THE MANY DEATHS OF MARY DOBIE

MURDER, POLITICS AND REVENGE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEW ZEALAND

DAVID HASTINGS

'DREADFUL MURDER AT OPUNAKE', said the *Taranaki Herald*, 'Shocking outrage', cried the *Evening Post* in Wellington when they learned in November 1880 that a young woman called Mary Dobie had been found lying under a flax bush near Ōpunake on the Taranaki coast with her throat cut so deeply her head was almost severed.

In the midst of tensions between Māori and Pākehā, the murder ignited questions: Pākehā feared it was an act of political terrorism in response to the state's determination to take the land of the tribes in the region. Māori thought it would be the cue for the state to use force against them, especially the pacifist settlement at Parihaka. Was it rape or robbery, was the killer Māori or Pākehā?

In this book, David Hastings takes us back to that lonely road on the Taranaki coast in nineteenth-century New Zealand to unravels the many deaths of Mary Dobie – the murder, the social tensions in Taranaki, the hunt for the killer and the far-reaching consequences of the shocking crime.

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FIG. 12: Portrait of the artist as a young woman. *Family album*

1.

TOMB WITH NO EPITAPH

After lunch on the last day of her life Mary Dobie went for a walk along the road leading north from the small settlement of Ōpunake on the Taranaki coast. It was late spring in 1880 and she was staying at the well-fortified redoubt in the town with her sister Bertha, the wife of an Armed Constabulary officer. Mary, who was an accomplished artist, stopped briefly to buy a pencil, apparently intending to do some sketching near Te Namu Pā about 2 kilometres away. She was more than just a dabbler; examples of her work from New Zealand and the Pacific Islands appeared in the London *Graphic* magazine, renowned for the quality of its illustrations.[1] To the west of Te Namu were spectacular views of the ocean and, on a clear day, the landward aspect was dominated by the majestic mountain that the Māori called Taranaki and the Pākehā Egmont. It was an ideal place for an artist, said

the local paper, 'one of the most beautiful spots in the district, and of an evening, and when the sun is setting, the scene is a most magnificent one'.[2] Mary was making the most of these natural splendours because she was about to return to England with her mother after three years living and travelling in New Zealand and the South Pacific.

The road she walked that day was as rich in history as the scenery was beautiful. One of the best tales told on the coast was about a local chief, Wiremu Kingi Matakātea, who had won fame at Te Namu Pā in 1833 when he led 150 Taranaki defenders as they fought off an attack by a superior force of 800 from the Waikato during the musket wars.[3] Then, in 1834, the pā was put to the torch by British troops trying to rescue Betty Guard, an Englishwoman who had been held by the Taranaki and Ngāti Ruanui tribes since her ship, the *Harriet*, had been wrecked five months previously.[4] Thirty years later Matakātea and Erueti – who was known as the famous prophet Te Whiti-o-Rongomai by the time of Mary's visit – helped to rescue and protect the survivors of another shipwreck, the *Lord Worsley*. The 600-tonne steamer with 60 people on board hit rocks and sank in the bay beneath the famous pā.[5]

Despite the beauty of the landscape there were signs of desolation everywhere. As Mary walked along the road she passed the ruins of an old flax mill which had thrived briefly ten years before. And the dwellings at Matakātea's settlement were now deserted, a reminder that she was on contested ground claimed by the first inhabitants and the new settlers.

The coast was frequently stormy but on the last day of Mary's life there was a gentle southwesterly breeze, with mostly clear skies and a flat sea. She gathered a bunch of flowers as she went and the last people to see her alive, other than her killer,

recalled a young woman in a blue dress, wearing a hat and making her way along the road accompanied by a spaniel and a retriever.[6] The dogs belonged to her brother-in-law, Major Forster Goring, who was stationed in Taranaki on account of tensions over the disputed land. The great walls of the redoubt – perched, like Te Namu Pā, on a clifftop overlooking a bay – testified to fears that those tensions might explode into deadly violence. But Mary had never allowed conventions or stuffy Victorian customs to inhibit her and she wasn't about to be corralled behind high, defensive walls on account of some fear that might be more imagined than real. In the few weeks of her visit, she had freely walked around the countryside sketching and chatting to people from all walks of life: Māori and Pākehā, soldiers and civilians.

Her plan on that springtime day was to be back at the redoubt in time for a game of tennis with Bertha. But the sisters never did play. The appointed time came and went with no sign of Mary. At first Bertha was not too worried. She thought her sister must have lost her way in the dense flax that covered the land between the road and the sea or, perhaps, had slipped on the rocks near the beach and sprained an ankle.[7] Three Armed Constabulary (AC) men went to look for her in the late afternoon. By the time darkness was falling and there was still no sign of Mary, the search party was expanded to include every available man. They called out to her, lit fires along the coast and, with flaming torches held high, retraced her footsteps along the road.

