

# LITERATURE

## THE NEW NET GOES FISHING — RECENT MAORI WRITING IN NEW ZEALAND

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For many people first acquaintance with New Zealand comes from reading the short stories of Katherine Mansfield. The reader of her works may be forgiven for gaining the erroneous impression that New Zealand is a little England transplanted in the South Pacific. The life of the characters in her stories is almost typically English despite the antipodean setting. There is little hint of the existence of cultural values and traditions other than those brought to the colony by the English settlers.

However, Katherine Mansfield's view of New Zealand society is a restricted one. Her world is that of the prosperous white settlers. Notably absent from her short stories are the Maori people, whose Polynesian culture was firmly rooted in these islands almost a thousand years before the arrival of the first European.

The tendency to dismiss the indigenous culture of the Maoris has remained almost to the present day. Such have been the emotional ties binding New Zealanders of English descent to the "old country" that we have failed to appreciate the wealth of Maori cultural expression in song, dance and poetry. The Maori has been the forgotten man of New Zealand literature. In 1956 Robert Chapman in the introduction to his *Anthology of New Zealand verse* regretted that there was a lack of poems about or by Maoris. Similarly, Dan Davin in his preface to the 1957 edition of *New Zealand short stories* expressed his disappointment that "this gifted people has not yet given us imaginative writers in English". As few *Pakehas* (the Maori word for New Zealanders of European descent) have taken the trouble to learn the Maori language, communication between the two cultures has been negligible. Apart from a handful of chants and songs rendered into English and some over-romanticized versions of Maori myths and legends, the richness of the oral literary tradition of the Maori has remained largely inaccessible to non-Maori speakers.

Recently, however, the situation has radically changed. Corresponding with

a general revival of Maori arts and crafts and a new interest in Maori language has come a burgeoning of Maori literary expression. At long last we hear the authentic voice of the Maori who expresses in poetry and prose the cultural conflicts of the members of his race, who are inexorably caught up in the conflict of two cultures, the one essentially rural and based on traditions of communal activity and the other technological and individualistic in orientation. Writers such as Hone Tuwhare, Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, Rora Paki, Riki Erihi and Arapera Blank are the representatives of this present generation of Maori people who have been educated in *Pakeha* ways but still retain pride in their Maori heritage even if English has replaced their native language as their preferred medium of expression. They are the first to make use of literary forms which are European in origin. Through their writings they endeavour to give insights into what it is to be Maori and draw attention to the values of a way of life which is being steadily eroded by European influences.

Of Hone Tuwhare, a fellow New Zealand poet, R. A. K. Mason, has said: "Here for the first time is a member of the Maori race qualifying as a poet in English and in the idiom of his generation, but still drawing his main strength from his own people". In the poems that make up the collection *No ordinary sun* (1964), Tuwhare laments the decline of Maori traditions. The heroic deeds of the Maori warriors in pre-European times remain only in the memory of the "old men chanting in the dark".

Where are the men of mettle?  
are there old scores  
left to settle?  
When will the canoes leap  
to the stab and kick  
the sea-wet flourish  
of pointed paddles?  
Will the sun play again  
to the skip of museles  
on curved backs bared  
to the sea's lash  
the sea's punch?  
to War! to War!

The coming of the *Pakeha* has sapped the strength and virility of the Maori race. The only tangible reminders of the proud past are "the bleached bones marrowless" on the wind-swept sandhills.

Hone Tuwhare's themes are essentially Maori. The deep reverence felt by Polynesian people for nature, their Earth Mother, is seen in the poem which gives its title to the collection. As R. A. K. Mason comments in the foreword: "In such a noble poem as "No ordinary sun", in speaking against atomic evils imperilling our shores, he (Tuwhare) draws so profoundly from Maoridom that the source can be felt to be in the depths common to all mankind".

Tree let your naked arms fall  
 nor extend vain entreaties to the radiant ball  
 This is no gallant monsoon's flash,  
 no dashing trade wind's blast.  
 The fading green of your magic  
 emanations shall not make pure again  
 these polluted skies... for this  
 is no ordinary sun.

