

# INTRODUCTION



Eldson Best is a key figure in the history of anthropology due to his involuntary triggering of a fundamental and long-lasting anthropological debate on the Māori concept of hau.<sup>1</sup> This international forum was initiated by Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), who resorted to Best’s ethnography in his famous essay *The Gift* (1925). Mauss concluded from his readings of Best that the force of hau, “the spirit of things,” compelled the recipient of a gift to make a return, and that this form of reciprocity, a structural force in Māori society and in other Pacific cultures, encapsulated a sociological principle of universal reach. Subsequent discussions on this topic, which involved several leading anthropologists in Europe, the British Commonwealth, and the United States—such as Raymond Firth (1901–2002), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), and Marshall Sahlins (1930–2021)—connected different trends and different moments in the history of anthropology. The literary life Best gave to the concept of hau was somehow shorn of its original significance and released into the world of Western interpretation, not necessarily with due attention to the context of the celebrated passage “I shall tell you about hau . . .” by Best’s Indigenous collaborator Tamati Ranapiri (active 1872–1907).

Some readers might find disputable the classification of Eldson Best as an ethnographer because he does not meet the criteria set out by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), widely considered the first ethnography in the strict sense of the term. However, the dichotomy between modern professional anthropologists and earlier amateur eth-

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nographers has recently been questioned—namely, in *Ethnographers before Malinowski* (Rosa and Vermeulen 2022), comprising twelve case studies that challenge the long-lasting ideology of professional authority according to which untrained observers produced poor ethnographies.<sup>2</sup> In a special issue of *Oceania*, Helen Gardner and Robert Kenny go to the point of claiming that the history of anthropology “has been written upside down” (2016: 223): they question the center-periphery model that systematically underscores in the history of ethnography the role played by metropolitan figures traveling from North to South—Malinowski, for example—to the detriment of colonial ethnographers whose lives were more entangled with Indigenous reality.

The recurrent impact of new data on theoretical discussions in Europe is reinterpreted by Gardner and Kenny as a symptom of malaise: the insufficiently acknowledged import of the South in the emergence of the ethnographic sensibility and in bringing the armchair paradigm “to the limits of its viability” (2016: 220; cf. Rosa and Vermeulen 2022: 13). The way in which Elsdon Best’s ethnography was engulfed by metropolitan theoretical discussions is one such case of unacknowledged import of the South. Considering him an ancestor of twentieth-century anthropology could be unjustifiable according to older scholarly standards in writing the history of the discipline; but in 2025—one century after Mauss’ *The Gift* (1925) and Best’s magnum opus *Tūhoe, The Children of the Mist* (1925b)—it seems appropriate to reverse the “upside-down” history of anthropology.

Moreover, the present volume aims at reading the work of Elsdon Best as inseparable from the learned input of his Māori ethnographic informants and collaborators—more exactly, his masters. It tells a story of two worlds connected by power relations, while arguing that Best’s endeavors are not reducible to their colonial dimensions in any simple way. On the one hand, the recording of an allegedly vanishing past in written form by Best and his Indigenous interlocutors was conducted for different reasons and mainly directed at two separate audiences, European and Māori, respectively. On the other side, it was a joint enterprise with significant points of intersection. Best’s re-

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lationship with Tūhoe tribal chief Tutakangahau (1832?–1907), of the Tamakaimoana hapū (sub-tribe) of Maungapōhatu, is paradigmatic: a transformative encounter between these two men took place in August 1896, when the visionary chief inducted the ambitious ethnographer into his role as an amanuensis, recruited to record the history, culture, lifeways, and spirituality of his iwi (tribe), which was under threat of settler swamping and the erasure of identity. We argue that such a relationship may be viewed as orality handing over its power to the written word, but not the surrender of Indigenous knowledge under threat of extinction, passing the guardianship over to Pākehā interlocutors. Rather, this was a manifestation of Indigenous agency. Tutakangahau and other Māori elders offered their repository of wisdom and knowledge to Best's pen to fulfill the hopes of future revival.

