

John White, 1826 – 1891

John O'Leary

John White occupies a minor but interesting position in the nineteenth-century New Zealand literary scene, thanks to the series of ethnographic novels he wrote about Māori. These books, while mediocre in terms of artistic quality, are culturally significant, for they reveal in a fascinating way the attitudes of many European New Zealanders of this period towards Māori and Māori culture.

White was born in 1826 in County Durham. The White family had strong Wesleyan connections, and in 1834 they emigrated from England to Mata in the Hokianga, where there was a Wesleyan missionary presence. White's low-church upbringing had a lasting influence on him – it lay behind his generally very negative stance towards traditional Māori religion, for instance. It was combined, however, with a profound interest in Māori culture, an enthusiasm that grew out of his almost daily contact, during this early period of his life, with the local Ngā Puhi people of the Hokianga. The ethnographic knowledge White gained at this time laid the foundation for his main career as an interpreter and, later, scholar of Māori culture. It also greatly influenced his writing, which was firmly rooted in his ethnographic interests.

The young White appears to have seen himself as a poet – he hung a picture of Byron on his wall, to the chagrin of his father – and he wrote quantities of mediocre English verse, some of it in the form of narrative poems modeled after Walter Scott, some of it in the shape of short lyrics addressed to a 'lady love'. At the same time, spurred on perhaps by his reading of Ossian, he was busy collecting local Ngā Puhi material, material which would one day form the basis of his ethnographic fictions. This material included 'New Zealand songs' (waiata and karakia, some of which White translated into English), 'native tales' (tara or stories told to him by Ngā Puhi friends, which White recorded in Māori and sometimes translated), 'NZ anicdotes' (short descriptions or observations in English illustrating Ngā Puhi life and custom), and longer narratives, often involving accounts of warfare, drawn from Ngā Puhi oral history. Various as this material was, it is unified by a focus on utu (response or revenge). This theme, indeed, later came to dominate White's writing about Māori. At first this material was collected quite haphazardly, in the moments White could spare from his farm work. But later on, as his

interest in it grew, White began filling notebooks with it in a more systematic manner.

It was perhaps inevitable, given his enthusiasm for poetry, that White would try to use his Māori material for his own literary purposes. One result was a series of 'Māori' verse narratives, or sketches for verse narratives, written about 1847, in which a variety of Māori elements, such as utu and puhi (betrothal), are wedded to melodramatic plots. 'Kora', 'The Midnight Ghost' and 'The Greenstone Mako' are feeble enough, but they show White using, or planning to use, Māori material in extended English compositions, something he would later do when he came to write his ethnographic novels. White was interested in writing prose, too, and it was at about this time that he began planning 'a historical novel'. This would depict, as White phrased it in the entry in his *Private Journal* for 30 July 1847 'the customs, tales and ceremonies etc. etc. of the New Zealanders'. This 'historical novel' would eventually be published, decades later and after several name changes, as *Te Rou*.

In 1851 White's family moved to Auckland, where White began work as a secretary and interpreter for George Grey. Subsequently White became involved in land purchases as a Government official; it was during this time, too, in 1854, that he married Mary Bagnall, an Aucklander by whom he would have a large family. Notable from this period of White's life is his lecture *Maori Superstitions*, which White gave in Auckland to the Young Men's Christian Association on 20 June 1856. Though not a work of fiction, White's lecture is interesting in the context of his literary career, for in it he dealt with many of the subjects (such as cannibalism, sorcery and tattooing) which would later appear in his ethnographic novels.

An especially striking feature of White's lecture is his strongly degenerationist view of Māori, whom he saw as having fallen from a higher plane of civilization, and his very negative opinion of traditional Māori beliefs, which White believed had held Māori 'in servile bondage'. This very negative view of pre-Christian Māori religion reappeared in White's ethnographic novels, where Māori, with few exceptions, are portrayed as trapped in a cage of superstition and fear. White's lecture was well received, and prompted by its success he gave two more in similar vein, in which, among other things, he fiercely condemned makutu (sorcery). Together with the first, these later lectures were published in 1861, by Government order, under the title *Lectures on Maori Customs and Superstitions*.

White's employment as a public servant ended in 1867, after which time he worked as an interpreter and land agent for a variety of clients both Government and private. He also invested in gold-mining in the Thames area; the venture proved unsuccessful. In 1874 he moved to Napier on the east coast of the North Island, where he acted as a land agent and edited the Māori-language newspaper *Te Wananga*, probably contributing the editorials that urged Māori to hold onto their land but to give up their ancestral customs (especially those relating to religion) and adopt European ways and beliefs.

