Alfred Domett, 1811 – 1887

Jane Stafford

Alfred Domett was born in Camberwell, near London in 1811. His father was a ship owner and had been in the merchant service. Domett went to St John's College, Cambridge though he left without a degree. As a young man he travelled widely in the United States, in the West Indies and in Canada, keeping a journal of his time in Canada where he worked as a surveyor. In 1835 he returned to Britain and joined the Middle Temple to read law, being called to the bar in 1841.

During this time he was part of a group of friends known as the Colloquials, 'a little debating society' which met in the family home of his cousins, Frederick and William Curling Young. Among members of the group were Joseph Arnould, later a high court judge, Christopher Dowson, grandfather of the poet Ernest, and Robert Browning. Browning had been at school with Domett's brother Edward and the two young men may have known each other as early as 1830. Domett was by far the most glamorous and worldly of the group, because of his travels, and because of his literary success, a collection, *Poems*, being published in 1831 and another, *Venice,* in 1839. Both were well received. His poem 'A Christmas Hymn' was widely anthologised, being favourably compared by a critic in *Blackwoods Magazine* to Milton's 'Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Nativity'.

The most conspicuous aspect of *Poems* is its languid introduction: 'For the publication of the following poems no good and sufficient reason can be given', the author states. 'Perhaps he publishes for lack of employment – perhaps in the hope of amusement – perhaps out of mere anxiety.…' Domett goes on to warn the reader that 'the rhymes are deformed throughout … the thoughts are too often crude and incoherent' while the work as a whole is 'flimsy, dull and commonplace … turgid and bombastic'. It is hard not to agree with this assessment of the poems that follow, some (rather self-evidently) written when the author was as young as fourteen. There are translations from the Greek ('Chorus of the "Seven against Thebes" of Aeschylus'), a sequence of ponderous and sententious 'Commonplaces', and re-workings of Shelley, Byron and Wordsworth:

> This brave bright earth with Mind o'erflows –
> With secret soul o'erfraught;
> In every form a feeling glows,
> In every tone a Thought …

The liveliest piece is a satire, ‘Elegy on the Death of Frisk’, which looks forward to the light verse Domett later published in New Zealand newspapers:

> Come all and mourn with saddest mind
> The good – the gentle, and the kind –
> The friend sincere – the guest refined –
> The foe to none; –
> The star of dogs has sure declined – For Frisk is gone!

Venice, published six years later in 1839, is far more technically proficient. The work is a single, lengthy poem which the poet summarises in his introduction as demonstrating ‘the advantages of the savage and civilised life to be blended and secured by study and knowledge of our mixed natures’. It is an early expression of imperial fervour, and shows the influence of Domett’s travels in Canada and the West Indies. The first section of the poem laments in Ruskinian manner Venice’s present decay – ‘Fair Magdalene of faded cites! gay/ And guilty once as sad, yet lovely now!’ – and reflects on the decline of civilisations: ‘The heedless Nations rush unto the snare/ Of greatness – to decay exulting go!’ Venice has had her day; other parts of the globe will have their turn:

> What eastern tracts yet rough with nature lie!
> …There – there shall learning lift her quiet eyes!
> There shall the gentle stir of culture wake …

There are, claims Domett, ‘no bounds to Progress backed by Time!’ Africa ‘pants for light she yet shall share’. The Pacific, configured in fervently orientalist manner, replete with ‘young girls … [w]ith rounded limbs in ebon beauty bare’ is also a contender:

> There lurks the raw material of Renown!
> There Genius yet shall dare the perilous verge
> Of Passionate thought…

While the poem seems up until this point universalist in the manner with which it allows the possibility of any race’s advancement, a distinctly imperial, settler theme now emerges:

> What homesteads of humanity
> Undreamt of yet, are yet to be!
> The laughing gold of cornfields gay,
> Trim huts where blue-eyed infants play,
> Sleek cattle glowing in green meads, shall shine
> Where rocks of sandstone rise – where sandy deserts pine.

