## 12 The New Zealand Wars and the Myth of Conquest

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In the mid-seventeenth century, the little island of Britain, rent by civil strife and internationally impotent, jostled a ravaged and fragmented Germany for the position of sick man of Europe. A couple of centuries later, Britain ruled large chunks of five continents and dominated the oceans in between. This rise from rags to riches, obscurity to world empire, ranks with that of Latin villagers and Mongolian nomads as a great imperial story. The ascent was shared to some extent by western Europe as a whole, and it was natural that Europeans should seek explanations for it other than mere accident. During the nineteenth century, for various reasons, the focus of explanation shifted from Christianity and civilization, institutions and geography, to a complex and sometimes ambiguous mythology of race and empire.

While nonviolent agencies—collaboration, conversion, and subversion—played important roles, war was always a key part of both empire and its myths. It was the "grand test" of racial fitness and imperial destiny, a leading tool of empire in the Pacific as elsewhere. Military history has a bad name in some scholarly circles, and many examples of the genre deserve it. But the fact is that you cannot understand empire without conquest and its myth. This chapter summarizes an earlier attempt to achieve some understanding through a

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particular case: the New Zealand Wars of 1845–1872 between the British, imperial and colonial, and the Maori tribes of the North Island. The main conflicts were the Northern War of 1845–1846 in and around the Bay of Islands; the Taranaki War of 1860–1861; the climactic Waikato War of 1863–1864 and its ancillary Tauranga Campaign of 1864; and the campaigns of the Pai Marire or "Hau Hau" Movement in 1864–1866 and of the great prophet generals, Titokowaru and Te Kooti, in 1868–1872.

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At the beginning of these wars, the Maori seemed impossibly outmatched by the British in military technology, organization for war, economic resources, and simple numbers. In the end, it required eighteen thousand British troops, together with careful preparation and logistical organization, to defeat them in the Waikato War. Even then, the Maori were able to delay and limit British victory. After imperial troops were withdrawn, Titokowaru came within an ace of success against vastly superior colonial forces in 1868–1869, a result that might have reversed the decision of the Waikato War. Prior to this, the Maori blocked the British in the Northern and Taranaki Wars and regularly defeated forces several times their own numbers—forces that were not trapped or surprised, but that actually chose to give battle. How is the effectiveness of Maori resistance to be explained?

Broadly speaking, it can be said that three types of military resistance to European expansion were possible. First, indigenous methods of warfare could be used. These were generally traditional, but could include new local inventions. The heavy Zulu stabbing assegai, and the tactics associated with it, originated by Shaka as an improvement on throwing spears, represented a new but indigenous development. The second type was imitative, the comprehensive copying of the European system. The Sikh army of the 1840s is a classic example. Imported weapons could be incorporated into an indigenous system of war without necessarily revolutionizing it. Gun-armed tribal warfare still aimed mainly at coping with local enemies of roughly equal resources, and its military and economic character reflected this. The third type of armed resistance can be described as adaptive innovation: a system that ideally transcended both of the others and was specifically designed to cope with European methods—not as a copy of them, fighting fire with fire, but as an antidote to them, fighting fire with water.

The indigenous Maori system of war could not cope with British warships, artillery, and numbers through open battle or the defense of traditional pa (Maori fortifications). Guerilla techniques could be seen as a form of indigenous resistance, and they sometimes used them against the British, but usually only as a supplement to other forms. The mainstream of Maori operations falls outside any useful definition of guerilla war. The axiom that guerilla methods are the only effective way in which the weak can fight the strong is often parroted regardless of its applicability. Guerrillas usually pay a heavy price for their mode of war in social and economic dislocation and in the occupation of their more accessible centers of population. It is not normally a method of preventing conquest but of making it expensive to the conqueror. Leaders from Vercengetorix to Mao have therefore turned to it only as a last resort. The Maori had a system with which they could hope to protect their land, and they were wise to prefer it to guerilla methods.

