

The Tapu Garden of Eden

A mysterious, moving and uniquely New Zealand story, for sensitive people, young and old, about how the past continues to influence the present.

BY

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Preview file information

This preview file of *The Tapu Garden of Eden* contains the prologue and the first three chapters. The complete book comprises more than twenty-three chapters and 151 pages.

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Front cover photo of Mount Eden (Maungawhau),
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Author's notes

Maungawhau (Mount Eden) is an extinct volcano formed about twenty thousand years ago. It is the youngest and highest of more than thirty such volcanic cones on the Auckland mainland most of which were used by the ancient Maori to defend their occupation of the narrow and highly desirable isthmus of Auckland they called Tamaki-makaurau. Using tools of wood and stone the defenders sculpted the slopes of these tall hills into wide terraces for gardening, dug trenches and pits at the top for food storage, dwellings and defence, and sometimes erected a perimeter of wooden stockades. The outlines of these remarkable pre-historic excavations, hardly appreciated by the people of New Zealand, are still visible on many of the Auckland peaks including Maungawhau.

Maungawhau means 'the mountain of whau', the whau being a shrub of thin branches (*Entelia Aborescens*) used by the Maori to make fishing nets. The British settlers named it Mount Eden after George Eden, the first Earl of Auckland who was the governor-general of India at the time Auckland was founded.

No doubt the British settlers — who came from a land where the highest 'mountain' was Ben Nevis, a mere 1,343 metres (4,400 feet) — were impressed by the bulk of Maungawhau and its vast pedestal and so had no hesitation in calling it a mountain. But none of the so-called 'mountains' of Auckland is a mountain at all. At 196 metres (650 feet) Mount Eden is dwarfed by New Zealand's real mountains such as Ruapehu (2,797 metres/9,180 feet) in the North Island and the country's tallest mountain, Aorangi (Mount Cook, 3,753 metres/12,300 feet) in the South Island.

There is a sprinkling of Maori words used in this story which will be familiar to New Zealand readers while non-New Zealanders should be able to infer their meaning from the context in which they are used. At least that is my hope. In case I am wrong, and because explanations in the narrative would be unnatural and patronising, I have provided a simple glossary at the back of the book.

The Tapu Garden of Eden is a work of fiction. Although the neighbourhood around Maungawhau is called Mount Eden, and is serviced by Mount Eden Road, there is no Allison Terrace, nothing called Edenside, and no Maungawhau marae. The people too are imaginary although I once knew an old man in Mount Eden much like Olav Kirsten. He had a large garden there, surrounded by a scoria wall, and owned a handsome golden Labrador whose photo hangs above my desk. Any resemblance to any other person, living or dead, is a coincidence.

Robert Philip Bolton
Auckland
June, 2006

Prologue

Long ago a young man arrived in New Zealand from faraway Europe. He was a sailor from Norway. He had travelled the world but had never before been so far from home.

But when, on one cold winter's July day, early in the twentieth century, his little ship steamed down the east coast of Aotearoa (New Zealand) and into the Waitemata harbour of Auckland, he knew he had found the most beautiful country in the world.

"Here I shall stay," he said, in his own language. "I shall make this place my home."

Auckland was not a large city then so the young man was able, with his savings, to buy a small parcel of stony land on the gentle and sunny north-western slopes of Mount Eden, the sleeping volcano that, even today, dominates this beautiful place. Clearing his land of rocks and stones — the better to cultivate its fertile volcanic soil — the young man from Norway came to learn much about the ancient Maori people who once lived on the mountain they still call Maungawhau. Walking on the high slopes above his land he could see the shapes of their terraced gardens, and the hollows that were once dwellings

and food storage pits. And he wondered what life was like in those not-so-distant times.

He talked often to the old Maori people who then still lived about, especially to the women who seemed to outlast their men and who, in those days, smoked their clay pipes and wore their moko — their chin tattoo — with noble pride. They bought this strange young man's kumara to sell outside the post office. And they talked freely to him about the history of the land he had bought from one of their people, searching their memories of how it once was, because he really wanted to know.

