

A way to avoid past mistakes

It was called history, but in truth it's hard to be sure all these years later just what was being taught in the classroom we entered once each day at the sound of the bell.

As we filed in, the teacher stood in the corridor, dragging on a cigarette and staring out the window. Fag reluctantly crushed out, he'd follow us in, say not a word, go to the blackboard and start writing out in chalk the entire history of Europe and England.

We had to copy every word, trying to keep up, But it was a challenge, for he wrote quickly. It may have been here I learned the fast but largely incomprehensible note-taking I use to this day.

The only discourse between pupils and teacher came after he'd marked our exam papers and handed them back, taking the opportunity to employ piercing irony at our failings.

I did quite well because it was about this time I discovered a photographic memory, although it was short-term in its utility - swot like hell all night before the exam, regurgitate next day, then forget it.

The only things I recall now are the Punch cartoons that enlivened the textbook. Yes, there was a textbook, which was read to us in class when we weren't doing marathon copying.

To be fair, there must have been some kind of lasting impact, because these days I fancy myself as an amateur historian.

But the reason I'm telling you all this has nothing to do with the methodology of high school teaching in the early '60s. It's to do with what was taught - the content, or more precisely, the lack thereof. There was absolutely nothing about New Zealand.

Our own history didn't exist, apparently. It was too recent, or not considered as compelling as accounts of the "home" countries from which most of us had sprung.

We were vaguely aware that something had preceded. My parents - migrants from Auckland - often muttered about the "first four shippers". I later discovered it was a reference to people descended from those who'd come here on the William Bryan, Amelia Thompson, Oriental, Timandra and others in the early 1840s.

There was no hint of a Maori history. They were never mentioned, and by the time you got to the sixth form those few who had been our classmates from the start of school had mysteriously vanished. There was no presence to remind us our country is a bi-cultural one, and the other half of the bi had been here many hundreds of years before the renowned first ships people.

The point of these reminiscences is to remind you of a project being undertaken by Heritage Taranaki, which is developing a modern adjunct to the already vastly different approach that's taken these days to teaching history at the school I have written about above.

With funding from TSB Community Trust, HT is well advanced in producing a smart-phone app, whose text, photos, audio and global positioning aids will enable people to visit the many Taranaki places that hosted land war action. The app will locate and help make sense of events that resonate to this day.

The first trail (of six planned) follows the course of the first war, the year-long one in North Taranaki that began in Waitara in 1860. There is much to see at some battle sites, little at others. Your phone will tell you what happened, as well as explain anything that remains, such as monuments, the largely ploughed-in remnants of fortifications, and perspectives in relation to the conduct of those fierce engagements between 1860 and the early 1880s.

One of the key features of HT's approach is a determination to engage with iwi on this latest account of our past, in an effort to ensure the story is as devoid as possible of a "history-as-recorded-by-the-victors" slant.

A benefactor of all this will be the school where my interest in history was piqued. These days, its history curriculum is rich with New Zealand's story and enhanced by field trips to many of the places covered in the app.

It's not a compulsory subject, though, which is unsurprising given the influence of people I've interviewed over the years who've said they have no time for history, only in what happens next.

They ignore the aphorism attributed to American philosopher George Santayana in 1905 - that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.