

John Eldon Gorst, 1835 –1916

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Nineteenth-century migrations to New Zealand from Britain, Europe, the United States and Australia resulted in a substantial literature of exploration, settlement and cultural encounter, as the new arrivals engaged with the long-established indigenous Māori population. By 1860, the immigrants began to outnumber Māori, and widespread tensions and finally open war resulted from their growing demands for land. John Eldon Gorst's *The Maori King* is one of a large number of works of non-fiction and fiction dealing with what for a long time were known as the Māori Wars, now known more neutrally as the New Zealand Wars. Gorst's analysis of the causes of the war in the Waikato region south of Auckland has long been considered the masterpiece of this body of literature. Gorst wrote of Māori not in general terms as an alien race but as individual human beings, most of whom he knew personally, and he saw with rare clarity the underlying causes of the wars, which were not simple but complex, and included confusion of aims and lack of understanding on both sides. As the late historian Keith Sinclair wrote in the Introduction to his 1959 edition, '...*The Maori King* has come to be regarded as the very best of nineteenth-century accounts of life among the Māori...Whoever wishes to understand the building of the British Empire, not merely in terms of the formulation of policy in London, but quite literally, from its foundation in native villages all over the world, can scarcely do better than turn to Gorst.' *The Maori King* has become one of the classics of New Zealand literature.

Gorst was a young man when he decided to leave England and seek a different kind of life in the antipodes. He turned twenty-five in the month he arrived in New Zealand, May 1860, and was only twenty-eight when he went back to England late in 1863, writing *The Maori King* on the way. He was not only young, he was also patrician in temper, and that was the source of the paternalistic ideas for enlightened white leadership of the Māori with which *The Maori King* concludes. He was a wealthy young man, with an independent income from family lands in Lancashire after his father's death in 1859. In 1852-53 he had been captain of his school, the fourteenth-century Preston Grammar, an early indication of his potential for leadership. At Cambridge he came third in the mathematical tripos, lower than had been expected of him, but still good enough to earn him election as a Fellow of St John's College. A contemporary at St John's was Samuel Butler, later the author of *Erewhon* (1872) and *The Way of All Flesh* (1903). After graduating

Gorst began reading Law, which was to become his primary profession when he returned to England and qualified later, but which fitted him well enough for the task when he was made Resident Magistrate in the Waikato. As a Fellow of St John's, he had entry in Auckland to the upper level of society, and in particular to the company of two other former Fellows of that College, the first Anglican Bishop of New Zealand, George Augustus Selwyn, and the first Chief Justice, Sir William Martin. His sympathetic understanding of Māori and their problems, and the kind of solutions he came to propose, have their origins in the examples and opinions of those remarkable men. Socially, a glimpse of Gorst is provided in the memoirs of the Reverend John Kinder, another Cambridge graduate, an artist, photographer, and headmaster of the new Church of England Grammar School. Gorst came to know him by August 1860, and Kinder describes him as 'a most pleasant companion', who used to take the Greek class in the school each morning when in Auckland.

From October 1860 Gorst spent increasingly longer times in the Waikato. Bishop Selwyn had introduced him early on to the Church Missionary Society, and initially he taught in their Waikato schools. By the end of 1861 he was being employed by the Government as an Inspector of these schools, most of which dated from pre-colonial days in the 1830s, but were now receiving some state financial support. From the middle of 1861 he was back in Auckland for a while where his first son was born. (He had met his wife Mary Elizabeth Moore on the ship coming to New Zealand – they were to have eight children.) During that time he taught a few days a week with Sir William and Lady Mary Martin in St Stephen's School for Māori children. From the end of 1861 until he was threatened with death and driven out by Rewi Maniapoto in April 1863, Gorst with his wife and son lived in Te Awamutu (Otawhao in those days) as Resident Magistrate and Civil Commissioner for Governor George Grey. In that capacity he was expected to implement Grey's policies in the Waikato and to keep him informed of Māori plans and attitudes. How Gorst managed to reconcile the liberal pro-Māori perspectives he had derived from Selwyn, the Martins, and the CMS with Grey's machiavellian plans to break the Waikato King movement by any means including war has to remain a mystery. It is at any rate the subtext of the story in *The Maori King*.

