

Maoris have more to say than ends up printed on tea-towels

Graham Wiremu

There still exists a manuscript written by Hongi Hika in 1814. While the written message is hardly startling — row upon row of alphabet letters in a laboriously executed copperplate hand — the document is significant nevertheless. It demonstrates that from the first contacts with those able to teach them (in this case the missionary Thomas Kendall), the Maori showed an interest in acquiring the skills of literacy.

These skills were subsequently put to use. Writing was employed in correspondence, in Maori newspapers, in recording traditions and in many other practical applications, including the signing away of land. But there is no automatic link, it seems, between literacy and literature. More than 150 years were to elapse between Hongi's ABC and the first published book of Maori literature as the Pakehas understand the term. Why was this so?

Readers of these pages do not, presumably, need to have literature defined for them. But it is worth pointing out that there is a Maori notion of literature, an oral one of great antiquity. All the wisdom and experience of the Maori was embodied in the spoken (or sung) word. Genealogies, history, mythology, religion and science were incorporated in poetry. Haka and waiata were composed — as they continue to be composed — for specific occasions or as expressions of the feelings of the composer. The forms were clearly defined, but there was room within them for creativity, ingenuity and individual expression.

Hidden

This rich, enduring tradition has been called "hidden" by Witi Ihimaera and Don Long, editors of a new anthology of Maori writing *Into the World of Light*. Passed on and performed amongst Maori and in the Maori language, it has been inaccessible to the majority of Pakeha unless they chose to consult written collections such as *Nga Moteatea*. Contemporary examples of the same tradition appear in *Into the World of Light*, some with and some without translation. But the majority of work included is written in English and fits an altogether more contemporary mould.

So then why should Maori people have begun quite suddenly — within the last thirty years — to express themselves in European ways.

Literary responses

Ihimaera and Long chart convincingly the emergence of a new Maori literary tradition. A deepening cultural malaise extending over many generations has in recent decades been recognised and checked in what is often called a Maori renaissance. The editors of

this anthology prefer to see it as a revolution, and there is much in their selections to support their preference. The decline in the use of the Maori language, geographical dislocation, the efforts of the assimilators and integrators — these have demanded new assessments and new techniques in all areas of Maori thinking and activity. *Into the World of Light* is a collection of literary responses.



An inventory of its contents reveals 124 pieces of poetry, prose and drama by 39 writers, all active in the 1970s. Twenty pieces are in Maori (ten of them with English translations), the rest in English only. Most have been published before, but 51 appear in print for the first time. Contributions range from a two-line poem based on the Maori pepeha, which may very loosely be described as a proverb, to stories of substantial length, from haka and waiata aroha to extracts from plays written specifically for radio and television. Included are writers who are largely unknown, writers well known to a Maori public such as Wiremu Kerekere, Ngoi Pewhairangi, Kingi Ihaka, Kohine Ponika and Dovey Katene-Horvath, and writers who enjoy a much wider public, among them Hone Tuwhare, Alastair Campbell, Rowley Habib, Patricia Grace and of course Witi Ihimaera himself.

Powerful collection

It is a prodigious and powerful collection.

Its predecessor, *Contemporary Maori Writing*, was a more modest affair. But that seminal anthology, published in 1970 by ex-editor of *Te Ao Hou* Margaret Orbell, had a more modest range of material to draw from. The new book's size and diversity is only a reflection of the tremendous eruption of talent and activity during the seventies. Indeed, one might suspect that Ihimaera and Long had lumped together just about everything by a Maori they could lay their hands on, were it not for the consistent quality of what is included and the marked absence of contributions by several other accomplished writers — notably Apirana Taylor, whose *Eyes of the Ruru* was published too late for inclusion here.

There are those who find any exhibition of Maoriness tiresome, or even offensive. They will be asking, if they've read this far, why bother? Why is a collection of specifically Maori writing any more desirable than an anthology of work by authors who are, say, left-handed, or whose surnames begin with the letter P? Arguing with cultural monomaniacs is a tedious and usually fruitless exercise, but a central problem arises which demands clarification. Quite simply, is there a special phenomenon which is Maori writing, and if so what is it?

Writing range

Introducing *Contemporary Maori Writing*, Margaret Orbell wrote that it was "shared experience and similarity of approach, rather than the fact of their being Maori, which justifies bringing their work together in a separate collection". If this was true twelve years ago it is no longer so today. The authors in this anthology range from those still in their twenties to such distinguished figures as Pei Te Hurinui Jones, Arapeta Awatere and Harry Dansey, all of whom have died since the book was first conceived eight years ago.

Some authors are country people, others were born, or at least raised, in the cities. Many do not speak Maori and are uncomfortable on the marae. Some have not involved themselves in the land issues or language issues which, arguably, characterise Maori politics of the last decade; others have been conspicuous champions.

The wide range of subject matter in the contributions to this book echos the diversity of their authors. Can any similarities be drawn between Pei Jones's account of the Whakangungu ritual, performed in Taumarunui in the early years of this century, and Bruce Stewart's moving and powerful story set in a modern jail, "**Broken Arse**"? What has Arapeta Awatere's poroporoaki to Kepa Ehau to do with