The Maori also rejected imitative methods—not simply because they could not imitate. As early as the 1820s they had acquired cannon, and there are signs that the Maori King Movement, founded in 1858, began developing a regular army. In 1862, a Waikato missionary saw fifty uniformed Kingite troops who were "apparently equal to an English regiment as regards order and discipline." An official knew of four similar companies and was told that the men received rations and were paid three pence a day—not a great deal less than a British infantryman's pay after stoppages (Ashwell 1835–1880: April 14, 1862; Gorst 1862). There is no indication that this tiny standing force was ever employed as such in the Waikato War, and the Maori were wise to avoid the temptation. Their regulars were clearly too few to meet the British force in the kind of front-to-front combat for which they had been drilled.

As for artillery, the Maori used cannon against the British in the Northern War battles of Ohaeawai and Ruapekapeka in 1845–1846 and at Meremere and Paterangi in the Waikato in 1863–1864. The Maori had competent gun layers among them—men trained on whalers and other vessels—and they sometimes had a limited amount of gunpowder to spare. But their cannon were old, with bores made irregular by corrosion and with makeshift carriages that made them difficult to aim and dangerous in the recoil. More importantly, the available projectiles—stones and pieces of scrap metal—were inadequate. These missiles made accurate and powerful fire all but impos-

sible. Such weapons were of little use in open battle, or even in the defense of *pa*. In the latter case, they were almost a liability because the essence of Maori strategy was the preparedness to abandon *pa*. A European-style reluctance to lose their guns might have proved fatal, and on the few occasions that they used cannon, the Maori derived little benefit and readily abandoned them.

The method to which the Maori actually turned was essentially innovative: It differed from both their traditional system and the British system. It was applied in a variety of ways according to the needs of a particular campaign, and it was progressively improved, but it was based on the same principles throughout the wars.

The Maori solution to British numerical superiority was to strike "attack" and "open battle" off their list of tactical options. Instead, they developed a new kind of fortification: the modern pa. To achieve their objectives, the British had to attack these positions. Originally, pa included a considerable amount of timber palisading, and it was often this that caught the observer's eye. But in fact it was the earthworks that were always the most important, and some pa in Taranaki and Waikato included no timber at all. The crucial parts of the earthworks were those below ground level; tactically, modern pa were trench systems. As such, they were not an uncommon response to a situation in which high enemy firepower rendered the open battlefield almost untenable. Unlike traditional pa, modern pa did not contain noncombatants, seed crops, tools, equipment, or reserve supplies. They had no economic function and could readily be abandoned as required. Easily constructed, cheap, effective, and expendable, modern pa were the basic building block of the various Maori strategies.

The rifle trenches of *pa* protected the garrison from small-arms fire, but two tactical problems remained: protection from heavy artillery bombardment and the actual repulse of the assault. Armed mainly with muskets, the Maori had no reliable long-range weapons to keep enemy artillery at a respectful distance, and their *pa* were often so small that the British were able to lay down bombardments that were enormous in relation to the target. Using breech-loading guns throwing shells of up to 110 pounds each, the British fired roughly twenty times the weight of shell per square yard at Gate Pa (Tauranga Campaign), on April 29, 1864, as they did into the Somme battlefield during the initial bombardment of June 24–July 1, 1916 (Belich 1989a: 182–183; Keegan 1976:235–236). Even if generous allowance is made for the increased effectiveness of explosives and for the fact that some

shots fired at the Gate Pa missed their target, it is clear that the Maori underwent a heavier bombardment in one day than the Germans did in seven.

One method of counteracting the threat of heavy bombardment was to provide a false target for the enemy. At Puketakauere (Taranaki War 1860), the Maori placed their main firing trenches well in front of virtually unmanned stockades, and the British shells passed harmlessly overhead (Belich 1989a:91–98). But a more important protection from heavy bombardment was the antiartillery bunker, first used by Maori in 1845. The garrison would sit out the cannonade in their bunkers and then move, through communication trenches or passages, to their firing positions or rifle trenches. This is strikingly similar to the pattern on the Western Front in 1914–1918, where static battle lines made possible concentrations of artillery so large that trenches alone were inadequate.

