

THE EDITORS

Quotes from Paul Moon

Introduction

This is the fifteenth year of Te Kaharoa – a journal founded and edited for a decade by Professor Paul Moon. It is also the 25th anniversary of its predecessor, He Tuhinga Aronui, which he also founded and edited. By way of a tribute to his contributions in this field for a quarter of a century, we have assembled quotes from his writings and lectures. Although these constitute a small selection, we hope that they give some insight into his thoughts on certain topics. As a historian, it is not surprising that most of these quotes are history-related, but some touch on other subjects.

We would like to acknowledge several former students who were able to assist in the collation of some of these quotes. The selected statements included here were chosen because most did not need too much surrounding context to make their meaning clear.

When deciding on the sequence of these quotes, we resisted the temptation to group them according to specific subject areas. In some cases, there are common themes being addressed by successive statements, but generally, the order of these quotes is largely random.

The Editors and Reviewers of Te Kaharoa
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The Quotes

1.

History is where memory and materiality mingle.

2.

The point at which we write or speak about history is the point at which history becomes distorted. All that remains are attempts at directing that distortion.

3.

Colonisation is amoral. It is an ecosystem which, like any other, is neither good nor evil, but indifferent.

4.

Beyond racism, beyond commerce, beyond civilising missions, beyond the desire to expand or proselytise, lies the root-cause of all colonisation. Only once this cause is grasped can colonisation be fully understood. That cause is disparate societies' need to achieve equilibria with each other.

5.

The notion of 'the past' is the first and greatest system to which history is related.

6.

Racism dehumanises the perpetrator more than the victim.

7.

Expressing racist views – that is, views where certain traits are attributed to an entire group of people are – is a telling sign of cultural insecurity.

8.

The more constricted the space for a reply, the greater the reliance on rhetoric.

9.

Suppressing free speech is the intellectually impoverished and infantile response of those who have no better counter-argument.

10.

The explanation for the first cause of colonisation must necessarily lie outside colonisation.

11.

The right of free speech is not an end in itself, but the best means we have of reaching the truth.

12.

Is the first task of a historian to establish the language to convey histories?

13.

Attributing motive or moral impetus to colonisation falsely assumes colonisation has a governing intellect. Yet, it is precisely a lack of such a governing intellect that gives colonisation its impetus.

14.

Exercising free speech responsibly and thoughtfully – rather than suppressing it – is the best antidote to hate speech.

15.

Colonisation is the process by which cultural, economic, and technological disequilibria are resolved.

16.

Debates about the morality of colonisation have soaked up the energy of so many historians, yet they are a wasted diversion as the forces that drive colonisation are amoral.

17.

The postmodernists' claim that there are no absolute, objective truths is the first lesson in self-refutation.

18.

Writing history is an act of repairing a chronology that only appears dismantled in hindsight.

19.

Nietzsche fetishised power as an emblem of goodness and happiness – a virtue against the vice of weakness. Yet, the glorification of power in this way is the ultimate sign of the weakness of the adulator.

20.

Surrendering free speech to censorship sacrifices intelligence to force.

21.

Evoking the spirit of a previous age is an act of attaching a prosthetic memory. It is not part of the body of history, but nonetheless can prop up perceptions of the past.

22.

Arranging evidence to construct an historical narrative relies as much on imagination as methodology.

23.

Language is inadequate to recount history, but is the best means we have of doing so.

24.

An almanac of historical facts robs that history of context, but to the same extent, frees it from interpretation, or worse, appropriation.

25.

Not only literary style, but also the structural formulae of history is strongly mimetic, as are efforts to defy mimesis.

26.

The more utopian a movement or philosophy, the more that nostalgic elements of the past can be detected in it.

27.

The notion that history has a purpose is a deception. History merely exists.

28.

To regard the self in relation to history is an act of disengagement from reality.

29.

If truth is degraded to subjective relativism, so, too, must meaning.

30.

When history is used for ideological purposes, it ceases to function as history.

31.

Is something factual because evidence determines it, or does evidence determine it because it is a priori factual?

32.

History without morality can simultaneously be the most accurate and the least engaging.

33.

Freedom of speech nourishes freedom of thought.

34.

Because knowledge of the past can only ever be fragmentary, in one sense, history is the effort to reconstruct those fragments. But equally, apart from assembling and prioritising those fragments, it is otherwise a state of enforced forgetfulness.

35.

If history is the chronological ordering of successive moments of the present, does that ordering create a subsequent sequence not encountered by those who experienced any of those moments?

