Reviews


These two books deal with the emergence of Rua Kenana as a prophet and leader for the Maori people in the Urewera district in the early twentieth century, his inspiring of the hopes and energies of a thousand or more followers among the Tuhoe and the enmity of others, his efforts to create farming communities which met the challenges of modernity from bases in tradition, the violent police raid on his settlement at Maungapohatu in 1916, the subsequent Supreme Court trials and the prophet’s effort to retrieve something from the disaster until his death in 1937. The subject is of great importance not just to students of things Maori but to the mainstream of New Zealand history—that is assuming ‘mainstream’ to include the central importance of race relations, the need to understand the deeper currents of Maori culture, the pressures which provoke Maori separatism and non-conformity and the sad consequences of attempting to secure conformity by heavy-handed law enforcement.

The two books agree on main lines of interpretation. They show Rua to be no saint but a remarkable man. His self-promotion as a new Christ, his messages attuned to his sense of the people’s need, were the bases of renewed hope and a release of energies among people suffering from cultural dislocation, ill-health, threatened landlessness and self-doubt. His goals were forward-looking—to help the Tuhoe to share in the fruits of the market economy by systematic production on their own land. At its height the community of ‘Ihiraira’ (Israelites) at Maungapohatu, with its attention to health and cleanliness, and its surrounding herds and cultivations, was a fine experiment in adaptation to modernity, from bases in tradition. For, as Binney in particular shows, Rua fits with the succession of prophetic leaders such as Papahurihia, Te Whiti, Te Kooti, and later Ratana, who deliberately challenged the pre-existing leadership and attacked the tapu which upheld it, substituting a new tapu system which protected the new leadership and enabled the community to confront new tasks. Historical records suggest that this kind of activity is ubiquitous in Maori and other Oceanic societies; most of the prophets and prophecies are of fleeting and very local validity but, when certain combinations of community need and leadership ability arise, the movement, as in Rua’s case, becomes of much larger significance. In this context Webster’s point about the movement creating the leader as much as the leader creating the movement is important.
Although some Tuhoe themselves judged him harshly, as a self-seeker and deceiver, and his movement was, from the outset, troubled by factionalism and leadership rivalry, the worst assault was from the government. Both books show the responsibility of local law officers for harassing Rua, and of ministers in Wellington for ordering the raid on Maungapohatu by armed police, before the possibilities of a negotiated settlement of differences had been exhausted. They show also how the maladroitness (to say the least) of Police Commissioner John Cullen led to the outbreak of gunfire, the deaths of two Maori (including Rua’s son) and other casualties on both sides. As if that were not enough, the ruinous cost of legal proceedings wrecked the community economically—another damning indictment of how western law can be the ruin of poor men.

The worst casualties, however, were tolerance, pluralism and moderation, victims of a dull settler ethnocentrism, magnified by the fervours of the World War. Pakeha New Zealanders who, with much justice, pride themselves on easy-going and cordial personal relations with individual Maoris, might well reflect on how this attitude can give way to paroxysms of self-righteous intolerance when Maoris, collectively or institutionally, appear to depart from the mainstream.

Both books rely on the techniques of oral history, as well as documentary history, drawing heavily upon interviews with numerous participants, both Maori and Pakeha. Both use a plenitude of contemporary photographs, to excellent effect. Both are printed in big-page format, attractively produced and reasonably priced. These strategies should have the highly desirable effect of bringing serious studies of Maori-Pakeha relations within the ken of the general public, which is much in need of them.

Yet the books differ sharply in quality. Binney (who, all credit allowed to the collective research for Mihaia, bore the most onerous responsibility of writing the text) has a sure and certain touch. Her analysis, though briefer, pushes deeper than Webster’s. Her observations are precise and sensitive, couched in economical but lively and attractive prose. The complexities of Tuhoe society, and of the impinging Pakeha society too, are laid out clearly and the interpretation of Rua finely related to them. She has a full account of Rua’s activity from 1918 to 1937 and the settlements he founded other than that at Maungapohatu, whereas Webster is very brief on this period. She seeks to avoid being judgmental about Rua but (fortunately, because she ought not to evade a historical appraisal which is not the same as moral judgment) she does end with two succinct pages embodying Maori criticisms of Rua, and summarising the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the movement.

There is a superb location map detailing numerous small settlements referred to, itself a product of difficult research. The authors’ skills as historians have also enabled them to track down many more documentary sources (and photographs) than Webster uses. Moreover they use them with the skill of well-trained historians, highly sensitive to their social meaning. The difference in quality in the two books thus rests on much more than the fact that Binney and her colleagues were able to get a transcript of the Supreme Court trial and Webster was not.

There is plenty of gold in Webster’s book too—detailed, vivid material largely drawn from his informants. Unfortunately he has contrived to bury it in a good deal of dross. This is largely because, in the fashion of social anthropology, he has sought to use the local study to create a model for comparison with other millenarian movements. Before reaching Rua and the Tuhoe the reader has to work through some eighty pages mainly devoted to Webster’s personal inspira-
tion, his field-work experiences and his informants, his theoretical orientations and some general geographical background apparently intended for overseas readers—all written with a very heavy parading of the first person singular.

