

The
SOUND

A NOVEL BY
SARAH DRUMMOND



FREMANTLE PRESS



KING GEORGE SOUND, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 1827.

KING GEORGE SOUND JANUARY 1827

My name is Wiremu Heke. Some people call me Billhook. On this day, with the story I had to tell, the Major called me Mister Hook. I stood outside a canvas tent on a reedy foreshore in the cleavage of two mountains, from which grey plates of granite channelled water down to the inlet. There were no buildings here, no roads or even horses, only a few tents, the bush and a brig sitting out on the water. I was oceans away from my home and I was waiting to be interviewed about a murder.

Beside me a soldier jingled the keys to my handcuffs. My stomach felt sharp and tight. Golden light filtered through the tent, musty from the ship's hold. I stood at the flap, looking in. A young man stared out at me, like a child who has heard stories of savages and cannibals. Only his white man's stiffness stopped him from reaching out to touch the pounamu stretching my earlobe, or the huge, glossy teeth around my neck. The young man sniffed and touched his nostrils with soft fingers. From the set of his eyes and his jaw, he must have been the son of the man writing at the desk behind him.

"Sir," the soldier said. "William Hook, sir."

The Major twisted in his chair and I looked down to the frayed canvas feathering my feet. The Major had just shaved and his jowls gleamed. He stood, a straight man.

"Are you from the same gang as Samuel Bailey?"

"Gov'nor Brisbane sir, yes."

"Where are you from, Mister Hook?"

From the little bay, where the eels are, near the marae, before the sand spit, before the open cliffs where the kelp surges like great black snakes in the swell.

“Aramoana. Otakau.”

“A native of the south island of New Zealand.” He sat and wrote. “Māori.” His hand stayed on the paper and he looked at me. “The *Sophia*?”

Ae, they all know, these men under the banner of the King. They know who did the burning and the killing. My father on the beach, bleeding, his fleet of waka sawn in half by Kelly and his thugs. But those men don’t know the smell of my charred Otakau. The work of a torch and a following wind.

The Major’s grim smile made me want to turn and leave his stinking golden tent but there was the idling soldier, and there were things that I needed done.

“I was a boy sir.”

“Approximately twenty years of age.” The Major wrote on his paper again. He asked me questions and then the same questions again. He ran around my story of the killing and then around it again. The Major wrote all of the names down carefully. His son returned with sweet black tea in white cups and the tent grew warmer with its steam and our bodies and the climbing sun. Finally the Major dipped the end of a pen in ink, blotted it on rough paper and handed it to me.

“Sign please.”

I stared at the black lines tattooing the paper. “If I do this, then you will go to the island and rescue Tama Hine and Moennan.”

The Major sighed. “Your ... sort are called sea wolves and pirates and that is in polite society, Mister Hook. Worse down on the docks. Your crimes in King George Sound have created tremendous hardship for my men and myself. Your actions are –”

“I beg your pardon, sir. But will you get them from the island?”

“My pardon is the least of your concerns.” But he nodded.
“First light. I intend to have Samuel Bailey arrested.”

I bent over the table and signed the paper.

X.

ARAMOANA 1825

Wiremu Heke was newly a man when the chiefs called a public meeting about Captain Kelly and the *Sophia*. Wiremu's father limped along. He was too broken to work but the elders held him in high esteem. Eight years after the attack and the people still wanted revenge. Several young men needed to avenge fathers and mothers who had died from the bullets. It was part of their heritage and their right, they argued, to gather up honour, the way the white man gathers up medals and stripes.

They had to find the sea captain. For all the rumours and stories from visiting whalers, Kelly and the *Sophia* never returned to Whareakeake or Murdering Bay as the whalers called it. Wiremu's father knew of his son's hankerings and volunteered him to the sea and a seaman's life in search of information on the Captain's whereabouts. "Send young Wiremu. He is hungry for the ocean." Wiremu was hungry for the girl Kiri too but the sea collected him up like a cuttlebone.

The chiefs ordered him and five other young men to work aboard the whalers, to collect crop seeds and knowledge from the shores of New South Wales, and find Captain Kelly. If they found him, they would entice him to return on a peace mission to Otakau where the chiefs would be waiting for him. No man explained to Wiremu how to garner a sea captain.

