

Edward Robert Tregear, 1846 – 1931

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Like other figures in the literary history of colonial New Zealand, Edward Robert Tregear was an all-rounder whose very versatility probably prevented him from excelling in any one genre. In his lifetime, he was best known as a civil servant who championed the cause of labour. Yet Tregear also harboured serious literary aspirations, trying his hand at fiction, poetry, comparative linguistics, anthropology and political analysis. Some of this — notably the controversial *Aryan Maori* — is now valued only by the historically curious. Still, Tregear's efforts in producing his *Comparative Dictionary* were little short of Herculean, while the remainder of his writing is always lucid and interesting, even though much of it is doomed to remain locked in the cabinets of archaeological curiosity.

Tregear was born in Southampton, England, in 1846, the eldest child and only son of seafarer (and eventually captain) William James Tregear and Mary Norris. Edward was an intelligent and imaginative child, who immersed himself in the classics and in Celtic and Nordic mythology. His enthusiasm for Northern Europe was fuelled by his Cornish ancestry.

Though educated initially at boarding school, Tregear's formal education was set back by financial disaster. In 1858, Captain Tregear was bankrupted, probably owing to gambling debts, and the family disaster was compounded the following year when he died of typhoid in Bombay. Four years later, in 1863, the teenage Tregear, his mother and his two sisters sailed to New Zealand, settling first in Warkworth and later in Auckland. In 1867, Tregear enlisted in the Auckland Engineer Volunteers for the Bay of Plenty campaign in the New Zealand wars. Decorated for bravery, he then worked throughout the Central North Island as a gold-digger, surveyor, and later Sub-Inspector in the Armed Constabulary. During these years, Tregear spent much time in the company of Māori, and he soon became fluent in the Māori language.

Tregear's itinerant lifestyle lasted until about 1875, although his itinerancy did not prevent him from literary projects. His most celebrated poem, 'Te Whetu Plains', was written during this period, although it remained unpublished until much later. 'Gold', however, was published in the *New Zealand Herald* in 1871 as the winner of a poetry prize offered by the Thames Mechanics Institute. Couched in the format of a dream poem, 'Gold' reads

something like an inverse retelling of Pandora's Box, in which 'King Gold' announces his intention to bless New Zealand with the gift of gold. Acknowledging that gold has often led to 'folly, vice & crime' in the old world, King Gold declares a 'new reign of Gold' in New Zealand, to be attended by the spirits of 'Wisdom, Genius & Skill':

For fair New Zealand with her beauty-dower
 Feels the sweet bridal-Kiss of mighty Gold,
 And smiles with happiness and joy untold,
 A new Danaë 'neath the dazzling shower.

The triumphal, progressive tone of this stanza is not, however, typical of Tregear's early work. Instead, as K.R. Howe notes, Tregear's early verse is generally of a dreamy, Romantic cast. It includes exotic ballads and poems of loss and thwarted love, being reminiscent of such nineteenth-century poets as Walter Savage Landor, Walter Scott, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and William Morris. Very little of this poetry was published during Tregear's lifetime, though Howe's biographical reading sees the unpublished poems as explorations of Tregear's sense of alienation in a new country, and of his frustrations in love.

Romantic frustrations became tangible in 1875 when Tregear began surveying in Taranaki, initially for the Government and then in private practice. In New Plymouth, he fell in love with Bessie Arden, a 19-year old who had been married two years earlier, but was then deserted by her husband, apparently for reasons of sexual incompatibility. In 1880, Bessie succeeded in obtaining a divorce through the tortuous Supreme Court process, after which the couple were married in New Plymouth, living in various Taranaki towns over the next few years. In 1881, Bessie gave birth to the couple's only child, Vera, in Patea.

In Patea, Tregear began a punishing schedule of reading and writing that continued for the rest of his life. His work issued in a torrent of poems, articles, and monographs on a variety of subjects — political, anthropological, linguistic and ethical — which were published in newspapers and journals around the world: New Zealand, British, German, American, and Australian. Many of Tregear's early publications were marked by his interest in the Freethought movement and his increasing religious scepticism, an outlook motivated in turn by his reading in comparative mythology, religion and linguistics. His output also tended towards the sort of state socialism and land nationalisation associated with New Zealand's political liberals, including

freethinkers and future premiers like Robert Stout and John Ballance. Not surprisingly, therefore, several of Tregear's early articles were published in Ballance's Wanganui-based *Freethought Review*.

Tregear's first monograph, however, departs from the earnestness of the freethinking milieu. *Southern Parables* (1884) is a short pamphlet of paragraph-length beast fables, each of them wrapped up by humorous moral maxims. The fables range from dreadful puns through to satirical jibes at the snobberies of colonial society, many of them concluding by twisting well-known sayings with comic intent ('Confusion is nine points of the law').

