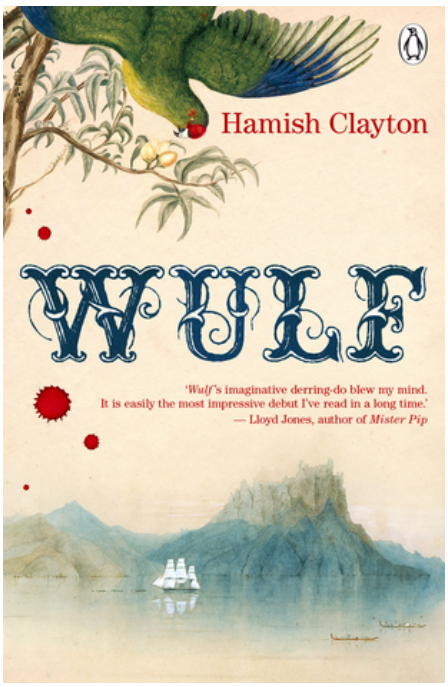

Wulf

Hamish Clayton

Wulf

Hamish Clayton

Wulf Hamish Clayton
Early nineteenth century New Zealand – the great chief Te Rauparaha has conquered tiny Kapiti Island, from where Ngati Toa launches brutal attacks on its southern enemies. Off the coast of Kapiti, English trader John Stewart seeks to trade with Te Rauparaha, setting off a train of events that forever change the course of New Zealand history.

Narrated by two English sailors on board Stewart's ship, these events are also eerily resonant of a more distant memory, stretching back into mythology, of the charismatic leader Wulf and an ancient lament. History, it seems, may be repeating itself.

Wulf, Hamish Clayton's inventive, brilliant first novel, explores a subject little covered in New Zealand fiction, and marks the emergence of a startlingly assured, exciting new voice.

Wulf Details

Date	:	Published January 31st 2011 by Penguin Books New Zealand (first published 2011)
ISBN	:	
Author	:	Hamish Clayton
Format	:	Paperback 240 pages
Genre	:	Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction

From Reader Review Wulf for online ebook

Samm says

i'm struggling in a real way to find published reviews of this book that aren't impressed by how intelligent it is, how dazzlingly written it is, how important it is, and all of this is true, really, and i'd probably like it more if it excited less uncritical OMGs from the reading public.

i guess for me the story did not challenge clayton himself very much within what is otherwise a challenging story to novelise. he told this story through the eyes of a nameless english trader. the maori characters are stories told be the fireside (and to be fair, this is what it says on the tin, and is done well, but it's worth noting critically). i was very distracted by the fact that female characters were not named, nor given dialogue, but clayton liberally used their bodies to represent conquest, sexual and violent, as well as mystery and lost history.

there were several moments in the book that captured my imagination and i love the setting of an old new zealand. even though it is part of my criticism, the stories woven around Te Rauparaha were beautiful and interesting, and i am generally here for books concerned with storytelling and history. i hope to see more books like this from different perspectives.

Sarah Laing says

I know this is a really good book; it just didn't do it for me. I was quite horrified by all the accounts of cannibalism and warfare. It was very visceral. As a rule, I shy away from historical fiction, and it takes a particular kind of book to break through my prejudices. I did appreciate the reimagining of NZ colonial history, and the magicification of the Kapiti bush. Despite the fact that I didn't enjoy reading this, I am insisting that my husband reads it because I'm sure that he will love it. Besides, he has read the original Beowulf.

Alumine Andrew says

What an amazing book! Newzealanders write extremely well about their own landscape and this is a great example. You can see the mists, smell the bush and feel the dampness in your bones.

This is the story of Te Rauparaha, a native chief who was in the North and South islands of NZ in 1820'-1840's. He was a fierce warrior and proud of his tribe (Ngati Toa) and his land. In the story he persuades the captain and crew of the Elizabeth to carry his warriors from Kapti Island to Banks Peninsula to engage in slaughter and conquest. He also guised his people through the North Island's desert like landscape to settle further south. The descriptions of the landscape endow it with almost supernatural powers.

