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Said, Heard, Written, Read

To What do we assume and what do we really know about literacy in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the nineteenth century? And what do we assume and know about oral expression in the same period?

In Aotearoa, the first culture of expression was oral. There was, as there is today, *whaikorero* done in terms of strict *kawa*, *whakapapa* recited to show genealogy and other relationships, kinds of speech for kinds of occasions. And then there was regular, everyday speech.

While Maori may have seen printed matter in the hands of whalers and sealers reading and writing was introduced to the local population primarily by the missionaries.

There are few records of love letters, novels, short stories or poems written by Maori in the nineteenth century. In the main the uses of literacy were religious and this involved reading, the reading of the Bible and political and this involved writing, the writing of letters to express the will of an *iwi* or *hapu*. Nottingham (1987) describes the functional literacy desired of his students by Marsden.

As well as these distinct uses of literacy there are other ways to look at literacy- as a help or as a hindrance. Moon (2000) sees literacy in the early nineteenth century as a matter of transition as this term is used in modernisation theory. Literacy is integral to modernisation.

Literacy is also part of colonisation and it involves a decrease or an alteration in the significance of orality. There is the image of a light going on when literacy is mastered so that people may see, may understand. This is pernicious when the idea is that the colonised will see and understand the point of view of the coloniser.

Moon (*ibid*) makes a critical appraisal of reading and writing and comes up with some interesting arguments about literacy. He draws on the work of Freidmann (1992) who suggests that education and literacy do not necessarily provide a strong causal link to improved socio-economic status.

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One question to be asked is what form of literacy are we talking about? Using a classification from Yates (1992) of the Adult Reading and Literacy Association Moon talks about improper literacy amongst other kinds of literacy. Improper literacy is where people follow words to get a general sense but do not read properly. Moon also makes comparisons with the situation in England in the seventeenth century where people could sometimes read but not write.

Moon seems to be informed by an historical model of Maori society which he refers to in a footnote (Moon 2000:88). There is an archaic period from the ninth to the fourteenth century in which there is a strong likeness to the original Polynesian background the period following being characterised by a distinct identity which was broken up with the arrival of the European. In these two earlier periods Moon suggests that Maori were non-literate and that in the immediate post contact period most Maori were illiterate.

Following this various kinds of literacy existed, proper and improper, functional and active and Freirean (cf Freire 1993) which is reflective and critical. Moon suggests that rather than helping Maori literacy might have been a hazard in some ways. The kinds of literacy that Maori were involved in were, to take the classification of Yates (*ibid*), functional and improper rather than active and Freirean.

Compounding the matter for Moon has been poor measurement of literacy of any kind by most commentators including anthropologists like Jackson (1967). The assumption that the iwi became literate to a great extent and that this happened quickly are both challenged by Moon. As well as these qualifications or criticisms there are major queries about the kinds of literacy that came into being.

Also, as part and parcel of the literacy situation, the power and authority of the talking chief was eroded. Moon suggests a trade-off of orality for literacy. He goes on to talk about Maori English, the way Maori speak English.

Moon also asks whether iwi were interested in acquiring books as articles of magic or for trading purposes rather than to read them.

The idea, widespread at the time, that literacy was the panacea, the tool that would allow Maori to survive and prosper in the nineteenth century is also examined by Moon. And then there was the intention that Maori were to be educated for specific purposes and Moon mentions

Nottingham's thesis on Marsden (Nottingham 1980). The kind of literacy involved is strictly task bound.

Literacy allowed entry to a new political elite in Aotearoa-New Zealand within which Maori were rarely found. Moon draws on Freire (1993) to suggest that missionary education including literacy education was a colonial tool. To be converted a person needed to be civilized and that meant being literate.

In an excellent discussion Moon suggests that in 1813 there is not a literate society but a hierarchy of literacy associated with a hierarchy of wealth and status. There are non-literate people who are not as yet exposed to the European and then there are illiterate people who work with others who know how to read and write and then there are people with proper and improper and other kinds of literacies.

It may be possible to suggest that there is a mix of oralities just as there is a mix of literacies. The work of Reese, Haden and others (1993, 1997, 1998, 2001) which is discussed below might be used to suggest that some people have an enriched oral environment while others do not or, at least, not enriched to the same extent. To Maori in 1913, the breaking up of an oral environment by the practices of reading and writing, by literacy, must have had effects that might only be imagined now.

Moon also considers all this in terms of what he calls 'cultural contamination'. This is to do with the displacement of orality by literacy in, mostly, its lesser forms.

