

John White: The Making of a Nineteenth-Century Writer and Collector of Maori Tradition

JOHN WHITE looms large in the scholarly topography of nineteenth-century New Zealand in the field of Maori studies and where recourse is made to collections of Polynesian tradition, although he may not be well known to historians.¹ He grew up in North Auckland, learnt Maori, and from quite an early age displayed a growing fascination with the history of the Maori society he encountered around him. He produced a string of sketches, lectures, articles, novels, and finally the remarkable collection of Maori traditions, the *Ancient History of the Maori*, which he prepared virtually single-handed towards the end of his life. This impressive series of volumes was envisaged as the definitive collation of Maori historical texts, but publication was terminated before all of it could see the light of day. Its unpublished parts now serve as a lode of knowledge, sometimes mined without acknowledgement by subsequent generations of scholars.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the importance of the collection, little has been heard about the editor of the *Ancient History*. How did he come to this work? What motivated him? What did he think of Maori people or their culture? In short, what can be discerned in his life that widens and deepens our understanding of White as a scholar of Maori?

Any recounting of White's biography relies heavily upon a singular document he kept between the ages of 20 and 24 (that is, 1846–1850). It is simply titled, 'PRIVATE JOURNAL, Begun Mata, June 5 1846 Friday'. It consists of daily entries kept between 5 June 1846 and 10 April 1848, and more sporadically till late 1850. Intended partly as a record of reading material, and a private account of his thoughts, it gives a revealing insight into details of his day-to-day work, his literary readings, the kinds of information he was gleaning from local Maori, and his own candid opinions of individuals he met, Maori or Pakeha, many of whom are poorly identified, if at all. It covers only his earlier, formative years, but the very personal nature of the diary — he intended to let only a future wife read it — means that this work is the most important document we possess about White.²

1 I should like to thank Niel Gunson, Ruurdje Laarhoven, and Joanne Lafoa'i for commenting on and correcting an earlier draft of this paper.

2 John White, 'Private Journal' (PJ), 1846–50, Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL), Wellington. References and quotations are taken from the autograph copy. In 1932 a typescript was made at

Little direct information exists on White's life before he was 20. We know he was born in the village of Cockfield in Durham, England, on 3 January 1826. His parents were Francis and Jane White. His father was a blacksmith. An uncle, William White, was a Wesleyan missionary in New Zealand.³ In 1834 the family followed William to New Zealand, enduring a shipwreck on Norfolk Island, where the swift intervention of convicts saved their lives. Francis White later petitioned the New South Wales authorities on the convicts' behalf.⁴ Towards the end of 1835 the Whites finally reached New Zealand, settling in the Hokianga. When John White was in his early teens he accompanied his father on a business trip to England. He seems to have spent a period in boarding school there, and had returned to New Zealand by late 1840.⁵

The Hokianga by this time, judging from the journal, had become a rather isolated place. Europeans were scattered about the district and formed small, seemingly self-sustaining communities amidst the larger Maori population. Contact with the outside world was by ship, travelling to Auckland, Sydney or England. Otherwise, trips were made overland, by horse, by foot, or by riverboat. White, like other early colonists, was a jack-of-all-trades, undertaking chores or repairs around the house, preparing the ground for crops, helping to cut and transport timber, herding cattle, or pig hunting. There were also weekly prayer meetings and chapel services on Sunday, followed by social visits. White, who by his early twenties had learnt to play some musical instruments, would be called upon to entertain such gatherings. After he had begun to write, he might read examples of his creations to family and visitors. There was also ample opportunity for individual recreation. White spent much of this time reading, writing, or collecting Maori traditions. Family life was in some respects reasonably relaxed. White did not always feel up to attending chapel or prayer meetings and does not seem to have suffered parental discipline for such lapses.

The most serious shortcoming of life in the Hokianga, at least in White's own opinion, was the lack of formal education. By the time he began his private journal, he was acutely aware of this. He admitted several times to having only a poor knowledge of spelling and grammar, a feature attested to by his phonetic

Turnbull of this text, which was then owned by the collector, Sir Joseph Kinsey. He had bought it and other White items from the latter's two youngest daughters. Two carbon copies were also made; one resides in the Turnbull and the other in the Auckland Institute and Museum Library (AIM). The typed text varies occasionally in its reading from the original, a not unexpected result of White's notoriously difficult handwriting. I intend preparing an edition of the journal for publication. I should add that at the time I read the top copy of the typescript in 1980, it had a series of valuable attachments, including photographs of White demonstrating 'drill' positions for Maori weaponry. These were used subsequently as the basis for the illustrations in the *Ancient History of the Maori*.

³ John White, 'Recollections of Myself', 1 January 1846, in 'Notebook 1848', ATL; PJ, 5 May 1847.

⁴ Cross to Phillipps, 6 August 1875, AO 75/639, Archives Authority of New South Wales, Sydney; 'Hannah's Reminiscence' (Hannah was a younger sister of John), manuscript owned by Mr L.E. Martin, Wellington, and cited with his permission. My attention was initially drawn to these papers by Dr Claudia Orange, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Wellington.

⁵ PJ, 7 May 1847; 'Hannah's Reminiscence'; A. H. Reed, 'John White: a biographical sketch', in A.W. Reed, ed., *Revenge: a Love Tale of the Mount Eden Tribe*, Wellington, 1940, p. xii.

renderings and poor handwriting.⁶ However, not all his siblings agreed. Hannah, a younger sister, writing late in life, believed they had had the very best teaching possible. This included attendance at the mission school, the attentions of 'an educated lady' as private governess, and the instruction of Mrs Eliza White, their aunt, described as being 'very well educated and refined'.⁷ White still regularly attended the mission classes in his early twenties, though it was only evening tuition once a week.⁸ It apparently consisted of reading and writing exercises, and rote learning, of weights and measures for instance.⁹ By 1846 he had begun to supplement his meagre learning with a regimen of self-education.

