

Review Article

From Your Dear Friend

Na To Hoa Aroha, From Your Dear Friend. The Correspondence Between Sir Apirana Ngata and Sir Peter Buck 1925-50. Edited by M.P.K. Sorrenson in 3 volumes. Auckland University Press in association with the Alexander Turnbull Library Endowment Trust and the Maori Purposes Fund Board, Auckland, 1986, 1987, 1988, pp.269, 284, 296. NZ price: \$134.95.

THE LETTERS exchanged by Sir Apirana Ngata and Sir Peter Buck over 50 years ago are very pertinent to the rethinking of New Zealand's past that occurred in 1990. The two were close friends who maintained their correspondence so as to keep each other up to date on both their actions and their thinking while they were many geographical and cultural miles apart. The letters cover the period from 1925 to 1950, the later years of the lives of both Ngata and Buck, when both were in their prime.

For the work of retrieving the manuscript material, editing it, and organizing it into three volumes we must be very grateful to Professor Sorrenson. Without the letters we would not have such ready access to the influential ideas that Ngata and Buck have bequeathed to us. The editor provides an introduction that gives some biographical details on the two men and a brief overview of the New Zealand setting at that time. The photographs in each volume give a visual setting for both men. Comments in Maori in the letters have been translated in footnotes, but some Maori words which are repeated frequently have not been translated each time, which may cause problems for some readers unfamiliar with the language. Very brief biographical details of the men mentioned in the letters are also included but are not so useful to those who are unfamiliar with personalities in New Zealand history. It is unfortunate that Edwin Burrows' name is misspelt in the last two volumes as he was a close colleague of Buck's at the Bishop Museum, and visited New Zealand to assist Ngata with recording Maori music. The production in three volumes, with an index at the end of the third volume, was an inevitable editorial decision with 174 letters to be included. The cover of the volumes is the design used by the Maori Purposes Fund Board.

The letters offer four main contributions to New Zealand history. They provide comment on current events particularly in New Zealand where Ngata as a member of Parliament and Minister of Native Affairs was very close to the action. They also provide the thinking of these two men as they undertook major endeavours for the Polynesian people, especially the Maori tribes. Ngata's main concern was to re-establish Maori tribes on their land, while Buck was a participant observer in several Polynesian societies as a member of the Bishop Museum (Hawaii) research programme in anthropology in Polynesia. Buck was also invited to spend a year lecturing in anthropology at Yale University, and subsequently returned to the Bishop Museum to become its Director. The two men also exchanged views on the contributions anthropology could make to ordering

their own perceptions, to furthering the in-depth knowledge of the Polynesian heritage, as well as commenting on the use of Pakeha pre-determined categories, as they both sought to move away from the imposition of Pakeha culture forms on 'our people' (I, p.123). Third, the letters contain a wealth of comments on how these two men saw themselves as Maori in relation to other Maori, Polynesians and Pakeha in both New Zealand and beyond; by their emphasis on tribal consciousness 'we are recovering a tribal, if not a racial pride. History may record it as a cardinal error that we postponed the evolution of a race' (I, p.163). Fourthly, the historiographic contribution needs comment: these letters have been left by men coming from a strong oral tradition. For that reason alone, if for none of the others, the correspondence is innovative and of interest to historians within and beyond New Zealand's shores.

Ngata's own strong pride in being Ngati Porou and a member of 'the greatest Polynesian race' (I, p.75), a heritage that he shared with Buck as a Maori, is one theme that runs throughout their correspondence. They underline the necessity they felt for the Maori of 'warding off the wrong doings of the pakeha' (I, pp.84-5). This could best be achieved by a commitment to demonstrate the superiority of the Polynesian race. They both saw their writing as a philosophical exposé of how Maori society had evolved in a Polynesian context. They reacted against the imposition of Pakeha culture forms 'on our people', yet had misgivings about whether 'any native [is] capable of analysing his own thought processes' (I, p.123). Ngata fully recognized the contribution Buck would make to the wider intellectual world 'as the representative of primitive man relying on your own instincts' (I, p.91), while he himself would continue to work at home in a political framework for his own people.