There is a lot of early NZ history in this book but not in a history-lesson kind of way. The main portrayal and telling of Te Rauparaha's life and conquests is chilling and mesmerising.
Incredibly well written it is one of the best NZ novels I have read. Clayton is in his early twenties and a student, what amazing talent.

Can't wait to read more of his work.

Lisa says

Hamish Clayton’s debut novel Wulf is a seductively raw story, entwining a primitively lush landscape like a vine in the mind as events based on New Zealand’s early history move slowly to their horrific conclusion.

There is a growing sense of menace as insouciant sailors come to trade in the early 19th century. Cowell, the ship’s trading master, has been to these islands before and he regales his shipmates with stories that should make them wary but they have no real idea what they are in for. The naïve narrator – called Davis Jones [1] as an unfunny joke by the crew on the Dragon though he’s otherwise un-named - tells this story as sailors do, foreshadowing events in the form of omens, symbols and shipboard superstitions which feed this atmosphere of menace. His naiveté is exacerbated by the fact that he, like the rest of the crew, is trying to interpret Maori culture only through his existing ideas about history and culture. Clayton occasionally has a bit of fun with this (as when they try to rationalise the Maori having the same name for the sun, Ra, as the Egyptians do), but most of the time it’s an acknowledgement that rough-and-ready traders are not best placed to negotiate the complex waters of First Contact.

To read the rest of my review please visit http://anzlitlovers.wordpress.com/201...

Marita says

It is curious that in a novel about New Zealand, a country where there are no wolves, tigers or snakes there are so many references to them. In this novel named Wulf, the Wolf in question is the fearsome, powerful chief, Te Rop’raha, (based on a real person, Te Rauparaha*). Author Hamish Clayton weaves a magical blend of New Zealand history, Maori folklore, as well as good fireside storytelling into his debut novel. Well, maybe not a fireside, but aboard ship the sailors on a trading expedition are regaled with stories about New Zealand, its people and above all Te Rop’raha (Te Rauparah) the Great Wolf, by the ship's trading master Cowell. The epic tale is in turn narrated to us by an anonymous narrator, a sailor on board the *Elizabeth* in the year 1830. Little do they know that once arrived at their destination they will participate in an event which will change their lives and the course of history in New Zealand. It is not for the faint hearted, for it is a bloody history and some enemies became dinner.

###
Some notes:
Today's North Island and South Island were originally called New Ulster and New Munster as per the novel. Stewart Island was known as New Leinster. In the novel today's South Island is also referred to as the Middle Island, i.e. the island between the North Island and Stewart Island. Entry or Kopitee Island is now Kapiti Island. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kapiti_...
#
***Te Rauparaha** in Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Te_Raup...
#
"To the left of me as I lay, inland, I could hear the singing of the forest. The percussive clicks and throaty calls rising to strange strings of whistles I knew to be the calls of the fat black birds whose feathers glowed green and brown, and from whose necks sprouted white tufts, worn like the rankings of Saxon chieftains."

These are the **Tui**, a well loved bird which has a wide range of sounds.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tui_(bird)
#
The fat little owls to which the sailors called out "more-pork, more-pork" are in fact called **Moreporks.**
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morepork
#
"All along the coast of the Northern Island we saw the black green trees suddenly blooming with blood red flowers. Cowell told us the New Zealand name of this tree; it was a string of native sounds that I never learned to handle properly. But it was a beautiful sound, this New Zealand name, a bird call in itself. And although I could never say it, whenever I heard it spoken I recognised it, and I knew it to refer to those black and green trees which bloom blood red in the weeks of New Zealand's high summer around December and January." These are **Pohutukawa** trees.