To achieve this ideal of improvement by self-instruction, White instituted a programme of reading. Along with his music-playing, these activities had the added bonus of deflecting his own sense of isolation in 'this wild uncouth land', and of enabling him 'to pass an evening of our monotonous life away in a slight pleasure'.¹⁰ Reading formed his principal hobby, all day if the book interested him, often till midnight or as a means of passing the time on boat journeys.¹¹ He was able to extend the range of reading matter through neighbourly borrowing from fellow Hokianga settlers or sympathetic visiting ships' officers.¹² His choice of reading was not restrictive; quite the contrary, he maintained an eclectic approach. Anything in print was sufficient to catch his interest. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern, amidst the diversity, certain recurring types of reading. In the light of his later scholarly contribution to Maori history, some are especially noteworthy.

The first of these reflected his interest in oral traditions and, in particular, the literature of Scotland, as represented especially in James MacPherson's *Poems of Ossian*. This work, when it was issued, had seized the imagination of eighteenth-century Europe. It claimed to contain the poems composed by Ossian, the son of Fingal, a famous third-century Scottish king. On 12 April 1847 White was finally able to obtain a copy shipped from Sydney, exulting, 'what pleasure I shall receive'.¹³ That White himself was already very interested in the subject is shown by his unusual action of obtaining a personal copy from Australia. He very soon compared the poems to Maori song poetry; for instance, writing of the poem 'Fingal', 'many of my NZ things will be as wild as this poem, that is be as disconnected in its parts compared with a modern poem though my authors are more elaborate than Ossian'.¹⁴

The Ossianic poems had not only been explosively popular, but had also aroused a major debate centring on their authenticity. White was familiar with

6 e.g. PJ, 9, 15 September 1846.

7 'Hannah's Reminiscence'. Eliza White seems to have run a school for Pakeha children during the 1830s and earlier 1840s. T.M.I. Williment, *John Hobbs 1800–1883: Wesleyan Missionary to the Ngapuhi Tribe of Northern New Zealand*, Wellington, 1985, pp. 96, 184.

8 PJ, 4 September 1846; 1 January 1847.

9 PJ, 9, 15 September 1846; 17 February 1847.

10 White to unidentified friend, 5 May 1847, John White Papers, MS 75 (JWMS), A77a, ATL.

11 PJ, 12, 15 February 1847; 27 June 1847; 19 October 1847.

12 PJ, 25 June 1847; 29 October 1847.

13 PJ, 12 April 1847.

14 PJ, 13 June 1847.

some of this literature. He appears to have read MacPherson's own defence of his work, 'A Dissertation concerning the aera of Ossian', and agreed that ideas expressed in it applied to Maori traditions.¹⁵ MacPherson had argued that Ossian's poetry was transmitted in an unbroken line from the third century, through succeeding generations of hereditary Court bards, and later still was retained in people's memory or committed to writing.¹⁶ During such transmission he believed the poetry remained unchanged because the tradition's words were so well adapted to the 'common turn of the voice' that it was almost impossible to substitute them for others.¹⁷ This notion of immutability allowed MacPherson to criticize later bards for making additions and interpolations and, on a few occasions, to rail against their allegedly corrupt or indecent language, or their unnatural and rather 'trivial' poems.¹⁸ He rejected any insights into Scottish history or culture from these later works as being largely obscure or inaccurate.¹⁹

White seems to have taken such views very much to heart, for echoes of them can be found in the *Ancient History*. There he spoke of the hereditary 'office of the priesthood', men who had preserved the orally transmitted history in their memory by means of 'the most austere religious care' and rehearsal 'from age to age in the presence of the most select circle of youths'.²⁰ Like MacPherson, White also apparently believed these traditions were immutable and could only be corrupted by more recent generations; he once objected to a suggestion that Maori ought to comment on genealogy, arguing that they would only dispute its accuracy.²¹

The other major form of writing that had a profound impact on White as a young man was poetry, especially Romantic poetry. He once described his feelings for verse thus: 'I know the words "Poet" or "Poetry" when they catch my eye in a book cause such a thrill in my heart that I could look at them for hours in a sort of trance, and still gaze on and find a pleasure'.²² The most influential poet for White, at least at the time of his journal, was Byron. The extent of White's enthusiasm and the ambivalent family attitudes to such a figure are delightfully captured in the journal entries:

in the evening made a frame for a likeness [sic] of Byron which I had a present of by a friend, also introduced Byrons work into the palour [sic], for the first time of my life, Father asked me what book I was reading I told him, he asked me what I thought of him I said he was the Poet of Poets, and the greatest man since Adam, also that the world had treated him

¹⁵ PJ, 14 April 1847. A substantial amount of literature has been produced about these poems. It is briefly summarized in my MA thesis, 'John White: an examination of his use of Maori oral tradition and the role of authenticity', Victoria University of Wellington, 1985, pp.36–50.

¹⁶ J. MacPherson, 'A Dissertation concerning the aera of Ossian', in *The Poems of Ossian*, London, 1805, I, pp. 16–17, 19.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁸ MacPherson, *The Poems*, II, p. 7n., p. 25n, III, p. 313n.

¹⁹ MacPherson, 'Dissertation', I, p. 51.

²⁰ *The Ancient History of the Maori*, Wellington, 1887–90, I, pp. [iii], 1–2.

²¹ Lewis to Native Minister, 2 June 1890, JWMS, B37c NO 90/373, ATL.