While there is a need for a much deeper treatment of the oral Moon makes a compelling case for the idea that literacy rather than the rum or the religion took away the power of leaders who once ruled with the spoken word. A number of questions ensue from this some of which take us outside the period. Can we now ask whether Maori radio in the latter twentieth century offered a return to the power of the oral? Or whether Maori Television offers an even more attractive participation zone for Maori?

Moon suggests that it was an irony that Maori were taught to read their history which they would formerly have spoken. With Maori television they now see as well as read and speak their history. What has film done to the literacy question? Do people understand films in different ways and are there parallels with the way people read books?

How does History work in or through different kinds of literacy anyway? Is it possible to suggest that literacy and the

understanding of history are linked or is this, once again, to make too big a claim for literacy? Or for h/History?

What is orality and how do people deal with it? Do the ways in which Maori speak both Maori and English in everyday life show distinctive features of the orality to which Moon refers? Do the ways in which Maori speak Maori or English formally or informally hark back to a loss of language, a loss of speech beyond the grammar and the nuts and bolts of words making sense? Is this loss what people are talking about or implying when they talk about the reclamation of te reo me ona tikanga, the language and its customs? When they talk about language as a taonga, a gift?

Orality? What about historians and anthropologists of the country who do not speak Maori? Theirs is a world of the deaf into which they sign with writing. But what about anthropologists and historians who do speak Maori? They run the risks attendant on tripping through fields of loss, fields of pain, of speaking but not being able to feel or think of the cultural situation.

But while it remains a mystery in many ways there is some extremely interesting research on orality or oral expression from the Early Childhood Education area (Reese *et alia* 1993, Haden *et alia* 2001). Research by Reese and others at the University of Otago suggests that preschoolers' memory and language skills can be significantly improved if their mothers talk to them in richer ways about past events. Many commentators observing Maori recite whakapapa or karakia have noted feats of memory in oratory. The research from Otago is important as it comes from outside literacy at least as we understand literacy in terms of reading and writing. Again this is outside the scope of this paper historically but the research suggests to me that important developments occur **before** literacy given a rich oral environment.

Given the importance that the electronic media may come to have these may well be the source or at least the setting of new political systems. If the local state cannot offer significant resources, if it is grounded in a locality with limits the internet offers possibilities beyond those limits. On the one hand the limits of the local situation are to do with politics, political will if you like. On the other they are to do with resources some of which look increasingly doubtful. In the nineties fish looked good as a resource diverted by the state to iwi as a Treaty settlement but as a declining global resource in the 2000s the bounty of the Sealord Deal seems mixed. Giving iwi airwaves

that are redundant in the age of internet radio might be another case in point.

To turn this question around; just as literacy was used as a tool in the conversion of Maori to Christianity are the electronic media, being used to bind Maori to a small local state? This might be said to be occurring through Treaty claims which give airwaves to iwi and then gives control to Te Mangai Paho and Te Puni Kokiri making funding subject to criteria set by those bodies? This is, again, outside the period of the nineteenth century but there are questions that seem to apply to both times, especially to periods of intense change such as the 1850s when English became the dominant language in the country and the 1990s when, especially on the radio, te reo Maori began to be heard again.

Moon is important as his literacy paper raises questions about the way sovereignty is understood. He is blowing up the equation of literacy with power. How does the electronic media, radio, tv and net, affect this understanding?

A central question is to do with the expectations of the missionaries in regard to literacy. Isla Nottingham's thesis (ibid) is important in that she talks about a controlled or a supposedly controlled effect; Marsden wanted students to be literate to a point. But there were others who thought that literacy would civilize in other ways. and this echoes or resonates with Jackson's anthropology and the critique of Jackson's anthropology by Moon is important i that it raises the question as to what kinds of literacy are involved and what kinds of effects it was meant to have. What has been read into literacy and why?.

The work of Yate, Resnick and Resnick (1977), Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and others suggest responses to literacy which vary considerably. For example, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) take a thesis set out by Resnick and Resnick (1977) arguing that two traditions of literacy exist. To paraphrase Bereiter and Scardamalia, 'high literacy', a tradition in education of the elites in Europe and America, has been aimed at developing the linguistic and verbal reasoning abilities, the literacy standards and sophistication, and the moral values and precepts appropriate to leaders of society. Mass education grew out of a 'low literacy' tradition of efforts to promote the minimum levels needed for religious practice.

However this happened in Europe and elsewhere- and this seems to me a complex question to say the least – the way literacy came to exist in Aotearoa/New Zealand was just as

complex and possibly more complicated by virtue of interaction with another culture.

Looking ahead at questions of orality and literacy we might say that talk beats print on most occasions. Radio will be more listened to than print media will be read in most groups of people. Where this might change is with voice recognition or speech recognition by computers. Watch or listen to this space and read into it what you will...

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