After a few hours one of the searchers found Mary's body lying in dense flax about fifteen paces from the road near a cluster of stones. Forster, as the senior officer in the redoubt, was summoned to view the horrifying scene by torchlight.

He described his sister-in-law lying partly on her left side under a flax bush with one arm across her throat as if to guard against a blow. Her face was covered in blood and her throat was cut so deeply that her head was almost severed.[8]

Everyone in small-town Ōpunake heard the news that night and by the following afternoon, when the evening papers came out, the rest of New Zealand knew about it too. The tone of the coverage was set by the headlines: 'Dreadful murder at Opunake', said the *Taranaki Herald*, 'Shocking outrage', was how the *Evening Post* in Wellington put it and other papers called the murder 'horrible', 'diabolical' and 'brutal'.

As with all big, breaking news stories journalists hastened to gather and publish as much information as they could. In the rush, it was disorganised with many papers running two, three or even four versions of the story simultaneously.

Readers were confronted with a mass of information, much of it contradictory. For instance, there was no certainty about the time the body was found. Some said 9.30 p.m., others 10.30. The scene of the crime was another source of confusion. Some said the body was 100 yards from the road, others 40. The *Evening Post* was even more confused. It said the crime had been committed south of Ōpunake when every other paper except the Auckland *Star* reported correctly that Te Namu was to the north.[9] The *Star* had it both ways, in one story saying north and in another saying south.[10] And how old was Mary? One paper said 22 and another 26. Her correct age was 29; she was just a few weeks from her thirtieth birthday.

But if getting the basic facts right was a difficult task on that first day, it was as nothing compared to the deeper questions: who had committed this atrocious crime and why? A number of answers were to be given in the coming days and Mary

was to have many deaths in print and in the popular imagination as people struggled to explain and understand what had happened. Many Pākehā feared it was an act of political terrorism in response to the state's determination to take the land of the tribes in the region. Conversely, many Māori thought it would be the cue for the state to use force against them. Rape was another motive that was reported with the certainty of fact even before the results of the post-mortem examination were known. Or was it robbery or maybe just the inexplicable act of an uncivilised savage? Then again, it might have been simply a crime of drunkenness. And who had done the deed? A gang was to blame, said one theory. Someone acting alone said another. A Pākehā was the killer, but no, maybe it was a Māori. One school of thought even blamed Mary because she had put herself in harm's way by strolling unescorted along a lonely road.

Mary was buried in the AC cemetery outside the redoubt, which is the last resting place of about fourteen people from the old days. No one knows the exact number because the graves of between six and ten Irishmen who served with the AC are unmarked.[11] Of the four marked graves, Mary's stands out because of an elegant tombstone dedicated to her memory by the soldiers of the constabulary. It was fashioned from a gleaming block of white marble and surmounted by a cross decorated with a wreath of thorns. At nearly 3 metres tall it was far grander than the other three modest gravestones in the little cemetery and a wrought-iron fence was built around it as an extra barrier to protect her memory. But the grave marker carries no moving epitaph to give a sense of who Mary was or why her life was memorialised in such an emphatic way. The two inscriptions on the tomb are confined to basic

information. The main one merely gives the span of her days and the names of her parents; her father had been a major in the Madras Army and her mother's name was Ellen. The secondary one says it was the non-commissioned officers and men of the AC who erected the gravestone.

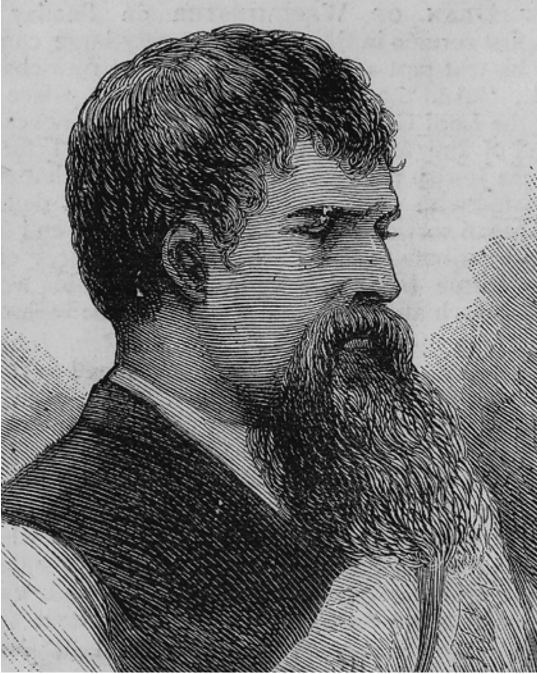
It is puzzling that the men who went to such lengths to commemorate Mary's life could not think of something more to say. It may be that they were simple, pragmatic people not given to expressing deep emotions or ideas and so confined themselves to the safety of specific facts and details. But soldiers frequently wrote or selected epitaphs to put on the graves of comrades who had fallen in battle.[12] A number were to be seen at the Mission Cemetery in Tauranga when the Dobie sisters visited there in the autumn of 1879. 'A man greatly esteemed and deeply regretted by his comrades', read the inscription on the tomb of a soldier killed at Te Ranga in June 1864. 'Time like an ever rolling stream, bears all its sons away', reads another, marking the last resting place of a man who fell at the battle of Gate Pā in March of that same year. Yet another was distinguished for the black humour in its message to the living: 'As you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so you must be. Prepare for death and follow me.'