The second major tactical problem with the defense of modern *pa* was the repulse of the assault. The ferocity, élan, and self-confidence of British troops made them extremely formidable in the attack—the conviction that they could not be beaten by inferior numbers of native warriors added an element that almost amounted to fanaticism. In some attacks on Maori *pa*, 40 percent of the assault party had to be shot down before the rest retreated. Added to this, modern *pa* often had to be relatively modest fortifications: low enough to avoid undue attention from artillery and small enough to be built quickly. The notion of British assault parties being hurled against massive ramparts or stockades built on precipitous crags is entirely inappropriate. Orakau (Waikato War 1864), which repelled five assaults, stood on a low rise and was only 4 feet high.

An even more important aspect of the problem of repelling assaults related to rapid small-arms fire, or rather, to the lack of it. The attackers' possession of rapid-fire small arms did not make a great deal of difference in assaulting trench-and-bunker systems. Much lighter defenses than were necessary to stop a shell could also stop a bullet. This remained true whether the bullet was fired by a musket, a breech-loader, a repeater, or a machine gun. In the later stages of the wars, British possession of rapid-fire weapons made little difference to attacks on *pa*. The point is not that the British attackers eventually got rapid-fire weapons, but that the Maori defenders rarely had them. They lacked what is usually regarded as an essential ingredient of trench warfare: the capacity to produce rapid long-range

fire. They had to seek ways of repelling determined assaults without the benefit of obstructive defenses or modern weapons.

Contrary to legend, the Maori were usually reasonable marksmen, insofar as good shooting was possible with a musket. This, together with good firing discipline, was important in the repulse of assaults, but the decisive factors concerned the construction of pa and the preparation of the surrounding battlefield. Carefully sited firing positions and salients for enfilading fire were regular features of pa. So too were light defenses like the pekerangi, a light fence that impeded an attacker and allowed time to shoot him. These devices were common in pa of the intertribal "Musket Wars" of the 1820s, but the heavy dependence on features that might surprise an attacker was a new development.

In some cases, the very survival of the garrison after a heavy bombardment had an important shock effect. The lack of damage to a garrison and its physical defenses was an unpleasant surprise for the British. Hidden and deceptively weak-looking rifle trenches might also prove decisive. False targets might distract assault parties as well as artillery. At Puketakauere, and at Titokowaru's pa in 1868, the whole central position was a false target that fixed British attention and enabled the Maori to pick them off from rifle pits on the flanks. At Gate Pa, the interior of the pa was in fact a trap—a mazelike confusion of trenches dominated by hidden firing positions. The British were allowed in and shot down. In terms of protecting the garrison, modern pa were trench and bunker systems; in terms of repelling assault, they were carefully prepared killing grounds. These traps and deceptions, together with the basic features of pa construction, were functionally analogous to the defender's rapid-fire small arms of later trench warfare. The Gate Pa would have done very well indeed as a tiny section of the Ypres Salient. Modern pa had wooden pekerangi instead of barbed wire and flax baskets of earth instead of sandbags, but the trenches and bunkers were essentially the same. In the long-occupied bunkers of the Taranaki War in 1861, the comparison extended to graffiti and the comforts of home.

The modern pa system did have its limitations. It was mainly defensive. Only Titokowaru was able to use it consistently to seize and hold the strategic initiative, and no leader was able to mount a really substantial tactical offensive and so annihilate a British army. The modern pa enabled the Maori to repel British assault parties, but these usually had ample reserves to fall back on, while the Maori

never had the numbers for counterattack and pursuit. This explains why casualties on both sides were disproportionately low for the intensity of the conflict. It is counterattack and all-out pursuit, the follow-up of victory, that causes really heavy casualties and destroys armies. In the New Zealand Wars, it rarely occurred. The British had the numbers but not the opportunities. The Maori had the opportunities but not the numbers. Finally, while sustained by a tribal social economy, the modern *pa* system's capacity to thwart superior forces was not infinite. Using it, the Maori could block continuous offensives by twice their own numbers or sporadic offensives by several times their strength. But they could not block the continuous offensive of an army several times as great as their own, and so they narrowly lost the Waikato War.

