

Chapter 15

Writing the Colony: Walter Edward Gudgeon in the Cook Islands, 1898 to 1909

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In 1903, half way through his 11-year tenure as New Zealand's principal colonial administrator in the Cook Islands, Lieutenant Colonel Walter Edward Gudgeon told an old military comrade:

I am here the absolute Governor of some 17 Islands, Chief Judge of the High Court, do Land Court, Surveyor General, Treasurer, & Civil Engineer to the Group. Encouraging the natives to plant when they think they ought to be sleeping, slanging the lazy, repressing those with swelled heads (a dangerous disease in the Islands) & flattering the vanity of those who are a little better than their fellows. Such is my life, rather lonely but full of interest for those who like myself love the Maori with all his faults.¹

Since as early as the 1860s, New Zealand governments' intermittent desire for a sub-empire in the South Pacific had been thwarted by the lack of interest and imperial mistrust of the British Colonial Office. In 1888, however, British protection was declared over the southern islands of the Cook group and, in 1890, Frederick Joseph Moss became the first New Zealand-appointed British resident. Having installed a number of progressive measures for a considerable degree of native self-government, Moss eventually fell foul of a variety of local interests. Failure to implement new legislation setting up a Federal Court and a consequent inquiry finding that his position had become untenable led to his replacement by Gudgeon in September 1898. After annexation by New Zealand in June 1901, Gudgeon became Resident Commissioner and remained in office until August 1909.²

The last two decades have witnessed a variety of calls for a closer and more complex reading of colonialism and of its texts by, among others, Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, Nicholas B. Dirks, Gyan Prakash, Thomas Richards, and Nicholas Thomas. There is general agreement that colonialism was neither monolithic, nor omnipotent, nor unchanging and Richards has characterised as 'fictive' the illusion of imperial control. Thomas has pointed to a haunting sense

of insecurity on the part of colonisers, fear of an inaccessible 'native mentality', and despair at their inability to reconcile an elusive reality with its accepted representations. At the same time, he has questioned the validity of denying complexity and agency to those accused of the same offence and Stoler has appealed for the same degree of differentiation as would be extended, for instance, to ruling elites of the colonised. In this terrain, it is clear that the analysis of colonial autobiography has unrivalled potential to illuminate both realities and representations and this essay will examine that potential in one such autobiographical project.

Thomas has also observed that colonial projects are often and more precisely projected than realised, their intent deflected or vitiated by opposition, competition, or internal inconsistencies, a perspective summarised by Cooper and Stoler as an 'overarching tension between what colonialism *was* and what colonial regimes *did*'. In considering the texts produced by those regimes, Prakash has advocated making their 'silences, contradictions, and ambiguities essential elements in the colonial story'.³ My purpose in this essay, then, is to outline, in the spirit of those observations and injunctions, a reading of Gudgeon's private Cook Islands journal and to identify some consequent questions for the present.⁴ First, however, it will be worthwhile briefly to mesh biography with the present exploration of the imperial project and consider the range of experiences, intellectual and political baggage and equipment, and mandate that Gudgeon took with him to Rarotonga.

Arriving, by his own account, in New Zealand from London in 1849 at the age of seven, he became a farm worker at 11 and later, largely self-educated, a colonial soldier in the Land Wars, a resident magistrate, a controversial landowner, acting under-secretary of defence, commissioner of police, and native land court judge. Long interested in Maori language and history, this position gave him the opportunity for deeper study; he participated in the vanguard ethnography of the Polynesian Society, chaired the inaugural meeting in 1892, and published prolifically in its *Journal*.⁵ He was, apparently, fluent in Te Reo Maori and held a strong opinion that 'much as the manners and customs of the Maoris may differ from ours, they may—so far as that people are concerned—be equally right and salutary'.⁶ He equally strongly asserted, however, that the missionaries had destroyed 'the even balance of the Maori mind' and 'all that is interesting in a Native race'.⁷

He would certainly have believed Maori a dying or diminishing race (a great impetus to ethnographic inquiry); contradictorily, he would have accepted that the close relationship between Maori and other Polynesians and New Zealand's 'success' in dealing with 'its own Maori people' conveyed some right or responsibility to govern all Polynesians. He expected that only major land confiscation would achieve Maori industriousness.⁸ As a progressive, if

somewhat sceptical and abrasive, small-'l', liberal then,⁹ Gudgeon would have been comfortable with British Liberal J.A. Hobson's endorsement of the validity and virtues of imperialism, an idea with few European enemies, if many perspectives, at this particular time.¹⁰ And he probably would have shared, at least in theory, Hobson's belief 'that the progress of world-civilization is the only valid moral ground for political interference with the "lower races"' and only if evidenced by their 'political, industrial, and moral education'.¹¹

