

Reviews

Maori Origins and Migrations, M.P.K. Sorrenson, Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, Auckland 1979. 102 pp. N.Z. price: \$5.85.

THE DOMINANCE of literary historians in recounting the history of ideas in New Zealand has disguised the one really sustained debate that has occurred here. This is the exhaustive debate concerning the origins and racial character of the Maori. From Cook to the modern anthropologists, the subject has attracted innumerable intellectuals, both learned scientists and imaginative cranks, and quite a number with a place in both groups. Although foreign influences upon this debate were great, the dialogue has been essentially a local one, which spawned an important local institution, the Polynesian Society.

This long quest for the whence of the Maori is the theme of Professor Sorrenson's exciting new book. The twists of the debate make for a fascinating narrative, which is told with clarity and precision. In crude terms there are three main stages to the debate. The careful observations and suggestions of Cook were followed by the missionary viewpoint of the early nineteenth century that the Maoris were of Semitic origin, the sons of Shem and one of the lost tribes of Israel. The second period from about 1860 to 1930 forms the heart of Sorrenson's tale, for it was then that the myth of the Aryan Maori was established. The methods used to establish this belief were varied. There was Edward Tregear who used linguistic evidence to link the Maori with Indo-European culture and who found 'survivals' of Hindu animals like the cow within Maori language. There was S. Percy Smith who, with the support of Elsdon Best, used Maori genealogies from oral testimony, to date the arrival of the Maori. These three men—Tregear, Smith and Best—were the moving spirits behind the Polynesian Society founded officially in 1892. The debate included other interesting figures bringing their own techniques and imaginations. A.S. Thomson, the army surgeon who drew upon craniometry; Julius Von Haast whose excavations of the moa suggested to him the existence of an earlier Palaeolithic group of moa-hunters; and John Macmillan Brown who resigned his Professorship at Canterbury in 1895 (after arriving here in 1874, not 1879 as Sorrenson claims in an uncharacteristic error) to devote himself to the task of tracing the Aryans into the Pacific via their megalithic remains. It is true that Haast and Macmillan Brown were widely criticized; and even the speculations of Tregear and Smith received some healthy scepticism, most notably from the Nelson lawyer, A.S. Atkinson, and Bishop Herbert Williams. But by the 1920s the central Pakeha myths about the Maori had been firmly established: that Maoris were of Caucasian or Aryan stock and probably of Indian origin; that the first discoverer of New Zealand was Kupe in

925; and that the Great Fleet had arrived in 1350 to drive out the Melanesian Moriori to the Chatham Islands. The third period of the story is less romantic. The arrival of academic archaeologists and anthropologists like H.D. Skinner, Roger Duff, and D.R. Simmons, brought a more empirical and vigorous methodology that gradually chipped away at the old myths. In a final ironical twist which Professor Sorrenson brings out effectively, the old myths, constructed by Pakehas for Pakeha purposes, entered Maori culture—at first among the Maori intellectuals like Buck and Ngata, and then within the ritual of the marae.

For historians of race relations Professor Sorrenson's book will serve to give a new meaning to familiar material; for intellectual historians it will be more central, an indispensable beginning. But it is only a beginning. Given the importance of the subject, this book is extremely thin—a mere eighty pages of text. In particular the context of the debate is barely explored. What was said emerges very clearly, but not the why, the animus behind the ideas. Far more, for example, is needed on the racial and social context of these ideas. At the end of the nineteenth century the social theorists of the western world were drawing tighter distinctions between races; but in New Zealand all the energy of the anthropologists went into providing a racial bridge between Pakeha and Maori. We need far more explanation for this than provided by Sorrenson; and the whole effort to give the Maori ethnological status as an 'honorary white' must surely be seen in terms of wider attempts to endow the Maori with the special virtues of the English people. While the legend of the Great Fleet was turning the Maori into great seamen, the study of Maori mythology was presenting them as great poets, and the legend of the great Maori warrior was also being established. The purpose and the wider impact of the debate on Maori origins as it flowed through into popular culture thus need further exploration.

Second, more is needed on the social context of the individual ethnologists themselves. Of what social class were the ethnologists and what were their occupations; what was the composition of the Polynesian Society; what effect did employment in a museum or in a university college have upon a writer's thought? Finally we need more on the international context of this debate. Professor Sorrenson is fully aware of this context and realizes that the New Zealand ethnologists were eager disciples of the British writers, men like Tylor, Lubbock, Spencer, Frazer and Max Muller. But too often he does not make important distinctions between, for example, Muller's diffusionism and Tylor's emphasis on independent invention; nor does the intellectual significance of certain New Zealand investigations become fully obvious. For example, the late nineteenth-century effort to establish a monotheistic religion for the Maori surely gained urgency from Tylor's view that monotheism was the highest 'civilised' stage of religious evolution.

These comments do not of course affect the importance of this volume. They are simply the reflections of the reader who, stimulated by Professor Sorrenson's efforts, would like some more.

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