



(1892)
The Polynesian Society

(Sorrenson, M. P.
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A Short History of the Polynesian Society

Abridged from M.P.K. Sorrenson's *Manifest Duty: The Polynesian Society over 100 Years* with an update to 2011

The Polynesian Society was founded in Wellington on 8 January 1892 with the aim of promoting "the study of the Anthropology, Ethnology, Philology and Antiquities of the Polynesian races". On the occasion of its Centenary in 1992, the Society restated its aim as "to promote the scholarly study of past and present New Zealand Māori and other Pacific Islands peoples and cultures". From the outset, the word Polynesian in the Society's name was very broadly interpreted, going beyond the so-called Polynesian triangle of the Eastern Pacific to include all the islands of Oceania.

The Foundations Years: 1892-1922

The prime mover in the Society's formation was S. Percy Smith, supported by Edward Tregear. Both were amateur scholars of Māori language, history and traditions. An elected President and Council operating from a base in Wellington served members scattered throughout New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific. Since the membership was unable to meet to read and discuss papers, the Council established the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* to provide a vehicle for communication, co-operation and the permanent recording of the material collected. Smith and Tregear were appointed co-secretaries and co-editors of the *Journal*.

In its early years the Society was virtually a two-man band with Smith and Tregear doing nearly everything. Both men were civil servants at the head of their departments: Smith was Surveyor General and Tregear was Secretary for Labour. Smith was undoubtedly in command, the main force behind recruitment of members, negotiations with officialdom, the development of contacts and

soliciting copy for the *Journal*, much of which he wrote himself; for a while he also acted as Treasurer. Tregear provided facilities for the Society, keeping the files and growing library in his office at the Department of Labour.

Over the years 1892 to 1922 nearly three-quarters of the Society's members lived in New Zealand with a significant cluster (22) in Hawai'i. Smith recruited a number of important Māori as members, including Tukino Te Heuheu, Major Keepa Te Rangihwinui, Major Ropata Wahawaha, Sir James Carroll, Apirana Ngata, Maui Pomare and Te Rangi Hiroa (Peter Buck).

During Smith's editorship the *Journal* appeared regularly and contained a good mix of material from New Zealand and Polynesia. Articles on Māori subjects were contributed by Māori elders both as authors and indirectly through Pākehā collectors. Smith, Tregear and Elsdon Best (a Council member) corresponded with Māori members and contributors in Māori. Smith set out his theories on Māori origins, migrations and religion in numerous *Journal* articles, many serialised and later published by the Society as Memoirs. Despite criticism, these theories became the prevailing orthodoxy on these topics, not seriously challenged until the 1930s.

When Smith retired to New Plymouth in 1901, the Society's headquarters and the files from Tregear's office were moved there. In 1909, printing of the *Journal* was transferred to Thomas Avery and Sons Ltd of New Plymouth, the beginning of a collaboration that lasted until 1967.

The Society's link with Native Minister Sir James Carroll bore positive fruit in the Maori Antiquities Act 1901. In 1920, Apirana Ngata took out a Life Membership and secured a £1000 grant from the Department of Internal Affairs towards the publication of Māori manuscripts.

In 1922, the year Smith died, the Society had 199 members, of whom seven were Māori and nine were women. Of the articles published in the *Journal* to that date, Māori topics accounted for 55 percent and Island Polynesia for 36 percent; 48 percent were classified as anthropology, 34 percent as history, 16 percent as linguistics and 3 percent as archaeology (Sorrenson 1992: 52). The anthropological articles comprised mostly ethnographic description and reports of traditional customs, and the history was mostly transcribed oral narrative. Leading contributors Smith and Best were committed and hard-working amateur scholars but lacked academic training. The appointment of H.D. Skinner (son of early Council member W.H. Skinner) as Lecturer in Ethnology at Otago University in 1917 was the first sign of changes to come.

The Wellington hegemony: 1923-1953

After Smith's death in 1922, Elsdon Best succeeded him as President but it was W.H. Skinner who held the Society together and arranged for its headquarters to be transferred back to Wellington in 1925. Ngata continued to provide valuable support, securing an annual grant from the Maori Purposes Fund Board and additional grants for special publications. When Skinner was elected President, Best and Johannes Andersen, Librarian of the Alexander Turnbull Library, were elected co-editors. Two new members of Council were elected: Maui Pomare, the first Māori council member, and H.R.H. Balneavis, Private Secretary to the Minister of Native Affairs. Māori

membership trebled and the Society's total membership topped Smith's goal of 250. The *Journal* grew in length. While Māori and Pacific oral traditions continued to dominate its content, Harry Skinner made his presence felt with articles on material culture which undermined the Smith-Best orthodoxy concerning Māori culture history and migrations.