The work of Best has been submitted to criticism by Māori scholars, particularly for its colonial setting and tone, for the lack of acknowledgement of native informants, and for the pretension to be complete. In her influential *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012 [1999]), Indigenous (Māori) researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith, for example, tends to see Best as someone who exploited the Māori values of gifting and opportunistically appropriated their generous sharing of knowledge. From her perspective, it is regrettable that Best's fame still overshadows the leading role of the Māori sages who allowed him to conduct his research. Non-Māori—or Pākehā—academics have also criticized Best's work in post-colonial or decolonial terms. Other studies put the critiques into question and challenge so-called radical Indigenous research. These diverse stances may be read as trends within a polemic that transcends anthropology; at the same time, Māori studies intertwine the history of anthropology in ways that also transcend contemporary politics.

For too long, Māori have had Pākehā (Europeans) discuss fellow Pākehā, such as Elsdon Best, and their ethnographies of subject peoples, their ethnological models that explain and situate Māori meanings in a Eurocentric discourse. We want in no way to take the place of Indigenous voices, which we deeply respect, but our work as historians of anthropology dealing with a

self-trained anthropologist and ethnographer who dialoged with Indigenous persons along ethical codes different from today's inevitably imply reflections on those voices, both past and present. Instead of demonizing Best for political reasons of the present time and pushing his Indigenous cocreators to the posthumous role of freedom fighters, the present volume questions the idea that Māori participation in Best's ethnographic project was the result of an imposed colonial creed in the inevitability of cultural loss. Contemporary renderings of Māori spiritual concepts are often presented as emanating from oral continuity, regardless of the salvage ethnography conducted by Best and his Indigenous collaborators—or masters—but their joint archival legacy, however unacknowledged, is ubiquitous. Instead of ignoring or belittling this literary chain of transmission, we suggest that it should be assumed as a Māori/Pākehā story.

Despite the ongoing discussions in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the anthropological debate on hau at the international level, Best is an excluded ancestor whose place in disciplinary history largely remains to be uncovered. The son of English immigrants in New Zealand, Elsdon Best (1856–1931) opted for an adventurous life in the open from an early age. He was a bookworm run wild, whose eclectic anthropological readings and ethnographic calling eventually determined his integration in the intellectual circle of Stephenson Percy Smith (1840–1922), a Māoriphile scholarly figure and politician who became his long-term mentor and friend. Best's career as a fieldworker followed the creation of the Polynesian Society in 1892, of which he was a founding member; yet it was his appointment as paymaster, storeman, and mediator in the roadmaking and land division processes among Tūhoe in the Urewera District in the 1890s that allowed him to put into practice intensive modes of ethnography in this mountainous region considered to be culturally preserved. From 1910, Best's later position at the Dominion Museum in Wellington represented a new chapter in his life, marked by an extremely prolific production of monographs and articles on a broad range of *Māori* cultural and historical themes.

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Most of the written sources in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on Māori society and culture have been written in English by explorers, traders, missionaries, government officials, and finally, the amateur ethnographers of what became the Polynesian Society in 1892—with Elsdon Best as, arguably, their *primus inter pares*. We should be constantly aware that their view of Māori in this literature is filtered through numerous European lenses, and Best is no exception to the rule. Moreover, he worked without consciously reflecting on his way of working and its underlying assumptions, biases, expectations, and preconceptions, thus requiring careful analysis on possible misunderstandings to make use of it more than a century later. This being said, the search for the vernacular elements inscribed in Best's ethnography, despite all filters and biases, is one of the epistemic roads to be followed by the historian, with due attention to significant intersections between these elements and the autonomous production of texts by Māori, either in manuscript or in print form. Much of this material remains unavailable to the monolingual dominant culture—a hangover from a century of neglect when the Māori language was devalued and almost lost to its owners.