In the same year White's first ethnographic novel was published in London. *Te Rou: or, the Maori at Home*, to give it its subtitle, follows the life of a pre-European hapu (sub-tribe) of Māori in the Hokianga region over several months. It is dense with ethnographic detail, much of which was drawn from the material White had collected as a young man in the Hokianga. The book is much less peaceful than its domestic-sounding subtitle suggests. It is in fact a relentless chronicle of murder and mayhem; especially gruesome are the scenes of cannibalism, which are described in lurid detail. Why White chose to concentrate, almost obsessively, on the darker side of Māori existence is not hard to fathom. He had a particular, degenerationist view of Māori, and this view informs his novel, just as it had shaped the lectures he had given years before.

In writing *Te Rou* White seems to have been influenced by Charles Kingsley, whose historical novels he greatly admired and to whom he proposed sending a draft of his book for comment. In particular, White appears to have been under the spell of Kingsley's *Hypatia* (1853), a capacious historical work in which the English writer had portrayed the savage, half-pagan world of fifth-century Alexandria. In *Te Rou*, as in *Hypatia*, a strange, alien society is recreated in enormous detail; in White's book, too, as in Kingsley's novel, there is a clear racial and cultural dialectic at work, according to which ancient or non-European societies are viewed as morally and ethically deficient. The only possibility of progress for such societies, it is implied, is the advent of Christian, European (specifically northern European) culture, with its notions of forgiveness, self-control, and reason.

Similar as *Te Rou* is in many ways to *Hypatia*, it is much less well written. White's plot is primitive, his characters are scarcely more than robots, and several of the chapters function too obviously as padding. The whole effect is one of a series of static scenes, or pictures, in which the bizarre and the cruel are emphasized at the expense of the normal and the human. In this respect, *Te Rou* resembles, in its own small way, contemporary European works such

as Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862), works which the critic Edward Said has defined in his study *Orientalism* as consisting, essentially, of 'tableaux of queerness'.

Reaction to *Te Rou* was generally positive. Writing in the *New Zealand Herald* of 27 March 1875, a reviewer judged that White's book was 'a very valuable contribution to the literature and history of New Zealand', while on 19 May the critic of the *New Zealand Times* claimed that White had 'not exaggerated at all'. In his depiction of his subjects, and that he had described the 'filth of body' and 'filth of mind' of the ancient Māori accurately and dispassionately. He also noted, however, that White's literary abilities were not of the first order – 'he might have constructed the plot of the story with more skill' – and hinted that White could lighten his tone ('a little of this style goes a long way').

White, who was proud of his book and sensitive about his writing skills, was hurt by such criticism. In a long, complaining letter to Grey dated 3 June 1872, written in reaction to negative comments leveled at an early draft of his novel, he defended his style, claiming that it faithfully reflected how Māori thought and acted and asserting that it could not be adjusted to suit European taste:

...as to pruning if he [the reviewer] means I fill up the outlines of the tale to [sic] much I do not admit his assertion. If I have repeated any thing twice over then he is right. If he means the writing does appear too much like a long talking (I mean the maori air of it) I then say if the book is to be about the Maori it must not only shew him as a man in every day of his life but even the thoughts and actions looks and words and must give not only the tone but the very way in which those words stand to each other when spoken otherwise part of the Maori life could not be shewn...

Certainly, in its dense ethnographic detail and rather ponderous fidelity to Māori forms of speech and speech-making, *Te Rou* stands apart. (White's only competitor in this respect is Edward Maning, whose much racier *Old New Zealand* had appeared 11 years earlier.) A sense of how seriously ethnographic White's book is can be gained from comparing it to a superficially 'Māori' novel such as George Wilson's *Ena* (also published in 1874), where what Māori elements there are, are merely decorative.

Te Rou does not seem to have sold well and did not bring White the money he had hoped for. His belief in the possibilities of ethnographic fiction appears

to have been undimmed, however, for by this time he had started writing a second book about ancient Māori. Like *Te Rou*, 'Hari, or the New Zealand Revenge' charts the activities of a hapu of pre-Christian Māori over the course of several months; like *Te Rou*, it drew extensively on material White had collected while growing up in the Hokianga. One notable incident involving the deliberate drowning of a young woman was taken directly from an 'anecdote' about the great Ngā Puhi chief Tamati Waka Nene which White had recorded decades before in a notebook.

