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Abstract

Describing European writing about the orient, the critic Edward Said once noted that literary accounts of its peoples tended to be organised round ‘tableaux of queerness’ (Said 103). The phrase, though dated now and open to misunderstanding, is a striking one, encapsulating as it does the tendency of these accounts to dwell on episodes characterised by the bizarre and (frequently) the cruel. Said, who had in mind writers such as Flaubert, was writing about European representations of the near/middle Eastern cultures, but his phrase can be usefully applied to European representations of peoples far from Algiers or Baghdad. In this article I’ll be looking at one particular ‘tableau of queerness’, or rather at a sequence of them: the little-known ethnographic novels of the nineteenth-century New Zealand ethnographer John White. Their existence reminds us that the project of representing Indigenous peoples in order to construct an opposing ‘European’ or ‘Western’ identity was by no means confined to the familiar territories of Africa and Asia. It was going on, in one form or another, all around the globe. White’s ethnographic novels are fascinating, in particular, because they show an early attempt at fictionalising an Indigenous people — Maori — who have since been the subject of much colonial and post-colonial writing.

JOHN O'LEARY

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AMATEUR 'ANICDOTES' — WHITE'S EARLY YEARS

John White (1826–91) is largely forgotten today. An early anthropologist and historian of Maori, he is accorded a couple of pages in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (Reilly 587–89) and the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* (Wattie 586–87) as well as a handful of references in the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*.¹ In his time, however, White was greatly respected. In the main he was admired for his ethnographic work, but he was also admired for his novel, *Te Rou*, which was published in 1874 (no lesser a figure than George Grey, a keen supporter of White's, praised the book in Parliament, describing it as 'intensely native' [Grey 567]). *Te Rou* was not the only novel White wrote. A second, unpublished one, *The Tale of Hari, the Maori Revenge*, remains in manuscript in the Wellington Public Library, while in 1940, as part of New Zealand's Centennial celebrations, A.W. Reed brought out *Revenge*, White's third and final ethnographic novel. White in fact was fascinated by fiction (as a young man he had wanted to be a poet) and wrote a great deal of it. This writing, while not necessarily 'intensely native', is intensely revealing, and offers an intriguing



John White

glimpse into the mentality of one nineteenth-century New Zealander as he attempted to translate an Indigenous people into fiction.

White was born in England, but he was brought up in the Hokianga in northern New Zealand, at a time when the European presence there was minimal and the local Nga Puhi culture was only semi-Christianised. Although staunchly Methodist and convinced, in very Victorian fashion, of the superiority of British civilisation, White was fascinated by Nga Puhi culture and studied it from an early age. He collected and translated waiata (songs), karakia (incantations), tupe (charms) and tara

(tales); in particular, he amassed hundreds of 'anecdotes' (as he called them), that is, short stories illustrative of Nga Puhi life and thought.² These 'anecdotes' cover a very wide range of subject matter, from canoe building to kumara (sweet potato) planting, from warfare to flax weaving – they are unified, however, by the theme of murder and revenge. Whether this theme reflected a real aspect of Nga Puhi culture, or whether it merely reflected White's own particular interests and prejudices, is debatable. What is certain is that these anecdotes, with their strong element of the bizarre and the cruel, provided much of the material for White's later fictional writings.

Perhaps inevitably White's ethnographic interests intersected with his literary inclinations. Initially he wrote verse imitative of Byron and Scott, with European locales and subject matter (one long piece, entitled 'Dover Castle', was apparently sent to an Auckland newspaper for publication but was refused). Gradually, however, he ceased writing about European themes and concentrated on 'Maori' subject matter, producing melodramatic poems such as 'the Chief's Last Act' in which a Maori chief, having lost his lover, kills himself (MS Papers 0075 092). Longer verse narratives incorporating Maori themes were also planned, and their plot outlines sketched – a typical one, dating from 1846 and entitled 'the Tale of Kora, the Twilight Star', tells a story of romantic love in which a young man, though 'puhi'd' (betrothed) to another, falls in love with a slave girl, Kora, and marries her despite the objections of his intended's father (MS Papers 0075 085). The story is thoroughly European in essence, but it shows how White was beginning to use Maori elements such as the puhi betrothal to propel his narrative. Later, White would make far more extensive and sophisticated use of such elements when he came to write his ethnographic novels.