²² PJ, 22 June 1847.

most infamously, we had a long chat on the same subject, from this time I date a change in my manner of reading, all these years I had to keep Byron locked up in my desk with many others, as they were prohibited books in our home.²³

It should be added that such parental opposition probably stemmed more from an objection to Byron's scandalous reputation, which doubtless affronted the family's pious Wesleyanism, than from any antipathy to poetry.²⁴ It is recorded, on different occasions, that both parents remarked favourably on poetry, and both read and wrote verse as young adults.²⁵

Despite the apparent relinquishing of such opposition, the ban was soon to be reimposed. Only five days after the joyous 'coming out' of Byron into the parlour, White had to record:

Byron was put out of the palour [sic], this morning by Father, (his likness [sic], that is) and I was told to keep him in my room, as no infidel should hang in the palour, I had a long argument with Father, about Byron, I said he was no more infidel than Milton as he made no one of his personages utter launguige [sic] more profane than Milton, has done, never mind Byron shall be my deity and preside over my pen and be my inspiration he shall hang so as to look down on my desk so

That his bold harmonious soul
Shall from its flashing casment [sic] dart
A muse that shall my thoughts control
Shall fire my brain, and rouse my heart,
He be the sun, I be the flower,
The bud that in my heart is hid
Shall by him bloom in learnings-bower
A dazy [sic] on a Pirmid [sic].²⁶

His devotion to poetry and, as the last quotation shows, his attempts at versifying, came to their ultimate fruition in his rendering of Maori song poetry. Contemporaries who reviewed the *Ancient History* praised in particular the translation of waiata; Edward Tregear, himself a bit of a dabbler in poetry, praised White's 'unique power of expression and sympathy'.²⁷ A Maori scholar, consulted about White's general Maori language abilities, volunteered the information that White's rendering in English poetical form of Maori song poems, such as the lament of Turaukawa in the *Ancient History*, were far clearer than versions by his near contemporaries such as Hare Hongi.²⁸

Such a passion for the 'infidel' Byron did not translate into any apparent waywardness in White's religious sensibilities. He was to remain, as one writer

23 PJ, 23 July 1847.

24 Niel Gunson, personal communication, January 1989.

25 PJ, 2 June 1847; 4 July 1847.

26 PJ, 28 July 1847.

27 *New Zealand Times*, 22 March 1888. Tregear's review was unsigned, but internal evidence and his correspondence with White make his authorship certain. Another review praised White's poetry in *New Zealand Mail*, 9 September 1887.

28 Information from the late Ruka Broughton, Wellington, 1983.

put it, 'a life-long member of the Wesleyan communion'.²⁹ The private journal has a number of entries suggesting a conventional piety. On hearing a tale about the formation of Hokianga by several taniwha, he noted: 'so much for ignorance and Heathenism'; when, on chatting to 'some few natives' after a prayer meeting, they disputed the soul's existence, he mourned: 'poor creatures [sic] they will find when it is too late O how awful that they should doubt'.³⁰ In an 1856 lecture entitled 'Maori Superstitions', he went on to complain that the Maori were held in 'servile bondage' to 'satanic' superstitions and he applauded missionary efforts to suppress them.³¹

His own religiosity did not inhibit him when dealing with Maori attitudes or beliefs. He entered sacred burial sites at least twice. The first occasion was apparently by accident. He handled objects, and recorded a lengthy description of the burials. He expressed a fear that he might be found by Maori, and admitted that this 'would be the cause of a great row'.³² More seriously, he returned several months later and, accompanied by the captain of a visiting vessel and several others, proceeded to loot the site. White took a bone flute; John Webster, a fellow settler, actually broke open a padlocked coffin; others of the party took various items as mementoes.³³

In his day-to-day dealings, White also took every opportunity to ridicule Maori beliefs or practices. He and George Webster (a younger brother of John Webster) had an argument with some men who were being tattooed, describing it as unnatural; on another occasion he called it ugly.³⁴ Nevertheless, it should be noted that White then gave a lengthy description of the tattooing. When a Maori accompanying him on a hunting expedition said one of them would die because he had heard an owl cry at an unusual hour, White simply laughed.³⁵ He even extended such attitudes to his much cherished collection of Maori tradition. He admitted once: 'I have also collected many Proverbs many of which are very good, others again are so indecent, there is much of my MSS, which must be left in MSS, there cannot be expected in savage life, that there can be nothing but what a modern would not blush at, nearly all my best tales are tainted with indecency'.³⁶ Ironically, Volume I of the *Ancient History* was to be accused by one Wellington newspaper of exhibiting the same vice.³⁷

29 *New Zealand Herald*, 14 January 1891.

30 PJ, 7 September 1846; 11 October 1846.

31 J. White, 'Lectures on Maori Customs and Superstitions', in the *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (AJHR), 1861, E-7, pp. 16, 21, 22.

32 PJ, 14 June 1847.

33 PJ, 4 September 1847; John Webster, *Reminiscences of an Old Settler in Australia and New Zealand*, reprint, Papakura, n.d., pp. 276–9. In Webster's account of the intrusion, the party had come upon the burial site quite by accident while out pig hunting. He also maintained that White's bone flute was given to Sir George Grey and later deposited in the Auckland City Art Gallery. However, there is a receipt for items including 'One Human Bone flute' signed by the Honorary Secretary of the Auckland Museum, 22 July 1859, acknowledging White as the donor (JWMS, A7, ATL). Presumably this is the item mentioned in the journal account.

34 PJ, 21 January 1847; 5 August 1847.

35 PJ, 20 October 1847.

36 PJ, 8 September 1849.

37 *Evening Post*, 20 August 1885.

