

Jessie Mackay, 1864 – 1938

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Jessie Mackay, often referred to as New Zealand's first native born poet, was a central voice in the 'Māoriland' school of late colonial writers, whose sense of a distinctly local literature was characterised by use of Māori mythological and legendary material. Mackay was born in Rakaia, Canterbury, in the South Island of New Zealand in 1864. Her parents were Scottish immigrants from the Highlands, and her early education was imbued with a sense of Scottish literature and history, often of dispossession. The eldest of a large family of girls, she went to Christchurch to train as a pupil teacher, and taught at small rural schools until 1898 when she moved to Dunedin. There she began her career as a journalist, which she continued in some form or another for the rest of her life, the only break being a brief return to teaching occasioned by a financial crisis in her family. In 1902 she returned to Christchurch and set up house with her sister Georgina, with whom she lived until her death.

On her arrival in Dunedin Mackay began writing a column for the *Otago Witness* on a range of subjects: literature, social and political issues, current events, cultural matters. The range of her essays included temperance, suffrage, penal reform, anti-vivisection, and employment reform as well as literary matters. In Christchurch she was made the 'lady editor' of the *Canterbury Times*, was the New Zealand correspondent for the British journal *Time and Tide*, and contributed to publications *Jus Suffragi Common Cause Votes for Woman*. Her interest in women's issues, especially the contemporary cause of women's suffrage (New Zealand women gained the vote in 1890) was reflected in her membership of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the National Council of Women, and expressed in the pieces she wrote for the journal *White Ribbon*. Her Celtic background was expressed in her advocacy for Home Rule for both Scotland and Ireland, and she was a leading member of the Society for Self-Determination for Ireland.

Much of her poetry was first published in newspapers – the Dunedin *Outlook*, the Auckland *Star*, the Lyttleton *Times*, Christchurch papers the *Press*, *Star* and *Sun*, the Sydney *Bulletin* and *Bookfellow*, London journals such as *Celtic Monthly*, the *Lyceum*, the *Spectator*. Her first collection of poems, *The Spirit of the Rangatira and other ballads*, was published in 1889. In the introduction she wrote what could be seen as a cautious manifesto of settler literature, hoping that 'at least a few [of her poems] have a flavour of

the colonial soil from whence they sprung ‘ and expressing the view that ‘...the heart of young New Zealand beats with the free untrammelled pulsation of enterprise – beats hopefully to the march of progress and culture; and, side by side with this aspiration after culture goes the dawning of a national spirit that will we trust brighten into the noonday of national prosperity.’

The range of subject matter in this collection is characteristic of her interests. There are treatments of Māori myth and customs: in ‘The Spirit of the Rangatira’ an old woman laments the fate of her dying race. In ‘The Taniwha’s Farewell’ a taniwha or monster remembers his alliance with a now vanished warrior:

But the Taniwha loved, in the days of the past,
Tiki whenua of Ngati Kuru;
 And the monster his power on the warrior cast,
 And swam in the wake of his war canoe.

Her Scottish background is celebrated in traditional forms such as ‘The Ballad of Grizel Cochrane’. ‘Strath Erran’ expresses the homesickness and sense of loss of the exiled Scottish immigrant: ‘my heart is sick an’ sair wi’ longing bitterly/ For the green sunny braes o’ fair Strath Erran’. There are humorous and topical verses such as ‘The Boundary Dog’s Complaint’, ‘A Christchurch Cold’ and ‘The Old Bachelor’s Lament’. Mackay’s interest in wider mythological systems and classical history and legend are exemplified in poems such as ‘Narkissos’, ‘The New Lorelei’, and ‘The Oath of Hannibal’, while the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a central influence in her work, is eulogised in ‘The Death of Longfellow’.

The collection’s most famous poem, which is still anthologised, is ‘The Charge at Parihaka’, a parody of Tennyson’s 1854 poem ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’. Tennyson’s piece celebrates the ill-judged yet heroic action by the British at Balaclava during the Crimean war when a brigade of soldiers charged the Russian canons. Mackay’s pastiche condemns the military actions of the New Zealand government against a community of unarmed and pacifist Māori who were resisting colonial land confiscations:

Yet a league, yet a league,
 Yet a league onward,
 Straight to the Maori pah
 Marched the Twelve Hundred.
 ‘Forward the Volunteers!
 Is there a man who fears?’

