

A Tradition of Māori Translation

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At the moment we, in Aotearoa, are witnessing a social shift in attitude towards te reo Māori. The Māori language is seen, heard and spoken more now than it has been for a long time in the history of our country. This is, for the most part, due to the efforts of the last four to five decades that were aimed at revitalising and reinstating the language within our society. An integral part of this development is the work of translation, Māori-English and English-Māori. Those, like myself, working in this field are continuing a long-standing tradition that was born from the need to communicate with each other, Māori and Pākehā. In order to honor the past as I move forward in my own work I have selected key translations from this tradition. In looking closely at these translations and the people who produced these works I will highlight the lessons that I have learnt, the things to remember and the notes-to-self that may or may not be new knowledge, nonetheless, they are things one can consider in the work of translation regardless of the language.



In 1769, Captain James Cook made landfall near Gisborne (Grenfell Price, 1971), aside from a very brief encounter with Dutch explorer Abel Tasman in 1642, this was the first time Māori had encountered another language dissimilar to te reo Māori (Wilson, 2016). In order to communicate and survive a number of early settlers learned to speak Māori, one missionary by the name of Thomas Kendall was particularly interested in the language. Accompanied by two Northland chiefs, Hongi Hika and Waikato, he travelled to Cambridge University in 1820 to work with linguist Professor Samuel Lee on the compilation of a Māori grammar, their work shaped the orthographic foundations of written Maori (Binney, 1990). It's unsurprising that seven years later, in 1827, the first ever published Māori translation were Scriptures from the *Holy Bible*. The translation was largely the work of missionary brothers Rev. Henry and Rev. William Williams, who were known more intimately by Northland Māori as Karuwhā (Four Eyes) and Parata (Brother) (Laughton, 1947). It was this work that initiated the tradition of Māori translation.

A renowned part of this tradition that can't be overlooked is the translation of the Treaty of Waitangi, which was completed under



candlelight two nights before the signing on the 6th February 1840 by the aforementioned Rev. Henry Williams and his son Edward Marsh Williams (Fisher, 1990). Both father and son had been living in Northland for seventeen years at the time and had an intimate relationship with local Māori and an in-depth knowledge of the Māori language and culture. Perhaps this is the reason they favored certain words over others in their translation, knowing their Māori landlords would not sign had a term like *te mana katoa* (complete power) been used instead of *te kāwanatanga katoa* (complete governance) to mean “all rights and powers of sovereignty”. The word *kāwanatanga*, a new term and concept to Māori society did not encapsulate fully the meaning of the English text, things might have been different if the word *mana* or another similar word familiar to Māori had been used. Who’s to know? However, this leads me to my **first lesson learnt**, the golden rule in non-fiction translation, don’t omit any ideas from the original text or submit any ideas into the translation and if it can be avoided, don’t rush.

In 1854, the same Edward Marsh Williams translated the first complete novel in Māori, *Te Haerenga o Te Manene* (*The Pilgrims Progress*). Generations of the Williams family made a significant contribution to the



history of translation and the ongoing survival of te reo Māori including the first substantial Māori-to-English dictionary, which is still used widely today. In 1916, Wī Rangihuna the editor of *Te Kōpara*, a Māori newspaper, wrote a lengthy tribute acknowledging this contribution. He praised in particular the work and scholarship of William Leonard Williams stating that there is no one who speaks Māori better than the Bishop and that his command of the language is far better than that of the people whose language it is (Rangihuna, 1916). This brings me to my **second point, note to self**, if ever looking for a translator always seek a recommendation, keeping in mind the source of that recommendation. It would be preferable if it were similar to Wī Rangihuna's and came from someone of his position, an eloquent and proficient speaker in both Māori and English. This may seem like common sense but it is commonly overlooked.

The thirty-four Māori newspapers that were in print between 1842 and 1932 hold one of the largest collections of translated materials from English-Māori and Māori-English. These newspapers were a vehicle of communication between Māori tribes and Māori and Pākehā and a testament to the bilingual society that existed in Aotearoa for over one



hundred years. The tradition of translation wasn't confined solely to the necessity of communication, like today it was also an interest. The Native Land Court was one of the key products of the 1865 Native Lands Act. Judge Charles Davis, known as Hāre Rēweti, who resided in the Auckland area was exceptionally skilled in the language; he produced the first known Māori translations of Shakespeare that were published in 1884. Here is just one extract:

Twelfth Night.—ACT II.—Scene 5.
GREATNESS.
Some are born great, some achieve
greatness, and some have greatness thrust
upon them.

