
REVIEW

Moon, Paul. 2016. *Ka ngaro te reo. Māori language under siege in the nineteenth century*. Dunedin: Otago University Press.

Jeanette King: Aotahi School of Māori and Indigenous Studies, and New Zealand Institute of Language Brain and Behaviour, University of Canterbury
<j.king@canterbury.ac.nz>

The latest book from prolific writer, New Zealand historian Paul Moon, *Ka ngaro te reo*, is a history of the Māori language covering the hundred years from 1800 to 1899. This century was undoubtedly the most momentous for the Māori people and their language. From previous intermittent contact with Europeans, the 1800s saw the arrival of missionaries, followed by European settlers, the development of a government, and widespread advances in infrastructure. Colonisation also brought with it concomitant deleterious effects for Māori, whose population declined to seriously low levels by the beginning of the 20th century. As for the Māori language, during the 19th century te reo acquired a written form, many new words and a Māori print culture developed and flourished for a time.

This formative period is often overlooked, thus a book about te reo in the 19th century is well overdue. Any description of the history of the language is of course tied up with the history of its speakers: what they were doing and what was happening around them. Accordingly, this book has an appropriate historical focus with Moon utilizing his skills to access a wide range of written material, including newspapers as well as church and government papers. But,

tellingly, the book contains very little material from a linguistic standpoint. This means that not all relevant information is included and that analyses are bereft of linguistic theory.

Chapter one begins with a description of a modern day tangihanga, with the ritual's powerful links to generations of ancestors, a powerful connection between the present and the past. The chapter then moves on to describe aspects of Māori language and culture in the year 1800. As well as giving details of tribal structure and the significance of whakapapa, Moon stresses the importance of the oral word along with the literary aspects of te reo Māori (oratory, song, fable). Chapter two covers up to 1814 and the arrival of missionary Samuel Marsden. During this period the main contact with Europeans was through interactions with whalers and sealers and early explorers.

Chapter three covers up to the mid 1830s and focusses on the work of the missionaries and their efforts to devise an alphabet for the Māori language as part of their aim of translating the Bible. While the important work of Kendall and others is given some prominence, there is no discussion of the fascinating details of the development of the alphabet for the Māori language in the late 1820s as ably outlined by Parkinson (2016). The biggest debate in the formation of the orthography for te reo was the comparatively late inclusion of <wh> in 1841. This is not mentioned at all, although Maclagan and King (2002) provide a good account of the reasons for the late acceptance of this phoneme into the Māori alphabet. In contrast, Moon makes much of the effect of the standardisation of the Māori language on dialect pronunciations, for example, citing contemporary sources regarding a now lost variant pronunciation of <h> in Northland (pp. 97–99). Moon posits that the formulation of a standard alphabet can have negative repercussions on dialectal pronunciations, but the evidence is necessarily speculative and not supported by an example in the Māori language itself, the fact that the various pronunciations of <wh> in the 19th century have coalesced to /f/ amongst modern speakers, an outcome not predicable by the orthography (see Maclagan and King 2002).

Easily the biggest change te reo underwent during early colonisation was its transformation into a written language, a process Moon suggests “reconfigured elements of Māori language and culture” (p.12). However, from a wider perspective, the presence of a reasonably uncontested orthography and written standard has been an underappreciated boon to the revitalization of the language. There are many endangered languages where a written form is either

non-existent or contested, situations which drain much productive energy in a revitalization context.

Chapter four covers up to the mid-point of the century from the Treaty of Waitangi through to the publication of the first (government) newspaper in Māori in 1842 and the arrival of European settlers. Here there is a discussion about the formation of neologisms in Māori as a response to the many new aspects of Pākehā culture. Moon focusses wholly on the role of missionaries in their coining of new words in their translation of the Bible (p. 110-111) and neglects work describing the role Māori themselves played in this process (see Harlow 2004 for a good description). The effect of *te reo* on New Zealand English through the borrowing of Māori words (see Macalister 2006) is peremptorily dismissed: “English had little need to borrow from *te reo*” (p. 110), whereas most scholars agree that “the most distinctive feature of New Zealand English is the presence of words of Maori origin” (Macalister 2006, p. 1).

The formation of the first government in the 1850s opens chapter five which covers the period up to the 1860s. This is the era of Governor Grey who had a strong interest in Māori culture, but from a perspective where the culture was “regarded as something belonging to the past” (p. 149). One of the strengths of the book is the numerous examples of the unyielding dominant narrative of the European towards Māori, “the embedded mentality of cultural superiority” (p. 67) in which the Māori language was seen as a barrier to successful completion of the colonial agenda. However, this strength with Pākehā sources also belies another major weakness: there are very few Māori sources cited so we do not get to appreciate Māori perspectives of *te reo*. While Moon mentions the burgeoning use of writing by Māori who were “constantly sending letters” (p. 109) there is no in depth description of the tens of thousands of letters written by Māori to government officials (particularly Land Purchase Officer Donald McLean) in the second half of the 19th century. These letters, and many others, are held in archives throughout the country. This written material, ranging in subject from land issues to mythology and poetry, has wider significance as arguably the largest body of writing which survives from an indigenous colonised people produced within a generation of European contact (Orbell 1995, pp. 19 & 21).

