

Craik's *The New Zealanders*: A Formative Case of Meaning-Construction

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Abstract

From the 1820s, there was a surge in the number of books about New Zealand being published in Britain. George Craik's *The New Zealanders* (1830) serves an exemplar of how many of these works – which tended to be more popular than academic – not only provided British readers with information about New Zealand and its indigenous people, but which also contributed to processes of meaning-construction that both reflected current trends in interpreting the non-European world, and to some extent anticipated new ways of understanding the indigenous other.

Introduction

Prior to the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 – the axiomatic point in Britain's official involvement in New Zealand – more than twenty books had already been written about aspects of the country. These books have been utilised regularly since as sources for histories of the period, and in more recent decades, have often been prefaced with a generic caveat about their cultural insights being diminished to some degree by the fact that they were written in an age when indigenous peoples and cultures tended to be viewed more pejoratively by European writers.¹ However, while such qualifications about the reliability of these works is now nearly ubiquitous, the all-encompassing nature of these cautions can run the risk of concealing the more intricate and nuanced ways in which such works about New Zealand in the 1820s and 1830s helped to construct meaning about the country for British readers in the nineteenth century. By focusing on the inaccuracy of representations of Māori culture in particular, there is a risk that other dimensions of these works can potentially be overlooked.

Using the example of George Craik's 1830 book, *The New Zealanders*,² this article examines three (often overlapping) aspects common to works on New Zealand written in this era: the emphasis of popular history over a more formal academic approach; the role of narrative in such histories; and their contribution to meaning-construction in a manner that both reflected existing currents in the manner in which meaning about the country had been formed, and that embodied emerging ways of seeing indigenous populations.

What is evident from this survey is that although Craik's book was hardly exceptional in the corpus of works published about New Zealand in the 1820s and 1830s, it nonetheless epitomises some of those aspects of the ways in which the country and its inhabitants were being depicted in text at this time. It also reveals how such publications encompassed shifting attitudes about the status of indigenous peoples in a way that was a departure from the views of previous generations – partially abandoning the savage/civilised dichotomy in favour of a more nuanced interpretation, in this case, of the nature and possibilities of Māori society. To this extent, such works were shifting away from interpreting the development of Māori society as an immanent process to the possibility of it occurring in a more intentional form.³

Historical European Representations of the Indigenous – A Thematic Summary

Edward Said's seminal 1978 work, *Orientalism*,⁴ spawned a substantial body of scholarship on how indigenous peoples were represented by Europeans historically, as various forms of the

Other, which reflected the roughly binary distinction Europeans in the colonial area marked out between themselves and the various grades of non-civilised peoples of the rest of the world. This branch of writing is insightful in the context of this article in that it allows for Craik's book to be positioned as part of late-Enlightenment ideas about human development. George Stocking, for example, emphasises the importance to writers of the period of the frisson generated by the 'ancient and modern' being brought 'into absolute contact' during colonial encounters,⁵ which in turn fortified the belief at the time in classical British social evolutionism, whereby less developed societies were seen as being in various stages along a continuum of development⁶ – something that was determined solely by Europeans. Such an approach to the Other made works from this period (particularly by British writers) dealing with the non-European world conform to what James Clifford has described as a system of economy of truth, through which power and constructs of history operate in ways which 'their authors cannot fully control'. What were seen at the time as ethnographic truths about indigenous peoples (especially their relative primitiveness) were necessarily partial and sometimes allegorical,⁷ although authors such as Craik would have regarded them as inherently and objectively true. One of the implications of this was that the likes of Craik's book not only embodied 'powerful "lies" of exclusion and rhetoric',⁸ but also perpetuated them, thus feeding into a literary ecosystem that continually reinforced a shared trope about the indigenous Other, and their prospects for development. In addition, what appeared to readers in Britain as 'first-time knowledge' in works such as *The New Zealanders* was in fact contingent on preceding 'power-laden' bodies of knowledge, values, and (British) cultural interpretations of the non-European world.⁹

The (almost inevitable) conclusion drawn from the works written in this philosophical and cultural milieu was that, in the case of Māori for example, the fate of the indigenous Other was nearly always eventual absorption into the world of Europe's Enlightenment. Simon During has argued that such an inevitability hinged on the entrenched notion that the West saw itself in this period as 'modern'. The force of this idea of modernity was such that, according to During, it became one of the factors propelling Western colonial expansionism. In addition the conviction in the exclusivity of Europe's modernity was so strong that 'other societies ... [could] enter history, grasp the future, only at the price of their destruction'.¹⁰

For Marie-Louise Pratt, such a view is evidence of what she identifies as a 'code' by which Europe 'produced "the rest of the world"'. Part of this code required not just an outward-looking gaze at the non-European world, but simultaneously, an inward-looking examination of how Europe conceived itself, and how this self-conception in turn enabled European writers in this era to 'encode and legitimate the aspirations of economic expansion and empire'. The process was a reciprocal one, where Europe's subordination of the Other was a vital component in how Europe shaped constructions of itself. Thus, although British writers in the era when *The New Zealanders* was published could claim to be a constituent part of the imperial metropole, and their renditions of non-European indigenous peoples shaped and reinforced readers' perceptions of the periphery, the 'obsessive need to present and re-present...[its] peripheries...continually to itself' revealed how the relationship between Britain and indigenous cultures outside Europe was a symbiotic one. The depiction of the Other needed to be shaped to fit the specifics of the narrative code that guided imperial narratives at the time, but so too did narratives about British cultural and social superiority need to be moulded to ensure that the distinction between civilised and partially civilised remained sufficiently pronounced.¹¹

