# William Pember Reeves, 1857 – 1932

*Tim McKenzie*

William Pember Reeves would be a minor figure in the literary history of New Zealand were it not for his meteoric political career. While a vigorous journalist and capable versifier in the Victorian manner, Reeves' most lasting achievement is *The Long White Cloud*, an influential history of the young British colony that reflects his inside political knowledge. Yet, like most of his best literary work, *The Long White Cloud* was written in England, once his political career in New Zealand had ended. Though in exile, Reeves continued to propagate his view of New Zealand in a range of historical, poetic and political writings. In these, he did more than anyone before him to shape the world's perceptions of New Zealand as a progressive and egalitarian society.

Reeves was born in Lyttelton, New Zealand, in 1857, the son of William Reeves and Ellen Pember, recently arrived English immigrants with prosperous Pember relatives. After a brief stint farming near Rangiora, Reeves' father became manager of, and contributor to, the *Lyttelton Times*, a connection of considerable later importance in his son's life. Reeves himself was educated at various schools in Christchurch, including, finally, Christ's College Grammar School (for which he later wrote the school song). Here, he excelled in classical and modern history, placing highly in the nationwide University of New Zealand entrance scholarship examinations in 1873 and 1874. Yet he did not attend University in New Zealand, intending instead to read law at Oxford.

This he never did. After a year spent touring Europe and residing with English relations, Reeves suffered a breakdown and returned to New Zealand in early 1876. Two years working as a cadet on a sheep farm in mid-Canterbury were followed by three years' pupillage with his father's lawyers in Christchurch, and admission to the bar in late 1880. But Reeves preferred politics and writing to law, on which basis he abandoned legal practice and began work for the *Lyttelton Times*, becoming its Wellington political

correspondent in 1883. He was also an active sportsman during these years, representing Canterbury in both rugby and cricket.

In 1883, Reeves' poetic tendencies became publicly apparent, when he edited a book of comic verse, drawn largely from the *Lyttelton Times*. *Canterbury Rhymes* had first appeared in 1867, and Reeves took the opportunity of a second edition to add two comic ballads of his own, written in jaunty fourteeners and anapaests. These are typical of the whole volume: unspectacular but mildly amusing renditions of Canterbury anecdote. In his Preface, Reeves anticipated exactly these criticisms, justifying the book not for its 'poetical merit', but as a 'pleasant, unpretending record … of the amusements, quarrels, politics, and progress of Provincial Canterbury'.

The progress of Provincial Canterbury was confirmed as Reeves' main public concern when, in 1885, he became editor of the *Canterbury Times*, a weekly from the same stable as the *Lyttelton Times*. He was, for example, an advocate for the construction of the Midland Railway line from Christchurch to Nelson, a stance that aligned him with the national Government led by Robert Stout and Julius Vogel. In 1887, Reeves organised the Canterbury Electors' Association, essentially the first organised political party in New Zealand, to contest that year's election. Even though the Stout-Vogel Government was defeated, Reeves was elected to the House of Representatives. Significantly, he had campaigned as a champion of men against money, a viewpoint which he was to articulate with increasing clarity during his political career, in speeches noted for their oratory and humour.

Reeves' parliamentary career did not curtail his other interests. He married Maud Robison in 1885, and the first of their three children was born in 1887. He continued to play first-class cricket until 1888, and to write for his father's newspapers, becoming editor of the Lyttelton paper in 1889. He tried his hand at short stories, publishing one each in the *Canterbury Times* and *Zealandia*. The latter story is a politically motivated fable of revenge against a large estate holder, the stock enemy of the Liberal voter. In contrast, *Colonial Couplets* (1889) was avowedly apolitical. A book of poems largely in the vein

of *Canterbury Rhymes*, it was a collaboration between Reeves and George Phipps Williams, a railway engineer and Canterbury character. Many of the poems present humorous views of contemporary political issues and, while metrically clever, they share many of the weaknesses of the *Canterbury Rhymes*. Yet the political poems are inevitably of historical-political interest. 'The Ladies' Triumph', for example, borrows from 'The Rape of the Lock' and (contemporary critics noted) Thomas Macaulay to prophesy the advent of women's suffrage and its dire consequences for men. 'The Premier's Puzzle' satirises an unnamed Premier (Harry Atkinson) for his lack of policy. 'A Ball in the Old Provincial Council Chambers' is more serious, self-consciously mingling comedy with lofty sentiment in a reverential eulogy for the pioneer politicians of Provincial Canterbury. In the process, it anticipates Reeves' later poems 'New Zealand' and 'A Colonist in His Garden', and indicates the bias of his historiography:

> They with the desert won the strife,
> They sowed the seed of social life,
> Whose stately tree we view.
> O flout them not in careless tones
> Who laid our State's foundation stones,
> And laid them deep and true.

