

Elsdon Best, 1856 – 1931

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In 2005 The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa brought back into print after a twenty-year lapse eleven titles by their former official ethnographer, Elsdon Best. It is difficult to think of another New Zealand writer of his period who today might be accorded such a vote of confidence. Eleven scholarly non-fiction titles devoted to traditional Māori culture, written before 1930, arriving in a crowded marketplace at the beginning of a new millennium: what persuaded Te Papa to take such a commercial risk? Their news release tells us that ‘his research was based on rare first-hand knowledge, wide reading, informed study and close discussion with Māori’. Without Best, they write, ‘we would know little of the customs and traditions of these times’. If this is indeed the case, then Elsdon Best must be counted as one of the country’s major literary figures, given that Māori and Pākehā identity, issues of indigenous knowledge and intellectual property are crowding conventional historiography off the campus and the literary pages. Best – long neglected and frowned upon for his extinctionist intellectual framework – is anointed again by the National Museum as an indispensable resource for knowledge of traditional Māori society. What do we know of this man and his life’s work, given that he is so seminal?

Best never intended his works to be used in assisting Māori to know who they were in 2005: he believed the authentic old-time Māori would disappear, replaced at best by a ‘brown-paper’ version of the true men of old (they were usually men). Indigenous knowledge was his prime concern, but not to validate Māori being: rather, it was to save the vanishing knowledge of the old ways, in the best nineteenth-century tradition of salvage anthropology. He certainly believed in intellectual property: witness his caustic outbursts and ongoing resentment, when Augustus Hamilton, the director of the Dominion Museum added his name to the title page of Best’s monograph, *The Stone Implements of the Maori* in 1912. Yet the concept of Māori ownership of what he recorded and published was antithetical to his mission: the science of an advancing civilization now owned such historic resources, in a similar manner to the way in which the settlers had come to own the best land. The conversion of oral knowledge into literary texts implied a form of intellectual property exchange, analogous to the way title deeds of Māori land were issued by the Native Land Court in order to expedite sale to Europeans. The

museum owned the written knowledge – as they have proven by continuing to republish until today.

The significant irony here is that Best – like any writer – has been unable to control the post-mortem uses of his output. Today, the kaupapa Māori movement, sprung from the cultural renaissance of the 1970s has reappropriated those parts of Best's writing that fit with their guiding philosophy: 'by Māori, for Māori and (often) in Māori'. While many of the movement's leading lights – from Maori Marsden in the early 1970s to Pita Sharples today – would undoubtedly find the racialised underpinnings of Best's cultural hierarchies distasteful, his influence is ubiquitous in their fields of study simply because he is the prime literary recorder of traditional Māori society. That he got certain things wrong, that many of his views are now passé, that he appropriated Māori knowledge to further his own career: all of this is up for debate and further study, but Best as an ancestor figure in the field, and in New Zealand literature in general, needs taking seriously.

With regard to biographical detail, there is a workmanlike study written by Best's grand-nephew, Elsdon Craig: *Man of the Mist* dates from the mid-1960s and is in need of revision, but the basic facts are there, the narrative shape of the life. *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* – both in print and online – has a useful thumbnail sketch by Jeffrey Sissons. The principal features of Best's extraordinary life that need bearing in mind are his early and continual exposure to a raw frontier society, where he learned young to enjoy his own company, to live and survive in the native bush that surrounded his parents' farm at Tawa near Wellington, and his access to local Māori at the Porirua pa. Best played with Māori children and was exposed to Māori society during the period 1855-1865 when Māori still held a numerical ascendancy and had not been subjected militarily by superior Western technology. His limited education (he passed the junior civil service examination at the age of seventeen), his inability to endure the confinement of offices and his love of the outdoors led him into a career as a bushworker and sawmiller, along with a stint as a volunteer with the Armed Constabulary.

It was while taking part in operations against Parihaka, the stronghold of the pacifist Māori prophet Te Whiti in 1881, that he made his first contacts with the group of men who were later to form the influential Polynesian Society: Percy Smith and Edward Tregear. Best began to read more widely in areas related to Māori history and culture, and gained exposure to developing anthropological theory. A three-year sojourn in the United States during the mid-1880s saw him work in the same kinds of industries, but he travelled

widely, learned Spanish, and saw first-hand the effects of westward expansion on Native American peoples. On his return, he began submitting articles based on his American travels to New Zealand newspapers. When the Polynesian Society was formed in Wellington in January 1892, he was a foundation member, dedicated to the preservation of all that related to 'Polynesian anthropology, ethnology, philology, history, manners and customs'. His first serious scholarly article, 'The races of the Philippines: I & II' was published that same year – and so began an association with this body of frontier intellectuals that was to continue until his death in 1931. The piece was remarkable in that it contained the seeds of his theoretical influences (such as Edward Tylor and Herbert Spencer), weighty material he had studied alone after hard days working in the bush or in sawmills; and as evidence of his natural facility for learning languages, having read Spanish academic and historical writing in the original.

There were new universities in New Zealand at this time, but Best had never matriculated, and was not of the right class to gain entry. There was a thriving culture of Philosophical Societies in centres large and small, and men such as Best, along with some educated professionals, read their learned papers to each other and published the results each year. This was a vibrant and questioning environment, where science was grappling with its growing power as the source of empirical data and thus, truth, while religion attempted to either reject or accommodate the changing intellectual world, post-Darwin. The auto-didact was somehow the ghost in the machine at such a moment: what later became orthodoxy in universities was often pioneered by those who without formal training, had taught themselves and each other. This was particularly true of fin de siècle anthropology in New Zealand, and accounts in some degree for the peculiar vitality and folk-scholar style that makes reading Best both enjoyable and frustrating. Best is never absent in his work, nor shy with the pithy or sarcastic aside. Chris Hilliard has criticised these peccadillos in *Tuhoe* (1925), Best's major study of the history and traditions of the Urewera peoples. Best is found guilty of blending his often unacknowledged sources, overplaying his own existence in the text, while managing to depersonalise his Tūhoe informants. What is missing here is any biographical insight, as if much else were possible to a writer like Best in his time.

Tuhoe – the book for which he is probably best remembered – was the result of his long association with the eponymous Bay of Plenty iwi, Māori who traced their whakapapa back to semi-mythical ancestors and their arrival on these shores in the canoe, Mātaatua. Best lived in their midst from 1895 to 1910, in the second phase of his career: ostensibly appointed as a

quartermaster on the road through the rugged Urewera ranges to Wairoa on the East Coast. Best's real mission was to gather ethnographical information on a people seen to be the last of 'the old-time Maori'. His appointment had been engineered by the Surveyor-General, Percy Smith – also a Polynesian Society member, author and Māoriphile. Recognising Best's voracious intellect, physical hardiness and unique proficiency in the Māori language, Smith encouraged him to be his eyes and ears amongst Tūhoe. It was a tense compromise at times: not all Tūhoe favoured the road passing through their lands, the best of which had been confiscated in the late 1860s after conflicts with the settler government. Others favoured the access to wage labour, better communications, and the benefits of Western technology; yet all were well aware of what had happened to Māori land holdings in other areas of the country where settler numbers and material progress had led to pressure for faster and greater land sales and eventually, bloody conflict.

Best was both an agent of this process and a recorder of cultural losses: his position could hardly have been more ambivalent. Yet he had few difficulties in attracting willing informants: a Māori-speaking Pākehā official was not unusual at that time, but one with a thirst for recording the old ways, customs and whakapapa (tribal genealogies) would have created a powerful interest. It has become fashionable for revisionist histories in New Zealand over the past two decades to create new images of Māori as victims of government duplicity, or savvy warriors whose tactics were well ahead of those who eventually defeated them. Māori have been portrayed as either without effective agency, or as smart losers. The situation was far more complex and nuanced: Best's informants illustrate both the equivalencies and inequalities of power, along with mixed motives and an all-too-human inability to control the future while making decisions in the present. Those Māori that Best talked to amongst Tūhoe had been exposed to Christian literacy for over fifty years and were in no way pristine; yet their willingness to share their knowledge with him was not due to their fears of imminent extinction, but because they were used to dealing with Pākehā and sought equality.

While Tūhoe wanted a share in their own future, and the benefits of modernity on their own terms, Best and his peers were seeking to excavate the vanished pre-European past. They sought to set down a record of Māori material society, along with its beliefs, before the last of those who retained any such knowledge passed on. Best's lack of training as an academic anthropologist had not prevented him from reading overseas 'authorities' and contributing to the debates in colonial and imperial settings. He was in many respects the model of a field anthropologist: fluent in the language of those he

proposed to study, well-read in the available literature, and eager to live amongst those he proposed to record. The theoretical models of late nineteenth-century anthropology – principally, sociocultural evolutionism – are long since discredited, but Best made good with what was at his disposal. While the concept of a progressive hierarchy of ‘savage-barbarian-civilized’ is distasteful today, in his time it made perfect sense to believe that primitive societies were being replaced as part of the upward evolutionary march of mankind – and that anthropologists had a duty to salvage what they could of such dying cultures for posterity. The fact that the colonizing cultures were instrumental in such disappearances was incidental.

Best’s literary output while he lived and worked in the Urewera was mainly restricted to articles for the Polynesian Society’s Journal, and working on assembling the manuscript for *Tuhoe*. Articles on Māori beliefs and spirituality from 1900 onwards were well received, and his definitions of important Māori words – such as hau (breath) and wairua (spirit) – found their way into New Zealand’s principal Māori language dictionary, *The Williams Dictionary of the Maori Language*. The 5th edition of this classic work (still unrivalled today in its 7th) had doubled in size from the 4th in 1892 – in greater part as a result of Best’s researches. By 1907, he had finished the manuscript of *Tuhoe*, but for various reasons, the huge two-volume work was not to see the light of day until 1925. He continued to collect and collate information from his chief long-term informants – men such as Tutakangahau and Paitini – until the former died in 1907. Growing weary of his late labours as a Health Officer, he left the mountain country in 1910 to begin the final phase of his writing life as the government ethnographer at the Dominion Museum in Wellington. He worked exhaustively here until his death in 1931, turning his vast store of notes and records into a series of monographs on Māori life, and gaining the status of a white tohunga (expert) on matters Māori.

While Best gradually lost credibility in anthropological circles in the decades after his death (unrivalled as a collector, but flawed as a theorist was the general assessment), his works, as noted, have remained in print and available for over eighty years. The reasons for this are that nobody, especially his critics, has been able to relive the period in which he worked, better his linguistic ability as a scholar of things Māori, nor his missionary-like zeal and sheer physical application to his calling. His works, however dated in language and style, are still the most exhaustive studies of pre-contact Māori society. Not only did Best read the overseas experts (and come up with suspect images of ‘the mythopoetic Māori’ from his studies of F. Max Müller), he read deeply in all the New Zealand ethnographers from Cook onwards.

Best recognised that New Zealand had a literary tradition and added to it with unmatched vigour. While living in his spartan camps in the Urewera, he would often walk miles after a day's work to discuss points of detail with Tutakangahau (who responded in kind). He would spend his evenings reading weighty tomes by candlelight, and copying out the whakapapa lists in his own specially developed shorthand. He had to wait until the last decade of his life to see much of this in print.

In any assessment of a New Zealand national literature, Best is a foundational figure; that he wrote non-fiction might for some purists place him outside the domain of imaginative writing, but Best was in fact creating a new national mythology for the settler society. This founding myth underlay the writings themselves: that the European presence in New Zealand was part of a grand evolutionary progress, beneath the wheels of which primitive societies were swept aside. The need to preserve their prehistory while destroying their presence was the interface of myth with the realpolitik. The story of Best's long writing career illustrates this process, and the writings themselves are in part the evidence of what it means to found a nationalistic settler literature on back of indigenous displacement. This is both anthropology as sign of Western triumphalism, and writing as record and erasure. Many Māori in his day wanted such records: *Tuhoe* was published with official financial backing from prominent Māori leaders such as Sir Apirana Ngata. Yet had Māori themselves had more control of their own destiny in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the traditional past would still have been abandoned by them for the fruits of modernity. As the traditional digging stick, the ko, was early thrown aside for the iron spade of the Pākehā, Māori continued to adapt to and employ technological advances. Best would almost certainly have been used by them, to help create the necessary national myths for this new society.

Eldson Best entered the literary bloodstream early and is an ongoing presence. In the late 1930s, Robin Hyde cited his work on Māori society; and Keri Hulme in going to the *William's Dictionary* in 1979 to define mauri for an article on bicultural poetry found not what her Kai Tahu ancestors might have signified by the term, but Best's more metaphysical rendition: 'life principle, thymos of man'. Best had obtained his Greek from the Sanskritist Max Müller: this definition of mauri was as Pākehā as it was Māori. Such creative syncretisms are the unacknowledged literary offspring of colonial cultural exchanges, and continue to defy the efforts of linguistic purists and ethnic essentialists to control the meanings of the past, the present or the future.

LINKS

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

[Best publication on line at The Knowledge Basket](#)

[New Zealand Electronic Text centre](#)

[Search for “Elsdon Best” in the Journal of the Polynesian Society](#)

[Search for “Elsdon Best” in Te Ao Hou](#)

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Collections of Best's papers and correspondence are held in the Alexander Turnbull Library of the National Library Wellington.