His brief from the New Zealand government comprised little more than passage through the Cook Islands parliament of the Federal Court Bill and achievement of annexation to New Zealand.¹² Beyond that there was a vague proposal for a land court on the New Zealand model, a catalogue of largely illusory mutual benefits set out by Premier Richard Seddon in his 1900 visit to the Cooks and in the consequent parliamentary annexation debate,¹³ and a general intention to 'leave the Natives, as far as practicable, to manage their own affairs'.¹⁴ Far from serving any major political, strategic, or commercial interests, New Zealand's first sub-imperial acquisition demonstrates Eric Hobsbawm's observation that, by this stage, 'the acquisition of colonies itself became a status symbol, irrespective of their value'.¹⁵

Gudgeon's 'A Journal of My Residence in the South Seas and of the Causes that Led to that Residence' is a remarkable combination of invective, self-justification, perceptive insight, and passing ethnographic note. Foremost is his predecessor, Moss, haunting both Gudgeon and his Journal, who, together with his associates, is the excoriated object of the bulk of the Journal's 68 pages. In policy, the only criticisms of Moss are of the manner and fact of his introduction of island councils for self-government, his failure to secure passage of the Federal Court Bill, and the lack of increased revenue and the material fabric of colonial government. Administratively, Moss is accused of a variety of fraudulent activities, benefiting to the point of illegality one particular commercial company, employing and favouring one 'Jimmy te Pou', and committing a variety of minor peccadilloes. In character, however, Moss is, from the first page, lacking in 'temper, tact, and common sense', vindictive, swollen-headed, a fool, 'a liberal of the carpet bagger type', unwise and 'an Hysterical old woman', arrogant, inebriated and 'an infabulous liar', insane and idiotic, an absolute despot, absurd, crooked, rabid, a mere crawler behind Sir George Grey', 'God in the Car',¹⁶ secretive, obstinate, and a good deal more.

The Moss administration inquiry report (characterised by Gudgeon as 'ingeniously colourless') found him guilty of error, want of judgement, and overbearing conduct but not of corruption, fraud, or dishonesty,¹⁷ and later assessments of him and his regime generally find both benevolent. Although it is true that Moss maintained an—often justified—critique of the successor regime until his death in 1904, the intensity and duration of Gudgeon's invective is

surprising. While he may be defining and establishing himself in opposition to his predecessor, other undercurrents appear in both *Autobiography* and *Journal*. In the former, Gudgeon's origins include 'Suffolk people of good social standing' fallen on hard times;¹⁸ in the latter, there are innumerable references to the low status and appearance of his many enemies.

Furthermore, there is a series of progressively intensifying anti-Semitic slurs, beyond even the standards of the day, against Moss 'the half bred jew'. In one episode, stemming from the antipathy between Moss and Gudgeon's later friends, allies and, in one case, son-in-law, the Craig brothers, he asserts:

there are very few instances on record, of a member of the family of Fagan, Shylock and Co, having told a Highland gentleman that he had no use for him. half [sic] a century ago *we* [my emphasis] should have settled matters by drawing the Resident's teeth until he disgorged all his ill gotten dollars, and annexed the island to Scotland.¹⁹

The contempt of the once-genteel, military (but not Highland) Gudgeon for the Anglican (not Jewish) but once-commercial and parliamentary Moss calls to mind H. John Field's suggestion of the influence on 'Imperial Man' of the public school values of Character and Duty as 'the two magnetic values of the Victorian that most represent the imperial need' as well as his hypothesis that individual commitment depended upon 'the close association that empire came to have with valued character traits'.²⁰

Having conveyed the tone and texture of the *Journal*, I shall more summarily complete the 360 degree view of Gudgeon's colonial world. The second villain is the *mataiapo* (major lineage chief) and senior public servant Makea Daniela Vakatani, almost invariably referred to contemptuously as Jimmy te Pou, who appears throughout the *Journal* and occupies more than a quarter of Gudgeon's final address.²¹ In eight minutely detailed pages, Gudgeon spells out defalcations, misdemeanours, crimes, and perjuries, for which he succeeded in gaoling Daniela, yet fails to mention an extravagant welcome and three weeks of feasting on his return.²²

