



# ENTANGLEMENTS OF EMPIRE



Missionaries, Māori, and the  
Question of the Body

**Tony Ballantyne**

***Entanglements of Empire* explores the political, cultural and economic entanglements and irrevocable social transformations that resulted from Māori engagements with Protestant missionaries at the most distant edge of the British empire.**

The first Protestant mission to New Zealand, established in 1814, saw the beginning of complex political, cultural, and economic entanglements with Māori. *Entanglements of Empire* is a deft reconstruction of the cross-cultural translations of this early period. Misunderstanding was rife: the physical body itself became the most contentious site of cultural engagement, as Māori and missionaries struggled over issues of hygiene, tattooing, clothing, and sexual morality.

Historian Tony Ballantyne explores the varying understandings of such concepts as civilization, work, time and space, and gender – and the practical consequences of the struggles over these ideas. The encounters in the classroom, chapel, kitchen, and farmyard worked mutually to affect both the Māori and the English worldviews.

Ultimately, the interest in missionary Christianity among influential Māori chiefs had far-reaching consequences for both groups. Concluding in 1840 with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi and the new age it ushered in, *Entanglements of Empire* offers important insights into this crucial period of New Zealand history.

Tony Ballantyne is currently chair of the History Department and director of the Centre for Research on Colonial Culture at the University of Otago. In 2012 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand. His books include ***Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World*** (Duke University Press, 2006), and ***Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Colonial Past*** (Bridget Williams Books, 2012).

‘Tony Ballantyne is at the forefront of New Zealand history, one of the most important historians of the British empire, and a key figure in the study of global history. His *Entanglements of Empire* is an extremely exciting book. Written clearly and cogently argued, it will find interest among multiple readerships, including historians of colonialism and settlement, religion, sexuality, cross-cultural studies, transnationalism, and empire.’

– *Associate Professor Damon Salesa*

‘Tony Ballantyne’s account of the encounter in what was to eventually become New Zealand between European missionaries and the various groups of Polynesians who were to become Māori is a richly interesting book. Ballantyne, an innovative historian who consistently works across and between the traditions of imperial history and national historiographies, here offers a book that is original, well researched, and deeply connected to current debates in studies of imperialism and New Zealand’s cultural history.’

– *Catherine Hall, author of Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain*

## CONTENTS

ix	Acknowledgments
1	Introduction BODIES IN CONTACT, BODIES IN QUESTION
26	Chapter One EXPLORATION, EMPIRE, AND EVANGELIZATION
65	Chapter Two MAKING PLACE, REORDERING SPACE
98	Chapter Three ECONOMICS, LABOR, AND TIME
138	Chapter Four CONTAINING TRANSGRESSION
174	Chapter Five CULTURES OF DEATH
214	Chapter Six THE POLITICS OF THE “ENFEEBLED” BODY
251	Conclusion BODIES AND THE ENTANGLEMENTS OF EMPIRE
261	Notes
313	Glossary
317	Bibliography
343	Index

*Introduction* BODIES IN CONTACT, BODIES IN QUESTION

Cross-cultural engagements have the power to initiate radical social change. Often fraught, rife with miscommunication, and marred by violence, encounters and entanglements between formerly unconnected peoples have frequently proven to be transformative moments in world history, occasions that have profound and often unexpected consequences, that are both material and cosmological. If we survey the last millennium of the global past, we see that such encounters have enabled the transfer of plants, animals, and germs, the diffusion of commodities and technologies, and the creation of a host of new trading relationships that created new forms of interdependence that linked previously disparate groups. These material exchanges have initiated far-reaching ecological modifications, as they have driven both tragic depopulation and sustained population growth, made fortunes and impoverished communities, and enabled the rise and fall of states and empires. Even though much historical work on cross-cultural encounters has documented their material consequences, both spectacular and horrific, we must not overlook the far-reaching but often elusive nature of the cosmological change that such meetings initiated. Meetings with newcomers, especially where those transitioned from brief encounters to lasting engagements, often undercut long-established pieties and created new spiritual orders. Encountering strangers has frequently called

into question the power of “old” gods and their earthly representatives (from shaman to priests). This doubt created space for new gods, for new religious authorities, and for new visions of both the natural and supernatural worlds. Gods and their powers were the subject of crucial cross-cultural battles over meaning and frequently these struggles gave rise to particularly significant forms of innovation, as translation, appropriation, and reinterpretation produced new and unexpected forms of practice and belief.