Over many years of digging and hoeing in his garden he found much evidence of Maori history. And when he uncovered something interesting — a fragment of carved bone, perhaps — the people from the university and the museum would come, and he would let them dig and sift through the soft, moist, volcanic earth surrounding his discovery, watching them quietly, and speculating with them on its significance and origin. Thus, slowly, and without realising it, the man from Norway became an expert in the Maori history of Mount Eden, gaining the respect of both the academic and Maori communities of his adopted home.

He lived in a little stone cottage built from the scoria he had cleared from the land. Indeed, he had enough stone to build a wall around his entire

garden, where he lived and worked until he was very old, when our story begins.

We meet him, his dog, his young neighbour, and his mysterious friend. And we find out why, many years later, his garden is a park with broad trees, mown lawns, shell walks, and flower beds; why the wall is still there but not the cottage; and why nearby, where there was once a worn dirt path, a black iron fence stands to mark the location of a special grave.

Chapter 1.

“You talk to the plants.”

The old man was digging his garden. He straightened up slowly from his work and turned towards the voice. There was a boy in the street, a small boy, standing on the bottom bar of the garden gate. His arms were wrapped around the top of the wickets and he was looking directly at the tall, thin old man.

The man — who had a very wrinkled face, pale blue eyes, a long white beard and long white hair — had seen the boy at the gate before. But the boy had not spoken until now; he appeared happy just to watch the old man, and the old man didn't mind. But now, for the first time, the boy had spoken so the old man stopped his work, pressed his heavy spade into the soil, and walked to the gate to better hear what the boy was saying.

“What you say?” he asked.

“Why do you talk to the plants? Can they hear you?”

“Oh, yes,” said the old man whose name was Olav Kirsten. “They can hear. They can hear.”

He spoke with a strange accent but the boy didn't seem to notice.

"You are listening?" asked the man curiously. "When I am talking with my beans you are listening?"

The boy nodded. Neither of them spoke again at once but the boy remained on the gate looking freely and slowly at the garden behind the old man. Olav Kirsten wiped his brow with his sleeve and waited, grateful for the short rest.

The boy had seen the garden before and had sensed — as many sensitive children had — that it had a special beauty beyond its appearance. It was quiet there. Its tidiness and tranquillity made people peaceful inside, and kind towards other people, animals and nature. There were many smells: the moist smell of compost and earth; the heavy sweet scent of flowers. There were always birds in the tall trees. And near the old man's cottage, beside his glasshouse, there was a black-looking pond — still and mysterious — where, if they shaded their eyes against the reflections, children could see orange-coloured fish moving lazily through the cool water.

From the gate the boy could see up the middle path, which was wider than the other paths, to the cottage. It was only a small cottage and it stood, at the far edge of the land close to the back boundary

which was marked by the scoria stone wall and the grassy-green rising of the great and bulky Maungawhau. Like the garden wall the cottage was made of large scoria stones held together with concrete. The roof was red-painted tin, and there was a yellow brick chimney at one end. Over the single cream-painted door was a tin awning with wooden supports. A green vine with dark red flowers — a *bougainvillaea* — grew wild around the door and over the awning making darkly-dappled shade on the dusty entrance. A wooden chair stood by itself in the shade, and beside the chair lay a large black dog.

The boy smiled when he saw the dog. Then, as he watched, the dog lifted himself heavily — he was evidently an old dog — and, with his head down, padded slowly down the middle path to where the old man was standing.

“There’s Brian,” said the boy, looking back to the old man.

“Ja. Is Brian. My dog.”

“He’s a nice dog. Is he *very* old?”

The dog stood faithfully beside Olav Kirsten and blinked slowly as he looked up at the boy on the gate.

“Ja. Is old. Like me is old,” said the old man leaning down to rub the dog gently on the head. The dog wagged his tail slowly in response.