Venice is too early to be influenced by specifically Darwinian ideas of evolution, but demonstrates the way in which such theories were already current. ‘Oh deem not yet Creation's labour done!’ Domett asks as he positions empire, especially settler empire, at the centre of a continuing improving world:

> All these must Time inform with life and mind!
> Realms shapeless yet in the Creator's hands;
> Late-finished tracts that languish for mankind,
> And savage peopled lands
> Wait to be polished, powerful, free,
> And crowd the far futurity!…
> Men perish, but MANKIND advances.

In this light, Domett’s decision to emigrate to New Zealand seems logical: his circle had connections with the New Zealand Company and his cousin William Curling Young had already gone, settling in the Waimea Valley near Nelson. Browning memorialised Domett’s departure in his poem ‘Waring’:

> What’s become of Waring
> Since he gave us all the slip,
> Chosen land-travel or seafaring,
> Boots and chest or staff and scrip,
> Rather than pace up and down
> Any longer London-town?

Browning comforts himself that ‘never star/ Was lost here, but it rose afar!’ From onboard ship, Domett enjoined him to ‘Write (to the world) – and to me in New Zealand’; Browning wrote back ‘I have read your poems; you can do anything – and (I do not see why I should not think) will do much’, adding melodramatically ‘I will if I live’. They continued to correspond until Browning’s departure to Italy in 1846.

Domett arrived in New Zealand to be met by tragic news. His cousin William Curling Young had drowned just before his arrival. Colonial society seemed stifling and philistine, too close to his friend Arnould’s description of it as ‘a damned dull collection of log huts in the antipodes’. Domett took pleasure in a trip around Golden Bay, where he observed the local Māori at close quarters, but then he broke his leg. This probably saved his life as it prevented him going with Arthur Wakefield, son of colony’s principle architect Edward Gibbon Wakefield, to a confrontation with local Māori beside the Wairau River, where through blunder and misunderstanding four Māori and

twenty-two settlers were killed, including Wakefield. Domett wrote an account of this in the local newspaper the *Nelson Examiner* and was part of a delegation of settlers to go to the capital Wellington to argue for harsher policies toward Māori and a more aggressive programme of land acquisition. He was the editor of the *Examiner* until 1845, arguing for the recall of the humanitarian Governor Fitzroy, addressing a poem to him entitled 'Recantation or an humble petition from the gentlemen and inhabitants of Nelson to the High & Mighty Prince Fizgig the First, one of the Kings of the Cannibal Islands'. In 1846 he was nominated to the Legislative Council. He was colonial secretary for New Munster from 1848 to 1853, and in 1851 was made civil secretary to the general government. He was instrumental in arguing the principle of free, secular and compulsory education, and in urging a legislative check to large, speculative land holdings. In 1854 he moved to Hawke's Bay to take up the position of commissioner of Crown Lands and magistrate, a demotion, he felt, from his previous position, and one he took to badly, escaping when the voters of Nelson elected him to the House of Representatives in 1855. During this time he worked towards the establishment of the General Assembly Library which opened in 1858. In 1856 Domett became commissioner of Crown lands in Nelson. In addition, he served on the Nelson Provincial Council from 1857 to 1863. In 1856 he married Mary George, a widow who had two sons. They had one child, Alfred Nelson Domett.

Domett remained the member for Nelson until 1866, when he was appointed to the Legislative Council. He was colonial secretary, or Premier, from 6 August 1862 to 30 October 1863 during the conflict in Taranaki, notable for his hard-line policies towards Māori, especially his advocation of land confiscation. The fall of his ministry was precipitated by revelations of his government's intention to absorb Waikato and Taranaki Māori land into European settlement. Domett continued as secretary for Crown lands, a position that was converted from the political to civil aegis in 1864, the year he also took on the role of land claims commissioner. In 1865 he became registrar general of land, as Jeanine Graham says, 'centralising most of the government's land concerns in his office'. In 1866 he also joined the Legislative Council, his anomalous position as both civil servant and politician being exempted from a general ban on such dual roles in 1870. In 1871 he retired and returned to England.

