, poor nutrition (even starvation at the extreme end) and high mortality and morbidity rates (Koning and Oliver 1993, pp. 19–22). From the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, the living conditions of Māori communities in the Far North “remained poor to abysmal” (Puckey 2011, p. 267) and they “simply staggered their way from one major health crisis to another” (Geiringer 1992, p. 16, quoted in (Koning and Oliver 1993, p. 28)), with the authorities seemingly deaf to pleas from local professionals to send more medical help (Koning and Oliver 1993, pp. 42–47). So, while the Bells and other Pākehā families were able to put nutritious food on their tables and raise healthy children, many Māori families were not.

¹⁶ Of those remaining acres, the Tribunal (1987, p. 76) also notes that 750,000 acres were leased to Pākehā and another 750,000 acres were ‘unsuitable for any development’, leaving only 3 million acres in Māori hands able to contribute to the communities’ economic survival and development.

By the time the Depression of the 1930s hit, the Māori land development schemes initiated by Sir Apirana Ngata¹⁷ as Minister of Native Affairs were starting to provide financial assistance to the Māori farming economy, but as Aroha Harris notes “they were never a cure-all for poverty, nor a buffer against the severe effects of the Depression” (Harris 2015, p. 327). These effects were disproportionately felt by Māori, who were often employed in casual labouring jobs and the first to be laid off. By 1933, Harris (2015, p. 325) reports that 75% of adult Māori men were unemployed. Moreover, until the first Labour government came to power in 1935, Māori were ineligible for public works schemes and were paid welfare benefits at a lower rate than Pākehā, on the basis that as collectively organized people they needed less and could “live off the land” (Harris 2015, p. 325). Despite the moves to correct these forms of financial discrimination, many families continued to need to supplement their farming incomes with welfare and/or part-time work for others. Reading Harris, I remember my father talking about the Māori men employed as seasonal workers on the family farm outside of Kaitiāia, a clear indicator, again, of the relative economic privilege of the Bells over these neighbouring families.

In Taranaki, the discriminations against Māori landholders were vastly accentuated by government policy regarding the confiscated lands. As already noted, confiscated land ostensibly “returned” to Māori was, in reality, retained in settler hands via the establishment of perpetual leases with low rents. This policy renewed the privilege of white settler families, such as the Bells, while continuing the trajectory of Māori dispossession and impoverishment. During the Depression, rent arrears were often remitted for Pākehā farmers, while Māori suffered the discriminations mentioned above. The Tribunal (1996, p. 12) notes that:

[p]rovisions were also made to help the lessees buy the freehold. By 1976, 63 percent of the Māori reserves had been sold by the officials administering them. Thus, land was said to have been “returned” to Māori, when in fact they were denied the control and possession of it.

While I do not know the history of the Bell farm at Puniho, I imagine that at some point my great-grandfather, or one or more of his sons, took up this opportunity to freehold their farm and secure their ownership on a long-term basis.

And in Auckland, where the Graham family had begun their lives in New Zealand and done so well, in the early twentieth century the dispossession of Ngāti Whātua continued unabated as the city grew. A commission in 1908 recommended that 600 acres be reserved for the tribe, but was ignored (Tribunal 1987, pp. 74–76). By mid-century, Ngāti Whātua were landless, their sacred burial grounds desecrated, and the last families were forced from their ancestral lands and relocated elsewhere in the city. When the Waitangi Tribunal heard their grievances in the 1980s, a Pākehā who had witnessed these final evictions gave the following evidence:

It is 35 long years ago but it is still a wound in my side as I remember the smoke drifting across Tamaki Drive. The smoke was billowing and swirling and illuminated from all sides by the flames of collapsing buildings.

The burning, smouldering whares [houses] and the embers glowed through the night. (I would say the embers smoulder still.)

¹⁷ Ngata was one of a small group of highly successful and influential graduates of Te Aute College, a Māori boys’ boarding school established in the 1850s. Exploration of educational discrimination against Māori is beyond my scope here, but the history of Te Aute in the early twentieth century is one indicative example. Ngata, and others who went on to be influential Māori leaders, attended Te Aute in the late 1800s, pursuing an academic curriculum that enabled them to undertake further education at university. Following the Royal Commission in 1906, pressure was put on the school to drop this curriculum in favour of teaching Māori boys agricultural skills to prepare them to take up farming. While the school resisted dropping the academic stream, an agricultural stream was introduced as a result of this pressure (Barrington 1992).

