

## **“The ghosts of bygone ages rude”: Ecology, Religion, and the Gothic in the New Zealand Settler Fable, 1845-1878**

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### **Introduction**

In *The Fable as Literature*, H. J. Blackham argued that the fable was a loosely-defined mode involving "a narrative device, to provoke and aid concrete thinking, focused on some general matter of concern," typically invoking "ironic comparison," "baited bafflement," and other "temerities" (xvii). A fable could be anything from "an aetiological nature-myth, an animal story," to "a series of amusing actions" constructed in the "satirical" literary space around a "political or philosophical ... message" (xviii).

Tzvetan Todorov similarly defined the fable as a "means of transformation" by which a simple moral statement could be "unfolded" through "illustration" into a socially and spiritually engaging narrative form ("Structuralism and Literature" 162). To readers, the fable's illustrations "function as signs of ... real or imaginary situations, signs which give form to our perception of the world," "in which one confronts in an abstract and general form" issues affecting their own lived realities ("Structuralism and Literature" 164). Fables' "variety of concrete characters," most distinctively, fulfil "the same roles" in multiple different stories, revealing prevailing cultural views on the more-than-human perspectives they appropriate ("Structuralism and Literature" 166).

Applying these frameworks to works produced during Britain's era of widespread imperialist expansion, Blackham reflected that

fables have been designed to show ... the absurdity of dreams of Utopia, and the nightmare of their enactment ... the thin crust of civilisation ... the tainted mutuality of colonial relations ... transformation by accidental detachment from attachments. (172)

Blackham describes the literary fable in terms of "a Gothic nightmare in incipient anarchy" (172), wherein animals take the place of humans in "a kind of post-evolutionary soup of dissolution and disillusion" (173). As pieces of colonial literature, fables represent the "fantasies and failed projects" promised to settlers by the imperial establishment, painted in direct contrast to the "surroundings and circumstances" of their newfound, unfamiliar environments (173-74).

In mid-nineteenth century Aotearoa New Zealand, settler-colonial literary encounters with the Indigenous ecologies of the archipelago only served to reinforce this Gothic "mechanism of repression and haunting" (Kavka 59). For instance, in 1888, settler-poet Douglas Sladen described his view on "the oppressiveness of the forest," concluding that "the forest means ennui - and a prison" (28). To Sladen, the "very depth" of the colonial environment was a near-personified entity embodying both "hidden beauty" and "cruel" wilderness (Sladen 28), a perfect setting for the construction of "literary animals" (Blackham 33).

Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, settler poets had consistently re-asserted this binary opposition in characterising Aotearoa's environments through the lens of the fable, employing native wildlife in imposing European morals onto "Terra Australis" (Obeyesekere 24) in spite of extant Māori experiences of the land (Said 105). These works of "fantasy," whereby settler-colonial ideologies were "channeled through borrowed or careworn forms" (Paton 56) as anthropomorphised animals and plants, were highly evocative of imperial efforts to unite "the force of Victorian etiquette and the power of Nature untamed" (Paton 54). Colonial writers would attempt to integrate themselves into their new environment in many ways, invoking ideas of religion, conquest, and control in their efforts to "stand on indigenous ground," as Misha Kavka describes, simultaneously portraying "repression and haunting" (59) alongside idealised views of a "South Pacific Eden" (58) in a distinctly Gothic mode. The fable would continue to play a role in this strain of settler literature in the decades following the initiation of mass European migration.

This article examines the development of the New Zealand settler fable throughout the period from 1845 to 1878, within the literary "age of empire" defined by Edward Said (83), describing how colonists aimed to establish a "natural occupancy" (Kavka 59) on Indigenous soil through the more-than-human voices of its native ecologies. It also considers the methods by which they Othered and re-imagined these landscapes through the Gothic mode. Two main case studies are explored. Firstly, the extended narrative lyric poem *The Pigeons' Parliament* by William Golder (1810-1876) is analysed, examining how this fable's origins and practices would serve to reveal the writer's attitudes toward the New Zealand bush during the earliest period of settler poetry. The second is the shorter elegiac narrative epigram "The Bird and the Idol" by Thomas Bracken (1843-1898), evaluated in the context of the later development of the prototypical Antipodean Gothic. In both cases, these parables are shown to represent how the clearance of New Zealand's native environments became anthropomorphically "common and conventionalized" within the Gothic, "acting an imperial role" (Obeyesekere 31) in portraying the landscape as "alien" yet existentially beautiful on a cosmological level (Obeyesekere 19). Moreover, the shared character roles found in these fables show, as per Todorov, the more-than-human "sphere of action" as it existed across the colonial mindscape ("Structuralism and Literature" 166).

