

# Early French Views of the Waikato and its Inhabitants (1840-54)

William Jennings

In March 1840, Bishop Pompallier, the head of the Marist mission in the Pacific, crossed the Kaimai ranges from Tauranga and entered the Waikato region. He had been sailing along the eastern North Island investigating coastal sites for future Catholic mission stations. In Tauranga, however, Maori so strongly encouraged him to visit the influential Ngati Haua in Matamata that he left his schooner and headed inland. Pompallier may not have been the first Frenchman to visit the Waikato region, but was almost certainly the first literate Frenchman there. The bishop and the Marist priests who would soon follow him into the region were well read and strongly influenced by France's prevailing Romantic movement, with its emphasis on the noble savage and the emotive power of nature. Throughout this paper the term 'noble savage' is used in the Rousseauian sense to encapsulate French cultural attitudes towards Maori. Indeed, one of the missionaries uses the term 'bons sauvages' (noble savages) to refer to Maori, although many also employ the term 'naturels' (natives). This paper will investigate how the cultural background of these Frenchmen informed their descriptions of Waikato Maori and the Waikato environment. It will use the newly-published ten-volume collected correspondence of the pioneer Marists in the Pacific, the *Lettres reçues d'Océanie*, as its principal source.<sup>1</sup> But before exploring the Marists' perspective of people and places in the Waikato, it would be useful to know why French priests were

roaming the interior of an antipodean British colony during the 1840s.

The Marists were members of the Society of Mary, a Catholic order founded in Lyon in 1816. The place and the year were significant. Lyon was renowned as a staunchly Catholic city devoted to the Virgin Mary, but during the French Revolution the Church had been persecuted, monasteries destroyed, and priests forced to flee or hide. Napoleon had allowed Catholicism to return on his terms in 1801; he wanted an active Church working for his Empire, not cloistered orders cut off from civil society. The restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1815 gave new freedom to the Church, whose energetic mission to re-engage with the French population spilled over into missionary work abroad.<sup>2</sup> In 1836, the Pope assigned the new vicariate of Western Oceania to the Society of Mary. The Society was young and so were its priests. The pioneer Marist missionaries, who arrived in New Zealand from 1838-43, were almost all in their late twenties or early thirties when they stepped ashore; Pompallier himself was only 36. They were from the generation born during the Napoleonic wars that had grown up with Romanticism and a Catholic revival, both sparked by the work of François-René de Chateaubriand. In 1802 Chateaubriand published his *Génie du Christianisme* (*Genius of Christianity*), a multi-volume apology of Catholicism that began by arguing that the beauty of nature, particularly in exotic locales, proved the existence of God. It also devoted substantial space to the work of missions from China to the Americas. Among the many anecdotes and stories in *The Genius of Christianity* was the famous tale *Atala*, published separately in 1801 to immense acclaim. *Atala* was reprinted five times by 1805 and inspired paintings, plays and prints throughout the century.<sup>3</sup> Its impact was such that the name *Atala* became a favourite for decades. René-Primevère Lesson, naturalist of the Duperrey expedition that visited New Zealand in 1824, named his daughter, born in 1819, Cécille-Eustelle-Atala;<sup>4</sup> when the wistful and romantic Madame

Bovary considers names for her baby daughter, Atala is one of her first choices.<sup>5</sup>

The plot of *Atala* combines Catholicism, Romanticism and the noble savage. It recounts a love story between two Native Americans and is set in exotic and remarkably beautiful landscapes. Central to the story is a solitary French Catholic missionary who works in isolation with his peaceful Native American flock deep in the forest and far from any other Europeans. Chateaubriand's work, with its lyrical prose and its exaltation of nature and the exotic, became the cornerstone of French Romanticism, a movement that peaked while the future Marists were young men studying for the priesthood. The Marists had unquestionably read Chateaubriand's work for its comprehensive survey of Christianity, its lengthy praise of France's missions and its Romanticism. They even imitated Chateaubriand's style in their letters from New Zealand. Fr Louis Rozet was clearly inspired by *René*, a short story from *The Genius of Christianity* that features exotic landscapes, a storm at sea viewed from the shore and even a volcano:

Opotiki, tribut où je réside dans une grande maison de jonc, est situé tout auprès de la mer; deux petites rivières d'eau douce l'entoure d'un demi cercle. Par derrière s'étend une belle plaine de six à huit lieux d'étendue; sur ses côtés, des montagnes couvertes d'arbres gigantesques et verdoyants bornent la vue qui ne s'étend jusque là qu'à deux lieux lorsque les vents déchaînés bouleversent la mer jusque dans ses entrailles. Les vagues mugissent sourdement. Elles s'élèvent à une hauteur prodigieuse et leurs sons assourdissants vient à la nuit me plonger dans le sommeil, car le bruit de la mer en courrou produit sur les sens de l'homme le même effet que les vents lorsqu'ils soufflent avec impétuosité, et les uns et les autres portent également au sommeil. De ma maison j'aperçois aussi un volcan. Il est sur une île qui se

trouve à huit lieux de moi. Lorsque le temps est clair, j'apperois les tourbillons de fumée qui s'ex[*halem*] de cette île embrassé et pendant une belle nuit l'on voit aussi les flammes qui s'élancent dans les airs.

