# A CANOE IN THE MIST

Elsie Locke

Analysis by Elena Bastianoni

Historical Novel

The novel *A Canoe in the Mist* (1984) by Elsie Locke was inspired by the Mount Tarawera 1886 eruption in New Zealand. The narrative celebrates friendship and resilience, disclosing the entanglement between storytelling and tradition, and juxtaposing Western epistemologies of risk negation to Māori Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

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| Year of Publication | 1984 |
| Publication Place | London |
| Editor | Jonathan Cape |
| Entity | 1886 eruption of Mount Tarawera |

## GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

### Volcanic eruption 1886 eruption of Mount Tarawera

REAL EVENT

| | |
|---|---|
| Time | June 10, 1886 |
| Location | Bay of Plenty New Zealand |
| Coordinates | -38.236832, 176.483860 |
| Impacted Areas | Mount Tarawera, Wahanga, Ruawahia, Tarawera; Lake Rotomahana and Lake Okaro; the Native villages of Te Ariki, Moura, and Te Wairoa; hills and valleys adjacent to Rotomahana; dust on Rotorua, Tauranga-Opotiki, Tairua, and East Cape. |
| Base/Complex | Mount Tarawera |
| Typology | Other |

> “Fissure-eruptions, both historical and geological, have been distinguished by the quiet emission of floods of lava. The Tarawera outburst was a fissure-eruption in which the ejected material was entirely fragmentary. It would thus appear to represent a rare or altogether new type of vulcanism” (Park 42,43)

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|---|---|
| Volcano/Eruption Typology | Terrestrial<br><br>“Mt Tarawera comprises a group of rhyolitic cumulodomes 24 km east-south-east of Rotorua in the Noith Island of New Zealand” (Timmins 99)<br><br>Explosive<br><br>“The most recent eruption occurred in 1886 and, although initially rhyolitic, the ejecta became pre-dominantly basaltic ash and lapilli” (Timmins 99) |
| Anthropization Level | Villages<br><br>“The native villages at Te Ariki, Moura, and Te Wairoa were overwhelmed with dust and mud” (Park 45) |
| Ecological Impacts | Changes In The Volcano's Shape<br><br>“It is, however, certain, from the evidence of the survivors at Te Wairoa, situated on the west side of Lake Tarawera, that the titanic outburst which split Mount Tarawera in twain from end to end and opened the yawning fissure that stretched southward for miles over the low plateau near Rotomahana, took place with appalling suddenness.” (Park 46)<br><br>Destruction Of Plants<br><br>“Wherever the dust or mud was over 2 feet thick the vegetation was entirely destroyed.” (Park 44)<br><br>Atmospheric Changes<br><br>For a space of four hours the craters situated on the line of the newly-formed rent poured out piles of ash that overwhelmed the whole country, which, as far as the eye could reach, was converted into a weird grey-draped smoking desert. (Park 46-47) |
| Social Impacts | Deaths<br><br>“The native village at the Pink Terrace, on the shore of Rotomahana, being situated on the edge of the fissure-rent, was blown out of existence, and the inhabitants, 11 in number, were instantly killed. The native villages at Te Ariki, Moura, and Te Wairoa were overwhelmed with dust and mud, all the inhabitants of the first two being killed, namely 52 natives at Te Ariki and 39 at Moura. The 14 killed at Te Wairoa included several Europeans”. (Park 44-45)<br><br>Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)<br><br>“The native village at the Pink Terrace, on the shore of Rotomahana, being situated on the edge of the fissure-rent, was blown out of existence” (Park 44) |

## Volcanic eruption The Mount Tarawera volcanic eruption of 1886

LITERARY EVENT

| | |
|---|---|
| Time | June 10, 1886 |
| Location | Bay of Plenty New Zealand |
| Coordinates | -38.236832, 176.483860 |
| Impacted Areas | Mount Tarawera, Wahanga, Ruawahia, Tarawera; Lake Rotomahana and Lake Okaro; the Native villages of Te Ariki, Moura, and Te Wairoa; hills and valleys adjacent to Rotomahana; dust on Rotorua, Tauranga-Opotiki, Tairua, and East Cape. |
| Emphasis Phase | Pre-disaster (causes / context), Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences) |
| Base/Complex | Mount Tarawera |
| Volcanic Risk Ref. | Referenced |