Throughout these analyses, this paper argues that the fable represented a literary method of imperialist expansion during the mid-nineteenth century, navigating the "Gothic problem" of Indigeneity in characterising native environments as "grotesque" and "distorted," divinely destined to be re-shaped in the image of the colonial homeland (Kavka 59-61). "The knotted tensions between past and present, between procreation and death," as Kavka characterises the New Zealand Gothic (63), would serve to reinforce settler-imperialist ideologies, encouraging the creation of "clean lines and open spaces" (63) through the exploitation and replacement of the colony's natural resources, expressed in the appropriated voices of the land's own ecologies.

## "Hinting at unseen horrors": Methods and historiography

Prior analyses of early New Zealand settler fables have focused on connections to European literature of the time, viewing the colony's written output as part of a wider British Imperial sphere of prose. Certainly, the colonial fable, in general, represents a nearly identical construction of European literature, simply transposed to an exotic setting (Said 239-41). However, environmental historian Tom Brooking has identified a dearth of information regarding the overarching ecological themes of this literature (41). On the other hand, historians such as James Beattie, Jane Stafford, and Erin Mercer have contributed to an understanding of the settler fable within a "post-enlightenment" current of European literature grounded in religious and imperialist doctrine (Brooking 41, Beattie 380, Stafford 28, Mercer 1).

Jane Stafford and Mark Williams argue in *Maoriland*, for instance, that colonial literature occupied a space between "the exotic or adventurous" and "small-town provincialism" (28) by the start of this period. Early authors characterised New Zealand as an idyllic location while paradoxically lamenting "the aridity of the intellectual climate" (30), "savage" landscapes and peoples, "gloominess," and "isolation" (27-28). "The language of the settler" remained separate from the actual environments of the archipelago, though it "creeps in" gradually in later writings (30), demonstrating a growing level of desired control by colonists over their adopted ecologies. This diametric opposition between place and ideology would find a place "in settings sublime and exotic, all configured by the conventions of European Romanticism" (35) by 1872. While Stafford and Williams stop short of explicitly categorising such poetry as Gothic, they summarise that such "processes and values" of contradiction and contrast are typical of "a Victorian poem" (55) within the New Zealand settler canon.

Similarly, William J. Schafer considers this early output as part of "a powerful cultural-ideological" (96) system comprising settler-capitalist impositions of a high-anthropomorphic "fundamental spooky alienness" (97) regarding the colonised environment. Such "cultural imperialism" was characterised not only by the "imposition of ideology" onto Māori and their local ecologies but also the production of "messianic and millenarian" (99) literature, combining new-world imperialism and old-world religion. By the end of the nineteenth century, these "crusader" (95) forms metamorphosed into a "pop-vernacular gothic" genre of settler poetry, invariably displaying a "belief in the hauntedness of the ... alienating empty landscape" (137). Schafer argues that the Antipodean Gothic can be contextualised within a colonial tradition embodied by Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville. This Gothic describes "a new place ... met in dreamlike conditions" (141) infused with "Christian revelation" (143), involving anomalous "creatures" and "primitive beliefs" (141) evocative of "ordinary life ... in a form so distorted and disguised by repression" (142). The personified landscape is key to this interpretation (142), embodied in the production of settler fables throughout this early period.

Other analysts have contributed to understandings of the developing New Zealand Gothic, especially regarding the creation of the settler fable against this backdrop. Timothy Jones notes that the contributors to *Gothic NZ*, edited by Jennifer Lawn, Misha Kavka, and Mary Paul, assert a "wide-ranging New Zealand Gothic" (16), wherein the mode ultimately developed from the consistent Othering and derealisation

"of all the glades, dells, and darkling woods that rise from fairy-tales" (Paton 56). "Nature is represented as a creeping, crawling, over-reaching menace" (Kavka 61), with Christian moral implications about colonising "this earthly world" (Jackson 93). Jones also characterises the New Zealand Gothic as a movement "away from realism" into a pseudo-impressionistic Gothic realm (27). Johnathon Wills is more explicit, claiming that New Zealand settler poetry had, by the time of Thomas Bracken, developed identifiable Gothic characteristics wherein "the bush is ... imbued with mystical personhood" (17), becoming inherently fabulistic in its moral conclusions promoting "ecophobia" (17) and "Arcadian ... moral righteousness" (13).