“Do you talk to Brian, too?” asked the boy.

“Oh, Ja,” replied the man. “Talk to Brian. He understands my words. You understand, Brian, don’t you.”

The dog turned from the boy to look up at the man. Then he sat down heavily to stare at the boy again.

“Your garden is big,” said the boy. “Do you grow all these things on your own?”

“Oh, no,” said Olav Kirsten.

“But Hone said you have no one to help you.”

Young Hone Wihongi was the old man’s neighbour and good friend. He lived with his mother in the house next door.

“Hone said that did he? But there is the sun and the rain and all of nature to help me.”

The boy nodded, seeming to understand.

“What is your name?” asked Olav Kirsten.

The boy told him his name.

“You know Hone, Peter?” asked the old man.

“Yes,” said the boy.

“You come here with Hone?”

“Yes,” said the boy.

“When? Last year?” He was trying to remember the boy.

“Yes,” said the boy. “Last year. But sometimes I come and watch you and you don’t know. I watch you over the wall, talking to the plants.”

“I know. I know. Sometimes I feel you there and I look up and see you,” said the old man, grinning. “But why do you watch only, Peter? You should speak to me before this.”

“Auntie said you are a good man. She said you have been kind. She told me and I wanted to see you.”

The old man was puzzled.

“Who is your auntie, Peter?” he asked. “What is her name?”

The boy shrugged. “Auntie. That’s all. She knows you.”

Olav Kirsten nodded but he didn’t understand.

“I have to go now,” said the boy, suddenly. “They’re calling me.”

“Who calls?” asked Olav Kirsten cupping a hand to his ear and looking down the street. “I hear nothing.”

“Sometimes they worry. They cry out to me. They want me to come back to them. I must go.” The boy stepped off the gate and paused. “Can I come and see you tomorrow? And Brian?” he added.

“Ja, Peter. You come tomorrow. I will show you things. Many things.”

Olav Kirsten moved forward to lean on the gate and watch the boy run off down Allison Terrace. But he was gone. Instead he saw only Hone coming home from school.

“You see Peter, Hone?” he asked when his young neighbour reached the gate.

Hone stopped.

“Who’s Peter?” he said.

“Peter’s a boy. Young boy. Younger than you — much younger — but he knows you. He was here. He ran down the street.”

“Didn’t see any boy running down the street, Olav.”

Brian, who had also come forward to the gate, whimpered quietly. Olav Kirsten bent and scratched his old dog’s head.

“Is funny thing, Brian,” he said. “He runs very fast I think.”

Hone was puzzled. He was sure nobody had passed him going down Allison Terrace. He turned around and looked back down the street. Nothing.

“Sorry, Olav,” he said.

Then he hitched up his school pack and passed on to the next house at the end of the garden wall.

The old man, though, stayed at the gate; before he went back to his digging, on that hot February afternoon so long ago, he shaded his eyes with his hand and looked down the street again. Nothing. But the boy had said he would be back the next day and the old man was glad.

“He will come tomorrow, Brian,” he said to his dog.

Chapter 2.

The sun was setting when Olav Kirsten stopped working in his garden. Now, in the cool of the evening, he sat on his chair beside the cottage door with his evening meal on a tray. Brian sat at his feet with a bone that Mrs Wihongi — Hone's mother — had given him.

"A dog needs meat, Olav," she said. "It's only natural."

Before he ate his own meal Olav Kirsten thought about his food; he had grown it all from seed. I had to do some hard work, he thought, but now I have a fair reward.

"Perhaps Mrs Wihongi is right, Brian," he said to the dog. "Not to blame that you need meat. You are looking skinny. I give you sometimes meat more."