A censorious attitude to particulars of Maori culture did not mean White was unappreciative of other features, intellectual or personal. In the 1856 lecture on 'Maori Superstitions', he admitted that the Maori were reasonably intelligent and possessed a singularly retentive memory.³⁸ The private journal refers to a number of Maori with whom he developed sound friendships. One in particular, Te Aho, of the Mahurehure hapu at Waima, was described as 'the only good friend I have, he tells me my faults without any resrve [sic], if I use a word (as he thinks) improperly, he is sure to tell me in very strong language, as he is good tempered and rather witty I put up with him'.³⁹ On a number of occasions White commented on Te Aho's abilities both to argue, or 'korero' as he called it, and to tell him 'tales', that is, traditions.⁴⁰ He was also, to judge from journal reports, a most perspicacious critic of White's own work.

White's attitude to Maori women was more complex. Very early in the journal he wrote: 'we have a very good looking servant girl about 20, daughter of the Kahakaha who was shot in the Ohaeawai fight he was on[e] of the rebels, if she had been a European she would have been — —, no tales lest some one see this'.⁴¹ Another Maori female is identified as Mihirangi. They met while he was staying with her relatives on a fishing holiday. He described her as 'rather good looking' and 'rather good tempered'. Over the next few days there was a good deal of banter amongst the party: 'took dinner and had a piece of fun with the Natives teaching them rounders, I noticed Mihi looked rather foolish when we were in her company, after tea was listening to Natives telling tales, Mihi asked me to tell them one, I promised to do so the next evening . . . was told that Mihi was in love with me, how laughable, no wonder she "sang a song of her own composing" with the addition of my name, tis a pity young ladies should be so lavish of their love, without asking the beloved's opinion'. Told by his host's wife that Mihirangi was singing about him, he affected not to know and suggested that perhaps she was angry with him. He subsequently heard she had asked her father if she could marry him. The following February he heard she had been quite ill, since

she says that she loves —, which is the cause of her illness I pity her poor girl but cannot help her, no doubt it was that 'Lady of Lake' [a story he told them] which made her love

38 AJHR, 1861, E-7, pp. 16, 36.

39 PJ, 22 March 1847; 17 June 1847. Wiremu Te Aho of Waima is recorded as writing to White on 3 July 1848; see D.R. Simmons, *The Great New Zealand Myth*, Wellington, 1976, p. 427.

40 e.g. PJ, 18 February 1847; 10 February 1848. The first of these references does not specify Te Aho by name, though given the frank nature of the comments he is known to have made he seems the likeliest Maori to have uttered some of the unsourced comments. For example, White once commented to 'the Native boy' how 'saucy' it was for the sun to set so quickly; 'he with astonishment said "you are a great swearer what an oath to the sun," it is a wonder he does not come down and carry us up and burn us for your sin.' PJ, 11 February 1847. The earlier journal entries for Te Aho progressed from descriptions such as 'the Native boy' to the incorporation of additional references to 'the Priest's son', who in turn was alternately called 'Aho' and later still 'Te Aho'. That these references did concern the same individual is further supported by consistent descriptions of him as quite young: ten or 12, or 'a mere child'. See, PJ, 3 July, 13 November 1846; 10 February, 22 March, 17 June 1847; 10 February 1848.

41 PJ, 17 June 1846.

the stronger, if I had had the least idea she loved—I would not for all the world have told the 'Lady of the Lake' to them, she is pretty and of high rank, but, she is yet, a New Zealander, she must accept one of her Chief lovers, she can choose as she has no scarcity, as

Cold this heart shall ever be
No foreign charm shall warm this breast. . . .⁴²

On the other hand, the sort of entries in the journal that follow are just as frequent: 'went to Rangiora to dine saw 4 NZ famed beauties, in my opinion they were all as ugly as sin and every whit as dark'; or, when recounting how the Maori wife of a host had washed both his dirty clothes and his clean shirt, he bluntly wrote: 'so much for a Native wife not to know the difference between a clean [and] a dirty shirt'.⁴³

The Pakeha family with whom the Whites had the closest relations, at least as reflected in the private journal, was the Hobbs family. White spent a lot of time with them, and his affectionate nickname for the father, the missionary John Hobbs, was 'old daddy'.⁴⁴ He exchanged books with, and told his stories to two of the daughters. Similar exchanges and readings of his work were carried out with friends such as George Webster. By mail he communicated with Henry Munro and C.O.B. Davis. His family generally seem, from the various entries, to have viewed his literary habits with genuine interest and good-natured amusement.

The writings that his friends and family heard or read were as varied in nature as the literature he had taken to reading. They consisted of poems and varied prose works (mostly stories), although he sometimes planned more ambitious undertakings, including a play.⁴⁵ Writing, he claimed, came easily to him. As he once admitted, 'I [am] a scribbler and dream of printing'.⁴⁶ His subjects included imitations of what he was reading, or were drawn from his surroundings, particularly relating to Maori historical themes. On the prompting of his friend George Webster he decided to become more expansive, and began toying with the idea of an 'historical novel'.⁴⁷ Coupled with this was a notion for some kind of book incorporating his various 'NZ anecdotes', his term for ethnographic data.⁴⁸ He began compiling lists of the 'Anecdotes'.⁴⁹ He even began a Maori dictionary. The work still exists, dating from May 1847, but it stopped at the letter 'k'.⁵⁰

Ever mindful of his educational shortcomings, White sought expert guidance on his style of writing. The authorities to whom he appears to have deferred most

42 PJ, 22, 25, 27 December 1846; 6 February 1847.

43 PJ, 17 January 1847; 29 December 1846.

44 PJ, 13 October 1846.

45 The play was entitled, 'The Despot's wife'. J. White, 'Notebook 1848', ATL.

46 PJ, 27 June 1847; the references to writing 'easily' are in PJ, 12 October 1846; 6 April 1847.

47 PJ, 30 July 1847.

48 e.g. PJ, 16 June, 8 September 1849.

49 'Anecdotes for my Book on New Zealand', JWMS, A143, ATL.