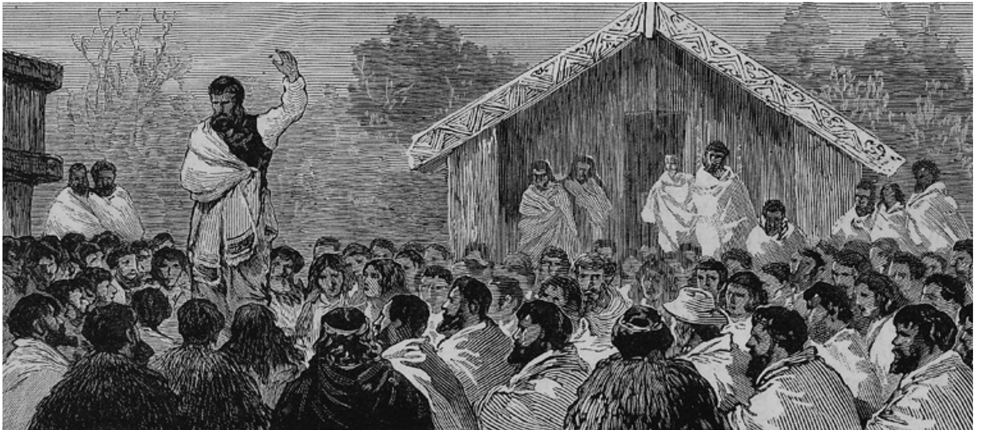
Of these three epitaphs only the first is original. The second is a quotation from the hymn 'O God our help in ages past' and the third is a standard inscription that can be traced back to a headstone in Ayrshire, Scotland, and perhaps beyond.[13] Even though they are not original, the quotations were most probably chosen to somehow reflect the personalities of the men buried beneath the ground. Yet when it came to Mary words failed the soldiers. They could think of nothing to say, not even an apt quotation. Perhaps it was because her death was so far

outside their experience and expectations. They understood that a man would be killed in battle but the brutal murder of a woman was something else. Instead of poetry and fine words, the symbolism of the tombstone left a message to posterity: the wreath of thorns spoke of great suffering and the prominence of the memorial was a reminder of how deeply her death had affected the community.

But memorials are not just inscribed in stone. People leave traces of their thoughts and existence in all sorts of places: letters, diaries, newspapers, official documents, court records, sketches and photographs. Some of these are deliberate and considered, sometimes they are preserved accidentally. Often they are filtered through the eyes of other people and reshaped or distorted by the prejudices and ideas of those who report them and pass them down through the generations. Sometimes they provide evidence of things that their authors did not intend to say. From a multitude of fragments and sources like these Mary Dobie's story emerges. Reports of the murder and the many versions of her death played out across a troubled political and social landscape and the effects lingered long after the story had faded from the headlines.

FIG. 17: Flirting on the high seas. *Mary Dobie, from* The Voyage of the May Queen*, courtesy Drake Brockman family*





FIGS 42 & 43: Mary's sketches of Te Whiti show where she stood on the contradictory spectrum of Pākehā opinion about him. The Graphic*, pk100014, pk 100015, Schoolhistory NZ*

FIG. 56: Watercolours by Armed Constabulary man Eugene Charles Buckley showing Tuhi and the scene of the crime. In the second search of the area, on the Saturday after the murder, police cut the flax which explains why it does not appear to be as thick as described in evidence at the inquest. The portrait of Tuhi was painted in the Ōpunake redoubt library on the day after he had made a damning confession to Constable George Taylor. *Eugene Charles Buckley, PHO2011-2281, PA*

FIG. 62: The provenance of this photograph of Tuhi has not been preserved but it is likely to be the one sold by a Cuba Street photo shop after the trial, and was probably taken while he was in The Terrace gaol. *State Library of NSW P1/180*

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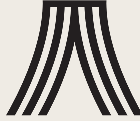

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