(Opotiki, the tribe where I live in a large house made of rushes, is situated right by the sea; two small freshwater streams surround it in a semicircle. Behind is a beautiful plain some six to eight leagues in size; at its edge, mountains covered in gigantic verdant trees form the horizon. When the raging winds stir up the very entrails of the sea, the horizon reaches only two leagues. The waves boom with a muffled sound. They reach a prodigious height and their deafening noise at night makes me sleep, for the sound of the angry sea affects the human senses like the wind when it blows with great violence; both are soporific. From my house I can also see a volcano. It is on an island about eight leagues from me. When the weather is clear, I can see the whirling smoke emanating from that burning island and during a clear night one can see the flames soaring into the sky.)<sup>6</sup>

Chateaubriand's depictions of Native Americans undoubtedly influenced how the Marists saw Maori in the Waikato and elsewhere in New Zealand. They likely also affected Pompallier's instructions to his missionaries, which, as Cynthia Piper notes, were remarkably tolerant for their time.<sup>7</sup> The French missionaries would have noted how their predecessors—Jesuits, Dominicans and Franciscans in Asia and the Americas—described indigenous peoples in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the writing of those pre-Revolutionary and pre-Romantic missionaries, there is a fine ethnographic tradition that sometimes extended to approval of supposedly primitive societies.<sup>8</sup> The distinction between self and other in praise of these early noble savages was however clear. In New Zealand,



particularly in the isolated stations of the Waikato, this distinction became blurred.

Relatively little has been written about the first Marists in New Zealand. Work on missions has tended to focus on the Anglican and Wesleyan missions, although there is growing recognition that study of the Marist mission has been neglected.<sup>9</sup> It has not helped that the French Marists were humble men—humility was one of the key tenets of their order—who left few records of their experiences apart from their correspondence. Working according to their principle *ignoti et quasi occulti in hoc mundo* ('hidden and as if unknown in the world'), the Marists did their best to stay out of colonial politics.<sup>10</sup> They also avoided commerce, never profiting from their Maori contacts to engage in trade. Land purchases were limited to what was needed for subsistence; by 1868 the Catholic mission owned just 59 acres in the central North Island.<sup>11</sup> The missionaries avoided putting down roots by moving frequently to new parishes, and often worked alone in the early years.<sup>12</sup> The language barrier was a hindrance; many priests were more comfortable speaking Maori than English. All these factors resulted in the Marists occupying a marginal space in the secular British society that was the society of record in colonial New Zealand. Early New Zealand accounts of the Marists' work appeared only in pious literature,<sup>13</sup> and struggled to shed a hagiographical tone when published for a wider readership.<sup>14</sup> More recently, scholars have begun to give greater attention to the role of the Marists in New Zealand, but largely from an historical perspective rather than a cultural one.<sup>15</sup>

Consideration of the Marists as writers has been even more limited, which is particularly regrettable since the priests' education had given them an extensive vocabulary and a practised style. Their letters from New Zealand are fine examples of travel writing. Nancy M. Taylor's *Early Travellers in New Zealand* includes travel writing by the lay missionary William Colenso and Bishop George Selwyn, but none by their contemporary Catholic rivals.<sup>16</sup> In her study of nineteenth-

century New Zealand writing Jenny Robin Jones looks at the work of four missionaries among the twenty writers studied; the Marists are absent.<sup>17</sup> The most important work to date on early New Zealand writers, Lydia Wevers's *Country of Writing*, examines work by a number of Protestant missionaries, including Colenso's travel journals from his long walk across the North Island in late 1841-42, but French missionary writings are again absent.<sup>18</sup> The absence of Marist sources is problematic here because at Lake Waikaremoana Colenso met Fr Claude-André Baty, who was also keeping a travel journal that he later copied into a letter to France. Colenso thought he was the first European to explore the area, and was chagrined to discover that Baty had walked the same paths a day earlier. A comparison of the two men's writing reveals contrasting perspectives of place and people; the practical, gung-ho Colenso possesses the land and condescends to Maori while the contemplative Baty communes with nature and his companions.<sup>19</sup>