In the Depression years of the 1930s, the Society suffered a temporary loss of members and the withdrawal of the annual grant from the Maori Purposes Fund Board, but revived with the restoration of the grant in 1938. After Best's death in 1931, Harry Skinner was appointed co-editor with Andersen—a prickly partnership that did not last. Conflict between the amateur ethnological tradition and the new discipline of anthropology began to come into the open; Skinner mounted a substantial attack on the Smith-Best orthodoxy concerning Polynesian origins and migrations and the existence or otherwise of a Supreme Being in Polynesian religion. As the debate became increasingly acrimonious, Skinner resigned as co-editor in 1934 and thereafter confined his *Journal* contributions to comments on artefacts, leaving the case for professional anthropology to be conducted largely from abroad by scholars like Te Rangi Hiroa and his associates at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. Contributions from leading Pacific scholars helped establish the *Journal* as an international publication but also brought complaints from New Zealand members that there was too much non-Māori material.

Despite the shadow of war, 1940 proved an outstanding year for the *Journal* in terms of both quantity and quality, with four issues totalling 711 pages and containing a wealth of material from professional anthropologists with international reputations. Articles from these issues published as a Memoir in 1941 were hailed as "state of the art essays summing up existing and generally agreed knowledge of Polynesian cultures".

Sir Apirana Ngata had been elected President in 1938 and served in that capacity until his death in 1950. Through the 1940s he was a regular contributor to the *Journal* with his annotated *waiata*, subsequently published by the Society in a series of Māori Texts.

In 1946 W.H. Skinner died and Andersen retired as Editor and Council member, symbolically marking the end of the Society's amateur phase. Clyde Taylor, William Greenwood and Jock McEwen jointly assumed the role of Editor. Though not professionally trained they were keenly attuned to new developments. The Society acquired new members fresh from war service, among them Harry Dansey, who became a respected journalist, and William (Bill) Geddes and Bruce Biggs, who embarked on academic careers. The Society published Geddes's *Deuba: a Study in a Fijian Village* in 1946 and Biggs's *Maori Marriage* in 1960. Ernest Beaglehole, who had published articles on the history of anthropology in New Zealand in the *Journal* in the late 1930s, contributed an essay entitled "Contemporary Maori Death Customs" with his wife Pearl in 1952, a venture into ethnography of the present-day that attracted severe criticism from the old guard. While amateur scholars like George Graham and Leslie Kelly continued to contribute Māori oral traditions to the *Journal*, professional anthropologists working with modern Māori mostly chose to publish

elsewhere. High quality contributions from Te Rangi Hiroa and his colleagues at the Bishop Museum led to the proportion of Māori material in the *Journal* falling below 50 percent.

The Auckland-Wellington axis: 1954-1992

The mid-50s saw Bill Geddes appointed co-editor of the *Journal*. Geddes was Senior Lecturer in the recently established Department of Anthropology at the University of Auckland with field experience in Melanesia and Sarawak. His influence was clearly demonstrated in the March issue for 1955, a splendid production that was widely praised. Geddes introduced a new design by distinguished Auckland typographer Bob Lowrie, a new scheme of distinctive colours for each issue and a new referencing scheme. In the Editors' Comment, readers were reassured that the editors wanted to serve amateurs and professionals alike. The issue offered a rich feast of high quality articles, including an essay from young Fijian anthropologist Rusiate Nayacakalou.

From then on, editors of the *Journal* were drawn from the University of Auckland Anthropology Department. The range of articles published in the *Journal* became more diverse; an increasing proportion provided by professional anthropologists, the staff and students of the Auckland Anthropology Department and leading social anthropologists in the United States. Despite good intentions, friction between amateur and professional contributors and readers were never far from the surface, especially after the arrival in Auckland of new academics and new scientific techniques in archaeology and linguistics. When archaeologist Jack Golson and his colleagues endorsed Roger Duff's two-phase model of Māori development and rejected any role for oral tradition in the organising and interpretation of New Zealand prehistory, they so attracted the ire of the traditionalists that one complained to the Maori Purposes Fund Board, jeopardising the Society's annual grant.

