

Elsdon Best: Elegist in Search of a Poetic

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Making up the mauri: Elsdon Best and the making of the Williams Dictionary of the Māori Language 1844-1917

Last year the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa brought back into print after a 20-year lapse eleven titles by their former official ethnographer, Elsdon Best (1856-1931). It is difficult to think of another New Zealand writer of his period who today might be accorded such a vote of confidence. Eleven scholarly non-fiction titles devoted to traditional Māori culture, written before 1930, arriving in a crowded marketplace at the beginning of a new millennium: what persuaded Te Papa to take such a commercial risk? Their news release tells us ‘his research was based on rare first-hand knowledge, wide reading, informed study and close discussion with Māori’. Without Best, they write, ‘we would know little of the customs and traditions of these times’. If this is indeed the case, then Elsdon Best must be counted as one of the country’s major literary figures, given that Māori and Pākehā identity, issues of indigenous knowledge and intellectual property are crowding conventional historiography off the campus and the literary pages. Elsdon Best, long neglected and frowned upon for his extinctionist intellectual framework, is anointed again by the National Museum as an indispensable resource for knowledge of traditional Māori society. What do we know of this man and his life’s work, given that he is so seminal? The first part of this essay examines Best’s writing through his public

persona as an ethnographer; the second looks at the poetry he published, to gain fresh perspectives on his complex psychology.

Eldson Best never intended his works to be used in assisting Māori to know who they were in 2005: he believed the authentic old-time Māori would disappear, replaced at best by a 'brown-paper' version of the true men of old. Indigenous knowledge was his prime concern, but not to validate Māori being; rather, it was to save the vanishing knowledge of the old ways, in the best 19th century tradition of salvage anthropology. (Stocking 78-109) He certainly believed in intellectual property, yet the concept of Māori ownership of what he recorded and published was antithetical to his mission. The science of an advancing civilisation now owned such historic resources, in a similar manner to the way in which the settlers had come to own the best land. The conversion of oral knowledge into literary texts implied a form of intellectual property exchange, analogous to the way title deeds of Māori land were issued by the Native Land Court in order to expedite sale to Europeans. The Museum owned the written knowledge, as they have proven by continuing to republish until today.

The significant irony here is that Best, like any writer, has been unable to control the post-mortem uses of his output. Today, the kaupapa Māori movement sprung from the cultural renaissance of the 1970s has reappropriated those parts of Best's writing that fit with their guiding philosophy: 'by Māori, for Māori and (often) in Māori'. (Smith 1998) While many of the movement's leading lights, from Maori Marsden in the early 1970s to Pita Sharples today, would undoubtedly find the racialised underpinnings of Best's cultural hierarchies distasteful, his influence is ubiquitous in their fields of study simply because he is the prime literary recorder of traditional Māori society. That he got certain things wrong, that many of his views are now passé, that he appropriated Māori knowledge to further his own career: all of this is up for debate and further study, but Best as an ancestor figure in the field, and in New Zealand literature in general, needs taking seriously. Those commentators who have nodded in his direction (Walker 25, 40, 194; Smith 79-85) do not engage with his background, his sources and the significance of his subterranean presence in all recent works on traditional culture.

For biographical detail, the excellent study written by Best's grand-nephew Elsdon Craig remains the standard resource. Forty years on, *Man of the Mist* (1964) is in need of revision but the basic facts are there, and the narrative shape of the life. *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, both in print and online, also has a useful thumbnail sketch by Jeffrey Sissons. (2006) The principal features of Best's extraordinary life that need bearing in mind are his early and continual exposure to a raw frontier society, where he learned young to enjoy his own company, to live and survive in the native bush that surrounded his parents' farm at Tawa near Wellington, and his access to local Māori at the Porirua pa (village). Best played with Māori children and was exposed to Māori society during the period 1855-65 when Māori still held a numerical ascendancy and had not been subjected militarily by superior Western technology. His limited education (he passed the junior civil service examination at the age of 17), his inability to endure the confinement of offices and his love of the outdoors led him into a career as a bushworker and sawmiller, along with a stint as a volunteer with the Armed Constabulary.

It was in 1881, while taking part in operations against Parihaka, the stronghold of the pacifist Māori prophet Te Whiti, that Best made his first contacts with two of the group of men who were later to form the influential Polynesian Society: Percy Smith and Edward Tregear. He began to read more widely in areas related to Māori history and culture, and gained exposure to developing anthropological theory. A three-year sojourn in the United States during the mid-1880s saw him work in the same kinds of industries; he also travelled widely, learned Spanish and saw for himself the effects of westward expansion on indigenous American peoples. On his return, he began submitting articles based on his American travels to New Zealand newspapers. When the Polynesian Society was formed in Wellington in January 1892, he was a foundation member, dedicated to the preservation of all that related to 'Polynesian anthropology, ethnology, philology, history, manners and customs'. (Sorrenson 24) His first serious scholarly article, 'The Races of the Philippines (I & II)' was published the same year, and so began an association with this body of frontier intellectuals that was to continue until his death in 1931. (*JPS* 1 [1892]: 7-19, 118-25, 194-201) The piece was remarkable in that it contained the seeds of his theoretical influences (such as Edward Tylor and Herbert Spencer), weighty material he had studied alone after hard days working in the bush or in sawmills; and as evidence of

his natural facility for learning languages, having read Spanish academic and historical writing in the original.

There were new universities in New Zealand at this time, but Best had never matriculated, and was not of the right class to gain entry. There was a thriving culture of Philosophical Societies in centres large and small, and men such as Best, along with some educated professionals, read their learned papers to each other and published the results each year. This was a vibrant and questioning environment, where science was grappling with its growing power as the source of empirical data and thus, truth, while religion (in this case Christianity) attempted to either reject or accommodate the changing intellectual world, post-Darwin. The auto-didact was somehow the ghost in the machine at such a moment: what later became orthodoxy in universities was often pioneered by those who without formal training had taught themselves and each other. This was particularly true of fin de siècle anthropology in New Zealand, and accounts in some degree for the peculiar vitality and folk-scholar style that makes reading Best both enjoyable and frustrating. He is never absent in his work, nor shy with the pithy or sarcastic aside. Chris Hilliard has criticised these peccadillos in *Tuhoe* (1925), Best's major study of the history and traditions of the Urewera peoples. He is found guilty of blending his often-unacknowledged sources, overplaying his own existence in the text while managing to depersonalise his Tuhoe informants. (Hilliard 118-19) What is missing here is any biographical insight, as if much else were possible to a writer like Best in his time.

Tuhoe, the book for which he is probably best remembered, was the result of his long association with the eponymous Bay of Plenty iwi, Māori who traced their whakapapa back to semi-mythical ancestors and their arrival on these shores in the canoe Mātātua. Best lived in their midst from 1895 to 1910, in the second phase of his career: ostensibly appointed as a quartermaster on the road through the rugged Urewera ranges to Wairoa on the East Coast. Best's real mission was to gather ethnographical information about a people seen to be the last of 'the old-time Maori'. His appointment had been engineered by the Surveyor-General Percy Smith, fellow Polynesian Society member, author and Māoriphile. Recognising Best's voracious intellect, physical hardiness and unique proficiency in the Māori language, Smith encouraged him to be his eyes and ears among Tuhoe. It was a tense compromise at

times: not all Tuhoe favoured the road passing through their lands, the best of which had been confiscated in the late 1860s after conflicts with the settler government. Others favoured the access to wage labour, better communications and the benefits of Western technology; yet all were well aware of what had happened to Māori land holdings in other areas of the country where settler numbers and material progress had led to pressure for faster and greater land sales and eventually, bloody conflict.

Best was both an agent of this process and a recorder of cultural losses; his position could hardly have been more ambivalent. Yet he had few difficulties in attracting willing informants: a Māori-speaking Pākehā official was not unusual at that time, but one with a thirst for recording the old ways, customs and whakapapa would have created a powerful interest. It has become fashionable for revisionist histories in New Zealand over the past two decades to create new images of Māori as victims of government duplicity or savvy warriors whose tactics were well ahead of those who eventually defeated them. Māori have been portrayed as either without effective agency or as smart losers by historians such as Belich (1998). The situation was far more complex and nuanced: Best's informants illustrate both the equivalencies and inequalities of power, along with mixed motives and an all too human inability to control the future while making decisions in the present. Those Māori that Best talked to among Tuhoe had been exposed to Christian literacy for over fifty years and were in no way pristine; yet their willingness to share their knowledge with him was not due to their fears of imminent extinction but because they were used to dealing with Pākehā and sought equality.

While Tuhoe wanted a share in their own future and the benefits of modernity on their own terms, Best and his peers were seeking to excavate the vanished pre-European past. They sought to set down a record of Māori material society, along with its beliefs, before the last of those who retained any such knowledge passed on. As noted, Best's lack of training as an academic anthropologist had not prevented him from reading overseas 'authorities' and contributing to the debates in colonial and imperial settings. He was in many respects the model of a field anthropologist: fluent in the language of those he proposed to study, well-read in the available literature and eager to live among those he proposed to record. The theoretical models of late 19th century anthropology – principally, socio-cultural evolutionism – are long since

discredited, but Best made good with what was at his disposal. While the concept of a progressive hierarchy of ‘savage-barbarian-civilised’ is distasteful today, in his time it made perfect sense to believe that primitive societies were being replaced as part of the upward evolutionary march of humanity, and that anthropologists had a duty to salvage what they could of such dying cultures for posterity. The fact that the colonising cultures were instrumental in such disappearances was, to them, incidental.

Best’s literary output while he lived and worked in the Urewera was mainly restricted to articles for the Polynesian Society’s journal and working on assembling the manuscript for *Tuhoe*. His work on Tuhoe, published serially during his residence there, appeared from 1896 onwards in the Society’s journal, so that by the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century he was established both nationally and internationally as an expert on Māori society, especially on spiritual matters. Articles on Māori beliefs and spirituality from 1900 onwards were well received, and his definitions of important Māori words such as hau (breath) and wairua (spirit) found their way into New Zealand’s principal Māori language dictionary, Henry Williams’ *Dictionary of the Māori Language*. The 5th edition of this classic work (still unrivalled today in its 7th) had doubled in size from the 4th in 1892, in greater part as a result of Best’s researches.

Another important word, mauri, was also affected by this expansion. Mauri is defined as a physical and emotional reaction in the earliest editions of the Williams *Dictionary* (1844) but by 1917 it had become ‘Thymos – the life principle of man’. (229-30) The transformation can be traced back to Best’s reading of F. Max Müller, the philologist and Sanskrit scholar who was a foundation figure of the orientalist movement as it manifested in linguistic discoveries made in the era of the East India Company and the British Raj. Best drew on Müller’s Gifford lectures, published in *Anthropological Religion* (1898), for his etymological (and metaphysical) expansion of mauri, clearly seeing an equivalence between Māori and archaic Greek concepts such that one could be used to define the other for an English-speaking audience. In Lecture VII ‘The Discovery of the Soul in Man and Nature’, Müller writes:

The Greek thymos, therefore, meant originally inward commotion ... [it] meant simply what moves within us, [but] it afterwards comprehended both

feelings and thoughts ... we never hear of thymos continuing after death [unlike psyche] ... [so it] was really an activity, and not like psyche, a something active. (212-13)

Why did Best see Müller's careful distinction of thymos from psyche (soul) as an appropriate rendition of mauri? In traditional society, mauri was most often manifest in the form of talismans as diverse as snags in an eel river where karakia (chants) were intoned to ensure a good catch, or stone images in gardens, or spiritually potent stone objects protecting canoes on long journeys. This latter sense is invoked in *The Maori Canoe*:

Each vessel that came from Polynesia to these isles seems to have had on board some sort of talisman, a *mauri*, *ara*, or *mawe*, looked upon as a sacred object endowed with protective powers, and which brought good luck to the vessel. (148-49)

The mauri resided in the talisman, potentiated by the karakia uttered by the tohunga, and by implication the objects were mauri: the metaphysical, so to speak, at one with the physical – and Best understood this. But as the word was moved away from the oral, dialogic culture to which it belonged, it acquired a literary, philosophical meaning that could be understood and classified by literate Pākehā who were themselves excited by the possibilities of comparing cultures old and new.

Best recognised that New Zealand had a literary tradition and added to it with unmatched vigour. While living in his spartan camps in the Urewera, he would often walk miles after a day's work to discuss points of detail with Tutakangahau (who responded in kind). He would spend his evenings reading weighty tomes by candle and lamplight, and copying out the whakapapa lists in his own specially developed shorthand. He had to wait until the last decade of his life to see much of this in print: the manuscript of *Tuhoe* was finished by 1907 but for various reasons the huge two-volume work was not to see the light of day until 1925. Best continued to collect and collate information from his chief long-term informants – men such as Tutakangahau and Paitini – until the former died in 1907. Growing weary of his late labours as a Health Officer, he left the mountain country in 1910 to begin the final phase of his

writing life as the government ethnographer at the Dominion Museum in Wellington. He worked exhaustively here until his death in 1931, turning his vast store of notes and records into a series of monographs on Māori life, and gaining the status of a white tohunga on matters Māori. It is these labours that the Museum in its latest incarnation has reissued.

In any assessment of a New Zealand national literature, Best is a foundational figure. That he wrote non-fiction might for some purists place him outside the domain of imaginative writing, but it is clear that he was in fact creating a new national mythology for the settler society. This founding myth underlay the writings themselves: that the European presence in New Zealand was part of a grand evolutionary progress, beneath the wheels of which primitive societies were swept aside. The need to preserve their prehistory while destroying their presence was the interface of myth with the realpolitik. The story of Best's long writing career illustrates this process, and the writings themselves are in part the evidence of what it means to found a nationalistic settler literature on the back of indigenous displacement. This is both anthropology as sign of Western triumphalism, and writing as record and erasure. Yet many Māori in his day wanted such records: *Tuhoe* was published with official financial backing from prominent Māori leaders such as Sir Apirana Ngata. Had Māori themselves more control of their own destiny in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was nevertheless inevitable that their past traditions would have been gradually abandoned for the mixed benefits of modernity. As the traditional digging stick, the kō, was early thrown aside for the iron spade of the Pākehā, Māori continued to adapt to and employ technological advances. Best would almost certainly have been employed by Māori – as indeed he was in his time, by Apirana Ngata – to help create necessary national myths for the new society.

Elsdon Best entered the literary bloodstream early and is an ongoing presence. Robin Hyde cited his work on Māori society in 'The Singers of Loneliness' (1938), her essay on the making of national literature. Keri Hulme in going to the Williams *Dictionary* in 1979 to define mauri for an article on bicultural poetry found not what her Kai Tahu ancestors might have signified by the term, but Best's more metaphysical rendition: 'life principle, thymos of man' (Hulme 290), a definition as Pākehā as it was Māori. In founding her discussion of bicultural poetry on what she

assumes is the definitive Māori meaning of her lodestone concept, Hulme unwittingly assimilates Best and Müller in the process: a rich irony for a writer who speaks proudly of herself as the possessor of a ‘mongrel’ ethnicity. (294) Such creative syncretisms are the often-unacknowledged literary offspring of colonial cultural exchanges, and continue to defy the efforts of linguistic purists and ethnic essentialists to control the meanings of the past, the present or the future. Best’s texts are dialogic in the sense that they derive from and contain conversations, no matter how disguised their form; and they are open to further conversations at this time of republication. The reappearance can be seen as part of a larger decontamination process, where texts discounted or minimised by postcolonial identity politics in one era may be reappraised in the light of another. The following examination of Best’s little-known poetic output aims to be a part of that transition.

2

Best and his poetry in the ‘Māori Twilight’

Settler society lacks a past so it takes over that of those displaced; modernity thus invents the primitive on the site of its loss, a mechanism similar to that of the Celtic- or Irish-Revival Myth collecting. (Stafford and Williams 20)

In terms of his temperament Elsdon Best strikes the reader often with an elegist’s tone. It was not that he was simply mourning the passing of pre-European Māori culture and its remote survivals, but as he grew older, like the dispossessed Lear, he saw his own fate in the disappearance of the late-colonial frontier. He was right, and those like him were to pass off the face of the land: the bush felled, the land tamed, farmed and the best of it bought cheaply or confiscated, now owned by the settlers. As Māori retreated to the rural and wilderness margins, Pākehā established great port cities and prosperous rural centres: there was little need for Māori-speaking administrators as Native Schools enforced the use of English, and the pioneering bush frontier became instead a racial and cultural barrier to Māori and their egalitarian civic hopes of the 1850s and 1860s. Māori were expected to assimilate, and either learn the colonisers’ language and adapt to civilised life, or talk to each other and

quietly disappear. Best, not a Pākehā Māori but deeply identified with those who had retained a measure of their language, customs and lifeways in the remoter regions, seemed to sense his own impending disappearance with that of his Māori campfire companions of old. His death in 1931 was the sunset of those late-colonial administrators and intellectuals who were bilingual and bicultural. It is within this complex, ambiguous historical and psychological zone that we should view his small but significant poetic output.

While the quote from Stafford and Williams above needs teasing out, the insight that relates to the Celtic Twilight seems apposite. No-one would ever compare Best and Yeats as poets, but they were both writing around the same time in colonial situations as the Victorian era slipped towards military cataclysm and the turning upside down of values that would usher in the Modernist movement. Yeats' adoption of the Irish folk-fairy world to bolster an emerging literary nationalism may not at first glance seem to have much in common with Best's enthusiastic absorption of Māori myth and history, as part of the coloniser's tendency to domesticate their literary inheritance in a land teeming with Māori spirits and their stories. Yet in many ways this feels intuitively right: a Māori Twilight created by Pākehā that reflects some of the origins and needs of its Celtic twin in the northern hemisphere. Listening to Yeats on Paddy Flynn, his font of Irish folklore, it is hard not to draw a parallel with Best and men like Tutakangahau and Paitini from whom he obtained data for the ethnography discussed already and some of the poetry to be examined here. According to Yeats, Paddy Flynn was:

a great teller of tales, and unlike our common romancers, knew how to empty heaven, hell, and purgatory, faeryland and earth, to people his stories. He did not live in a shrunken world, but knew of no less ample circumstance than did Homer himself. Perhaps the Gaelic people shall by his like bring back again the ancient simplicity and amplitude of imagination. (*Celtic Twilight* 6)

Gaelic traditions were re-absorbed by Irish writers of English during the 19th century, and by Yeats' day the re-telling of Celtic myths was no new thing. His dalliance with such revisions did not endure but his language and the thinking in his remarks about Paddy Flynn find a later echo in Best:

Our Maori folk are of those who feel the unseen presence in forests, who hold close kinship with nature, who have a fellowship with every member of the far-scattered Children of Tane. They enter sylvan solitudes imbued with a subconscious feeling that they are among not only friends, but beings related to themselves – for are not men and trees alike descended from Tane? (*Maori Religion* 63)

Yeats' modernism was consciously reflected in his later poetry; Best, as seen here, had absorbed the late 19th century idea of the subconscious that became a commonplace in the intellectual milieu of post-World War One. Yet his root orientation was towards the past, and by advancing the concept of a Māori Twilight, linked to the Irish sensibility noted above, we can begin to understand both the subject matter and the temper of his poetry. Anthropology in the 19th century grew out of and replaced folklore studies; there are close similarities between Yeats' fairy romances, fuel for the Irish nationalist revival, and Best's fascination with Māori folk beliefs and myth in the invention of a settler literature. Best was a writer with a scientific leaning but early efforts at creating a poetic from his data indicate that he could have gone on in such a genre. His popular anthropological writings were often peppered with snatches of verse and the super-heated metaphors Hilliard deplored in *Tuhoe*.

Best's poetic output was not large and seems to be concentrated near the beginning of his published work and through the period leading up to and just after his arrival in Wellington in 1910. The early pieces, from 1897 onwards, were published in newspapers such as the *Otago Witness* (1851-1932) and the *Canterbury Times* (1865-1917). His known influences are from the Romantics, principally Wordsworth and Coleridge; at least, these are the poets cited in his later writings on Māori and their relationship to Nature. They certainly do not appear to be his teachers of style: the ballad forms and the subject matter of the early work suggest Longfellow, Tennyson and Kipling. Indeed, an auction catalogue of Best's books in Auckland, in May 1969, offered by his grand-nephew Elsdon Craig, included copies of *The Poetical Works of Henry W. Longfellow*, *The Poetical Works of Bret Harte* (both inscribed and/or annotated by Best), and *Twenty Poems from Rudyard Kipling*, also inscribed. Perhaps the bush ballads of the *Bulletin* writers in general, and Paterson and Lawson in

particular, supplied a local model. Best's work is derivative in the most obvious sense: he is not trying to pioneer a style; rather, he adopts convenient vehicles for the subject and the narrative flow. The earliest works discussed here are 'Mohaka's Raid on Tuhoeland' (1897), based on his initial researches into Tuhoë history and culture; and 'The Men Who Break the Trail' (1898), a hymn to progress. The third and final piece to be analysed, 'But now!', was written in 1913 and is an exiled bushman's response to the corrupting effects of civilised comforts on humankind.

The summary of Best's poetry that follows is drawn from Elsdon Craig's 1964 list of Best's known published work (231-38) and it is worth noting that more poetry may come to light with the increasing availability of online versions of the colonial newspapers that were the commonest venue for verse publication. A significant amount of Best's prose appeared in newspapers because popular journalism was not only a source of additional income but one of the means whereby he disseminated his ideas and discoveries, made his name and created an audience for the later books. That he should try his hand at poetry in the same medium should surprise no-one, given the strong oral base of his researches, the recitative nature of its recensions and the Victorian predilection for narrative poetry.

'[Mohaka's Raid on Tuhoeland](#)' appeared in the *Otago Witness* 21 October 1897 (46) under Best's pen-name 'Tuhoë'. '[The Men Who Break the Trail](#)' was published under the same pseudonym 13 January 1898, also in the *Witness* (49). Craig has less detail about 'At The Head of the Road', published 1898 in the *Hot Lakes Chronicle*, Rotorua, and 'The Children of Pani' which appeared 1904 in the *Canterbury Times*. 'How Tiaki Tutu went down to Hades', an article in the series 'Sketches from Tuhoeland', was published 1905 in the *Times* (Craig dates it 1904, but it appeared 8 March 1905). Best includes a poem in the article, a story about a battle between Tuhoë and Te Arawa. He does not claim authorship, attributing the work to 'the local bard' then cutting the ballad short, saying: 'But enough of the bard of Ruatahuna, for that warlike saga runs into many cantos'. It is plainly Best's work, of a piece with his writing of the time; he was not averse to interpolating unattributed excerpts from his poems into his newspaper writings. This happened again in 1913 with 'Polynesian Voyagers: No. VI. The Peopling of the Many-Isled Sea', published 18 June 1913 in the *Canterbury Times*. (15) Writing about the peoples of the Marquesas, he cites

ethnologist Abraham Fornander and includes a stanza in the Best style. (A later variant of the same stanza appears in the *Otaki Mail*, 29 September 1926.)

By 1913, when he wrote 'But Now!', Best's poetry publications were infrequent, as he was fully employed in writing up his researches. The poem is written into a notebook now at the Turnbull Library and was probably never published. (Maori Notebook no 13 111-12) There is an article from this period, 'Porirua and They Who Settled It. The Taming of a Wild Land', that was published in the *Canterbury Times* 11 March 1914 (13). It contains no poetry per se, but Best's opening salutation 'To The Old Bush Legion' is in the form of a mihi, which though written in English is Māori in style and execution, disclosing its origins in oratory:

To the Men who planted Wheat with a Hoe, and ground it in Hand-mills;
The Men who wore Fustian, and left their Coats at Home;
To the Bush Sloggers of Four Decades, who Carved out Homes with the Axe,
and Smoothed the way for Us:
The Trail Breakers of the Past, who, with Butter at Sixpence a Pound,
Conquered the Wilderness, and Opened up the Dark Places for our whirring
Motor Cars.
To the Old-Timers who Succeeded!
And To Those Who Did Not!!
Greetings!

This is a good example of Best's adoption of the Māori thought forms and rhetorical techniques which are also apparent in his poetry. The speaker greets his anonymous Pākehā forebears (tūpuna) and declares his admiration for their work in pioneering the civilised comforts the colony has come to enjoy. From the tree-felling of the 'Bush Sloggers' (to whom he belonged) to the advent of roads and 'whirring Motor Cars', Best has been witness to the arrival of industrial modernity, and as we will see he doesn't much like what he helped to create by opening up 'the Dark Places'.

Best's fifteen-year sojourn in the Urewera wilderness began in 1895 and he quickly established relationships with Tuhoe elders and chiefs. Tutakangahau of Maungapohatu was one of the first and most important of these, their friendship

lasting almost until the old man's death in 1907. The first poem to be examined here, 'Mohaka's Raid on Tuhoeland', appeared in the *Otago Witness* two years after his arrival and is based on information Best had received concerning inter-tribal warfare. His versification of Tuhoē history, a not-too-distant battle of the 1820s, was obtained from kōrero (stories) provided for him by his local informants. Unlike the derivative legends Alfred Domett had from Sir George Grey in composing his corpulent romance-epic, *Ranolf and Amohia* (1872), Best's material was based on first-hand anthropological field-work by one who spoke Māori and recorded everything he was told on the spot, at the time. The poem is lengthy (it covers one and a half columns of the *Witness*), its style and diction are elevated and the subject and tone Homeric; it affects an epic register but mercifully eschews a Domettian duration. Written no doubt for recitation, it rollicks along in a vigorous ballad metre with rhyming couplets that magick some arresting rhymes: 'The leader of the Legion, the war gods sacred waka / Companioned with his atua, Tu-nui-a-te-ika'. Note the familiarity with the Tuhoē subject matter, and the free and accurate use of Māori, in bringing alive the spiritual world of their warfare ('waka' gets a footnote: 'medium of a god [atua]').

Before proceeding with the poem, it is useful to know that Best included the story of Mohaka in the historical sections of *Tuhoē*, and a summary of this will guide us into the verse. (*Tuhoē* 510-18) The story concerns an attack on Tuhoē by the Ngati Kahungunu hapū, Ngati Ruapani, at Ruatahuna in 1826 (the date was obtained from Tutakangahau, but Best adds it was perhaps around 1828-29). Best writes that he obtained these 'notes concerning Mohaka's raid' from 'Tutakangahau, Tama-rau and a member of the Kahu-ngunu folk of Te Wairoa' (516); thus he had information from the descendants of both combatants. The raid was intended to avenge the expulsion of Ngati Ruapani by Tuhoē from the area of Lake Waikaremoana and includes reference to an ōhaki in the poem's first stanza: 'Their ancient feud to children they bequeathed with dying breath'. Such ōhaki were deathbed instructions given especially by a chief to his successor, including vengeance to be exacted on old enemies.

To the story: Mohaka was a tohunga of Ngati Kahungunu, and a waka atua, a medium of the god/spirit Te Po Tuatini. The matakite (vision, prophecy) that came to him in a dreaming sleep required Kahungunu to capture an urekehu (fair-haired person) from Tuhoē, to bring him alive to the tohunga to be ritually degraded (me mimi ki te waha,

by urinating into his mouth). This was a whakaeo, an occult means of depriving Tuhoe of their power. Such a man, Mata-ngaua, was captured near a lone tree as the vision of Mohaka had foreseen, but one of the raiding party slew him, ‘and so Ruatahuna was lost to Kahungunu’. (513) It appears the one who killed Mata-ngaua was probably related to him; he would have needed good reason to defy the vision coming from the atua via the seer. The prophecy also said that should the urekehu be slain then Ngati Ruapani would be forced to flee (ka haere peke wha koutou, you will crawl away on all fours), which is exactly what Best’s Tuhoe informants assured him did happen. (516) There were further disputes over Waikaremoana in the early 1860s which were settled without open conflict: ‘the chiefs and catechists and Tamehana of Ngati-Kahu-ngunu, preserved peace’. (517) Virtually all of what Best reveals in the narrative of the poem is contained above. What is noteworthy in the bare bones of a story where utu once more works itself out in the economy of Māori society, is the way Best employs recent Māori history factually, along with a rich vocabulary of Māori language and an insider’s knowledge of Tuhoe spiritual belief and practice. All this he would publish as anthropological material in the months and years ahead, but what this poem reveals are the first fruits of his field-work and how comfortable he is with Māori realities, as opposed to the external, sentimentalist stance of Domett. For all its technical conservatism, there is a verbal richness and invention in Best’s poem that may well be unique among the decorative and derivative verse of 19th century Māoriland. Kahungunu and Tuhoe are portrayed more vividly than the opposing sides in Tennyson’s *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. The geographical setting is accurate, the natural world is evoked with the mention of the kawariki and rengarenga, in the context of a call for the fruitfulness of offspring – children who will live to avenge Kahungunu’s earlier defeat by Tuhoe.

Best uses an extensive Māori vocabulary to which he adds a list of sixteen footnotes to enlighten *Witness* readers; an odd juxtaposition of persona and register: poet and anthropologist. This is both an indication of his first-hand knowledge (a willingness to ventriloquise the poem from a substantially Māori world view) and his awareness that urban New Zealand audiences of the time would be lost unless told that a matataua was a scout for a war party, and the ‘Fish of Tu’ were the slain. Another footnote – ‘Te Rehu: Te Rehu-o-Tainui, war god of Tuhoe’ – refers to one of the first anthropological articles Best had published, a few months earlier, in the *Journal of the*

Polynesian Society (JPS VI, June 1897: No 22, 41-66). This piece describes in some detail the evolution of a Māori atua, in this case a war god, and how the tohunga was a medium (waka) for the god's prognostications on the upcoming battle. As seen above (and footnoted in the poem) the papa (signs) for the war party on this raid were the urekehu Mata-ngaua, and the lone tree where he stood. All this is described in the poem, right through to the failure of Ngati Ruapani to obey the vision and their eventual retreat on all fours, as prophesied.

What is not immediately obvious to modern readers, and perhaps not to those at the time, is that the poem contains fresh insights into Māori warfare and spirituality. This is not some never-never land of eroticised pseudo-Māori maidens and noble warrior chiefs: underneath the conventional form and heroic diction is an accurate account of how Māori lived, believed and fought in the immediate pre-Treaty era. While his focus was on the past, Best was not romanticising his subject: he was treating Māori seriously. Religious ceremonies to do with success in war are depicted economically, and the accurate use of the correct terminology is glossed so as not to interrupt the movement of the line:

Across the awful tapu the takapau is turned,
And to the horokaka the sacred wallet borne.

The reader can either sweep on with the narrative, or check note 14 to learn that 'Hurihanga takapau' is a 'ceremony to lift the tapu'; 'horokaka' (not attracting a footnote) is an iceplant, as well as the term for a rite performed when war parties left and returned. A sense of what is happening can be gained from the previous narrative context (we know the tohunga is seeking visions, matakite, to ensure success) but the enquiring reader is catered for, as Best shares the kura huna (hidden knowledge). The mingling of alliteration and plosives 'tapu-takapau-turned' gives the insistent metre an energy that derives from commingling lexical items from two different languages.

If the story of Mohaka reveals Best's empathy with Tuhoe and his fascination with the Māori world, 'The Men Who Break the Trail' (*Otago Witness* 13 January 1898) is a chill wind indeed for Māori – and evidence of another aspect of Best's persona. The poem reads both as a Kipling-esque hymn to Progress and an elegy for a pioneer

vanguard running out of new rivers to cross as civilisation sweeps the face of the globe, removing ‘Stone Age men’ by war, or erasing their culture through education and evangelism:

While some are teaching the heathen hymns, for heaven his soul to fit;
And some, to the song of the Winchester, are bidding him rise and get;

While there is a thread of what Lawrence Jones has called William Satchell’s ‘creative evolution’ running through the poem (Jones 143), its main concern is to extol and lament the passing not of indigenous peoples but the ‘western Heke’s hustling scouts’. A heke is a migration, the advance guard of which Best styles as ‘the Homeless Hapu’, those mavericks who venture out at the head of any movement of peoples, eager to explore new worlds as yet unseen or unconquered. The ‘western Heke’ are Europeans, the flood of explorers and settlers who have come south to displace Māori and all others in their path. The advance guard are pictured as ‘spray that leads the way’, to be followed by the larger waves of the sea of Pākehā behind them, about to inundate the land and overwhelm its residents. Here the politics of displacement and erasure cheerfully borrows Māori concepts to describe those persons and powers that will sweep the speakers of the language away:

From the hidden Land of Tane that gave our nation birth
The mighty wave of the western Heke is surging round the earth.

That wave of socio-cultural evolution, to call it by its anthropological name, was given scientific respectability by thinkers such as Herbert Spencer – with what is now often mistakenly called ‘social Darwinism’. For Best and his fellow pioneers of the Homeless Hapu, the call was irresistible: ‘They march with Progress in the van and Science in the rear’. Unpalatable as this may sound to readers today, the poem takes an accurate temperature reading of its author’s times.

Best’s experience as a bushman and wanderer both here in New Zealand and in the United States lifts the poem above its extinctionist clichés to present the reader with a colourful picture of frontier life and works:

They're shearing in the southern lands, they're trading in the north,
From the hidden depths of Mother Earth, they drag the gold god forth.
They're carving out four empires with axe and spade and brand;
They run the long-tailed griffin from Maine to Maoriland.

This vision of furious imperial activities undertaken by pioneering knights of labour is muscular and evocative. What it neglects to mention is that those chasing the whales from New England to Bluff were trading with and inter-marrying among Māori, that Māori had gone off sailing the world on Pākehā ships and made it in numbers to the Alaskan gold rushes. (Orbell 24-44) Māoriland here, as Stafford and Williams point out, is really Pākehāland, with the old owner's name tacked in an empty gesture on the door. But settlement and cultivation, civilising the wilderness and turning forest into farms is not at the heart of this poem: what resonates most of all is Best's cry to avoid the irritating and constricting demands of a settled progress and its bourgeois conformities, by imagining a restless band of adventurers who must press on or die:

No man may stay the Breaker's way, no woman bid him wait,
For he is bound for the stamping ground of the restless overland,

These trail breakers (or blazers), their life's work done, must go beyond the beyond; if they are now as obsolescent as the primitives they encountered in the uncivilised wildernesses of their exploring days, then they too must await extinction:

They'll pierce the realm of Further Out, to find themselves among
The tribes they left in the hidden west in the days when the world was young.

They don't complain, but like the stoical savages of so much imperial ethnography,
'With never a wail they camp on the trail and wait for the coming end!'

Best was in his early forties when he wrote this, but manages to sound like a well-worn sage. As his triumphalism shrivelled in the new century, this vision of what it meant to be born out of time was realised. The temper of the last poem discussed here is one of misanthropy and a measure of disgust at what urban comforts could do to any free spirit. It was written on the eve of the Great War, at a time when Best, in

uniform again with Massey's Cossacks, had gleefully celebrated the cracking of strikers' heads (Craig 164-66). 'But now!' is a bilious response to a world in which he found himself increasingly out of step. If the poem was composed at the same time as Best's return to the saddle, arrayed in cowboy clothes bought in America and mothballed since his arrival home in 1883 (as Craig describes him), the picture it gives of a bushman stranded on Lambton Quay is further darkened by his reactionary swing into conservative politics. The poem – given in full below, with his corrections – sets out to compare Te Whanganui a Tara of the 13th century with the Wellington of Best's day.

But now! : – Miramar 1200 AD 1913 AD

Where once the stalwart savage fought
By hill and vale and creek
The puny, town bred folk await
The factory whistle's shriek.

Where roll the waves of Tane's Sea
Where Kiwa's billows crash
Where loomed our frontier forts on high [the]
The gleaming 'lectrics flash.

And where the raft borne northern braves
Crossed Taia's famous strait
Now sounds upon the evening air
The sinkers rolling gait.

Where once the moa stalked abroad
O'er fen land, dune and bush
Afar the pale skinned tipua hears
The tram cars ceaseless rush.

Aye, where the lordly Star Fort frowned,
Where Tara lived and died

Where hill pas girt the Red Lake round [hedged]
The whining street cars glide.

No more athwart Hataitai's isle
The roaring war dance sounds
No more the pitau swings to line
The ancient fishing grounds.

For where bold Tara's naked toa
On human cutlets fed [entrees]
Your soul destroying tea room girls [the]
Their luresome comfits spread.

Yea, where the tattoed men of yore
Strove like Napoleons,
The hawker with his barrow lures
Your bright simoleons.

Where brave old Kupe's war canoe
Swung hissing through the lake,
Your four inch collared gentry view [Our]
The liner's curving wake.

Where once by hidden trails there lurked
The fearsome tiwha sign,
The news from pole to pole afar
Leaps flashing down the line.

And where the Rua Koha flashed
O'er Heretaunga's plains
Now swift as Tamarau there dash
Your roaring railroad trains.

Whilom on Ranga's [?] lofty peaks

Flared high the signal fires,
Alack-a-day, the morning news
Speeds humming o'er the wires.

Where rugged Neolithic trails
Gave on our hill set pas [their]
Now spurn the flying miles behind
Your whirring motor cars.

(Maori Notebook no 3 1911-12)

It is interesting first of all to examine some of the corrections: the changes of pronoun and other alterations (the original is square bracketed, right). Best revised certain pronouns after the first stanza to give the speaker a Māori persona, to distance him from modernity. Thus 'the frontier forts' becomes 'our frontier forts' (possibly ambiguous); 'The soul destroying tea room girls' becomes 'Your'; 'Our four inch collared gentry' also becomes 'Your'; and 'Their hillset pas' alters to become 'our hill set pas'. This seems to indicate Best's ambivalence, writing as a member of the settler culture but identifying with Māori. He admires their courage, vigour, and manly mastery of the elements and the brutal code of war. His disdain for the pampered upper class of his own day is apparent.

While technically plodding, the poem reveals much about Best: all that is worthwhile is in the past, in the age of stone, while modern life is a hollow sham. The virility of the ancient warriors is in sharp contrast with the beneficiaries of Edwardian technology and its emasculating comforts. The war canoes of old, manned and propelled by 'Kupe's warriors', show up the bourgeois, class-ridden degenerates on board their steel liner. The fearsome practice of cannibalism is somehow elevated in contrast to a modern generation of tearoom patrons, lured into excess by sexualised Jezebels, those 'soul destroying tea room girls'. The changes of pronoun noted above distance the writer from modern humanity, aligning the poem's persona with a bygone age, and with Māori. The Pākehā urban present lacks the substance of a Māori past where the challenges to survival would have done for most of the Wellington weaklings in their 'whirring motor cars' whom Best saw around him on his daily walks to the Dominion Museum.

Ironically, for one who accepted evolutionary doctrines, there is a strong implication of the *unfit* surviving and proliferating. This valorisation of rugged wilderness life, against the domain of the pale office worker he feared becoming is an echo of A.B. Paterson's 'Clancy of the Overflow': 'And the foetid air and gritty of the dusty, dirty city / Through the open window floating, spreads its foulness over all'. (Paterson 21) The pleasant strains of 'lowing cattle' are replaced for the speaker by the tramcar's 'fiendish rattle': Best was in fact knocked down by a tram on Thorndon Quay in his later years due to his constant habit of jaywalking. (Craig 198) There was certainly trans-Tasman sympathy and a literary precedent reinforcing his disdain for a civilisation that so emasculated its menfolk.

In many respects, the poem has strong undertones of a migrant in a state of culture shock: Best was not long out of the bush, and was having great difficulty adjusting to city life. Unable to return to his 'homeland', he sounds angry and depressed, finding himself late in life in an alien terrain. As a married man, anxious to provide for his younger wife, he felt compelled to live and work in the city in order to turn his massive store of knowledge from notes and articles into published books, Best was stuck – and he deeply resented it. The shadow of the teenager who had fled a life like that of Melville's Bartleby the scrivener for farm and bush was ever present during Best's remaining Wellington days. Too old to swing an axe, and too important to waste repeating his years of field-work, Best had become something of a social misfit and spiritual exile, increasingly divorced from the contemporary world. His very average piece of verse is an early example of the 'Man Alone' psychology that emerges more clearly in later writers such as John Mulgan and Barry Crump: maladapted males in flight from intimacy and engagement with contemporary realities.

Best's final years were spent in the Dominion Museum producing the great body of work he would bequeath: what we see in this poem was captured clearly by a British visitor to the country in 1929, Margery Perham. This remarkable woman (1895-1982) had much in common with Best. A tutor in Modern History at Oxford, she became an expert in colonial administration and made numerous overseas trips, witnessing conflicts from Somaliland (1922) to Nigeria (1968) where at the age of seventy she witnessed the Biafran war. An influence on British colonial policy, she was the first Director of Oxford's Institute for Colonial Studies. In 1929 she visited this country as part of a Rhodes Travelling Fellowship, ranging extensively through the North Island (including a trip to the Urewera), meeting as many politicians and government officials as she could manage over the course of three

weeks. Her goals were to examine race relations and colonial administration (she had been highly critical of New Zealand's handling of the Mau protests in Western Samoa during the mandate). She later wrote an account of the Fellowship in which she describes a meeting with Elsdon Best.

Told she must talk to 'the greatest living authority on Maori', she visited the old man in the Dominion Museum in 1929, two years before his death. Her account is vital in any estimation of Best: an outsider with academic training and a wide knowledge of colonial race relations, she was in no way dewy-eyed about the fate of indigenous peoples in the Empire. A rare view of the white tohunga at his desk in his final days emerges (Perham 173-74). Best was 'so old and so valuable' she was told, that 'Funds had been raised mainly by the Maoris, to keep him alive and writing until the last possible moment'. She found him engaged upon writing 'still another work on Maori religious thought' and saw 'an enormous man [...] eyes brilliant with intelligence and vitality'. He told her how he had fought against Māori; and of his own vanishing tribe of Pākehā hoariri (fighting friends) – 'how men of his generation who had fought Maori loved them'. (173) He described his determination after these wars to live among Māori and how he had been adopted by them. Surviving wartime opponents often find they have more in common with each other than with the civilians they were sent to defend: they become blood brothers. If 'real Māori' belonged to the past, so did Best: in writing to the very end, he was as much involved in an act of self-preservation as in the retrieval of Māori realities.

Perham summarised what Best was saying: not until Pākehā had fully understood '[Maori] customs and ideas [...] and [knew] their vast genealogies by heart' would they be allowed 'into the innermost secrets of their thoughts'. He talked so she could see 'what a tragedy the white invasion had been to the old generation of Maoris [...] the circle of their ideas [...] broke almost at a touch by the white man'. The Māori patterns of life, 'the elaborations of *tapu* and *mana* which Best himself can hardly understand [...] were as delicate and as complex as a cobweb and were dislocated by the gun, money and Christianity'. An old chief (possibly Hamiora Pio) is quoted on the defilement of 'our sacred life principle of man', presumably meaning mauri although Perham says this was as close as Best felt he could translate the speaker's Māori. His people were left to watch and die, in despair for themselves, hoping that their grandchildren 'might learn to become *Pakehas*'. Best recounted another story of a 'tattooed old man' (most likely Tutakangahau) discoursing on mauri in

Socratic fashion, picking up a stone near their campfire and questioning how ‘substance could hold together unless some spiritual force existed within it’.

Perham found Best fascinating on subjects in the past, but when it came to the present, and she tried to draw him on ‘the Maori of today’, he became less interesting. *He is living in the past*, she wrote, *re-creating it in his books*. (174, emphasis added) He gave her one of these and sent her off to see his protégé Johannes Andersen (1873-1962) who was more forthcoming on the present parlous state of Māori in relation to land and labour. While it is not surprising that an elderly historian was less engaged with the contemporary world than his younger fellow citizens, Perham’s observations are telling, and accord with the psychology that emerges from the poetry. Best was ‘less interesting’ about New Zealand in the late 1920s because his interests lay elsewhere, in a past he inhabited, both real and imaginary. While she reveals his willingness to send money and goods to his old friends – ‘Oh Best, I have no blanket. Give me one immediately [Tuhoe]’ – Best was not concerned with the descendants of the ‘old time Maori’ unless it was through leaving them a record they might one day access in their assimilated state. Best appears as preternaturally ancient, a Jungian wizard in his den, and yet somehow immature. His peculiar temperament fitted him for the role he had fashioned and made his own. Perham’s portrait is of a priest alone with his books, a sorcerer with his spells, almost a type of that esoteric Māori priesthood he championed, whose ways were unknown to the common people. A seven-year-old boy’s declaration that he wanted ‘to be a Maori tohunga’ seems oddly fulfilled in this picture of his last years. (Craig 12-13) His childhood days in Porirua, playing with the Māori children from the pa, going eeling with his mates and no doubt learning to speak the language at an early age had set him on a course from which he hardly deviated.

The poetry written by Elsdon Best in his long career was not part of a significant historical change of style and content, nor very influential in and of itself. Its principal interest is biographical: what was the psychology of such an influential figure, and how does it bear on what he wrote at differing periods in his life? The verse is fascinating for the insight it gives both into him and his times, and as a commentary on the more serious ethnographic writings. Best was an occasional poet, but he knew how to compose and deploy a bush ballad, and what he did write captured certain important aspects of the era through which he lived. He introduced a sharply observed Māori historical reality in the Mohaka poem, and while he never addressed contemporary Māori problems in his work (as Perham observed), he was

well equipped to take them seriously as subjects for vernacular poetry, and do them justice. His Spencerian stance on the vanishing native – and the equally endangered white explorer vanguard – reveals beneath the rhetoric a state of anxiety about the effects of the inevitable Progress he was hymning. His final rejection of modernity as it manifested in consumerism and urban decadence has a prophetic disdain that seems to owe something to fascist and eugenicist notions. Male power and a warrior past are celebrated; yet while logically only the fit should survive, it seems that material progress merely gives birth to a race of weaklings. Perpetual struggle and war was one answer to this contradiction, something the great dictators of 20th century he rejected would put to the test in the decade after his death.

Jeffrey Papanoa Holman recently completed a doctoral thesis at the University of Canterbury, ‘Best of both worlds: Elsdon Best and the metamorphosis of Māori spirituality / Te painga rawa o ngā ao rua: Te Peehi me te putanga kē o te wairua Māori’. His latest poetry collection, *The Late Great Blackball Bridge Sonnets*, was published by Steele Roberts in 2004.

Appendix

A Select Bibliography of Elsdon Best’s Writings

Best published monographs, pamphlets and numerous newspaper and journal articles 1886-1932. Some of this material is listed below.

A. Books and Articles

Waikaremoana: The Sea of Rippling Waters. Wellington: Government Printer, 1897.

The Land of Tara. Rpt. from *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, New Plymouth: Avery, 1919.

The Maori: Memoirs of the Polynesian Society, Volume 5. 2 vols. Wellington: Tombs, 1924.

The Maori as He Was: A Brief Account of Maori Life as it was in Pre-European Days. Wellington: Dominion Museum, 1924.

Tuhoe: The Children of the Mist. 2 vols. New Plymouth: Avery, 1925. ‘Published by the Board of Maori Ethnological Research for the Author and on behalf of the Polynesian Society.’

B. Bulletins published by the Dominion Museum, Wellington, and printed by the Government Printer

- 1912, No. 4. *The Stone Implements of the Maori*.
1916, No. 5. *Maori Storehouses and Kindred Structures*.
1924, No. 10. *Maori Religion and Mythology*.
1925, No. 7. *The Maori Canoe*.
 No. 8. *Games and Pastimes of the Maori*.
 No. 9. *Maori Agriculture*.
1927, No. 6. *The Pa Maori*.
1929, No. 12. *Fishing Methods and Devices of the Maori*.
 No. 13. *The Whare Kohanga and its Lore*.
1942, No. 14. *Forest Lore and Woodcraft of the Maori*.
1982, No. 11. *Maori Religion and Mythology, Part II*.
2001. *Notes on the Art of War*. Ed. Jeff Evans.

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