In 1885, the Tregears moved to Wellington, in response to an invitation from Ballance in his role as Minister for Native Affairs. Ballance had asked Tregear to work as an editor on John White's Government-commissioned *Ancient History of the Maori*. Owing to some misunderstanding over his Māori language abilities, however, Tregear did very little work on this massive project, instead continuing to work as a surveyor for the Government survey office. Nonetheless, Tregear found Wellington more stimulating than Taranaki, and he became active in the Wellington Philosophical Society, the Theosophical Society, and the Union Debating Club. He maintained international links as well, being elected in subsequent years to the rank of Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (1886) and Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (1890), by belonging to the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, and the British Philological Society, and by becoming Vice-President of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science.

Tregear is perhaps best remembered for his next book, the infamous *Aryan Maori* (1885), which Gibbons calls 'the most spectacular example of how writers could indulge their theoretical fancies about Māori'. Viewed with hindsight, *The Aryan Maori* is little more than an ingenious historical curiosity, though its argument was perhaps more plausible in the bullring of Victorian comparative linguistics than it is today. Extrapolating particularly from the comparative mythological and philological studies of the German-born Oxford Professor, F. Max Müller, Tregear argues that Māori are descended from the original Aryans of North Asia and, moreover, that the Māori language preserves the Aryan language 'in an almost inconceivable purity'. Full of speculative Victorian enthusiasm, Tregear insists that anyone who works through his book's argument carefully, 'will share my convictions before he reaches the end'.

The Aryan Maori divides into two halves. The first provides tables comparing Māori and Sanskrit words and suggesting their common provenance. The intended highlight of this endeavour is Tregear's discussion of what he calls 'graft-words' which he believed to preserve memories of Māori pre-history in Asia. Thus, for example, he insists that the Māori language contains coded reference to cows, bulls, cats, and pigs, though these animals were unknown in New Zealand before European contact. A Latin word like 'taurus' (bull), for example, he sees as an Aryan (Indo-European) relation of possible Māori words for concepts like courage, challenge, and loud noise ('tara', 'whakatara', and 'tararau'). The second half of the book continues this inquiry into Māori origins by way of mythology, suggesting, among other things, that the slaying of monsters in Māori mythology is linked to the great serpents of Old Indian worship.

Tregear's confident tone throughout the book ('Not yet have I seen one shadow of disproof') belies its highly speculative content. In retrospect, *The Aryan Maori* can be seen as an unconscious attempt to outflank the conclusions of Social Darwinism, by showing that Māori are not descended from 'freebooting Huns or Vandals, mad for plunder and the sack of towns', but are actually kin to their European colonisers:

The ordinary European who counts in his ranks the Bengalee, the Savoyard, and the Portuguese as Aryans, need not blush to own his brotherhood with the beauties of Hawaii or the heroes of Orakau.

Reflective of wider nineteenth-century debates on the origins of language and mythology, *The Aryan Maori* received a mixed reception. While there were some very favourable responses from around the world, the reception included some savage critique, particularly of Tregear's methodology, and notably from the Nelson-based lawyer, A. S. Atkinson.

None of this stifled Tregear's output. He continued to lecture and publish widely on Polynesian origins and related questions, as well as showing an interest in social and political questions. In 1890, he received third place in the *Evening Post* newspaper's jubilee poetry competition for a poem subsequently republished in Tregear's 1919 volume as 'New Zealand'. Curiously, given Tregear's Polynesian interests, 'New Zealand' mentions the Māori only in passing (the sound of the 'war-cry', the 'shakings of the savage spear'). Instead, it is a pious paean to the emerging nation. After sketching the progress of settlement and the growth of agriculture and industry across New

Zealand, the poem turns to prophesy a noble future for the nation which, because it loathes ‘the war of caste and creed’, will escape the old-world’s ‘crushing poverty’ and ‘social miseries’. This vision, which turns New Zealand into a socialist version of paradise, has similarities with that of William Pember Reeves. Certainly, Tregear admired Reeves’ state socialist agenda, and in 1891, Tregear was appointed civil service head of what would become Reeves’ Department of Labour, a post that he held for the next 19 years. This involved him directly in the attempt to relieve ‘crushing poverty’ in New Zealand, a task which he approached with both administrative zeal and generous personal engagement.

Also in 1891, Tregear redressed the European bias of the ‘New Zealand’ poem by producing a book of Polynesian fairytales, *Fairy Tales and Folk-Lore of New Zealand and the South Seas*. Even more so than *The Aryan Maori*, this is a derivative work, involving the retelling of 34 stories collected by other Pākehā writers in the manner of Andrew Lang or the Brothers Grimm. (Stories from William Colenso had made up a significant portion of the second half of *The Aryan Maori*). The stories are drawn from across the Pacific, including New Zealand, Hawaii, Fiji, the Cook Islands, and Samoa. Though Tregear does not avoid stories with tragic endings, the collection is unashamedly directed at children, aiming to bring the Pacific alive for settler children in the way that European myths had fired the imagination of the youthful Tregear.