LEARNED LECTURES — WHITE AS ETHNOGRAPHER

Dissatisfied with the narrowness and isolation of life in the Hokianga, White moved to Auckland in the 1850s. While there he continued to write on Maori themes (it was during this period that he began the story that would ultimately be published as *Te Rou*). Perhaps the most interesting pieces of writing he produced at this time, however, were the three lectures on Maori beliefs (or 'superstitions' as White termed them), the first of which he gave at the Auckland Mechanics' Institute in 1856. In it, White discussed Maori mythology and migration traditions, tohi (baptism) rituals, makutu (witchcraft) and moko (tattooing). While White followed George Grey's account in *Polynesian Mythology* (1855) fairly closely, there is a notable focus on cannibalism, which is ascribed a divine origin (White 1856, 7). In addition there is a marked tendency in White's lecture to connect Maori mythology to the Bible. The inundation of the world by the offspring of Tawhirimatea and Rangi ('hail, rain and sleet'), for example, is compared to the Flood of Genesis, while Tiki's creation of man out of blood and clay is seen as analogous to God's creation of Adam (10–11). This tendency to see Biblical parallels in Maori mythology was by no means peculiar to White, it should be said. Many missionaries (and some early ethnographers) believed that Maori were either Jewish in origin, or at least had dwelt near the Jews in prehistory, before migrating east across Asia into the Pacific.³ Maori, it was thought, though once highly civilised, had degenerated through loss of contact with Old World cultures, forsaking the worship of the True God and falling into deplorable practices such as cannibalism. It is this degenerationist subtext that runs through all White's depictions of Maori.

White's first lecture was well received, and prompted by its success he gave two more in 1860 and 1861. He took up where he had left off, dilating upon Maori 'superstitions' and their pernicious effects (as he saw it), before moving on to deal with warfare rituals, land tenure, canoe landing points, iwi (tribal) origins and chiefly mana (authority). While the subject of man-eating was carefully skirted ('the cannibal rites of the Maori battlefield I will pass unnoticed,' he said, 'as any description of them would disgust you' [1861: 36]), the practice of makutu (witchcraft) was roundly condemned, and lurid accounts of it — and of the utu (revenge) taken on its practitioners — were offered to White's audience. Maori, in other words, were being depicted by White as degenerate, bizarre and cruel. Only by abandoning their beliefs and converting to Christianity, White suggests, could they be saved.

CARNAGE AND CANNIBALISM — WHITE'S ETHNOGRAPHIC NOVELS

This highly negative view of Maori culture, and the tendency to depict it in lurid episodes that focussed on the bizarre and the cruel, was carried over by White into his fictional writings. In this treatment of an Indigenous or alien culture, White had good precedent, for European writers had been producing similar

TE ROU;
OR,
THE MAORI AT HOME.

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.

BY

JOHN WHITE,

NATIVE INTERPRETER, AUCKLAND; FORMERLY RESIDENT MAGISTRATE
AT WHANGANUI, AND NATIVE LAND PURCHASE COMMISSIONER.

LONDON:

SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON, LOW, AND SEARLE,
CROWN BUILDINGS, 188 FLEET STREET.

1874.