Ngata's main work was land reforms and land consolidation for Maori people. This was possible only because of the tremendous respect he had earned for himself from his fellow politicians and other influential Pakeha. He used his legal training to good effect to present a coherent and convincing case, which enabled him to obtain significant sums of money to put Maori back on their land. But his was not predominantly an economic goal; he saw the re-establishment of Maori on their land as a crucial step towards reviving Maori tribal consciousness (II, pp.23, 25-27, II, p.146), in an era when acculturation and assimilation were the popular Pakeha concepts.

As Minister of Native Affairs Ngata was able to be more effective in promoting his native development schemes (II, p.140), an endeavour in which Buck was supportive. They both had a vision of days when that Ministry would become a Ministry of Polynesian Affairs, to bring in Rarotonga and Samoa, and thus encompass the Polynesian heritage to which Ngata was committed to giving greater dignity. He recognized that relations between New Zealand and Samoa had been soured by the way the Mau rebellion had been handled, an issue that he labelled as 'bad for New Zealand's image overseas' (II, p.104).

In addition to this practical work Ngata had a strong philosophical commitment to show the world how Maori tribal organization had developed and demonstrate its pride of place amongst other Polynesian groups. His ideas and his written papers have thus proved to be a major contribution to ethnology and anthropological understanding. He gained much of his inspiration and confidence in his ideas about the evolution of the Maori 'race' and its particular forms of social organization from Buck, who had the formal training in anthropology. Ngata aimed to use 'the background of Maori society and culture against which to throw the kindred material of other branches of the race I think that it [is] necessary to record the local systems before we can deduce the Polynesian kaupapa' (II, p.73). This view clearly placed him in the forefront of two major dimensions of anthropology, comparative ethnography, and ethnological reconstruction, while he was also an excellent example of one of the first indigenous applied anthropologists.

One means Ngata suggested to give Polynesian issues greater prominence in the

politics of New Zealand was to institute some anthropological training for colonial jobs (II, p.104). He and Buck both strongly supported the establishment of anthropology in New Zealand, but that took another 20 years to accomplish. In their letters they evaluate critically the contributions of the various anthropologists working in New Zealand at that time in terms of their potential contributions both to pragmatic and sympathetic work with the Maori and Polynesian community and to the wider theoretical issues which they saw New Zealand offering to the wider anthropological world. This commitment to applied anthropology predates much of the work elsewhere in the world that was developed out of the Second World War. Yet again they were ahead of their time.

Buck's commitment was to the more theoretical aims of anthropology. Having graduated from Otago Medical School and having practised medicine in the New Zealand health service, he saw the research programme in Polynesian anthropology at the Bishop Museum in Hawaii as the opportunity he was seeking to commit himself full-time to the discipline (I, p.42). Under the directorship of Dr Gregory, the Bishop Museum research programme concentrated on gathering detailed ethnographic data from a number of Polynesian societies, using anthropologists from Yale and other American universities. Buck was thus a major addition to the group, working with Edwin Burrows, Ralph Linton, Frank Stimson, Kenneth Emory and others. Some of them were away in the 'field' so their paths crossed very literally, but he welcomed the cross-filtration of ideas, and the assured publication of his work that the Bishop Museum had instituted through its Bulletin series. The whole experience there strengthened his conviction that his own Polynesian background gave him advantages over his non-Polynesian colleagues.

His training as an anthropologist was thus strongly influenced by anthropologists at Yale, such as Clark Wissler, who clearly directed Buck's interests towards considering Polynesia as a culture area. In addition his exposure through Sapir to the ideas of comparative linguistics gave him additional insights about using his skills in the Maori language in order to conduct field research and understand the wider range of meanings within the Polynesian context. Buck's concern was to place Maori tribal organization in the context of a Polynesian heritage for a wider Pakeha audience. His very detailed accounts of the material culture evidence, such as house styles, canoe construction, household equipment, weaponry etc., drawn from a number of Polynesian societies, provided the base on which to build a broader picture of the Polynesian culture area: 'At the end of it, the Polynesians should be the best recorded race of any of the tinted races of mankind. It is too big and important a study for us to neglect having a share in it' (I, p.47).

