

Introduction

Paul Millar

This edition of *Kōtare* follows *Kotare 2007.1: 'Women Prose Writers to World War I'*. While it wasn't an intended outcome, the division of these volumes of biography according to each subject's sex does emphasise the different preoccupations of early New Zealand's male and female authors.

In general, early writing by women dealt with relationships within the domestic sphere. Often these were tales of individual courage and fortitude, depicting a frontier world constrained by imported values, and poorly governed by males who were too-frequently absent, whether physically, or emotionally and spiritually. While realist women writers did allow their female protagonists to emerge triumphant—if such a word can be applied to understated acts of self-reliance, and limited assertions of independence and free will—the women of this raw colonial society were ripe for escapist romance and melodrama. When the greatest certainty was change, an idealised hero and the closure of a fantasy marriage provided some counter to less pleasant accounts of frontier life of the sort Katherine Mansfield exoticised with Gothic gruesomeness in 'The Woman at the Store.'

The early male prose writers of the colonial period supply a reason for men's absence and distance from women (the educated absentees at least). Most seem to have been adventuring Victorian autodidacts come to take possession of whatever seemed unclaimed in the new colony. Writing, for many, was simply another skill, a tool of the versatile colonist who could also turn his hand to building, trading, farming, mining, fishing, soldiering, salvage anthropology and politics.

As Ken Arvidson observes, these early writers and adventurers produced 'a substantial literature of exploration, settlement and cultural encounter'. At the heart of this body of work lay a fascination with all things Māori. One of the earliest chroniclers, the Pākehā Māori F.E. Maning, became 'the anonymous authority' behind a slew of anthropological treatises 'on Māori customs like tapu and muru'. In a similar vein, John Eldon Gorst later analysed the cause of the war between Māori and Pākehā in the Waikato region, to produce a masterpiece that sees 'Māori not in general terms as an alien race but as individual human beings'.

Many of the contributors to this volume have noted how this loose grouping of Māoriphiles, which also included Sir George Grey, John White, and Elsdon Best, often demonstrated remarkable ambivalence towards the Māori with whom they forged relationships. Maning, to quote Alex Calder:

...began as a 'Pākehā Māori', an easy-going white man living among Māori on Māori terms, with a Māori wife, four children, good friends, and wealth that could not be measured in monetary terms; [but] later in life, following the century's commercial and racist turn, he became a successful businessman, a judge of the Native Land Court, and a frankly bigoted disparager of a dying race.

In similar vein, Sir George Grey collected, edited and translated Māori myths in a way that 'profoundly shaped European New Zealanders' perceptions of Māori mythology' without once acknowledging what Jenifer Curnow so clearly elucidates, that Wiremu Te Rangikāheke's manuscripts were the essential source of his knowledge. And Elsdon Best, described by Jeffrey Papanoa Holman as the 'indispensable resource for knowledge of traditional Māori society'—who took part as a young man in the armed assault on Te Whiti's pacifist Māori community at Parihaka—never really acted to try and correct the fact that the race he so assiduously documented was, he believed, disappearing from the earth.

Whereas Pākehā wrote to record and advance the colonial enterprise—often writing Māori out of the present in the unquestioned assumption that they recorded the death of a race—their Māori contemporaries wrote to resist colonialism and challenge its rhetoric. As Judith Binney observes, the texts, sayings and waiata of warrior and prophet Te Kooti Arikirangi, for example, preserved a different history of injustice and the ability to 'rise above betrayal'. Similarly, Sir Apirana Ngata, whose every word strove to resist the effects of Māori de-population and loss of land, reignited 'Māori self-esteem'. Jane Stafford and Mark Williams explain how Ngata's efforts at, 'improving Māori farming, health and economic outcomes were central to what has been called a "Māori Renaissance".'

The writing of William Satchell and Alfred Grace marks a period of transition in terms of the treatment Māori characters. Satchell, who was married to a Māori and had attempted to write about colonialism from a Māori perspective, struggled to conceive of a future for the race. Jenny Robin Jones observes that although Satchell 'felt that modernity should prevail', he 'spells out the cost' in one novel by having his sympathetic Māori characters die.