Life for this Otakau boy changed quickly after the meeting. A sealing schooner arrived and its captain offered to take him aboard as a mate to Van Diemen's Land, where he could then

work his way to the New South Wales colony. He had time to romance the girl but briefly, in a sweaty rush by the river. She had a knowing glint in her eye that he would leave soon. Kiri's breath whistled as she cried out, and later as she slept on the thatch mat he'd laid down for her, he watched her breathe. When she awoke, he asked her about her wheeze. She did not think of herself as unhealthy or ill. "Born on the river, Wiremu," she said, stroking his face. "Born on the river."

His father arranged for Wiremu to be tattooed. He squatted on the mat beside his son and talked as the tattooist worked. His father told him stories to distract him from the pain of the chisel. He talked and talked. It seemed rudderless talk until Wiremu realised he was talking his way into ancestral stories, carving them into Wiremu's memory while the tattooist carved the spirals into his flesh.

He told Wiremu how he came to build boats, the same boats Wiremu would paddle out beyond the heads to catch barracouta. He had learned his trade from his uncle who had learned from his grandfather. Wiremu's great-grandfather was first a boatbuilder, but when he was broken by his enemy's mere, he became a carver of wood and then a tohunga tā kaue, a carver of flesh.

Wiremu's great-grandfather had fallen in love with a Ngai Tahu girl. She was the daughter of a visiting chief. She wore a necklace of orca teeth. She saw Wiremu's great-grandfather carving into bartered kauri, on the edge of the river where he lived with his wife and son. She watched him carve the ocean into the wood with chisel and hammer. He may well have been using a leaf, his blows and strokes were so fine. He asked the wood politely to work for him. She saw that and she asked him, "Why don't you work it harder and it will be quicker?" He replied that he must ask or the ocean would be lost. It was a mere he was

carving and as he smoothed his hand over the wood, he thought that one day it may kill a man or break him, and his blood would fall over the earth like resin. Only when she said she had sought him out because she was told he could give her moko, did he look up at the girl.

“Ae,” Wiremu’s father sighed and smiled.

The next day Wiremu’s great-grandfather laid her down on reed matting in a cool shelter. She turned up her chin to him and he gripped it in his hard carver’s hands. She was sweating. He gave her narcotic seeds to chew and told her to leave the pulp under her tongue so the juices would spread to the back of her mouth. It made her saliva rise and she was soon light-headed.

He stirred the liquid in the bowl beside him, the ash of burnt shit and fish oil, water. He laid out the contents of his tool bag: a handle of manuka and blades made from the wings of albatrosses, some with serrated edges and some flat and sharp. He wound the handle to the blade with string. Then he began to carve her, tapping the bone blade against her face with a small wooden mallet.

He carved for most of the day, rubbing his black concoction into her wounds, wiping away her spills of blood with a softened flax cloth. At first the pain was unbearable but her flesh was soon numb with the drug and the hammering. The sound of the chisel thudded against her skull, eased by his voice as he told her stories of his ancestors.

One of the kuia, her grandmother, helped her to her feet and they left the shelter. She could not open her mouth for three days. She felt unable to breathe. She could not eat. Her belly an empty hut. Her grandmother had moko. Now very old, she sat with blankets around her shoulders and knees. When she spoke, she pointed out the girl with lips long ago blackened by the ink of burned caterpillars and tree resin, and it was like an accusation

when she told her she was under the spell of the tohunga tā kaue. She liked to smoke a pipe, though she told her granddaughter never to do this. She also instructed her not to eat fatty foods or embrace a man until her moko was healed. If she did these things, the black lines would bleed and disappear and she would be forever shamed as a woman who had disrespected her moko.

She stayed in the hut, hiding her swollen face. On the fourth day she emerged to see the tattooist being chased from his hut by an angry woman wielding a stick. After the kui had given her leaves to protect her lips, she went to see her father. He told her off for taking moko without asking his permission but she was ready for womanhood and quietly he was pleased, she knew. She asked him about the tohunga tā kaue.

They married, the girl with the orca tooth necklace and the carver of wood and flesh. Together they travelled around the island. He tattooed many other people. His tattoos always depicted the sea, the waves and the spirals of the spirits that eddied in the shallows. Everyone who saw Wiremu Heke's great-grandfather's moko recognised his work.

Wiremu's father talked all day. He gave him all of his stories the day before Wiremu sailed out of Otakau with tender, freshly tattooed buttocks, to cross the sea to Van Diemen's Land.

HOBART 1825

“Go west. Go west!” The man who leaned into Wiremu’s face had piano-peg teeth. “Boss Davidson doesn’t mind playing his chances. We’ll make a good lay from the sealskin and be out of the way of the Governor and King. Not a white man to be seen in the west.” Seal were getting fished out of the Strait, he said. Seal were getting scarce and the Islanders controlled their patch with firearms. A good time to go west.