The Maori King is perhaps an odd title for Gorst to have given his book. The first Māori King, Potatau te Wherowhero, elected to the leadership of the federated Waikato tribes south of Auckland in 1858, died in June 1860 soon after Gorst arrived in Auckland, and they didn't meet; and Gorst did not in those days have a high regard for his successor, his son Tawhiao Matutaera Potatau. For Gorst's Auckland contemporaries however, the Māori

assumption of the title of King with its implications of independent sovereignty was an act of rebellion. It was a matter of indifference to most of them that the Waikato tribes had never signed the Treaty of Waitangi with the British Crown and that they saw in kingship a paradigm for the government they felt the Colonial Government had denied them. With rapidly growing numbers of new immigrants clamouring for land, it was convenient to be able to see the Waikato tribes as rebels, and for General Cameron's Imperial Army to attack them and forcibly deprive of their lands. So 'the Maori King' became at that time a convenient term for demonising a tribal federation the colonists were determined to be antagonistic towards. When Gorst subtitled his book 'the Story of Our Quarrel with the Natives of New Zealand', he was being heavily ironic because he did not share the colonists' attitudes towards the Māori, and thought the colonists were manipulating the imperial government.

Gorst identifies other causes for the war. He believed the colonial government had failed to establish an effective 'native service' and to provide education. He saw the tensions that had arisen among the tribes from the new money-value of land, and from the lawlessness and drunkenness of too many of the settlers. He saw too the inferior social status and the contempt with which the colonists regarded Māori, and the exclusion of Māori from the legislature. And he knew that Māori were well aware of the fate of indigenes in America and Australia: 'They say that as the English dog and rat have entirely exterminated the native dog and rat, so the Englishman will destroy them'.

Gorst's dislike of what he saw as the unscrupulous self-interest of the colonists in their dealings with both the Māori and the imperial government is a major theme of *The Maori King*. His criticism of the colonists naturally led to his being widely damned by them, gaining him 'a somewhat unenviable notoriety for his virulent attacks on the colonists,' as journalist John Featon wrote fifteen years later. Māori readers of *The Maori King* may well have felt similarly aggrieved. Although Gorst was their strongest advocate, the condescension with which he represented many of their customs and values, and his habit of making fun of some of their adaptations of European ways can only have been hurtful. Wiremu Tamihana and Rewi Maniopotō, the most important of the Māori he had close contact with, were both perhaps as much as thirty years older than he was, with long-established records of chiefly leadership before Gorst's story even begins. From his perspective however, the perspective of a young magistrate whose judicial powers they prevented him from exercising, they were less wise than he.

Gorst's raw materials were parliamentary reports and records, including those he himself had written as Civil Commissioner, the reports of other Resident Magistrates, newspaper accounts, and his own notes of conversations with leading figures both European and Māori, and of major meetings he was present at. The book gains in immediacy as it goes on and as Gorst himself becomes increasingly present in the events he describes. His presence is not always visible, as he is sometimes in the narrative in the third person, appearing now and then as 'the magistrate' or 'the commissioner'. His prose style is however fluent and temperate, even when cuttingly sarcastic and polemical. There are many echoes of the balanced and antithetical style of Edward Gibbon. Feeling that European implements like ploughs and carts had given Māori more leisure time than they needed, for example, he writes: 'A little civilization has made them idle, and idleness has made them mischievous.' Or, considering the reasons Māori began withholding land from sale to the voracious Land Purchasing Department, he writes: 'They were willing to sell their land for civilization and equality, but at no other price. Despairing of obtaining these boons from Government, the desire to withhold land altogether became nearly universal, in order to check the aggrandizement of that power that might hurt them as an enemy, but did not much benefit them as a friend.' There are echoes of John Stuart Mill also, soon, like Gorst, to be an independent Liberal in the 1866-68 British Parliament.

Gibbon's antithetical style seems to have been Gorst's major model, and it influenced not only his prose but the larger structure of his narrative as well. *The Maori King* is not a simple story of Pākehā (European) versus Māori but a story of many overlapping conflicts. Colonial interests are shown as at odds with imperial interests; and within the imperial sector Governors Browne and Grey are drawn as temperamentally opposite characters. Among the Māori, oppositions are even more sharply drawn, most obviously between the antithetical characters of the warlike Rewi Maniapoto and the statesmanlike Wiremu Tamihana. Gorst saw it as a tragedy that Grey and the government had refused to recognise Tamihana as a force for good and a surety for peace, since he had restrained Maniapoto until the very end. The bitterness with which Gorst laid bare the irony that it was above all the peaceable Tamihana's lands that were confiscated, arose perhaps from his own unease of conscience in having been Grey's man in the Waikato. History has sustained Gorst's high estimate of Tamihana's character and the role he played as the storm clouds gathered. One wonders how he felt though when in later years, long after Wiremu Tamihana had died in 1866, Rewi Maniapoto was lionized by Auckland society, who in the 1860s had lived in terror of him.