The wider body of post-colonial literature is also of use in this context. Edward Said, for instance, examined the mid-nineteenth century settler fable in *Culture and Imperialism*, noting that Kipling's "eccentric animal and quasi-theological" parables were often interwoven with his "bleak visionary" view of India's native ecologies (134, also Renes 135, Smith 187). Said asserts (83) that British colonists generally wrote "from the perspective of a massive colonial system whose economy, functioning, and history had acquired the status of a virtual fact of nature" (134), a belief threatened by the "difficult, sometimes hostile environment" (138) of the colonial landscape. Their new surroundings, through fable, were transformed into a "lusterless world" of the Other, exoticism, and the uncanny (56, 159), wherein animals were used to critique the "divine and ... the demonic" (Blackham 34-35).

In sum, this paper aims to contextualise mid nineteenth-century settler fables using these frameworks as a structural backdrop, examining how the Gothic inextricably became a part of these literary works throughout the period.

### **"A seeming hopeless cause": William Golder and *The Pigeon's Parliament***

Settler fables initially focused on the suddenness whereby Europeans were introduced to what they perceived as an alien, aberrant environment. Scottish settler William Golder's 1845 poem *The Pigeons' Parliament* embodies this tendency. Golder had arrived in the colony in 1840 after a long process of emigration. While he had a background in agriculture, his main occupation was teaching, in which he had become semi-qualified during his time at a seminary (Opie, "Golder" 3). As such, he enjoyed a higher level of education than many of his settler-colonist peers, and eagerly contributed material to what he perceived would become a distinct colonial literary culture.

In doing so, Golder engaged with aspects that typified colonist existence, addressing "political, economic, and social improvement" (Opie, "Golder" 4) of the land through a lens often informed by European imperialist ideals revolving around science and religion, invariably underlined by intentions to modify the environment in accordance with these ideologies. Biographer Brian Opie places Golder's works within the broader scheme of what he terms "a progressive philosophy" akin to Whiggish interpretations of history ("Textscapes" 81). "Savage wilderness, unsocialised nature, [and] unremitting labour" would define these works, Othering the colonial landscape in encouraging its imperialistic transformation (Opie, "Textscapes" 82). Golder's writings were also influenced by "Celtic preoccupations and themes," employing the corresponding "deeply eccentric and aestheticized histories" of his homeland in

constructing a "quasi-religious" view of the colony's environment as Providence-promised land (Said 227).

Categorised by Opie as "crusader poetry" ("Textscapes" 73), *The Pigeon's Parliament*, a satirical narrative lyric poem, follows an imagined government of kererū as they navigate the arrival of colonists in the Wellington region and the environmental implications thereof. The fable is distinctly European in form, evocative of similarly "crusader" desires to expand the literary conventions of the Old World into this new land rather than to construct them anew. As such, Golder's birds fit into what Blackham observes as "a ready-made scheme of identification for human group identities" (203), embodying in their discussion the environmental, and social anxieties of the colonial politician in their resemblant "noisy flight" (Golder 4). Eventually, the birds conclude that God sent the colonists to New Zealand as a uniting force against Māori-driven "rank extortion" (Golder 70), and that ecological change will secure their safety "'neath British banners and mild sway" (72).

Golder's fable serves to cast colonialism as an inevitable development in the archipelago's history, a transition between disorganisation and civilisation described through a distinctly European colonial lens. As such, Biblical imagery is used to legitimise these changes. Europeans are variously described as "Adam's seed" (6), "Creation's family" (7), and "candidates and heirs of Heaven" (10) in the first canto alone. Queen Victoria, too, is lent a Biblical legitimacy through her identification with "a seraph's soul" (12). More explicitly referencing the environment, the "removal / Of lumb'ring forests" (69), Golder's birds declare, meets with "[...] the approval / Of smiling HEAVEN, who'd deign to bless / Each useful effort with success" (69). Moreover, Golder quotes from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, imbuing his animals with divine agency in appraising their environment: "Know'st thou not their language and their ways? They also know, and reason not contemptibly" (Golder i). In portraying the native wildlife as giving "thanks to God" (55) for colonial expansion, Golder's moral is clear: European imperialism is a divine gift to the land, otherworldly in its benevolent nature.

However, Golder also provides an infernal counterpoint, heavily infused with a Gothic Othering of the environment. In his character of the Fantail, an anxious foil to the staunch pigeons, Golder writes that the untamed nature of the wilderness has "given [man] the tools of Hell / to do the Divil's work" (39), corrupting the settlers into "malicious wretches" (57) incapable of experiencing harmony with the environment. The Fantail also alludes to a "sulph'rous" (45) aura surrounding colonists, who "live by spitting fire" at their quarry. The environment itself is portrayed as a Satanic entity capable of "set[ting] one creature 'gainst another," the "cause of every evil" (39) in this apparently new, unspoiled land. In altering the unfamiliar environment, the settlers are alienated from the divine light that initially delivered them.