In military terms, the remarkable thing about the New Zealand Wars was not the eventual Maori defeat, but the degree of their success along the way. The key to this was the modern pa system; an innovative military method designed as an antidote to the British system, a form of counter-European warfare. While British possession of steamships for transport was quite important, the modern pa system meant that the British did not win the New Zealand Wars through superior technology, superior methods, or indeed through any kind of qualitative superiority at all. In the final analysis, they won for the same reason that the Goths beat the Romans: overwhelming numbers.

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Though the Maori lost in the end, the level and nature of their successes along the way contravened some fundamental tenets of European racial and imperial mythology. The essence of their military achievement was therefore laundered out of contemporary British interpretations and, to some extent, out of history. The process was quite subtle. It was systematic but not deliberate or conspiratorial, and it did not preclude recognition—sometimes generous recognition—of such things as Maori courage and chivalry. It was never entirely effective; blatant facts persisted in poking out. But it worked well enough to consistently misrepresent the New Zealand Wars. Whatever their historical success, historiographically the British won the wars hands down.

The driving force behind this myth was an enormously powerful British expectation of victory. Sometimes it proved so strong that it simply overshot the evidence—given one element of an equation, com-

mentators would deduce the second from the principle that the British always won battles against savages. This tendency often acted in concert with a reluctance to credit the Maori with strategic finesse and the ability to coordinate the movements of two or more groups and with the propensity to exaggerate Maori numbers and casualties. The combined effect was the frequent creation of fictional victories and the still more frequent exaggeration of real ones. Historical molehills became historiographical mountains. The expectation of victory also meant that when defeats were recognized, they created a massive shock, an acid test for the myth of conquest. British responses to defeat basically consisted in an effort to absorb this shock; through some kind of palliative, which counterbalanced the disaster; through a satisfying explanation that softened the blow by providing acceptable reasons for it; or through a suppressive reflex whereby the defeat was played down, ignored, or forgotten.

One kind of palliative involved taking that aspect of a lost battle in which the British had been least unsuccessful and treating it as an autonomous operation. This ameliorated or even nullified the disastrous aspects. Another was the exaggeration of Maori casualties. The thin red line may have been worsted, but not before it had piled the ground high with Maori corpses. High Maori casualties might be deduced from "bloodstained trenches" observed after a battle or from the number "seen to fall." British accounts were liberally peppered with both phrases. The former made a corpse from a cut finger, while the latter ignored Maori combat practice: When you were fired at, or about to be fired at, you instantly dropped to the ground. The British knew of this practice—some colonial units adopted it—but its implications for estimates of Maori losses were rarely acknowledged.

Hard evidence of Maori casualties was often manipulated. When Maori estimates of their own casualties were received, the British dismissed or discounted them or assumed that they referred only to chiefs. When Maori bodies were counted after a battle, it was assumed that many more had been carried off. This assumption was sometimes true, but more often it was both gratuitous and false. On one occasion, it was too much even for the colonial press: "It is generally supposed that the Hau Haus have been exterminated to the extent of something under 10,000, but with the usual tact and consideration that distinguishes these playful creatures, they have done their own undertaking and removed the entire lot" (*Punch*, or the Wellington Charivari: August 17, 1868). British exaggeration of Maori casualties

was important in the manipulation of victory, but it had its greatest impact as a palliative for defeat. The more damaging or embarrassing the defeat, the greater the tendency to inflate Maori losses. On some occasions high estimates of Maori casualties lacked even a frail basis in fact and were created purely by the need for them. "Their wounded are not more than 8," wrote one British commentator, "our wounded come to near 100. From this it will be seen that a large number of them must have been lost in the lagoon" (Maunsell 1850–1877:November 30, 1863).

