

110th Anniversary of the Birth of Rewi Alley

Great Hall of the People

Beijing

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E nga iwi, e nga mana, e nga reo, mai i nga topito o Aotearoa ki tenei pito o te Ao –

Haere mai! Nau mai! Haere mai!

E tau i runga i te aroha o te tangata ki te tangata.

We are here today in the Great Hall of the People to honour the memory of a very distinguished New Zealander. It was in this building that milestones in Rewi's life were marked – his 80th birthday when Deng Xiaoping, who had had dealings with Rewi dating back some forty years, hosted the party. And it was here that his memory was honoured on the hundredth anniversary of his birth.

In this Hall, in which major moments in the history of modern China have been observed, it is appropriate that we again honour someone who did so much to help build modern China.

Today we start by recalling that 110 years ago it was in New Zealand that Rewi was born.

Rewi spent more of his life in China than he did in New Zealand. His greatest achievements were here in China. But he is nonetheless honoured in New Zealand as a great New Zealander.

Rewi's very name, the name of one of the great figures in Maori history, linked him to a proud tradition in New Zealand – of being a fighter, of bravery,

leadership, willingness to confront authority, of respect for tradition and of honouring cultural values.

Rewi had all those qualities. As a young man he fought in terrible conditions in Europe in the First World War: he endured the hardships of trench warfare, he was injured, and carried the scars of that war for the rest of his life. From that experience he began to form ideas that shaped his future life and thinking – ideas about politics and international relations, about fairness and respect for one's fellow human beings, regardless of race, background or status. He came to question the view, still widely held in New Zealand at that time, that empires and military alliances provided a blueprint for the future.

Initially he used his strength and determination to try to develop one of New Zealand's harshest areas for farming. It helps explain, perhaps, why he felt so much at home years later battling nature in Gansu.

His experience of farming in New Zealand brought out attributes of persistence and a tolerance of hardship. It gave him a sense of identity with those who struggle to earn a living from the land. It taught him that those who work in the most difficult circumstances need spirit and determination, that they must be prepared to live with failure and not give up, they must learn from it and be willing to start again. By the time Rewi came to China he had well and truly imbued in him that spirit of human tenacity.

So it was with this formative background that Rewi left New Zealand in 1927 and came to China. He left New Zealand physically, but he never left it emotionally. He never ceased to be a New Zealander. When I knew him fifty years later, in the mid 1970s, he wanted to talk about New Zealand, to remember the land of his birth and discuss what was happening there. He was critical of the New Zealand government, (in private he was critical of much of what the then Chinese government did too). But he was also quick to praise what he admired.

Today the number of New Zealanders who have come here to join these commemorations is a mark of the pride that New Zealanders take in Rewi's accomplishments.

But it is because of his achievements here in China that his name is still honoured, twenty years after his death. There was a period in Rewi's life when these achievements were discounted or disparaged in his homeland. There were those who attempted to blacken his name, to question his motives, to deny his achievements. It is an episode of which New Zealand is not, and should not be proud. But history is not only a healer. It also strips away the peripheral and the unimportant. It reveals the essence of events and of men.

History's judgement of Rewi is one that is, and will continue to be, strongly positive. It will acknowledge his humanity. It will honour his scholarship for we must not forget that Rewi was not only a fighter, a builder, and educationalist. He had a hunger for learning about the land he lived in. The library he built, the collection of cultural treasures he built up, the poetry he wrote and the classics he translated for the benefit of a western audience. The soldier and farmer with little formal education became a scholar.

I will leave others to recall Rewi's achievements in Shanghai, in flood and famine relief, behind the Japanese lines with the Red Army, in the Gong Ho movement, and later the work he did at Shandan in Gansu. It was practical, it developed work skills that China needs today, it pointed to the need to develop China's west, so loudly echoed in the policies of China's government today. It is a record that has inspired many. In 1986 New Zealand's Prime Minister, David Lange, came to Beijing and called on Rewi. There have been many great sons of New Zealand, he said to him, "but you, Sir, are our greatest son". It is why, when Jiang Zemin went to New Zealand, a visit to Rewi's old school to honour him there was unquestioningly included in his programme.

So Rewi is a man that two nations are proud to claim, and to share as their own. His legacy is something on which those two nations have been able to draw as we have built our modern relationship over the past 35 years. In his later life he enjoyed nearly 15 years when New Zealand had the government presence here in China that he had argued for decades we needed to have. He became an honoured and frequent guest at the Embassy, and a bust of him sits now in the entrance foyer to greet all those who go there.

Those of us who knew him in that period recall the generosity of time, advice and encouragement he gave us. Those who came later can only admire a life of huge achievement.

So we all today, Chinese and New Zealanders alike; those who knew Rewi personally and those who know him by repute, his family and his friends, we join in acknowledging the memory of a great son of New Zealand and of China.

No reira e nga tini mate, e Rewi ma, takoto mai, moe mai.

Ratou kua wheturangitia ki a ratou, Tatou nga morehu ki a tatou,

no reira tena huihui tatou katoa.