It was dark by the time he finished his meal. He went inside to fire the lamp that was his only source of night light. Inside, the little stone house was neat and clean and snug. At one end was a small cast-iron fireplace on a scoria hearth. To one side of the fireplace was a cupboard where he stored his wood and coal, and, to the other, a

bookcase of old books in the Norwegian language. Between the bookcase and the door, which was in the middle of the front wall, was one of two windows and it was under this window that Olav Kirsten had his little kitchen: a sink and a spirit cooker and, under the bench, room for the few pots and dishes he needed.

At the other end of the house, the end opposite the fireplace, was his narrow bed beside which were two shipping trunks one of which contained the old man's few clothes. The other, standing on its end under the other window, served as a bedside table upon which stood a brass marine chronometer that ticked off the passing years and, nearer the bed, two framed photographs. One, in a dark wooden frame, was a family portrait taken when Olav Kirsten was a boy of about fifteen. He was sitting on the ground in front of a stone house, with his legs crossed, in front of his father, his mother, and his three older sisters. The picture was brown and silvered with age, reminding the old man that he came not only from a distant country but also from a distant time; another century. The other photo, smaller and more recent, was of Brian: a close-up of the dog's head and shoulders taken when he was young. Olav Kirsten had found a brown tin frame for the photo and the two pictures stood together on the trunk beside his bed.

But for a soft and comfortable armchair, the only other furniture comprised the wooden chair, which served its purpose both inside and out, and a small round table standing in the centre of the room. The table had a faded and limp woven cloth for a cover, a cloth that Olav Kirsten's mother had given to him before his first voyage. She had received it as a wedding gift from the Lapps of her village.

It was into this scene that the old man entered to sit in the armchair, with the lamp on the table behind his head, to read from the old books. At last, as his head nodded with sleepiness, he blew out the lamp and lay on his back in the narrow cot. He thought, for a moment, of the boy he had met that day and whom he hoped he would see again. Then he fell asleep for the rest of the night as he had done more than thirty-two thousand times before. On the floor rug beside his bed Brian waited in the dark until he was sure the old man was asleep. Only then did the old dog close his eyes and lay his grey jaw on the rug to sleep. And somewhere, far away to the north, a small boy, who had not yet seen four thousand nights, lay in dull but constant pain. With open and sometimes tearful eyes staring into the night he thought about the gentle, kind old man and his dog who were his new friends.

Meanwhile, next door, Hone Wihongi was in his bedroom doing his homework while his mother was

in the living room watching television. Sometimes Hone leaned across from his chair, pulling the curtain aside to peer into the night. When the yellow glow faded from his neighbour's window he called out to his mother.

“Olav's light's out, mum.”

“Okay, dear,” called Mrs Wihongi, relieved that the old man, who had bought his land from her husband's family and had lived in his cottage since before she was born, was asleep in his bed, safe for another night.

She knew nothing of the meeting — between boy and old man — which had taken place earlier that day. Nor did she know of another meeting that day between two people discussing their special plans for Olav Kirsten's garden. And even if she had known of either meeting she could never have guessed how, together, they were going to change the lives of so many people in the quiet Mount Eden neighbourhood that she, Hone and Olav Kirsten had called home for so long.

Chapter 3.

Earlier that afternoon, as Hone was talking to Olav Kirsten about the boy he had called Peter, his friend Betty Grey, who had finished school the previous year, was working at her desk in a downtown office building not far away. It was her first job — she was the receptionist-typist for the small firm — and she was anxious to succeed. She found the work easy enough, and was receiving good training, although one of the partners always made her nervous.

Because she sat at the reception desk, at the only entrance to the firm's office, every person arriving or leaving had to pass her desk. Thus she was puzzled and alarmed when she thought she saw a small brown face — the face of young boy — watching her from behind the darkly-tinted glass door that led from the reception area, where she sat, to the firm's office suite beyond. How, she wondered, could he be there without her knowledge?

And was he beckoning to her? Did he want her to follow him? But where? And why?

Betty was puzzled and worried. No one should be in that corridor. She knew she would be in trouble if the boy were seen by the partners. But she was uncertain. Had she *really* seen something? Someone? Someone beckoning? Could she see anything at all through the tinted glass?