However, for all the impetus of writers like Craik to portray particular indigenous societies in this era as ripe for (further) civilisational advancement at the hands of a beneficent imperial interloper, Robert Young has identified a tension inherent in this trope. He has observed that if the civilising mission was eventually completely successful, then the claims of British superiority necessarily would be diminished if the indigenous group in question ascended to the same civilisational height that Britain had reached. Consequently, there was an ‘inner dissonance’ in works such as *The New Zealanders*, which on the one hand held out hope for Māori ‘advancement’, while on the other hand, sought ‘to keep the races forever apart’¹² by emphasising (often to exaggerated degrees) the differences between Europeans and the Other, and more specifically, the deficiencies in the latter. British readers were thus left with a paradox in this period: the depiction of indigenous peoples (in the case of Craik’s work, Māori) as being simultaneously ready to be fully civilised, yet possessing traits that in practice prevented their civilisation. The tension produced by this paradox remained unresolved in *The New Zealanders*.

Craik’s Whiggish *The New Zealanders*

George Lillie Craik (1798-1866) was born in Fife, Scotland, and educated at St Andrews University. He moved to London in 1824, where – two years later – he became a writer for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. This was an organisation committed to disseminating information among Britain’s middle and working classes – particularly those who for whatever reason were unable to pursue formal education.¹³ His first major work in what became a long literary career was *The New Zealanders* – a book that very much embodied the Whig depiction of the past, in which global history was portrayed as conforming to a linear path of progress and enlightenment.¹⁴ This sort of rendition of history was strongly deterministic,¹⁵ with a tendency (stronger among some writers than others) to shape the evidence to fit a reasonably pre-determined narrative.¹⁶ In the process, there was a propensity among historians and other writers in this era ‘to heighten the colouring of their historical narrations by laying hold on some difference of opinion or some conflict of policies and claiming this as a moral issue’.¹⁷ To some extent, this made the rendition of history a means to other ends, rather than an end in itself. In the case of Craik’s work on New Zealand, that extra-historical end was the portrayal of the country’s history as an advance towards (British-induced and British-defined) civilisation. Craik depicted Māori as ‘savages’, who were ‘ignorant of some of the commonest arts’, but who nonetheless exhibited ‘the keenest sense of the value of those acquirements which render Europeans so greatly their superiors’, and who possessed ‘a character which, at no distant period, may become an example of the rapidity with which the barbarian may be wholly refined’.¹⁸ Such a construction of the country’s history and its potential future – from savagery to potential civilisation – was common in works about New Zealand at this time,¹⁹ but few writers were as strident in representing this transition as Craik. It was also a departure from earlier British views about indigenous peoples, which all but ruled out any prospect of them changing from their ‘barbaric’ state, and which simultaneously cast them as subversive of civilisation yet subservient to it.²⁰

Progress was an ideated motif that Craik returned to throughout his book. European exploration, in his analysis ‘ensured to every barbarous people the power of losing their barbarism, sooner or later, by contact with the all-pervading progress of civilization’. But without European intervention, he cautioned, Māori would remain ‘ignorant of nearly all the useful arts’, and left only with ‘a limited and generally rather monotonous music, some skill in carving ornaments in wood’, and with no means of attaining more advanced levels of science. Craik warned that in the absence of the uplifting forces of Western progress and improvement, Māori could end up ‘almost in the same situation with a herd of the lower animals, in so far as

the accumulation of knowledge, or, in other words, any kind of movement forward is concerned'.²¹

Craik set out not only to document the history of New Zealand and its state by 1830, as he interpreted it, but also to prescribe how Māori might be elevated – with a guiding European hand – to overcome their ‘ferocious disposition’ and displace it with ‘a correct appreciation of the better parts of their character’, with the aim of ‘promoting their improvement’.²² This idea of development had ‘already become part of British common sense’ by this time, with deliberate intervention by advanced states being represented as the antidote to the disorder and ruin ascribed to ‘savage’ societies.²³ Craik drew strongly on such themes, and concluded in his work that civilisation would ‘eventually triumph [in New Zealand] even over all the ignorance, prejudice, and ferocity, with which she has here to contend’.²⁴ Thus, his exposition of New Zealand was bounded by a doctrinaire view both of the possibility of the country’s development, and of the centrality of Britain in this process.

Popular Writing on New Zealand

The New Zealanders was the first substantial book written about New Zealand by someone who had not visited the country. This absence of first-hand experience was not necessarily an impediment, though, as by the time of its publication, there was a growing stream of books and reports produced by Britons who had had direct contact with New Zealand, which Craik was able to utilise as the basis of his own work. In addition, his book was not intended to be an overtly academic volume, but more of a popular publication – a form of what was labelled at the time as an ‘entertaining work’²⁵ directed at a general readership who had at best received perhaps just a few years of secondary-school education.²⁶ Part of the significance of such a categorisation is that it emerged at a time when European works about peoples in the non-European world were becoming more academic in form, with (sometimes still embryonic) theoretical and methodological procedures and standards applied to their analyses.²⁷ Increasingly, ‘professional’ history and anthropology were disciplines beginning to feature more prominently in universities, with new epistemological concepts being marked out in order to establish their supposedly valid scientific basis.²⁸ Popular publications, by contrast, tended to be more descriptive than analytical,²⁹ and catered for a readership whose interests seldom reached into these more conceptual academic areas. Craik’s work, while well structured, and incorporating certain ideas about progress and improvement that were prevalent at the time, tilted overall to the latter category.