Reports of an old man being dragged from the fire are wrong. He actually cast himself into the holocaust of his home. I remember vividly the wailing of the wahine [women] and the confused shouts of the young. It could be clearly heard on the harbour.

I have never forgotten that infamy. It is time the injustices Ngāti Whātua suffered were redressed.

(evidence of John Broadbent, ([Tribunal 1987](#), p. 125))

By mid-century, my parents were married and settled on the Bell family farm in Kaitaia. They never had much money and had to work hard to make ends meet. However, they were healthy and well-fed and had a secure economic foundation on which to raise their family and live comfortable and happy lives. They were also white and “respectable”, members of a family of some standing in the community (even if they were the poor relations of that family!). At the same time, their Māori neighbours were working as wage labourers, often still living on marginal lands, and were starting to migrate to the cities to take up working class jobs there (see, for example, ([Williams 2015](#))). Furthermore, in addition to their differential class locations, Māori communities and families nationwide lived with the ongoing sense of burning injustice skewing and blighting their lives (and fueling ongoing resistance). The [Tribunal \(1987, p. 126\)](#) conclude, for example, that “Ngāti Whātua inherited a legacy of bitterness, division and defeat”. In Taranaki, this legacy of bitterness and injustice was at least as strong, with the [Tribunal \(1996, p. 13\)](#) arguing that:

the conquest [was] so arranged as to inflict the pain of the past on every generation of their people. [. . .] Taranaki Māori were dispossessed of their land, leadership, means of livelihood, personal freedom, and social structure and values. As Māori, they were denied their rights of autonomy, and as British subjects, their civil rights were removed. For decades, they were subjected to sustained attacks on their property and persons.

This was the nation into which I was born in the 1950s. I grew up in a community with a large Māori population, with Māori neighbours and friends at school. These Māori families were largely poorer than my family, some deemed “respectable” and others not. By the time I entered high school in the late 1960s, there were few Māori in the academic stream that prepared teenagers for tertiary education. Instead, they were in the streams that prepared them for blue-collar, working class employment, or at best, white-collar clerical jobs. These obvious differences in social location were accepted and normalized via discourses that naturalized this situation, and whose efficacy depended on forgetting our national history.

5.3. Symbolic Privilege

At the outset of this paper, I mentioned the difficulty the privileged have in seeing our/their privilege, and the discomfort that can follow at times when we/they are forced to see it. Privilege is made difficult to see by discourses that naturalize and normalize the systems of advantage and disadvantage and the contrasting social locations of different families and groups. These act as a form of magic that turns privilege into something else, like the magician turning a rabbit into a handkerchief (actually, the rabbit is still a rabbit but to the audience it has disappeared—a parallel to forgetting). In this section of the paper, I want to briefly sketch some of the symbolic resources that my family has had access to over time that have made it easy not to “see” the rabbit.

Researching the life of my great-great-grandfather, George Graham, has brought home to me the all-pervasive effects of social hierarchy in the nineteenth century British world. His letters to superiors that I have seen in the archives are all signed “your most obedient humble servant”, a formula not peculiar to George, but one used in all letters to superiors that I have read from that period. In nineteenth century British culture, social distinctions that created class divides and marked degrees of privilege

were finely grained, jealously guarded and hugely powerful in shaping lives and opportunities.¹⁸ Thinking of this now, it is easy to imagine how the discourse of colonization as a “civilizing mission”, bringing “civilization” to uncouth “savages”, would have been an easy fit for colonial settlers as a way to make sense of their own lives and actions, as well as making sense of the new experiences and encounters with a completely different culture and world.