Unlike *Te Rou*, however, 'Hari' has never been published. This is regrettable, because 'Hari' is a more accomplished work than *Te Rou*. The novel's multiple, inter-locking revenge plots, in particular, are worked out most cleverly, and there are a number of highly dramatic scenes written in bold, imaginative prose. It is also psychologically more interesting, for some of White's Māori characters in 'Hari' evince an almost European sensitivity and Christian charity, and appear in some way to be groping towards a higher state of civilization (as White saw it). Needless to say, these characters come to a sad end, for their ethos of kindness and love has no place in the savage, pagan society White depicts, but their presence is significant. Even more notable is the ritual desecration of the chief Te Rou which occurs towards the end of the book, and which was apparently based on real-life incidents White had heard about earlier in his life and which he had alluded to in his *Lectures*. Although the desecration is explained in terms of a complicated story of revenge, the underlying subtext is clear. Te Rou, the central character of the pagan Māori world depicted in *Te Rou*, indeed its very touchstone and heart, is symbolically degraded, and with him the whole structure of pre-Christian Māori belief.

In 1879 White, who was by now recognised as a leading authority on Māori, was appointed by the Government to write an official history of New Zealand's indigenous people. *The Ancient History of the Maori, His Mythology and Traditions* occupied White for a decade, and was his magnum opus; he found time, however, while engaged on this huge project, to write a third ethnographic novel.

Revenge: a love tale of the Mount Eden tribe, which White began in 1882, is set, like *Te Rou* and 'Hari', in pre-Christian times. Like them, it charts the activities of a hapu of Māori over several months; unlike the earlier ethnographic novels, however, which were set in the remote Hokianga region, the locale is now the familiar Auckland isthmus and nearby Awhitu peninsula. *Revenge* differs from *Te Rou* and 'Hari'. In being much less violent. There are

no scenes of cannibalism, for instance, and what warfare there is minor and takes place off-stage. The focus of the book, instead, is on the complex ceremonies that structure the peacetime lives of the Ngaiwi – the long, detailed account of a gull-egg gathering expedition is especially impressive – and, particularly, on the theme of love (the hero Popo and the heroine Ata-Rehia engage in an extended, highly Victorian romance). White's Māori in *Revenge*, in fact, are very unlike their murderous, irrational compatriots in *Te Rou*. They much more closely resemble those Māori characters in 'Hari' who had appeared to be groping towards a higher form of civilization. In *Revenge*, however, these 'evolved' Māori survive and prosper, unlike in the earlier book.

Revenge, despite its title, ends on a happy note, with Popo and Ata-Rehia described as living long and having 'a large family at Mount Eden'. In this respect the Māori lovers resemble White himself, who had eight children and who lived for a time in the Auckland suburb of that name. White in a sense is writing about his *ancestors* –geographical and spiritual, if not biological ones. What such an appropriation of Māori forebears means is open to debate: it can be interpreted positively, as a recognition by White that Māori were not so different after all, or negatively, as a final, insidious act of colonizing possession.

White completed *Revenge* in 1890, but the book was not published in his lifetime (he died the next year while traveling to Whakatane). In 1940 A. W. Reed, as part of New Zealand's Centennial celebrations, brought out an abbreviated, edited version of the novel.

White's ethnographic fictions remain little known, overshadowed as they are by the more artful writing of that other 'Pākehā Māori', F.E. Maning. As testaments to certain nineteenth-century European attitudes and assumptions regarding Māori and Māori culture, however, they stand as important, fascinating documents.

LINKS

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

[Auckland Museum – White manuscript holdings](#)

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

BOOKS

Te Rou; or, the Maori at home. London: Sampson Low, 1874.

Revenge: a Love Tale of the Mount Eden Tribe. Wellington: A.W. Reed, 1940.

Ancient History of the Maori, his Mythology and Traditions. Wellington: Government Printer, 1887-91.

OTHER

Maori Superstitions: a lecture. Auckland: Printed by Williamson & Wilson, 1856.

Lectures on Maori Customs and Superstitions. Wellington: Government Printer, 1861.

PAPERS

Collections of John White's manuscripts and correspondence are in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, in the Grey Collection in the Auckland Public Library, and in Auckland Institute Library. The manuscript of White's second, unpublished ethnographic novel, 'Hari, or the New Zealand Revenge', is in the Wellington Public Library.

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