While there is plentiful documentation of Domett's public life during this time, little or no evidence of his private and literary endeavours survives, apart from the monumental text of his poem *Ranolf and Amohia: A South-Sea Day-*

Dream, complete when he arrived in Britain. He said that in New Zealand only his wife and Governor Grey had read the poem, and it is certainly indebted to Grey's *Polynesian Mythology* (1835) and his collection of Māori material *Ko nga moteatea, me nga hakirara o nga Maori* (1835), as Domett describes it '*Poems, Traditions and Chaunts of the Maories* in the native tongue'. Domett has also used Edward Shortland's *Traditions and Superstitions of the New Zealanders* (1854), Augustus Earle's *Narrative of a Twelve Months' Residence in New Zealand* (1832) and Joel Polack's *Manners and Customs of the New Zealanders* (1840). There are footnotes which refer to these and other sources, and appendices on pronunciation of Māori words, 'waiata, or native songs', legends, and 'natural objects' (trees and shrubs, birds and insects).

However, as the poet and anthologist Allen Curnow said, 'nobody questions the total inaccuracy of the poem as a representation of Māori life'. Despite a grounding in the actual, *Ranolf and Amohia* is most appropriately seen as romance, a product of European Romanticism, an evocation of a legendary past replete with noble savages, dusky maidens, and landscapes alternatively sublime and gothic. As such, it takes its place among works such as Longfellow's *Songs of Hiawatha* (1855), Elias Lonrot's *Kalevala* (1835-49), Lady Charlotte Guest's *Mabinogion* (1838-49), Samuel Ferguson's *Congal* (1872), Edwin Arnold's *Indian Idylls* (1883), and even the work of high Victorianism Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1833-85), nostalgic reactions to modernity which use scholarly or ethnographic material, often as a means of laying claim to that material in the face of an original ownership that has disappeared or is said to be dying out.

The plot of *Ranolf and Amohia* is relatively straightforward. Ranolf, a young Englishman is shipwrecked off the coast of New Zealand, saved by the local Māori tribe, and meets and falls in love with Amohia the daughter of the Rotorua chief, Tangi-Moana. Kangapo the conniving tohunga or priest observes Amohia's love for Ranolf, and sees that it will interfere with his plans to marry her strategically, so arranges to have Ranolf kidnapped. He is rescued by Amohia who arranges his escape to an island; she learns of her imminent marriage, and follows him by swimming across the lake. They are reunited, and flee through the bush, returning to Rotorua in time to take part in a battle between Tangi's forces and those various tribal enemies stirred up by Kangapo. Tangi is killed, but Ranolf leads a party into the enemy camp to capture Kangapo. Ranolf grows restless with his life among such savage strangers, longs to return to England but worries about Amohia's place there. Amohia, for her part, interprets his melancholy as weariness of her. Peace is

established between the warring tribes, and the question of Amohia's marriage is again raised. She decides to leave, in part to release Ranolf from his obligations to her. She encounters Kangapo who tries to capture her, but in the ensuing struggle he falls into a pool of hot mud and is killed. Amohia falls – or jumps – into a river, is carried along for a time and is cast up, seemingly drowned. When this is recounted to Ranolf, he is beside himself with grief and guilt, but then Amohia reappears. They are reunited, and she explains the misapprehension surrounding her supposed death. They board a ship for England.

Domett takes 500 pages, 150,000 lines, to tell this relatively straightforward story (there are no sub-plots). He is not unaware of his prolixity:

> Then pardon us, although
> Beguiled, dear Reader, at this stage too long,
> (Alas for sins of inartistic Song!)
> O prithee pardon, if with little skill
> We fling these scraps together – skip who will!