While Baty and Colenso were recording the day's events in their travel journals, Fr Antoine Séon was struggling to establish the first Marist mission in the Waikato. Pompallier had returned to Tauranga in 1841 and sent Séon, who had been in New Zealand for just two months, to establish a station at Matamata.<sup>20</sup> Séon spent over two years there making no headway at all before silently departing in January 1844. Pompallier, through his improvident spending and tendency to be the only distributor of Catholic gifts among Maori, had absorbed the mission's mana and its money, leaving almost none of either for his priests. The ragged and impoverished Séon had no chance of winning over the prestigious Ngati Haua, especially since Te Waharoa's son, baptised Wiremu Tamihana by CMS missionary Alfred Nesbit Brown in 1839, strongly favoured the Anglican cause.<sup>21</sup> Séon had travelled widely across the Waikato region and believed that his station would be more successful at Rangiaowhia, near modern Te Awamutu, but Pompallier refused to let him move. Only in March 1844 did the bishop allow

Séon's replacement, Fr Jean Pezant, to relocate to Rangiaowhia, which became the most successful Catholic mission station in New Zealand.

From their stations the Marists wrote to friends, family and the Society of Mary in France. Their letters home, regardless of addressee, had to pass unsealed through Marist headquarters, so that they could be copied if deemed interesting. The tone and content of the letters varied widely according to the writer's aims. Some were progress reports and included practical requests for clothes, shoes and books. Others, confessional or critical of Pompallier, were confidential. In letters to family and friends, there might be quite lively extracts relating to daily life, their travels, the people they met and the environment they lived in. Some of their writing was for fundraising and publicity purposes, since extracts might be published in the missionary journal, *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, or circulated among wealthy benefactors. Most of the priests' letters were well-written, both in terms of grammatical accuracy and literary style. This paper will focus particularly on the correspondence of three of the pioneer Marists. Two lived in the Waikato for a number of years: Séon, who wrote a lengthy and detailed description of Maori cultural practices from his station in Matamata, and Pezant of Rangiaowhia. The third was Fr Garin, who recorded his thoughts as he went on foot and by waka from Kawhia to Auckland. Other missionaries' letters will also be considered, especially where they provide a contrast between the Waikato and other parts of the country.

### **Waikato Maori**

The Marists generally viewed Maori positively, noting the depth and complexity of their cultural practices, their skills in oratory and their thirst for knowledge. Garin even referred to them as

'bons sauvages', the French term for 'noble savages'.<sup>22</sup> In the same letter he wrote: 'Je dis naturels et non sauvages parce qu'ici le terme est moins odieux' ('I say natives and not savages because here the term is less odious').<sup>23</sup> Séon visited a group of thirty Waikato Maori in 1844: 'La plupart sont de vieux Maori enracinés dans leurs superstitions, mais bons' ('Most are old Maori rooted in their superstitions, but good').<sup>24</sup> Pompallier's instructions to his missionaries showed a degree of tolerance towards Maori spiritual beliefs quite unusual for nineteenth-century evangelism, yet typical for the Marists in New Zealand. The tolerant approach of the Society of Mary is explained in part by the fact that it was a new order whose missionaries were predominantly youthful and in part by the influence of Romanticism on the Society. Their marginal situation in a British colony—as French outsiders with no military or political power to back them up—doubtless also contributed to their attitude by removing some sense of superiority.

Of all Maori in New Zealand, the inhabitants of the Waikato had the highest reputation among the Marists. Fr Pezant had this to say about Ngati Haua:

Cette tribu se distingue par son beau langage et son bel accent même parmi toutes les tribus de Waikato qui ont la réputation de parler le mieux la langue nouvelle-zélandaise dans toute la Nouvelle-Zélande. Elle passe aussi pour être très-brave; et un de ses guerriers, Te Waharoa, a laissé un nom illustre dans tous les environs par sa valeur.

(This tribe is noted for its fine language and beautiful accent, even among all the Waikato tribes, who are reputed to be the best speakers of the New Zealand language in the whole country. It is also renowned for its courage; one of its warriors, Te Waharoa, has an illustrious name for valour in all the surrounding areas.)<sup>25</sup>

Such praise must be put into context. The Marists believed that Maori in other parts of New Zealand were losing many fine qualities to increasing European corruption. Many letters written in the Bay of Islands, Auckland, Tauranga and elsewhere record the missionaries' disappointment at finding that the noble savages of their imagination and expectations were a dying race damaged by tobacco addiction, prostitution, venereal diseases, infertility and swindling.

Le nombre des naturels diminue prodigieusement à mesure que celui des Européens augmente. Les maladies secrètes, maladies vénériennes, contractées par la mauvaise vie des Européens avec ces pauvres naturels qui font tout ce que ceux-ci veulent pourvu qu'ils leur donnent quelques figues de tabac, les font mourir rapidement. Beaucoup d'enfans de ces naturels meurent presque en naissant à cause de ces maladies.

