

Tregear meanwhile began to assume a role as the history's public defender. He sent copies or wrote to eminent people about *The Ancient History*, including the distinguished Sanskrit scholar Max Müller and the Polynesian scholar William Wyatt Gill. He assiduously reported back their comments to White, including Gill's description of the history as 'priceless'.<sup>81</sup> In 1888 the *New Zealand Times* published an unsigned review of the second volume by Tregear. He regretted the smaller number of genealogies, but regarded the translations of traditions as particularly valuable since most recorders shrank from giving them. He noted the archaic language of the 'old charms and spells' which benefited, he wrote, from White's inestimable mastery of the obsolete priestly dialect. Tregear also referred to White's translations of Maori song poetry, praising his 'unique power of expression and sympathy'.<sup>82</sup>

As successive volumes of *The Ancient History* emerged, notice was taken by English reviewers. The magazine the *Saturday Review* considered the works a 'treasure of knowledge'. It made various comparisons with other bodies of tradition such as Indian Vedas and Greek mythology, and thought the Maori one of the most metaphysical of backward races with an astonishing grasp of abstract conceptions.<sup>83</sup>

The English anthropologist, E. B. Tylor, reviewed the first four volumes for *The English Historical Review*. He thought the work's main interest for European students lay in providing a well preserved and carefully recorded series of 'barbaric traditions'. No better opportunity, he maintained, had been provided to judge what 'savage tradition' could really stand for as a source of history. He did point out the 'awkward differences' between the various accounts of some traditions but hoped White would not think the work was underrated, for in fact Tylor thought 'the full and untouched versions of the stories' showing their own historical defects made them much more valuable than if they were 'artificially reduced to consistency'.<sup>84</sup>

\* \* \*

The language used both by White and the government in various letters and memoranda reveal them as engaged in a typically bureaucratic mode of discourse. Though conscious of the work as an important piece of scholarship their chief concerns focused on issues of administrative and financial control. On occasions this led to inappropriate, if understandable decisions being reached. For instance the government limited the project to four years, but seemed unaware of the ramifications this would have even when these were pointed out to them. It is not surprising that the undertaking was eventually terminated before it had been completed.

Since publication, the verdict on *The Ancient History* has not been entirely kind. Doubts have been raised about its worth as a body of Maori tradition. This is certainly not the place to begin to comment