She squinted. Stared hard at the door. There was no one there. But she had to be sure. So she left her desk and went through the door in time to see a small figure turning the corner at the end of the corridor where the partners shared a large office. She ran down the hall and around the corner but: nothing. She looked in the little kitchen, the only other room, but the boy — if it was a boy — had disappeared.

As she stood alone in the corridor, puzzled, thinking she must have imagined seeing someone, or something, she heard raised voices coming from the partners' office. It seemed that her employers were having an argument. The door was closed so she didn't hear everything but what she did hear frightened her.

She stopped, the mysterious boy forgotten, and listened. She couldn't help it.



"It's bullshit!" shouted an angry Michael Pike.

He was sitting at his office desk in front of a window. Behind him the Waitemata harbour sparkled in the late morning sun. But he didn't see the view. He was watching his partner, Wally Greensborough, who was standing across the desk from him.

"Come on, Wal," he continued, pleading now. "There's a couple of acres of prime real estate there, waiting. If we don't get it someone else will. Surely you can see that?"

"I told you," said his partner, trying to remain calm. "I've tried and tried."

"And?"

"Same story yesterday. He's a nice old joker. He listens to me politely. He shakes his head." Wally Greensborough shrugged. "He won't even discuss it."

"Shit!" said the irate Pike, thumping the desk with frustration.

He stood up and walked angrily to the other side of the large office from where he could see, distant from the city, the great rising of Mount Eden. And all around he could see many of the buildings from which he and Wally Greensborough had made their money. They had prospered, he reflected, because of the successful combination of his financial skills — some would say cunning — and the

salesmanship of his partner. But now there was this Mount Eden business. He was puzzled not only by his partner's failure to convince the old man to sell but also by his distinct lack of enthusiasm for the entire project.

Composed now, he returned to his chair to face Greensborough again.

"Now then, Wal," he said quietly, patiently, to his partner who had, by this time, resumed his seat. "Let's go over it again, okay?"

"Yeah. Okay," said Greensborough, sounding resigned, impatient and annoyed.

"Right," continued Pike putting his hands together as if in prayer. "Now. Here's this old man, a hundred and fifty years old, right?"

"He's eighty something," said Greensborough. "More like ninety I think. I don't know exactly."

"Okay," said Pike shrugging. "What's it matter. He's old."

"Yeah. He's old alright. But he's not sick. And he's not stupid."

"Never mind about that. We'll come to that later," said Pike. "Now this old man, eighty? ninety? whatever, owns a couple of acres of dirt right in the middle of Mount Eden, a very desirable residential area, you must agree. A lovely bit of land sloping ever so gently to the sun. Right so far, Wal?"

“Yeah, but—”

“Now wait on, mate. Now this old joker, what’s his name again, Wal?”

“Kirsten. Olav Kirsten. He’s Norwegian or something.”

At the mention of Olav Kirsten’s name Betty moved closer to the closed door. She was nervous, afraid of being caught there, but she knew something important was going on. She felt she just *had* to keep listening.

“Yeah. Kirsten,” Betty heard Pike say. “He gets this land when? — turn of the century or something — gets it for a bloody song. A few bucks, right?”

“It would have been a lot of money then,” said Greensborough. “His life savings.”

“Yeah,” said Pike, frustrated. “But compared with now, not much, eh?”

“Now,” Pike continued, “Mr Wally Greensborough, the nicest salesman in the world, the joker who can talk anybody into anything with his charm and his smile, goes along to this old Mr Kirsten with a very fine offer. It *is* a very fine offer, indeed, isn’t it, Wal?”

“Well, under normal circumstances it is a fine offer, Mike. We both know that. But these are not normal circumstances. And there’s nothing normal about Mr Kirsten.”

Pike got up and leaned across the desk to bring his face close to his partner's.

"Bullshit!" he said again.

"Come on, Mike," said Greensborough, annoyed with his partner's unusual obsession with this project.