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| Typology | Emission Of Pumice Stones, Gases, Ash Rainfall, Volcanic Bombs |
| Volcano/Eruption Typology | Terrestrial |
| Anthropization Level | Houses, Public Buildings, Schools, Streets, Villages, Lake Shores, Cultural Heritage Sites |
| Ecological Impacts | Earthquake, Changes In The Volcano's Shape, Physical Landscape Changes, Destruction Of Plants, Destruction Of Animal Species, Atmospheric Changes |
| Social Impacts | Deaths, Injuries, Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites), Destruction Of Public Buildings, Social Disruption, Trauma, Depopulation, Relocation, Recovery |

## INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

### Attitudes

| | |
|---|---|
| Name | Lillian Perham |
| Age | Eleven Years Old |
| Gender | Female |
| Native Place | Auckland (new Zealand) |
| Nationality | An English Subject From New Zealand |
| Reactions | Curiosity, Adaptation, Disregard, Trust In Authorities, Unawareness, Trust |

| | |
|---|---|
| Name | Matilda “mattie” Hensley |
| Age | Eleven Years Old |
| Gender | Female |
| Native Place | England |
| Nationality | English |
| Reactions | Fear, Apprehension, Unease, Awareness, Caution |

### Reactions

| | |
|---|---|
| Name | Lillian Perham |
| Age | Eleven Years Old |
| Gender | Female |
| Native Place | Auckland (new Zealand) |
| Nationality | An English Subject From New Zealand |
| Reactions | Curiosity, Wonder, Astonishment |

| | |
|---|---|
| Name | Matilda “mattie” Hensley |
| Age | Eleven Years Old |
| Gender | Female |
| Native Place | England |
| Nationality | English |
| Reactions | Terror, Fight For Survival, Cooperation |

## COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

### Attitudes

| | |
|---|---|
| Name | Indigenous people |
| Reactions | Unease, Caution, Awareness, Acceptance |

| | |
|---|---|
| Name | White people |
| Reactions | Unawareness, Denial, Disregard, Scepticism, Wonder, Carelessness |

### Affects/Reactions

| | |
|---|---|
| Name | Indigenous people |
| Reactions | Fight For Survival, Intervention, Cooperation, Prayer, Heroism, Empathy, Sadness, Survival Instinct, Trauma |

| | |
|---|---|
| Name | White people |
| Reactions | Fight For Survival, Intervention, Cooperation, Heroism, Fear, Astonishment, Empathy, Sadness, Trauma |

## LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

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|---|---|
| Keywords | Volcano, Earthquake, Rotomahana, Waka Wairua, Tarawera, Geysers, Hot Springs, Canoe, Maori, Pink And White Terraces, Mist. |
| Similes | 3) “The falling stones were hissing in a peculiar way that reminded her of mosquitoes preparing to bite”. (Locke 105)<br>“It’s like a house burning down”. (Locke 118) |
| Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes | Locus Amoenus, Deified Nature, Deities, Gods, Death |

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|---|---|
| | Civilisation Colonised People Colonisers Violation Of Laws Of Nature Prophecy Miracles Violation Of Taboos Supernatural |
| Syntax | Hypotaxis, Complex Verbal Phrases, Complex Noun Phrases, High Frequency Connectives, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language |
| Punctuation | Multiple Commas, Multiple Exl |
| Morphology | Preference For Verbs Adverbs, High Frequency Passive Forms, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language |
| Phonetics/Prosody | Sound-related word choice (onomatopoeia, rhyme, alliteration), Relevance of language rhythm |

Elsie Locke's 1984 novel *A Canoe in the Mist* is a tale of hope and survival inspired by the catastrophic eruption of Mount Tarawera in 1886.

