

As another cycle of Matariki moves across the skies of Aotearoa it presents an opportunity to reflect on a history which charts aspects of the collection of knowledge and the translation of traditions in New Zealand since Maori and European first made contact.

In the 1800's the Victorian attitude towards museums was one of worship.<sup>1</sup> If knowledge was power, then these monolithic halls represented the strong arm of British dominion. Having originally developed out of a combination of the private art collection and the academic institution, the museum became an independent entity whose primary role was one of instruction through the collection and study of objects.

On the other side of the world Maori were utilising traditional practices developed over hundreds of years in a different mode but not for dissimilar purposes. Knowledge was a powerful tool in a society in which oral conventions were a significant means of conveying skills and understanding. When Matariki (Pleiades) became visible in the winter months it signaled the beginning of a time traditionally put aside by Maori for Wananga and the transferal of specialised knowledge. This process took place in the Whare Wananga,<sup>2</sup> the equivalent of a school of learning, and as with the educated elite of Great Britain, it was the domain of a select few.

These alternate approaches to the development of centres of knowledge exchange demonstrate the diversity of two cultures which would inevitably come together in an often unpredictable and constantly evolving fashion.

TRADE AND EXCHANGE

Early encounters between Maori and European prior to the arrival of the now infamous Dutch and English explorers were not infrequent. Maori accounts suggest that at first the European sailors were thought to be turehu (fairy people) or patupaiarehe (fair-skinned fairies) but as contact became more frequent, interaction progressed from the feared mythical creatures viewed from a distance to be quickly supplanted by a ready trade and exchange of goods.<sup>3</sup> Very few records of these occasions exist but these early meetings were to define the beginning of a highly charged and often turbulent history of knowledge exchange.



ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMPLES

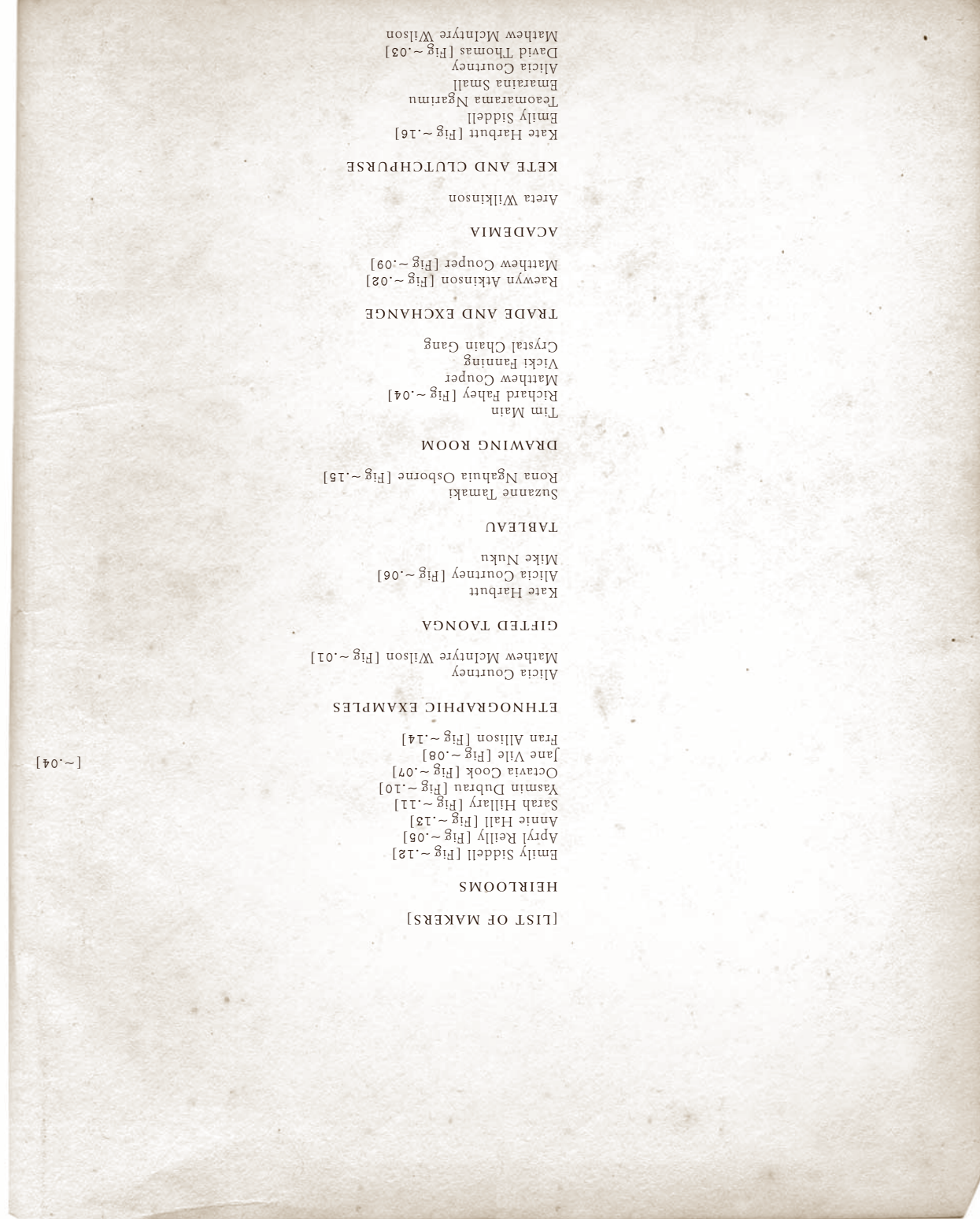
In 1769 Captain James Cook was instructed by The Royal Society to collect specimens on his travels from which to “*build up practical knowledge on the basis of meticulous observation and experimental testing, for the benefit of humankind*”.<sup>4</sup> Any objects procured from the “*natives of the several lands where the ship may touch*”<sup>5</sup> would upon his return to England be subjected to examination, classification and finally stored in lofty temples of art and academia. European expansion programmes were fast becoming competitive scientific races as much as unrestricted expeditions of understated dominance. This period also marked the beginning of a burgeoning museum craze, which quickly sped across Europe with unqualified and relentless ‘collectors’ plundering first the antiquities of their own and neighboring countries<sup>6</sup> and then shifting their attentions to the ethnographic ‘curiosities’ of “*Countries Hitherto Unknown*”.<sup>7</sup>