50 'Dictionary of words of the New Zealand Language, Mata, May 25 1847', JWMS, A139, ATL.

were Hugh Blair, the eighteenth-century Scottish critic, Dr Johnson, Addison, and Burke: the last two he considered especially instructive on matters of prose writing. There were other writers, too, whom he rated as stylists in particular genres. In poetry he consulted Milton and, not unnaturally, Byron. For prose he read the letters of Burns.⁵¹

A genre of writing that White spent some time and thought over was translation. He often translated Maori into English (or vice versa) for locals, and was acutely conscious of the difficulties inherent in fully capturing the meaning of the original text. He did not always judge his efforts to be a success.⁵² Maori songs were a particular bother, 'as the composers go such a way from the ordinary way of talking', and only hinted at the subject matter, expecting the listeners to 'make out the meaning if they can'. He gave, in English, a typical example: "from whence is the wind". According to White, this seemed 'a very plain question', but it really meant 'from whence did he come who has smitten my heart'.⁵³

By 1847–48 White's varied scribblings had begun to build up. In particular, his Maori material amounted to several hundred songs and assorted items. In an undated draft letter to his aunt, he wrote that he had 200 or more anecdotes, songs, and letters, though the words '200' and 'songs' were later erased.⁵⁴ A further letter dated 11 July 1847 put the number of songs alone at 350, while a draft letter to the Anglo-Irish poet Thomas Moore mentioned the figure of 320 songs.⁵⁵ Comments made in the private journal support these figures: 'I think if I were to write all that that [sic] I know about NZ it would make a large volume, the songs a second, and notes to them a third, no small collection of stuff to fill 3 volumes'.⁵⁶

White had clearly passed beyond writing some simple literary experiment to a more serious concern to collect and record Maori traditional information. In a letter intended to ask Thomas Moore's 'oppinion [sic] and criticism' of some Maori waiata, White identified his motivation in undertaking such a feat as a combination of his isolation, his lack of education, his reading and his literary writing. He described New Zealand as 'this distant Corner of our Globe' and a 'wild country', which had prevented his obtaining 'the most liberal education'. He had, however, 'had time and opportunity to read most of the works of Englands Poets, with many of the antiends [sic], also many of the Scotch . . . from which I have imbibed a taste for that sort of writing that has urged me on to collect the songs of this country to the number of 320'.⁵⁷

A second letter written a month later confirmed the essential factors motivating his interest in Maori tradition. In this letter he wrote that it was this liking for poetry which had 'prompted me to collect the songs of this land, writen [sic] in

51 There are numerous references to these writers, including PJ, 20 January 1847; 28 December 1848; 3 October 1846; 12 January 1847; 19 October 1847; 22 June 1846; 12 March 1847; 15 July 1846; 1 January 1848; 9 February 1847; 30 July 1847; draft for book, JWMS, A143, ATL.

52 e.g. PJ, 18 November 1846.

53 PJ, 24 June 1847.

54 n.d., 'Notebook 1848', ATL.

55 JWMS, A85, A77a, ATL.

56 PJ, 10 July 1847.

57 7 June 1848, JWMS, A77a, A141, ATL.

the NZ tongue by a NZ friend of mine to the amount of 350!' The 'NZ friend' is not identified. He went on to say that these songs were 'equal in grandur [sic] of languge [sic]' to that used by English poets.⁵⁸ A more intellectualized explanation for his collection was provided in the extracts assembled for a proposed book on the Maori. The main contention in these quotations was that to know a 'primitive race' and their opinions and minds, one had to delve into their 'manners', their superstitions, proverbs, and popular stories. A passage he took from *Sketches in Persia* (1828) by Sir John Malcolm warned that those who ignored such things would be likely to come to an erroneous judgement about the 'character' of the people concerned.⁵⁹

The desire to collect Maori tradition was not entirely of recent origin. Snippets of biographical comment about White's life before the journal indicate he was reading and writing literary works from at least 1843, when he was 17.⁶⁰ It is probably safe to assume that an enthusiasm for ethnography was not far away. The earliest references are in a letter to a Charles Davis in 1844, who was probably C.O.B. Davis, later a distinguished linguist and author on the Maori. This letter suggests that Davis was a part of White's exchange network for books, and for his own writings. Not unexpectedly, there is also a discussion of Maori word meanings. Most important, White also noted that he had given to a Maori called Elijah a book in which to copy 'Native' songs.⁶¹ This must have been a common practice of White's, for another manuscript in his collection ends with the note: 'Na hemi no te 27 o ngara o maihi 1845' (By Hemi on the 27th day of March 1845).⁶²

The literary motivation behind such ethnographical interests was to cast a dangerous mantle over his work, both in the Hokianga and afterwards. In the journal, there are several comments indicating a wish to see his various writings published.⁶³ It was a means to 'get a name', and a ticket out of the boredom of his Hokianga farm life.⁶⁴ Sometimes this desire led him to seek publication for his Maori works, such as his song translations or his dictionary.⁶⁵ At other times he attempted to interest newspapers in his stories and verse based on European subjects.⁶⁶ He tried sending items to England.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, he also seems to have chosen the more hazardous path of combining ethnographical and fictional impulses in the same account.

58 White to friends, 11 July 1847, JWMS, A85, ATL.

59 'Mottos for my N.Z. Book', 12 July 1849, JWMS, A143, ATL.

60 PJ, 25 January 1847; 1 May 1847; 'Manuscript of poems c.1850', MS, ATL.

61 White to Davis, 28 May 1844, JWMS, A77a, ATL.

62 JWMS, A89, ATL.

63e.g., PJ, 23 December 1848; also 25 August 1847; 1 November 1847, for other people's comments on this.