"I mean it," said Pike again as he leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. "We offer the old guy more money than he's ever seen in his life and guarantee him a brand new luxury apartment for the rest of his days. Come on, Wal, that's what I'd call a very fine offer under any circumstance."

"Except this one," insisted Greensborough. "For God's sake, man, *he* doesn't want a luxury apartment. He doesn't want anything. It doesn't matter what we say or do, or how much money we offer, he won't budge."

"Come on, Wal. He's human isn't he?"

"I don't know—" said Greensborough; Pike looked at him strangely. "—I mean of course he's human," he added. "But he's a strange old guy. Sort of a local legend."

Betty shook her head slowly and sadly. It's true, she thought. Mr Kirsten is a local legend.

"Oh, come on," said Pike. "Look. Let's keep going. See if I've got it all."

“Okay,” said Greensborough.

“Right. Now the old man hasn’t got any money. He owes the council for years and years of rates on the understanding that when he dies the council takes the land in payment. Right? The council can then sell the land to anyone.”

“Yeah,” said Greensborough. They had been through this many times. In those days Mount Eden was an independent borough with its own council; it hadn’t been hard for Greensborough to find out about this unusual arrangement about the rates.

“And if we get the land we have to pay the back rates. That’s all the council cares about?”

“Yeah,” said Greensborough with a sigh.

“The council doesn’t want the land?”

“No. They said they’d auction it.”

“So anyone could get it, right?”

“Right.”

“There are no other strings?”

“No.”

“And we can put up a block of flats? It’s big enough for planning and all that? The council will let us?”

“Right. Mike, we’ve been through all this before.”

“I know. I know. But come on, Wal. Can’t you see? It’s the chance of a lifetime. Easier to deal with the old man now, and take care of him for a couple of years, than wait till he’s gone and have to get in an auction with a million other greedy bastards. There’s a fortune to be made out of that land. You must be able to see all that.”

“Of course I can see it. But you’ve got to understand: I *can’t* get through to the old man. He will *not* sell. To us or anyone. It’s *impossible*.”

“Nothing’s impossible, Wal. You know that.” Pike was insistent. “You’re the best salesman in the country. You’re half the reason for our success. We’re an amazing team.”

He picked up a thick file and waved it in the air.

“Look. I’ve done my bit. All the contracts. All the plans and specifications. Titles. Finance. The bank’s right behind us now, you know that. Cash flow. It’s all here, Wal.” He dumped the file heavily on the desk. “All we need is the old man’s agreement and now you say it’s impossible.”

“Well it is,” said Greensborough angrily.

Betty could tell, from the sound of his voice, that Wally Greensborough was moving towards the door and was about to come into the corridor so she hurried back to her desk. Greensborough opened

the door and stood there, holding the door handle, talking back into the office to his partner.

“Why don’t you go out there yourself,” Betty heard him say. “Go and talk to him. You’ll see.”

She picked up typing where she had left off.

“I bloody might,” she heard Pike shout down the corridor. “I just bloody might.”

The door slammed and Greensborough left the building without even glancing at her. That was unusual; he was usually kind and polite. But he was obviously angry and, although she didn’t understand everything that was said between him and Mr Pike, she knew that something was going on, that Mr Greensborough didn’t like it, and that whatever it was it was bad news for Mr Kirsten.

She stopped working and went down the corridor again hoping she might find the mysterious boy. But there was no one there. She looked at the closed door of the partners’ office and wondered what she should do. She knew she wasn’t allowed to talk about anything that went on in the firm, including business discussions between the partners, but she decided that because of Mr Kirsten, and because his land once belonged to the Wihongi family, she should probably tell her friend Hone.

This is the end of the preview file of *The Tapu Garden of Eden*. Thank you for your interest and support. For complete buying information go to www.bolton.co.nz. For any questions, comments or feedback don't hesitate to email me at robert@bolton.co.nz. Thank you.