It was a tavern at the Hobart docks, where men heaved and swayed like the sea inside the sandstone walls. Samuel Bailey gave Wiremu another mug of wine and spoke to the red-faced man who was his boss. “His name is Billhook. Easier to say than his real name. Billhook will do. He’s a real good blackfella. Take him on, eh?”

All the sweat, the people so close, the wine and then Boss Davidson’s offer; it was as confusing as it was intoxicating. Wiremu, christened Billhook by his crewmates, stood on the docks the next day and watched the *Governor Brisbane* shifting against the pylons.

Not north to New South Wales for Billhook. He shipped out of Hobart Town three days later bound for the west country. Men crawled amongst the rigging like possums in trees. It took them another three days along the Derwent and through Storm Bay to get to the sea. They were becalmed in the mornings, drifting under hills made smoky blue by the mist, and then away as the midday wind worked up the water writhing black

with the shining spines of humpback whales.

During the three days, Billhook began to know the crew. It was said that Samuel Bailey was a swell's son run out. He was wind-burned, with deep cracks around his mouth. A white man. Billhook quickly realised he would never know the weather coming with Bailey. His eyes clouded all the storms in his heart until the moment he lashed out. He got wild alright but Bailey getting wild made him steady as a snake.

Pigeon was a black man, a Sydney native, who quickly got on side with Boss Davidson with his clever wit, and his great strength which belied his lanky frame. A boy called Neddy, born on Kangaroo Island to a black woman and a sealer there. The brothers Jack and Tommy Blunt were the first white men Billhook had met who were born in this country. Two black men: Black Simon towered over Billhook, his back ribbed with scars of the lash, he spoke with a strange accent; and Hamilton, a small, very dark man with an easy smile who could speak many languages. Jimmy was the crew's boatsteerer. The men called him Jimmy the Nail because he had once driven a pike through a rival's hand and nailed him to the starboard gunwale of his whaleboat. He was a short, sandy man with a ready humour and a scar down the side of his nose. Pigeon told Billhook that Jimmy the Nail had shot black men at their fires to get women. Pigeon knew this because he'd helped him find their camps at night.

At Robbins Island on the western fringes of the Strait, they weighed anchor and went ashore to gather more crew and supplies for the journey west. Boss Davidson and Jimmy the Nail haggled for pork, sealskins and women with a bluff sealer, who introduced himself as the Strait's Policeman.

The first time Billhook saw Vandiemonian women, they were returning to the hut from muttonbirding, long sharp

sticks slung across their shoulders, threaded with fluffy grey chicks. Seven women. One child. Twenty dogs. Big dogs they were, some as high as the women's waists. Long-legged hunting curs, all lolling tongues and ears askew and whiskery grins.

The women walked over the bald hill towards the hut, spread out in a line, the sun behind them, so that their dark shapes with the sticks looked like the white man's martyr. Some of the impaled birds flapped wearily in the wind as though still alive. The wind tossed the island grass like an ocean about their legs. If the dogs hadn't been moving, their shaggy brindle pelts would have made them near invisible against the grass.

Billhook watched the women walk towards them.

Bailey muttered, "Which one do you want?"

"We got plenty pork," said Billhook and realised his mistake when Bailey laughed and pointed to the woman on the far right.

"That one."

She was short and strong and wore a frock of skins with the fur on the inside and a red knit cap. She was laughing but she stopped when she saw Bailey point her out. The clanswomen walked wide of the two men and cast down their eyes. They looked angry or shamed and not as strong as they did on the hill. Billhook's mother had made his sisters smear their faces with stinking dirt and messed their glossy hair with manure, when the white whalers first came to Aramoana. His sisters were only little girls then but his mother knew to keep them safe.

Bailey stood looking at the woman, chewing tobacco and spitting. His mouth moved around his screw jaw as if it hurt to speak. He took off his cap. He was not an old man but his hair ran away from his head, thin, soft wisps over pink skin.

From the highest point of the island Billhook could see a

conical hill on the coast of Van Diemen's Land. In the evening, a single line of smoke bloomed from the top.

"See that smoke?" he asked the Policeman. "On top of the mountain over there."

"It's the blackfellas," said the Policeman. "The fellas. That's why the Worthies light a fire up here too." He gestured behind him to the dark shapes of the women laying swathes of green branches over a frugal flame. A quick burst of smoke floated into the sky. "They're saying hello back to their fellas. Hello. Goodnight. Whatever they say."