Over the ferny plain
 Marched the Twelve Hundred!

'Forward' the Colonel said;
 Was there a man dismayed?
 No, for the heroes knew
 There was no danger.

While Tennyson's poem balances the imbecility of the command with the heroism of the soldiers, at Parihaka everyone has blundered, and, in Mackay's account, looks not only savage and vindictive, as they undoubtedly were, but comic and foolish:

Children to the right of them
 Children to the left of them,
 Women in front of them,
 Saw them and wondered;
 Stormed at with jeer and groan,
 Foiled by the five alone,
 Never was trumpet blown
 O'er such a deed of arms.
 Back with their captives three
 Taken so gallantly
 Rode the Twelve Hundred.

When can their glory fade?
 Oh! The wild charge they made.
 New Zealand wondered
 Whether each doughty soul
 Paid for the pigs he stole:
 Noble Twelve Hundred!

Mackay's account is factually very accurate. One presumes she is following newspaper reports, not least because of the heroic role she gives to the reporters present. It is informed by the radical liberalism of her Scottish background, with its sympathy for the victims of dispossession, and the complicating effect this has on her position as, technically, one of the colonisers.

The Sitter on the Rail and other poems appeared in 1891. Its title poem refers to those who prevaricate over political issues, especially women's suffrage, a cause in which Mackay was heavily involved, collecting signatures for the vast petition that was presented to parliament that year:

We know that you can *talk*; it's another thing to *do*.
 Come down in the arena; for if e'en there you fail,

You'll criticise your neighbours less, good Sitter on the Rail!

A similar disapproval of inactivity in public affairs is expressed in the poem 'Dreamer and Doer'. Mackay was an acute critic and reader and her satire of the often-flowery conventions of late colonial poetry is seen in the poem 'Poet and Farmer' where the practicalities of rural existence are placed against the poet's romanticised view:

The incense of the dewy clover mead
Invites the happy roaming bee to suck it;
The queenly rose is throned in verdant bower;—
(Well, I must milk. Say, Susan, where's the bucket?)

From the Maori Sea was published in 1908, by which time Mackay was settled in Christchurch, in a cottage in New Brighton, and later on the Cashmere hills, descriptions of which appear in her poetry. The collection shows her continuing interest in Māori subjects: 'Maori War Song' is a grim address to Tu the god of war and 'Tane's dark daughter', the goddess of night and death. Her Scottish background is addressed in 'The Burial of Sir John Mackenzie', where a New Zealand politician is farewelled in the style of a highland chief with clan and pipers, but his clan, 'a wider clan than ever he knew' comprise the dispossessed and disinherited of his adopted New Zealand:

The landless man and the No Man's man
The man that lacked and the man unlearned...

Here the New Zealand and the Scottish cultural landscape are conflated, as in 'After Bothasberg' which commemorates a 1902 Boer War battle in which a number of New Zealand soldiers died. The poem's Scottish dialect and the references to Scottish traditions merge the two countries' histories and contextualise the New Zealand deaths in a wider sense of the past. As Mackay says in 'The Ancient People',

Lo, and lo mine ancient people!
Cairn and cromlech hold them sleeping; —
Mine though the world divide

In other poems, the two physical landscapes merge, as the literary language of the traditional adapts to the new place: 'The Call of the Upland Yule' has May-thorn but also toi-toi grass and kea birds. In 'Dunedin in the Gloaming' the city is similarly a mixture of the local and the romantic: 'Lady of

the Māori pines, the turrets and the eyries'. 'Spring fires' describes the fires on the Canterbury hills in terms of the real – ti-trees and tussock – and the mythological – 'dim Earth Goddesses' of 'a tender heathenesse'. The Scottish ballad tradition is evoked and adapted in 'Rona in the Moon' where a girl is trapped by her bad behaviour in the moon ('You'll never break your prison golden, –/Never, late or soon'), though Rona's surroundings, gourd and ngaio tree, are local. Mackay's interest in Scandinavian mythology is seen in 'The Seeing of Sigurd' and 'Sunset on the Kaikouras' which blends that mythology with that of the Māori, as the Icelandic hero Balder and Kiwa combine:

Great Balder comes to die!
 Not the North shall wholly keep him;
 Taniwha and Toa weep him;
 Kiwa's serpents give him wail...

