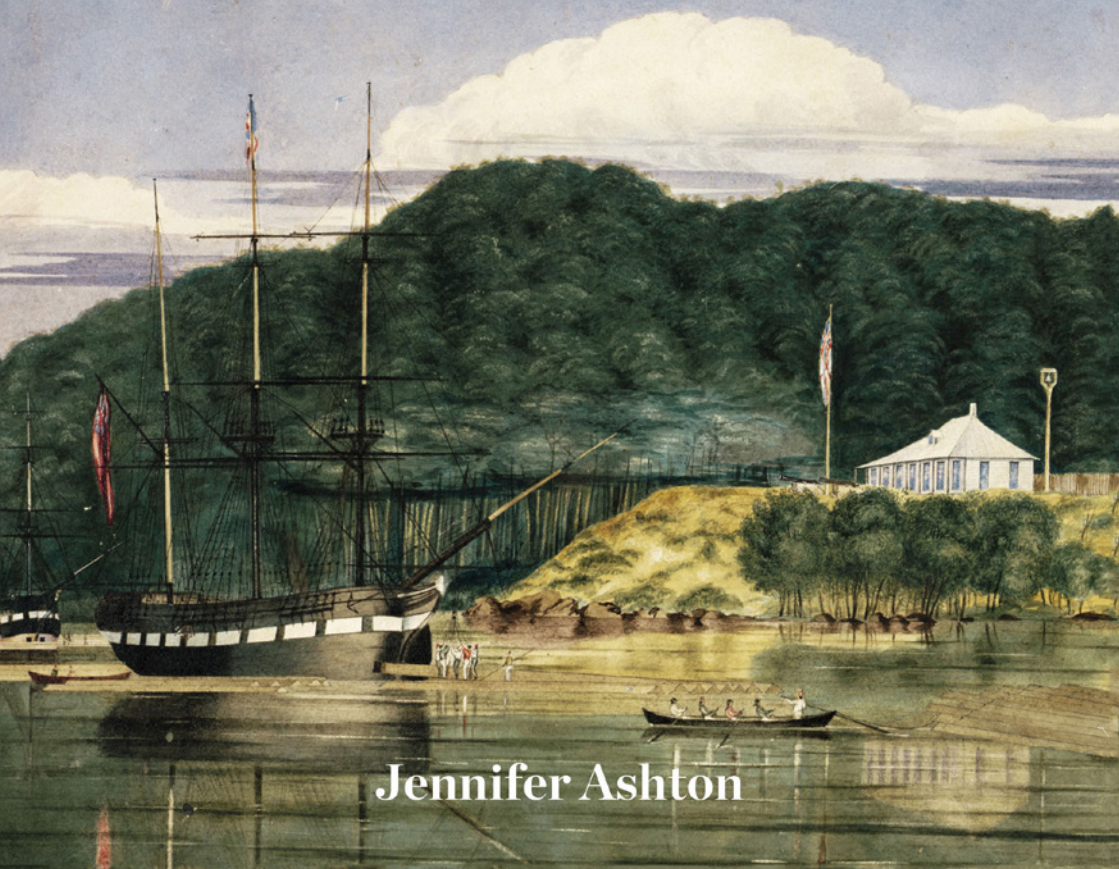


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AT THE MARGIN OF EMPIRE

John Webster and the Hokianga, 1841-1900



Jennifer Ashton

In this remarkable book, Jennifer Ashton illuminates the early history of New Zealand through the life of one man: John Webster.

This book is far more than a simple biography: it offers a different way of looking at the history of nineteenth-century New Zealand. – Hazel Petrie

Born in Scotland in 1818, Webster came to New Zealand via Australia in 1841. He spent most of the rest of his life in Hokianga. *At the Margin of Empire* charts his colourful experiences carving out a fortune as the region's leading timber trader and cultivating connections with the leading figures of the day, Māori and Pākehā. Webster was friends with Frederick Maning, and visited by George Grey, Richard Seddon and other colonial luminaries. He fought alongside Tāmati Wāka Nene in the Northern War, married one of Nene's relatives and built up his kauri timber business through trade with local chiefs. Through his daily interactions, Ashton argues, Webster helped slowly shift the balance of power in the North: the credit that he extended to his customers and kin saw them selling land to pay debts, helping push Māori into economic dependence.