Although the paths of academic and popular works had not yet substantially diverged by 1830 (and still remain connected in some ways), Craik was overtly positioning his work on New Zealand as a popular work. There are some specific features of his book which, while not exclusive to popular books of the period, nonetheless mark out common traits of this category of writing at this time. The first of these is the absence of source comparison or critique. *The New Zealanders* does not contain a bibliography, and although Craik did disclose some of his sources in the text,³⁰ the intermittent footnotes he provided reveal that he was familiar with a relatively narrow range of published material relating to New Zealand. There was practically no consideration, for example, of the connection between the sources, the historical knowledge they were built on, the expertise or motives of their authors, or distinctions between empirical evidence and presupposition.³¹ Craik took on face value, for example, a source which gave him ‘no reason to doubt’ that the first European arrival in New Zealand was Juan Fernandez in 1576,³² even though no corroborating evidence for this existed. And later in *The New Zealanders*, he speculated that tā moko (traditional Māori tattooing) was undertaken partly to

stave off cold weather.³³ Again, this was a conclusion reached with insufficient supporting evidence.

Craik sometimes resorted to comparisons with other cultures and periods in history in order to give meaning to aspects of Māori culture that he otherwise found inexplicable from his laconic base of sources. In the case of tattooing, for example, he immediately drew supposed similarities between the practice in Māori society, and that in the Caribbean, North America, Guyana, Venezuela, and ‘many of the South Sea Islands’.³⁴ This method of deducing meaning by establishing similarities with other cultures was employed by Craik throughout *The New Zealanders*. Likewise, for example, when it came to outlining Māori religious beliefs, he suggested that ‘[m]any allusions are found in the Greek and Roman writers’, to certain Māori rites, and then went on to cite Jewish, Abyssinian, Russian, and Catholic comparisons with elements of Māori religion.³⁵

Dependence on this method was a tacit concession by Craik that he had insufficient source material at his disposal to reach more certain conclusions without the need for often spurious intercultural comparisons. It also nudges his work further in the direction of a popular (as opposed to academic) book by foregoing a more detailed analysis of a particular subject in favour of constructing a partially hybridised conception of indigeneity, relying on supposed similarities as a means of fortifying a sense of reader-familiarity with the topic.

Another of the indicators that Craik’s book was predominantly popular is the near absence of any reference to official British policy on New Zealand in this period. In the 1810s and 1820s, the various policy responses to New Zealand emanating particularly from the colonial administration in New South Wales are bypassed in *The New Zealanders*. Similarly, the evolving policy of the British Government on the territory is overlooked by Craik. Political perspectives generally are absent from this work, resulting in a book that is relatively strong on local anecdote (obtained overwhelmingly from the accounts of British visitors to New Zealand), but comparatively weak when it comes to a more comprehensive analysis of the country. And neither did he address many of the philosophical or constitutional issues arising from Britain’s intervention in New Zealand at this time – the sort of considerations that some writers had tackled since the previous century when examining British involvement in other parts of the world.³⁶ Furthermore, there was almost a complete absence of a direct voice from any hapū or iwi (sub-tribe or tribe) in the context of his work. Although Māori were one of the principal subjects of the book, their representation was almost solely at the hands of European interlopers, with any direct information about them being selected, evaluated, filtered, and relayed in ways determined by those European writers. The result was a book that certainly met the demands of the general reading public in Britain, but because of its non-academic focus and derivative content, was seldom used by other writers – even those in later generations – as an authority for events in the country. Instead, they preferred to rely more on sources written by those who had actually visited New Zealand (many of whom Craik had depended on for his own book).

There are other indications as well of the popular orientation of *The New Zealanders*. In addition to the failure to engage in any serious way with British colonial policy, or the numerous reports produced by officials in this period, Craik’s use of sources was more selective than comprehensive, and he was generally uncritical when it came to issues of their balance and veracity. In addition, substantial portions of *The New Zealanders* were little more than précis of previous works dealing with aspects of the country. Chapters five, six, nine, eleven, and twelve, for example, are abridged extracts from John Rutherford’s account of New

Zealand. According to James Drummond, who edited Rutherford's work in 1908, Craik 'may have had "The New Zealanders" partly written when the manuscript describing Rutherford's adventures was placed in his hands. In that case, he wove it into his book, using it as a means of illustrating his remarks on the Maoris' customs'.³⁷ In another example of Craik's tendency simply to paraphrase other works for parts of his book, chapter three of *The New Zealanders* was essentially a condensed account of two French expeditions to New Zealand in the late eighteenth century – those of Jean François Marie de Surville and Marc Joseph Marion du Fresne.

