10 A Triptych of New Zealand Governors: Fitzroy, Grey and Browne

In the period between 1840 and 1860, New Zealand was a tiny, impoverished settler colony which possessed a rudimentary government scarcely able to protect itself, and whose writ did not run beyond the boundaries of a few scattered settlements. It lacked most of the state-like features of colonies such as the Canadas or New South Wales. Government in New Zealand was not so much an institution which carried out policy, but a collection of officials, some of whom had very little function, led by a governor whose chief task was to prevent the settlers from excessively irritating the Maori inhabitants, and thus bringing about their own destruction. Since government was more of an ideal than a reality, basic theoretical issues were more prominent in New Zealand than in other colonies. In addition, the settler population and many of the Maori saw the governor as the possessor of personal authority who would protect them from each other. He was expected to be a ruler rather than a mere symbol of the monarchy, the role of most British colonial governors by the 1840s. As a ruler the New Zealand governor was seen as the repository of personal virtues and vices in the same way as governors in more developed colonies had been during the 1820s and 1830s. Exaggeration of the governors’ personal qualities gave the New Zealand governor an almost mythological status in popular accounts of the early period in the colony. A remnant of this can be seen in a poem by Thomas Bracken, the author of New Zealand’s national anthem, in which Governor Grey is apotheosized as a king in the forest whose towering attributes were recognized by the forces of nature. He was like a giant tree

whose head above the other plants rose high;
He was the forest’s first-born. Sun and sky
Had known him, and had smiled on him ere he
Had kinsfolk near, or leafy brethren nigh;¹

M. Francis, Governors and Settlers
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Grey outshone his predecessor Fitzroy and his successor Browne, and was the dominating central panel of the triptych of early New Zealand governors.

ROBERT FITZROY, THE KING OF THE CANNIBAL ISLANDS

Robert Fitzroy was one of the most remarkable men to be put in charge of a settler colony during the nineteenth century. Precocious, overbearing and inspired with a divine mission to redeem native peoples, and to restore them to their state at creation, 'perfect in body, perfect in mind', his appointment upset the New Zealand settlers, who viewed the Maori simply as an obstacle to the possession of farm land which they could put to better use than the original inhabitants. Before his arrival in New Zealand, Fitzroy, who was then in command of a scientific survey vessel, had returned some inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego to their native land after educating them in English and the plainer truths of Christianity. He had also given them a slight acquaintance with husbandry, horticulture and mechanics.² The Maori were to be treated in the same way.

Fitzroy’s psyche and motivations are better known than those of other early nineteenth-century officials because of his association with Charles Darwin. As Captain of HMS Beagle, Fitzroy was in command of the most productive of nineteenth-century scientific expeditions, and his disputes with Darwin in which he took a fundamentalist interpretation of Genesis and the Biblical Flood, have made him the subject of careful analysis by historians of science. These have dwelt upon his polarized view of reality, his obsession with good and evil, his moody and quarrelsome nature, and his eventual suicide, in such a way that he appeared irrational and rigid in his approach to the modern world. However, this portrait of cognitive dissonance should not be painted too sombrely. Fitzroy was not excessively antediluvian, nor was he adverse to all of Darwin’s work. After all, he had named a mountain and a sound in Tierra del Fuego after Darwin, and had urged his scientific companion to publish his Journal of Researches. Fitzroy had also given Darwin a copy of Charles Lyell’s Principles of Geology,³ a work which reinforced the latter’s determination to look for natural rather than supernatural origins in changes in the organic world. Fitzroy himself could cope with scientific evidence, but preferred to use it to defend a literal interpretation of the Bible.