The volcano, located in the Bay of Plenty region of Aotearoa-New Zealand, caused serious ecological damage (Orchiston and Drummond 523) and had major influence on atmospheric conditions, releasing vast amounts of ash rainfall, volcanic gases, and stone (Timmins 99). The eruption was so violent that it altered the shape of the volcano itself (Park 46), endangering the geothermal area of Rotorua. The Pink and White Terraces of Lake Rotomahana – silica terraces of geothermal origin, an extraordinary natural wonder and a crucial part of Māori land and cultural heritage – was destroyed, along with nearby Māori villages, including Te Wairoa, a popular destination for tourists drawn to the wonders of the land. The eruption caused many deaths – both Maori and European (Park 44-45) – and was both preceded and accompanied by an earthquake, which caused an anomalous wave on Lake Tarawera, near the site of the eruption.

*A Canoe in the Mist* is a historical novel building on real events and characters. Indeed, the author author was inspired by the stories of the actual inhabitants of Te Wairoa (Locke 6). The novel, set in the village, is centered around the experiences of two eleven-year-old white girls, namely Lillian Peckham and Mattie Hensley. Lillian, the daughter of a housemaid at the local hotel, forms a friendship with Mattie, a British girl travelling along with her parents to discover the wonders of the world. The story outlines the days preceding the eruption, describes the moment of maximum crisis, and presents its aftermath, underlining human industriousness and compassion in moments of crisis.

The title is highly symbolic: not it does refer to Māori culture, but it also points at notions of premonition and risk awareness. As the two girls join a guided visit to the Pink and White Terraces, the group – composed of British tourists led by the Māori guide, Sophia – see a mysterious canoe, ancient and richly carved, approaching them before disappearing into the mist. The sighting is immediately preceded by an anomalous wave on the lake, which is attributed to an earthquake. The white tourists, as well as the non-Indigenous inhabitants of the village, dismiss the event as a hallucination, whereas the Māori interpret it as a bad omen, a "waka-wairua", or ghost canoe:

They saw that canoe on the lake,' said Kira. 'That ghost canoe. It go to the tapu mountain. That means we all going to die.' […] The Maoris thought the canoe was an omen. […] 'A ghost canoe,' said Mr Haszard calmly. 'Hold up your head, Kira. We are not all going to die. We are Christians here at Te Wairoa. God in Heaven takes care of us. We don't go in fear of those old superstitions. (54)

The sighting of the ghost canoe is not a mere fictional element, as it pertains to Maori cultural memory, supported by a legend reporting its appearance before the 1986 eruption of Mount Tarawera (Rowe et. al. 296).

Mr Haszard, the non-Indigenous schoolmaster of the local Māori school, dismisses the omen and labels the figure of the waka-wairua as mere superstition, invoking the supremacy of Christian beliefs over Māori traditional beliefs. Moreover, his name is highly symbolic, evoking the notion of "hazard" while being assigned to a man who dismisses risk preparedness as futile. It is the Māori guide Sophia – who also happens to have mixed ancestry, being the daughter of a Scottish man – who offers a different response to the geological risk, one that is based on Māori Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and cultural memory:

'Yes, it was an omen. But remember this: a disaster is foretold, but when it will come and who it will strike, no one knows. We must go on living as if life is for ever. […] [ Tuhoto] has done no more than interpret the omen […] He thinks the people have turned away from their traditions, and he wants them to know, like a prophet in the Bible. (Locke 66)

Acceptance, preparedness, and mental clarity: these are the traits of the Māori point of view as presented in the novel, where the wisdom and knowledge derived from Indigenous cultural memory are highlighted as a strategic response in the face of chaos. The Māori woman refers to the local *tohunga*, a senior member of the community endowed with profound knowledge of cultural memory and even magical abilities. The elder prophesies a great calamity for the Māori community because of its adaptation to colonial rule, drawing upon a traditional founding story regarding the arrival of the Indigenous people to their ancestral land. The original *tohunga*, Ngatoro-I-Rangi, cast the demon Tama-O-Hoi into the heart of the volcano; thus, the tremor that triggered the mild earthquake is seen as a sign of the demon's revenge.