Sentiments like these indicated Reeves' ambitions as a serious poet. At any rate, he was a successful one. *Colonial Couplets* was favourably reviewed and quickly purchased, running through two editions and more than 1,000 copies.

Though Reeves' Statism is only faintly discernible in *Colonial Couplets*, it was becoming explicit in his prose. Among his newspaper contributions in 1890 was a series of pseudonymous articles on communism and socialism. Despite the pseudonym, it became widely known that the 'Pharos' seeking to bring political light to New Zealand was Reeves. Republished in pamphlet form, *Some Historical Articles on Communism and Socialism* ranges widely from Plato to Edward Bellamy via the Jesuit *missiones* in its investigation of the utopian ideal. While 'Pharos' claims an educative rather than a proselytising purpose, his concluding sketch of English Fabianism is

sympathetic (more so than his brief treatment of Marxism). Reeves was clearly providing an intellectual basis for the parliamentary Liberal party's view of the State as the best promoter of popular welfare.

Reeves' radical political views did not lessen his popularity with the electorate. He was re-elected in 1890, and became a Minister in John Ballance's first Liberal Government, holding the portfolios of Education, Justice, and later Labour. As Minister of Education, he was involved in the production of the *New Zealand Reader* (1895), an anthology for schools of pieces on New Zealand history and geography. But his most enduring political legacy stems from his role as Minister of Labour. His groundbreaking programme of industrial legislation included a range of workplace reforms, including the compulsory arbitration in industrial disputes. Reeves reflected on this legislation later in *State Experiments in New Zealand and Australia* (1902).

Meanwhile, concurrent with the start of the new Ministry, Reeves' second volume of poetry appeared, again in collaboration with Williams. *In Double Harness* is similar in spirit and content to *Colonial Couplets*. There is more cheerful political verse, indicating the kind of issues facing a parliamentary candidate in the 1890s. According to 'Put to the Question', these seem to be Home Rule, crossing Cook's Strait, secular education, the position of Catholics, Temperance, Suffrage, Railways, and the eight-hour day. Like its predecessor, *In Double Harness* also contains some serious, Reeves-penned poems. These include 'An Old Ambassador's Pets', an effective dramatic monologue in heroic couplets that attempts the chilling self-disclosure of Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess'. The shades of other Victorian models – Ruskin and Swinburne, for example – haunt poems like 'The White Convolvulus', which aims to describe the beauties of the New Zealand bush in layers of imagery and a glut of adjectives, culminating in this description of the convolvulus:

> Goblet ethereal swaying clear
> Pale as the stars on a midnight mere,

Thinner than shells that in ocean lie
Or pinion carven of ivory.

After *In Double Harness*, Reeves published little during his time as a Minister, concentrating instead on Ministerial duties. His key labour legislation was enacted in 1894, by which time Ballance was dead and Richard Seddon had become Premier. Relations between the idealistic Reeves and the pragmatic Seddon were somewhat strained, and in 1896, Reeves left New Zealand for the post of Agent-General in London. This was a prestigious appointment, although as a civil servant responsible for trade and representative matters, Reeves' political career was effectively over. This enabled him to return to writing and publishing. His experience of political innovation in New Zealand placed him in demand as a lecturer and writer, and he became friendly with many members of the Fabian Society, including George Bernard Shaw. Though never a member of the Society, a Tract by Reeves on New Zealand's state experiments appeared under Fabian auspices in 1896.

In January 1898, Reeves published *New Zealand and Other Poems*, featuring new and previously published work. The title poem, 'New Zealand', reiterates in rousing tones (Allen Curnow calls it 'windy bombast') the colonial sentiment of New Zealand as a land ripe for development ('See men to the battlefield pressing/To conquer one foe – the stern soil'). In Reeves' mind, as this paean to New Zealand's (Pākehā) people indicates, the forecasted development will accord with the tenets of Reeves-style socialist liberalism:

Though young they are heirs of the ages,
    Though few they are freemen and peers,
Plain workers – yet sure of the wages
    Slow Destiny pays with the years.
Though least they and latest their nation,
    Yet this they have won without sword,
That Woman with Man shall have station,
    And Labour be lord.