(The number of natives is falling prodigiously while that of the Europeans increases. These poor natives are dying rapidly from secret, or venereal, diseases contracted from the bad life of the Europeans, for whom they will do anything for a few plugs of tobacco. Many children of these natives die almost as soon as they are born because of these diseases.)<sup>26</sup>

'Le mal vénérien (grâce pour ce mot) est commun sur les côtes' ('Venereal disease (pardon the term) is common in coastal areas'), wrote Fr Petit-Jean in Northland.<sup>27</sup> However, the Waikato region was inland, far from the principal areas of European contact. Waikato people in consequence seemed nobler, more authentic, more Maori, closer to what the Marists had expected. Pezant wrote:

A mon arrivée à Rangiaowhia, je trouvai une immense différence entre les naturels de Tauranga et ceux de Waikato à l'avantage de ceux-ci. Je remarquai en eux plus

de douceur, de simplicité et d'ouverture, plus de dispositions et d'inclination à la foi, infiniment moins d'attache aux anciennes superstitions du pays.

(On my arrival in Rangiaowhia I found an immense difference between the Tauranga natives and those of Waikato in favour of the latter. I found them kinder, simpler and more open, more disposed and inclined towards the faith, and far less attached to the old superstitions of the country.)<sup>28</sup>

Séon, whose knowledge of the Maori people was based almost entirely on his years in the Waikato, revealed cultural relativism in his letters. In writing about moko, he acknowledged that different cultures had different criteria for judging beauty. 'Les habitants de la Nouvelle Zélande sont généralement bien faits. En voulant ajouter à leur beauté naturelle, ils se défigurent aux yeux des Européens par leur tatouage' ('The inhabitants of New Zealand are generally handsome. In wishing to add to their natural beauty, they disfigure themselves in the eyes of Europeans with their tattoos.')

Rather than using moko to communicate to the European reader that the intrepid writer was among ferocious savages, Séon praised the beauty of the tattoos and then described how they were carried out. He also remarked on their importance as taonga:

C'est un trésor pour eux: tes habits, ton argent, tes cheveux ... voilà les trésors de l'étranger; pour nous c'est notre moko. A la mort d'un chef, on ne lui couvre pas la figure, son moko (tatouage) lui tient lieu de linceul.

(It is a treasure for them: your clothes, your money, your hair ... those are the foreigner's treasures. For us, it is our moko. When a chief dies, his face is not covered. His moko is his shroud.)<sup>30</sup>

The shift of pronoun from 'them' to 'us' is noteworthy. Séon was presumably quoting a Maori speaker, but he does not indicate it, leaving an ambiguity about whether he considers himself part of the 'us'. The missionary could have assumed the mantle of all-knowing European describing a primitive culture, but instead he admitted that even after two years in the Waikato:

L'expérience m'apprend aussi chaque jour que beaucoup de choses que je croyais comprendre des usages de ces peuples, je ne les comprenais qu'à moitié et que je vous eusse induit en erreur sur plusieurs points.

(Experience teaches me every day that many things I thought I understood about the customs of these peoples were only half understood, and that I may have led you into error about several points.)<sup>31</sup>

Séon's hesitation did not prevent him from writing the best description of Maori society in the correspondence of the Marists. He covered tapu, tangi, warfare, agriculture, whare, waka, clothing, food and many other cultural practices he had observed in Waikato Maori, especially Ngati Haua. He did not condemn their practices, and often tacitly approved of them.

Ils ne refusent rien à leurs morts. Aussi des Maoris voyant ensevelir un Anglais dans un seul linceul de calico s'en fâchèrent et accusèrent les parents de n'avoir point d'affection pour leur parent défunt.

(They refuse their dead nothing. Thus when some Maori saw an Englishman buried in just a canvas shroud they became angry and accused the family members of having no affection for their dead relative.)<sup>32</sup>

Where he could have criticised Maori for not having developed a written version of their language, Séon instead noted that 'un très-grand nombre de jeunes gens et d'hommes mûrs ont appris entr'eux à lire et à écrire. Ils sont avides de connaissances' ('A

great number of youths and men have taught each other to read and write. They thirst for knowledge’).<sup>33</sup> He admired Maori oratory.

Ils sont éloquents, pleins de feu et d’action dans leurs discours; les images, les figures y abondent. Ils pérorent en marchant, une petite hache ou une arme maori à la main.

(They are eloquent, full of fire and action in their speeches, which abound in images and metaphors. They pace about while making speeches, a hatchet or a Maori weapon in their hand.)<sup>34</sup>

The use of adjectives with positive connotations, as in the following example, is one way Séon conveyed his regard:

Une personne qui n’avait pas de marmite prépara devant moi un bouillon d’herbes pour un malade. Elle le fit cuire dans un vase de bois avec des pierres rougies au feu; il donnait une odeur aussi bonne que s’il eût été préparé dans le vase le plus précieux.

