

Mana From Heaven; A Century of Maori Prophets in New Zealand. By Bronwen Elsmore. Moana Press, Tauranga, 1989. 398pp. N.Z. price: \$35.

MANA FROM HEAVEN describes Maori attempts 1820-1920 to find in the Bible a rule by which Maori could live successfully amid change. Elsmore shows that while many Maori rejected the Pakeha-led churches, their acceptance of the Bible as a source of spiritual truth prompted a century of vigorous religious experiment.

Elsmore's work redresses a recent tendency to stress the politics of Maori protest at the expense of its religion. She shows, for example, that Te Whiti's teachings gave rise to millennial dreaming throughout the North Island, and that too often the search for miracles was the only answer people found to the problem of evil in their lives. Nevertheless in Maori society religion was inseparable from the technology and politics of everyday life, and, inevitably, statements of political autonomy appeared at the same time as the first experiments with introduced religion. The two remained indivisible throughout the period, and Elsmore's decision to deal with religious ideas in isolation is one of several which reduce the explanatory power of her book.

Elsmore's approach is quantitative and descriptive. She presents an impressive number of independent Maori interpretations of scripture, many of which had slipped out of knowledge. A disadvantage, however, of the quantitative approach is that it highlights the backwash of development at the expense of its major shapers. The gap is obscured between movements which exhibit the clear line of development towards Christian orthodoxy, and responses whose behaviour chiefly demonstrates the psychology of the oppressed. This large group cannot be explained in terms of the biblical ideas adopted, and Elsmore's rejection of analysis on the grounds of protecting their 'uniqueness' denies them dignity. Perhaps it is well to remember that Maori religious thinkers distanced themselves from the 'fringe'. Te Whiti, Tawhiao and Te Kooti rejected the title 'prophet', which had been brought into disrepute by excesses perpetrated in the name of inspiration.

The conceptual framework of *Mana* consists of the thesis that the timing of the piecemeal publication of the Bible in Maori 'largely determined *how* the movements manifested themselves *when* they did' [Elsmore's italics]. For example, Elsmore suggests that prophet movements predominated between 1860-1890 because in 1858 the prophetic books of the Old Testament, the last to be translated, became available. This view parallels the 'improved efficiency' explanation of missionary success in the early 1830s. A more empirical view of the evolution of the movements looks to the development of the image of the godly king of an independent people in the 1850s. This was radicalized in the trauma of war to that of the revolutionist leader imbued with supernatural authority.

While the importance of the Old Testament prophets to Maori religious leaders is often stated, in most cases it is difficult to prove. Te Ua Haumene, for example, a Kingite politician and former Wesleyan teacher, was the founder of the Hauhau or Pai Marire church. His prophetic calling came in 1862 as the resolution of a classic, climactic conflict between his politics and faith, when God confirmed his authority and revealed that the last days, as written in 'Revelation', were at hand. The rule of life for Te Ua's church, its worship and its hope for the future, came from the New Testament, published 1837; its past was contained in the covenant between God and Abraham recorded in 'Genesis', also available early. To suggest, as Elsmore does, that Te Ua acted out the role of Zerubbabel is to misunderstand that Te Ua's whole career issued from his conviction that he was, himself, a prophet of God.

Elsmore's misreading of Te Ua stems in part, as do other difficulties, from lack of consultation of Maori language sources. For major figures who left substantial writings, none are cited. In the absence of outside reference points, the sourcing of Maori behaviour to specific Bible verses is too confident. While it is possible, for example, that the

importance of 'whiteness' in the thinking of Remana Hi (ch.37) comes from a line in 'Ecclesiastes', the association of white with positive values is a feature of Maori writing in this period, reflecting the Pakeha assault on Maori dignity and identity.

Mana From Heaven is, however, a survey which uncovers a largely forgotten section of history. As a resource, its comprehensiveness is unlikely to be surpassed, and it opens up rich avenues of study. By revealing the enormous influence of introduced ideas Elsmore has courageously opposed the erroneous view that, having tried Pakeha religion and found it wanting, Maori returned to the ways of their ancestors. The traditional Maori world was irreparably changed in the nineteenth century. *Mana From Heaven* shows that Maori society succeeded in restating its identity not by retreat, but by the vigorous assertion of the right to change.

LYNDSEY HEAD

University of Canterbury

Ples Blong Iumi: Solomon Islands, the Past Four Thousand Years. Edited by Hugh Laracy. Institute of Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1989. 176pp. NZ price: \$35.

THIS BOOK is a collection of essays, with some historical focus, on Solomon Islands written by young Solomon Islanders, with Dr Hugh Laracy as 'facilitator' and editor. Laracy, working quietly and modestly, has done this service to budding islands writers and their governments before in *Tuvalu: A History*, published in 1983. His task was not an enviable one, given the highly political nature of these exercises in the ideology of newly independent states.

The genesis of this collection is unique: advertisements went out through the media in Solomon Islands, so the contributors were largely self-selected. It is hardly surprising then that only one of the 14 writers is a woman. In this book there is an enormous amount of information of interest to both Solomon Islanders and outsiders. It, in the main, is clearly written even when the material discussed is quite complex. Topics focus mainly on social themes — education, social change, the arts, concepts of time, writing, pre-history, oral history, population movement, and religion. As well, there is a chapter on land and economy, and there is one on politics. Several useful and mainly statistical appendices are included, although the National Anthem (p.160) and the chronology (pp.152-156) imply what can only be a false picture of Solomons society, that women are not significant. This is ironic in the light of the book's theme — society — as women are society's primary conservators, a fact acknowledged in passing in Moffat Wasuka's chapter on education (p.99).

There is always a danger in a book commissioned to affirm national identity that 'Merrie Melanesia' can be overstressed — a trap that most of the poets and novelists discussed by E. Iamae (pp.43-45) have avoided. Perhaps this explains why there is virtually no mention of a not inconsiderable part of early Solomons history involving warfare, and the suspicion with which these small-scale societies viewed each other, even down to the micro-level of clans. Head-hunting, with its significant demographic effect, is glided over while neither attendant slavery nor cannibalism are mentioned. Of course, Melanesians are sick of the Western obsession with such topics, but this book exemplifies how far the pendulum can swing the other way. One gets an impression of a peaceful, harmonious group of islands disrupted by often barbaric 'araikwao' (white people). It would be too much to expect sustained self-criticism in the first collection of historical essays by Solomon Islanders, but near-universal concord pre-European contact is a new myth.