Palliatives were important, but the main way of ameliorating the shock of defeat was to offer acceptable explanations for it. The first and most simple acceptable explanation was overwhelming Maori numbers. There was a tendency to exaggerate Maori numbers at all times, but immediately after British defeats it suddenly became acute. As with the exaggeration of Maori casualties, slender favorable evidence was accepted, strong contrary evidence was rejected and, on occasion, no evidence at all was required. The British were outnumbered because they were beaten, and they were beaten because they were outnumbered. The exaggeration of enemy strength is very common in war, and emphasis on it may seem to belabor the obvious. But the tendency was pervasive, influential, and persistent. The Maori achieved what they did with a quarter as many fighting men as most contemporary British believed—and half as many as most historians believe.

Another acceptable explanation was to credit Maori with "natural advantages" that were formidable but not admirable and that often acted in concert with an environment allegedly more hostile to Europeans than to indigenes. The "capacity to burrow like rabbits through the high fern" and survive gunshot wounds through the head are two of many possible examples (Carey 1863:118; Belich 1989b:34). It was often alleged that the problem was not beating the Maori but finding them. Sometimes this was true, and rough terrain was common, but most often Maori forces took up relatively accessible positions and waited to be attacked in them. Maori were skilled at bushcraft, but this scarcely compensated for the huge disadvantage of fighting full-time soldiers with part-time ones. Colonial conflicts are still often described as "wars against nature," but rain falls on black and white alike.

The third acceptable explanation of defeat was Maori imitation of Europeans. After perusing Maori Waikato War entrenchments, an

officer suggested that perhaps "the most studious of them have been reading our works published on fortification" (New Zealand Herald: January 15, 1864). European renegades were allegedly the most common conduits of civilized military knowledge. Sometimes they existed, but they were not asked for advice on modern trench warfare, which they could not have given anyway. More often they were invented to acceptably explain defeat. "The strength of the place [Ohaeawai Pa, 1845] has struck me with surprise, and I cannot help feeling convinced that the Natives could not have constructed it without some European assistance" (Despard 1845:1050, July 12).

Scapegoats provided a fourth way of acceptably explaining defeat. Maori allies were ideal scapegoats, but when they were not available British interpreters fell back on their own officers. Very few imperial and colonial commanders in the New Zealand Wars escaped severe criticism, often vitriolic. Failed leaders were seen as exceptions to the rule of British military excellence, rather than used to question the rule itself. One newspaper was "driven to a painful contrast between out commanders who imperil New Zealand, and those who saved our Indian Empire two years ago" (The *New-Zealander:* October 3, 1860). Some British leaders were mediocre; some were very able indeed, but still came to grief against the likes of Titokowaru. Able or not, their reputations were readily sacrificed by their countrymen on the pyre of defeat by blacks, screening it with smoke.

These explanations had two things in common: They were acceptable to the British, and they were inaccurate. What defined acceptability and precluded accuracy was a British stereotype of Maori military abilities. British commentators were quite capable of recognizing Maori courage, chivalry, dexterity at guerilla methods, and intuitive or traditional fort-building skill. But there were other qualities that they were reluctant to acknowledge. For some commentators, these included good marksmanship, discipline, and the capacity for sustained and well-organized physical labor. Collectively, this could result in quite serious distortion: Some Maori victories could not be explained without reference to good shooting, battle discipline, and high work rates. But a still more important aspect of the stereotype was the reluctance to credit the Maori with the higher military talents: the capacity to coordinate, to think strategically, and to innovate tactically and technically.