64 PJ, 17 February 1847.

65 e.g. PJ, 17 March 1849; 15 May 1849; 22 December 1850; White to editor of the *New Zealand Wesleyan*, 10 October 1850, JWMS, A114, ATL; 'dirge', JWMS, A84, ATL; karakia used by shark fishers, newspaper clipping, c.1850, Sir George Grey's copy of Maunsell's *Dictionary of Maori*, Auckland Public Library (APL).

66 PJ, 10 October 1846.

67 PJ, 21 June 1846.

The draft preface for his book on 'everything that is worth printing' about the Maori includes the following enigmatic statement, citing Dr Johnson: "when truth is sufficient fiction is worse . . ." with the latter remark in our mind we hope the following pages will be perused'.⁶⁸ If this book was truthful, that is ethnographic, were others he wrote 'fiction', that is literary? A Maori tale, which was allegedly recorded from an informant, begins: 'some books are lies from end to end, and some great lies were never penned, I think somehow this is (perhaps) not one'.⁶⁹ This revealing line was later erased by White. The clearest statement on the precise relationship between his ethnographic and literary work comes from Te Aho: 'he tells me that he has a long tale for to tell me, but he will not do so yet "for" said he "I think you are writing tales, for your own composition, besides writing all you hear from every person, and after awhile you will tell people the tales as true" he is a sharp little fellow'.⁷⁰ Such suggestive statements may help to explain why an entirely fictional composition by White in the form of an authentic Maori tradition, 'Te Ponga raua ko Te Puhi-huia', came to be published as authentic in Grey's *Nga Mahi a nga Tupuna Maori*.⁷¹

This same ethnographical and fictional dualism may also lie behind White's great historical novel series. Initial sketches of his work seem to have been begun at the behest of George Webster.⁷² In 1854 White started writing the opening pages of the first volume.⁷³ This was finally published in 1874 as *Te Rou*. Its intention is made abundantly clear by the subtitle, 'A Tale, exhibiting the social life, manners, habits and customs of the Maori race in New Zealand prior to the introduction of civilisation amongst them'. In the preface he wrote that the object of the series was to 'embalm' the fast disappearing Maori knowledge.⁷⁴ Characteristically, a fiction writer again seems to have influenced this work. This time it was the English historical novelist, Charles Kingsley.⁷⁵ Throughout his life White was to give these works the status of a popular, but still accurate, history of the Maori.⁷⁶

One of the more common techniques used by White in the Hokianga to collect such Maori tradition was the continual buttonholing of Maori, either during the course of meeting or working with them, or virtually 'off-the-street'. He seems to have been an incessant questioner, ever inquisitive about what or why things were done. One group of Maori helping to grind wheat are reported to have jested

68 JWMS, A143, ATL.

69 'Man and Tui', 15 February 1847, JWMS, A143, ATL.

70 PJ, 8 December 1847.

71 Simmons, p. 367.

72 PJ, 30 July, 4 August, 25 December 1847.

73 White Papers, MS 328, AIM.

74 J. White, *Te Rou*, London, 1874, p. v. Three other book-length novels and some fragments have been located so far by the author. The second volume is incorporated in the same ms. as *Te Rou*, in MS 328, AIM. The other two are in the Wellington Public Library: 'Tale of Hari [spelt Hami]: the Maori Revenge', 'Revenge: a love tale of the Mount Eden tribe'. This is a typescript from which a much-edited version was published by A.W. Reed in 1940 under the same title. The fragments are located in JWMS, A110, ATL; NZMS 714, I, APL.

75 White to Holt, 30 May 1872, JWMS, A77a, ATL.

76 White to Moss, c. late May 1885, JWMS, A61, ATL.

that he was 'a very teasing sort of fellow for I ask them a thousand questions which no one but myself would ever think of'.⁷⁷ Te Aho is recorded as giving an excellent description of how White looked and acted when walking about: 'you for instance (addressing me) he said are one of the most unknown inquisitive [sic] people in the world, you cannot go anywhere without a book in your hand or pocket, and every old Native man you meet you must stop and ask him more question[s] about olden times than a god could answer'.⁷⁸ White possessed some self-awareness: in a letter he wrote to Aperahama Taonui of Te Popoto hapu in 1851, he signed himself 'na to hoa pakiki' (by your frequently questioning friend).⁷⁹ Taonui, either directly or through his writings, was an important informant: he was one of only four Maori to have been approached by letter, cited in the manuscripts and in the final version of the *Ancient History of the Maori*.⁸⁰ After leaving the Hokianga, White's requests for information were all carried on by correspondence. Not every Maori approached was as tolerant of his queries as those in the Hokianga, or as eager to provide information to a Pakeha.⁸¹

His own family seems also to have found him rather trying. In one entry White scribbled a verse beginning, 'a sharp rebuke, a cold reply/ Can lay no spark of genius low', after his father is reported to have declared at table that 'he never saw such a boy as I am he said I could talk when no one else can he was puzzled to know where I got my ideas from'.⁸² He took ready delight in argument, being willing to hold his own against all comers. Generally, his family took it all good-naturedly, though at times it seemed to those close to him that he was most unwilling to accept alternatives.⁸³ He was the same with Maori friends and informants. Te Aho observed that 'you are sure to have an answer for every question to make it your way, and to suit your ideas, as you live in argument for if a man 4 times as old as yourself were to argue with you, you would best him as you have such ideas as no one else has, and you make ever thing twist in every shape to make your opinion good'.⁸⁴ His stubborn, argumentative adherence to his own point of view was to stand him in good stead later in his life, when he had to suffer the trauma of job losses and the tortured progress to publication of the *Ancient History*.