The discourse of the civilizing mission was dominant at the time that George Graham came to Aotearoa, New Zealand in 1840 and he was a persistent proponent of it throughout his time in the country. He became known as an “ultra philo Māori” (Buchanan 1997), a “Māori lover”, for his support of Māori people and his struggles against various injustices against them.¹⁹ It seems that his early contacts with Māori, and maybe particularly the experience of organizing and working with Māori labourers building military barracks in Auckland in the 1840s, left him with a warm regard and admiration for Māori. However, reading the archive I notice how this regard and admiration is inextricably linked to the ways in which he saw these labourers adopting the standards of British civilization—their honesty, sobriety, love of reading, regular religious attendance and work ethic provoked his affection and respect. As his life in New Zealand progressed, George retained this positive perception of Māori and it is notable that one of his more historically significant relationships was with Wiremu Tamihana, a Māori leader who embraced Christianity and established the economically flourishing, agricultural-based community of Berea in the Hauraki Plains.

Crucially, these warm and admiring relationships with Māori sat alongside George’s work for the British military and his building of wealth via the acquisition of Māori land. He was a cog in the colonial system, supporting the assertion and projection of British power and sovereignty in New Zealand, and a successful provider for his family, primarily through land speculation. How did George reconcile his fondness and admiration for Māori with his economic and military activities which, from today’s perspective, were clearly against their interests? All lives are studded with elements of contradiction (such as social justice fighters passing the homeless in the streets on their way to their comfortable suburban homes), but I have no doubt that the “civilizing mission” was at least a solace to George in any dark moments he experienced as witness to the Māori dispossession and impoverishment that began during his period in the country. I have no reason to doubt that he saw himself as a “good” man and believed that the capitalist economic system, British legal and political systems, and Christianity, were all beneficial innovations for the Māori world.

I have no comparable archive to give any specific insight into the mindset and beliefs of Allen and Mary Bell, but by the time they arrived in New Zealand in the 1860s the symbolic justifications for colonization were shifting, the “civilizing mission” giving way, to a degree at least, to a more directly racial discourse. By the time the Bells settled in Taranaki in the 1880s, the Social Darwinist discourse of a racial struggle for survival was a common justification for war and confiscation, and the resulting degradation of Māori communities (see, for example, (Stenhouse 1994; Clayworth 1999)). Settlers justified and consoled themselves with the argument that Māori were an inferior and “dying” race, making way for the superior white race of the British Isles. From this perspective, investing in infrastructure for Māori communities, or economic supports for Māori farmers, were considered a waste of resources: “some also viewed Māori as lazy and unlikely to use land productively, and so

¹⁸ Even as late as the 1960s, this notion of respect for class distinctions was being promulgated. In church, as a child, I remember singing the hymn “All things bright and beautiful”, first published in 1848. It was one of my favourites for its attractive melody (it was written for children) and the lyrics about the creation of myriad creatures in the natural world. It also included this verse, which naturalised the social hierarchy of wealth and class as part of God’s plan:

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.

¹⁹ My thanks to Alison Jones for sharing the excerpt from her great-great-great grandfather Buchanan’s diaries with me.

believed that any new investment in infrastructure would be wasted on them” (Binney and O’Malley 2015, p. 299).²⁰ While I have no idea if my great-grandparents adhered to this discourse, they certainly benefited from the systems of discrimination it supported.

By the time I was walking to school, past poorer Māori houses and in the academic stream at high school while most of my Māori peers were not, the symbolic resources the Pākehā community drew on to feel comfortable with this situation—and to not “see” the injustice of it—had shifted again. The discourse that percolated through my hometown (although I have no memory of it being repeated in my family) was that Māori were lazy and not interested in education. Māori farms were underdeveloped because they did not care and could not be bothered putting in the effort. What money they had was spent on alcohol or given away to family. Māori children did not do well at school because their parents put no value on education and did not encourage them. Pākehā families and individuals, on the other hand, could account for their achievements as a result of their own merits and the hard work they had put in. Rather than a strictly racial discourse, but still marked with shades of the “savage”, the symbolic justification for structural injustice had shifted to arguments about inherent talent and effort, in other words a discourse of meritocracy.