However, Tregear’s crowning achievement of 1891 was the appearance of his *Maori-Polynesian Comparative Dictionary*. Inspired by Tregear’s correspondence with Müller over *The Aryan Maori*, the dictionary evidences years of colossal labour, all of it done outside of working hours. Drawing on Tregear’s extensive network of correspondents throughout the Pacific, the Dictionary is organised as a Māori-English dictionary, giving after the English translation groups of words from different Polynesian languages that are ‘apparently allied [to the Māori] in sound and sense’. Many of the entries also contain comparative mythological data. Nonetheless, although the Preface speaks of Māori as ‘but a dialect of the great Polynesian language’, Tregear limits the speculations on Polynesian origins in this work, admitting that ‘the masters in the school of Comparative Philology have ... frowned upon the attempt of instituting comparisons between these almost-unknown semi-barbarous tongues and the classical or oriental languages’. For completeness, however, he guardedly admits Malay, Micronesian and Melanesian comparisons on the grounds that ‘it would be mischievous to exclude these apparently similar forms from comparison with each other’.

Though the Dictionary received some adverse criticism, Tregear was generally praised for his labours, from New Zealand and from experts overseas. Yet his philological work did not exempt him from professional work in the Department of Labour. Tregear wrote extensively on the subject of labour and labour law in New Zealand, with much of this writing published in the *Journal of the Department of Labour* (which he founded and edited until 1910), and in a range of international (particularly American) publications. This involved some controversy, for Tregear's sympathy for State Socialism meant that his writing was not always that of an impartial civil servant. Yet he remained Secretary of Labour even once Reeves departed for the post of New Zealand Agent-General in London and if anything, gained greater influence on the content of labour legislation as Reeves' replacement, Premier Richard Seddon, took a more hands-off approach to the Labour portfolio.

Wellington continued to prove congenial to Tregear's academic interests over the years. He was, along with influential ethnographers S. Percy Smith, Elsdon Best and others, a foundation member of the Polynesian Society which was formed in 1892. Over the coming years, he contributed regularly to the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, though his more substantial role was as an editor (1892-1900). Much of his research energy continued to be directed linguistically: he published dictionaries of various French Polynesian languages (1895 (after serialisation in the 1893 volumes of the Polynesian Society's *Journal*), 1899) and in partnership with Percy Smith, a Niuean dictionary (1907).

Some of Tregear's diverse interests find their way into his only novel, *Hedged with Divinities* (1895), a 'futuristic dystopia of female dominance', as Harvey McQueen and Roger Robinson call it. *Hedged with Divinities* begins as an adventure story, which predicates a world entirely stripped of male inhabitants except for an adventurous engineer named Jack Wallace. Thanks to Jack's youthful quest after esoteric knowledge, he is in a tohunga-induced coma when cataclysm strikes the world's male population. Awakening three years later into an all-female world, Wallace is crowned King by the ecstatic inhabitants of Auckland, whereupon he immediately begins to repair the economy of a country decaying through lack of male leadership. The inhabitants of Auckland also have an eye to the preservation of the human species, however, and Wallace is statutorily compelled to act as husband to a selection of his Kingdom's finest female specimens. As the first children are born, Wallace receives suits from Māori and from the Australian colonies, begging him to spread his paternal favours. Finding the pressure too great,

however, he flees to Fiji in the recovered company of his former fiancée, Nelly Farrell.

In its opening chapters, *Hedged with Divinities* fuses Tregear's interests in comparative mythology, religion, and Polynesian culture with occasional glimpses of his pet theories ('The Māori of the present day are poor creatures compared with their very accomplished forefathers...'). The remaining chapters develop his interest in questions of colonial political development, while consolidating a decidedly Victorian view of sexual roles, in which 'the wholesome fairness of maidens of the Anglo-Celtic race' is found unfit for managing civilisation without male oversight. In fact, the attempted independence of either gender is judged negatively, with particular rebuke directed at the feminist views encouraged by 'a clique of hysterical writers'. All this is intertwined with a peculiarly male sexual fantasy, which it is tempting to read in reference to Tregear's own almost-celibate marriage, and which, viewed retrospectively, is almost comic ('Thanks be to goodness! I've been cussed by a man again!').

