

George Grey, 1812 – 1898

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George Grey is chiefly remembered today as an important figure in nineteenth-century New Zealand politics. His activities as a collector, editor and above all translator of Māori myths and legends, however, have had a determining influence on New Zealand literature. Writers as various as Alfred Domett, Jessie Mackay and James K. Baxter made use of his translation of Māori mythology; poets in particular have been fascinated by his work. Grey's version of Māori myths and legends, more generally, has profoundly shaped European New Zealanders' perceptions of Māori mythology.

Grey is thought to have been born on 14 April 1812 in Lisbon, a few days after his father, a soldier, was killed in battle in Spain. Grey returned to England for his education, entering the Royal Military College, Sandhurst in 1826. In 1830 he went with his regiment to Ireland, where he served for six years. It was during this period that he appears to have developed a scholarly interest in language and literature (especially translated literature), as his acerbic notes in the margin of an 1832 English translation of Schiller's play *Fiesko* attest.

This interest in language, while unusual in a young army officer, was characteristic of his time, for at this period language was seen as providing a unique clue to the origin and development of the human race. This notion that language (and the beliefs and traditions it expressed) was an important key – especially the language of 'primitive' peoples 'uncontaminated' by civilization – was something that Grey carried with him throughout his life. It lay, in part, behind his practice of recording local languages in the remote, newly acquired territories that he governed. It was partly responsible, in particular, for the collecting of the Māori material Grey acquired in New Zealand: in a speech he gave in 1851 to the newly-formed New Zealand Society Grey stated that he hoped a study of Māori 'laws, traditional customs and languages' would help 'clear up and illustrate the history of the entire human race, of all time, considered as an harmonious whole'. This notion of language as being highly significant also lay behind Grey's habit of buying medieval manuscripts, incunabula, first editions, dictionaries and books of translations whenever he could, material he built into a vast scholarly library. This collection still exists, one half in the National Library of South Africa in Cape Town, the other in the Auckland Public Library.

Between 1837 and 1839 Grey led two exploratory expeditions to Western Australia, expeditions he described in his *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North West and Western Australia*, published in London in 1841. The expeditions were failures, but they had the effect of bringing Grey into contact with local aboriginal cultures and languages. The result was Grey's first major contribution to philology, his *Vocabulary of the Dialects of South Western Australia*, printed in Perth in 1839 and later republished in London. In this year, too, he married the daughter of a local magistrate, Eliza Lucy Spencer, with whom he was to have a child (who died in infancy) and a long, unhappy marriage.

Though trained as a soldier, Grey was not especially happy in the army, and when in 1840 he was offered the governorship of South Australia he resigned his commission and took up the new post. Within a few years he had rescued the colony from bankruptcy and expanded the area of settlement. This success prompted his superiors in London to offer him the governorship of another recently acquired colony, New Zealand, which at that time was in financial difficulties and suffering from warfare with Māori. Grey arrived in 1845 and immediately set about re-establishing the colony's finances and pacifying (or at least conciliating) Māori. In between his duties as governor, meanwhile, he began collecting examples of Māori orature. This material was destroyed when Government House burned down in 1848. Undaunted, Grey started collecting again. By 1851 he had enough to part-print *Ko nga moteatea, me nga hakirara o nga Maori* (translated as *Poems, Traditions and Chaunts of the Maories*); the book was published in 1853. As the first major collection of Māori songs, *Moteatea* had and still has enormous importance, but the fact that it was a Māori-language work inevitably confined its appeal to a small number of scholars and missionaries.

Grey left New Zealand in 1853 to take up the governorship of the Cape Colony. Once there he began collecting examples of African languages and literature – he even employed a professional philologist, Dr. Wilhelm Bleek, to help him in his researches. His interest in Māori culture, however, was still very much alive, and in 1854 he published *Ko nga mahinga a nga tupuna Maori* (translated as *Mythology and Traditions of the New Zealanders*). This book, usually referred to by its later title, *Nga Mahi a nga Tupuna Maori* [The Deeds of the Maori Ancestors], formed, and still forms, one of the most important collection of Māori mythology ever made. It is far from being, however, a transparent account of pre-European Māori myths and legends, and a considerable amount of scholarship in recent years has been devoted

to examining Grey's use of his source texts, texts which were provided to him by a number of Māori informants, notably the Te Arawa chief Wiremu Maihi Te Rangikāheke (William Marsh). At the risk of generalization, it can be said that Grey preserved much of the vigour, humour and beauty of his source material, while carrying out a certain amount of abbreviation (especially of genealogies) and bowdlerization. He also removed references which suggested his informants were familiar with Christianity. A particular criticism leveled at Grey is that he did not acknowledge his sources except in the most general, vague way. Such casualness on Grey's part should perhaps be seen in the context of his era, for at this time ownership of cultural materials by indigenous peoples was rarely, if ever, recognised.