In 1956 Te Rotohiko Jones accepted the presidency but passed it on after a year to Tipi Ropiha. When the latter stood down in 1958 the Māori presence in the Society's Council was maintained for many years by Sir Apirana Ngata's son William.

In 1958 the Council began a series of monthly meetings in Wellington, an innovation which lasted several years. The Society's Rules were amended to make the editor a member of Council. Lengthy skirmishing over the location of the Society's library was resolved by a postal ballot which placed it on indefinite deposit in the Alexander Turnbull Library.

Jock McEwen brought stability to the Society as President from 1959 to 1979, ably supported by John Booth as Secretary from 1958 to 1971. Both President and Secretary were strategically located in government departments in Wellington. During the 60s and 70s the Society enjoyed a period of sustained development, reflecting the expansion of anthropology and the social sciences in New Zealand universities. As a consequence the Society and the *Journal* became more than ever a vehicle for professional anthropology and associated disciplines. Membership peaked at 1464 in 1968, then began to decline as the *Journal* lost contributors to new journals in history, archaeology and Pacific affairs, and interested amateurs found the *Journal* becoming too specialised. However, the amateur

element continued to be represented on Council by long-serving members like Tony Batley, Keith Cairns and Les Lockerbie.

Within the Auckland Anthropology Department, the editorship passed from one member to another as editors left on fieldtrips or to take up overseas appointments. The *Journal* continued, as in the past, to reflect the concerns and contacts of the current editor, though they did not use it to publish their own work to the extent that Smith had. A section of Pacific Commentary and Shorter Communications was introduced by Murray Groves. The linguistic content increased under Bruce Biggs, though it never rose above ten percent. Under Ralph Bulmer articles on New Guinea increased, while Antony Hooper and Judith Huntsman tipped the balance back towards Polynesia. In general the mix of disciplines characteristic of the 60s was maintained through the 70s but the geographical distribution changed in favour of the Pacific Islands.

In addition to achieving international success with the *Journal*, the Society produced a steady stream of additional publications in the 60s and 70s. These included a new Māori Monograph series and several Memoirs. 1976 was a very productive year for the Society. On the initiative of Judith Huntsman as editor the March issue was a special topical issue, *Incest Prohibitions in Micronesia and Polynesia*. Publication of a Polynesian Society Memoir under the title *Pacific Navigation and Voyaging* revived the long running debate about Polynesian and especially Māori origins, and included essays describing voyages using traditional navigation methods and research employing computer simulation.

In 1979 the printing of the Journal was transferred to the Auckland University Bindery. Changes were made in format (to A5 page size) and cover design but the basic colour coding for issues was retained.

Although the editorship was now firmly located in Auckland, the Society's headquarters remained in Wellington through the 1970s. When John Booth retired in 1971 the secretary position passed to Bernie Kernot, a lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington, and then to Peter Ranby, who, however, moved to Auckland in 1979. In that year Bruce Biggs, Professor of Linguistics and Māori Studies in the Auckland Anthropology Department, succeeded Jock McEwen as President, and the following year the Society's registered office was transferred to Auckland and has remained there ever since.

Te Arikinui Dame Te Atairangikaahu became Patron of the Polynesian Society in 1981 and served in that capacity until her death in 2006. At her invitation the Council held a meeting at Waahi Marae on 17 November 1982, the only meeting held on a *marae* and outside Wellington or Auckland. In the 1980s Council was broadened with the election of Judith Huntsman as its first woman member in 1982, followed by Ann Chowning in 1984 and Margaret Mutu in 1985. Samoan historian Malama Meleiseā joined the Council in 1989 and in the 1990s the Tongan linguist Melenaite Taumoefolau was elected.

Two important developments in the history of the Society were the establishment in 1970 of the Elsdon Best Memorial Medal awarded for “outstanding scholarly work on the New Zealand Māori”, and in 1984 of the Rusiate Nayacakalou Medal awarded for “recent significant publication on the Island Pacific relevant to the aims and purposes of the Polynesian Society and the interests and concerns of the late Dr Nayacakalou”.

The Centenary 1992

The Society celebrated its Centenary in 1992 with a sense of achievement. The 100 years had seen the publication of 400 *JPS* issues, 49 Memoirs and 11 other volumes, including the four parts of *Ngā Mōteatea* and three special Māori monographs. To mark the occasion the Society not only awarded both an Elsdon Best and a Nayacakalou Medal but also arranged with the University of Auckland for its President, Professor Emeritus Bruce Biggs, to deliver the Macmillan Brown Lectures and for the University of Chicago Distinguished Professor Marshall Sahlins to present the annual prestigious Robb Lectures. Two new monographs were also published: the *Centennial Index*, compiled by Dorothy Brown, and a history of the Society entitled *Manifest Duty: The Polynesian Society over 100 Years* by M.P.K. Sorrenson.