Here, Golder engages with what Elizabeth Hale contextualises as "a long literary tradition of associating Down Under with infernal realms" (106), a Gothic imagining of the New Zealand bush as an inherently evil force that preys on the "giant acts of faith" (104) colonists are seen to commit in re-shaping local ecologies, transforming them into the "white furies" that stalk Golder's bird-life (Golder 44). The carceral and punitive aspects of this figurative Hell are also explored in the poem, with Golder

describing the wilderness as "dark as a dungeon", the animals of the forest being "buried in the shade". More explicitly, Golder presents the native forest as haunted, hosting "the ghosts of bygone ages rude" with "tombstone"-like ancient tree-stumps (36).

References to the land and its Indigenous inhabitants as demonic, chthonic, or unholy forces against God remained common aspects of Gothic literature throughout the period, manifesting here as what Renes has framed as "Indigenous sickness and mortality ... interrogat[ing] the Christian framework" (285). Golder's implication is distinctly Gothic: that the "waste wilds" (Golder 100) of New Zealand represent an inescapable and scarcely definable location trapping the lone settler. The forest itself expresses Otherness and hellishness representative of such carceral isolation. In context, these common conventions could represent "a safe retreat" into "comfortable and useful" European narrative tropes involving spiritual redemption (Blackham 133). Golder's "sense of alienation, distance, and fear derives from [his] uprooting" in a similar fashion to colonial stock characters observed by Said (86), and a retreat to chthonic imagery could be easily interpreted, for instance, as an attempt to invoke the familiar, classical narrative format of katabasis – the prodigal return from an underworld-like state of being, as the forest apparently represents.

There remains a secondary dimension to this carceral imposition, however. The "combination of fear and inviting allure" within Golder's forest is, despite the "generalized malevolence" (Said 208) of his Gothic illustrations, presented with optimism due to underlying supremacist ideologies regarding race and Empire. "The cosmic doom" Golder expresses in "confront[ing] the political challenge of the imperial domains" through his bird court soon reveals itself as "the alien world of the *indigènes*," where "one can negotiate small deals" in the conversion of the landscape (Said 208). The "'forest primeval'" (Paton 51) so dreaded by the settlers, reflected in the hushed dialogue between Golder's birds, is gradually revealed throughout the text as a personified anti-Indigenous anxiety. This revelation unravels the Gothic strangeness underpinning the work, forcing the once-observed, abstract antagonist to become characterised as a concrete, racialised entity. Such a "racialised theology" (Lawn 19) subverting Golder's Gothic setting serves to intertwine his conceptions of the wilderness as a "punishment and confinement" (Jones 23) with a prevailing colonial ideology motivated by racially-charged "hierarchies of value" (Lawn 19).

*The Pigeons' Parliament* is, correspondingly, self-contradictory in its application of the Gothic mode. Rather than having the pigeon 'colonists' conclude that European forest clearance would harm them, Golder appropriates their perspective in manufacturing the environment's consent to its own destruction. The Māori stewards of Wellington's ecologies are consistently looked upon as inherently distrustful and asocial - according to the pigeons' President, "they / now look upon us as their prey" (8), incite "evil" conflicts (10), and execute inexplicable "ravages" (3). Moreover, in spite of Golder's diabolic illustrations of "the poor deserving" (61) European settlers, his characters paradoxically conclude that "the hardy workman" (73) will prove the land's God-ordained saviour. As Wills notes, the characters in colonist literature must always remember that they "are here together in the bush" (26), even if it leads to moral contradictions.

In developing his contribution to settler identity as an independent force, Golder aimed for his fable to promote the "application of energy and force to nature to bring the land into conformity with human purposes," as Opie comments ("Textscapes" 81). Golder argues consistently that the role of Europeans is "to send / Timely protection to this land" (72), creating order within an alien overgrowth. Despite the complete removal of New Zealand's ancient biota, the continual seizure and clearance of land is cast as having "great benefits" for "our Country" (Golder 59). Lawn characterises this as expressing "anxious permeations" of the introduction of the wilderness, representing Indigeneity, "into the national home within 'nature'" (18), the preservation and cultivation of which evidently concerned Golder. This constant antagonistic re-framing between the forest and its Indigenous inhabitants, then, is indicative of the poem's intention as a settler Gothic exploration of the "instabilities" of early colonial expansion (Lawn 17-18), anxious not just regarding the wilderness but rather the entire sphere of Empire.