For some British interpreters, it was less a failure to perceive than a reluctance to recognize. In 1869, Colonel Whitmore, in commenting on a minor ambush set by Titokowaru, noted that individual scouts

had been permitted to pass unmolested. He suspected that the chief had done this intentionally to avoid springing the trap prematurely, but he expressed this conclusion quite tentatively: "If this surmise is too civilized a motive for his [Titokowaru's] movements, it is very difficult to understand why he permitted so many individuals traveling almost alone to pass ... and reserved his attack for the strongest party likely to pass" (1869:12 March). Whitmore was no fool; he had recent hard experience of Titokowaru's abilities, yet he still hesitated to credit him with so simple a trick. The British stereotype of Maori military abilities created the limits within which the interpretation of events had to operate. According to the stereotype, certain Maori abilities did not exist and could not therefore be used to explain British defeats and difficulties. In particular, Maori strategic skill and field-engineering innovation, products of the higher military talents, were the last explanation to occur to a British observer. Since they were also the true explanation, the whole British interpretation was reduced to something not unlike an attempt to explain a football game without reference to the ball.

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Some aspects of the British interpretation of the New Zealand Wars will be familiar to readers of military history. Contemporary accounts of most wars tend to be biased toward the writer's own party. But the natural predilection for reports favoring one's own side is not enough to explain the interpretative phenomenon sketched above. Unacceptable facts and implications were suppressed almost to the point of overkill, and the real explanation of British defeats was avoided with a desperation that might be described as psychotic in an individual. In the search for alternative explanations, the British did not stop short of stretching credibility to its limits or of sacrificing the reputations of their own generals. Why did this strong tendency to mythologize exist, and why did it have these characteristics?

The myth of conquest was the product of a dialectic between the stubborn blatancy of fact and the value placed on preconceptions. Some preconceptions were so widely shared and so highly valued that most British commentators protected them from threatening evidence. Protection took the form of converting the realities into the least unpalatable shape possible. It was a two-way struggle, and preconceptions did not always win; sometimes the evidence was simply too blatant to be suppressed or acceptably explained. But there was always a pressure to bring events into conformity with expectations.

Most of the relevant preconceptions were related to the body of thought known as Victorian ideas of race. An extensive literature exists on this subject, and no substantial examination is possible here, but it should be noted that Victorian racial thought was more complicated and less intentionally malign than is sometimes implied. The purpose here is not to castigate the Victorians for not being like us, but to assess the effects of their cherished preconceptions on a historical interpretation. The Victorians were neither the first nor the last group of people to see their success as evidence of inherent superiority and to look to racial and other hypotheses to rationalize this belief.

One effect of British racial attitudes was the totally unselfconscious use of an ethnocentric system of measurement; a culture-specific frame of reference. European styles of military organization and generalship were wrongly assumed to be the only effective forms. Te Kooti was believed to be the most able Maori leader partly because he adopted some of the accoutrements of European generalship. On horseback, "attired in a red shirt with boots and breeches, a sword suspended from his side," communicating with his subordinates by orderly, Te Kooti seemed to control his forces in a way the British understood (British Parliamentary Papers 1868-1869:386-390), A more traditional Maori command system was not so easily recognizable. Similarly, it was difficult for the British to accept that the King Movement was an effective military organization. Where was the chain of command, the staff, and the commissariat? Equally hard to accept was the way in which sophisticated artifact technology, the European hallmark, was neutralized by superficially less impressive techniques. It was almost impossible for a Victorian to acknowledge that a wonderful scientific achievement such as the Armstrong gun was functionally inferior to an antiartillery bunker, a mere hole in the ground.

This ethnocentric frame of reference formed a passive backdrop to the interpretation of the wars, limiting the British ability to recognize Maori military achievements for what they were. But there were three other groups of ideas that played a more active role, joining the events themselves as the positive determinants of interpretation. The first was the conviction of British military superiority per se; the second was the notion that British victory over such people as the Maori was, by a law of nature, inevitable; and the third was the belief that most non-European peoples, including the Maori, lacked the intellectual qualities known as "the higher mental faculties."