This discourse was further bolstered by the idea that we all began on a “level playing field” that gave each individual an equal opportunity. If Māori did not do well, they had only themselves to blame. This “level playing field”, or “equal opportunity”, argument depended on the convenient forgetting of our history. We learnt no New Zealand history at school. We/Pākehā had conveniently forgotten how we had actually come to occupy these comfortable positions of classed and racialized privilege. For me, personally, it was not until I was a trainee teacher in the 1980s and attended a lecture by Ranginui Walker, at which I learnt about the thriving Māori economy of the 1850s, that I was exposed to alternative understandings. I remember the shock and epiphany of that lecture, “There is nothing inferior about Māori. What has happened to them was done to them!”. From that seed, in fits and starts, I began the long, ongoing journey of learning about and starting to understand the systems of privilege and discrimination that account for the inequalities and injustices still prevalent around me today.

6. Conclusions

One of the values of critical family history is the way it illuminates and helps us tease out some of the intricate workings of historical privilege over time. The concrete details of particular families are powerful tools for exposing the often abstract and hard to see concept of privilege. I have focused here primarily on economic status identified by wealth and land ownership, but this rich tool lends itself to a focus on many different issues. To further explore racialized and class privilege, parallel stories could be told focusing on issues such as the educational or health status of my family across time in contrast to education and health statistics for Māori communities. Important work can also be done by focusing, in particular, on the dynamics of gendered inequalities in combination with race and/or class. In addition, while I have focused on the history of my own country, there are strong parallels to be drawn elsewhere, beginning with whatever form of “historical windfall” began a cascade of mechanisms and effects of relative advantage and disadvantage.

I have followed the thread of my own particular branch of the Bell and Graham families from the arrival of my first ancestors to Aotearoa New Zealand. To my generation, this has been a solidly, 100% white/Pākehā family line, but the generations following mine include children and grandchildren of Māori descent and who identify as Māori. I know also that at least one of George Graham’s grandsons, George Samuel Graham, married a Māori woman and had seven children, beginning

²⁰ Koning and Oliver (1993, p. 13): ‘Māori were seen as a “dying race” whose remnants would be absorbed into the dominant British culture. [. . .] It was widely believed that Māori should be required either to adjust to the dominant economy or suffer the consequences.’

a line of Māori Graham families. In addition to these Māori–Pākehā family connections that I do know of, there are likely to be others that I do not. It is important to note that these histories of intermarriage and entanglement between Māori and Pākehā are not uncommon in Aotearoa New Zealand (see, for example, (Wanhalla 2013; Kukutai and Webber 2017)) and we cannot then draw a tidy racial (or class), line between the trajectories of Māori and Pākehā family histories. The picture of privilege across branches and generations of my extended family, or any family, will be crisscrossed with components of relative privilege and disadvantage, and the same is true for any social group we care to identify.

I have argued for the ordinariness of my settler family history, which may not be representative of others but, even so, enables us to see the workings of historical privilege that will be paralleled in different specifics in other Pākehā families. My family no longer has a family farm, our only property in land taking the form of suburban sections on which we live. This shift itself speaks to a number of things—to the consolidation of farms into larger and larger units, to the Pākehā relationship with land as property to be bought and sold as needs and interests shift (rather than a homeplace that is the foundation of indigenous identities and an integral component of indigenous ways of life), and to a failure to amplify our particular familial economic privilege over time. As a family we remain “middling”, which does not detract from the reality of our relative privilege compared to many Māori families in our communities.

Finally, it is crucial to reiterate that, while I have necessarily focused on Māori disadvantage here, throughout our colonial history Māori have struggled against the structures designed to keep them subordinate and to destroy their culture and communities. They have not been passive victims of Pākehā domination, but smart and resilient fighters for justice and survival throughout (Cox 1993; Walker 2004; Puckey 2011; Anderson et al. 2015). The issue of mechanisms of Māori land dispossession and injustice are not behind us and, as I write, the four-year long occupation of Ihumātao in Auckland continues against plans for a housing development on this illegally confiscated (stolen) land (<https://www.protectihumatao.com>). There have also been hopeful shifts during my lifetime, with the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal and Treaty settlement policies to address (in a small way) the historical injustices of the past, and ongoing moves to enact Māori sovereignty and Māori-centred approaches in education, health, justice, housing and so on. Within this context, it behooves us Pākehā to educate ourselves about our history (and Tribunal reports are an invaluable tool here) and to support ongoing Māori struggles and initiatives, however our location and circumstances allow.

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