

## THE TOUCHSTONE PROJECT

Andrew Last

"Vaiaio," said Boua Huata Holmes as we loaded the taoka (treasure) stone, complete with its mantle of accumulated garden compost, into Brendon's tiny Smart car. Vaiaio (the source); this stone – inaka pounamu – comes from the headwaters of Te Awa Wakatipu/the Dart River; under the mantle of Makahi (Mt Aspiring). Inaka, a taoka of huge significance to Southern Māori, was prized for its distinctive colour; chatoyancy and a morphology that allowed it to be worked into implements.<sup>1</sup> Te Awa Wakatipu feeds Lake Wakatipu near Glenorchy. The Kawarau River exits Wakatipu and merges with the Mata-Au (Clutha River) near Cromwell in Central Otago. Mata-Au is the second-longest river in Aotearoa and defines the Otago region.

Professor Leoni Schmidt beckoned me to come into her office and talk to Professor Khyla Russell, Kaitohutohu (Māori adviser) of Otago Polytechnic. Khyla explained that a touchstone was needed for the new formal entrance building planned for the Polytech's Dunedin campus. Khyla asked me to organise the making of the touchstone, explaining that the kaimahi toi (art workers) ought to be part of the Polytech. For me, a long-term Aussie manuiri (guest) to Aotearoa, this was quite a flattering burden of responsibility to be charged with.

As Brendon and I handled the heavy boulder, Huata paused in reminiscence of the time long ago when the stone was carried from the river; its shape dictating obvious handholds. Our initial discussions for working the stone considered emphasising these first handholds and visually encouraging future touch. Brendon modelled the idea with Photoshop manipulation. We trialled a sandblasting technique for etching into the stone, but found that much of the water-worn outer surface of the stone would have to be removed and felt the stone would lose the integrity of its form.

Pete Murphy (Kai Tahu, Dunedin School of Art graduate and nephew of Khyla) stayed close by Huata's side to awahi (assist) his walk down the rocky path to Makereatu (Blackhead) Beach. Huata was quite ill at the time, but wanted to accompany us on this trip gathering resources for the touchstone project. Blackhead is a popular Dunedin surf break and the site of a contentious quarry that has profoundly altered the shape of a prominent headland at the southern end of Otepoti/Dunedin's city boundary. Columnar basalt (onewa), the black stone typical of Dunedin's volcanic geology, tumbles down the cliffs into Te Moana Nui-a-Kiwa (the Pacific Ocean). We were looking for an onewa column that would raise the inaka and tautoko (support), the metaphoric association of material and place. Eventually we found a stone, thankfully within the quarry's yard, and struggled to load it into the car.



Figure 1. Touchstone. Photo: Brendon Monson.

The touchstone project paused for the summer break. We were all set to resume, but found that the onewa we had selected was no longer in the Art School's garden bed where we had left it. Clearly our care had been inadequate and the stone was found desirable to others as much as to us. After confessing our carelessness, Huata graciously allowed that the particular column was "not meant to be." Khyla put the word out, and two columns that had been selected for the project were delivered to us on a truck with a Hiab lifter:

In a studio set up to work stone on a jewellery scale, some serious improvisation was needed to manipulate hundreds of kilos of stone with minimal herniation.

The onewa was trimmed to allow it to stand well. It was obvious that this alteration would leave the height of the touchstone fine for children, but hard on those with less supple spines. We had resolved to include pakeho (limestone) from the southern side of the Waitaki River as a component of the touchstone project. Stone from this area defines the northern boundaries of Otago and plots a watercourse that traces back to Aoraki (Mt Cook), the most tapu (restricted) mauka tūpuna (ancestral mountain) for South Island iwi (tribes). The white stone is very soft and is easily worked with hand tools. We decided to make the base stone of this material and shape it to suggest a continuation of the contours of the basalt column. Pete had an appropriately sized stone in his garden collection and adeptly melded the white stone to the black.

We invited jewellery student and carver Jennifer Duff (Kai Tahu) to contribute to the touchstone mahi (work). Jen has been working with pounamu all her life. She sanded the surfaces of the inaka with diamond sponges, bringing to life the nodes of deep green and sloughing off the sharp, river-worn rind.



Figure 2. Working in the studio. Photo: Andrew Last.



Figure 3. Touchstone collaborators: Jen Duff, Brenda Monson and Pete Murphy.  
Photo: Andrew Last.



Figure 4. Progress in the studio. Photo: Brenda Monson.

