

Colenso yields formidable lexical legacy in both English and Maori



Dianne Bardsley

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

THE OPPORTUNITY to research and analyse the vocabulary of a particular individual in history is rare, given that there is usually insufficient data available. But in the case of significant pioneering New Zealander and ex-Cornishman William Colenso, influential botanist, missionary, printer, and politician, an extremely comprehensive record of both personal and public written material has been made available for study.

From his arrival in New Zealand with the Church Missionary Society in 1834 until his death in 1899, Colenso was dedicated to letter-writing with friends and acquaintances, writing to newspaper editors on contentious issues, and publishing scholarly essays about his wide-ranging areas of interest.

Consequently, there is an opportunity to learn a considerable amount about the man and his social and cultural context as well as his language. At the New Zealand Dictionary Centre over the summer, a graduate research student was employed in scouring and recording terms and usages from these papers to help us build a profile of Colenso and his language characteristics.

In November this year, a celebratory interdisciplinary conference will be held to mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of this complex, gifted, and often troubled individual.

Within a short time of his arrival in the country, Colenso commanded a surprising understanding of, and fluency in, te reo Maori, and for the rest of his life he had a concern for the survival of the language.

In a speech in 1868, Colenso asked of his fellow members of the Hawke's Bay Philosophical Institute, "situated as we are here in New Zealand - in Maoriland - what have we done to conserve their language or to preserve those fast fleeting relics of the past?"

Colenso did much to conserve the Maori language, and in his personal letters where he incorporates uncommonly used Maori terms, such as heke, kite, ope, and riri without glossing, it is shown that friends and colleagues were also fluent to an extent and in contexts that were not widely realised, adding weight to the idea that pioneers adopted a range of Maori terms other than those for flora and fauna.

Interested in several contentious issues and involved in some fiery personal and political relationships, Colenso used colourful terms



Cared for te reo: William Colenso, 1862. Within a short time of his arrival in the country, he commanded a surprising understanding of, and fluency in, te reo Maori. Photo: N L CROMBIE

characteristic of the English with which he had been brought up in Cornwall. Colenso did not suffer fools. His usage shows that he took and gave offence.

In one of his frequent letters to the *Hawke's Bay Herald* as early as 1858, he showed intolerance for "grooms, duffies, toadies, touters, sycophants, lickspittles, or expectants".

His expressions for nonsense or rubbish showed similar colour. He used flappedoodle and tarradiddle, contemporary synonyms for nonsense, the latter a term used with the sense of a white lie. Flappedoodle is an English term that appeared frequently in 19th-century New Zealand newspapers.

Incidentally, in the *Grey River Argus* (1872) we find a lovely citation condemning the content of one of our longest-running papers: "The *Lyttelton Times* speaks of the *Otago Daily Times* as a paper that once had principles, politics, and distinct aims, but which now dispenses doses of the mildest flappedoodle."

We have no evidence of its recent use but flappedoodle appeared in our papers as late as the 1940s. So what has replaced it?

Balderdash, baloney, bunkum, and claptrap are still in use; codswallop, hogwash, piffle, and poppycock are still heard; tommymrot and twaddle have lasted longer than flappedoodle and tarradiddle. These are all polysyllabic, expressive, and mostly polite.

Gobbledegook, humbug, and jiggery-pokery are still used with a distinctive sense of rubbish, certainly with connotations of dishonesty and pretentiousness. In the Antipodean context where we used to be known as Britain's overseas farm, bullswool is a common and contextually appropriate exclamation for disbelief or rubbish.

There is much to learn about how and when words, nonsensical or not, came into and out of use and just as much to learn of those who used them. William Colenso was a colourful individual who provided a formidable lexical legacy for us to analyse. And that's neither tarradiddle nor bullswool.

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