Similar concerns are voiced in the short stories and novels of Witi Ihimaera. Ihimaera is a young Maori writer of considerable promise who pleads eloquently for the preservation of the distinctive values of *Maoritanga* (Maori culture). His portrayal of Maori life is both realistic and compassionate. He records the strains and stresses that affect the Maori people, whose traditions are threatened by contamination from without. Social changes strike at the heart of Maoridom. The closeness and warmth of community life are fast disappearing. The young people are increasingly attracted by the bright lights of the city, leaving the *whanau* (rural community) deserted except for the old ones, the *Kaumatuas*, who remain the lonely guardians of tribal lore.

For a moment he mourns to himself, this old one. Sadly he recalls an ancient saying. How old it is he does not know. Perhaps it had come with the Maori when he journeyed across the sea to Aotearoa. From Hawaiki. From Tawhiti-roa, Tawhiti-nui, Tawhiti-panamano the magical names for the first home of the Maori. No matter... Even before the Pakeha had come to this land, his coming had been foretold.

Kei muri i te awe kapara he tangata ke,  
 mana te ao, he ma.  
 Shadowed behind the tattooed face a stranger stands,  
 he who owns the earth, and he is white.

And with his coming, the tattooed face had changed. That was the way of things, relentless and unalterable. But the spirit of the Maori, did that not change as well? Ae, even in his own day, Maoritanga had been dying. But not the Spirit, nor the joy or aroha. Now...

He cannot help it, this Kaumatua, but the tears fall.

The Maori language has almost gone from this whanau. The respect for Maori customs and Maori tapu, that too was disappearing. No more did people take their shoes off before coming into this meeting house. The floor is scuffed with shoe-marks. The tukutuku work is pitted with cigarette burns. And even the gods and tipuna, they have been defaced...

This meeting house, it had once been noble. Now the red ochre is peeling from the carvings. The reed work is falling apart. The paint is flaking from the swirling kowhaiwhai designs. And the floor is stained with the pirau, the beer, for even that has been brought into this meeting house.

So too have the Maori fallen from nobility. They do not come to this meeting house with respect nor with aroha. They look with blind eyes at the carvings and do not see the beauty and strength of spirit which is etched in every whorl, every bold and sweeping spiral. They too are the strangers behind the tattooed face (*Pounamu, Pounamu, 1972*).

But the impression must not be left that modern Maori writing dwells excessively on the past or is unduly pessimistic concerning the eventual absorption of Maoritanga into European culture. In this respect the title of the most recent work by Witi Ihimaera is significant: *The new net goes fishing*. The old net of past generations has to be put aside as it is no longer appropriate to the realities of life today and must be replaced by a modern one. The Maori youth of today hold the future of their ethnic group in their hands. In *Waiariki* (1975), the first collection of stories written by a Maori woman to be published, Patricia Grace takes up a similar theme. The Maori girl in *The parade* stands for this present generation of Maoris who no longer feel shackled to the old ways. She is poignantly aware that her people are looked upon as anachronisms, relics to be exhibited for the crowd's amusement at festivals and anniversaries.

Is this what we are to them? Museum pieces, curios, antiques, shells under glass, a travelling circus, a floating zoo?

But this does not discourage her. The note upon which the short story concludes is one of optimism in the inherent strength and nobility of the Maori race and its ability to meet the challenges of the future with the courage and determination it has shown in the past.

I took in a big breath, filling my lungs with sea and air and land and people.  
And with past and present and future, and felt a new strength course through me.  
I lifted my voice to sing and heard and felt the others join with me. Singing loudly  
into the darkest of nights. Calling them to paddle the canoes and to paddle on and  
on. To haul the canoes down and paddle. On and on --

Hoea ra nga waka,  
E te iwi e,  
Aotea\*, Tainui\*, Kurahaupo\*  
Hoea hoea ra.

Toia mai nga waka,  
E te iwi e,  
Hoea hoea ra,  
Mataatua\*, Te Arawa\*,  
Takitimu\*, Tokomaru\*,  
Hoea hoea ra.

This marriage of Polynesian and European literary traditions has added a further dimension to New Zealand writing. Such is the vigour and purpose of this literature that one cannot discount the possibility that the next Katherine Mansfield will come from the ranks of the Maori writers.

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\* The seven canoes that brought the Maori people to New Zealand from their legendary Polynesian homeland in Hawaiki.