

He karakia na te arawa

By Margaret Orbell

It used to be the custom to greet the dawn with songs of joy, for the coming of daylight was experienced as a triumph of life over death. Darkness was associated with death and defeat, and the dawn was a time when atua, spirits, retreated to the underworld and human beings asserted themselves once more.

Birds, too, greet the sunrise with song as they shake off sleep and begin communicating with one another, reclaiming their territories. To human beings, their loud singing at daybreak seemed a celebration of the values associated with daylight. It was all the more meaningful because birds were often associated with things of the spirit. Moving freely in the inaccessible realms above, and speaking with mysterious eloquence, they seemed often to know more than humans and to have the power of predicting the future. In whaikorero and waiata it is usually a high compliment when a man is likened to a bird.

People in the Rotorua district used to greet the very early dawn with a chanted karakia, that looks forward to the daylight and its accompanying chorus of bird-song. The words of this karakia were published in 1853 in George Grey's book *Ko nga moteatea...* (p. 432), and a commentary on it was published

later by C.O.B. Davis, who was probably the best of the nineteenth-century writers on Maori poetry. Davis explains that the kaka is mentioned first because this semi-nocturnal parrot is the first bird to be heard in the morning: 'before the great concert of native birds begins — before any faint shadows penetrate the night gloom — the loud scream of the kaka reminds the traveller that he must rise and pursue his journey, for the Maoris are invariably early risers'.¹

The second bird to be mentioned is the pitoitoi, or robin, because it is the next to sing. It is the leader of the birds' chorus, beginning its song a little before the bellbirds, tui and other birds.²

The first words of the karakia refer to the mythical origin of the kaka and pitoitoi: they came here from the paradisaical homeland of Hawaiki. The idea seems to be that when the birds wake and sing at dawn it is as if they were coming to life for the first time, and so the poet, in speaking of their arrival from their first home, is bringing them to life, starting them singing. And there is also the implication that the birds' songs hasten the daylight: if they would sing, the dawn would come. So the poet, in starting the chorus of bird-song, is bringing the daylight. And in this way Hawaiki, as the original source of the kaka and the pitoitoi, becomes in a sense the source of the light

of day. This is not surprising, for the land of Hawaiki, when it was viewed as a source of life, was thought to lie in the direction of the rising sun.³

The poet speaks next of the birds that are, by now, singing on the tapu mountain of Ruawahia (this is the ancient name for Mount Tarawera; it now generally refers to its central peak). Davis explains that 'the "children" of that mountain are the birds, and the idea seems to be that as soon as the Ruawahia birds begin the song, the songsters of all the groves will join the chorus'.

Three other places in the Rotorua district are mentioned. The present writer has not managed to locate them, though Hakaipari must be a cliff or ridge. The meaning of the reference to Maurea and Matirau is uncertain, and the translation of this line is tentative.

The last bird to be mentioned is the piopio, or New Zealand thrush. This is now extinct. It is described as having been a little larger than a tui, with olive-brown plumage, reddish tail feathers, a white throat and a grey breast; it inhabited the forest, especially the undergrowth, flew only short distances, and lived on insects, worms and berries. Nineteenth-century observers record that the piopio's 'morning salute is a long-drawn rather plaintive note', and that 'a few hours after sunrise they cease to sing or to answer each other's notes, and generally remain silent in fine weather during the day'.⁴ So the piopio may be mentioned here because its cry was especially associated with the sunrise.

The karakia ends with the triumphant statement *ka ao, ka ao, ka awatea*: it is day, day, daylight.

he karakia na te arawa

He karakia whakapoto i te pō kia hohoro te awatea

Aha te manu i rere mai i runga o Hawaiki?
Korire toro, tākiri te ata, korihi te manu.
He kākā te manu i rere mai i runga o Hawaiki.
Korihi te manu, kāore, ka tino awatea!
Pitoitoi te manu i rere mai i runga o Hawaiki.
Korire, tākiri te ata, ko te manu! Kāore, ka tino awatea!
E tatari atu ana ki ngā tamariki o Ruawahia, e tangi mai nei.
Ka whakatoro te kohu o Hakaipari,
Waiho Maurea hei tiherunga wai o Matirau.
Ka tangi te piopio. Aha, he pō, he ao, he pō, he ao!
Tākiri te ata, korihi te manu, ka ao, ka ao, ka awatea!

A karakia to shorten the night and make daylight come quickly

What are the birds that flew here from Hawaiki?
The depths are explored, the dawn is coming up, the birds are singing.
Kaka is the bird that flew here from Hawaiki.
The birds are singing, and wonderful, it's broad daylight!
Robin is the bird that flew here from Hawaiki.
From the depths the dawn is coming up, and here are the birds. Wonderful, it's broad daylight!
They were waiting for Ruawahia's children, and here they are crying now.
The mist at Hakaipari stretches out,
And Maurea will dip up the waters of Matirau.
The thrush is crying. Oh it's night, day, night, day!
The birds are singing, it's day, day, daylight!

Notes

1. From a newspaper article published at an unknown date. A clipping of the article is in the Hocken Library, Dunedin; the manuscript reference is F & J 9, item 14.
2. On the basis only of this song, H.W. Williams' *Dictionary of the Maori Language* defines pitoitoi as meaning not only 'robin' but also 'a sea bird'. Thinking that birds of this name had in reality flown here from over the ocean, Williams assumed that only sea-birds (of some unknown kind) could have done this. But the flight from Hawaiki is a mythical, religious one.

Williams makes another mistake, I think, in taking both *reretoro* and *korire*, on the evidence only of this song, as being terms for the grey warbler (*rirerire*). His interpretation of *korire* is