However, *The New Zealanders* did achieve its intended aim of informing lay readers about aspects of the country. Craik selected and summarised or paraphrased those texts which he felt would best convey information about New Zealand to a popular audience, without critiquing these sources to any noticeable degree. Neither did he offer much in the way of interpretation or any new insights about the country. At the same time, he excluded any sufficient consideration of official sources that were available in this period.

The popular orientation of *The New Zealanders* is also evident in the way that the text appeals to prominent issues of the day, rather than concerning itself with more enduring conclusions about the subject matter. The trope of beneficent British colonisation, for example, is prevalent in the book, and at Craik's pen is sketched out as the antidote to almost all that is wrong in 'savage' societies. His language was rich with suggestions that the arrival of British civilisation would have an 'incalculable effect' on the 'control and diminution' of 'revolting' savage life. Without some form of colonisation, New Zealand had few prospects in Craik's estimation. Left to its own devices, 'even the bounty of nature, instead of conferring upon its Inhabitants a dower of perfect innocence and blessedness, has in some cases only reduced them to a race of nerveless and grovelling voluptuaries'. It was only through contact with Europeans that Māori would acquire the 'established and universally understood notions of propriety and fitness'.³⁸

The fact that Craik addressed these concerns so frequently throughout his text is a good indication that its appeal was to the concerns of readers at the time, for whom the ethics and morality of colonisation were emerging as increasingly serious considerations, as were those arguments which justified and vindicated British intervention in other territories.³⁹ On the penultimate page of *The New Zealanders*, Craik portrayed impending British involvement in New Zealand as an obligation guided by the colonial equivalent of Adam Smith's invisible hand: 'the extension of civilization throughout every region of the earth where the people are ignorant and wretched, appears to be the peculiar duty which Providence has imposed upon a maritime and commercial nation'.⁴⁰ As Britain was on the cusp of more formal intervention in New Zealand when Craik's book was published,⁴¹ it offers a glimpse into how at least a sector of the British reading public was being informed about what practically amounted to the obligations that civilised countries had to intervene in those territories that were regarded as uncivilised. This was very much the popular moral orientation in Britain at the time,⁴² and Craik's book epitomised it.

Comparative Works

The New Zealanders was not the only work on the country published in this period, and although it possessed distinct features which are the focus of consideration here, it belonged to a corpus of early European ethnography about Māori that in various ways either influenced or can be contrasted to *The New Zealanders*. Of course, the most important distinction between Craik's book and those of his contemporaries is that he never visited the country, so his research was necessarily derivative rather than based on first-hand experience. However, regardless of

this, most of the books published about New Zealand in this period fall into a category that could be described as ‘encounter literature’,⁴³ which reflects efforts by one culture to comprehend, classify, and compartmentalise another culture which is still largely unfamiliar to them. Four broadly representative contemporaneous examples of such works illustrate the state of understanding that Britons had of Māori society at this time, and how European concepts of the development of peoples outside of Europe was projected onto New Zealand’s indigenous inhabitants. The first of these is Augustus Earle’s *Narrative of a Nine Months’ Residence in New Zealand*, published in 1832, and based on an eight-month visit to the country that Earle had undertaken from October 1827. Consistent with prevailing European views about the nature of civilisation, Earle regarded Māori as deprived of most of the traits found in the peoples of civilised nations.⁴⁴ However, this was no binary civilised/non-civilised dichotomy. Instead, Earle’s views (like those of Craik) reflected elements of what later became known as stadial theory, in which humanity was understood to be in various stages of development.⁴⁵ Earle depicted Australia’s indigenous people, for example, as being ‘humans of the lowest grade’ whereas Māori were ‘of a superior order’ of native.⁴⁶ Earle was less explicit than Craik about the need for Britain to foster Māori development, but shared a broadly similar belief in the innate superiority of western-European civilisation.

The missionary William Yate unavoidably brought a religious perspective to his interpretation of Māori society at this time, but in keeping with Earle and Craik, similarly saw Māori as being in need of British civilisation. In his 1835 book *An Account of New Zealand*, he echoed Earle’s views of Māori, informing readers of his ‘high idea of the superior character and disposition of the New Zealanders [Māori]’, and described them as ‘bold, daring, adventurous ... and in the possession of a good natural sense; presenting a fine field for Christian labours, and for the hand of civilization’.⁴⁷

An indication of how widespread this belief in the possibility of civilising Māori was comes from the book *Manners and Customs of the New Zealanders* published in 1840. It was written by Joel Polack, who was not a missionary, a brief visitor to the country, nor an official. Rather, he was a resident of New Zealand, a merchant, and was Jewish. Yet, despite having these different frames of reference when seeing Māori, Polack’s conclusions mirrored those of his British contemporaries. Like Craik, he positioned Māori on a continuum of civilisational advancement, although his historical points of reference were more expansive. In the case of religion, for example, Polack made numerous comparisons between the rites and rituals of Māori and those of Persians and Hebrews, and pointed out (as Earle had previously) what he saw as ‘[t]he superior civilization of the New Zealanders compared to the Australians, (the most degraded of the human race)’, and accordingly held out hope for Māori ‘refinement in civilization’.⁴⁸

This seam of identifying the possibilities of Māori becoming (more) civilised was tapped into by William Brown, who concluded in his 1845 book, *New Zealand and its Aborigines*, that ‘their [Māori] natural capacities, mental as well as moral, are of a high order, and eminently fit them for amalgamating easily, at no distant period, with their civilized brethren’.⁴⁹ As with Craik and many other writers in this period, Brown ascribed to British culture and society the highest level of civilisational development, and saw it as a goal towards which Māori society could be oriented.