Hedged with Divinities is Tregear's only published work of prose fiction, and the ensuing years saw most of his literary efforts directed towards small Polynesian linguistic and anthropological studies. In 1900, Tregear visited the Pacific in the entourage of the Premier, Seddon, who was travelling in search of improved health. Tregear acted as the party's chronicler, with his text accompanying numerous photographs and initially published as *A Premier's Voyage to the South Sea Islands in Search of Health* (1900). The book has a chequered history, however, because Seddon seems to have been offended by the title's reference to his ill-health. On his orders, it was repackaged in anonymous form as *Rt. Hon R. J. Seddon's Visit to the South Sea Islands*, with the text unaltered but some photographs excised. Tregear's text balances travelogue with political panegyric in its account of Seddon's stately procession through the Pacific, during which the Premier dispenses goodwill, promises of New Zealand aid, and moral counsel to Tonga, Fiji, Niue and the Cook Islands. Notes about linguistic and mythological matters give intermittent glimpses of Tregear's personal interests, but the book is as of much interest today for what it reveals about the view-from-above which the New Zealand visitors assumed as it is for its generalist comments on Pacific government and ways of life.

Tregear's last substantial work was *The Maori Race* (1904), a well-received and compendious collection of the customs, beliefs, practices and lifestyle of the 'ancient' Māori, before European contact. Largely derivative and intended

for a general audience, *The Maori Race* draws from a host of authors including Tregear's fellows in the Polynesian Society, Best and Smith. While the book contains the paternalistic superiority typical of its time, and assumptions about a decayed Māori race, it also communicates Tregear's passion for things Māori and his underlying conviction of an essential kinship between 'the restless sea-rover from the Northern isles and his darker brother of the Southern seas'. He is, for example, quick to defend Māori custom against accusations of barbarity, by comparing it regularly with the unsavoury history and debased practices of Europeans. Thus in explaining the role of human sacrifice in ancient Māori rites, Tregear the socialist notes that 'Human life is freely sacrificed every day in the crowded industrial centres of population for the production of wealth'. Nonetheless, apart from occasional footnotes and asides (particularly towards the end of the book), Tregear largely refrains again from definitive conclusions about Māori origins, admitting them to be 'highly controversial'.

Tregear retired from the civil service in 1910, an occasion marked by the award to him of the Imperial Service Order in 1911. Retirement also spurred him to write more poetry, partly through the encouragement of A. G. Stephens, literary editor of the Sydney-based *Bulletin*, who had championed Tregear's verse in articles on New Zealand poetry. Under Stephen's influence, *Shadows and other verses* appeared in 1919, containing new poems and poems which had been printed in various Australasian publications, mostly from about 1910. The most enduring poem from *Shadows* has been 'Te Whetu Plains', which itself is much older than 1919, reworking an unpublished poem from Tregear's surveying youth. Its nightmarish, brooding romanticism portrays a dark, uninhabited New Zealand landscape of strange silences ('tis a songless land'), in which rest is unattainable, even perhaps, in death. Building on recent geological knowledge, the poem's nine, carefully patterned stanzas depict a 'lonely rock' on the plains as the embodiment of the landscape's otherness, a rock born from 'waves of flames' in earth's 'tottering ... infancy'. In this Darwinian environment, hostile to humanity, the speaker pleads with God for a calmer rest than the plains' 'ghastly peace'. Allen Curnow describes the tone of the poem as 'strained', so that the poem succeeds like few others in providing 'the colonist's true response to a landscape he found not merely alien, but repellent and terrifying'. The rest of the poems in the small volume are a curious mixture of romantic, socialist, religious, and patriotic sentiment that hunger after ideals of rest and peace. While one or two of these were included in early twentieth-century anthologies, they generally lack the creeping sense

of alienation that has won 'Te Whetu Plains' a permanent place in the corpus of New Zealand poetry.

Tregear's retirement from the civil service enabled him to become more active in labour politics. He briefly became a labour City Counsellor in Wellington in 1912-1913, and he worked to unite the various factions of organised labour into a viable national political party. He also analysed some of the struggles of New Zealand labour in articles for overseas publications, while continuing to contribute occasional articles to the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* until 1921. In that year, the Tregears moved to Picton, where their daughter Vera had moved after marriage in 1908. Though Tregear maintained an interest in Polynesian studies, and continued to be feted as a Labour activist, his writing days had ended, and he died in Picton in October 1931.

While much of Tregear's literary work is now forgotten or derided, the breadth of his output remains a testament to some impressive ability. Few people today would contemplate writing novels, compiling books of fairy tales for children, and single-handedly editing dictionaries of comparative philology; most, indeed, would regard the *Maori-Polynesian Comparative Dictionary* as work sufficient for one lifetime. Tregear's output thus stands as a reminder of a bygone literary age in which polymaths, undeterred by their amateur status, endeavoured to create an emerging national literature. The continued appearance of Tregear's works in facsimiles and reprints demonstrates that subsequent generations find that endeavour fascinating, and that Tregear has attained the status of a foundational figure in New Zealand letters.

LINKS

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre](#)

[1966 Encyclopedia of New Zealand](#)

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

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PAPERS

- Some of Tregear's papers and correspondence are held at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, though many other papers are in private hands.