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Title Page of *Te Rou*

'tableaux of queerness' for several decades. In particular, the English cleric and novelist Charles Kingsley had in 1853 produced *Hypatia*, a vast, detailed recreation of fifth-century Alexandria that told (or purported to tell) the story of the beautiful Greek mathematician and her terrible death at the hands of an enraged mob. White

admired Kingsley's writing and had read *Hypatia*; he even proposed sending excerpts of his own novel, *Te Rou*, to the English writer for comment (Letter of June 8th, 1872 MS Papers 0075 077A). Certainly the society depicted by Kingsley (described as 'filled with sensuality, hatred, treachery, cruelty, uncertainty, terror' [2: 29]) is strikingly like that depicted by White in his own novel. If there is a difference, it is that the Alexandrians of Kingsley's book are decadent and exhausted, whereas the Maori of White's novel are trapped in a cage of superstition and fear. Both peoples, however, are united in their need for salvation — in the case of the Alexandrians, through an infusion of Germanic virtues brought by Goth invaders, and in the case of Maori, through the saving truths of Christianity and nineteenth-century European civilisation brought by British colonists.

Distracted by his work as a journalist and government official, and by the demands of a growing family, White worked slowly on his novel. By 1872, however, he was ready to give extracts of *The Maori* (as he then called it) to the newspapers for review, and in 1874 *Te Rou* was published in London by Sampson Low, a small firm that had a niche market in antipodean subjects. Handsomely produced, with a gold rangatira (chief) figure on the front cover and a map inside, *Te Rou* told (or purported to tell) the story of the Kopura, a pre-European Maori hapu (sub-tribe) living in the Hokianga.

The book is divided into twenty-four chapters, most of which have graphic, highly visual titles, such as 'The Attack and Capture of Otu Pa' and 'Cooking a Dead Slave'. The narrative, in other words, is presented in a series of dramatic scenes, or tableaux, rather than in a continuous, even narrative flow (one New Zealand critic described White's book as 'a perfect mine of episodical adventures'.⁴ The text is supplemented with many waiata (songs), whakatauki (proverbs) and karakia (spells), which, in general, are well translated. In addition, occasional notes provided by White underpin the narrative, translating Maori phrases, explaining Maori customs, and providing the scientific names for native New Zealand plants and animals.

White introduces his text with a Preface in which he strongly stresses the factual, historical nature of his book:

The tale contained in the present volume is not fiction. Though woven together in the form of a tale, as the most convenient for lifelike representation, the places mentioned are all real, as may be seen on the accompanying map; the incidents are all true, and have occurred; the personages are all real, though the names have been slightly altered to avoid unnecessary offense to the living; the native mode of expression has been carefully followed; and the songs, proverbs and incantations are trustworthy (though, perhaps, in some respects imperfect) reproductions of the ancient originals.

(White 1874, v)

White's claim of factuality and historicity — which he probably made to distinguish his novel from superficially 'Maori' productions such as George Wilson's *Ena* (1874) — while significant, is not really tenable. What is offered to

the European reader in *Te Rou* is a carefully constructed *version* of pre-Christian Maori life, acceptable to nineteenth-century Europeans, albeit one that does indeed make very extensive use of real-life incidents and personages and bona fide ethnographic data such as waiata and karakia.

How, exactly, does White construct his massaged version of pre-Christian Maori life? One important strategy is selectivity, by which I mean that White tends in *Te Rou* to concentrate on the bloodier, more gruesome aspects of pre-Christian Maori existence. *Te Rou*'s subtitle ('the Maori at Home') might lead one to think that the book is going to deal with the arts of peace, but this is not so. *Te Rou*, in fact, is a long and exceptionally bloody chronicle of murder, warfare, suicide and cannibalism.

The carnage starts immediately, with old Tare's graphic description of how in former days he slew a neighbouring chief, Papa, who had trespassed on his lands. This is soon followed by the murder of some young tribesmen at the neighbouring Otu pa, whose cooking and dismemberment are later described in horrific detail. This act provokes a gruesome account of killings in past years carried out by the Kopura:

I took the spear I had gained when first I fell, and, looking round, I saw six of those who had been so brave but a short time before laid low as the worm. I smote them on the head with a branch of a tree which I broke for the purpose, and then besmeared the calves of my legs with their brains. Going farther on...I saw Kawe sitting against a stone. His arm was broken; I bound it up, and while doing so the other two came back with the head of Haupa's uncle, which they had cut off with a piece of flint.... (19)