The touchstone sculpture sits on a stainless steel plate that allows the work to be securely bolted to the concrete floor. The plate was sourced from Rietveld's amazing recycling yard in Kaikorai Valley, Dunedin, and plasma-cut by Kevin O'Neill and Stu Hewson from the Polytech's engineering department.

The in-house goodwill economy was squared away with a batch of home-baked Anzac biscuits for the engineering smoko table.

We had intended to sandblast a pattern representing river eddies down the basalt and continuing onto the Oamaru stone. Brendon digitised Pete's chalk drawing and cut a sandblast stencil using a digital vinyl cutter. Brendon and I spent a weekend rigging up an outdoor sand blast facility and, after two hours of deeply unpleasant blasting, achieved almost zero result. The stone face was covered with a fine but tough white mineral layer. Our vinyl stencil lasted just about as long as it took to remove this layer. With a deadline looming, I decided to abandon the sandblasting.

The final construction stage was carving the top of the basalt to match the contours of the inaka boulder. This involved repeated lifting of the boulder; refining the shape of the basalt with an angle grinder and replacing it to test for fit. Eventually, all the components of the sculpture were joined with liberal quantities of epoxy glue and a steel spine embedded through the white stone into the basalt.

With a week to go before the opening of the new building, a truck was borrowed from the building job and the touchstone moved 200m to its permanent site.

The work was finally bolted down the day before the carpetlayers cut the carpet tiles around its base and three days before the building's official opening.



Figure 6. Installing the stone. Photo: Andrew Last.



Figure 5. Transporting the stone. Photo: Andrew Last.

The touchstone emerged unscathed from a frantic weekend in which a building site was transformed into a completed project. On Monday morning the touchstone played an integral part in the whakawātea (clearing of the way) ceremony for the inauguration of the new building. The ceremony was attended by representatives of ka Papatipu Rūnaka (the four Kai Tahu councils that have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Polytech), the Polytech leadership team, Polytech staff and workers involved in the building project.

Khyla was delighted with the ceremony, with Huata's koha (gift) to the Polytech being honoured by the collective and individual efforts of all participants.<sup>2</sup> I was profoundly relieved that I had managed my part

in the touchstone project in a way that had eventually turned out to be tika (correct). The touchstone embodies the whakatauki (proverb) that is part of the Memorandum of Understanding:

Kua tawhiti kē to harereka,  
kia kore e haere tonu.  
He tino nui rawa ōu mahi,  
kia kore e mahi nui tonu.

We have come too far, not to go further.  
We have done too much, not to do more.<sup>3</sup>

This mahi toi (artwork) has been completed by Tiriti (Treaty of Waitangi) and MoU partners in a way that acknowledges whakapapa (interconnectedness), kawa (protocol) and tikaka (the right way to do things). For me and the Dunedin School of Art, it represents a point of reciprocity for the knowledge and inclusion shared by the MoU partners. Since the signing of the MoU in 2004, mātauranga Māori has been progressively embedded into the DSA curriculum. Such knowledge has broadened and enriched the culture of the school and enables a much stronger sense of connection between people, place and learning.

Boua Huata's words bring together the kaupapa (purpose) of the touchstone:

As artists, we perceived our Dunedin Otago Polytechnic and inland complexes as being geologically, educationally and spiritually placed within the influence of the Ocean, Alps and encased between the mouths of our two great rivers. Our stone was chosen to represent all those elements and our presentation was a collective task, culminating in its present position, to be left unnamed; to beckon passers-by, to give or absorb energy latent within the stone.<sup>4</sup>

Born in Melbourne in 1963, **Andrew Last** has been living by the edge of Dunedin Harbour near Aramoana since 2001. After briefly studying engineering at Monash University, Andrew found his true vocation at RMIT's Gold and Silversmithing department, gaining his undergraduate qualification in 1987 and his Masters in 1994. Andrew's art practice is diverse, encompassing diamond rings, houses, musical instruments, bicycles, boats, silverware and sculpture. Studying te reo Māori at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa in 2007-08 has opened a pathway of engagement with Māori that continues to enrich Andrew's education and art practices.

1 See Russell Beck and Maika Mason, *Pounamu: The Jade of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin, 2010).

2 From an email correspondence between the author and Professor Khyla Russell, 2 November 2015.

3 For the text, see <https://www.op.ac.nz/assets/PDFs/Kai-Tahu-MoU.pdf> (accessed 8 March 2017).

4 From an email correspondence between the author and Boua Huata Holmes, 13 March 2017.