The balance of Moss's former associates, the Law and Order League or the *Piri Moti* (Stick to Moss), fare little better. 'In Appearance [sic] and manner the friends of Mr Moss were of a lower type than his Enemies [sic]. the [sic] former I find to be men of shady antecedents and many of them foreigners.'²³ Among that 'gang of thieves', the collector of customs is imbecile and must be replaced; Sherman is 'Mischievous . . . Conceited, Religious, and Vindictive'; Henry Nicholas an unblushing robber 'as crooked in mind as he was in body', a sly-grogger, murderer, and, with Chas W. Banks alias Scard, an embezzler; Gelling a disreputable young hanger-on; Garnier is incapable and faces prosecution; Henry Ellis is loathsome, an embezzler who 'fled to Rarotonga to avoid arrest'; Caldwell

‘a fanatic but not a fool’, and Richard Exham a forger and thief. Thos Sherman has the appearance ‘of a Houndsditch Jew’, an impediment to his relationship ‘with the better class people’; and the major trading company of Donald and Edenborough is a corrupt and fraudulent manipulator of Moss and the entire administration.

Gudgeon’s common attitude to the administration officials is revealed in his exclamation, ‘Some of the men with whom I have to work are beneath contempt’. Customs officer Albert Whitty is involved in ‘irregularities’ and dismissed; the trusted Frederick Goodwin kills himself firing a rocket and is found, along with Gudgeon’s nephew, Ralph Gosset (imprisoned for two years—Gudgeon wished he had died too) to have been swindling the accounts and audit; a new customs officer is an ‘incompetent fool’; his formerly favoured Mangaia island resident, Large, is increasingly vindictive, excitable, vain, absurd, and quarrelsome, constantly calling on Gudgeon for help; Miller, collector of customs, is Seddon’s spy and a lunatic; and Panapa Vairuarangi, the best man in the north, embezzles public money.

The mission and its missionaries, *Papaa* and Maori, are cruel, mischievous, above all intolerant and tyrannical, guilty of supporting the *ariki* (high chiefs) and the old ways, and ‘consistently opposed every european [sic]’. As early as 1899, Gudgeon had decided that ‘sooner or later [he] must put the Mission down’. It ‘is at the bottom of and responsible for all Maori troubles’, ‘the decadence of the race began with their evangelisation’, and ‘the L.M.S. Polynesian is a born criminal’. In trying to ‘make a Maori into a third class Britisher’ and failing, it ground ‘the very life of a happy laughter loving people ... out of them’. As to the lives of women, the mission is guilty of physical abuse, degrading women’s originally fairly happy lot by putting ‘into their heads the modern idea of the woman in the House and the man in the Field’, and ‘turning out the most lazy, immoral and extravagant lot of drabs known to modern days’.²⁴

The *ariki* have been feudal, despotic, greedy, and oppressive, and ‘the time has come when the Crown must take up the duties of the Arikis’ in order to protect the ‘little people’: ‘it will be good for the place when the present lot of Arikis die out’. Under Gudgeon, an *ariki* has ‘no pull over her people’ in court and is now subservient to the governor of New Zealand (in practice, the resident commissioner). For the most part, *ariki* play a fleeting role; ‘Queen’ Makea Takau, head of government who had made herself paramount chief not just of Rarotonga but of the whole group, ‘is not a Makea at all, she is a mere mission fake’, and her agency and enterprise are obscured in allegations of tyranny and greed.

Unfortunately, the *unga* (common people) are unable to see the need to curtail or destroy ‘the irresponsible powers of the Arikis’. In 1902, Gudgeon observed that ‘it has long been clear to me that a large majority of the present generation prefer [the old] system with all of its oppressors, to european [sic] rule’. These,

however, 'are the people whom I have to protect, and therefore it is advisable that Rarotonga should be surveyed with the least possible delay'; this because 'the Cook islanders are a dying race and the Govt their natural heirs'.²⁵ As to 'the Cook Islander' in general, he 'is at times described by his friends, as lazy, sensual and thievish', but is 'not a lazy man when he perceives the necessity for exertion'. Perhaps the relationship between Gudgeon and the Cook Islanders, as far as it can be generalised, is best conveyed in 1902:

It is not easy to decide what policy ought to be pursued in this group, for the Natives are peculiar, and the difficulty is to fing [sic] out what policy they will accept and approve.²⁶

Perhaps, however, the impact of the mission has, as in New Zealand, destroyed 'all that is interesting in a Race' as suggested by the infrequent, fragmentary, and abrupt ethnographic observations that, eventually, peter out almost entirely.