With regard to Māori writing, a particularly accessible publication is John Caselberg’s collection of translations of 19th century writings by Māori (1975) which includes Māori perspectives of missionaries, the Treaty debates

and the New Zealand Wars. By overlooking such material Moon's book loses an excellent opportunity to include discussion of the use of the Māori language in political discourse, the epitome of which were arguably Renata Tamakihikurangi's 1861 letters about the wars (Caselberg 1975, pp. 82–97) which have been expertly analysed by Head (2001).

In chapter six, which covers the 1870s to the 1890s there is much useful material covering both the social Darwinism expressed by Pākehā of the era, which existed alongside the romanticism of the “Māoriland” of Pākehā writers. It was also this period which saw the passing of the Native Schools Act (1876), where government funding was only to be supplied for schools where English was the medium of instruction. Thus, the era of the Māori language mission schools came to an end.

Turning to the end of the 19th century the book concludes with a chapter covering the year 1899 and the summation of Moon's thesis and the idea proposed in the book's title that the Māori language was under siege. His reasoning is that “given the dire condition of the Māori population by the 1890s, it is hardly surprising that this was when te reo reached its nadir” (p. 13). Moon assumes that because Māori themselves were deemed to be dying out then their language must also have been dying. While he provides much evidence that this was the Pākehā viewpoint of the time few Māori sources are cited. While it is uncontroversial to say that the 19th century colonisation of Aotearoa initiated the processes that would eventually lead to te reo becoming an endangered language in the 20th century, in 1899 the Māori language was still spoken in predominantly Māori communities where all but a few Māori still resided. That is, the domains present in 1800 were in 1899 still strongly associated with speaking Māori: the home, the community and important marae ritual. And during the course of the century te reo had extended its scope into the written form, and had flirted with a print culture. To be sure, the additional domains now present in the wider environment: education, business and government which were initially Māori were strongly English by the end of the 19th century. English certainly had the power of status which would ultimately be the motivator for language shift in the 20th century. But that shift was not present at the end of the 19th century. It had yet to come. So while Māori themselves may have felt under siege at this time it does not follow that the language was too.

The literature on language endangerment tells us that while absolute numbers of speakers can be an important indicator of the health of a language, it is the existence of intergenerational language transmission which is the key

indicator (Fishman 1991). Moon himself cites Inspector of Schools that at the beginning of the 20th century saying that “te reo was still the mother tongue of practically all Māori children” (p. 198). Benton’s work (1991) shows that the shift away from raising Māori children as speakers of Māori really only began around World War One and that the nadir of te reo was actually in the 1970s when there were only two communities which were raising children as speakers of te reo.

Instead of *Ka ngaro te reo* (the language disappears) an alternative title might be *Ka ora te reo* (the language lives). For the information contained in Moon’s book is capable of such a reading. Moon himself contends that the present day tangihanga described in the opening pages is very similar to those conducted 200 years ago, the main difference being that the language differs greatly in the “context in which it was nestled” (p. 17). In many ways this book describes the resilience of the Māori language in the 19th century.

References

- Benton, Richard A. 1991. *The Māori language: Dying or reviving?* Honolulu: East West Center, 1991. Reprinted by New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 1997.
- Caselberg, John (ed.). 1975. *Māori is my name: historical Māori writings in translation*. Dunedin: John McIndoe
- Fishman, Joshua A. 1991. *Reversing language shift*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Harlow, Ray. 2004. ‘Borrowing and its alternatives in Māori.’ In Jan Tent and Paul Geraghty (eds) *Borrowing: a Pacific Perspective*. Canberra: ANU. 145–169.
- Head, Lyndsay. 2001. ‘The pursuit of modernity in Māori society — The conceptual bases of citizenship in the early colonial period.’ In Andrew Sharp and P. G. McHugh (eds) *Histories, Power and Loss*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books. 97–121.
- Macalister, John. 2006. ‘The Maori presence in the New Zealand English lexicon, 1850–2000: Evidence from a corpus-based study.’ *English World-Wide* 27 (1): 1–24.
- Maclagan, Margaret and Jeanette King. 2002. ‘The pronunciation of wh in Māori: A case study from the late nineteenth century.’ *Te Reo* 45: 45–63.
- Orbell, Margaret. 1995. *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Maori myth and legend*. Canterbury University Press: Christchurch.
- Parkinson, Phil. 2016. *The Māori grammars and vocabularies of Thomas Kendall and John Gare Butler*. Canberra: ANU. [First published in *Rongorongo Studies* in 2003].