"Worthies?"

"Titters. Tyrelore. Island Wives. Worth their weight, Billhook. We'd starve without 'em, hear me."

The women worked hard in the sea and on the land, the Policeman said. Scraping skins, collecting salt, hunting tammar and giving succour to men who smelt like muttonbird and seal. He talked of muttonbirding. The women went out to the muttonbird grounds with their dogs, spent the day putting their arms down burrows until their faces touched the ground. They showed the Straitsmen how to do this when they were first taken to the islands. Crouch down and thrust your arm into the hole after the parent birds had gone out hunting for fish. Crouch down until the grass and stones scratched your cheek. Feel the wriggle, the bleating heart of the fluffy chick, its feeble pecking at your hand, haul it out, break its neck over a stick, leave it on the ground for one of the other women to thread onto a stick before the dogs got to it. The worst job was draining the oil from the muttonbirds after they were plucked, and squeezing out the gurry. And the black snakes in the muttonbird burrows. Snakes everywhere. Lurking in the bushes they called barking barillas. Full of snakes after baby chicks and eggs. But no one ever seemed to get bitten by the snakes. Sometimes they felt

the dry slither of a tail but if snake felt you coming they left you alone.

“You hunt and clean muttonbirds too?”

“Nah,” said the Policeman. “That’s the Worthies’ job. That woman Mary,” the Policeman pointed to one of the women. “She’s the wallaby woman. She’s got six dogs. Between all the women there be twenty-eight dogs so they’re a job to feed. Fine dogs they are. Quick and quiet. Like the lurchers from the old country. Their husbands steal them from the shepherds over on the mainland, or trade them and breed them up. Good hunters they are. Never rush a mob of kangaroo without knowing which one they want. Twenty roo in one day once and the Worthies had their skins pegged out by dinnertime. She’s good with dogs, that Mary, but she’s gettin’ difficult. I reckon she’ll be aboard with you lot.”

The Policeman sold Boss Davidson two women, Dancer and Mary, to take west aboard the *Governor Brisbane*. The strong one, the woman Bailey had pointed out to Billhook, the Policeman wanted to keep her. He was attached to her, he said. He fingered the hard edges of the sealskins that Jimmy had traded him for Dancer. Behind him, a girl child of about eight peered around the doorway and spoke to Mary in her native language. The Policeman turned and spat, “Git!” and she snapped her head out of sight.

In the morning Boss sent his crew in to the island. On the shore, Dancer and Mary waited until the pigs were dumped in the bottom of the dinghy and then climbed aboard and sat on the warm carcasses. Mary turned her face away from the island and from her dogs, which milled about the shoreline, crying for her.

The *Governor Brisbane* shipped out midmorning. Billhook looked down from his spar in alarm as Dancer began to wail

loudly. She and Mary sat huddled on the foredeck, Dancer's face greying as the swell rose. She cried out in her language and threw up. Boss Davidson, standing at the wheel, grinned at her and shook his head.

"You must have a padlock on yer arse, Dancer, shitting through yer teeth like that."

"The water makes her sick," said Mary and stroked Dancer's short cap of hair. She took her amulet pouch and sprinkled something powdery and red into Dancer's outstretched palm. Then she held the pouch against Dancer's belly and spoke in swift, watery language. "And there's Devil in this sea 'ere," she called to Boss Davidson, and Boss nodded like he knew what she was saying.

Mary was right. Currents sucked away from sandbars and surged into strange whirlpools. Westerly winds crashed into the easterly swell, complicating the backwash from the rocky cliffs. It was a glad feeling to be away from the islands and into the open sea, away from those uncanny surges, to see the islands sink away and become a mere smudge on the horizon, the sea glittering with an aslant sun and deep blue, rising up to meet the schooner. Dancer quit her crying and vomiting when the islands were out of sight.

They butchered the two pigs on the first afternoon and salted the pork into barrels. They used most of the salt aboard as Boss had plans to get more at Kangaroo Island.

"There's a few tars there too, who'll want a lay," he said that evening.

Kangaroo Island came up on the horizon on the morning of the fourth day. The island rose out of the sea like a beast in the heat's magic haze. They sailed through the Backstairs Passage, where Jimmy the Nail, who'd lived there, told Billhook that a woman had escaped her island captors by swimming seventeen

miles back to the mainland. “With a baby strapped to her back.” They sailed past the cliffs of the cape and into Newland Bay. Billhook, Bailey and Jimmy the Nail rowed the dinghy towards a white shore, the boat swishing over seagrass beds, the water flattened by the lee of the island. It began to rain softly.