His Maori language proved an invaluable tool in fieldwork in Aitutaki, Samoa, Tongareva, Tuamotus, Mangareva and later Kapingamarangi. It enabled him to obtain detailed descriptive material in a very short time, an accomplishment his Pakeha colleagues could not achieve. He published monographs on each of these societies with detailed drawings of the craft techniques. While living in Hawaii he also recorded the arts and crafts there; this work was published posthumously. He was constantly comparing myths that he collected throughout Polynesia against his own knowledge of Maori myths. He integrated these into his monograph *Vikings of the Sunrise*, the text of which had been delivered as a series of lectures in anthropology during his year at Yale. Thus he, and to some extent Ngata, were ahead of their time in suggesting the value of phenomenological analysis at a time when anthropology was very much focused on the objective approach of science.

Buck recognized even at that time the need to consider the material objects not just as end products, but rather 'to recognize human psychology and social institutions that created the material expressions of culture' (III, p.104). He wanted to complete these studies of individual Polynesian societies 'so that I can start on the real job of making

studies of Polynesia as a whole' (III, p.179). He produced seven ethnographies, a number which places him along with Raymond Firth and Margaret Mead in the Pacific anthropological world. Ngata was very supportive of Buck's writing and was constantly urging him to complete the piece of work before him so he could get on with the next piece; he recognized that ethnographic analysis was easier for Buck (I, p.102), but saw that they could both benefit from this. They provided stimulation for one another as well as the support necessary in their chosen fields isolated from like thinkers.

They saw that they were breaking new ground, and sought to encourage improved understanding of Maori and Polynesian culture by appointing a trained anthropologist to work in New Zealand to build up the discipline on both the practical and theoretical sides. They envisaged anthropology contributing both to a theoretical overview of Polynesia and to the practical training of public servants to work in the Polynesian community (II, p.110). Despite their hopes that Felix Keesing might take on such a position in the 1930s, the University of Auckland did not appoint an anthropologist until 1950 when Ralph Piddington started the department there, some 20 years after Buck and Ngata had first discussed the idea.

Buck was also ahead of his time in bringing a dynamic view to the structure of Polynesian society, such changes over time being not always for the better. The intrusion of western influences was all too familiar to him and Ngata as Maori, who had suffered the loss of their land and much of their language as well as some understanding of the importance of their tribal heritage. Whereas other members of the Bishop Museum ethnographic team included a brief overview of what was known about the pre-contact history of societies they were studying in an early chapter of their monographs, Buck was able to draw on his own concerns about the past as a Maori through oral tradition, and thus he did not have to rely on Pakeha accounts of the past, or misconstrued data from the field. 'I believe we know more of the past than any of the other seed which came from Rangiatea' (II, p.14).

He was deeply concerned with indigenous concepts and meaning (as opposed to meaning imposed from outside) and shared with Ngata the recognition that it was difficult to make 'white people see the meaning of things as they [the Tuamotuans] saw them and to prevent them from giving things a different meaning from what they really had' (III, p.176). Such understanding of meaning could be gained only by a strong grasp of the local language in the field, a concern that Malinowski bequeathed to anthropology in the 1920s. But language as a tool to gain data, as distinct from language as access to meaning, did not become widespread in anthropology until the 1960s with the development of ethnoscience as a sub-discipline. The 'statistical and mechanical models' that anthropologists were using in the 1950s presented the ethnographic material only from an outsider's viewpoint, and so could not represent an indigenous view. With the advances in linguistics in the 1960s, anthropologists borrowed the distinction between 'emic' and 'etic' models, based on phonemics and phonetics, in order to clarify the insider and the outsider view. Buck and Ngata both recognized that their indigenous understanding was significantly different from that of the 'pakeha way of putting things into a series of pakeha bottles with appropriate pakeha labels' (III, p.124). 'The Polynesian corpuscles carry us behind the barrier that takes a pakeha some time to scale and the key of speech cuts out some other months' (I, p.45). Thus they were both very committed to provide correctives to the Pakeha anthropological view (III, p.185).