After this, the blood-letting increases: the Kopura gather their allies and attack their enemies at Otu pa. The attack is successful, and many of the Otu people are killed, in circumstances of great savagery; even the odd, wounded survivor is brutally dispatched. Revenge obtained, the Kopura return to their settlement, but their peacetime lives are scarcely less violent – a mother, taken prisoner, drowns herself and her child; an old slave, Koko, is clubbed to death and eaten; a wife is insulted by her husband and hangs herself; and the husband is then ambushed and garroted by the wife's devoted retainer. Finally, the hapu's ariki (high chief), Takaho, who was the insulted woman's father, dies of grief, and two old women are strangled to accompany him in the afterlife.

Particularly horrific are the scenes of cannibalism that punctuate *Te Rou*. Previous writers about Maori had alluded elliptically to this practice; White himself mentioned it in his lectures, but had refused to dwell on it. In *Te Rou* any such hesitation is cast aside, and the reader is offered several scenes in which man-eating is depicted in lurid detail. Here, for example, is a passage describing the consumption of one of the young Kopura men murdered by the Otu pa people:

A young chief took a rib, and, while picking it, stood over the old women directing the division of the flesh. A young damsel also took some flesh from a leg, and returned to

a group of her young companions, who asked for a taste. The flesh having been divided, the baskets were set before those who were to feast, and soon all were eating, laughing as they picked the bones. Those who had a thigh or an arm-bone would bruise one end of it, warm it again at the fire, and suck the marrow out of the bruised end; and to make sure of getting it all out they would heat a fern-stalk, which they passed through the bone, then draw it across their lips, sucking the marrow off with their curled, protruded tongues.... (51)

Noticeable here is how White increases the horror of the scene by his careful use of terms such as 'damsel', which carry connotations of innocence and harmlessness grotesquely at variance with the activity being described. The presence of these 'damsels' here is noteworthy, too, because according to writers on the subject such as Edward Shortland, Maori women rarely in fact took part in the eating of human flesh (Shortland 67–74). White presumably knew this, but chose to include women in his cannibal scenes in order to underline what he saw as the savagery and brutality of pre-European Maori life. It is a significant distortion, for through it, the highly regulated tapu activity of consuming human flesh is presented as a casual commonplace, the very image of bestial social disorder.

White's selectivity — his relentless concentration on the bloodier, more gruesome aspects of pre-Christian Maori existence — distorts his readers' view of Maori, since it gives the impression that ancient Maori life was a constant round of killing. Why White concentrated, in his novels, on this darker side of Maori life is not hard to fathom: he had a particular, degenerationist view of Maori, underpinned by a strong streak of Methodist disapproval of and dislike for pagan Maori culture. This view of Maori and Maori culture emerged in his fiction just as it did in his more straightforward ethnographic writings.

White's concentration on the darker side of pre-Christian Maori culture, and his tendency to depict this in highly coloured, extremely dramatic scenes, or tableaux, undoubtedly makes *Te Rou* resemble those 'tableaux of queerness' which contemporary European writers produced as they described other cultures. *Te Rou*, indeed, should be seen as part of a larger literary tradition produced by nineteenth-century European writers in which the exotic, bizarre, and unusual elements of an alien culture are focussed on obsessively — one thinks in this connection, not merely of Kingsley's *Hypatia*, but of a book like Flaubert's *Salammô* (1862), which, like *Te Rou*, meticulously reconstructed a strange, cruel, ancient world, in this case that of the ancient Carthaginians.