Similarly, Alfred Grace, in his *Tales of a Dying Race*, echoed the conventional view of Māori as destined for extinction. But, argues John O’Leary, he was less conventional in his ‘scepticism concerning the claims of European culture.’

In the late colonial period Māori in Pākehā fiction were increasingly being employed for local colour and exotic flavour rather than, as they had been in the past, as emblems of unsettling equality and local power. As Maori numbers declined so did their visibility in Pākehā prose. Daphne Lawless’s essay on politician Vincent Pyke’s novels of adventures in the goldfields, for all their populist melodrama, point to a settler focus, and more pressing regional themes and concerns.

The ironist Samuel Butler was inevitably more outward looking, extrapolating from his part in the colonial process lessons for the old world. *Erewhon*, that ‘major work of Victorian prose [and] a key indicator of changing values’, to quote Roger Robinson, draws from New Zealand experience to produce one of the ‘outstanding examples of the genre of imagined world irony.’ Not to be outdone, Julius Vogel removed his statesman’s jacket just long enough to make his own series of startling predictions in his single utopian classic *Anno Domini 2000; or, Woman’s Destiny* (1889).

It is rare in recent critical discussions of New Zealand writing to find Alan Mulgan recognised for much more than his relationship to his famous and tragic son John, author of the seminal realist novel *Man Alone*. But in this volume Mulgan Sr. marks the beginning of a new phase in New Zealand writing. His forebears may have turned their backs on the imperial centre to make a new life, their focus firmly on the colony’s options, opportunities and future. But, as John O’Leary argues, Mulgan’s writing expressed ‘very clearly certain cultural concerns that characterized the period.’ In particular the ‘firm conviction that England was Home’ which ‘he spent the rest of his life, like many in his generation, attempting to reconcile ... with the fact that he was a New Zealander living half a world away from England.’ This sense that he ‘belonged to two worlds marks nearly all Mulgan’s writing, and forms the leitmotiv of his thought.’

Stephen Hamilton writes that like the journalist Mulgan, the essayist and editorialist Monte Holcroft, ‘chronicled a lifetime of rapid and dramatic change in all aspects of life in New Zealand: social, cultural, political and economic.’ There was a high seriousness to much writing from this period, as if words could create something weighty out of a half-finished society. Its

writers moved away from lively engagement with the processes of colonisation to more measured, overtly nationalist, accounts of the growth of a new society. Māori, now an overwhelmed minority, were partitioned in literature behind barricades of sentimentality and racist humour (see for examples 'Attitudes to the Maori in Some Pākehā Fiction' by Bill Pearson in *Fretful Sleepers and Other Essays*, Auckland: Heinemann, 1974, pp. 46-71).

The appearance of the mercurial socialist politician and polemical writer John A. Lee at this juncture seems at first to present something of a problem. As James Smithies observes, 'No clear consensus has formed about ... Lee, in either literary or political terms, and he remains a somewhat enigmatic figure.' And yet Lee, it turned out, was nowhere near as enigmatic as his near-contemporary Frank Sargeson, a closeted gay man whose work seemed, for a time, to have defined the mid-twentieth century's inherently heterosexual brand of literary nationalism. As Lawrence Jones argues in his substantial assessment of Sargeson's achievement, the life of this central figure in New Zealand literary history has been so often refashioned, that 'in a sense there have been four lives, including the posthumous one, which is still in process.'

Where Sargeson's stakes have risen, Roderick Finlayson's have fallen, and he is perhaps 'the least known of the recognised writers of his generation.' Finlayson, who lived among Māori, is, one might argue, a Māoriphile out of time. Unlike other fiction of this era, Finlayson's work is characterised by a sympathetic portrayal of Māori life in a Pākehā-dominated society. Perhaps his neglect is because there is something defeatist in his depiction of Māori pastoral village life and its 'gentle' humour, which blunts the angry politics underlying his work. Yet a reassessment of his writing would seem timely. Philip Steer makes it equally clear that another due for more intensive critical attention is the final author featured in this volume, the homosexual novelist James Courage.