*The Pigeons' Parliament* is a fable highly representative of early colonial attitudes toward the wilderness. Golder aimed, in crafting this parable, to create a literary justification for what Wills summarises as "an opposition ingrained in European thought between civilisation and wilderness" (13). Underlined by a syncretism of settler-colonial Christianity and the Gothic, Golder alienated the environment and its Indigenous inhabitants through non-human eyes, likening imperialist expansion to a divine revelation upon an unholy native landscape. In doing so, Golder expressed his strong anxieties regarding 'primeval' environments and peoples compared against land clearance and exploitation, as well as seeking homely European comforts among such unfamiliar ecologies.

### **"Hearts more callous": Developing traditions**

Later works in this developing corpus of New Zealand settler fables reveal the crystallisation of the "nineteenth-century neo-Gothic" (Craig 45) within eco-colonial literature. Like *The Pigeon's Parliament*, these writings would characterise settlers as familiar characters in an alien landscape, weaving Biblical and highly referential narratives in contrasting "the built and the natural" (Craig 45) as the sphere of empire continued to expand. Authors would attempt to replace the land's histories with colonial geographies, aiming towards a coalescence of a distinct and default settler literature.

Poets such as John Barr (1809-1889) would continue in largely the same tradition as Golder, using their parables to juxtapose the brutality and beauty of the colonised environment. Barr, a Scottish settler in Dunedin, employed his fables in contrasting an idealised New Zealand "where social justice would prevail" with his lived experiences of "displacement" (McQueen 21). His "descriptive and satirical" (Barr iii) poem "On a Rat," written between 1852 and 1860, extensively referenced the Gothic discontinuity between the "paridisaical" landscape and its apparent corrupting effects (Hulme 187). The titular rat is described as a "most detested creature" nonetheless deserving of freedom in the New Zealand bush, as its "worthless" status still makes it superior to the "twa leggit rats wi' hearts more callous" that populate the colony (Barr 14-15). Overall, the fable moralises upon the "crime" perceived to be prevalent among a nebulous population of "wicked people" (Edmond 33) that threatened "the moral and religious organization" of Barr's ideal society (Renes 41).

Barr's employment of the macabre and his integration of Christian religious doctrine, like that of Golder, connect his literature to the wider Antipodean Gothic tradition (Lawn 17). In "On a Rat," Barr uses morbid yet mundane imagery that would have been familiar to the typical British colonist, such as the "hangman's rape" and "gallows" (15), directly alongside Biblical images of "Adam's birth" and "auld Clood" (14). The "old new country" (Kavka 59) described by Barr is shown to be a constant reminder of a distinctly Christian notion of eternal torment, "a reckoning ... that's waur than death" and "a lasting life of burning shame" (Barr 15) promising to overtake the new colony if its environments and peoples are not brought under control.

Most prominently, Barr harks back to "the Scottish vernacular tradition" of his Celtic antecedents, which would have been familiar to many of his compatriots in Dunedin, according to critic Liam McIlvanney (17). The poem itself appears to have origins as an oblique "panegyric" to Burns's "To a Mouse," though with a distinctly altered message (McIlvanney 13). Whereas Burns laments the expansion of industry into the countryside through his rodent character's predicament, Barr poses an equally "radical challenge" to "consolidated settler identity" in arguing for its continued development against "a hostile and unfathomable wilderness," both literal and moral (McIlvanney 14, 17). Both animal characters are agrarians forced into unfamiliar environments; however, where Burns's mouse shies from the plough, Barr's rat looks to exploit its surroundings "that [it] nicht eat" (Barr 15).

Like other Scottish-born Burnsian poets in New Zealand, Barr evidently aimed to use his status as "community bard" in aiding "Scottish emigrants to come to terms with their new environment" (McIlvanney 8). Altering Burns's fable - creating the unfamiliar from the familiar, and radically shifting "the illustration of the moral," as Todorov puts it ("Structuralism and Literature" 163) - suggests a number of differences between conditions in domestic rural Scotland and in the Otago colony. An adherence to the Scots language and traditional poetic format "no doubt helped the Scottish emigrants feel connected to their homeland", a necessity in a colony at the alienated "edge of the map" (McIlvanney 8, Stafford and Williams 27-28). "Imitated, customised, adapted" by Barr, however, the fable took on new meanings, altering the animal characters, their actions, and their conclusions into macabre and grotesque forms, increasing dramatic tension in encouraging new settlers to integrate into his favoured religious, communitarian ethos of existence and, ultimately, to oppose initiatives against development (McIlvanney 8, 18). Ultimately, Barr, like Golder, concludes that further imperial development is necessary for the colony to depart from such Gothic "degradation" (Blackham 224) and move toward an Arcadian society expressive of "moral faith and moral ideal" (Blackham 215).