ROMANTIC AND SENTIMENTAL — WHITE'S ANGELIC MAORI

If a selective concentration on the darker side of Maori existence is one means White uses to mould his version of pre-Christian Maori life, another is the injection of Christian or European notions into the thoughts and actions of some of his Maori characters. Most of the Maori in *Te Rou* are fiendish; there are some, however, who are decidedly angelic, or at least sentimental and romantic. An

example is the captive mother who drowns herself and her child: drastic as her act is, she herself is portrayed in the most pathetic manner: 'Her tears fell on the nurseling's face and partially awoke him, and she said, "Oh my child! Do not stop me in my song for thy father; it is all I have to give him..."' (201). This kind of sentimentalising is apparent in other parts of the novel. One male character, Poko, for instance, boasts how as a young man he became a slave to love in a very troubadour fashion ('I did not care for father, mother, priest or tapu. I loved, and that was all I wished to know; and love was my only master...'), while another, Heta, fights a rival for the hand of a young woman, Aramita, in a barely disguised knightly combat (162–63).

The influence of medieval romance (or nineteenth-century versions of medieval romance, such as Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' or Scott's *Lady of the Lake*) is palpable here: White is giving his European readers characters and sentiments they can relate to, in what otherwise might seem a wearying chronicle of incomprehensible mayhem. The fact that the characters in *Te Rou* generally address each other in archaic, 'medieval' English, full of thee's and thou's and woe is me's, only underlines the debt that White owes to this British literary tradition.

White, in fact, is playing a kind of double game. On the one hand he relentlessly portrays Maori as alien and devilish (thus fulfilling the nineteenth-century European reader's craving for the bizarre and the exotic); on the other hand he carefully offers some Maori characters who are sentimental and 'Christian' in feeling and behaviour (thus fulfilling the nineteenth-century European reader's need for something familiar to identify with). In this way, the reader of *Te Rou* is both repelled by, and drawn into, the lives of White's Maori characters.

Equally interesting, in this respect, is what White chooses to leave *out* of his narrative. White had difficulty with the sexually explicit nature of much pre-Christian Maori culture,⁵ and this unwillingness to deal with the issue of physical sex (typical of White's period) is carried over into *Te Rou*, which, for all its claimed ethnographic accuracy, signally fails to deal with this important aspect of Maori life. Sex, in fact, is completely absent from the book: White's Maori kill, and kill brutally, but never make love. It is another example of how White's depiction of Maori is carefully tailored to suit the tastes of his nineteenth-century European readers.

Te Rou, as mentioned previously, was not the only novel White wrote. Even before it was published he had begun a second ethnographic fiction, the unpublished *Hari*. Like *Te Rou*, *Hari* describes (or purports to describe) the life of a pre-Christian Maori sub-tribe (the Tihao) living in the Hokianga. Like *Te Rou*, it presents the life of the Tihao in a series of 'tableaux of queerness' in which there is a marked focus on the bizarre and the cruel. Like *Te Rou*, too, *Hari* possesses a number of characters who display, in contrast to the prevailing ethos of murder and revenge, romantic, sentimental attitudes of a very Victorian cast. The morality of these characters is necessarily at odds with the savage, pagan

culture (as White depicts it) that these characters live in, anticipating as it does an apparently Christian and European mentality. These characters, indeed, seem in an odd way to be trying to become European.

TAMING THE SAVAGE NATIVE— THE INDIGENOUS BECOMES DOCILE

Hari is notable, in particular, for one very striking scene in which Te Rou (the chief who gave his name to White's first ethnographic novel) has his tapu (sacredness) ritually destroyed by having cooked food placed on his head (White, *Hari* 631). This scene, which was apparently based on a true event, and which White had described in one of his lectures, takes place towards the end of the novel; it marks a change in the way Maori are depicted by White, for after this climactic episode the Tihao become pacific, even docile, the literary equivalents, in a manner, of the passive, dreaming Maori painted by late nineteenth-century New Zealand artists such as Charles Goldie.⁶ While this destruction of chiefly mana (authority) is explained in terms of a complicated plot involving a wife's revenge, the real significance of the episode is clear. Te Rou, the central character of the pagan Maori world depicted in *Te Rou* and *Hari*, indeed its very touchstone and heart, is symbolically degraded, and with him the whole structure of pre-Christian Maori belief. Maori have to be tamed, it seems, even (or perhaps especially) in fiction.