The Role of Narrative

Approximately half of the content of *The New Zealanders* is in the form of a narrative history, with accounts both of the country and of individual Europeans who travelled through parts of

it. Occurrences and developments in the book were ordered by Craik broadly in a chronological sequence, and in keeping with his Whig approach to history, this history maintained its strictly Eurocentric ideas about progress and improvement, suggesting a partially nomothetic approach, with emphases on causal determinations.⁵⁰ Thus, although the narrative approach remained central to the work, accommodated within it was some consideration of the ‘slower-moving currents of social history, those of peoples and groups and their ... cultural forces’.⁵¹

Overall, though, *The New Zealanders* maintains a strong attachment to the sort of narrative account with a beginning, middle, and end.⁵² This immediately presents a problem because Craik asserts his ‘beginning’ as starting at the point when Europeans commenced their exploration of the region. To this extent, he necessarily negates the preceding indigenous history of the country. This is not for a want of sources, however, as previous works had addressed aspects of New Zealand pre-European history.⁵³ Rather, the start of Craik’s narrative was determined by his perception of what he termed the ‘savage’, which in his estimation existed in a non-historical state:

What the Child is to us for the study of man as an individual, the Savage is also for the broader but not less difficult study of man as a species.... We are to look upon the manners of barbarians – their limited knowledge, their rude contrivances, their degrading superstitions – as exhibiting in many instances a picture of what we were ourselves in the infancy of our social state; and we are to regard their fierce passions, whether of love or hatred, as the materials with which the structure of the more equable affections and more systematic virtues of civilized life has been reared.⁵⁴

Such a stance reveals the extent to which a narrative history can end up with the history it depicts being (mis-)shaped by the creator of the narrative.⁵⁵ Hayden White labelled this sort of trait in narrative history an ‘impositionalist’ approach’, in which accounts of the past, and to that extent, the past itself, were transformed by being converted into a narrative.⁵⁶ Even if the basic facts that Craik collected were correct, it was the nature of their emplotment that undermined the historical reliability of the narrative that housed them. What Craik’s narrative achieved was to help readers see otherwise isolated pieces of information about New Zealand in a specific context, through enabling them to appreciate what preceded and succeeded particular events. It may have been a rendering that was influenced by Craik’s own cultural perspectives on the world, but it nonetheless helped give structure and meaning to events to his readers. Of course, in turn, it was informed by Craik’s selective and limited research, which arguably exercised as much, if not more influence on the narrative as the narrative did on the research.⁵⁷

Craik’s approach to narrative, in addition to relying on a broadly chronological sequence, frequently depended on generalised explanations of specific events. Such generalisations were deployed because they could help give meaning to an entire class of events, rather than having to examine each event, no matter how seemingly insignificant, on its own terms.⁵⁸ Thus, when mentioning an episode in which a small group of Māori women cut their arms and chest with sharp pieces of shells on the return to their community of a chief who had been in Australia, Craik wrote that the practice ‘always takes place on the meeting of friends who have been long separated’.⁵⁹ A specific instance was in such ways converted into a general principle with a uniform meaning (and without adequate supporting evidence).

One of the consequences that can flow from such an approach, and which is evident in *The New Zealanders*, is that individual events are sometimes selected or emphasised (knowingly or not) because they fortify the generalisations on which the narratives are built. Craik’s ardent

rejection of the romanticised notion of the Noble Savage – and idea which had gained some support in Europe in preceding decades⁶⁰ – saw him attempt to buttress his own view by selectively drawing on sometimes isolated occurrences to build his case. In one instance which illustrates this approach, he wrote about two thefts he had read of involving Māori perpetrators. This was sufficient for him to conclude that ‘[i]n such a state of society ... every man is either a robber, or the victim of robbery: it is a scene of universal violence and depredation. Yet this is what some writers call the reign of absolute liberty. It is the absolute liberty of the strong to tyrannize as they choose over the weak’.⁶¹ Similarly, Craik’s belief in the existence of an order of humanity – corresponding to degrees of civilisation which various peoples had achieved at this time – was vindicated by a single example of a recent encounter between a small group of Māori and an indigenous Australian community which took place in Port Jackson. Craik took this example and used it as further proof of his generalised view of gradients of humanity. He described how, on this occasion, the Māori visiting Port Jackson, showed ‘quite as much interest as any of the Europeans on board about the condition of these poor people [the indigenous Australians], who were examples of a barbarism evidently many shades deeper than their own...they expressed both pity and contempt at their wretched mode of living’.⁶² Once more, Craik used isolated events to reinforce categories of understanding and perception about New Zealand that were modelled on the need for the narrative to conform to a particular orientation based on prevailing European ideas about progress.