In telling the story of John Webster's long and colourful life for the first time, this biography also explores the wider transformation of relationships between Māori and Pākehā during the nineteenth century. It is an intimate and revealing account of life in early New Zealand.



After a career as a technical writer and editor, Jennifer Ashton graduated from the University of Auckland history department with a PhD in 2012. Her doctoral thesis was placed on the Dean's List and won a special Post-Doctoral Award from the Kate Edger Educational Charitable Trust. She lives in Auckland.



FIGURE 1: *'Mr John Webster of Opononi, Hokianga, a famous North Auckland Pioneer and veteran of the Maori War.'* Auckland Weekly News, 14 July 1904, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries



FIGURE 17: *John Webster's garden at Opononi, c. 1900. Webster can be seen on the stairs to the left. Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries*

Hokianga's Timber Baron, 1855–1870

FOLLOWING THE MISADVENTURE IN GUADALCANAL, WEBSTER and the *Wanderer* continued on to New South Wales, where in November 1851 fate dealt the schooner a final blow when it was wrecked in a gale off Port Macquarie. Instead of calling time on his ill-fated travels and returning to New Zealand, Webster stayed on in Australia. He spent part of his time there trying his luck on the newly discovered goldfields, but his other preoccupation was securing his reputation as Boyd's companion and as an adventurer in his own right.

Over the next year, he took the first steps towards publishing his Pacific experiences. He met George French Angas and together they began work on preparing a number of his drawings for publication.¹ Angas had already become known as a painter of the Pacific and its people, having published two illustrated works about South Australia and New Zealand, in 1847. The two men shared plenty in common: they had both undertaken overland expeditions in Australia as well as spending time in New Zealand, where Angas had met Nene and Patuone. There was even a cross-over between the subject matter of their illustrations in that both men had been keen to use their art to capture the natural history and material culture of the Pacific. Webster no doubt recognised that Angas's artistic skill was superior to his own, and saw the benefit in asking someone who had already been published to rework his drawings.

But even with Angas on board, and despite his association with the by now well-known story of Boyd's disappearance, Webster was not able to raise the money needed to pay the cost of publication. So in 1853 he left Sydney for England to see if he would have more luck securing the funding there. The value of the paintings to the study of natural history was recognised by the Royal Geographical Society, to whom he presented them in 1854. This was followed by the highlight of the trip when he was granted an audience with Queen Victoria, who was also given the chance to see the illustrations from the far reaches of the world. But, in the end, his reputation as an artist and explorer never reached the heights he hoped, although he did manage to complete publication of his Pacific journal in 1863 as *The Last Cruise of 'The Wanderer'*, and some of Angas's paintings appeared in a limited edition of the book.

By the beginning of 1855, Webster had returned to New Zealand to take up his earlier life in Hokianga. Now well into his thirties, he was ready to leave the adventurous life behind and pursue a more settled, domestic existence. Most obviously, this new way of life involved marrying George Russell's eldest daughter, Emily. Webster had known Emily from his time as Russell's employee, and he had tried, in a low-key way, to maintain a friendship with her via her father after he had left Hokianga to work for Brown & Campbell in Auckland. In his letters to George Russell he had regularly closed by sending his 'best respects to Miss Russell', at one stage adding: 'Should Miss Russell have any commission I can do for her or for yourself before I go [to California] I shall be always most happy.'² His determination to pursue the relationship after his return to New Zealand culminated in his and Emily's wedding on 12 April 1855 at George Russell's home at Kohukohu.

Any plans the couple might have had for their new life together were soon overtaken by family events. In June 1855, George Russell died. Webster moved into the Russell home at Kohukohu and assumed responsibility for the younger members of the family, and for running his father-in-law's business. Two days before his daughter's wedding, Russell had appointed Webster and John Logan Campbell his executors. They were made trustees of Russell's estate and given responsibility for managing and disposing of his property for the good of his children: Emily, William, Ani, Caroline, Fanny and Frederick Nene. Russell also appointed

the two men guardians of his four children still under the age of 21.³ As the man on the spot in Hokianga, and as a member of the family, Webster was better placed than Campbell to fulfil the day-to-day responsibilities of managing Russell's affairs, with the result that he inherited his father-in-law's role and influence.