Most of the non-Indigenous individuals discard the anomalous wave and the vision of the canoe as a collective illusion, either by their inability to accept the geological risk or by economic interests. Conversely, the Indigenous voices and Lillian adopt a wiser course of action, one that is based on acceptance and preparedness.

Far from inciting conflict between Indigenous and Western epistemologies, the novel reflection on cultural difference through the innocent voices of Lillian and Mattie, both liminal figures between the colonial past and a new decolonial perspective. When the Māori belief in the ghost canoe is dismissed as a superstition, Lillian rebelliously points out the similarities between the two cultures, exclaiming: «in England, don't they have old castles with knights in armour walking round with their heads under their arms?» (57).

Lillian and Mattie embody two converging but distinct perspectives on the environment and geological risk. While Lillian has grown up in close proximity to Māori land and culture and thus feels closer to Indigenous epistemologies regarding local geological entities as alive and interconnected, Mattie adopts a different perspective. Indeed, she envisions geological entities through the lens of rational thinking, perceiving rock and lava as inert matter that are disconnected and purely destructive. Conversely, the Indigenous perspective – shared by Lillian – envisions such forces as regenerative, as the locals coexist pacifically with volcanic risk:

This mud and steam and smelly stuff, it's got…it's got such power and it isn't even alive. Papa says there's a core of burning rock deep down in the earth and the heat has to sizzle out where it can. It's so inhuman! Us up here with the animals and trees and flowers, and down there enough heat to burn us all up. (19)

Mattie is attracted to the beauty of the earth's surface, while Lillian – who has benefited from her proximity to Māori culture – also appreciates the vital power of the land, embodied by its geothermal and volcanic agency:

"'But it doesn't,' said Lillian. 'The steam comes out and cooks the dinners. In those old times when they didn't have pots, Ngatoro was a hero. He didn't really make the hot springs, though. He only found them.' 'People can fall into hot springs and get boiled to death,' Mattie persisted. 'People can fall into lakes and get drowned, too,' said Lillian. 'Are you scared of going across the lake tomorrow?' 'Not a bit. I've been in boats hundreds of times and never seen anything happen.' 'Nothing is scary when you're used to it. Nothing bad ever happens at Rotomahana.' (19-20).

The conclusive phrase of Lillian's speech, however, denotes a certain degree of unawareness regarding the real magnitude of the geological risk, as the girl "lay there full of curiosity" (76) when the earthquake preceding the eruption manifests itself, an attitude deriving from inexperience, as she had never felt the effect of such a phenomenon. Conversely, Mattie's initial reaction of terror is followed by the recognition of the volcano's great power, a resilience strategy rooted in the acceptance of non-human agency and relationality. Mattie's mother too promotes empathy and cohesion as strategic tools to ensure survival in moments of crisis: "'We'll all keep together, the five of us, like one family,' said Mrs Hensley. 'And put up a stiff resistance, shall we, Lillian?" (91).

Non-Indigenous buildings and commercial facilities crumble under the pressure of lapilli and volcanic bombs ejected by the Tarawera. The damage suffered by the Māori school, guided by a British man, is emblematic of the vulnerability of the whites and their culture as well, in the face of nature's fury in colonial territories. In this context, white people are rescued and sheltered by the Māori, whose homes can withstand the volcano's wrath. The Māoris' ability to fruitfully express their feelings of terror, anxiety, and loss qualifies them as inspirational to the British, who "made tiny islands in a sea of strange words and strong emotions", as the Maoris "did not hide their feelings of loss, grief and fear; but there was no panic either" (116).