ACADEMIA

The importance and significance of the term ‘Curiosity’ was at its peak in the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> It represented an attention to detail, an uncompromising diligence and a connoisseurship unprecedented at any other time since the scholarly revival of the Renaissance. “*The person of intelligence and learning who was not ‘curious’ was almost impossible to conceive*”.<sup>9</sup> During this period there was no clear distinction between academia and scientific study as the pursuit of knowledge was primarily restricted to the wealthy. This changed in England with the opening of the Great Exhibition of 1851 held in the technological masterpiece, The Crystal Palace. The primary outcome of this event was an awareness by Parliament that the previously elitist domains of galleries and museums should become public “*by which all classes might be induced to investigate those principles of taste which may be traced in the works of excellence of all ages*”.<sup>10</sup>

DRAWING ROOM

The principal Victorian middleclass activity was the acquisition of social acceptability and status, a pursuit that governed every aspect of life. “*There have always been two main reasons for a private individual to accumulate possessions: a love of the objects themselves and a satisfaction in the social prestige they confer*”.<sup>11</sup> To enter the inner sanctum of a Victorian home was an opportunity to be subtly instructed as to the attributes of its owner. A carefully positioned sheet of music or painting would suggest knowledge of the arts. A well placed book with an



appropriate passage within view indicated a demeanor appropriate to literary pursuits. The display of fashionable antiques showed knowledge of history and scholarship, and the accumulation of foreign and fanciful treasures and ethnographic specimens demonstrated that the hosts were both well traveled and fiscally solvent.

HEIRLOOMS

Those that immigrated to New Zealand came ill prepared for the experience.<sup>12</sup> The strictly defined parameters of Victorian society were understandably difficult to transplant and then maintain in the colonies. Early settlers were expected to not only transfer ideas of social order from Great Britain and other European nations, they were also required to transport the possessions and trappings associated with their standing.<sup>13</sup> They brought with them only the most precious things from the world they had left behind. These objects provided a sense of the familiar to their owners but also extended a very physical connection with traditions that had been taken for granted prior to their relocation from the motherland to unknown territories.

GIFTED TAONGA

Maori sensibility toward the personal object was in sharp contrast to the Victorian colonist. Although Taonga denoted attributes including status and social standing, they were also often the physical representation of an ancestor and as such provided the ‘owner’ with genealogical links, rights of passage, spiritual protection and geographical connections.<sup>14</sup> Many early European ‘collectors’ of these objects were geologists and geographers surveying possible colonial settlement locations in which interaction with local iwi was commonplace and necessary for the procurement of land. Some of these men developed close relationships with Maori and subsequently came into possession of many artifacts both gifted and purchased. Also at this time was a burgeoning tourist industry from Europe which among other outcomes resulted in the production of ‘native’ objects by Maori developed specifically for trade.

TABLEAU

Governor George Grey’s assimilationist policies of the 1840’s and 50’s encouraged Maori to assume all of the expectations of Victorian colonial society. While some Maori were eager to make this life-style modification<sup>15</sup> for others it was a far more difficult transition. With the introduction of disease, war and inter-racial marriage and traditional customs

