

A Book's Progress: The Story of *The Ancient History of the Maori*

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One of the treasures in the Alexander Turnbull Library is the Maori manuscript collection of John White, who died in 1891. Many of the items in this collection were intended for his work devoted to providing a series of Maori historical texts encompassing the mythological origins to the present of nineteenth century New Zealand. Only the first six volumes of the projected thirteen were published between 1887 and 1890. A seventh featuring some crudely drawn illustrations was issued posthumously. The set was entitled *The Ancient History of the Maori, His Mythology and Traditions*. Along with the Maori publications by Sir George Grey, these still remain one of the major published collections of Maori tradition. They have been the subject of a variety of criticisms which have been summarised elsewhere.¹ What has been less well publicised, apart from an excellent synopsis in the *New Zealand National Bibliography to the Year 1960*,² is the sequence of events which marked the progress to publication of White's major opus and contemporary critical reaction.

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The story of this book begins appropriately enough in the last months of Grey's administration (1877 to 1879) when a flurry of telegrams between John White and the Native Minister John Sheehan led to White being appointed as the compiler of a Maori history.³ Sponsorship of scholarship was a feature of Grey's administration perhaps little appreciated, either then by the populace, or later by New Zealand historians. Be that as it may, the choice of White for such an enterprise was universally praised at the time by collectors and scholars such as Samuel Locke, Alexander Shand and the German ethnologist Adolf Bastian.⁴

The decision was made for a number of reasons. Grey spoke of a need to collect Maori history before it was lost. Sheehan focused on its practical application as a body of tradition for the Land Court and university study. Both men championed White as one of the best qualified for the job.⁵ White himself considered the status and salary an adequate trade-off for giving government his private Maori manuscript collection.⁶

Who made the final decision to proceed is not clear. Certainly the three key participants were White, Sheehan and Grey. The matter may