



► **NATHAN GRAY** ADVENTURER/LAWYER

'It was the lure of the horizon. Nothing else mattered.'

Competitive sibling rivalry was partly responsible for driving a young lawyer to walk the entire Great Wall of China, **Danielle Teutsch** writes.

IN MAORI culture the first-born twin is deemed the younger because he is "kicked" out of the womb. That means Nathan Hoturoa Gray, a 32-year-old New Zealand-born lawyer, is forever a peg below his identical twin brother in status.

Gray admits this competitive sibling rivalry is partly what drove him to join a motley crew of five men aiming to be the first Westerners to walk the 4000-kilometre length of the Great Wall of China, from the Gobi Desert to the Bohai Sea.

Gray and his trekking companions, a Buddhist monk, a Mormon golfer, a Jewish photojournalist and an Italian recording artist, were far from a cohesive group when they set off in 2000 and were destined to split. They were propelled by individual dreams and divided by their own ambitions and egos.

Gray, whose account of his obsessive quest to walk the wall has recently been published (*First Pass Under Heaven*, Penguin), is frank about his role in the disharmony.

"Before I started I was very self-centred, very ego-driven, competitive and individualistic regarding my outlook on life," he says.

After the group split Gray stubbornly continued the journey, impelled to keep following the "dragon's spine".

The 2000-year-old ancient wonder is said to be the world's longest graveyard because more than a million people died building it. In a way, Gray wanted to pay homage to the forgotten builders.

"The wall, like the pyramids, gives you the sense of the enormity of the human race and what it can achieve," he says.

But there was another, less fathomable, reason to continue – the desire to arrive at an end point. "It was the lure of the horizon," he says. "Nothing else mattered."

The power of Gray's journey is in its transformative nature. With each step along desert plains or steep cliffs, every encounter with hospitable peasants

and cold bureaucrats, each experience of thirst, extreme hunger, blizzards and lightning strikes, Gray's mental armour is stripped away.

Even his twin brother barely recognised him after a stint in the desert, crouched over like an ape, sniffing an apple he is about to eat. "I felt like a naked animal, walking the planet," he recalls. "It was about survival, firstly, then finding a balance between liberty and security; then finding your self-respect."

Gray was heavily influenced by Buddhist thought as well as Maori beliefs during his journey.

While walking the Gobi Desert section of the wall, Gray felt a familiarity with the landscape he believes is due to one of his ancient ancestors having trodden the same path. At other times he felt a strong sense of death, such as just before he witnessed a stabbing murder. Most of the time he was guided by intuition and seemed to pay a heavy price if he ignored it.

At the beginning of the journey one member of the group finds a hat and wears it but is warned that it is a bad omen. The group finds itself dogged by misfortune until the hat is abandoned. There are even several supernatural occurrences, such as when Gray feels an alien presence pass through his body. "The sensation is despicable, like being forced to place my mouth around an exhaust pipe and suck in the fumes," he writes.

It would be understandable if, after almost nine months of trudging through rugged terrain and enduring weather extremes, hallucinations had replaced clear thought and the surreal had become real. But it's clear that Gray is someone in whom both the logical and

mystical are deeply rooted – and that this duality is a recurring theme in his life.

BORN to a Scottish father and Maori mother, Gray believes he has inherited the intellect of one and the spirituality of the other. His struggle through life is to find the right balance between the two, and lessons learnt from the wall have helped.

Gray now realises his mere survival was a victory and he has a heightened respect for life as a result.

He was forced to abandon the quest to become the first Westerner to walk the wall, a title won by the Buddhist monk. "The walk took exactly nine months, so it's like a birth, a rite of passage," he says. He also learnt a lot from one of his companions, Polly

Greeks, a Kiwi journalist who interviewed Gray then ended up following him to China to walk a section of the wall.

Greeks wrote her own account of her two-month journey, *Embracing The Dragon: A Woman's Journey Along The Great Wall Of China*. She detailed the tempestuous nature of their love affair and Gray copped flak for being occasionally domineering and insensitive.

Unlike Greeks's book, written soon after her return from China and still raw with emotion, *First Pass Under Heaven* had the benefit of reflection and hindsight. It took Gray two years of



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“cathartic grieving” and another year of finetuning the manuscript before he started taking it to publishers. At first he was told he would never succeed because Greeks had already written the story.

But the book has been a modest success in New Zealand. It was recently published in Australia and Gray is now looking for a Chinese publisher. “In a way, her book paved the way for mine,” he says.

Since that journey, Gray has hitchhiked from Alice Springs to Darwin “just to see if I could still do it” and has worked for a New Zealand

ministry. There are plans for further adventures in South America and the Himalayas.

But his current focus is on setting up a foundation to bring young people from different nations together to walk sections of the wall. One dream is to take a group of blind children, getting them to feel their way along.

The wall, that great divisive symbol, is what may have finally united his Western legal mind with his Maori heart.