One area of development in anthropology, medical anthropology, was not foreseen by Buck, yet with his medical training he could have contributed so much to our knowledge of Polynesian physiology, epidemiology and attitudes to health. But at the time physical anthropology was more concerned with measuring skulls and long bones, and this obviously did not attract Buck at all.

These two men valued the anthropological approach for rather different reasons. Buck saw that he could bring to anthropology a perspective which differed from that of the Pakeha: 'I am at present representing primitive man and relying on my instincts. I listen to these other theories about myself, not that I accept them in their entirety but in order that I may look at myself as others say they look at me. I want to get their way of approach in order that I may approach myself without their assistance and without having read into me things that I don't believe I ever felt . . . I am laying the foundations of an education for future work' (I, p.76). He held a wider vision of the Polynesian race than other colleagues working on the Bishop Museum ethnographic team (II, p.12). His contribution is notable for turning anthropology inside out, so that a number of other anthropologists have chosen to look at their own culture rather than at some other exotic culture.

Ngata was more of a diffusionist than Buck; he saw his collection of waiata and haka, in the language with its various dialects, as a significant contribution to understanding how Polynesian ideas became Maori ideas. He wanted to know 'What happened in Raiatea, Tahea and those islands after our folk migrated to New Zealand?' (I, p.97). His dearest wish was to write up his genealogical detail into a monograph 'to knock spots out of the accepted theories relating to exogamous & endogamous marriages' (I, p.89); but he lacked the time because he was so deeply embroiled in more practical concerns, such as 'unearthing talent in every district' that would follow 'The new way [which] is to send out a colony armed in the pakeha fashion to acquire land' (I, p.91), not seize it as Pakeha had done. He wanted to study the history and traditions of carving with its centre in New Zealand and to follow through the diffusion of art forms as a means to understanding Maori social organization over time, but felt he did not know enough (III, p.200). He relied on Buck to provide the intellectual context in which he could present his ideas. Both men were interested to record the 'waves' of settlement, by means of their insider viewpoint improving the understanding of Polynesia, but only if a fair degree of indigenous thinking was accurately included. They referred to themselves as 'marginal men' with a view from both the Pakeha and the Polynesian camps, and thus able to transcend the difficulties of being a complete outsider. They were on their way to phenomenological analysis, but some thirty years before Alfred Schütz's ideas became popular in social science.

For example, Buck refers specifically to the unique viewpoint the two men shared as 'one of the race' (II, p.231), and to Ngata himself as 'the most brilliant son' to represent 'the greatest Polynesian Race' (I, p.76). Ngata expressed his great pride as a Ngati Porou and as a Maori, whereas Buck's Taranaki background, together with a Pakeha father, provided him with insights into both the world of the Maori and that of the Pakeha. He discussed with Ngata the strengths that would enable him to bring to the Bishop Museum research and to anthropology the viewpoint of his race: 'In Polynesian research it is right and fitting that the highest branch of the Polynesian race should be in the forefront and not leave the bulk of the investigations to workers who have not got the inside angle that we have' (I, p.48). This pride and self-confidence are a hallmark of these letters, which were a medium for offering support between friends many miles apart, and facing potential attacks on their views of this superiority of the Polynesian race.

The use of the term 'race', which occurs frequently throughout the letters, must be seen in its historical context. Europeans had singled out the Polynesians as somehow racially superior to Melanesians because of their 'colour' and their 'higher civilization', that is, they possessed a chiefly structure. Buck and Ngata had absorbed those positive connotations and used the term with great pride and positive feeling to refer to all the good aspects of their Maori and wider Polynesian heritage — it had none of the negative connotations that 'race' and 'racism' have today. Yet while they shared this extreme

pride, each held a different perspective on the integration of his race with the Pakeha. Ngata saw himself devoting his attributes and energies to warding off the wrongdoings of the Pakeha, particularly over land and the loss of Maori tribal identity, while Buck saw himself as drawing together the Polynesian and the Pakeha viewpoints to the benefit of both. Each presented a panglossian view, somewhat reminiscent of the noble savage image.