Jennifer says

Wulf is an epic tale, along the lines of Beowulf or Gilgamesh. It tells of Te Rauparaha, the great chief of Ngati Toa, and his quest to dominate the New Zealand Maori. The story takes place mostly around the Kapiti coast and Kapiti Island, which is where I live, making the descriptions of Kapiti Island (Kopitee in the story) extremely evocative. I could easily picture the characters standing on my beach and looking out to Kapiti Island, because it's something I do nearly every day. The writing is beautiful, but so carefully crafted that I felt held a little separate from the stories and the characters, sort of like a disinterested observer. My only major quibble was that early in the book there was perhaps an overabundance of sexual metaphor - people hiding in wet clefts in the steep thighs of the mountains - sort of thing.

Quotes:

In only a day we'd become used to the lie of the land, the views that surrounded us there. We'd found a way of inhabiting the beach, or it had begun to inhabit us. We had nestled into our uneasiness, furnishing the strangeness at the end of the world with the routine that came when a day was spent in the one place. There was the stream we drank from, a couple of hundred yards north along the beach. Behind us, disappearing into the trees, the rumour of a path along which we knew we would find good firewood. Beyond that the green forested hills, so clear we could touch them though we reckoned them a day's walk there and back. When we closed our eyes we saw the shades of clear blue air; we saw green Kopitee behind. We saw the beach shining like dark glass when the water was at low tide. Fifty yards of hard wet sand left like a mirror by the sea's flat retreat, an oystercatcher standing there balanced upon its own perfect reflection. Our thoughts were clear and calm as we lay there and watched the day falling away. And in the south-west beyond Kopitee we could see the northern sounds of the Middle Island, forty miles away we guessed, though its shapes in the apricot sky were as clear as cut paper.

I wondered if, when we returned into the north of the world, the woods of the barrels in which we'd borne water through our journey would forevermore carry the traces of the pure cold springs of New Zealand they'd once contained. A ghost of water. I wanted to be able to carry the character of the country in a bouquet of its scents and colours and tastes. If we could, we would have traded with the New Zealanders for the light of their clear streams and pure mountains. We couldn't but we took them anyway. Their sunsets

were part of our story, just as the arrival of our ships had already become part of theirs. We were, us and them, part of the same story, different verses woven into the same song.

Rogue Wilson says

I struggled with this novel and, in line my new philosophy that "life is too short to finish books you're not enjoying", I have abandoned it mid-way. My issue is the lack of real character development and language that I did not find accessible. Very disappointed.

James Winstanley says

Probably one of the best books I have ever read. Not only is it modern in a way that it actually enjoyable, but it completely changed the way I view New Zealand, and I'm very grateful for that.

Justin Paul says

I really did 'really like it'. One of the best Kiwi books I've read. Bold narrative but read a little like Melville and/or Conrad. Maybe not in their class yet.... Found the last quarter of the book confusing but would recommend this highly to anyone who likes historical fiction and/or NZ fiction. Don't often read books twice but would with this...

Kiwiflora says

From its opening words this book grabs you by its visual imagery. That first page conjures up a land of power, secrets, strangeness, and above all the inevitability of terrible and frightening things about to happen. It is eerie reading this book. You know you are not, but it certainly feels as if you too are trekking through dense New Zealand native bush, wandering on a desolate sandy beach, sitting on a brig slightly off shore on gentle seas. And all the time knowing that you are a foreigner in this land, always with the sense that you are being watched and observed by the locals. Very uncanny.

At the center of this story is an unnamed crewman on the 'Elizabeth', an English ship that in this tale arrived in New Zealand waters in 1830 looking to trade with the Maori, specifically for flax. For such a man and his fellow crew members, this new land would not have resembled their homeland in any way. Neither would the bird life, the fish life, the plant life. Combine this with the tales about the land's fearsome inhabitants - warmongers, revenge-seekers, desirous of muskets, rumours of cannibalism - and the scariest of them all, the great chief Te Rauparaha, it is little wonder that the visitors are in such awe of this land.