Over the next decade and a half he continued to watch over his younger brothers- and sisters-in-law, expanded Russell's former business and built a family of his own. From the front doorstep of his new home positioned high on a point of land overlooking the river, he could watch the ships negotiate their way through the Narrows to collect the timber that was being stripped from the increasingly barren hills beyond. Meanwhile the hum of activity outside the house was matched by that on the inside, as the number of young residents grew. Between 1856 and 1868, he and Emily had seven children: Caroline, George, Alexander, John, Fairlie, Montrose and Florence, although Fairlie and Florence died in infancy or childhood. Webster was determined that the success and settled prosperity he was experiencing in the world of trade would be shared by his children. Increasingly this meant continuing a trend started by his late father-in-law that involved fashioning his family into a model of Pākehā respectability.

Russell had formed what have been called the 'tender ties' of empire⁴ with Māori in the 1830s by entering into relationships with at least two women, Hautonga Haira and Herina Tuku, although both of them had predeceased him. But by the 1850s he had been raising his children in a way that exposed them as much as possible to Pākehā society. Although he had once been willing to accept the compromises that collaboration with Māori had brought, by the end of his life he had been trying to redraw social boundaries with Māori and to return to more conventional middle-class European norms of behaviour. The English domestic regularity that had been imposed on Kohukohu's gardens and buildings would now also be brought to bear on its 'half-caste' inhabitants.

Russell had been able to pursue this course because of his economic position. His role as the 'Lion of the river'⁵ and the centralisation of the timber industry at Kohukohu meant that he was to some extent freed from dependence on Māori and the social compromises that came with it. He had also been aided by two other things: the absence of his children's

late mothers; and the fact that he could afford to pay for a vital tool he used in reshaping his family into the Pākehā middle-class ideal: education.

In a pattern that extended back to the arrival of the missionaries in New Zealand, Russell sent his children away to school so that they might be exposed to European influences. In the mid-1840s, Emily had gone to Melbourne to live with a friend of her father's and to receive her education, while William and Caroline were sent to Auckland for the same reason. Shortly after Russell's death in 1855, Frederick Nene was being educated at a school in Kororāreka. The education the children received was designed to see to their moral as well as their intellectual betterment, and to turn them into respectable members of the colonial elite. For example, Frederick was offered the chance to learn French and the violin; the latter in particular his teacher believed 'has a good moral effect when the child is directed into the right idea of using it'.⁶

Judging by the opinion of visiting naval officer Theodore Morton Jones in 1851, the grooming had been a success. Morton Jones considered the Russell children 'exceedingly well brought up', having benefited from 'a good education'.⁷ On the other hand, Morton Jones described Frederick Maning's household as being overrun with 'semi civilized' Māori relations who 'had free access to the house, and look upon it almost as much their house as his', while two of Maning's children, Mary and Hauraki, were to be seen 'in true Maori costume . . . as wild as young colts'.⁸ During the 1840s, Maning had continued to associate closely with his Māori kin without compromising his gentlemanly status at Kohukohu and his friendship with Russell. But by 1847 even he was making moves to expose his children to outside European influences. That year he sent his eldest daughter, Maria, to Hobart for her education following the death of her mother, Moengaroa, in much the same way and at the same time as Russell had sent Emily to Melbourne.

Webster's marriage to Emily was another manifestation of this changing social landscape. During the 1840s, Webster had eschewed sexual relationships with local women and had remained aloof from the intimate frontiers of empire. When he married Emily, he not only secured his economic fortunes, he also entered a marriage that conformed closely to a respectable Victorian union. John and Emily's marriage certificate recorded their occupations as 'Gentleman' and 'Lady', the acmes

of respectability.⁹ Their union can be contrasted with the marriage of Webster's own brother, William, to Annabella (or Hanapara) Gillies, whose mother was of Ngāti Toro and who was a distant cousin to Emily. When William and Annabella married in 1850, the marriage register described him as a 'trader' and her as a 'half caste'. Annabella had been a maid at the Mangungu mission station and remained closely aligned to her Māori relations, being bilingual all her life. Despite their shared whakapapa and status as daughters of Māori women, Emily and Annabella were separated by the nature of their family life and by the labels applied to them. Emily's upbringing and education allowed her to transcend the racial classification applied to 'half-caste' women such as Annabella, to downplay her Māori background and to become a Victorian 'lady'. In the process, Webster secured a wife who enabled him to conform as closely as possible to a middle-class ideal, and to satisfy the expectations of an evolving colonial society.