Twelfth Night.—ACT II.—Scene 5.
HĪKA, NUI (GREATNESS).
Whanau ai etahi, ko nui tonu ;
Whai atu i a nui, ehinu, ka whiwhi noa ;
Rere aurara mai a nui ki
Etahi tu tangata.

(Taken from Te Korimako, April 15, 1884, p. 8)

I marvel at the depth of his translations but what I admire the most are his modest words that precede the publication, he writes, “various emendations are doubtless necessary, but I must place this feeble rendering before critical Māori readers for what it is worth” (Davis, 1884, p. 8). This brings me to my **third point to remember**, I too should invite



feedback and advice from those who I consider to be more learned than I am in order to grow and develop in my own work.

At a young age we, in Aotearoa, learn to sing the most notable translation into Māori, our national anthem, the poem, *God Defend New Zealand*. In 1878, Governor George Grey requested Judge Thomas Smith translate the five verses of the anthem (Swarbrick, 2012). Restricted to the music of the English version, Smith completed a sense-for-sense translation rather than a word-for-word translation, which you can see below. The words differ in the Māori version, however it interprets the spirit of the English text as well as containing a rolling rhyme in Māori, no easy feat indeed! **Lesson four** – I’m reminded here that sense-for-sense and word-for-word translation practices have their places and depending on the genre of the original text and the brief given it’s up to the me, the translator, to determine when, where, how and to what extent I use either of the two while ultimately aiming to stay true to the original text.



English "God Defend New Zealand"	Māori "Aotearoa"	Māori "Aotearoa" translated
1. God of Nations at Thy feet, In the bonds of love we meet, Hear our voices, we entreat, God defend our free land. Guard Pacific's triple star From the shafts of strife and war, Make her praises heard afar, God defend New Zealand.	1. <i>E Ihowā Atua,</i> <i>O ngā iwi mātou rā</i> <i>Āta whakarangona;</i> <i>Me aroha noa</i> <i>Kia hua ko te pai;</i> <i>Kia tau tō atawhai;</i> <i>Manaakitia mai</i> <i>Aotearoa</i>	1. O Lord, God, Of all people Listen to us, Cherish us May good flourish, May your blessings flow Defend Aotearoa

(Taken from Wikipedia, God Defend New Zealand)

Nearing the 20th century, English became the dominant language of the country as the Pākehā population surpassed the Māori population (Pool, 2011). The need to communicate in both languages through the press, in the courtroom and in other formal settings grew less prominent and so did the tradition of translation. All of the translations I have spoken to this far were completed by Pākehā, as I honor them and their contribution to this tradition I also want to acknowledge their Māori counterparts, many of whom haven't been recorded in history, who surely taught and guided them in their work.

In the early 20th century a new generation of Māori translators emerged who included the likes of Sir Apirana Ngata, Kīngi Tahiwī and many others. This generation were native Māori speakers who, for the most



part, were formally educated in English. There are a number of people from this cohort who contributed substantially to the tradition of Māori translation in their time, however the two I am drawn to are Rēweti Kōhere of Ngāti Porou and Pei Te Hurinui Jones of Ngāti Maniapoto. Both Kōhere and Jones worked professionally as translators and interpreters but their most celebrated works were completed out of interest. Kōhere wrote himself that he found it enjoyable translating the literature of the Pākehā intellects (Kohere, 1931, p. 71). I'm yet to discover another whose work exceeds that of Kōhere's in a genre that is considered one of the most difficult forms of language to translate – poetry. Here are just three examples from his array of work:

“ All that glisters is not gold.”
“ Ehara i te koura anake te mea kanapa.”