In 1851 the family moved to Auckland and White embarked on his adult career, initially working for Sir George Grey as some sort of secretary or translator.⁸⁵ The private journal ended a few months before the shift. From then

77 PJ, 25 June 1846.

78 PJ, 12 June 1847.

79 White to Taonui, 7 Tihema (December) 1851, A.F. McDonnell Papers, MS 151/7, ATL. This is the earliest extant piece of writing by White in Maori.

80 Reilly, p. 378.

81 Part II of this article, to be published in the next issue, will be a discussion of the relationship between White and his Maori informants. For further details on White's correspondence seeking ethnographic information from both Pakeha and Maori, see Reilly, pp. 326–56.

82 PJ, 21 January 1847.

83 PJ, 24 November 1846; 29 October 1847.

84 PJ, 17 June 1847.

85 Extract by Adolf Bastian, JWMS, A71, ATL. The extract was a translation of part of Bastian's work, *Die heilige sage der Polynesier, Kasmogenie und Theogenie* (The Holy Legend of the

on, knowledge of White, the man, has to be discerned between the lines of bureaucratic 'officialalese' and the artifice of his writings. Most of his working life was spent either as a government interpreter, Maori land purchasing officer, or Resident Magistrate. Besides Grey, he came to know Sir Donald McLean, who was often to be a powerful patron or, as White put it, 'the matua [parent] to whom I told every thing'.⁸⁶ White was to serve as one of those anonymous officials responsible for enacting the policies that Grey or McLean enunciated. The trials inherent in such postings as Resident Magistrate for the upper Whanganui in the troubled mid-1860s are caught in the description of himself as 'getting "Grey-Headed"'.⁸⁷ He was then only 38.

White's career also reflected the travails of the ordinary New Zealander caught up in the economic slumps of the later nineteenth century. He was moved from one temporary position to another, complaining all the while of being 'shuttlecocked', of holding a 'present degrading position',⁸⁸ but finally having to accept the ultimate humiliation of redundancy.⁸⁹ Like others, he sought solace on the Thames gold-fields and, like others, experienced only greater financial ruin.⁹⁰ He migrated from his Auckland home to Napier looking for work, writing fatherly letters back to his children from lodgings, until he was employed as the editor of the Maori newspaper *Te Wananga*, published by the Heretaunga (Hawke's Bay) chief, Henare Tomoana.⁹¹ It was a job he called 'vexation' and 'slavery'.⁹² He also worked on Maori land disputes, but later admitted that he abhorred 'law, disputes and litigation'.⁹³

In 1879 it seemed for a while that he had achieved success at last: he was appointed compiler of an officially-sponsored Maori history.⁹⁴ However, changes in the project's conditions wrought by indifferent government administrations, coupled with a general lack of comprehension on the part of many Ministers and officials about the reasons for such an undertaking, soon crushed

Polynesians), Leipzig, 1881. In the extract, Bastian, a prominent German ethnologist of the period, recounted his meeting with White and commented on the latter's work. He considered White's ethnographic contribution to be important for 'our new science of Ethnology'. Bastian to White, 27 April 1886, JWMS, A71, ATL. He also considered his talk with White 'the most enjoyed one of my stay there'.

86 White to McLean, 22 July 1870, McLean Papers, MS 32/632, ATL.

87 White to Fenton, 7 May 1864, JWMS, A119b, ATL.

88 White to Bell, 19 September 1872, JWMS, A52, ATL.

89 First in 1867 (Williamson to White, 10 December, JWMS, B37b, letter 246, book 31, ATL), then in 1872, various memoranda and letters in JWMS, B37b NS 72/880, ATL.

90 Halse to Cooper, 1 April 1872, JWMS, B37b NS 72/550, ATL; Seed to White, 8 June 1872, JWMS, A68, ATL. Further information on what has tended to be a mysterious time of White's life (no biography chronicles this period) is located in Reilly, pp. 153–7, and Tom to [White], 6 February 1869, White Papers, MS 328, miscellaneous bundle, Maori dictionary, AIM.

91 'dadi John' to Ada and Elva, 20 March 1875, White Papers, MS 328, miscellaneous bundle, Maori dictionary, AIM; Harding to [?Hocken], 22 April 1910, Hocken F & J 11, p. 132, Hocken Library, Dunedin.

92 White to ?, 22 December 1876, Polynesian Society Papers, MS 1187/203, ATL.

93 White to Grey, 2 October 1875, GL:NZ W 31, 4, APL.

94 AJHR, 1879 sess. II, G-16; JWMS, A57 ND 79/1360, letter 254, B37a NO 79/1755, B37b ND 79/1360.

White's illusions.⁹⁵ By 1885 he was writing that he feared the government would 'throw me on one side', and he accused them of having 'blighted my powers for future exertion'.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the project did continue for another five years, though under increasing budgetary pressure.⁹⁷ By then, six volumes of historical traditions had been produced under the general title, the *Ancient History of the Maori*. In 1890 Parliament finally put a stop to what they considered a financial drain on the nation's purse.⁹⁸ Even so, plans were mooted by the Native Department for the project to continue.⁹⁹ But White's sudden death on 13 January 1891, while preparing to take up a new post as a Land Court interpreter, put an end to the idea.¹⁰⁰ Apart from the posthumous issuing of the illustrations prepared for the *History*, nothing more was produced.¹⁰¹

At the end of White's life, he was considered by some to be one of the greatest Pakeha scholars of Maori.¹⁰² Not only obituarists spoke highly of him; that august body, the committee of the Anthropology section of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, passed a vote of sympathy with his widow and praised his work, which had been of 'inestimable value to anthropological Science and to the history, in particular, of the Maori Race'.¹⁰³

His posthumous reputation has not fared so well. Complaint was made about the numerous typographical errors in the *Ancient History*,¹⁰⁴ a matter brought to White's notice by such stalwart friends as A.S. Atkinson.¹⁰⁵ However, the most significant criticisms turned on his editorial methods.¹⁰⁶ The most thorough-going and minute analysis of these methods has been made by Kendrick Smithyman, but he based his account on only a small sample of White's work. Smithyman suggested that White almost continuously re-created his historical accounts.¹⁰⁷ It needs to be pointed out that recent studies of near contemporaries, such as Grey and S. Percy Smith, show that White's standards of editing were by no means out of step with local practices.¹⁰⁸

95 The course of the project between 1879 and 1885 is best revealed in JWMS B37a and *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* (NZPD), 1880, 36, pp. 280, 445–8; 1884, 48, p. 444.

