

Contemporary reactions and reviews, with one exception, considered *The Ancient History of the Maori* to be a significant ethnographic work. The exception was the review published in the Wellington *Evening Post* which damned the first volume for its disjointedness, its 'broad language' and large amounts of genealogy. The anonymous reviewer then trumpeted his principal criticism:

The presence of whole pages containing indecent allusions is assuredly without excuse, and certainly renders the volume before us unsuitable for general perusal. When we read the legend of the creation of woman in language which is positively disgusting, we shudder when we reflect that the author, who makes 'the New Zealander speak for himself' has promised that the Maori shall give us the meaning of the names of mountains, rivers and headlands.

The reviewer hoped no further volumes would follow and wished the first had not gone beyond its proof sheets.⁷¹

The reaction of the public was immediate. Stocks of the first volume went so briskly it was 'almost sold out, but those purchasers who had hoped for titillating obscenity were quickly disabused of this expectation. Sales of subsequent volumes nosedived. Whereas officials accepted the fact that the high sales had resulted from the newspaper's obscenity charge, the Minister responsible for the project preferred to think that the sales slump was really caused by a lack of interest of the 'busy class' of New Zealand colonist. Presumably they were too preoccupied taming the bush to read a book.⁷²

The following week the *Evening Post*, in an editorial entitled 'Another Source of Extravagance', castigated the government for producing such expensive works. It reported that *The Ancient History* was to be suppressed owing to the amount of 'indecent matter' contained in it.⁷³ This report was taken seriously by many of White's supporters. A. S. Atkinson told White that he had written to the government appointed referee Dr Hector urging the latter that such actions were about as reasonable as expurgating a work on anatomy. Taking a realistic view of human nature, Atkinson suggested either putting the offending terms in Latin, or raising the book's price. Later he began his own systematic correction of typographical errors and the like, for which purpose White appears to have supplied him with extra copies.⁷⁴

Tregear too believed the reported suppression and wrote in no uncertain terms supporting White's work:

Allow me to offer you sympathy in regard to the manner your book has been treated by the 'Evening Post' and others of like idiotic intellect. It is infinitely vexing that the book should be checked just at its start, and for such reasons! To me, the canting hypocrisy that devours thousands of books of Zola and other filthy French writers (as this generation does) and then turns up its eyes in horror at the idea of the names of the parts of the human body being printed in medical Latin, is too much . . . the book was not intended for a popular work, but for those interested in Maoris and Maori history — for the *popular* reader there are thousands of volumes of 'slush'