On the 'Elizabeth' is a young man, Cowell, who joined the ship in Sydney. He has been to New Zealand before, can speak Maori fluently and is there to act as a middle man between the ship's captain and the Maori traders. He is also a marvellous story teller and over a period of time regales the mesmerised crew members with stories of the exploits and conquests of Te Rauparaha. Any New Zealand history book will tell you what an extraordinary man Te Rauparaha was, both in his ambitions and his brutality. Dubbed 'Napoleon of the

South' he seemed to spend his whole life exacting revenge for many and various wrongs. Naturally the myths that had built up around this man were also many and various, being perfect fodder for the imaginations of the sailors. He became the Great Wolf, always there, watching and waiting for the right moment to attack.

Rumours of a huge load of flax coupled with the chief's desire for muskets eventually lead the 'Elizabeth' to Kapiti Island, Te Rauparaha's stronghold, lying just off the east coast of the lower half of the North Island. A waiting game begins, during which the tension slowly winds up notch by notch. You see, the Great Wolf is far cleverer than the white sea captain, resulting in a major clash of the two entirely different cultures. What is a moral and ethical dilemma for one is a perfectly acceptable negotiation and result to the other. The consequences are disastrous.

The 'Elizabeth' was a real ship, Cowell and Captain Stewart were real people, and the incident they all find themselves involved in did happen. This was only one of many encounters and clashes that the Pakeha visitor had with the local Maori. We generally learn about them through history books, objective and fact driven. Very rarely do we experience what it may have been like to encounter a people so different from oneself. And in a land that is so dramatic and awe-inspiring, and all the time threatening and unknown.

Reading this book is like reading poetry, but in a prose form. It is just so stunningly beautiful. Many New Zealand novels are dark, gothic and morbidly gloomy. This is not a happy tale either, but the writing is so full of colour and richness that it is almost as if it is all taking place in some sort of enchanted wonderland. Anybody with an interest in New Zealand history, or a love of the land will feel uncannily linked with this story and the people in it.

Miriam Barr says

Wulf is a beautifully written novel, very poetic. I found it a captivating read, made more so by the fact that Cowell is my husband's ancestor. It is a pity that none of the female characters who play such pivotal if small roles were worthy of names. When I closed the last page and realised this, the book as a whole fell far in my estimation. Were it written in the 1950's I could perhaps forgive it. Alas. Clayton should know better. These women were presumably also part of our history and just as worthy of remembering by name as the men who caused so much trouble.

Alan Wightman says

A lyrical evocation of early trading encounters between Europeans and Maori in 19th century New Zealand. Our unnamed sailor-narrator is fascinated by this new country and one of its nastiest warrior-chiefs, Te Rauparaha - fascinated but also wary of the unknown.

And there are unknowns everywhere, lack of understanding enveloping our narrator like the earth is surrounded by sea. The same sea that brought him here, allowed him passage.

And just as everything about this country can be only be understood by newcomers in terms of their own country, so our narrator learns nearly all he knows about Te Rauparaha through the ship's interpreter, its "supercargo", Cowell. The narrator's telling and Cowell's telling alternate, feedback and possibly intertwine in a captive and sometimes sensual manner.

Although he focusses on an unsavoury event in its early history, Clayton has written a love story to his own country, writing adoringly and stirringly of its inhospitable beauty.

Grace Harris says

A very enjoyable storyline

Kelsey McFaul says

Wulf is one of my favorite novels of the year.

I didn't know very much (ok, virtually nothing) about New Zealand fiction before visiting there earlier this year, but discovered *Wulf* in Unity Books in Auckland, one of those shops just designed for book lovers with titles arranged in thematic clusters so you literally want one of everything.

Wulf, written by first-time author Hamish Clayton (during his PhD--mad respect!), recounts the history of English trader John Stewart's encounter with famed New Zealand chief Te Rop'raha in the early nineteenth century, but sets these historical events against the backdrop of an enigmatic tenth-century Anglo-Saxon epic. The poem, "Wulf," is a cryptic and obscure narrative of a woman's desire for a man called Wulf, though her relationship with him is deeply ambiguous. He is sometimes her lover, sometimes her son, sometimes interchangeable or part of a love triangle with a second warrior, Eadwacer.