Military achievement was one sphere in which British convictions of superiority were particularly strong. Recent historians stress the

undoubted weaknesses of the British regular army, and it is easy to forget that, on the extant record, this army won four-fifths of its battles before the Second South African War of 1899-1902. Given this record, a belief in the superiority of British arms did not have to be based on anything other than empirical observation, and it both derived from and was reinforced by actual events. But the line of reasoning normally used went further than this. Military excellence was seen not as an acquired attribute of the British regular soldier but as a characteristic innate in all Britons, including settlers. The typical qualities of the British soldier were also those of Carlyle's John Bull: "Sheer obstinate toughness of muscle; but much more, what we call toughness of heart, which will mean persistence hopeful and even desperate, unsubduable patience, composed candid openness, clearness of mind" (Carlyle 1845:215). Not only was military excellence a constant; it was also a defining feature of the Briton. Consequently, though the notion of military superiority predated the nineteenthcentury upsurge of interest in race, it lent itself easily to fusion with ideas of racial superiority.

The second group of ideas concerned the inevitability of British victory over the Maori. This belief was closely associated with the idea of Fatal Impact and, from 1859, with Social Darwinism. It was not derived simply from the fact that the British had more men and more guns, or indeed from the conviction that they were superior soldiers, but from what was widely perceived as a law of nature. A basic axiom of nineteenth-century racial thought was that Europeans in contact with lesser races would inevitably exterminate, absorb, or, at the very least, subordinate them. As with the conviction of military superiority, this belief arose from an amalgam of experience and theory. By 1830, the decline of aboriginal populations in many areas seemed to indicate that "uncivilized man melts 'as snows in the sunshine' before 'superior' capacities" (Bannister 1968:15). In an age without knowledge of bacterial and viral infection and immunity, there was a strong tendency to attribute this not merely to practical factors such as disease and alcohol but also to "some more mysterious agency" (Darwin 1906:418).

These two groups of preconceptions combined to create the powerful expectation of victory—and its inverse, the shocked reaction to defeat—that was the dynamic force behind the British interpretation. But it was the third group of ideas that set the limits within which this force could work. Though they might select the most favorable elements available, interpreters drew their particular stereotype of

Maori abilities from a general stereotype of the savage. A dislike of steady labor and the "excitability" that led to poor marksmanship were aspects of this, as were some "natural advantages." But the most important feature of the stereotype was the absence of the intellectual qualities of scientific curiosity, inventiveness, and high reasoning ability. These were collectively known as the "higher mental faculties," and their warlike manifestation was the higher military talents.

The European monopoly of the higher mental faculties was the inner tabernacle of Victorian racial attitudes. To question it was to question a whole worldview. When events did indeed cast doubt on it, as with evidence of Maori possession of the higher military talents, Victorian commentators avoided, misinterpreted, or suppressed them. Thus the real explanation for British defeats and difficulties in the New Zealand Wars was banished from the realm of the acceptable.

Maori military resistance to Europe may have been unusually effective, and the interpretative response it invoked may therefore have been exceptionally strong. But the racial preconceptions cherished by British interpreters of the New Zealand Wars were widely shared by Europeans and neo-Europeans. We may be looking at a widespread myth of European conquest that refracts the history of many conflicts. though the precise angle of refraction will vary. Scholarly disesteem has meant that the military history of contact and empire has not been revised as energetically as other dimensions, which may mean that a residue of myth survives in today's received versions. Blatant racial denigration is easily eliminated, but battles are notoriously difficult phenomena to reconstruct, and it is tempting to draw on older works for the fundamentals of interpretation. Hints of a New Zealand interpretative syndrome are apparent in quite recent works on many wars of conquest, in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific. The very phrase *colonial small wars* is arguably part of a suppressive reflex. Real conquest existed, of course, and it was important—though not all-important—to empire. But conquest coexisted and interacted with a larger shadow of itself: its myth. The myth may have helped determine history as well as refract it down to us. The European belief in their invincibility gave confidence, almost fanaticism, to their arms. If they failed, they tried, tried, and tried again, like Robert Bruce's spider, convinced that racial destiny meant ultimate victory. The myth of conquest had some capacity to be self-actualizing: to create empire, as well as obscure the process of creation.