Scottish settler Alexander Bathgate (1845-1930) would also express currents of European environmental thought in his fables, similarly employing the Gothic mode in personifying New Zealand's ecologies. His parable "The Clematis," written some time after 1874 and included in Douglas Sladen's *A Century of Australian Song* (1888), is exemplary of this. Bathgate would, in this fable, outwardly promote "the Arcadian ideal of contiguity between nature and culture" (Wills 25) through more-than-human analogy. "The Clematis" was written against the backdrop of Julius Vogel's numerous public works initiatives, including his imposition of the proto-conservationist Forests Act in 1874 (Beattie 382). On the other hand lay desires to

"bring the land into conformity with human purposes," moulding "future form of nature and nation" (Opie, "Textscapes" 81-82). This debate would lead to public "anxieties (and hopes) about forests" by the time of the poem's composition (Beattie 381-82).

Bathgate also connects his plants to "the imperial realm" (Said 109) through anthropomorphism. Distinctively, however, this is not done in asserting colonial "primacy over forest conservation" (Beattie 381), but in a "romantically picturesque" (Bathgate, *Picturesque Dunedin* 5) manner - a positive, idealistic promotion. The clematis itself, potentially a native plant, is described in a decidedly Arcadian manner, possessing "floral beauties" and "unsullied garlands" that "form a picture to delight," (Bathgate, "The Clematis" 77) implying "an Arcadian relationship with nature" (Wills 55) on the colonist's part. It is quickly aided by the "stalwart" trunk of a mapau tree, whose "dusky boughs" staunchly hold the vine as it displays its "fairy crown" (Bathgate, "The Clematis" 77). The contrast between the strong, masculine darkness of the tree and the weak, feminine lightness of the vine asserts that both elements must exist in any given relationship in order for its survival.

Todorov notes that such a contrast is drawn "in the name of Christian principles" "between death and blood, love and life" (*Introduction* 136-37). In the realm of settler Gothic, Jackson recontextualises Bathgate's theme in terms of the "proximity" of "the sacred and bodily flesh" (99), whereby the mundane mapau is accorded the ability to elevate the otherworldly clematis through its worldly, physical form. For Bathgate, the holy light of the clematis complements the mapau's concrete melancholy. "The Gothic's profane sacred, would be ... a labour that produces nothing that does not ground itself," Jackson asserts (99), theorising that such tension reifies the "ecclesial motif" (99) of Christian holiness through literary means.

This development of the Gothic mode in settler environmental literature was defined through the continued employment of a Christian imperialist morality, creating the growing contrast between the idealism of settlement and the reality of their "new land" (Brooking 53). The more-than-human would serve as an instrument for these settler-colonists to express "anxieties" (Beattie 381) surrounding the landscape's peoples and ecologies. As the settler fable continued to develop as a tendency within New Zealand colonial poetry, ideas relating to the literary alienation of the natural environment would become increasingly evident.

**"The soulless image": Thomas Bracken's "The Bird and the Idol"**



Fig. 1. Illustration from Bracken's *Musings in Maoriland* (1890), depicting the morbid intersection of the more-than-human and religion. (Bracken, *Musings in Maoriland* 209)

Thomas Bracken, an Irish settler who would eventually become known as "New Zealand's national poet" (Hunt 23) was among these writers. Bracken was chiefly an agriculturist, similar to Golder, prior to his 1869 arrival in the colony. Despite his comparative lack of education, Bracken had become a published poet in 1867, writing topographical works on Victoria during the latter half of the Gold Rush. After his migration to Dunedin, he continued to publish poetry during his tenure as a journalist and socialite (Hunt 23-24). Bracken was also known under the pseudonym Didymus, an epithet used by Thomas the Apostle and traditionally associated with a "romantic tale" (Nedungatt 533) of exilic proselytism in the Far East. Accordingly, he often published in religious periodicals (Hunt 23); trans-denominational Christian doctrine permeates his writings.

Bracken's poetry generally filled a Romantic or Gothic niche, and he evidently sought to relate his works to those of the extant European canon. Moreover, he consistently anthropomorphised New Zealand landscapes. His compilation *Behind the Tomb*, published in 1871, illustrated the land as an uncanny, uncivilised facsimile of Britain:

Our new land is a reflex of thy face,  
 Its features in the same rough mold were cast.  
 Yet, unlike thee, Tradition finds no place,  
 A cloud of Barbarism shades the past. (30)

Bracken's *Behind the Tomb* portrayed the environment, with exotic flora and landforms, as a beautiful veneer behind which lay an unchangeable landscape inherently hostile to colonists. Bracken expressed disappointment at the sheer foreignness of New Zealand, motivated by cultural and social isolation – in *Behind the Tomb*, he bemoaned his status as "an Exile" (26) surrounded by "Eden's lovely bowers" (23). This background overwhelmingly characterised his later environmentally-minded works.