96 See various correspondence in JWMS, A61, B37a CS 85/1586, ATL.

97 Various papers in JWMS, A60, B37a, B37c, B37d; NZPD, 1888, 62, pp. 492–4.

98 JWMS B37c NO 90/602, CS 90/2671; NZPD, 1890, 68, pp. 258–62.

99 JWMS, B37c NO 90/2086, NO 91/414.

100 JWMS, B37c NO 91/414.

101 JWMS, B37a NO 91/414, NO 91/750.

102 *New Zealand Herald*, 14 January 1891; *Auckland Star*, 13 January 1891; *Auckland Weekly News*, 24 January 1891.

103 Hamilton to Mrs White, 21 January 1891, attached to the top copy of the PJ typescript, ATL.

104 H.W. Williams, *A Dictionary of the Maori Language*, 7th ed., Wellington, 1975, p. xxxi.

105 Atkinson to White, 25 October 1887, JWMS, A70. Atkinson's corrected and annotated volumes of the *Ancient History* are located in the ATL.

106 Amongst the more important critics are Elsdon Best, who annotated his comments in JWMS, c. 1912; also see E.W.G. Craig, *Man of the Mist: a Biography of Elsdon Best*, Wellington, 1964, p. 139; J.P. Johansen, *The Maori and his Religion*, Copenhagen, 1954, pp. 282–3.

107 Kendrick Smithyman, 'Making History: John White and S. Percy Smith at Work', *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (JPS), 88, 4 (1979), pp. 377–9, 386–93, 399–407.

108 Smithyman, pp. 379–89, 391, 393–9, 401–11; Johansen, p. 280; D.R. Simmons 'The Sources of Sir George Grey's Nga Mahi a Nga Tupuna', JPS, 75, 2 (1966), pp. 179–84; D.R. Simmons and B. Biggs, 'The Sources of "The Lore of the Whare-wananga"', JPS, 79, 1 (1970), pp. 35–41.

A reading of the current collections of White's work does suggest that his procedures were at times faulty. The evidence shows that he did try methodically to collect, transcribe, and index material for the *Ancient History*.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, the sheer scale of the work appears to have overwhelmed him; indexes are often a welter of cryptic terms and numbers; and some material is recorded on odd scraps of paper.¹¹⁰ He also seems to have adopted several ways of numbering manuscript items. Items were grouped according to their original manuscript source, page, subject, contents or, more commonly, according to the item's original placement in the manuscript source.¹¹¹ But these numbering systems seem to have broken down; numbers sometimes did not fit into any clear sequences, while certain manuscripts had a variety of apparently unconnected numbers or had no numbering at all.¹¹² The mundane complexities and difficulties he encountered in organizing the manuscripts for publication well up from the papers: multitudinous cross-references, instructions to himself to locate a similar or related manuscript piece, and notes to change the order of the manuscripts.¹¹³

His efforts to achieve a comprehensive coverage of Maori traditions for the *Ancient History* prompted him to cull all manner of sources for information, including the Maori letters he had received or translated during his time as an official and newspaper editor.¹¹⁴ His resort to previously published material became somewhat overzealous: Grey complained of plagiarism.¹¹⁵ The material collected covered every imaginable aspect of Maori society and culture: from waiata aroha, waiata tangi and karakia to a 'Pese Samoa', or 'Samoan Song (modern)'; from the great legendary cycles about Maui, Tawhaki, or Rata to traditions about European arrivals; from accounts of religious ritual to a description of the early Maori reaction to the sounds of clocks and bells.¹¹⁶ This same 'scatter-shot' approach applied to his informants. On one count it has been estimated that 336 individuals contributed to the *Ancient History* alone; a number of them were indirect contributors, being cited, for example, in Land Court minutes. Some of the informants were Pakeha acquaintances keen to pass on some ethnographic titbit. However the larger proportion were Maori, representing, it seems, all the major tribal and geographical areas, though quantitatively the most significant tribal source proved to be Ngai Tahu.¹¹⁷

Clearly, a comprehensive textual study remains to be done before a definitive insight into White's practices can be arrived at. Nevertheless, the present

¹⁰⁹ White to Cooper, 30 May 1881, JWMS, B37a CS 81/2169, ATL; White to Bastian, 30 August 1881, JWMS, A61, ATL; White to Cooper, 8 August 1882, JWMS, B37a CS 82/3793, ATL; White to Cooper, 20 February 1885, JWMS, B37a CS 85/590, ATL.

¹¹⁰ Reilly, pp. 410–20, 439–40.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 421–33.

¹¹² *ibid.*, pp. 427–8, 430–1.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 433–43.

¹¹⁴ A brief summary of the sources is in *ibid.*, pp. 360–68.

¹¹⁵ Grey to Hislop (NZ Colonial Secretary), 14 November 1888, JWMS, B37d CS 88/3639, ATL.

¹¹⁶ Reilly, pp. 368–75.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 375–80.

evidence tends to suggest that a critical usage or citation of White's material is justified with the proviso that, as in the case of all the nineteenth-century editors of Maori tradition, the published evidence requires careful comparison with the manuscript sources.

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