Moteatea and *Mahinga* had been small-scale, scholarly productions, read by perhaps no more than a few dozen readers, and paid for by Grey himself. Grey's next book, *Polynesian Mythology, and Ancient Traditional History of the New Zealand Race*, which appeared in 1855, was quite different. This was a translation into English of many of the legends that had appeared in *Mahinga*, and it was published by the famous London firm of John Murray, which had published Byron earlier in the century and would publish Darwin's *Origin of Species* a few years later. *Polynesian Mythology* was a commercial as much as a scholarly venture. Murray was to foot the publishing costs, while Grey was to receive half the profit, and the book reflects this fact, being handsomely produced, with numerous illustrations of Māori life and custom.

In terms of content, too, the book was carefully designed to appeal to its mid-Victorian readership. A number of *Mahinga*'s legends were omitted, either for reasons of length (like the Paoa legend) or because they reduplicated, or seemed to reduplicate, themes already covered by other legends (like the Te Huhuti story). At least one legend (the famous Hinemoa narrative) lost matter that might have offended its Victorian audience, while the many waiata and karakia (songs and incantations) that punctuate *Mahinga* were either left out, or considerably shortened. Generally speaking, in terms of language, Grey's English translations tended to emphasize the legends' picturesque and sentimental qualities, rather than the historical and informative. Grey can be, and has been criticised for his translation of his Māori material, though it should be remembered that translation practice at this period differed from the modern model, which is far more aware of issues of ownership and which generally emphasizes fidelity to the source text over the production of easy, readable prose.

Polynesian Mythology, for all its limitations, represented a huge step forward in vividness and power, when compared to the vague, fragmentary accounts of Māori mythology that had appeared in earlier descriptions and narratives. A good example of this vividness can be seen in Grey's account of the death of Maui, the trickster demigod and culture hero of Māori mythology:

Then Maui asked him [his father], 'What do you mean, what things are there that I can be vanquished by?' And his father answered him, 'By your great ancestress, by Hine-nui-te-po, who, if you look, you may see flashing, and as it were, opening and shutting there, where the horizon meets the sky.' And Maui replied, 'Lay aside such idle thoughts, and let us both fearlessly seek whether men are to die or live for ever...'

Then Maui asked his father, 'What is my ancestress Hine-nui-te-po like?' and he answered, 'What you see yonder shining so brightly red are her eyes, and her teeth are as sharp and hard as pieces of volcanic glass; her body is like that of a man, and as for the pupils of her eyes, they are jasper; and her hair is like the tangles of long sea weed, and her mouth is like that of a barracouta...'

Hardly was this conversation concluded with his father, when the young hero went forth to look for companions to accompany him upon this enterprise: and so there came to him for companions, the small robin, and the large robin, and the thrush, and the yellow-hammer, and every kind of little bird, and the water-wagtail, and these all assembled together, and they all started with Maui in the evening, and arrived at the dwelling of Hine-nui-te-po, and found her fast asleep.

Then Maui addressed them all, and said, 'My little friends, now if you see me creep into this old chieftainess, do not laugh at what you see. Nay, nay, do not I pray you, but when I have got altogether inside her, and just as I am coming out of her mouth, then you may shout with laughter if you please.' And his little friends, who were frightened at what they saw, replied, 'Oh sir, you will certainly be killed.' And he answered them, 'If you burst out laughing at me as soon as I get inside her, you will wake her up, and she will certainly kill me at once, but if you do not laugh until I am quite inside her, and am on the point of coming out of her mouth, I shall live, and Hine-nui-te-po will die.' And his little friends answered, 'Go on then, brave sir, but pray take good care of yourself.'

Then the young hero started off, and twisted the strings of his weapon tight around his wrist, and went into the house, and stripped off his clothes, and the skin on his hips looked mottled and beautiful as that of a mackerel, from the tattoo marks, cut on it with the chisel of Uetonga, and he entered the old chieftainess.

The little birds now screwed up their tiny cheeks, trying to suppress their laughter; at last, the little Tiwakawaka could no

longer keep it in, and laughed out loud, with its merry cheerful note; this woke the old woman up, she opened her eyes, started up, and killed Maui...

