

Ka Ngaro Te Reo: Māori Language Under Siege in the Nineteenth Century

By Paul Moon

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My early childhood was spent in my mother's home area of London until, at the age of nine, my family moved to my father's home town in Yorkshire. It seemed only natural to me that the local people spoke with a different accent and used dialect words and unfamiliar expressions. But I was shocked when, having been asked to read a piece from a book, my new teacher announced to the class that I spoke correctly while my thirty-plus classmates did not. The 'news' that one language or form of language was superior to another had a profound and lasting impact on me — one that deepened when a classmate in my next school, in Auckland, was publicly castigated for using both the Māori and English forms of her name. Those were, of course, just tiny pointers to a reality of much greater significance, but they and other memories resonated as I read Paul Moon's new book *Ka Ngaro te Reo: Māori Language Under Siege in the Nineteenth Century*.

Te Reo's slip from being the only language spoken in New Zealand in 1800 (albeit one with many geographic variations) to near extinction by the century's end was dramatic. However, the course of converting it into written form saw the filtering and then reconfiguring of elements of Te Reo, which had 'momentous effects' on its retention and ongoing transmission, as well as on culture and customary leadership (12). Tellingly, the process encouraged a trend towards the greater standardisation of Te Reo in text, which eventually flowed through to the spoken language. Organised chronologically, *Ka Ngaro te Reo* reveals how both benign and malign forces contributed to its decline.

Chapter One attempts to reconstruct the scene as at 1800, when Te Reo was not only a strictly oral language but also heavily imbued with its own literature: the oral traditions, metaphors, and whakapapa that underlay its vitality. As the chapter title acknowledges, Te Reo was a treasure handed down from the ancestors with spiritual dimensions of its own. Chapter Two picks up from the end of the eighteenth century until the end of 1814. The end date marks the arrival of Evangelical English missionaries who sought to make the Bible and Christian teachings available to Māori in their own language.

Chapter Three continues the story into the mid-1830s with a wide-ranging and detailed summary of the struggle to render the oral Te Reo into written form. It offers a background to the changes that would occur once the first Anglican missionaries began work on that project. Although they had little success with religious conversion initially, their intended flock showed much greater enthusiasm for literacy and ownership of the books being produced. As the 1830s progressed, they enjoyed greater success with their spiritual mission. However, as the translators became more fluent in Te Reo and produced revised versions of biblical works, some Māori were unsettled by these new, 'improved' translations. Having integrated Christian ideas into their own spiritual understandings, revision could be interpreted as a violation of what many had now accepted as sacred text.

It was also during the 1830s that the standardisation or homogenisation of the language really began to show. Māori had previously been unconcerned by variety in their language and there is no evidence that they applied higher status to one form over another. However, the British, 'bedevilled' by variety in forms of English, sought to ensure unity of language in New Zealand. As I had discovered in Yorkshire, a standard form of language was intended to be a social unifier, not only within Britain but also throughout its expanding empire (43).

From Chapter Four the account becomes one of further onslaught and decline in the use of Te Reo. Moon shows how even efforts to preserve the language tended, at best, to mummify it or, at worst, contribute to its demise. In discussing the importance of language as a ‘culture shaper’, *Ka Ngāro Te Reo* acknowledges paradoxes, such as how Governor George Grey’s preserving mythologies in Te Reo (albeit somewhat distorted versions of Te Reo), intended as a way of bringing Māori further under colonial control, also served to speed its downfall. Several other seemingly positive practices are shown to have had negative impacts on the language over the course of the century, but all-too-often, Te Reo was treated with disdain or whole-hearted animosity.

Māori had a comprehensive vocabulary; one that included an extensive taxonomy for many features of the natural world. Moreover, as is mentioned in Chapter Three, the language used in the 1830s, when the language was still strong, remained true to that of historical events being recalled. Such examples are evidence of the discipline of oral transmission — of knowledge and of history. The still-espoused notion that ‘tribal’ societies are static was imposed upon Māori amid claims that Te Reo was ‘unable to make any useful contribution to the country’s future’ (141).

As Moon points out in his Introduction, Te Reo was an oral language while writing ‘was the medium of the coloniser’. In the process of compiling dictionaries and translating documents, Pākehā were inclined to invent their own random neologisms, which were neither Māori or English in their origin. Consequently, in the words of Walter Mantell, Māori could be ‘induced to accept gibberish’, which would offer the legal fraternity opportunities to ‘prey upon their ignorance’ (212). Although Moon does not mention examples of inaccurate translations being used to government benefit, he refers to the problem of untrustworthy translators.¹ However, a thought-provoking quote from George Orwell’s *1984* refers to how the introduction of newly created words goes hand in hand with the destruction of old ones and that the aim of ‘Newspeak’, created by Orwell’s ‘Ministry of Truth’, was to ‘narrow the range of thought’ (110).

For some, the enforcement of English language education was a means of rendering ‘native children useful and valuable auxiliaries to the Europeans’. Thus, English was the language of Māori servitude (107). Eventually, the disproportionately few Māori members of the House of Representatives would find that, English being the language of power, an ability to speak in that tongue gave them far greater influence in the political arena. Practical realities were chipping away at the viability of Te Reo.

From the 1870s and on towards the end of the century, many believed that Māori were a dying race, one that was succumbing to an allegedly superior people. The idea was convenient from many points of view. As their numbers diminished, more land would become free for settlement by Pākehā and there would be no reason to keep insisting that they learn English. Te Reo was doomed by nature. As all the king’s resources were unable to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, it must be equally impossible to reinstate the many reo of 1800 but, as the book concludes, 1900 saw something of a turnaround in attitude which has continued in the present.

Despite some unnecessary repetition of ideas, there are few editorial glitches. The only one of significance being on page 64 where the date of London merchant Joel Polack’s arrival at Poverty Bay is given as 1769; the date of the much earlier visitor Captain James Cook’s visit rather than Polack’s. The statement that, from the early 1840s, the Anglicans were ‘once again the state church’ is a little more puzzling unless it is intended as a metaphor implying their favoured status with government officials (125). If that is the case, it is not at all clear. However, these are small points. *Ka Ngāro Te Reo* offers important and valuable insight into the multiplicity of factors which strained the viability of Te Reo as a living language for the modern world, together with thoughtful analysis of their impacts on culture more broadly.

¹ See, for example, Hazel Petrie & Hohipere Tarau, 'Māori texts and official ventriloquism', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 46, 2 (2012), pp.129-140.