**“ A little learning is a dangerous thing,
Drink deep or taste not the Pierian spring.”**
**“ Kia tupato ki te matauranga pakupaku,
Kia hohonu te inu ki te kore kau e pa atu ki
te puna o te matauranga.”**

**“ 'Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.”**
**“ Pai atu te aroha ahakoa kihai i tutuki,
I te kore rawa e aroha.”**

(Taken from Te Toa Takitini, October 1, 1924, p. 117)



Kōhere also carried on the task of Charles Davis translating Shakespeare, however it was Jones who was the first person to render an entire play into Māori. It is often said that Jones completed this translation in 1945, however there are extracts of the translated play published in *Te Toa Takitini* in 1926, stating he had already completed the full translation (Bennet, 1926). The first stage performance of this work, *Te Tangata Whairawa o Wēniti (The Merchant of Venice)* was directed by Don Selwyn many years later in 1985 and a cinema version was produced in 2002. Jones went on to translate *Julius Caesar*, *Othello* and Edward FitzGerald's *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. **Note-to-self number five** – In considering the rich legacy left behind by these two elders I'm reminded how important it is in this field, where one can easily be swamped with formal documents, to maintain a sense of passion and excitement for translation through projects of interest.

Māori translation became stagnant nearing the later half of the 20th century. Finally, in 1987 the Māori Language Act was passed declaring te reo Māori an official language of Aotearoa, which resulted in the establishment of Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo Māori (The Māori language Commission). This Act was repealed and succeeded by Te Ture Mō Te

Here you can see two methods this group followed in translating words into Māori. The first three words have been created by amalgamating two Māori words based on the meaning or purpose of the original English word, whereas the fourth word is an old word that has been carried into a new context as it has a similar function. The words this group created gave the Māori language community the capacity to continue speaking in their everyday activities, in doing this they also left an example for future generations to follow when challenged with creating new words. Due to the growth of the language this task has largely shifted to the Māori language community, take the word ‘selfie’ for example. The translation of this word emerged organically from within the community. In fact, there are three words that are used today:

- ahau-i – self-i
- kiriāhua – image of self
- matatahi – one face

Having three words for one word and no overarching authority to quality control is concerning to some, however I’m not too worried. It is a welcoming sign of development and in time the preferred word, hopefully

the most apt, will be preferred and used by the Māori speaking community and the others will fade. This leads me to **note-to-self six**, follow the examples that have been set in place by prior generations when creating words, something that teachers and parents are tasked with on a regular basis.

Too often, in the discourse about te reo Māori revitalisation, we focus on where we are yet to be and what we are yet to achieve. However, if we look back over the last 31 years, since the passing of the Māori Language Act, we can see how substantial the growth has been and how Māori translation and interpretation has contributed to that growth. Alongside bilingual signage in public areas, it is becoming normal to have the option to choose to complete a survey, a voting form, an assignment or even an eftpos transaction in te reo Māori and now more than ever there is a growing variety of learning tools, games, toys, resources, literature film and broadcasts that have been translated into Māori. This is something to be proud of and celebrate.

In 2016, I approached Māori author, Witi Ihimaera and asked if I could translate one of his publications into Māori. At the time, unbeknown to



me, he was working on a short story about the Battle of Ōrākau, which was fought within my own tribal area in 1864. After some deliberation, he agreed. It was decided that we would publish a bilingual short story based on the events of the battle that could be used as a resource in schools to help teach New Zealand history and te reo Māori. However, as Witi continued to research and write the story grew and so did my translation task. In 2017, we published *Sleeps Standing: Moetū*, the first English-Māori bilingual novel with parallel texts. Our aspiration was fulfilled thanks to Waikato-Tainui who distributed the book to schools in the Waikato area with teacher notes

In order to conclude my notes-to-self I want to draw on what I have learnt from this project. My work, like a number of other active Māori translators is spread across a number of areas. This is due partly to the high demand in work and the small number of qualified translators. In completing this project I confirmed the area I want to specialise in – education. **Lesson seven** – find an area of expertise. As the Māori translators community continues to grow and develop this progression will inevitably happen over time as key individuals gravitate towards their own specialised areas. I believe it is a necessary move in order to



maintain a standard of quality in Māori translation in the various sectors we operate in.

In Māori culture it is important to acknowledge the past as we move forward. The tradition of translation that we uphold today was born out of the need to communicate between Māori and Pākehā. Communication remains at the heart of our work but the reach of that communication has grown to inform, to educate, to entertain, to share stories, histories and culture through a Māori lens and empower and transform Māori speaking communities today and in the future.

Glossary

Aotearoa	New Zealand
te reo Māori	the Māori language
Pākehā	New Zealander of European descent
mana	power, authority
kāwanatanga	governance

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