The new way of depicting Maori was continued by White in his third and final ethnographic novel, *Revenge*, which he wrote toward the end of his life, and which A.W. Reed edited and published in 1940, nearly half a century after White's death. Despite its title, *Revenge* is largely a peaceful story. Warfare threatens the Mount Eden tribe, the pre-European tribe living on the Auckland isthmus who are the subject of White's novel, but it does not materialise, and the only cannibal character, the albino man-eater Pupuha, is executed for his misdeeds. If cruelty and violence are generally absent, the bizarre, however, is not: *Revenge* has a number of striking scenes designed to fascinate the European reader. One occurs early in the novel when tribespeople wave their arms in front of their ailing ariki (high chief), in an attempt to 'scrape away' the evil spirit that is thought to be possessing him (White 1940, 40). Later, in another striking scene, Popo, who is still unwell, is 'steamed' in an oven, the intention being, apparently, to 'sweat' the malady out of him (189). Of particular note, too, is the extended, highly detailed description of the gull-egg gathering expedition in the Waitemata harbour undertaken by the Mount Eden tribe (180–86), and the depictions of the pakuha (mass betrothal meetings) that occur several times in the novel.

Revenge ends happily, with the hero Popo and the heroine Ata-Rehia marrying and living happily ever after - White states on his last page, in fact, rather prosaically, that they had a 'large family at Mount Eden'. In this the two Maori lovers resemble White himself, who had several children and who lived in the Auckland suburb of that name. White, in a sense, is writing about his *ancestors*

— his geographical forebears, if not his biological ones. This claiming of local ancestry has been identified by the literary critic, Terry Goldie, as one of the cardinal characteristics of European writing about Indigenous peoples (Goldie 149–68). It is fascinating to see it displayed so clearly, so unselfconsciously, here.

NOTES

- ¹ White's straightforward ethnographic work, in particular his massive *Ancient History of the Maori*, has been discussed by Michael Reilly in two articles for the *New Zealand Journal of History*. See 'John White: the Making of a Nineteenth-Century Writer and Collector of Maori Traditions', and 'John White: Seeking the Elusive Mohio — White and his Informants'.
- ² White's 'anecdotes' are scattered through his *Private Journal*, notebooks and other papers. Many of the most striking are to be found in two notebooks entitled 'Anecdotes for Book on New Zealand', MS Papers 0075 139 and 143.
- ³ The missionary the Rev. Richard Taylor, for instance, whose voluminous study of New Zealand and its Indigenous people *Te Ika a Maui* appeared in 1855, believed that Maori were one of the 'long-lost tribes of Israel' who had wandered east across Asia and taken ship to Hawaii, Tahiti and, finally, New Zealand. Arthur Thomson, on the other hand, a military surgeon and amateur ethnographer whose massive *Story of New Zealand* was published in 1859, proposed that Maori were of Malay origin and had migrated in 'proas' from Indonesia via Timor, Fiji and Samoa.
- ⁴ See the review 'Te Rou' in the *New Zealand Herald*, 27th March 1875. Reviewers of *Te Rou*, both in New Zealand and England, were respectful rather than enthusiastic. One commented that a little of White's style 'goes a long way' and wished that White had constructed the plot of his book 'with a little more skill' (see review 'Te Rou' in the *New Zealand Times*, 19th May 1875).
- ⁵ White had to bowdlerise, for example, many of the Nga Puhi tara (tales) he collected as a young man while living in the Hokianga. 'Nearly all my best tales are tainted with indecency' he recorded disapprovingly in his *Private Journal* (see *Private Journal* entry for 22nd August 1849).
- ⁶ Charles Goldie, who was active in Auckland around the turn of the century, painted both Maori and European subjects, especially portraits. He is best known today for his painstaking, detailed pictures of elderly Maori, who are often shown as passive, dreaming figures, lost in reverie and remembrance of times past. See for example, *Memories* (1903) and *Meditation* (1904).

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