That he was a great warrior and chief there is no doubt. But his apotheosis at the end was an irony not even a Gibbon could have foreseen.

Returning to England, Gorst published *The Maori King* (1864) while the wars were still being fought, and entered an illustrious career in politics, firstly as Liberal MP for Cambridge, from 1866 to 1868, then as the Conservative member for Chatham, from 1875 to 1892, and as Conservative member for Cambridge University, from 1892 to 1906. Between 1868 and 1875 he devoted himself to reorganizing the Conservative party, without salary. In 1885 Lord Randolph Churchill obtained for him the position of Solicitor-General, and with it a knighthood. He was appointed Under-Secretary of State for India in 1886, and was Financial Secretary to the Treasury from 1891 to 1892. From 1895 to 1902 he was the last Vice-President of the Privy Council's Committee on Education.

The Children of the Nation (1906) grew out of the practical interest in the education and health of children that he cultivated in that last role. One of his recurring concerns was that the state should assume more responsibility for both, especially in regions suffering social and economic deprivation. He saw clearly that the well-being of the poor was being jeopardized rather than helped by the activities of uncoordinated and self-gratifying charities, and he was scornful of those who branded attempts at state-sponsored alleviation as socialism. By this time Gorst had moved away from the Conservative Party into a Liberal position once again, but it is typical of his independence in politics that he dedicated *The Children of the Nation* 'To the Labour members of the House of Commons, in token of my belief that they are animated by a genuine desire to ameliorate the condition of the people.' The book was a significant addition to the growing impetus for improvements in the well-being of children at that time, and it was welcomed in America as well as in Britain.

In 1906 the British Government sent Gorst to New Zealand to represent them at an International Exhibition in Christchurch, and the result was *New Zealand Revisited* (1908). The book combines Gorst's review of New Zealand's bicultural tensions of forty years before with his very approving, even rose-tinted, picture of race-relations in the present. By 1906 the outgoing tide of Māori population, endangered for so long by disease and deprivation, had at last shown signs of turning. There was undoubtedly a fresh optimism in the air, encouraged at the political level by the new assimilationist policy of the government, which offered a more cooperative model for coexistence than the original policy of amalgamation, which had really meant the subordination and even suppression of Māori culture. Added to these things was Gorst's

personal pleasure as the weeks went on at revisiting the sites of his youthful political activities in the Waikato and Auckland, and at renewing old acquaintances, Māori and European. *New Zealand Revisited* is thus a more relaxed and discursive book than the closely-argued, urgent and angry *The Maori King*. Where the latter is a fiercely polemical text of historical importance, the former is a very agreeable period piece. It also fills in many gaps in *The Maori King*, especially with details of Gorst's private and social life in 1860s New Zealand, at home and travelling, that had no function to serve in that book and so were left out. In *New Zealand Revisited* Gorst combines this retrospective with a richly detailed picture of New Zealand life as the colonial phase was coming to an end. The following year, the country acquired Dominion status, and its movement towards complete autonomy was under way. Gorst died in London on 4 April in 1916.

LINKS

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

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

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre](#)

[New Zealand History on line](#)

BOOKS

The Maori King: or, The Story of Our Quarrel with the Natives of New Zealand. London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1864.

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PAPERS

Due to an accident, or World War One damage in London, all of Gorst's personal papers have long ago been lost. Considering the eminence to which he rose in British politics after his New Zealand years, the loss is of real magnitude. The entry on Gorst in Cook's *Sources* is cryptic: 'Efforts to trace papers have proved unsuccessful. Neither Sir R. Sykes, Bt (whose mother was Gorst's daughter) nor another grandson, John Gorst, M.P., know of any papers. Relevant papers may be found in other collections. The Northcote Mss at the British Library contains correspondence with Lord Iddesleigh, 1880-2. Letters on Gorst's candidature for Cambridge University (1891) are available at Cambridge University Library.' He is abundantly visible however in nineteenth-century British Hansard reports, and in the *Times* and other British papers.