



NEW ZEALAND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## BEFORE NZAA AND AFTER 2004

Les Groube  
Mellionec, France

The Maori of New Zealand, almost from the first European contact, have provoked intense speculation on their origins and relationships. This curiosity may have been partly inspired by pique that these islands, the largest in the Pacific beyond New Guinea, were discovered and colonised long before Europeans had learnt to venture off-shore, but largely it was a genuine and sustained curiosity, tinged all the time with an alertness that the Maori were a formidable military threat to colonial expansion.

From the onset of colonial aspirations in New Zealand it was officially conceded by the British that, in contrast to Australia, land was “owned” by the sedentary agricultural Maori, and some sort of legal exchange or documentation, acceptable in English/Roman law, was necessary for all land purchases. Thus under this policy—but not always the scrupulous supervision—of the colonial administrators, land had to be “correctly” purchased through the traditional land tenure system. Although, particularly in the early years of English settlement, many land sales were fraudulent—both parties were capable of great deception—the fact that land was “owned” through descent from recognised ancestors thrust Maori history into the forefront of colonial politics. Maori principles of ownership through right of original occupancy, *take tupuna*, or by conquest, *take raupatu*, were analogous to those in English and European law. Thus the widespread interest in Maori traditions had a quite pragmatic origin; in order to lever the land away from the owners it was necessary not only to accept the authenticity of the traditions themselves, but also to get to know those traditions so that conflicting claims could be resolved through the courts. As the colonial government took upon itself the sole right to purchase land, the government itself became involved in sanctioning Maori oral history. Every official land purchase was a *de facto* acknowledgment of the authenticity and validity of Maori tradition.

Government approval of Maori history is nowhere more obvious than in the astonishing literary and translation efforts of Governor Sir George Grey who published within a few years, Maori songs (*Ko Nga Moteatea* 1853), stories (*Ko nga Mahinga a nga Tupuna Maori* 1854) with the latter in translation (*Polynesian Mythology* 1855). This vast output could be seen not only as formal

notification of government approval but, cynically, as a means of “tidying up” the complex and often conflicting local traditions by publishing “certificated” versions. This cynicism could be undeserved; Grey was a dedicated scholar of the Maori language. These works were clearly labours of love but he was still one of the cleverest administrators in the Colonial Service and his books not only clearly implied the official acceptance of Maori traditions by the colonial authorities but gave notice to the aspiring English settlers that they must do likewise. The Colonial Office had learnt a great deal from the experience of purchasing land in India where it was essential to work with and not against the established land tenure systems.

It is probable that throughout the Colonial Service officers were encouraged to establish sound legal bases for any purchases; in dealing with preliterate societies this meant becoming familiar with local customs, authority structures and inheritance systems. Few were as adept at this as Sir George Grey. In the newly emerging landed class of white New Zealand, as pressure for land increased, amateur genealogists, oral historians and translators (Maori and Pakeha) were in great demand and eventually many became professionals serving in the Maori Land Courts as translators or judges. Grey’s published works and many other books from a growing band of traditional scholars, the files, official letters, submissions, claims and counter-claims became, and remain, the legal basis of land ownership. Oral history had been incorporated into property law, but in becoming so had also become the property the state.

The extraordinary story of the collection and usurpation of Maori oral traditions to the service of the state, and the not always impartial legal system which made judgement between conflicting versions, might seem to have little relevance to the formation of the NZAA. This lies in the slow emergence, during fifty years of collection and publication of genealogies and oral stories, of submissions, disputes and judgments in the Land Courts and numerous discussions, letter exchanges and debates between a select group of “experts”, of an “authorised” version of Maori traditional history. The centre-piece of this was the widely accepted “traditional trinity” of Kupe, Toi and The Great Fleet, first published in this celebrated form seventy years after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi (Smith 1910).

With genealogically derived dates of AD 950 and 1150, the account of the Polynesian discovery of New Zealand by Kupe, Toi and his grandson Whatonga and the eventual settlement of Aotearoa by a fleet of canoes in AD 1350 was convincing, romantic and, because it entered the primary school syllabus, clearly authorised. Assiduously taught, learned and believed as authentic history by Maori and Pakeha alike, the official version was still alive, but not

quite well, when the first meetings of the nascent Archaeological Association were held only fifty years ago.

The reason for this disquieting situation in the traditional story of the settlement of New Zealand (and Polynesia) was a reaction against the excesses of the traditionalist's claims, both in New Zealand and the Pacific. Culminating in the quasi-fraudulent "discovery" and publication of the *Lore of the Whare Wananga* (Smith 1913, 1915) a handful of influential scholars, mainly through the pages of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, convinced a far from sceptical public that the memory of the Maori *tohunga* was prodigious, recalling in infinite detail events remote in time and place as the Polynesians colonised the vast Pacific Ocean. But, as I argued many years ago (Groube 1986:58):

The real owners of the past of any nation, state or province are not the people today, nor the land-owners who are the guardians of the evidence but the manipulators of that past, the historians, prehistorians and archaeologists who transform the past into words.

With this ownership comes responsibility so that the burden of grappling with this "authorised version" is now borne by the NZAA, which is, whether it likes it or not, the legitimate heir to Grey, Smith, Gudgeon, Best and the lot.

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of this Association, therefore, I would like to see a renewed determination to re-examine the pioneering manipulators of the Maori past, both amateur and professional, their methods, motives and results. To the young Turks of professional archaeology today, such a task barely falls within the remit of the NZAA, but from what I have been able to read since leaving New Zealand in 1969, I am fearful of the emergence of an apartheid prehistory, where professionalism and—if I may be allowed an old man's cynicism—fadism, has wrenched us from our primary task: unravelling the history of the Maori. To do this we must examine—to use the new BBC vogue-word—the bullshit we inherited from the nineteenth century. When I left New Zealand I thought this re-examination was underway; I have been disappointed with what I have read. We, the scientific manipulators, should not ignore the genealogical manipulators who preceded us; it may be boring, it may be unrewarding and certainly unpopular, but I would hope that in 2054, on the 100th anniversary of the Association, we can proudly report that we have thoroughly disinterred our own past, that we can sharply distinguish the authentic from the fake, the speculative from the hopeful, the truth from the vogue.

It would be remarkable if New Zealand could teach other countries that came under the yoke of European colonialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries how to cope with their own apartheid of the past. The European, particularly British, colonial view of the pasts of the millions of people whom

they temporarily “administered” was patronising, racist but above all pragmatic; the past, or at least the *massa*’s rendering of it, was used as an instrument of control, if not of repression. The NZAA must come to terms with its own colonial past through scholarship and wisdom.

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