36.

Does the inclusion of all extant evidence relating to the history of a particular period or event risk missing the importance of what was forgotten by those who lived during that period or event?

37.

Does a good history lead us away from personal empathy with the subject in the pursuit of professional detachment, like a seasoned lawyer defending just another client? Or does a good history lure us into the account, and if so, can it then be trusted?

38.

If what we remember individually occurs for physical and psychological survival, does this influence the emphasis we place on how and what is recalled from the past when writing history? In other words, does history reflect our own survival narratives?

39.

If history is comprised of an accumulation of present moments that have elapsed, then is history presented sequentially more an abstraction than a reality?

40.

If utopianism is the projection of nostalgic idealisation onto the blank slate of the future, then the quality of utopian thought can only be as good as the strength of the nostalgic gaze.

41.

Identity is the offspring of imagination and environment, and nothing else.

42.

The moral relationship between coloniser and colonised is like that of a lion when killing the antelope. The experience is immediately good for the lion and bad for the antelope. There is no greater moral status to the action than this.

43.

History is part of the architecture of our identity, and the more we explore history, the more intricate and robust that architecture becomes.

44.

Our memories can follow a chronological sequence, but that is not the same as saying our memories are organised in precise chronological units. On the contrary, there is almost no measurement of the gaps in time between one memory and the next.

45.

As soon as people start using history for ideological purposes, then they have disqualified themselves as historians. From that point, they are just propagandists.

46.

There are two things that empires do not do: they do not bring themselves into existence; and they do not give themselves meaning. These are the functions of an extra-imperial force.

47.

The claim to understand something is also a claim to impose meaning on it.

48.

The past is not dead unless we either consciously go out to kill it, or through ignorance, forget it.

49.

While it is necessary to learn from the past, it is futile to attempt to resurrect it, if only because the past can never be objectively understood.

50.

It is a human instinct to impose meaning on history. The first stage in this irrational process is to select and assemble the elements of history most suited for that imposition.

51.

We may well be the product of all preceding history, but we are not its end result, just its latest layer.

52.

In no other discipline do the dead exercise as much influence over the living as in history.

53.

If history did not exist, we would have to invent it, which is precisely what the ideologues do.

54.

The tipping point of a decaying society has already been reached when the past is evoked only for its virtues, and not its vices.

55.

Revering, or worse still, imitating the past is one of the greatest signs of cultural insecurity. After all, that past was once a present.

56.

It is easy to look at the glories of the past. It is much more difficult to understand the reasons for their atrophy.

57.

Reverence of the past is delusional, if only because knowledge of the past is incomplete, and what fragments have survived can only be understood subjectively. Disappointment in the past might be a more reasonable response.

58.

Reviving historical values or practices amounts to cultural mimicry. True cultural understanding begins with an awareness of why those values and practices became confined to history in the first place.

59.

The past cannot be an antidote to the present. Indeed, because it has already expired, it can risk acting as a toxin.

60.

Those who distort history the most are the ones who have the most to fear from history.

61.

The extent to which purpose is attributed to history is proportionate to the extent to which history's insentience is ignored.

62.

Words are the foundation of all thought, and so great power lies in how they are sequenced.

63.

The closer history is to our own place and our own experience, the greater the requirement becomes to fight off an accompanying melancholy.

64.

History gives the illusion of evolution and process, but it can equally be seen as a much more random set of events not leading to any inevitable end, and not even serving any evolutionary purpose.

65.

There can be no sense of citizenship without a knowledge of history.

66.

If we claim to live without the need for history, is all that is left for us a succession of snapshots of the present, with each one deleted as soon as it is seen, and with the eye trained only to looked for the next impression of the present – impressions that are instantaneous, then instantaneously gone.

67.

There is a risk that an historical framework can be assembled as an historical cage.

68.

Writing history not only gives voice to the voiceless, but form to the formless.

69.

If all extant evidence needs to be interpreted according to the motive behind it, how do we discover the motives that led to the absence of such evidence?

70.

Historical evidence is not improved by good prose, but historical understanding can be.

71.

The extent to which something is utopian in ambition will also be the extent to which it will be dystopian in practice.

72.

Being swept along in the current of the majority is not an act of will but an abandonment of the will.

73.

The most superficial ideas tend to be clung to with the fiercest determination.

74.

Throughout history, there has been a tendency for majorities in society to rule through strength, and for minorities to overcome that strength through ideas – ideas which are then embraced by the majority, and so the cycle continues.

75.

Doubt is the precursor of all insight.

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