I am not convinced of the worth of all this. Some of the discussion of his informants (rather fewer than Binney and her colleagues contacted) is interesting but much is inconsequential. Though he meant his discussion to be in part a tribute to them, his comments are sometimes donnish and a trifle condescending. Rich as it no doubt seemed to Webster it would perhaps have been better kept private, save for formal acknowledgements.

With regard to theory Webster admits to being a *bricoleur*. Indeed he is. He starts out honestly enough with the goal of stating his theoretical bias, but quickly deluges us with a welter of general propositions. Thus we get a dose of Levi-Strauss’s structuralism, Neil Smelser’s structural functionalism, Freud on the unconscious, Burridge and others on millenarianism, Marx on praxis, Weber on charisma and many others besides. Once again we meet stock-in-trade concepts like relative deprivation and anomie.

It is all too general, loose and ill-related really to inform the data, or to permit the testing of generalisations by the data. Another author could have come up with a different list and we would not be much the wiser. Why not, for example, toss in Clifford Geertz, or Berger and Luckman, or some other theorist whose general propositions fit roughly or in part to Rua and New Zealand society? The attaching of academical labels and great names and the construction of loose theoretical models do not necessarily add anything; indeed they too often tend to evade explanation rather than provide it. Such unfortunately seems to be the tendency of much social anthropology and ‘Maori studies’. In terms of helping us understand Rua and his people can any of it match, for example, Binney’s remarkable exposition of the symbols and insignia used by the movement on its buildings and flags?

On particulars too Webster can be unsubtle to the point of error. Given the availability of detailed studies of the flexibility of Maori social structure and leadership it is surprising that his concepts of ‘rangatira’ (p.86) and ‘chief’ (p.103) are so rigid. Personal names are mis-spelt—(E. W. Tuckey for E. W. Puckey, p.264; F. E. Hamlyn for F. E. Hamlin, p.99; *Saunders of the River* for *Sanders of the River*, p.268). Should not *papatu* land be *papatu* (or *papatupu*) land (p.138)? There are occasional lapses in grammar and punctuation. On p.157 Webster creates an image of Maori and Pakeha contract labour toiling in the ‘intense’ heat of summer, bare torsos running with sweat ‘while the sun burned down remorselessly from an incandescent sky’; it is a wildly inaccurate description of outdoor contract work in the benign Bay of Plenty summers—a work which, though hard, was and is actually preferred by Maori then and now to avoid becoming wage slaves. In many such small ways Webster shows a lack of touch as regards rural New Zealand and its people.

Generally his prose, like Binney’s, is lively and readable. Sometimes it is eloquent and moving. But it is also marred by Webster’s persistent self-consciousness. The phrase ‘my fieldwork’ (or ‘my theories’) obtrudes repeatedly. Obvious points are laboured and even fresh and valuable points lose much by repetition.

These features—for which the publishers as well as Webster must bear responsibility—are unnecessary and sad, because they spoil an otherwise rich account. As it is Webster’s most detailed and precise work—on the land laws and their
operation about the turn of the century, the police raid itself, and the trial—remain valuable. It is clear too that Webster is a man of sympathy and understanding towards Rua and the Tuhoe. It is a pity that he did not write a shorter, less pretentious book.

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The abolition of provincial government in 1876 was followed by an epidemic of new counties and boroughs in New Zealand. In recent years those local bodies have produced a rash of centennial histories. While often valuable as digests of recondite detail, collectively the usually handsome volumes display improvements in New Zealand book design more than advances in the research and composition of local regional history.

But *A History of Tauranga County* does mark an advance. Eschewing ‘council history’, Dr Stokes treats the county as a region and plots its colonization and development in a clear and comprehensive manner. The author is a geographer and the skills and perceptions of her profession are very evident. Though the country is her primary focus, the region is functional, not merely formal: the trains do not vanish the moment they cross the county boundary. The urban areas, frequently ignored in county histories, are placed firmly in their regional context. Dr Stokes offers plenty of facts and figures for those who like precision (say, social studies pupils) but the detail is always subordinated to the exposition of general themes. Her summary of early industrial projects (p.281) is a fine example of her capacity to draw together apparently disparate subjects. Only in the final chapters is there any unwonted impression of discursiveness, the result of incorporating some particularly lengthy quotations.

Most striking are the maps, sixty-six of them altogether. Many embody original research. Older maps (with two exceptions) have been redrawn to ensure clarity. No other New Zealand local or regional history remotely approaches the cartographic excellence of this work.

Unlike many local histories, in which undue space is given to the Heroic Age of the Founding Fathers, this book is generally well-proportioned. For example, the battle of Gate Pa is completed in three sentences (p.80); the portrait of the missionary A.N. Brown is a balanced miniature (p.48); and the contribution of G.V. Stewart, Tauranga’s Wakefield, receives succinct and judicious analysis (pp.158-65). The behaviour of individuals is always carefully related to contemporary circumstances. Thus the chicanery of the government land purchase officer J.C. Young and his interpreter Abraham Warbrick is not sensationalized but shown as broadly consonant with the tendencies of the Land Court and European attitudes towards the Maoris.

For rural areas where sizable runs predominate and the total number of properties is moderate, the local historian can readily produce an account which is both comprehensive and intimate. The task is much more difficult in farming districts