Bracken's first serious attempt at engaging with the fabulistic more-than-human was his 1878 composition "The Bird and the Idol," which announces itself as "a fable new". It concerns "a simple lark" which hopes, by professing its devotion to "a lovely idol," that the statue may be brought to life. The lark fails, and is punished for its idolatry, forbidden to return to its sunlit "morning perch". "The Bird and the Idol," like *Behind the Tomb*, evidently draws from British Romantic and Gothic works popular at the time, evoking the genres' characteristically neo-medievalist imagery in illustrating a story of pseudo-chivalric lost love (Lawn 12). Like Golder, Bracken offset his 'exilic' status in the "incomprehensible and intractable real world" by invoking familiar fabulistic conventions, and would "enter the province of divinity" through advocating wide-scale worldly change (Blackham 164). Bracken also used the fable as a narrative form in a similar manner to his predecessors, not seeking to revise the form in terms of a colonial context but rather to expand European conventions and understandings across his own understanding of the Pacific imperial sphere.

Immediately, Bracken positions his fable as having a role in his imagined future supremacy of European settler culture in New Zealand. An introduced bird – the lark, brought to New Zealand in 1864 ("Local Intelligence") – takes centre stage in this fable, immediately centring European experiences in the clearance and replacement of colonial ecologies. Bracken's lark – representing, like Golder's birds, the homogenised form of the settler – is referred to in the masculine, carrying with it contemporary gendered expectations of agency. As James Beattie describes, the prevailing attitude of the contemporary colonial public was that "native species inevitably succumbed to the relentless progress of European plants and animals" (386), lending the latter a figurative superiority in forming a unified settler culture. Whereas Golder may have acknowledged the kererū and pīwakawaka as birds "simply present in the new place" (Opie, "Textscapes" 83), Bracken portrays a "productive pastoral future" (Wills 61) effected by the introduction of exotic species, a "positive remaking of the land" (Wills 62) in the settler's image.

Like the writings attributed to the historical Didymus, Bracken intended that "the lesson is the kernel, the story is only the shell" (Nedungatt 547) in constructing his fable's moral. Sub-textually, the poem expresses frustration with the slow pace of

afforestation. European settlers, Bracken argues, are perplexingly unable to enact substantial environmental change in a satisfying way. Though the colonist watches "through Eden's windows" ("The Bird and the Idol"), the transformed landscape remains inaccessible, as "soulless" as the idol in Bracken's work. Erin Mercer notes that "this Gothicised environment" was typical of nineteenth-century colonial literature, with "a certain amount of settler alienation" (2) underpinning the sense of isolation experienced by its characters.

The "intersection of two overpowering irrational forces" - 'enlightening' colonial development and the "spectral" native environment - transfixes the settler-lark, who remains isolated in "menacing bush" (Mercer 2). Though the native environment is merely a "form of painted clay," it cannot easily be transformed into something substantively reminiscent of the European homeland. As Michelle Smith comments, there existed a prevailing "notion that the environments of ... New Zealand were lacking" among settler-colonists, who harboured "desires to recreate comforting and familiar aspects of the British environment" (186), a situation explored by Bracken through tragic parable. Aesthetically, Bracken suggests a "Gothic landscape that is emotional as much as physical," as Timothy Jones writes (27), frustrating the expectations of settlers, who are "wronged ... or warped by narrow conventions" (15-16) in anticipating the environment's transformative destruction.

Bracken's moralisation was evidently inspired by a number of prior works. John Milton, directly referenced in *Behind the Tomb*, commented extensively on "Idols through the Heathen World" in *Paradise Lost*, where he linked them to the "falsities and lyes" (Milton 1.367-375) promised to mankind by fallen angels. In "The Bird and the Idol," Bracken's links between the idol and the hopelessness of reshaping the New Zealand wilderness mirror Milton's descriptions of the exiled Ezekiel, who witnesses "dark Idolatries / of alienated *Judah*" (Milton 1.457) in a vision dubiously promising reconnection to his ancestors' homeland. "The Bird and the Idol" also shares its strict iambic pentameter and mythological tone with *Paradise Lost*, cementing these links. Likewise, the imagery of an incomplete, "soulless" idol echoes Goethe's "Pygmalion" and Schiller's "The Ideal," placing Bracken's work within "the 'hypostasization' of Romantic elegiac poetics into Gothic effects" (Wills 54). These references engage "with a specifically New Zealand tradition of supernatural Gothic" based on the audience's familiarity with prior works, as Mercer notes (2), while still Othering the colonial environment with a view to its destruction.