John and Emily's marriage took place against an evolving political backdrop throughout the colony in the 1850s. In that decade the 'half-caste' children of Māori mothers and Pākehā fathers were reaching maturity and were becoming more visible both nationally and locally. At the same time, their position within New Zealand society was becoming more difficult as settler numbers increased, the founding of the King movement loomed at Waikato, and suspicions among Pākehā towards Māori throughout the country grew. Their status became even more problematic following the outbreak of war in the 1860s as the conflict forced them to make difficult decisions about how they were going to identify themselves, particularly as Pākehā were more likely to view them as Māori than Pākehā.¹⁰ The impact of the Taranaki and Waikato wars in Hokianga is discussed in more detail in the next chapter, but judging by the experience of Emily Russell and Annabella Gillies, these questions were being faced even in the decade before the crisis of wartime.

The political implications of having Māori kin were also highlighted by a growing Pākehā conviction that Māori were a people in decline. James Belich has described how the idea of Māori being a declining race gained currency from the 1860s as conflict and confidence in the colony's destiny meant that 'both nature and natives were inevitably to be swept aside in the inevitable march' to the future.¹¹ Again, though, these ideas were

abroad in the 1850s. In 1856 a board of enquiry was held into 'subjects connected with the Native race', primarily subjects relating to land tenure and the willingness of Māori to sell land to the government. The witnesses who appeared before the board were also asked their opinions on the reason for an apparent decrease in Māori numbers, on the basis that they were experts in 'native' matters. John Webster was one of these witnesses. As part of a general statement about the condition of Māori in Hokianga, he claimed that he had noticed a substantial change in the condition of Māori between his departure in 1848 and his recent arrival back in the district. Whereas before they had flocked to the Wesleyan mission chapels and schools, now the 'schools were abandoned and the natives scattered'. In the absence of a magistrate, Māori had become 'much more quarrelsome and ill behaved'. When questioned about Māori access to liquor, he replied, 'The desire for spirits has increased lately. There had been no desire for spirits when I was in the country formerly. I have seen confirmed cases of drunkenness.' Perhaps most tellingly, he said, 'I have observed a great decrease in the native population about Mr Young's at Pakanae, and the vicinity. The natives often remark "By and bye the Europeans will have all the land, why then should we quarrel about it"', seemingly endorsing the idea that Māori would inevitably give way to Pākehā.¹²

These statements aligned Webster with the ideas of wider colonial society, which has been described as being typified by a disinclination to interact with Māori.¹³ Increasingly, Webster was striving to fit in with the respectable section of the new society whom he viewed as his equals, which now involved disassociating himself from the relationships formed in earlier years. He tried to do this in part by arguing that it was Māori who had changed rather than himself, and that the connections he had formed pre-dated this apparently sad decline.

For Webster, this disassociation involved marrying a woman of mixed descent who had been raised to feel at home in the Pākehā world, taking over responsibility for giving his young sisters- and brothers-in-law a European education and then raising his own children in the same way. When George Russell died, Webster became responsible for Frederick Nene Russell's schooling at Kororāreka, and his own children were sent away for their education. In old age, his and Emily's oldest daughter,

Who would not wish since modern times display
 A thousand journals, towns, mature in folly, of
 who could withhold his hand, or who can blame,
 For writing what they've seen, since lords have done the same
 He in whose breast this miser wish doth reign,
 Let him the feelings of a nobler heart disdain
 Of what he's seen, or heard, or know he'll tell
 My God of eloquence my pen nor break the spell
 Whether now in poetry, or prose, or rhyme,
 The rules and superstitions of another time
 The words that held us awe a lawless form
 Or deadly tenor of the secret Makutu
 Or tales of Hahungu, or loud Pike's
 Unknown the word spoke @ the dawn of day
 The Hauri & the Haka each explains
 And whence their beauty from distorted limbs they gain
 The Hauri and the tangi each unfold
 And when in their usage in the days of old
 And Taper on a Chops of Christ's head
 Or taper where repose the ashes of the dead
 And last the Puhu youths contracted marriage soon
 By parents made all children ought of marriage know
 From their my pen each secret thing unravel
 And laugh or weep as best becomes the (tail) tale



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