After the Centenary: 1993 -

After presiding over the centennial year, Bruce Biggs retired as President and was succeeded by Professor Sir Hugh Kawharu, who in turn retired in 2005 to be succeeded by Dame Joan Metge and in 2010 by Dr Richard Benton.

Following the death of the Society's Patron in 2006, the Council decided to ask both Tumu Te Heuheu (Te Heuheu Tūkino VIII) and the Samoan Head of State Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Efi to become the Society's Patrons, thereby together representing both the Aotearoa “home” of the Society and the many peoples of the Pacific.

During the 20 years since the Centenary the Society has faced new challenges and developed some innovative solutions. In the mid-90s, the Society somewhat unexpectedly found itself in financial difficulties. Routine costs had risen and book sales were not covering the difference between these costs and annual income from dues and subscriptions. An appeal to long-time Life Members resulted in a designated publication fund. Support in kind from the University of Auckland Arts Faculty reduced production costs of the Journal. Royalties from commercial re-publication of two works previously published by the Society provided a nest egg that allowed the Editor and Council to contemplate other publishing ventures. In 2004 new editions of the Oldman catalogues (Memoirs 14 and 15) were launched and 2006 saw the publication of the Macmillan Brown Lectures, *Kimihia te Mea Ngaro: Seek that which is Lost*, delivered by Bruce Biggs 13 years before. Three memoirs on Cook Island history were published: an edited compilation by Rangī Moeka'a and Richard Walter of Te Ariki Tara 'Are's *History and Traditions of Rarotonga* (2000), a study of *War and Succession in Mangaia—from Mamae's Texts* by Michael Reilly (2003) and, also by Reilly, *Ancestral Voices from Mangaia: A History of the Ancient Gods and Chiefs* (2009). These three volumes maintained the Society's longstanding commitment to publishing texts in indigenous languages.

A different sort of publication was Pei Te Hurunui's biography of the first Māori King, published by the Society in 1959 and long out of print. Shortly before her death in 2006, the Society's Patron Te Arikinui Dame Te Atairangikaahu had expressed a wish that the work be reprinted. The Society responded, engaging Jenifer Curnow to edit a new edition, which was published in association with Huia Press in 2010 as Memoir 55.

In 2002 the Society undertook its most ambitious project ever with a new edition of the four parts of *Ngā Mōteatea: The Songs*, Apirana Ngata's collection of Māori *waiata*, in association with Auckland University Press. A team of editors, advisors, translators and technicians collaborated for six years to publish one volume a year from 2004 to 2007.

Apirana Ngata wrote in 1933: "With the revival in interest the demand has arisen for a pocket edition of 'Nga Moteatea'.... a selection of the easier songs.... in order that the renaissance may be further stimulated". Following this lead, the Society recently contracted Dr Jane McRae to write an introduction to *Ngā Mōteatea* and Hēni Jacobsto provide a full Māori translation. The resulting work, *Ngā Mōteatea: An Introduction*, was published in 2011, again in association with Auckland University Press.

All of these publications, as well as the recent "special issues" of the *Journal*, provide income in addition to dues and subscriptions. These new income streams will cushion the Society as *Journal* issues become available on-line and the Council assesses how this affects past sources of income. Of course, the *JPS* issues as always are published quarterly.

An exciting outcome of modern digital technology is that in 2009 the first 100 volumes of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* were made freely available on-line through the University of Auckland Library. From the Society's perspective it is particularly gratifying that the earlier volumes of the *Journal* are now available to the Oceanic peoples whose texts they recorded and traditional practices they documented, whose languages and ancient past they described, and whose ancestors' voyaging and migrations they debated.

Subscription

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Information

For Readers

The Polynesian Society was formed in New Zealand in 1892, co-founded by Stephenson Percy Smith and Edward Tregear. It counted Elsdon Best, W. H. Skinner, Sir Āpirana T. Ngata as some

of its earlier presidents. One of the oldest learned societies in the Southern Hemisphere, its aim is to promote the scholarly study of past and present New Zealand Māori and other Pacific Island peoples and cultures.

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