Wills notes that environmental poetry of the Antipodean Gothic tradition often referenced Milton and his Romantic successors regarding the wilderness, representing the idealised European landscape through Eden, a paradise forbidden to humans (19). Eden, "the original Arcadia of Christian culture," also reflects the fact that the beauty of the wilderness could be corrupted through the "pitfalls" of original sin (Wills 19-20). As Alarcos describes, the Miltonian "Edenic place" (76) became an idealised object in the colonial Gothic mode, unwaveringly signifying outward imperialist growth toward a "civilised future" (Wills 22). Conversely, New Zealand's presently 'undeveloped' environments were viewed as "a steep wilderness ... overgrown, grottesque, and wilde," as Milton describes Satan's distant mooring-place (81). Such Gothic depictions were influenced by "the concept of the sublime ... Milton ... and the German tradition" (Alarcos 18).

References to prominent works within contemporary literature were likely also employed to elevate Bracken's poetry among the colonial intelligentsia, including the missionary-researcher William Colenso, who regularly quoted from Goethe in his publications (e.g. Colenso 317). In referencing such well-regarded works, Bracken was likely attempting to characterise himself as "educated," a necessity for settler poets to be taken seriously as colonial *littérateurs* (McQueen 20). However, Bracken's implicit connections with the Romantic also indicate his opinions on "how and where" the burgeoning Antipodean literary body should position itself, mixing elements of "established Gothic tradition" (Mercer 1) with original ideas in diverging from its European roots.

Bracken's background in Christianity evidently influences the text, further cementing it within European tradition. The Biblical condemnation of "idols" and "carved images" (*NRSVue*, Lev. 26.1-2) is readily explored within the poem, most explicitly in divinely punishing the lark's idolatry. Bracken presents a traditional "dichotomy," as Smith notes (191), between apparently positive Christianity and "dangerously Other" forces of apostasy, commonly re-contextualised by settlers as a conflict between Māori and European traditions (Smith 187). Beattie assesses that New Zealand's colonist population generally believed that Christians created productive land, whereas heathens destroyed it, reinforcing that "it was a Christian duty to prevent land from becoming waste" (382). As Obayasekere notes, Europeans used the symbolism of Indigenous peoples "offering their hearts and blood to their idols" (17), whether figuratively or literally, to signify a "ritualistic, dividualized, fatalistic" culture belonging to the "wild" (17-18), "utilizing a conventional sign system" in separating the coloniser from the colonised (18).

Linking heathenism to the New Zealand forest's 'waste wilds', Bracken connected the lark's idolatry to his imagined future colonial pastoralism, unattainable without the wholesale re-shaping of the land and its Indigenous histories. The "incarnation of Christian morality" (Todorov, *Introduction* 137) pervading Bracken's work directly connects to the "settler psychological agony" of the wilderness (Wills 61), "expressive both of anxieties surrounding ... indigeneity, as well as Western assumptions" (Mercer 1) in a way distinctly linked to the Gothic mode, representative of the style's crystallisation by 1878.

## Conclusion

The settler fables of mid-nineteenth century New Zealand considered throughout this article display the extent to which colonial poets sought to portray the native environment as isolating, alienating, and Other, demonstrating strong tendencies toward a distinctively Gothic mode of framing ecologies. Through more-than-human storytelling, these parables fully expressed desires to modify the land for European benefits, integrating Christianised imperialist moralities in justifying British settler-colonial expansion.

Early writers such as William Golder would use fables as methods of manufacturing the environment's consent to its own destruction, portraying a holy European force against the "ravages" of the unfamiliar forest environment and its Indigenous peoples. Incorporating elements of religion and the macabre, these poets equated virtue with the destruction and exploitation of native ecologies, employing the beginnings of a

New Zealand Gothic in literature. As the period continued, writers such as Bathgate and Barr would reinforce these themes, creating further contrasts between the fearful bush and the deified ideal of settlement. By the end of the period, authors such as Thomas Bracken fully expanded on this colonial Gothicisation of the environment, illustrating the tension between settlers and their new ecologies through unsettling oppositions while casting their efforts as what they perceived to be crusades toward taming the New Zealand wilderness. Settler fables, through their personification of local wildlife, served as powerful instruments by which European morals could be imposed, in a literary sense, upon the land itself.

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