The other side of the Tūhoe raids

ALISTAR KATA is contributing editor of Pacific Media Centre’s Pacific Media Watch project.

The Price of Peace [documentary], directed by Kim Webby. English and Te Reo Māori. 2015, 87min.
www.nziff.co.nz/2015/auckland/the-price-of-peace/

MOST New Zealanders will remember when Tūhoe activist Wairere Tame Iti shot the national flag, during a powhiri ceremony, at a Waitangi Tribunal Hearing in 2005. New Zealanders will also remember when Iti, along with three others, was tried and found guilty of firearms charges as part of what the media coined, the ‘Urewera Four’ (Gay, 2012) trial. The man with a full facial Tā moko is regarded throughout the mainstream media as somewhat of a rebel, and by the state as a ‘dangerous proto-terrorist intent on infecting New Zealand’ (Hill, 2012).

But a new documentary, The Price of Peace, by award-winning director and co-producer Kim Webby provides exclusive access to the world of Iti, and gives an alternative approach to the story of the Urewera training camps and the 2007 New Zealand police raids on the Tūhoe community. The film, which made its debut at the New Zealand International Film Festival this year, addressed how the raids specifically affected the Tūhoe community, how the media covered the debacle and the importance of reconciliation and the state of race relations in New Zealand.

Webby says that it was important to show Iti as more than just an activist. Webby wanted to show the backstory of the way he was raised, the place he was raised and what inspired and sparked him to become an activist. She wanted to show the sides of Iti that the public rarely get to see; the father, grandfather, marae committee member and community leader.

Throughout the film the audience watches him interact with family members and his mokopuna (grandchildren) through his trial, bringing a greater understanding of what kind of person he is away from the spotlight and showing the effect of the trial on the people closest to him.

Secondly, the film confronts the emotional, physical and psychological impact the raids
had on the Tūhoe community, namely the
people of Ruatoki. The emotionally charged
testimonies from Iti’s partner Maria Steens
and her daughter Amie Rangihika give a per-
sonal perspective to the situation and show
the very real effects of the New Zealand
police’s actions. Both Steens and Rangihika
describe being taken outside their flat, sepa-
rated from each other and witnessing police
hold Iti face down on the ground with guns
aimed at his head. In the Sky City cinema
on the afternoon of the film’s premiere,
there was a thick silence and a few sniffles
as these very personal stories rolled onto
the screen. Webby said the significance of
these testimonies was not only to show the
traumatic impact of the raids on all involved,
but to give an understanding of the legacy
they have left on the Ruatoki people, leading
into the process of reconciliation.

Thirdly, the documentary focuses on
the media’s portrayal of Iti as a sensation-
alised character and reporters branding him
as an extreme activist. With a background in
journalism, working for shows such as Fair
Go and 60 Minutes, Webby understands the
nature of news is to always pick the most
polarising aspect and for stories to be told
in sound bites. But the film provided the
opportunity for more in depth coverage
of Iti and the Urewera story. One of the
most poignant scenes in the film is where
Iti emerges from the Auckland High Court
and is met with a media scrum. He starts
answering their questions in his native
tongue ‘hey diddle diddle’ in Māori, as if
to counter the circus that the media had
become during the trial.

Through Iti’s tale of adversity, the his-
tory of race relations in New Zealand is
looked at. The documentary shows the rec-
conciliation between Iti’s family, the wider
Ngāi Tūhoe community and the New Zea-
land police, represented by Commissioner
Mike Bush. These are beautifully spiritual
and moving scenes that allow space for a
wider dialogue on the misunderstandings
and differences between Te Ao Māori (the
Māori world) and the Pākehā world. In the
film Iti’s lawyer, Russell Fairbrother, talks
about Iti’s trial being a case of two worlds
that don’t talk easily with each other. He
couldn’t have painted a more accurate pic-
ture of the history and state of race relations
in the country.

Not only is the film Iti’s personal story,
but his journey represents the struggle of the
Ngāi Tūhoe people and their 170-year bat-
tle with the state (Joseph, 2015). Towards
the end of the film, Webby highlights the
significance of the monumental Tūhoe-
Crown settlement, which is a fitting way
to round out the film and bring closure to
the whole story.

There is one element of the film that
lends itself to negative critique. The docu-
mentary is largely told from a Tūhoe per-
spective, and unapologetically so. But as a
spectator, I found myself thinking back and
constantly referencing the coverage I had
seen throughout the New Zealand media.
I had seen Iti outside the courtroom, I had
seen Iti in security footage in the training
camps, and like the rest of New Zealand I
had seen Iti sitting in the docks of the High
Court. The fact of the matter was that I
had never seen this side of the story. I had
never seen Iti face down on the ground
while police were pointing guns at his head,
I had never seen Steens and her daughter taken from their home by armed officers, and, just like the rest of New Zealand, I had never seen Iti, full-face moko and all, laughing and playing in his backyard with his mokopuna.

What this film calls audiences to do is to understand Māoridom on a deeper level. For the people of Tūhoe, Māori culture isn’t something that people are used to seeing just on the marae or whenever the occasion calls for the display of traditional customs, it is a way of life. Tūhoe is a way of life and this film achieves a greater understanding of that notion. It allows the public or audiences to make their own mind up about a man and a community who have previously been misunderstood.

References