A second epistemic road consists in restituting the intellectual forces at work in Best's anthropological reflections on Māori "precolonial" spirituality. We pay particular attention to the late influence of Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), whose views on primeval Indo-European religious thought were outmoded in late nineteenth-century Britain since they were long surpassed by the contrasting focus of evolutionary anthropologists on so-called savages as prehistorical representatives. We identify Best as someone who incarnated Max Müller's philological credo and who adopted and adapted some of his ideas to a new context at the turn of the twentieth century and as late as the 1920s—namely, the notion that "illiterate" peoples could have a sophisticated spirituality that was not to be measured by observers insufficiently acquainted with their language.

Although Best, who often described the Māori as "barbarians," was also influenced by sociocultural evolutionism, his work does

not reflect a positivist belief in progress in any straightforward way. There are dissonant and even pessimistic dimensions to his writings. One of his sources of inspiration was *Modern Man and His Forerunners* (1918), a book by the now forgotten biologist Herbert Spurrell (1877–1918), which revealed how humankind was destroying the planet. In Best, we find a combination of ecological and spiritual concerns in relation to nature, which led him to elaborate an anthropological critique of the burgeoning West. Inspired by Māori primordial spirituality—what he called Māori “mythopoetics”—Best sought to project it onto his secularized perception of nature. Religious metaphors were likely to gain in poignancy what they lost in mysticism. Both Pākehā and Māori could react emotionally to the representations of the old pantheon. He, at least, constantly did so in his work.

A hallmark in the history of anthropology and ethnography due to the publication of Bronisław Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, 1922 was also the year in which Elsdon Best succeeded the late Percy Smith in the presidency of the Polyneesian Society. Predating Malinowski’s *Argonauts* by fifteen years, Best compared the ancestors of the Māori who first arrived at Aotearoa with the heroic navigators of ancient Greek mythology: “For it is the old, old story of the Argonauts, of happening on a new world, of the conquest of the earth by man” (Best 1925b, 1:5).<sup>3</sup> This coincidence is symbolic as it tells us something about the two men’s respective destinies in the history of anthropology: undisputed fame in the case of Malinowski, significant oblivion in that of Best—except in Aotearoa/New Zealand and within the specialized field of Māori Studies. Considering the debate on the Māori concept of hau, one would expect Elsdon Best’s name to be an indispensable reference for any anthropologist, but the fact that a small parcel of his ethnography has become a part of the canon—witness the periodical *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*—does not mean that his immense work is known internationally, let alone read.

In many ways, Best’s ethnography was pre-Malinowskian; however, a careful analysis of his monographs reveals holistic dimensions that caution against any hasty reading of their tables

of contents, which may give the false impression of scattered or disconnected topics. Since he considered that religion played a crucial role in preserving social order, religious issues were not confined to this or that chapter, but constantly resurfaced as a cohesive factor. We will see that his understanding of religious restrictions surrounding all activities from birth to death has more than a purely descriptive scope. Best's writings incorporate a theory of social cohesion through religion that does not annul his diachronically oriented obsessions but adds an unexpected layer of synchronicity to his anthropology. We also suggest that empirical grounds should be considered in the appreciation of Best's reconstitution of the pre-Christian order.

Best sought to reconstitute the Māori past as objectively as possible, that is, as factual historicity, unable to foresee the subsequent criticism that this claim, far from being universalist, was anchored in a European worldview—or, to use François Hartog's formula, in a specific "regime of historicity" (Hartog 2003). Best has been accused of subverting the order of Aotearoa history, namely by relegating cosmogony and anthropogeny to the end of his monograph, *Tūhoe: The Children of the Mist* (1925b), as non-historical mythology. The fact remains that by cross-checking and selecting his oral sources, and by a constant effort to situate precolonial events in universal history, Best eventually nuanced his own evolutionary categories of "barbarian" and "Neolithic man." While we aim at contextualizing his historical enterprise in its colonial setting, we call attention to Best's concern with reconstructing not just past phases of cultural history but the minutiae of historical events—particularly among Tūhoe. This resulted in a chronologically oriented anthropology that contrasted with the vague or timeless diachronicity of evolutionary anthropologists.