In this book I examine the cross-cultural debates and entanglements set in motion by the establishment of Protestant missions in New Zealand in 1814, especially those arguments and engagements that turned on the ways in which the human body was understood and organized. Missionary work, which raised pressing questions about the body and its meaning as it tried to transform both the material and cosmological order of “native” life, developed in the wake of British imperial intrusion deep in the southern Pacific. The arrival of Lieutenant James Cook’s *Endeavour* off Te Ika a Māui, New Zealand’s North Island, in October 1769, punctured the long isolation that had conditioned the development of the Polynesian culture in New Zealand. In 1769, approximately 100,000 people lived in the islands that we now call New Zealand, a population that descended from the migrants who sailed south from the central Pacific around 1250 C.E. While this population shared common ancestors, spoke dialects of a common language, and had a common cosmology, they had developed a set of profoundly localized identities which were defined by the landscape, competition over valuable resources, and, above all else, *whakapapa* (genealogy). This cultural world was transformed by the arrival of Europeans, who appeared so strange and marvelous that they were initially called *tupua* (goblins), *pakepakehā* (fairy folk), or *atua* (supernatural beings). It was through the encounter with the overwhelming difference of Europeans—their unusual boats, their strange clothing, their unfamiliar languages, their unusual foods—that these Polynesian peoples who had long settled in New Zealand discovered the fundamental cultural commonalities that united them.<sup>1</sup> The new sense of their common way of life encouraged these communities to begin to define themselves by contrasting themselves with the strange outsiders who visited their world. They began to call themselves *tāngata māori*, the ordinary people, and with time, “Māori” became the term commonly used by both native and stranger to designate the first people who had made their home in the islands of New Zealand.<sup>2</sup>

Cook’s arrival not only began to crystallize a new sense of “Māoriness,” but also ushered in a new world, full of wonder, risks, and opportunities. In



the wake of Cook, many European vessels visited New Zealand in search of timber and flax for shipbuilding or in search of seals and whales, which produced a range of commodities that were valued in industrializing Europe and that also might be used to pay for Europe's insatiable demand for Asian spices, tea, textiles, and porcelain. Through their engagements with these ships and their crews, most Māori communities learned about metal and the written word, and discovered a bewildering array of plants and animals (from potatoes to sheep, horses to cabbages). They also discovered the awesome power of European firearms and soon felt the terrible effects of the microbes, unseen and unknown, that were a largely uncontrollable part of the biological and cultural baggage that Europeans brought with them into the southern Pacific.

The Europeans who traveled to New Zealand before 1814 typically made only fleeting visits to a few regions: the far south of Te Wai Pounamu ("the Greenstone Waters," New Zealand's South Island); Cook's Strait between Te Ika a Māui and Te Wai Pounamu; the Thames area on the east coast of Te Ika a Māui; and the Bay of Islands in the far north of Te Ika a Māui (see map 1). Sailors and sealers had no intention of settling in New Zealand, and those who did briefly sojourn among Māori had no choice but to accept the power of Māori leaders and the authority of local lore and law. Conversely, the missionaries who arrived in the mid-1810s intended to remain in New Zealand, and their very motivation was the desire to effect cultural and religious change. They hoped that God would eventually allow them to "root out" those aspects of Māori life that did not fit with the injunctions of the Bible; they wanted to use the power of God's word to ultimately remake all Māori, to convert them into pious and God-fearing Christians. They understood that this was to be a difficult task, a great battle against both the weaknesses of the "heathen" and the power of Satan. In 1824, the wife of one leading missionary in New Zealand described this project as "Christian warfare with the great enemy of souls [Satan]!"<sup>3</sup> While they were confident that they would ultimately transform Māori society, as they entered the field missionaries expected to be tested, to be challenged by the "heathen," by immoral Europeans, by themselves, and by Satan himself.<sup>4</sup>

Progress was indeed slow for the missionaries, but even before large numbers of Māori began to convert in the 1830s, the missionary project began to effect significant change. Although Māori were initially wary about Christian teaching, they recognized that the presence of missionaries stimulated trade and made it possible for them to access valuable new technology. Metal tools were greatly valued as they allowed many traditional tasks to be completed

more quickly and enabled land to be brought into cultivation with greater ease. But Māori also quickly realized that axes and hoes had further utility, that they could be deployed as potent weapons in hand-to-hand combat. Although the cross-cultural musket trade was a central point of contention in the mission, from the outset Māori associated these weapons with missionaries as Marsden had given the *rangatira* (chiefs) Korokoro, Ruatara, and Hongi Hika pistols and muskets, which quickly became key markers of the rangatira's *mana* (charisma, authority, power).<sup>5</sup> By establishing close relationships with missionaries, some chiefs, especially Hongi Hika, rapidly accumulated significant numbers of firearms, which they deployed in campaigns against local rivals and in a wave of long-distance raids to the south.