The narrative is in effect a frame on which Domett hangs a number of discussions. There are long and graphic descriptions of the landscape in which the poem is set, the thermal region of Rotorua, 'this remote sweet wilderness, / This Life-deserted, Life-desiring land', including passages describing thermal geysers, boiling mud pools, the native bush and the Pink and White Terraces, lava formations on the volcano Tarawera, later destroyed in the 1884 eruption. There are descriptions of Māori art and culture, seen not in a romantic light, but as savage and degraded:

> What dwarfish forms those ponderous heads upbear:
> Their crooked tortoise-legs, club-curved and short;
> Their hands, like toasting-forks or tridents prest
> Against each broad and circle-fretted breast …

The emotions of the two lovers are explored at length. Amohia is described in terms taken from Shelley's orientalist works and Tennyson's Arthurian heroines: she is '[l]ike and unlike – such counterpart/ And contrast to that deathless dream of Art'. But she is also accorded status as interpreter and story teller of her own race. Through her and other members of her tribe, Māori myths, legends, customs, songs and rituals are explained at length to Ranolf: 'Their superstitions, legends, lays, / Could endless disquisitions raise'. Domett makes it clear that his recitations by Māori speakers have been

translated – not just from Māori but from the poetic values of an oral literature into a form of discourse more aligned with Victorian poetics:

> An ancient legend [Amohia] began to tell
> Of one God-hero of the land,
> Of which our faithful lay presents
> Precisely the main incidents,
> Diluting only here and there
> The better its intent to reach,
> The language so condensed and bare,
> Those clotted rudiments of speech…

In his notes to the poem Domett explains the principles on which this 'translation' has been effected: because oral poetry relies on performance – gestures, expressions, asides – as much as on text, the written version needs to be recast to convey the full force of the original: his versions will then 'in their English dress have much the same appearance to an English reader as the originals to a native hearer'.

But what constitutes the bulk of *Ranolf and Amohia*, what modern readers find indigestible and Victorian readers praised, are the philosophical discussions and meditations of Ranolf, as Denis McEldowney describes him a 'sailor-student' akin to Arnold's scholar-gypsy. Partly these concern the nineteenth century problem of doubt versus belief. 'We *ground* on those mudbanks of Doubt' he laments. His instincts are not to entirely reject belief, but are firmly non-sectarian: '*What need of temples?'* he asks,

> … All around
> Through Earth's expanse, through Heaven profound,
> A conscious Spirit, beauty-crowned,
> A visible glory breathes and breaks,
> And of these mountains, moors and lakes
> A Holiest of Holies Makes!

Ranolf's (and Domett's) stance is Darwinian and triumphalist. He states, 'All creatures – foul or fair / One universal endless progress share; / In their procession headed by mankind'.

As an intrinsic part of this inner debate Ranolf looks at the belief system of the Māori, finding in it, as a man of his scholarship and reading would, evidence of unity, 'how on God by various names they call,/ While God's great smile shines equally on all; – / Allah, unimaged, One; Brahma, Vishnu.…' This unity, '[a] universal warp-and-woof/ Of Sympathy', is demonstrated through

Māori mythology's parallels with other systems: Ranolf describes '[t]heir legends … recastings from the ancient mould … Greek, Gothic, Polynesian – all/ Primeval races on a train/ Of like ideas, conceptions, fall'. Jacob Bryant, Jacob Grimm and Max Muller are clear influences here. This recognition of unity gives status to the Māori material the poem contains, although it is made clear that Māori myths are inferior forms: after one rendition Ranolf ponders, 'that savage story strangely rings/ with echoes of profoundest things'. As Amohia explains her belief system, he responds by setting out for her 'the stately Ship of Western thought', and pointing to the equivalences between her knowledge and his:

> 'More myth and deeper' – murmured he
> As Amo rose and bid them wait
> Her quick return: 'But how translate
> In German style the mystery? –
> Shall Hapae our URANIA be?'