Writing was one means they could make their mark both for their race and in the Pakeha world. They saw the need to record data in written form both for Pakeha and their own Maori descendants. Buck even had the foresight to sense that these letters themselves might be 'very valuable data for some future historian' as 'a current summary of contemporary events' (II, p.180). They showed no diffidence about committing esoteric knowledge to paper; on the contrary they shared that as a positive responsibility to their own race. In addition to their own writing they strongly supported the writing of others about Polynesian matters. Both of them served on the Board of Maori Ethnological Research and were members of the Polynesian Society, two organizations heavily committed to publication of works on Maori and Polynesian society. Buck, in particular, saw these two organizations as important to the development of anthropology in New Zealand. The Board of Maori Ethnological Research became the Maori Purposes Fund Board in 1939, the body which published Buck's *The Coming of the Maori*, the most widely read of all his work. The Polynesian Society, an independent organization of scholars interested in this cultural area, will undoubtedly pay tribute to the contributions of Ngata and Buck in the promotion of a Polynesian viewpoint when the Society celebrates its centenary in 1992.

The letters are also striking for their regularity. Each writer responded to queries raised by the other with minimal time lag. Since most of the correspondence was exchanged between New Zealand and Hawaii, or the eastern United States, I found it surprising that the letters followed on from one another so closely. Enquiries about the commencement of airmail services to and from New Zealand revealed that these letters predate that. Also both Ngata and Buck mention several times the care which they took to meet the deadline for the boat that was leaving. So the smoothness of the time flow is in part due to efficient mail services, but also to their dedication to keeping in touch with each other. The careful ordering of topics, even to numbering them, is of great assistance to the reader. I believe the commitment to keep each other abreast of the various aspects of each other's work was part of the strong friendship between the two men, and also inspired by their realization that they had something unique to contribute as Maori scholars working in a Pakeha-dominated world.

The title Sorrenson has chosen indicates the significance of the friendship between these two men. They were writing as fellow New Zealanders, as Maori, as former political colleagues, and as two people who shared an intellectual curiosity about the wider ramifications of the background of New Zealand population. But more than that, they were friends who understood the bases of one another's thinking, and the premises on which arguments were based. Each recognized the strengths in the other and drew on these for mutual benefit. For that reason I am troubled by the 'exposure' that such publication has brought to what was originally intended as a private exchange. As noted above, however, Buck foreshadowed the possibility of their publication. Thus we are not faced with the same dilemma as was raised by the publication of Malinowski's field diaries.¹

Reading these letters in 1990 arouses some further thoughts about the heritage that these two men have bequeathed to us. Many of the Maori issues that Ngata was

1 Michael W. Young, *The Ethnography of Malinowski*, London, 1979.

addressing, such as strengthening Maori tribal identity, the tangata whenua and whence they came (II, pp. 54, 73) and the re-establishment of Maori on their own lands (I, p.24; II, p.142), are issues that are prominently before us today. The affinity between Maori and other Polynesian societies has been enlivened by the large numbers of Samoans, Cook Island people and Tongans, who migrated to New Zealand in the early 1970s and whose children are now New Zealand-born, but striving to retain their Polynesian heritages. And it has also been enlivened by Hawaiians seeking support from the Maori community for their Homeland campaign to strengthen their identity, and by the Fiji coup of 1987. Ngata's recommendation that the New Zealand civil service should do more to meet the needs of the wider Polynesian population, including Samoa and the Cook Islands, possibly with a Ministry of Polynesian affairs, has been activated some fifty years later. He would be gratified but also sad that it took so long. Both men would rejoice to hear the Maori language spoken today at kohanga reo and welcome Maori songs and dances on TV and radio, and the awareness of tribal concerns raised by the Waitangi Tribunal.

These three volumes give us a unique perspective on the contributions of the two men to New Zealand history as well as to the history of anthropology in Polynesia. Their correspondence is vital to our current attempts to integrate the key ideas in Polynesian studies, as well as to understand their personal commitments to the work they chose to undertake, which stands as a great memorial to their innovative thinking. I have stressed their contributions to anthropology and to Polynesian studies as that is where these three volumes are most likely to have their major impact.

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