As Grey put it in his Preface, in *Polynesian Mythology* the European reader heard (or seemed to hear) for the first time 'a heathen and savage high-priest explaining to him, in his own words, and in his own energetic manner, the traditions in which he earnestly believes, and unfolding the religious opinions upon which the faith and hopes of his race rest.'

Polynesian Mythology had a formidable impact. In Germany, an anonymous reviewer in a Leipzig newspaper stated that Grey had opened up 'a completely new field', while in Ireland his colleague in the July 1855 issue of the *Dublin University Magazine* said that he had read Grey's book 'with unabated interest from beginning to end' and praised, in particular, its 'dim and misty sublimity.' Scholarly opinion was no less positive. In Germany, Professor Carl Schirren, a noted expert on Polynesian mythology, stated in a footnote in his book *Wandersagen der Neuseeländer und der Maui-mythos* [Migration Legends of the New Zealanders and the Myth of Maui] that Grey's book held the 'key' to the whole of Polynesian mythology. In Austria, the Royal Geographical Society of Vienna made Grey an Honorary Member. In France, *Polynesian Mythology* was translated into French for the Anthropological Society of Paris.

The general public was equally enthusiastic. Almost from the day of its publication Grey received letters of praise from readers, and requests to use the material in *Polynesian Mythology* for literary and musical purposes (this was especially true when the second edition of the book was published in 1885). The Hinemoa legend, in particular, excited much attention, in part because it dealt with a theme (romantic love) which was popular with Grey's mid-nineteenth-century audience. Grey's friend, the poet and politician Alfred Domett, spun it out to enormous length in his massive epic *Ranolf and Amohia* (1872); artists such as Nicholas Chevalier drew on it in lush, suggestive paintings such as *Hinemoa* (1879); and several composers and librettists produced musical works based on it. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, and on into the twentieth, thanks to numerous reprintings, *Polynesian Mythology* continued to exert an influence, with the Hinemoa legend, for instance, providing the basis of New Zealand's first feature film (*Hinemoa*, 1914). The Maui story cycle, for its part, inspired such poets as Jessie Mackay and, later, James K. Baxter, whose description of Hinenuitepo

(‘with teeth of obsidian and hair like kelp’) in ‘East Coast Journey’ clearly draws on Grey’s translation (see above).

Polynesian Mythology was not the last book Grey published with New Zealand subject matter, for in 1857, while still Governor of the Cape Colony, he put out a collection of Māori proverbs, *Ko nga whakapepeha me nga whakaahuareka a nga tipuna o Aotea-roa* which appeared with English translations and explanations under the sub-title *Proverbial and Popular Sayings of the Ancestors of the New Zealand Race*. This book has its own very special importance as a repository of traditional Māori wisdom, but it has not exerted the influence of *Polynesian Mythology*. Grey printed a second collection of Māori songs (*Ko nga waiata Maori*) in Cape Town the same year.

Grey returned to New Zealand in 1860, serving as both Governor (till 1868) and Premier (from 1877 till 1879). He devoted himself mainly to politics in this period and did not publish any literary works, though he did act as something of a patron for the ethnologist and writer John White, whose “Māori” novel *Te Rou* (1874) he praised in parliament. Grey spent his later years as a backbencher, and retired to Kawau Island, near Auckland, where his reputation, beautiful house and massive collection of rare objects and books attracted the attention of the local populace and discerning travellers such as the English writer James Froude. In 1887 Grey gave his book collection to the newly opened Auckland Public Library; five years later he left New Zealand for England, where he was reconciled with his wife, from whom he had separated in 1858. Grey died in London on 19 September 1898, and was buried, after a state funeral, in St. Paul’s Cathedral.

Grey’s literary and cultural achievement, in making Māori mythology available to the wider world at so early a date, was, if not beyond criticism, nevertheless remarkable. His influence on how New Zealanders and the wider world saw and see Māori mythology, while properly the subject of academic scrutiny today, continues to be enormous.

LINKS

[Te Ara – An Encyclopedia of New Zealand, 1966](#)

[Prime Ministers of New Zealand](#)

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre \(includes full texts\)](#)

[Auckland City Library Manuscripts Collection](#)

NZ History NetDictionary of New Zealand Biography**BOOKS**

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TRANSLATIONS

Polynesian Mythology. London: John Murray, 1855.

PAPERS

Collections of George Grey's manuscripts, letters, and other papers are held in the Grey Collection in the Auckland Public Library, Auckland, New Zealand; in the National Library of South Africa, Cape Town; and in the British Library, London.

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