Most important, however, Māori were drawn to the missionaries because of their awareness of the power of literacy. Through their encounters with Samuel Marsden, at mission schools, through missionary itineration, and through the auspices of “native teachers,” Māori learned how to read and write in their own language. The missionaries, of course, believed that these skills were essential for conversion and were the foundation for the construction of a “native church.” For Māori, however, these skills not only allowed them to access the Bible, but also made possible an array of new forms of economic, social, and political activity. Some Māori used these skills to fashion their own understandings of scripture and developed distinct cosmologies and ritual practices: by the 1830s, the narratives of both the vernacular Old and New Testament had become an important store of metaphor, symbolism, and argument. Thus, even within the context of the increasing disparities of power that characterized frontier society, literacy and the Bible provided successive generations of Māori leaders with new skills and knowledge that could be turned against colonization. The radical potential of the Bible, particularly when wrenched free of missionary control, was clear; as one Māori bluntly stated in 1843, “This is my weapon, the white man’s book.”<sup>6</sup>

But vectors of cultural transformation did not flow only one way. Anglican and Methodist missionaries who lived with and among Māori while they worked on the frontier were also transformed by the experience. No matter how much they hoped to recreate British models of Christian faith, the Christian family, or civilized sociability, they made their new home in a land that would never be Britain. On the furthest frontier of the empire, the great bulk of their congregationalists and fellow Christians were Māori, not Britons. The missionaries initially lived in houses built on Māori models and constructed with local materials, and even after they were able to con-



struct “civilized” British houses, their domestic arrangements never simply replicated British models. Māori were omnipresent in the mission station and in mission houses. Māori “girls” provided essential domestic labor for the mission, preparing food, cleaning and washing, and acting as nannies. Māori men accompanied missionaries on their expeditions, guiding them, providing physical labor, and teaching them about the history of the land, how they understood the workings of nature and the supernatural, and how indigenous social life was organized. On the mission stations, Māori men worked closely with missionaries as “native teachers,” as increasingly skilled workers (sawyers, carpenters, and farmers), and as laborers, and were frequent visitors to mission houses. So even though propagandists imagined missionary stations as little models of England, the great weight of historical evidence suggests that Māori frequently dictated the rhythms of missionary life and were quite successful in indigenizing the mission station as a space.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time as the physical presence of Māori was an inescapable part of the missionary world, missionaries were also drawn into the mental world of Māori. In order to Christianize Māori society, missionaries first had to grasp the operation of essential social laws, develop a basic understanding of local politics and kin-group rivalries, and gain linguistic competence in spoken Māori. Te reo Māori (the Māori language) was the functional language of the mission. It was the language of native service, the language of educational and social instruction, and the primary idiom of cross-cultural communication. Most important, it was the language of scripture. Missionaries labored long and hard, individually and collectively, on the massive project of translating the Bible into te reo Māori with the aspiration of creating a clear and idiomatic rendering of God’s word into the local vernacular. This vast undertaking, which took decades, not only reshaped the linguistic underpinnings of Māori mentalities and transformed Māori political idioms, but also changed the missionaries themselves. Listening, speaking, and writing te reo Māori modified the linguistic and mental worlds of the missionaries. Not only did many missionaries come to write a moderately creolized form of English that made routine use of Māori words and phrases, but the study of Māori language also suggested to some missionaries that deep affinities connected Britons and Māori, despite the manifold differences in the patterns of their everyday lives. Some leading missionaries even became convinced that the British and Māori peoples were long-lost cousins, members of an expansive racial family that was diffused across the face of the globe but who were ultimately connected by their common Indo-European or Aryan linguistic and racial heritage.<sup>8</sup>

Many advocates of colonization were critical of these missionary beliefs and argued that this immersion in the Māori world undercut the national and imperial allegiance of missionaries. They argued that missionaries, especially those who openly opposed the plans for the large-scale settlement of New Zealand formulated by the New Zealand Company, had become “philo-Māoris” (“Māori lovers”) who were intent on preventing the extension of colonial authority and the effective “amalgamation” of settlers and Māori.<sup>9</sup> Even though British Protestant missionaries played a key role in the intensification of cross-cultural contact on the New Zealand frontier, boosters of imperialism saw the missionaries’ commitment to the creation of a “native church” grounded in the Māori Bible as indicative of their betrayal of true British interests.