The geological crisis therefore triggers a moment of reconciliation between Maoris and British people, as the survivors come together in their last refuge against the "devil's rain" produced by Mount Tarawera, a sense of union stemming from the shared experience of vulnerability. This process of social and spiritual cohesion is emblematically symbolized through collective prayer drawing from both Indigenous and Christian spirituality:

there was a new presence since those far-off times when Tama-o-hoi had threatened his vengeance from the cleft which kept him prisoner—the Christian God of mercy. The people sang hymns and prayed all night, both the Christian prayers and the old-time karakia. The clamour of voices defied the clamour of the mountain. Among the Pakehas only Willie Bird, who had married into a Maori family, could enter into this. When Maoris came into the stores, the hotels and the school, they fitted themselves into those Pakeha places. Now the Pakehas were flung into the Maori world. (117)

The idea of common vulnerability and the decentring of human power in the face of natural disaster is further metaphorically conveyed through an aviary metaphor: "We're only birds of passage" (118). This phrase, pronounced by Mattie's mother in reference to her family's condition as mere visitors to the Māori land, highlights her as a positive example of a non-Indigenous person who consciously refuses colonial frameworks of oppression, acknowledging Māori sovereignty in a decolonial way. "But at this moment we're all in the same boat" (118) is the woman's subsequent remark, to which a young Māori girl replies, underlining the fragility of colonial power: "All you Pakehas are birds of passage" (119). This phrase also highlights the physical and ideological disconnection between the white settlers and the more-than-human world of Aotearoa-New Zealand, revealing how colonial practices of dominance are built on the domestication of conquered territories and cultures. Moreover, the expression "birds of passage" also underlines the human condition as being marked by vulnerability to non-human agency, a framework in which anthropocentric hierarchies are dismantled. Even Lillian's bond with the Māori land, which outlines her as an intermediary between the colonial

past and the decolonial future, is marked by privilege. It is Miriam who points out how her ancestors were not subject to colonial rule: “But it is not your birthplace. […] You can find another home. That is the way of the English. They go all over the world and pick the fruits they find there, and if they don’t like it they move on and pick other fruits. Our land is part of us. If Tama-o-hoi destroys the land of our ancestors, we have no place to stand on’” (119).

On a symbolic level, *A Canoe in the Mist* illustrates different motifs. These include the *locus amoenus*, exemplified by the Pink and White terraces, and the representation of nature as being sentient through supernatural forces. References to spirituality are interlaced with the motifs of death, colonization, and trauma. As a paratextual support to the narrative, the novel also contains a section dedicated to a map locating the various geographical areas that are described, as well as a glossary of the Māori language, where the several terms in the Indigenous language frequently appearing throughout the narrative are explained.

Moreover, the novel contains two intertextual references to other tragic volcanic phenomena of the past, an element hinting at non-Indigenous knowledge about geological risk. These references include the reminiscence of the effects produced by the 1883 eruption of the Krakatoa – which was perceived by the characters living in Australia at the time – and the 79 AD. eruption of the Vesuvius destroying the Roman city of Pompeii. Noticeably, the latter is referenced through Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), a literary work known to Mattie’s father and the demonstration of the power of crisis-literature to spread knowledge and awareness about geological risk.

The novel ends with a Māori mourning ceremony, commemorating loss and celebrating life, to which both Māori and British people participate. The notion of sisterhood, unity in moments of crisis, and empathy, is strengthened through Lillian and Mattie’s friendship, an element that is also portrayed by the newly found solidarity and mutual support between the adults portrayed in the novel. The closing act of the novel is a hymn to rebirth, newfound friendship, and solidarity, where the terrifying experience of the geological disaster is sublimated through a resilience strategy based on the recognition of shared vulnerability. Moreover, *A Canoe in the Mist* highlights the strength of Māori cultural memory, suggesting a new epistemology that is rooted in an alternative form of relationality valuing compassion and respect for non-human agency.

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Created: 2025-07-17 | Last Updated: 2025-11-19