(A person who did not have a pot boiled up a mixture of herbs for an invalid. She prepared it in a wooden vase with red-hot stones. It gave off an aroma as good as if it had been prepared in the most precious vase.)<sup>35</sup>

Compared to other Maori the Marists worked with, notably Ngapuhi in Northland, Waikato Maori had less contact with the Marists’ Anglican and Wesleyan rivals, which was another point in their favour. Pezant wrote of Ngati Haua, perhaps in error given the rise of Wiremu Tamihana, that ‘Le corps de cette peuplade belliqueuse avait toujours résisté aux sollicitations des ministres protestants’ (‘the bulk of this warlike tribe had always resisted the pleas of the Protestant ministers’).<sup>36</sup> Such a statement may seem unusual given the presence in the Waikato of CMS and Wesleyan missionaries, but Brown, Morgan and their



colleagues were relative newcomers to the region compared to the CMS missionaries in Northland, whose presence dated back a generation.

Even when discussing potentially negative topics, Séon found ways to avoid condemnation and to present Maori favourably. When it came to theft, for example, he hinted that there was a different attitude between the taking of everyday items (perhaps more an attitude of communal sharing) and the extremely serious theft of a taonga.

Le vol bien répandu; il est peu de voyage où l'on ne perde quelque chose de cette manière surtout en fait de tabac. Soit dehors soit au lieu de ma résidence, j'ai été volé dix fois au moins. Je dois ajouter cependant que mon diurnal, ayant été reconnu comme objet volé entre les mains d'un Maori, ses chefs le fustigèrent et l'un d'eux fit 18 lieux pour me le rapporter.

(Theft is widespread; it is rare while travelling not to lose something, especially tobacco, in this way. Both in the place where I live and away from it I have been robbed at least ten times. I should add nevertheless that when a Maori was found to have stolen my prayerbook, his chiefs beat him and one of them came 18 leagues [100 km] to return it to me.)<sup>37</sup>

Further proof of their admiration for Waikato Maori is that none of the Marists who mentioned cannibalism did so within a Waikato context. Pezant referred to the practice before he came to the Waikato, notably when he discussed Te Rauparaha's South Island campaign. Other priests, particularly those in Northland and Tauranga, discussed it in passing, but never within a Waikato context.<sup>38</sup>

The correspondence of the pioneer Marists shows that the French Romantic construct of the noble savage framed their views of Maori. Within the construct, the missionaries depicted

Maori as the tragic figures of formerly noble savages ruined by corrupt European culture. Waikato Maori were different, however. Since they were inland, they had been less corrupted by European values. They were consequently purer, more authentic versions of the noble savage that the prevailing Romanticism had conditioned the priests to expect. The Marists consequently portrayed Waikato Maori more favourably than coastal Maori.

### The Waikato Environment

The North American landscapes Chateaubriand described in *Atala* and other parts of *The Genius of Christianity* are undeniably beautiful. In 1854 Garin compared the tranquillity of the New Zealand bush with life in Europe where the Crimean war loomed:

Vive encore la Nouvelle Zélande où le missionnaire et son compagnon de voyage peuvent encore, en suivant l'étroit sentier, manger en paix la nourriture qu'ils ont à porter avec eux, puis goûter avec calme les douceurs d'un sommeil d'autant plus profond et bienfaisant que la fatigue de la marche a été plus grande.

(Long live New Zealand where, as they walk the narrow tracks, the missionary and his travelling companion can still eat in peace the food they have brought with them, then calmly savour the sweetness of sleep that is deeper and healthier the greater the fatigue from walking.)<sup>39</sup>

The Romantic flavour Chateaubriand had brought to France's Catholic revival meant that closeness to nature was closeness to God. After a night in the north Waikato bush, Garin penned a line that could come from *Atala*: 'Ces vieilles et antiques forêts portent au recueillement et à la prière' ('these old and ancient

forests inspire reflection and prayer').<sup>40</sup> At sunrise on the shore of Kawhia harbour, he wrote:

Les oiseaux par leurs chants variés nous annoncent le jour et nous invitent à unir nos prières à leurs chants pour publier d'une commune voix les grandeurs de notre commun créateur.

(The birds and their multifarious songs announce the dawn to us, inviting us to join our prayers to their songs so we can proclaim with one voice the greatness of our creator.)<sup>41</sup>

As with the construct of the noble savage, however, there was a big difference between expectations and reality. Walking through the New Zealand bush during the summer might be very pleasant, but crossing the Waikato region in winter was another matter entirely. It was a district of swamps and rivers. Séon's station in Matamata was at the edge of his Waikato parish, forcing him to spend more time away from his base. 'Ici les chemins sont mauvais, les marais sont nombreux, plus ou moins profonds; quelques uns ne sont à sec que sur la fin de février et de mars, lorsque l'été a passé' ('The paths here are bad, there are many marshes of varying depths; some dry out only in late February or March, at the end of summer').<sup>42</sup> In late April 1843 he wrote:

Depuis cette pleine lune les pluies de l'hivers ont commencé. Je vais retrouver pleins les nombreux marais que j'ai laissés à sec. Heureusement je me fais un peu à ce genre de fatigue qui use le corps. Je n'en ai pas ressenti jusqu'à ce jour de grandes incommodités.