From the Maori Sea and *The Sitter on the Rail* are short, pamphlet like publications. *Land of the Morning* is a more substantial collection with an illustrator, Dagmar Huie. Its Foreword indicates Mackay's now assured place in New Zealand literary circles by thanking the novelists Edith Searle Grossmann and Edith Lyttleton, the poet and short story writer Blanche Baughan, and the literary editor of the Sydney *Bulletin*, A.G. Stephens, with whom she had an extensive correspondence. The volume collects together poems published earlier, but also includes 'The Noosing of the Sun God', a major work based on Māori mythology, which tells the Prometheus-like story of the Māori hero Maui attempting to control the sun God in his progress across the sky. Mackay's belief in the fundamental unity of religious belief is expressed in the poem 'Many Mansions', as the Māori heaven, Reinga, is conflated with the Teutonic Valhalla, the Hindu Swarga, and the Buddhist Nirvana. And Mackay's consciousness of the need to manufacture a local sense of culture in the face of the pragmatism of settler New Zealand is expressed in 'Pessimist to Socialist' where she laments 'Pale lieth Poetry/ Passing and dying./ Have they no care for her,/ Selling and buying?'

Mackay's work reflects the mainstream role of poetry during this period as a communal voice. The title poem of *Bride of the Rivers* was written for jubilee number of the *Timaru Herald*. This 1926 volume collects other pieces written for newspaper publication over a long period: current events in Europe from Russia ('Ivan the Black') to Yugoslavia ('Christmas in Kosova'). Despite changes in poetic practise, and the modernism of younger writers, Mackay remains with her Māoriland subject matter: 'The Harvest of Tane Mahuta' describes a spiritualised bush, 'The Lakeland Tangi' peoples that landscape

with its archaic inhabitants: Back lies the light of Tu (God of War) Tane (creator of man) infinite,/ The chant of the priest; the fury of the toa (great warrior)

Her support for the cause of Home Rule in both Ireland and Scotland was a constant thread in her writing, both prose and poetry, as was her social activism. The title poem in the 1935 collection *Vigil* refers to the evening of April 10, 1919, when the first prohibition poll in New Zealand was held – the prohibition cause was narrowly lost, supposedly by the votes of overseas soldiers: ‘Is it ‘Yea’, is it ‘Nay’, /For your life, for your soul?’ she asks. In ‘Scotland Unfree’, from the same collection, she argues for dominion status – that is, limited independence from Britain – for Scotland and Wales: ‘Britain? What Britain that’s wanting of thee,/ Scotland unfree?’ she concludes. Her only trip to Europe was in 1921-2, when she visited Scotland, was photographed in her family tartan, met leaders of the Irish nationalist movement, and attended the Irish Race Conference in Paris.

By the time of Jessie Mackay’s death in 1938, the kind of high-Victorian poetry she exemplified was thoroughly out of date, the causes she championed either won (such as suffrage or Irish independence) or thoroughly lost (such as temperance), and the species of colonial nationalism she practised was viewed with deep suspicion. Intent on seeing themselves as the originators of a specifically local poetry, the nationalist poets and critics of the 1930s dismissed her work, excluding her from canonising anthologies. A more generous and more complex reading recognises the importance of her generation of writers in expressing the need for a literature not simply based on deference to the imperial centre, and aware of local realities and landscapes. For Mackay this was inextricably intertwined with a sense of European culture, British literature, and her Scottish background, all of which enriched the sense of what European identity meant during the late colonial period.

LINKS

[1966 Encyclopaedia of New Zealand](#)

[Bibliography at The New Zealand Literature File](#)

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre](#)

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Jessie Mackay's papers (1902-1930), MS Papers 778/1, are held by the Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand.