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Book launch speech: Ngā Mōteatea: He Kupu Arataki: An Introduction, by Jane McRae, Māori translation by Hēni Jacob, published in Auckland by Auckland University Press, as Polynesian Society Memoir 56, 2011.

Tonight we are gathered here to celebrate the launching of the last instalment in a remarkable venture of New Zealand scholarship and publishing: the Introduction to the four volume series, Ngā Mōteatea. This Introduction fulfills the intentions of Apirana Ngata who wanted to provide readers with a “pocket edition” (p. 9) containing a song selection that might entice them on to sample more fully the diverse range of songs contained within the other volumes. That ambition, first announced in 1933, has been amply achieved in this bi-lingual work by Jane McRae and Hēni Jacob.

This Introduction outlines how Ngata contacted various Māori individuals, and scoured public and private manuscript collections, in order to secure the best possible range of songs. As McRae and Jacob point out Ngata’s intentions were to keep alive the voices and the knowledge of the elders of the Māori world. Consequently, he took great care to acknowledge the various contributions he received from throughout the country: this was not his work but the collective effort of a galaxy of Māori people. The Introduction explains the work of Ngata’s successors, including Pei Te Hurinui and Hirini Mead who completed the English translations, and Mervyn McLean whose life-long recordings of songs were utilised for the accompanying CDs. Ngata himself strove to record various songs from recognised performers of his day, and now thanks to modern technologies readers become listeners too, able to experience the composers’ ancient sound world.

Most appropriately the Introduction explains the Polynesian Society’s long and dedicated commitment to this work since parts of Ngā Mōteatea began to appear in the Society’s Journal in 1944; a fitting reciprocal acknowledgement of the long relationship Ngata himself had with the Society, starting in 1895 and only ending with his death in 1950 when he was its President. The beauty of the Introduction’s design also acknowledges the care and commitment to this important collection of its present publishers, the Auckland University Press. Ngata himself hoped that publication of Ngā Mōteatea would “inspire” younger Māori

generations to preserve and perform these ancestral arts (p. 43); an ambition everyone involved in this important undertaking endorses.

At the heart of this Introduction McRae and Jacob use the texts of the accompanying ten sampler songs to explore key elements in the art of their composers. Most of Ngā Mōteatea's poetry derives from compositions of the 19th century. Each of these song poems, even those comprising only a few lines, are filled with a complex of allusions to elements of Māori life, its philosophies, histories, values and religious beliefs. McRae and Jacob explore and explain the meaning of individual song lines to demonstrate how the simplest seeming reference harbours a host of associations with what Bruce Biggs liked to call Te Ao Kōhatu, The Stone World of the ancestors.

The Introduction categorises and explains the different types of song poetry gathered by Ngata into Ngā Mōteatea, drawing on the rich archives of the collection itself to explain the form and content of each of these song types. A theme of complaint runs through the commonest song categories such as the waiata aroha (the love song), the waiata tangi (the lament), and even the waiata whakautu, or songs in reply to other people's disparaging comments. In these diverse songs the reader re-experiences the full range of feelings, from infatuation to bleakest despair. But there is also humour as in the sentinel's chant by Puararo of Ngāti Toa that compares the watchful young warrior to the "high-stepping kōkako" (p. 59). The wry image is a typical example of the perceptive way composers used the natural world in order to capture an aspect of human behaviour.

These songs were part and parcel of a community's life: they were composed to suit every kind of occasion and experience. They were also frequently performed in public situations since an oral society such as that of the ancient Māori world required the constant practice of singing and the other arts to ensure regular transmission of knowledge between the generations. McRae and Jacob choose a song by Miriama Te Pourewa of Rongowhakaata to illustrate the potency of the oral world in lines that describe how people engaged in a constant and public form of talking amongst themselves; not always kindly meant either as Te Pourewa's song makes plain.

The complex body of knowledge carried in these songs is hard to discern for those not raised within that world; there are tantalising mentions of place names and ancestors that would mean little to those outside a particular composer's community. McRae reminds us that this was an era when Māori "lived and worked together in a network of family and tribal groups" (p. 83). Here the labour of Ngata, Te Hurinui and other contributors is seen to best advantage, providing us with invaluable annotations and explanations of these hidden meanings. McRae and Jacob show how apparent canoe names in one lament for a young chief of great potential are in fact references to the world of the gods and of death; appropriate acknowledgement of the domain to which the dead young man is being farewelled. This is also a world where the living co-exist with the spiritual domain: one song chosen for the Introduction was composed by a tūrehu (a supernatural being) of uncommon beauty who complained about her human husband's bad treatment.

Ngata's collection also stands astride the old stone world and the new one which followed after the coming of the Pākehā. There are songs which incorporate elements from both. McRae and Jacob quote a song that mixes older natural imagery as well as the drunken confusion brought on by drinking rum in order to describe the composer's sensations of love. The authors also highlight the innovation of writing which led many Māori scholars and singers to begin recording their works, thus forming the basis of a new kind of printed world from whence Ngata's Ngā Mōteatea was to emerge. Although of the literate new world, McRae and Jacob argue that Ngā Mōteatea remains more firmly rooted in the older, oral world of autonomous tribal communities. They illustrate the last point by using a lament for the defeat of Ngāti Whātua at Te Ika-a-Ranganui by Hongi Hika's Ngā Puhi in the early 19th century. Like many other such songs it is filled with mention of places, histories and people specific to the tribal communities concerned in the composition. McRae and Jacob also emphasise the emotional candour found in such compositions; for example, the lament is brutally frank about the desire to consume an enemy's brains. Such language alerts us to the very different beliefs and customs of the composer's time. But if we are to understand these compositions fully we need to respect that other world in its own terms.

Perhaps the most important theme developed by McRae and Jacob concerns the orality of these songs and how the different male and female composers actually constructed their creative works. Memorisation of the songs, frequently composed in isolation, was standard. Remembering these songs was aided not just by well trained memories but by the artful use of repetition in the images and words employed by different composers. Following Margaret Orbell's important research McRae and Jacob show the various devices of the composers: the template structures used for each kind of song category; the shared stock of imagery and phrases which were repeated albeit with slight variations; and the cryptic references to ancestors and other pieces of historical knowledge across multiple tribal songs. To aid recollection words were also shortened and standard grammar rules ignored; as McRae points out, "Brevity is ... a marked characteristic of the poetic language in Ngā Mōteatea", even in long songs (p. 107). As was typical of all classical Māori language a few words might convey a rich range of meanings to a listener or a reader. The artistry of the composer was revealed in the way these various existing forms and phrases were subtly altered perhaps to suit a new occasion, or to include new names appropriate to the performance of an older song by another tribal community.

The wordcraft of Ngata and Ngā Mōteatea's other contributors dignifies the compositional fruits of the many artists from Te Ao Kōhatu. This Introduction too has been well served by the knowledge and skills of its two authors. Jane McRae aimed to write an introduction that showed us how the song composers used words and imagery to create specific artistic effects for their audiences in an oral world. Her colleague, Hēni Jacob, has supported this ambition through the quality of her translation which echoes the poetical achievements of the composers as if in reverential homage to their art. A reader will learn a lot here about the beauty and complexity of ancient Māori songs but at the close of this work they will doubtless find themselves, as I did, longing to take up again the four volumes and discover much more. That is, after all, what a successful Introduction is intended to do.