The focus of Best's anthropology, if not his obsession, was the precolonial (or pre-Pākehā) past, but his ethnography also addresses change under colonialism—in particular, the impact of Christianity on the old creeds and rites. Vernacular statements cited by Best reveal neither he nor his interlocutors had a simplistic view of the process of conversion to Christianity, quite the contrary. He collected testimonies revealing the permanence—

albeit in a transformed form—of Indigenous religious concepts. For example, he found that comparisons between Christian and pre-Christian representations were formulated in terms of mana. Through the textual reproduction of his Indigenous authorities, he revealed how Māori established a relationship between the powers of white people—their arts and, above all, their writing—and the powers of the white people’s god. The former confirmed the latter. Best reported how the challenge of cultural change provoked different responses, marked in some cases by ambivalence. While some conservative *tohunga* rejected Christianity and writing, there were also sages involved in new forms of teaching through writing. These projects sometimes intersected with ethnographic projects of Indigenous initiative.

This is a story of two worlds connected by power relations and violent colonial encroachments—and yet, our reopening of this file aims at overcoming long established modes of postcolonial critique to create more empathy with both Pākehā and Māori ancestors in the history of anthropology. Criticism risks being purely presentist if Best is made to “fail” based on things he could not have realized in his time and space. The unrealistic expectation that a colonial autodidact could have written and behaved like a twenty-first-century anthropologist only prolongs the leaving behind of Best in the *whakapapa* (genealogy) of the discipline. Instead of discarding his extraordinarily complex work as if it does not matter, the present volume claims that it deserves to be reassessed by more creative and open-minded criteria. This should allow us to recover the flesh and blood people behind the old anthropological and ethnographic literature and to understand the dialogues Best and his Māori collaborators had in their own time, namely around the urgency of recording a supposedly vanishing past in written form. One century later, a new place for Best’s works may be found in a less “dark anthropology” (Ortner 2016) and a more “joyful history of anthropology” (Singh and Guyer 2016). Instead of interpreting their descriptions of, and arguments on, Māori traditions within the invention of tradition paradigm according to which the reconstitution of the so-called precolonial past was but a response to contemporary colonial is-

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sues, we are attentive to spiritual and emotional reasons why they were deeply committed to this project. As a reflection of Māori “mythopoetics,” Best’s own mythopoetics invites us to discover a shared understanding of the Māori worldview as something powerful and inspirational that should be transmitted into the future.

Those who are affected by such beauties, whose minds are thrilled by the majesty of Hine-Maunga, the diverse moods of Hine-moana, and the glories of the Dawn Maid, who hear the silent song of the old Earth Mother and her offspring, it is they who ever listen to that song in the hour of heart sadness, and who know full well the truth of Longfellow’s lines: “Such songs have power to quiet / The restless pulse of care, / And come like benediction / That follows after prayer.” (Best 1922a: 3–4)<sup>4</sup>

#### NOTES

1. With regard to Māori words in the text, since the 1970s it has ceased to be the practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand academic writing (and writing in general) to italicize lexical items from one of the country’s official languages. Out of respect for this development, we also abstain from treating Māori as a foreign language. Where quotes of original material contain italicized Māori words, though, the italics are retained. Moreover, adding the definite article “the” to Māori (or Tūhoe, etc.) is considered a colonial relic.
2. Including a chapter on Best’s first monograph, *Waikare-moana: The Sea of the Rippling Waters* (1897; see Holman 2022)
3. Considering that the manuscript of *Tuhoe: The Children of the Mist* (1925b) was completed by 1907, it is clear that Best did not borrow the idea from Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942). In fact, Best had already compared Māori to the Argonauts of Greek mythology as early as 1894 in the *New Zealand Mail*, which was reprinted in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* in 1901. As for the above quoted passage, it appeared in an article published in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* in 1913b (22: 153).
4. Considering the nature of the “Anthropology’s Ancestors” series, we have partially omitted the bibliographical and archival references that underpin much of the narrative presented in this book. The present vol-

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ume includes selected excerpts from J. P. Holman's *Best of Both Worlds: The Story of Elsdon Best and Tutakangahau* (2010) and F. D. Rosa's *Elsdon Best, l'ethnographe immemorial. Sauvetage et transformation de la mythopoétique maorie* (2018).