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Improving the news

Memories of times past

by PHILIP TEMPLE

James McNeish warns off reviewers of *Touchstones* with Mark Twain's epigraph to *Huckleberry Finn*, which declared that anyone finding motive, moral or plot in his book would be respectively prosecuted, banished or shot. McNeish is also at pains to state that his book is not a memoir but a collection of memories and, as essayist Martin Edmond has observed, 'However crucial [memory] is for identity, it is still a *made up* record, not a true and verifiable one.' This seems an apt description of *Touchstones*, a narrative towards creating an identity through selected memories of places and people (including their dialogue) by a writer who, despite the production of 25 other works of fiction and non-fiction, says he has not been one for self-analysis.

McNeish has always been one of our more elusive, even evasive, writers, difficult to pin down, to be sure which parts of his non-fiction works are not actually made up, whether the 'facts' are quite what they seem. Wife Helen in one of the dialogue sections of *Touchstones* puts her finger on it. "'Have you noticed,' she said to Lottie, 'how he invents things? ... It's the novelist in him ... He's very plausible.'" Plausible, and eventually persuasive.

The first half of the book is 'People', McNeish's relationships with nine men and women who exerted key influences on his life and career from the 1950s to the 1980s. There was radical theatre producer Joan Littlewood in London who convinced him he was no playwright; BBC radio features producer Jack Dillon who was McNeish's 'Oxford' as a radio broadcaster; Danilo Dolci, Sicilian reformer, whose work gave McNeish his first international critical success, *Fire Under the Ashes*. More significantly, Dolci gave him a way of writing. His book *The Outlaws of Partinico* (1955), McNeish says, was ten years ahead of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* in pioneering the first 'non-fiction novel'. 'He invented a way of story-telling based on interviews with witnesses who cried out and cried scandal, producing a literary masterpiece ... he was a kind of sorcerer. I was his willing apprentice,' and graduate.

The second half is 'Place' and that is mostly Te Maika, on the peninsula that protects the southern reaches of Kawhia Harbour. But as a metaphor in McNeish's life memory, this is an island in the Tasman Sea from which the mail launch creeps 'past the reef, making for the open sea and the mainland.' It is an island in its isolation, a place where a man might become an island himself, sequestered in a house powered by kerosene and hedged by trees that create an oasis on a thistle-bound and sheep-chewed hillside.

Here, after a self-imposed exile overseas, McNeish is transformed from being a 'stranger in his own land' into someone who belongs more than he expected. Guided by ghosts, dreams and Aunt Jean, he slowly connects to his Maori ancestry and makes a widening exploration of his father's life and family. *Touchstones* begins and ends with his father and the thread of discovering identity and place holds the book together. For a writer who abjures self-analysis, this is a public and engaging demonstration of it.

Much has been left out, some stories are left unfinished, there are errors, but these seem unimportant in someone who 'invents things.' McNeish continues, as he began on the *New Zealand Herald*, with a 'talent less for reporting news than for commenting on it, and occasionally *improving* on it ...' But McNeish's news is never less than evocative of people worth knowing and lost times and places worth remembering.

TOUCHSTONES, by James McNeish (Vintage, \$ 29.99).