Onto the mysterious, bitter, longing canvas of the poem, Clayton maps the British's interactions with Te Rop'raha and their relationship with New Zealand as a place, through the voices and stories of two English sailors. One, the narrator, describes the haunting beauty of this country, its compelling allure:

> "...We sailed the wild coasts of deep green forests and shiny black sand, their blue and white air brighter and clearer than any church windows we'd ever seen...I breathed in that wild air and felt those island breezes coursing through me. I felt the pleasure of that country, a sexual desire for its high winds and sheer green valleys I knew to be cradled inside its borders of shining shores" (82).

He chronicles the trials of being far from home, the explorers' instinct to compare all foreign places to familiar ones, alongside a deep fascination with the practices of native people:

> "As we sailed around the world we had misplaced the date...and so as we looked at the fierce new sun rising warm over the wild morning we thought of the cold light that we imagined it had left in the last hours of a darkening British sky. A fading sunset in our minds a whole world away from the bright morning of this strange green country, new to us and ancient. The sun was brighter here. Its light was wilder and younger, its heat more savage. The legends told in these islands spoke of men who had gone to war against it, for the New Zealand sun was a mischievous god. They had caught him in enchanted ropes of woven flax and tamed him, beating him with a weapon made of magic jawbone" (67).

The narrator's knowledge of these legends comes from his relationship, verging on obsession, with Cowell, the *Elizabeth*'s young trading master who knows the New Zealanders' language, their myths, their leaders, and keeps the preserved head of one in a locked box in his cabin. It is through Cowell's stories that we learn of the warrior larger than the myths he creates about himself, who has conquered the whole Northern Island with rapacious violence and sits enthroned at Kopitee Island, controlling the trade in flax (what the British came for), poised for the seizure of the Middle Island and its tribes. Through his stories, the sailors come to call Te Rop'raha the Wolf, the ruler of "a land that has never known wolves," an imported British beast (56). All the while he waits for their arrival:

> "He is the river and he is in the river, and he lies there asleep in the dreams of men...He is the shiver of sharks following this ship. He is the shark and he is the dark and silent water it swims through, a creature of the deep...We are sailing towards him and he is coming" (57)

Two thirds of the book builds toward the encounter between the *Elizabeth* and Te Rop'raha, which when it finally happens feels anti-climatic and deeply clouded, for the narrator is never privy to an audience with the chief and gets all his information secondhand, through the subtly subversive Cowell. And when Stewart strikes a deal to bring Te Rop'raha to the Middle Island in exchange for a hold of flax, our narrator absconds from the ship and spends two weeks camping with the natives on Kopitee, rendering the violence, greed, and injustice of the transaction obscured in a mist and the momentousness of moral failure blurred and dull as an unsharpened blade.

The fluidity, beauty, and rhythm of Clayton's prose are like love letter to his homeland, making New Zealand glitter like a green gem in the sun and the novel a pleasure to read. Meantime, the visceral and metallic clarity of native history and legend, and the candidness and unabashedness of British attempts at mental and physical conquest indicate a deep respect for indigeneity and ancientness, an acknowledgement of complicity and complexity. That Clayton wrote the novel as a doctoral student is seriously impressive, and the comparison between British epic and New Zealand history is ingenious, ironic, and haunting. Were I ever to write a novel someday, I hope it'd be like this one.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I read this for my self-declared New Zealand November. Hamish Clayton is a New Zealand author, and it is about the first encounter of the British traders with the New Zealanders, more specifically Ta Raupahara and his people, who have recently been engaged in heavy warfare on the islands.

I know some people feel this book is brilliant, and I can see what the author is trying to do - part Moby Dick with the different styles in every chapter, part Beowulf shoutout with some chapters more in verse than in prose. But I just didn't enjoy it all that much. This kind of approach results in a distance from the characters. I think this story would be more interesting from the New Zealander perspective, or with more insight into the culture, but it just screams outsider the whole way through. The story of Ta Raupahara, the "Napoleon of the Southern Hemisphere," seems interesting, but I felt I learned more from random internet reading than I did from this novel. That's a story I'd like to know more about.