Finally, as with many authors of popular histories in this period, Craik was reluctant to concede that there were any deficiencies in the body of knowledge about his subject (or that if there were, they were inconsequential on the premise that what remained unknown about the savage was probably not worth knowing anyway). His stated object was to ‘gather and compare the scattered notices of this people [Māori], which have been given by many voyagers and residents in the country’, and while he boasted of having ‘the advantage of consulting an original narrative, written by a sailor who was detained by them for several years’,⁶³ Craik was silent on other sources that he either overlooked or was unaware of.⁶⁴ This implicit presumption of full knowledge of the subject (which is evident throughout Craik’s work) is important because it elevates the writer to a position of omniscience. This is an obvious deficiency in his narrative: a restricted range of source material from which he confidently drew sweeping generalisations rather than conceding the limitations of knowledge about New Zealand that his book revealed.⁶⁵

Procedures of Meaning-Construction

Why did people read popular histories such as *The New Zealanders* in the 1830s? There is no direct evidence, but among many possible answers, probably the most obvious, almost self-evident response is to become informed. ‘Informed’, in this context, though, has a constrained meaning. A work that merely informs is little more than an almanack – an inventory of facts largely devoid of context, chronology or critique. Of course, this may well suit some readers, enabling them to assemble these facts in a sequence and priority of their own choosing. However, if the range of history books published over the last two centuries is any measure, those readers seeking the almanack version of history are very much in the minority. In addition to informing readers, practically all works of history (books, journal articles, documentaries, and so forth) have a weightier function: to take the raw facts at the author’s disposal, and give them meaning. The process by which this is accomplished can vary considerably from one writer to the next. Before delving into Craik’s approach to meaning-construction, it is worth noting that meaning-construction itself is the product of an implicit relationship between the reader (who seeks information, meaning, context, relevance, and maybe even instruction from the work in question), and the writer, who while determining the meaning based on the

evidence, to some extent (perhaps subconsciously) acknowledges those expectations of the reader.

When it comes to examining meaning-construction in *The New Zealanders*, it is first necessary to establish what the process involves. Meaning-construction, in this case, is based on three general and partially overlapping traits: deciphering and transposing indigenous cultures into a European framework using a common typology; fostering a shared perception of empirical objects, conditions, and events as part of a process of ranking the civilisation of Māori society; and conforming with a pattern of discourse on the subject which simultaneously reflects and projects meaning about it to other producers and consumers of information about Māori society in this era.⁶⁶

One of the first requirements of meaning-construction is to ensure that the subject matter is comprehensible to the reader. At an elementary level, this simply means that the reader can understand the text. However, the notion of a work being comprehensible extends to the ability of the reader to make sense of topics that are sometimes outside their existing realm of knowledge. The literature dealing with British involvement in territories unfamiliar to British readers placed on writers in the early decades of the nineteenth century (such as Craik) the substantial burden of giving meaning to aspects of indigenous cultures that were foreign to European readers at the time (in Craik's case personally unfamiliar as he had never visited New Zealand). Even conceptions of history and the passage of time differed between various cultures,⁶⁷ which often resulted in popular writers of the period conveying details of their subject country and its peoples to their readers in ways that subverted these cultural distinctions.

The result was a form of historical transposition, in which events in an indigenous culture were classified according to a typology that would be familiar to British readers, but often at the expense of obscuring the more nuanced indigenous understanding of the events or episodes being described in text. There are several categories of examples throughout *The New Zealanders* which reveal this process at work. Religion was one typology which Craik dealt with in some detail. Although the information he had obtained on Māori spirituality and metaphysics was derived almost entirely from just a handful of European sources, Craik nonetheless felt confident enough to categorise aspects of what he called described as the indigenous 'religion' of New Zealand. His use of the word 'religion' was itself is a form of cultural transposition, in which British understandings of the term were overlaid onto Māori rites, rituals, spirituality, and beliefs. This element of meaning-construction was not necessarily an end in itself, though. In order to assert the superiority of (Anglican) Christianity over other religious traditions, a common means of comparison first had to be established.⁶⁸ By reshaping Māori religious beliefs into a typology that enabled such comparisons, the case for the supremacy of Craik's idealised version of Christianity could be mounted.

In defining the inferiority of the category of Māori religion, Craik resorted to a saturation of bias in his analysis. Various Māori practices were depicted not as rites, but more pejoratively as 'superstitions'. Likewise, these beliefs were the realm of the 'uneducated man', and only common in 'rude nations', practiced by 'barbarous' peoples with 'feeble ideas'. In an even more deprecating manner, Craik referred to an atua [deity] as 'the invisible cannibal', and the belief in astronomical portents as 'vulgar'.⁶⁹ Accentuating this primitive-civilised dichotomy could only be achieved, however, by first aligning Māori belief system as a religion that conformed to the typology of religion that British readers would have been familiar with. In

doing so, Craik was able to establish to his readers how much more advanced the British were in their religious beliefs than Māori.