(Since the last full moon, the winter rains have begun. The many swamps I last saw dry will be full next time I see them. Fortunately, I am getting used to this sort of

fatigue that wears out the body. I have not been seriously affected so far.)<sup>43</sup>

Séon, like most of his confreres, seems to be resigned to the hardships of missionary life, praising its good points and patiently accepting its bad aspects. Their attitude tended to make light of the difficulties of travel. Fr Bernard, however, was different. Dissatisfied with his station, be it in Tauranga or Samoa, here was one missionary who spelt out the hardships. On 15 August 1844, Fr Bernard wrote from Tauranga:

J'arrive d'hier de conduire m(onse)g(neu)r à Waikato chez le p(ère) Pezant, c'est à dire à 4 jours de marche d'ici à travers les bois, les rivières, les marais nombreux et les montagnes glissantes. [...] J'y ai passé une nuit très-froide avec Sa Grandeur; il gelait bien dur. Nous n'avions qu'une couverture pour maison [...] En revenant j'en ai passé un autre au pied d'une montagne, couvert d'un petit hangard de fougère, au milieu d'une pluie continuelle, ayant tous mes habits trempés jusqu'au milieu du corps.

(I returned yesterday from guiding Monsignor to Fr Pezant in the Waikato: four days' march from here across forests, rivers, numerous swamps and slippery mountains [...] One night with His Grace was particularly cold; there was a hard frost. We had only a blanket for shelter. [...] On the way back I spent another night at the foot of a mountain, under a little fern shelter, in the middle of constant rain, with all my clothes soaked through to my body.)<sup>44</sup>

This was Pompallier's last long journey on foot in New Zealand. Later in life when he was bishop of Auckland, Pompallier was criticised for not travelling among Maori in his diocese. His reluctance to travel, especially to Rangiaowhia, has been attributed to the bishop's disappointment at the changes to

Maori society brought about by contact with Europeans.<sup>45</sup> However, the reality of the midwinter trip through the Waikato region may well have put the bishop off any subsequent travels there.

The Waikato environment was not always the beautiful and spiritual place of the Romantic imagination that the Marists had been primed to expect, but it was exotic. Chateaubriand and his fellow Romantic authors and artists depicted exotic landscapes, and the Marists were keen to point out the same. In the south-west Waikato, Pezant found other obstacles as he set out on a tour. 'Mokau est un vaste pays tout hérissé de montagnes, tant entrecoupé de vallées, de rivières et de marais, peu habité et où les chemins sont peu frayés' ('Mokau is a vast country bristling with mountains, cut by valleys, rivers and swamps, with few inhabitants and the roughest of paths').<sup>46</sup> The ancient forests described above, and hot-water springs near Séon's Matamata station all added to the effect.<sup>47</sup> Garin, travelling by waka down the busy Waipa and Waikato Rivers, pretended his brother was on board with him when he noticed an unusual sight.

Enfin nous sommes arrivés dans la rivière *Waikato*. Voistu ce que cette eau charie; on dirait des œufs qui surnagent. Ce sont des pierres *ponce*, c'est-à-d(ire) des pierres brûlées par les volcans et devenues en conséquence si légères qu'elles peuvent flotter sur l'eau; tous les bords de la rivière sont recouverts de ces pierres plus ou moins grosses.

(We have at last arrived in the Waikato River. Do you see what the water is carrying? They look like floating eggs. They are pumice stones, stones burnt by volcanoes and consequently so light that they float on water. Every bank of the river is covered in these stones both big and small.)<sup>48</sup>

To the Marists the beauty and wonders of nature were signs of God's presence. More evidence of the power of nature came from Fr Reignier, writing from his station in the Rotorua Lakes district. The White Terraces in particular attracted his attention:

Une colline ayant à sa cime un bassin d'eaux chaudes, d'un bleu savon, présente le coup d'œil le plus magnifique; l'eau, tombant doucement, baigne les contours de la colline, formant une soixantaine de larges degrés d'amphitéâtre, ciselés comme de main d'homme, des tourelles marbrées en toutes sortes de couleurs; aucun spectacle n'est plus imposant. La beauté et la magnificence des degrés du palais de Versailles n'a rien d'approchant.

(At the summit of a hill, a soapy blue hot-water pool makes the most magnificent sight; the water, falling gently, bathes the contours of the hill, forming an amphitheatre of sixty wide terraces, as if carved by man, of marbled columns in all colours. Nothing surpasses this sight. The beauty and magnificence of the terraces at the Palace of Versailles cannot compare.)<sup>49</sup>

The gardens of Versailles were the high point of Classicism's influence on nature, the culmination of French attempts to dominate and improve the natural environment. But the White Terraces proved to Reignier that nature outdid human effort. Reignier saw God's handiwork ('as if carved by man') in this supreme achievement of nature. He also saw proof of Chateaubriand's aesthetic argument that natural beauty proves the existence of God.

Contrast the Marists' view of the Waikato with another Frenchman's account from later in the nineteenth century. Jules Verne had never visited New Zealand, but his negative depictions of Waikato Maori in the sullen Waikato landscape of *Among the Cannibals* (1868) reflect the perspectives of an

industrial age with no place for noble savages or nature worship. As he showed in many of his works, especially *The Mysterious Island* (1875), nature is to be cleared and conquered, not admired for its beauty or divinity.

The pioneer Marist missionaries arrived in New Zealand between the ages of classicism and realism. Imbued with the Romantic ideas of their time, they wrote about the people and places they encountered using the cultural constructs established by Chateaubriand and other French artists. Romanticism made their approach to Maori more tolerant and their opinions of Maori society far more positive than if they had begun their mission a generation or two earlier or later. It meant that they saw Waikato Maori as more authentic noble savages compared to coastal Maori, who had been sullied by corrupt European values. The Waikato environment also provided Marists with another contrast between Romantic ideals and reality: the beauty of exotic nature proving the existence of God versus the daily grind through swamps and forests. In either contrast, the missionaries accepted reality but their Romantic heritage shone through nevertheless.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *Lettres reçues d'Océanie par l'administration générale des pères maristes pendant le généralat de Jean-Claude Colin (1836-1854): Édition critique*, ed. by Charles Girard (Paris: Karthala, 2009). Letters will be referenced

- using the document and paragraph numbers, e.g. LRO, Doc. 125 [8] is *Lettres reçues d'Océanie*, document 125, paragraph 8. All translations are mine. Nineteenth-century spellings in the letters have been respected.
- 2 Jessie Munro, *The Story of Suzanne Aubert* (Auckland: Auckland University Press & Bridget Williams Books, 1997), pp. 36-48.
  - 3 For more on the success and impact of *Atala*, see Armand Weil's introductory essay to his critical edition. Chateaubriand, *Atala*, ed. by Armand Weil (Paris: Corti, 1950), pp. ix-xxx.
  - 4 Paul de Dekker, 'A French Naturalist Among the Maori: René-Primevère Lesson', in *The French and the Maori*, ed. by John Dunmore (Waikanae: Heritage Press, 1992), p. 27. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this reference.
  - 5 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 80.
  - 6 Rozet to the sisters of Saint-Martin-en-Coailleux, 10 Octobre 1841, LRO, Doc. 112 [1].
  - 7 Cynthia Piper, 'Missionary and Maori', in *Turanga Ngātahi, Standing Together: The Catholic Diocese of Hamilton, 1840-2005*, ed. by Dominic O'Sullivan and Cynthia Piper (Wellington: Dunmore Press, 2005), p. 21.
  - 8 See, for example, J. Bouton, *Relation de l'établissement des françois depuis l'an 1635 en l'Isle de Martinique, l'une des antilles de l'Amerique* (Paris: Cramoisy, 1640); P. Pelleprat, *Relation des missions des PP. de la Compagnie de Jésus dans les Isles, et dans la Terre Ferme de l'Amérique Meridionale* (Paris: Cramoisy, 1655); Jean-Baptiste du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Ant-isles de l'Amérique* (Paris: Jolly, 1667-1671); Antoine Biet, *Voyage de la France équinoxiale en l'isle de Cayenne entrepris par les François en l'année 1652* (Paris: Clouzier, 1664).
  - 9 Keith Newman acknowledges as much in the introduction to his *Bible and Treaty: Missionaries Among the Maori—A New Perspective* (Auckland: Penguin, 2010).
  - 10 Pompallier was present at discussions at Waitangi in early February 1840, but limited his involvement to seeking a guarantee of religious freedom. He explained the Treaty's meaning to Maori chiefs, but



did not pressure them to refuse to sign it. E.R. Simmons, *Pompallier: Prince of Bishops* (Auckland: CPC, 1984), pp. 44-45. Paul Moon's controversial criticism of Pompallier in *Hone Heke: Nga Puhi Warrior* (Auckland: David Ling, 2001) appears to have been based on strongly biased nineteenth-century Protestant sources. The Bishop's long stay in the new French colony of Akaroa was most likely for personal reasons (he was hoping to leave New Zealand for a bishopric in France) rather than political ones.

<sup>11</sup> Piper, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon Kerins, a twentieth-century Marist, described the pain of these regular transfers in his novel *No Lasting City* (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Anon. [Fr. Peter McKeefry], *Fishers of Men* (Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1938).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Mary Goulter, *Sons of France: A Forgotten Influence on New Zealand History* (Wellington: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1957).

<sup>15</sup> See E.R. Simmons, *A Brief History of the Catholic Church in New Zealand* (Auckland: CPC, 1978) and *Pompallier*, Michael O'Meeghan SM, 'The French Marist Maori Mission', in *The French and the Maori*, ed. by Dunmore, pp. 38-68. Recent work on Father Garin, one of the pioneer missionaries, can be found in Giselle Larcombe, 'Antoine Marie Garin: A Biographical Study of the Intercultural Dynamic in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand Authors' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Canterbury, 2009). The most comprehensive study of the early Marist Maori mission is Sandy Harman, 'The Struggle for Success: A Socio-cultural Perspective of the French Marist Priests and their Maori Mission, 1838-1867' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Nancy M. Taylor, ed., *Early Travellers in New Zealand* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

<sup>17</sup> Jenny Robin Jones, *Writers in Residence: A Journey with Pioneer New Zealand Writers* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2004).

- 18 Lydia Wevers, *Country of Writing: Travel Writing and New Zealand, 1809-1900* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002).
- 19 William Jennings, 'Travel Writing and the First Marists in New Zealand', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 14.4 (2010), pp. 345-64.
- 20 For a brief biography of Séon, see Michael O'Meeghan SM's article in the *Marist Messenger* of December 2007. Sites relevant to Séon's time at the Matamata station are described by Joan Stanley in her *Matamata-Piako District Heritage Trail* (Matamata: Matamata-Piako District Council, 2009), pp. 10 and 23.
- 21 Evelyn Stokes, *Wiremu Tamihana: Rangatira* (Wellington: Huia, 2002).
- 22 Garin to pupils of Meximieux, 12 June and 17 July 1841, LRO, Doc. 99 [50].
- 23 Garin to pupils of Meximieux, 12 June and 17 July 1841, LRO, Doc. 99 [26].
- 24 Séon to Lagniet, January 1844, LRO, Doc. 303 [44].
- 25 Pezant, Memorandum on Rangiaowhia, 15 January and 10 April 1850, LRO, Doc 865 [4].
- 26 Forest to Colin, 3 February 1844, LRO, Doc. 313 [5].
- 27 Petit-Jean to Colin, 18 May 1842, LRO, Doc. 159 [5].
- 28 Pezant, Memorandum on Rangiaowhia, 15 January and 10 April 1850, LRO, Doc 865 [12].
- 29 Séon to Lagniet, January 1844, LRO, Doc. 303 [12].
- 30 Séon to Lagniet, January 1844, LRO, Doc. 303 [12].
- 31 Séon to Lagniet, January 1844, LRO, Doc. 303 [2].
- 32 Séon to Lagniet, January 1844, LRO, Doc. 303 [20].
- 33 Séon to Lagniet, January 1844, LRO, Doc. 303 [7].
- 34 Séon to Lagniet, January 1844, LRO, Doc. 303 [13].
- 35 Séon to Lagniet, January 1844, LRO, Doc. 303 [30].
- 36 Pezant, Memorandum on Rangiaowhia, 15 January and 10 April 1850, LRO, Doc 865 [4].
- 37 Séon to Colin, 28 April 1843, LRO, Doc. 253 [12].
- 38 An article in progress entitled 'New Perspectives of Kai Tangata (Maori Cannibalism) in the Correspondence of the Marists' discusses the issue in more detail.

- <sup>39</sup> Antoine Garin to Numa Garin, 23 January and 13 February 1854, LRO, Doc. 1322 [32].
- <sup>40</sup> Antoine Garin to Numa Garin, 23 January and 13 February 1854, LRO, Doc. 1322 [49].
- <sup>41</sup> Antoine Garin to Numa Garin, 23 January and 13 February 1854, LRO, Doc. 1322 [42].
- <sup>42</sup> Séon to Lagniet, January 1844, LRO, Doc. 303 [42].
- <sup>43</sup> Séon to Colin, 28 April 1843, LRO, Doc. 253 [2].
- <sup>44</sup> Bernard to Colin, June and 15 August 1844, LRO, Doc. 330 [13].
- <sup>45</sup> Simmons, *Pompallier*, pp. 148-49.
- <sup>46</sup> Pezant, Memorandum on Rangiaowhia, 15 January and 10 April 1850, LRO, Doc. 865 [15].
- <sup>47</sup> Séon to Lagniet, January 1844, LRO, Doc. 303 [24].
- <sup>48</sup> Antoine Garin to Numa Garin, 23 January and 13 February 1854, LRO, Doc. 1322 [47].
- <sup>49</sup> Reignier to Feret, 23 December 1843, LRO, Doc. 299 [15].