Intriguingly, Labour's grand destiny was diluted in later revisions, so that the 'toiler' replaced Labour as lord, while New Zealand lost its destiny to be 'Hope to the world'.

*New Zealand* also contains 'The Passing of the Forest', a piece regularly anthologised in either this or its 1925 version. Once again, its lament at the settlers' destruction of the forest is of greater historic than intrinsically poetic interest. Patrick Evans calls it a 'competent piece of insincerity', and Curnow comments that Reeves here falls 'into a trap set by self-flattery to catch honest sentiment', with the resulting verse 'false' and 'inflated'. Certainly, it lacks much in the way of poetic originality, and it is too wordy and exhortative for contemporary tastes. Still, Reeves' versification is, as usual, sure-footed. There are felicitous passages, too, as in the portrayal of the deforested hills as 'plundered and insulted kings' who, 'Stripped of their robes', have drawn down the clouds to cover themselves.

The poems in *New Zealand* are studded with references to sea and foam, constant reminders to the colonial mind of its distance from the Motherland. A similar sense of colonial remove, verging on deference, emerges in the two history books that Reeves published in 1898. The first, *New Zealand*, is a short volume commissioned for a series on 'The Story of the Empire'. Its successor, *The Long White Cloud*, is Reeves' most successful work. An expanded version of the short book, *The Long White Cloud* established the steady march of a British colonial society as the standard interpretation of New Zealand history in the first half of the twentieth century. It is forthright and generally fair, though its assumption of European racial superiority and its vision of colonial progress are now unpalatable, as is its paternalistic (though always sympathetic) attitude towards Māori. Unquestionably, as Keith Sinclair says, this is 'a New Zealand Liberal view of New Zealand history', which in places reads as 'disguised autobiography'. Yet such bias is inseparable from the book's fascination and its strengths. Reeves' firsthand sketches of political figures and events (particularly those added in the third edition) will outlast the revisionist readings they unquestionably invite.

*The Long White Cloud* is also a book of great stylistic vigour. MacDonald Jackson praises 'the brilliant ironies' of Reeves' prose, in contrast to the 'medley of dreaminess and rant' of his poetry. The book's opening paradoxes, for example, are almost proverbial:

> Though one of the parts of the earth best fitted for man, New Zealand was probably about the last of such lands occupied by the human race. The first European to find it was a Dutch sea-captain who was looking for something else.… It takes its name from a province of Holland to which it does not bear the remotest likeness, and is usually regarded as the antipodes of England, but is not.

This captures the book's energetic, decisive and breezy tone. The writing is engaging, too, with arresting images throughout. Thus New Zealand comprises 'long, wasp-waisted, mountainous islands' (the phrase is from the third edition), while the Continuous Ministry of 1869 to 1891 is compared to the pearly nautilus, with 'respectable sailing and floating powers'. At times, too, Reeves employs his famous ironies to savage effect. For example, the career of James Busby, first British Resident in New Zealand, is 'a prolonged burlesque – a farce without laughter, played by a dull actor in serious earnest'.

After 1898, Reeves' literary output slowed somewhat. He continued as Agent-General until January 1909 (by which time the role had changed to that of 'High Commissioner'), producing two works of note in that time. *State Experiments in New Zealand and Australia* (1902) is a lengthy comparison of the progressive social legislation passed in New Zealand and the Australian colonies during the 1880s and 1890s, laden with statistics and quotation. Despite this, its narration of evolving labour, land and franchise laws (among others) is surprisingly readable. Fast-moving and informative in the customary Reeves style, the book is marred only by an ugly racialism that scars the chapter on labour reform and the final chapter on 'The Exclusion of Aliens and Undesirables'. While largely ignored in Australasia, *State Experiments* was well received in American, European and Russian academic circles. It was reissued by Allen & Unwin in 1923, and Macmillan Australia in 1969.

In 1908, Reeves provided text to accompany paintings of New Zealand by Frank and Walter Wright. *New Zealand* is essentially an entertaining travelogue, stuffed with natural and scenic description, facts about the country, retellings of MĀORI myth, and historical anecdote. Though lacking the serious intent of Reeves' other exilic works, even here he writes to political purpose, promoting New Zealand as a tourist destination, and recommending the reader to take advantage of the excellent Government services for tourists and immigrants.