Religion was a topic of such importance partly because of the role that Protestantism played in the British imperial process – both as a forerunner to more formal types of colonisation, and as a subsequent tool in the process of civilising indigenous populations.⁷⁰ And in keeping with this particular artery of meaning-construction, which conceived of religion in evolutionary terms (commencing with ‘savage’ superstitions right through to contemporary nineteenth-century Protestantism), Craik provided several examples to support his view. When discussing, for example, the sanctity of human hair for Māori, he relayed some supposedly similar instances which represented stages of religious evolution in other parts of the world. ‘We have a remnant of these old feelings’, he wrote, ‘in the reverence with which his beard is regarded by a Turk of the present day. It is recorded, too, that no reform which Peter the Great of Russia essayed to introduce among his semi-barbarous subjects, was so pertinaciously resisted as his attempt to abbreviate their beards’.⁷¹ The use of ‘semi-barbarous’, is particularly suggestive of this gradual maturation of cultures, culminating in that of Craik’s own country and era. Another related element of meaning-construction in *The New Zealanders* was the rendering of indigenous religion as a single generic category that Craik almost perfunctorily applied to a number of unconnected cultures. The uniformity of the working definition of religion that he depended on is evident in the connections Craik drew between often vague similarities in rituals among various indigenous belief-systems. However, bundling up such diverse belief-systems into a single category was only possible through a process setting aside the singularity (both in origins and development) of the cultures and traditions being reviewed. In addition, this process of meaning-construction rested on an implicit presumption that religion was a separate category in indigenous societies (as it had partially become in some Western nations), as opposed to it imbuing almost every aspect of life in those societies.⁷² Thus framed, readers of Craik’s work acquired an understanding of Māori religion that hinged on both similarities with other ‘traditional’ religions, and differences with nineteenth-century British Protestant Christianity. This model of a generic indigenous religion (bound by common ‘primitive’ rites and beliefs and separated by geography and perhaps slight ritualistic variations) was strongly enforced throughout *The New Zealanders*.

Once Māori culture and history had been deciphered and transposed into a typology that was more easily comprehensible and relatable to modestly-educated British readers, the next stage in meaning-construction that appeared in *The New Zealanders* was the fostering of a shared perception of the status of civilisation of Māori culture among these readers. Empirical objects, conditions, and events were assessed against a contemporaneous British metric in order to provide a means of evaluating Māori society in a way that would resonate broadly with readers’ own perceptions on these topics.

The effects of achieving such a shared perception of events and circumstances among readers were twofold. Firstly, it positioned Māori society on a civilisational scale that included other indigenous groups, as well as peoples from different periods in history. In effect, this was a context-setting function, through which British readers could classify Māori society as a specific group based on its degree of civilisation,⁷³ and then locate it within the matrix of all other societies throughout history which they were aware of. And secondly, it embedded a notion of moral and civilisational superiority among the book’s British readership. Craik left no doubt that Britain, in the period in which he was writing, was at the apex of world civilisation – a benchmark against which all other peoples and cultures could be assessed. In Craik’s mind, many aspects of Māori society represented ‘the very reverse of anything like moral

advancement',⁷⁴ which was the sort of assessment that was predicated on a belief that Britain's civilisation was the standard against which other cultures' should be measured. Indeed, he explicitly asserted that Britain was '[a]t the highest point of civilization', and that its influence was 'all-pervading'.⁷⁵ However, he was careful not to reduce this analysis into a binary view of civilised versus uncivilised. Instead, he adhered to the view that there was an order of civilisation, and that as part of the process of meaning-construction, his work aimed to rank Māori on this spectrum. He suggested, for example, that Māori civilisation exhibited 'a much richer and more interesting variety of peculiarities than that of most other savages',⁷⁶ and drawing on this evaluation, argued that the accounts of the 'fierce passions' that were alleged to have been exhibited by Māori were 'the materials with which the structure of the more equable affections and more systematic virtues of civilized life has been reared'.⁷⁷ Thus, while still regarded as savages, Craik suggested that they were closer to his civilised archetype than other cultures.

However, while such arguments conceded that there were gradients in what constituted being civilised, there was still a significant gulf depicted in *The New Zealanders* between the British and the savage (this latter category of which included Māori). The gradients of the savage may have suggested that some were closer to civilisation than others, but there remained an implicit separation between all non-civilised peoples (who were subject to evaluation by Craik on their comparative civilisational status) and the British (and by extension, Europeans) who were in a singular category: the civilised. This distinction is epitomised in Craik's general assessment of the uncivilised: '[w]hat the Child is to us for the study of man as an individual, the Savage is also for the broader but not less difficult study of man as a species'.⁷⁸ The uncivilised could be positioned on a scale, depending on their stage of 'maturity', whereas the civilised had advanced to a stationary state.⁷⁹

Craik was especially critical of any suggestion that Māori epitomised Rousseau's notion of the Noble Savage. He regarded such romanticised suggestions as 'fictions', and argued instead that '[t]he more we examine the various shades of barbarous life, the more shall we be satisfied that men are more virtuous, and skilful, and happy, exactly in proportion as they are advanced beyond the savage state'.⁸⁰ Instead, he took the view that Māori were not to be idealised but to be civilised.⁸¹ In advancing this position, he was constructing for his readership a particular meaning relating both to the state of Māori in the hierarchy of civilisation at the time, and the possibility (maybe inevitability an obligation) for a civilised force to act on this group at some point in the future. In this aspect of his meaning-construction, description preceded prescription, with the condition of Māori – as Craik portrayed it – being juxtaposed with the possibility of 'improvement',⁸² and the (barely) implicit suggestion that Britain would at some point be the agent of this improvement.

The New Zealanders was not written in isolation from any contemporaneous philosophical or historical influences. Rather, it conformed generally to a pattern of discourse on such topics which simultaneously reflected and projected meaning. To a large extent, this was inevitable, owing to the fact that Craik was informed by views on the non-civilised world that were prevalent at the time, and because of the symbiotic relationship he had with his readers, whose meanings of the world he both anticipated and reflected. The most significant area in which the book fitted into the currents of the age was in its treatment of the non-European world. The origins of such representations extended back centuries in European literature,⁸³ and by the early nineteenth century, they were appearing in popular publications, but in ways that were challenging prevailing views about the uncivilised world.⁸⁴ Instead of the earlier, more static representation of the world, in which each social and ethnic group was assigned its fixed place

in the order of things,⁸⁵ by the early nineteenth century, the possibility of civilising the savage – a development that was intentional rather than immanent⁸⁶ – had gained prominence. *The New Zealanders* accorded with this perspective, and thus contributed to what at the time was a new branch of meaning-construction about the country and its indigenous inhabitants. In the eighteenth century, one of the very few sources available about the country to British readers (and by far the most popular judging by the multiple editions of it that were published), was Cook's account of his visit to the country in 1769-1770.⁸⁷ In the decades that immediately followed, Māori were generally depicted in Britain (principally on the basis of Cook's work) in two connected ways: as the generic 'wild savage'; and as a people who were peripheral (geographically and in every other sense) to British interests and regarded largely as exotic curiosities.⁸⁸ Craik's book (among others) was one of the earlier texts about Māori that moved away (albeit almost imperceptibly at times) from this tendency to genericism and to exoticism by attempting to understand Māori as a distinct group – even though part of Craik's method was to rely on making comparisons with other groups in order to emphasise certain characteristics he believed typified Māori culture and society (and in doing so, yielded precisely to those tendencies to genericism and exoticism).

The sort of meaning about Māori that Craik was constructing in *The New Zealanders* was not an abrupt departure from the writings that preceded it, but perhaps can best be represented as a transitional work – a bridge between eighteenth-century views and those that emerge more prominently from the mid-nineteenth century. Part of this specific meaning-construction involved overlapping discourses relating to race, ethnicity, culture, and prevailing beliefs about a hierarchical scale of mental and physical evolution among civilised and savage.⁸⁹ This reinforced one of the longstanding ideas that had emerged during the Enlightenment, in which there was a series of systematic exclusions for those who did not qualify for participation and inclusion in political and social life of developed countries – one of the main exclusions being the category of 'primitive races',⁹⁰ which in turn invigorated the civilising impulse of the sort that was already evident in informal British intervention in New Zealand by the time that Craik wrote his book on the country. The rigid savage-civilised dichotomy was transforming, and to some extent, diminishing by the early nineteenth century,⁹¹ and Craik lent his support in his book to those schemes that would 'promote the improvement of the New Zealanders, by opening for them a means of intercourse with the civilized world'.⁹² A few generations earlier, faith in such an approach was rare, but by 1830, it was part of a new way in which British readers were seeing the non-European world.

Conclusion

The New Zealanders was published a time when the number of books that had been written about the country was small, and when views in Europe about indigenous peoples in other parts of the world were evolving significantly. During this period, the term 'New Zealander' [that is, Māori] was shifting in its use in British literature from a designation that had been almost interchangeable with savage over the preceding six decades to one that applied to a single cultural and ethnic group. This greater, though still relatively slight specificity was part of the construction of what would soon widely be known as Māori, and was a feature of the gradual process of overcoming the initial deficit in the understanding of Māori culture and society that was typical of the earliest British encounters in the country.

It is self-evident that books such as Craik's are regarded as products of their age – reflecting the way British society perceived the world at the time they were written. However, such publications were also works of meaning-construction. Being more popular in tone and

orientation, the extent of their readership was generally much greater than strictly academic works, but more significantly, their particular narrative form conformed to and reinforced particular perceptions about the nature of so-called uncivilised peoples, and the potential role of nations such as Britain in the territories of those peoples. Thus, *The New Zealanders* went beyond being an exercise in information-sharing: it provided context, understanding, and meaning to the subject-matter; it transposed and deciphered aspects of Māori culture and society into a typology that would have been reasonably familiar to British readers; it built on a popularised understanding of what constituted civilisation, and how Māori fitted into the hierarchy of the world's civilisations; and it conformed with a pattern of discourse on the subject which simultaneously reflected and projected meaning about Māori culture and society to consumers of that information in Britain. To this extent, Craik's work went from prioritising investigation and analysis to passing judgement on Māori using popular British measures and understandings.⁹³ As much as such an approach might invite criticism for its historical method and its general reliability, to the same extent, it was a vital part of meaning-construction for British readers on New Zealand in this period.

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 - ⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
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- ¹⁹ Frederick A. Weld, *Notes on New Zealand Affairs* (London: Edward Stanford, 1869), 61; John Bright, *Handbook for Emigrants and Others, Being a History of New Zealand* (London: Henry Hooper, 1841), 97; Charles Hursthouse, *An Account of the Settlement of New Plymouth* (New Plymouth: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1849), 31; Alexander Strachan, *The Life of the Rev Samuel Leigh* (London: The Wesleyan Mission House, 1870), 328.
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- ²² *Ibid.*, 76.
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