To understand the unity of this system and the way in which Māori and European thought can be identified through their respective mythologies is central to Ranolf and Domett's understanding of the world as '[t]his vast Machinery for making Souls':

> … as the Law of Storms
> Cannot be gathered from a single breeze
> Or local gale; so must a myriad forms
> Of lives and their environments be learned
> And disentangled ere can be discerned
> The law that flows around each, unguessed, unseen,
> Like fluid wool that through the ribbed machine
> Which looks so bare, so finely runs and fast
> O'er whirling cylinders, a viewless stream…

In 1872 Browning, now widowed, famous, and back in England, wrote to a friend, 'Waring came back the other day after 30 years' absence, the same as ever, nearly. He has been Prime Minister in New Zealand for a year and a half, but gets tired, and returns home with a poem'. It seems clear that Domett's intention was not so much retirement as a triumphant accession to his rightful place in London literary life. His friendship with Browning was quickly renewed – his diaries are an important biographical source for Browning's latter years – and Browning advised him to take *Ranolf and Amohia* to his own publisher Smith and Elder, who declined to take the risk themselves, but published it at the author's own expense. Reviews were respectful. Browning was enthusiastic praising 'such treasures of old and new

language, and such continuance of music in modes old and new'. Domett sent a copy to Tennyson, and Lady Tennyson reported to Browning her husband's view that 'your friend only wants limitation to be a considerable poet'.

Perhaps encouraged by this response, Domett published *Flotsam and Jetsam* in 1877, a collection of both early poems and ones written after his return. Some, such as 'The Forest Beauties: Upper Canada, 1834', and 'A Stage Coach in the Alleghanies' date from his early travels in North America. His successful poem 'A Christmas Hymn' is reprinted and reworked in 'A Christmas Hymn 1877'. There is an attack Domett wrote in 1841 on a critic of Browning's work, *Pippa Passes* (1833), where the critic is described as

> A squat black beetle, potent for his size,
> Pushing, tail-first, by every road that's wrong
> The dirt ball of his musty rules along
> His tiny sphere of grovelling sympathies …

The only New Zealand reference in the collection is the poem 'Invisible Sights' which tells of an antipodean returning to England, agog to see the great figures of the London literary scene, and suggest a certain sense of anti-climax on Domett's part:

> 'So far way so long – and now
> Returned to England? – Come with me!
> Some of our great 'celebrities'
> You will be glad to see!'
>
> . . . .
>
> Carlyle – the Laureate – Browning – *these*!
> These walking bipeds – Nay, you joke! –
> Each wondrous power for thirty years
> O'er us head-downward folk
>
> Wrapt skylike, at the Antipodes, –
> Those common limbs – that common trunk!
> 'Tis the Arab-Jinn who reached the clouds,
> Into his bottle shrunk.
>
> The flashing Mind – the boundless soul
> We felt ubiquitous, that mash
> Medullary or cortical –
> That six inch brain-cube! – Trash!

In 1883 a new version of *Ranolf and Amohia* was published by Kegan Paul with a new sub-title, *A Dream of Two Lives.* Domett had enlarged the text by 4,000 lines, reordering some of the episodes to give the philosophical discussion primacy. That this was in keeping with Victorian taste is attested to by the *Spectator's* review which stated that '[t]he bounding life which runs through the philosophy redeems it from all charge of being abstruse or dry'. Recognising the dual aspects of the work, the reviewer praised the poem's '[g]rand pictures of scenery painted on alternative panels with vigorous and vivid sketches of modern doubts and faiths'.

Domett died on 2 November 1887. His political legacy in New Zealand is mixed. His advocacy of secular education and his establishment of the General Assembly Library must be set against his punitive views on the 'native question' and his prosecution of widespread land confiscation. In literary terms he was unlucky to write in a form and at a time which became rapidly, deeply unfashionable. *Ranolf and Amohia* became a literary joke, a measure of how bad colonial writing was in the eyes of the literary nationalists of the 1930s and 40s who saw themselves as the first real generation of New Zealand writers. Yet anyone who reads the poem comes away with respect for its technical achievement, the intense melodrama of its descriptive passages, as well an insight into the central preoccupations of nineteenth century with all its scholarship, its enthusiasms, its contradictions and its unpleasantnesses.

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Alfred Domett's papers, Domett Papers (1801-1886), MS Papers 1632, and his letter book (1848-1871), qMS Papers 0616, are held in the Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand.