

## Alfred Grace, 1867 – 1942

*John O'Leary*

Though a minor figure on the New Zealand literary scene, Alfred Grace is not without interest. His short stories, sketches and novellas, conventional but deftly written, reveal much about turn-of-the-century colonial attitudes, especially as these related to Māori.

Grace was born in 1867 in Auckland, to which his parents, who had been missionaries among Tuwharetoa in the Taupō region, had been forced to flee by the outbreak of war. Despite this, Grace retained a fondness for this part of New Zealand, and Lake Taupō and its surrounds are frequently the setting for his stories. Grace retained a fondness, too, for Māori, though it was an affection shaded by a paternalism that we today find unacceptable.

Grace was sent to school in England in 1875, and completed his education at Cambridge. In 1887 he returned to New Zealand and settled in Nelson. He worked as a school master, but found time to write articles and short stories, some of which were published in New Zealand and Australian periodicals. In 1895, seven of these were collected and published as *Maoriland Stories*. One or two of the 'Māori' pieces in this collection have become quite well known; in them Māori are portrayed as picturesque, passionate and childishly cunning, in contrast to the Pākehā (European) characters who are cold and emotionally restrained. The cost of such self-control – and, more darkly, the sense of racial superiority that underlies it – are hinted at in 'The Chief's Daughter', in which an Englishman sobs as he finally gives in to a Māori maiden's passionate advances.

Māori, as portrayed by Grace, have a darker side; when wronged, they seek utu (often translated as revenge). This is most vividly seen in 'Hira', where a jilted Māori woman arranges for her Pākehā lover's European wife to be slain and her head embalmed as a keepsake. The story, though slight, is an intriguing one, deftly mixing as it does romance, ethnology and a thoroughly fin-de-siècle fascination with violence, sex and death.

*Maoriland Stories* were well received (one reviewer judged them 'well proportioned') and established Grace as an up-and-coming New Zealand writer. Walter Besant, a leading English literary figure of the time, took an interest in him, and as a result of introductions in London, Grace was able to

secure the prestigious firm of Chatto & Windus as the publishers of his second book of short stories, *Tales of a Dying Race* (1901). As the title suggests, the 28 stories in this collection are entirely about Māori; Māori conceived, moreover, as destined for extinction. In this belief that New Zealand's indigenous people were doomed, Grace was entirely typical of his time. What makes *Tales of a Dying Race* interesting is the rather ambivalent attitude toward Māori that Grace displays, and his scepticism concerning the claims of European culture.

In 'Arahuta's Baptism', for example, Christianity is brought to Māori by the complacent German missionary Poggendorf, but at the cost of a young girl's life. In 'The King's Ngerengere', which is loosely based on a real visit to England by Patara Te Tuhi and Tawhiao in 1884, Māori visitors to England perform rites in a country stream; the joke, however, is on the local villagers, who are comically shocked by such 'heathen' goings-on. Māori are portrayed as violent and treacherous in stories such as 'The Utu of the Ngatitōa', but are capable, too, of love and devotion, as shown in the semi-autobiographical 'A White Wahine', where the loyal Pito-iwi protects a missionary's wife against demands for vengeance. The best-known story in the collection, 'Te Wiria's Potatoes', is more complex. As Lydia Wevers has suggested, the stealing of Villiers' crop by local Māori, and his acquiescence in the theft, functions to excuse and normalize the greater theft of Māori land by Europeans during the process of colonization.

*Tales of a Dying Race* received good reviews from the British critics, with one describing it as 'a purposeful book, full of subtle meaning and tender sentiment ...and great insight into the manners and customs of our semi-savage dependents.' Spurred on by this interest in the manners and customs of 'our semi-savage dependents', Grace published *Folk Tales of the Maori* in 1907. The book is a collection of tara (tales) collected by a Māori friend of Grace's, Karepa Te Whetu of Ngāti Koata, and translated by Grace into rather Edwardian idiom (at one point young Māori women are described as 'gamboling like true daughters of their mother, Nature', while a group of young Māori warriors is pictured as 'as ardent a body of braves as ever owed fealty to a fair maid'). Some, like 'The Kiritea Girl', deal with makutu (sorcery). Others, like 'Fish Hooks', deal with utu. 'Putā and Her Dog Kuikui' is a Lassie-like story of canine devotion, which a local reviewer judged to be 'the finest New Zealand story yet written...a masterpiece.'

*Folk Tales of the Maori* was intended to be a serious contribution to ethnology and it was well received. One reviewer judged that it was 'a

valuable book' while another thought it had 'freshness sufficient to arouse the most jaded mental appetite.' Grace, however, returned to fiction in his next work, *Atareta, the Belle of the Kainga* (1908), a melodramatic romance set in early colonial times which deals with themes of love, sex and the clash of pagan and Christian cultures. These, as portrayed by Grace, are equally unattractive: if the traditional pagan ways of the tohunga (priest or expert) Tuatara and his followers are cruel and inhuman, the new religion of the missionary Villiers and his wife is cold and unforgiving, and together they drive the lovely Atareta to destruction (she commits suicide by jumping off a cliff). Though *Atareta* is scarcely a radical critique of social attitudes (let alone of the process of colonization), it does make an implicit plea for a kinder, more enlightened approach to morality, especially sexual morality. In this respect Grace can be seen as a liberal voice questioning the strictures of the Victorian moral code his society had inherited.

Grace's ambivalent view of Māori is apparent in his next work, a series of sketches entitled *Hone Tiki Dialogues* (1910). The sketches, 12 in number, are short, two- or three-page affairs, set in Wellington; in them, an unnamed narrator (presumably Grace) records the conversations he has when he encounters a Māori friend of his, Hone (John) Tiki. Hone as a character is a curious mixture of the naïve and the shrewd. In 'A Delicate Subject' he wonders innocently why it is that Europeans always seem to end up with everything and Māori with nothing – before touching the narrator for a loan. In 'The Usefulness of Bellamy's' he imagines that the life of an MP is an easy one (they are paid, he opines, to do nothing but talk) but observes cannily how the parliamentary bar of the title is used by MPs to jolly constituents into abandoning awkward demands. Sometimes Hone comments directly on New Zealand society as in 'The Pakeha Woman.' European women, in Hone's opinion, are thin, domineering and acquisitive, which is why Māori men won't marry them. (Māori women, by contrast, are plump, obedient and happy with very little in the way of material possessions, which is why European men *will* marry them.) Parsons excite Hone's special dislike, mainly because via various circuitous routes they end up, he thinks, with any money Māori possess.

A notable feature of the *Dialogues* is the Māori English Hone uses. This was the first attempt to render Māori English phonetically, and it was judged only partially successful at the time. To modern eyes it reads as unpleasantly condescending, though it should be recalled that Grace, like a number of Victorian and Edwardian writers, often reproduced dialect or non-standard English, and by no means confined his attentions to Māori English alone.

*Hone Tiki Dialogues* was well received, to judge by a 7 January 1911 review in the *Evening Post* which lauded what it saw as Grace's accurate portrayal of the Māori's 'shrewdness and simplicity, crude race prejudice and pride'. Another critic compared the dialogues to 'the better French *contes*' (tales). Such praise may have encouraged Grace to start writing his longest work, *The Tale of Timber Town*, which was published in 1914 after serialization in the *Otago Witness*. Set in and around Nelson (the 'timber town' of the title), the book is a melodramatic romance which incorporates the real-life story of the 1866 Maungatapu murders, in which three men carrying gold back to Nelson from a local goldfield were brutally murdered. The case caused a sensation in its day, and fascinated a writer as great as Mark Twain, as Grace noted in his preface. In Grace's hands, the simple murder story is padded out with semi-satirical observations on small-town life, a varied cast of colourful characters (many of whom speak in 'amusing' non-standard English), and a complex, three-sided interracial romance which sees the handsome English hero, Jack Scarlett, involved with an angelic European New Zealander, a fiery Māori maiden, and a beautiful young Jewish woman.

The depiction of these three women, and of Jack's relations with each of them, is perhaps the most interesting element of the novel. Rose is pure and good; she bottles plums, keeps house for her widowed father, and betrays her feelings for Jack in only the most restrained, English way. Amiria, by contrast, is passionate and forthright; she declares her love for Jack openly, suggesting they marry 'in the Maori way' (i.e. cohabit). Rachel, the young Jewish woman, is frivolous and materialistic. She is interested in Jack mainly because he is rumoured to have found gold in the hills behind Timber Town, and quickly abandons him when he is accused of murder. In the end, Jack chooses to marry Rose, the epitome of moral and racial purity, though not before he is tempted by Amiria who, having rescued him from a shipwreck, has a certain claim to his affection. The racism of Jack's verdict on her suggestion that they live together ('the thing may be all right for you, but I should lose caste') reads embarrassingly today, though it is slightly tempered by Jack's sense that his European conventions are petty and mean. More shocking is the virulent anti-Semitism to be found in Grace's portrayal of Rachel and her father, who is characterized as 'a typical Jew of the Ghetto, crafty, timid, watchful, cynical, cruel'. (Rachel herself is portrayed not only frivolous and materialistic, but also as vulgar – she wants to put a diamond in her front tooth.) Asians, too, are treated by Grace with contempt: a ship from China forced to undergo quarantine in the town's harbour is described as being crewed by men who

'jabbered like monkeys', while one of the Europeans visiting the stricken vessel enquires 'when do the animals feed?'

*The Tale of Timber Town* was Grace's last work of fiction. In 1924, on the strength, presumably, of his book, he wrote a preface to the 1866 account of the trial that followed the Maungatapu murders. He also practised journalism, produced a guidebook to Nelson and district, published a history of the Nelson County Council, and edited a volume of poems by a local poet. He was also active in local life and politics. He died in Nelson on 18 March 1942.

In his day, Grace was judged by one critic to have earned 'an honourable place among our immortals.' The verdict sounds strange now, but one or two of Grace's short stories (e.g. 'Hira') can still be read with pleasure, while his fiction, generally, retains a period interest.

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