Three men and a woman ran down the rocky hill to where the boat rocked in the shallows. Dogs yapped around their legs. Two more black women dressed in wallaby smocks and knit caps dragged sacks of salt along the beach. One of the women smoked a pipe as she worked.

“See those tars?” Jimmy the Nail pointed to the men gathered on the beach to watch them wade ashore. “See their uniforms? Those ones still wearin’ slops. By the time they been here five years they’ll be in skins like the blackfellas and will have some say in matters. Now see that bloke. That’s Jim Kirby. He bin here a while.”

Kirby was red-faced with hair once orange and now faded to a bright yellow. His long beard was red and white. He was dressed in skins which he couldn’t have cured too well for they smelled bad and rotted off his body, falling into tatters about his knees.

“And this is Smidmore,” Jimmy muttered to Billhook. “Me old mate.”

Smidmore was dark but no native. A Gael perhaps or one of the Black Irish with spiralling black hair that he tied behind his neck with a leather thong and an eye that turned. He carried a fiddle, like the one played in the Hobart tavern, a gear sack and a gun. Smidmore hadn’t been on the island long, from what Jimmy had told Billhook, for he wore the canvas slops given to all new sealers. Despite his clothing, Smidmore acted with Kirby as if they were lords of the island. Billhook wondered aloud to Jimmy why they would take on a lay as tars when they could be island chiefs. Jimmy replied quietly that they were being run off

since Johnny Randall planned to go west too. And something about women. There had been some trouble with the women.

They loaded the little boat with two guns wrapped in oiled cloth, two bags of cabbages and potatoes and fifteen sacks of salt sewn closed with the sinew of kangaroo tails. One of the women climbed in, calling her two dogs after her. Kirby and Smidmore got in too. The men and women left on shore pushed out the boat until they felt it free from the sand. Bailey and Billhook grabbed at the oars. The women waved and sobbed and called to the woman in the boat. They rowed out to the channel that would take them through the breakers.

The black woman stood at the bow holding a rope, her feet planted firmly on the thwart. She was magnificent and when he could, Billhook turned to look at her. She looked different to the two Vandiemonian Worthies. Her face was thinner, her hair straighter and she didn't have strings of tiny shining shells about her throat. Instead, so tightly thonged that it dug into the hollow between her collarbones, she wore the whitened skull of a newborn baby.

The crew wriggled the boat alongside the *Governor Brisbane*. The wind had come up in the absence and it blew the boat off before anyone could get a rope. Hands grabbed for flying ropes on the next try and they fastened the dinghy. The island woman pointed to the salt and let Samuel Bailey know in good English that she'd collected it herself and it must be looked after. She had Bailey on the edge of nodding in obedience until he grunted and turned away.

Mary scowled at her from the schooner's deck. Mary had been boss woman on Robbins and Billhook could almost hear her thoughts. Who was this uppity sprite? And how was she allowed to bring her dogs and Mary not?

The woman threw one of her dogs up to the ship. The short,

whiskery terrier landed on deck and turned to snarl at Hamilton, the black jack, then looked over the side at his owner, wagging his tail. On her next throw the bigger dog, a lean hunting dog similar to Mary's, hit the stringers and dropped, shrieking, into the sea. She let out a cry of dismay. Bailey laughed. The dog swam around the dinghy, shaking water out of its ears. She hauled it in by the skin of its neck. The islander Smidmore grabbed a rope dangling from the gunwales and she tied it around the dog. She nodded to the black jack who hauled the animal up, its body hanging from its elbows, tail between its legs and looking down at its mistress with wrinkled brow.

Once her dogs were safely on board, she nodded again at the sacks of salt. "Don't you drop that salt. Plenty hard work," she said to Billhook. She looked at him hard. "You no white man." She pointed a good true east with long fingers. "You from over there?"

Billhook nodded.

"K'ora!" she said grinning, her teeth as white as her infant child's skull and Billhook grinned back in spite of himself.

Rope ladders tumbled down. He watched her climb and wondered how many rope ladders she'd climbed in the cover of night to see a white captain moored at the mouth of American River, a man who scribbled in his books about timber and soil and wallabies and winds but never of the black girl who climbed onto his ship and was shown to his cabin.

"Sal," said Smidmore to the men in the dinghy who were watching Sal climb aboard. "That's my Sal. She's mine."