### Bodies in Contact, Bodies in Question

My particular concern in this book is the place of the body in the exchanges between Protestant missionaries and Māori. At a fundamental level, this focus reflects the ubiquity of the body in the archival records of these encounters. The body is a recurrent concern in the early letters of Māori Christians, as well as in missionary journals, letters, travel narratives, and pamphlets. In this large and diverse archive, the body was mobile and polysemic. Early converts to Christianity blended indigenous metaphors with biblical imagery to explain their struggle to embrace Christianity. In a letter written in the early 1830s, a man named Wariki wove together the *ngārara*, the evil lizard of Māori mythology, with the New Testament’s identification of the heart as the seat of the conscience and the core of an individual’s character to explain that despite his best efforts, he had not yet been able to accept Christianity.<sup>10</sup> “My heart is all rock, all rock, and no good thing will grow upon it. The lizard and the snail run over the rocks, and all evil runs over my heart.”<sup>11</sup>

For their part, missionaries constantly worried over the body. They believed that remaking Māori bodies was an essential part of the missionary project. Māori had to set aside practices, such as slavery, tattooing, and cannibalism, that some missionaries saw as evidence of Satan’s continued power in New Zealand. Yet bitter experience taught the missionaries that effecting such changes would be very difficult, and they were forced to make a range of accommodations to these practices. In many ways, it was the less spectacular and more routine struggle to reshape Māori social arrangements that was at the center of the missionaries’ drive to remake Māori culture. They worked very hard to encourage Māori to give up polygamy and to embrace Christian

marriage as the basis for the sexual, social, and economic order. Missionaries also hoped to inculcate new models of work, hygiene, and comportment through mission schools and the exemplary model of the missionary family. In short, the reform of the indigenous body was an indicator of the spiritual advance of the mission. Missionaries were also concerned about the extent to which their calling imperiled their own bodies; they routinely reflected on the physical consequences of the heavy labor, constant walking, and poor diet that accompanied missionary work. Many dwelled at great length on the threat of illness and the dangers of childbirth, for even though the early missionaries in New Zealand ultimately produced large families, it seemed that death was never far from their door. Others worried about their ability to resist the physical temptations posed by the isolation of missionary life and the power of the culture that surrounded them.

Tā moko, or tattooing, demonstrates the ways in which cross-cultural engagements raised questions about the meaning and management of bodies. Missionary texts, especially those from the early years of the mission, dwelt on this custom and frequently suggest that tattooing had to be set aside if Māori were to truly embrace Christianity and if they were to progress toward “Civilization.”<sup>12</sup> For example, Samuel Marsden in 1819 told the young but well-traveled rangatira Tuai that tā moko “was a very foolish and ridiculous custom; and, as he [Tuai] had seen so much of civilized life, he should now lay aside the barbarous customs of his country, and adopt those of civilized nations. Tooi [Tuai] replied, that he wished to do so himself; but his Brother urged him to be tattooed, as otherwise he could not support his rank and character as a gentleman among his countrymen, and they would consider him timid and effeminate.”<sup>13</sup> Tuai’s argument that tā moko was a crucial element of the projection of his chiefly authority confirmed the links between status and tattooing that many European observers had drawn by this time. Other rangatira went further than asserting the importance of the practice in representing rank and power, turning the mirror of cultural reflection to question British bodily practices. John Liddard Nicholas, a supporter of the foundation of the New Zealand mission, reported that when the rangatira Te Pahi was challenged about tā moko during a visit to New South Wales,

he immediately censured some of our own [practices] as far more ridiculous, and many of his arguments were both rational and convincing. Like most of the New Zealand chiefs, he was highly tattooed, a mode of disfiguring the face which is generally practised by all the savage tribes in the Pacific

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