Though Reeves contemplated a return to New Zealand upon completion of his official duties in 1909, he remained resident in England. He became a director of the National Bank of New Zealand and, through his connections with the Fabians Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Director of the London School of Economics. His involvement at L.S.E. was not entirely successful, exacerbating tensions with London's Fabian community that had first surfaced when his daughter Amber had an affair with H.G. Wells. Though Reeves' star faded somewhat at this time, Amber went on to become a novelist, while Maud Reeves stepped into the literary limelight with her pioneering sociological investigations into the living conditions of working class women. These were published as *Round About a Pound a Week* in 1912.

Apart from new editions of *The Long White Cloud* and miscellaneous articles, Reeves published nothing new until 1925, when he privately printed his collected poems. *The Passing of the Forest and Other Verse* assembles much of his earlier poetry (often substantially revised), together with poems reflecting his newer interests and European location. 'The Mutter of the Guns' was 'written on a Kentish hill-top during the Great War', and gains added poignancy from the fact that Reeves' son, Fabian, was killed in France in 1917. There are Hellenic poems, too, reflecting Reeves' newfound interest in Greek nationalism. New Zealand appears in these last poems, but it is often seen from England. Two poems celebrate the achievement of the 1924 Invincible All Black touring team to Britain, while 'The Dream Imperial', for a Shakespeare tercentenary collection, visualises little volumes of ale-stained

Shakespeare accompanying colonists around the globe, spreading the vision of 'Old England, kind in peace and fierce in war'.

The collection also contains 'A Colonist in His Garden'. Reeves' most well-known poem, this reflection on exile and belonging was first published in the *Monthly Review* in 1902. Its first section comprises a letter written from England to New Zealand, in which the colonist's correspondent insists that, so far from 'Home', surely no one can be content in those 'lonely islands',

> Where men but talk of gold and sheep
> And think of sheep and gold.

With no past, the English correspondent insists, New Zealand is 'set in the rut of commonplace', full of the 'bold aggressive New'. By contrast, England is where 'beauty weds grey Time'. Is the colonist not tempted to return?

The colonist-speaker's answer is one that Reeves, notably, never enacted, though he probably intended otherwise in 1902. To the colonist, England is better as a distant and 'dim romance' than a reality. Having fought 'Nature for a home' and 'made the wilderness to flower', the colonist can not now turn to England, 'forsaking all'. He belongs in his new land, as his defiant caesura proclaims:

> Here am I rooted. Firm and fast
> We men take root who face the blast…

It is easy to scoff at the poem's colonial myths ('We stand where none before have stood'), the fact that the colonist plants his garden with birches and oaks, or its rousing political sentiment of the 1891 Liberal variety:

> 'No art?' Who serve an art more great
> Than we, rough architects of State
> With the old Earth at strife?

Yet the poem evinces genuine feeling in its sense of the colonial task as a vocation, its commitment to the creation of a new society, and also, perhaps, in the wistful glance over the shoulder at the life that might have been.

Reeves' only return to New Zealand was a six month trip in 1925-26. This found its way into a revised edition of his *New Zealand* travel book, but on the whole, his literary output stalled in these last years. He began his unpublished memoirs, distributed loose-leaf printed sheets of new poems to friends (including, movingly, a revision of 'The Mutter of the Guns') and wrote unpublished light verse for his grandchildren, before dying in London in 1932.

Reeves' literary output is impressive in its range. His political and historical writings represent genuine achievement and innovation in New Zealand letters, and are themselves valuable historical documents. As a poet, he largely deserves Curnow's 1960 judgement of the colonial poets as 'ambitious men of action on a diminutive stage, who but for [the] exigencies [of colonial life] might have written nothing anyone would wish to preserve'. Nonetheless, despite its sentimentalism Reeves' poetry surprises with the occasional humorous aside, or admission of frustration or failure. Curnow comments also (1945) that by capturing the conflict of the exiled spirit in his writing, Reeves helped set the literary problems for the next generation of New Zealand writers. For that at least, his writing remains important.

**LINKS**

1966 Encyclopaedia of New Zealand
New Zealand Electronic Text Centre
*The Long White Cloud* at Project Gutenberg
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**PAPERS**

Many of William Pember Reeves' papers are held at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Letters from Reeves to G. H. Scholefield are also held in The Alexander Turnbull Library's collection of Scholefield's papers.