Women, Maori and *Papaa*, including Gudgeon's own wife and daughter, are largely absent from the Journal and, except for *ariki* and an occasional and incidental European, nameless. They most often appear in the context of domestic conflict or sexual relationships in which Maori at least are, apart from mission abuse, far from subservient.

The New Zealand governor, government, and parliament are mistrustful, deceitful, got-at, uncomprehending, and pusillanimous, contributing nothing to the Cooks' prosperity, and, above all, very distant, the latter demonstrated in Gudgeon's plausible assertion that he himself formulated his objectives, strategy, and tactics as resident commissioner. Only in this relationship with New Zealand is he an 'absolute Governor'.

Given the personalities and circumstances portrayed in his Journal, Gudgeon must be admired for the restraint of his opinion 'that this was not a pleasant community to be connected with'. It is a matter of some interest, however, that the handful of residents of whom he approves are never as carefully characterised nor so vividly and visually presented as are his reprobates. Yet, alongside the persona of the colonial administrator, his character and duty delineated in contrast to the lack of character and derelictions of his opponents, there appears the person, often vitriolic, but occasionally engaging, more rarely wistful or even regretful. Enough of vitriol; the engaging quality, however vitiated elsewhere, appears in his continuing validation of the Maori point of view, in personally paying off his nephew's misappropriations, in his observation of changed gender roles, and in his refreshing acceptance of the sexual adventures of young men and women; wistfulness in his desire to 'see some regret in the faces of the people when [he leaves] the Islands'; and something close to regret in his observation after an absence 'that the Maoris had persuaded themselves

I was not coming back' and 'the Polynesian is unreliable but afraid of me when I am here'.

Harking back to Gudgeon's boast to his old comrade, the Journal illuminates the contrast between the projection and the project, a contrast captured at another level in Allen Curnow's poem 'The Unhistoric Story':

Vogel and Seddon howling empire from an empty coast
A vast ocean laughter
Echoed unheard, and after
All it was different, something
Nobody counted on.²⁷

Here is fertile material for a closer analysis of a colonial world. In this case, however, I want to leap over that to consider some questions for the present that arise from the reading. First, does such a marginal example add to our general understanding of the nature of imperialism and colonisation? Although I am not yet clear on that, the understanding of New Zealand's marginal Cook Islands sub-imperialism promises to make some contribution to the appreciation of the complexity of the broader imperial webs.

Second, does this kind of work re-centre rather than decentre the coloniser, or even provide support for new kinds of imperialisms? My provisional answer is that it depends—depends on what is done with the work. And that, in turn, opens up questions about the most productive relationships between insiders and outsiders, however strained those terms—questions of the sort that have been raised in the past by Donald Denoon and Doug Munro.²⁸ For myself, I see this work as one half of a project the other half of which, the re-centring of other participants, may more sensitively and accurately be taken up by others.

Third, are New Zealand governments, just as much as in Gudgeon's day, more interested in *being* something in relation to the South Pacific than in *doing* something? And that raises in turn the control of diplomats, aid and development officials, and consultants in the region. Anyone who has travelled in the Pacific in the last two decades will have witnessed New Zealand's disciples of economic fundamentalism operating quite as untrammelled as was Gudgeon in his imperial day.

Fourth, might empty or even loaded calls for democracy (limited to the holding of dubiously 'free and fair' elections and devoid of equity and economic and social justice) result in 'democracy'—another idea with few enemies but a number of perspectives in the West—becoming as degraded a concept in the future as was imperialism in the later 20th century? A little less posturing and a little more partnership might be of benefit to New Zealand, the countries of the Pacific, and real democracy itself.

And last, for me personally, a realisation of how much an outsider I am to my colonial predecessor (another interesting aspect of the insider/outsider debate) and yet how much I must resemble him to an outsider of us both—an alarming but salutary insight.

ENDNOTES

¹ Gudgeon to unknown, 2 May 1903, W.E. Gudgeon Papers MS-Papers-3253, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington (ATL).

² This paragraph draws on Richard Gilson, *The Cook Islands 1820-1950*, ed. Ron Crocombe (Wellington 1980), 57-109; Angus Ross, *New Zealand Aspirations in the Pacific in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford 1964), 234-44, 252-69.

³ Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler, 'Introduction—tensions of empire: colonial control and visions of rule', *American Ethnologist*, 16:4 (1989), 609-21 and particularly 609, 616; Nicholas B. Dirks, 'Introduction: colonialism and culture', in idem (ed.) *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor 1992), 1-25, 7-8; Gyan Prakash, 'A view from afar (South Asia)—an interview with Gyan Prakash', in Robert Borofsky (ed.), *Remembrance of Pacific Pasts: an invitation to remake history* (Honolulu 2000), 296-302, 296; Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: knowledge and the fantasy of empire* (London and New York 1993), 2; Ann Laura Stoler, 'Rethinking Colonial Categories: European communities and the boundaries of rule', in Nicholas B. Dirks (ed.), *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor 1992), 319-52, 319-21; Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, 'Between metropole and colony: rethinking a research agenda', in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds), *Tensions of Empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley 1997), 1-54, 5-6, 9, 21-2, 29; Nicholas Thomas, 'Partial texts: representation, colonialism and agency in Pacific History', *Journal of Pacific History*, 25:2 (1990), 139-58, 147-9; Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: anthropology, travel and government* (Cambridge 1994), 1-3, 13-16, 50-1, 105-6.

⁴ Brief quotations from the journal are generally not footnoted.

⁵ This biographical note draws on Walter Edward Gudgeon, *Autobiography* [1910], in Walter Gudgeon, *Autobiography and Related Materials* fMS-079 ATL; E.W.G. (Elsdon) Craig, *Destiny Well Sown: a biography of Lt.-Col. W.E. Gudgeon, C.M.G. etc* (Whakatane, NZ 1985); David Green, 'Gudgeon, Walter Edward 1841-1920' (updated 7 April 2006), *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz> accessed 22 April 2006; and M.P.K. Sorrenson, *Maori Origins and Migrations: the genesis of some Pakeha myths and legends* (Auckland 1979), 34-5.

⁶ Walter Edward Gudgeon, 'The Maori People', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 13:51 (1904), 177-92, 177.

⁷ Walter Edward Gudgeon 'The *toa taua* or warrior', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 13:52 (1904), 238-64, 239.

⁸ *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* [NZPD] 114 (1900): 387-426; Gudgeon, *Autobiography*, 25.

⁹ Craig, *Destiny Well Sown*, 30, 32.

¹⁰ E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (London 1987), 60.

¹¹ J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism: a study* (3rd edn, London 1988 [1902]), 237.

¹² Walter Edward Gudgeon, 'A journal of my residence in the South Seas and of the causes that led to that residence [1910]', in Walter Gudgeon *Autobiography and Related Materials* fMS-079 ATL 1. The Journal comprises 68 pages numbered 1 to 68 and lying immediately after page 73 of the *Autobiography*.

¹³ [Edward Tregear], *The Right Hon. R.J. Seddon's Visit to Tonga, Fiji, Savage Island, and the Cook Islands, May, 1900* (Wellington 1900), 425-42; NZPD 114 (1900): 387-93.

¹⁴ Seddon to Ranfurly, Memo Urging Caution, 27 December 1898, G11 70.1 Box 4 Archives New Zealand, Wellington (ANZ).

¹⁵ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 67.

¹⁶ Gudgeon, *Journal*, 27, 62. A reference to the juggernaut character of Cecil Rhodes as portrayed fictionally in Anthony Hope [pseudonym of Sir Anthony Hope Hawkins], *The God in the Car* (London 1895).

¹⁷ *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, A3 (1898), 16.

¹⁸ Gudgeon, *Autobiography*, 1.

¹⁹ Gudgeon, *Journal*, 16.

²⁰ H. John Field, *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life: the British Empire at the turn of the century* (Westport, CT 1982), xii, 30.

²¹ Gudgeon, *Autobiography*, 173.

²² Scott 1991, 91-2.

²³ Gudgeon, *Journal*, 2.

²⁴ Gudgeon, *Journal*, 46-8.

²⁵ Gudgeon, *Journal*, 40-41, 45.

²⁶ Gudgeon, *Journal* 39.

²⁷ Allen Curnow, 'The Unhistoric Story', in idem, *Sailing or Drowning* (Wellington 1941), 20-21.

²⁸ Donald Denoon, 'The right to misrepresent', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 9:2 (1997): 400-18; Doug Munro, 'Who "owns" Pacific history: reflections on the insider/outsider dichotomy', *Journal of Pacific History*, 29:2 (1994): 232-37.