Ethnic labelling in the Otago press, 1860–1995

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Background

The application of ethnic labels in the media is an important part of the dialogue of 'othering': the making of a distinction between the dominant 'us' and the 'others' of minorities (Riggins 1997). Macalister (1999, 2000) has shown in two articles in this journal how the use of Māori vocabulary has varied in the *School Journals* over the years, reflecting changing attitudes towards Māori and Māoritanga. The use of labels for ethnic groups in the popular press provide an equally sensitive guide to changing attitudes over the years. One has only to think of labels used in New Zealand's press prior to World War II. Terms like 'nigger' and 'Chinaman' seem not only strange but repulsive in the light of today's standards of labelling, yet they were perfectly normal — if rare in the case of 'nigger'[1] — well into the Twentieth Century.

Often changes in such usage can be quite minor, and yet apparently reflect a significant trend. One such example is afforded by the ethnic label 'Pākehā'. While no New Zealand newspaper is yet able to cope with macrons in normal text usage, up into the 1990s there was considerable variation among New Zealand papers in the capitalisation of the term. Some papers shifted fairly early to a capitalised spelling as befits an ethnic term with the same status as Māori, or had always used the capitalised form. The *Otago Daily Times* steadfastly resisted this trend,[2] until on 15 May 1999 it began without comment to capitalise 'Pākehā'. It is difficult not to see this as a (reluctant?) acceptance of the ethnic content of the term Pākehā.

Little detailed research has been done surveying usage in the popular press over a long time span. One such survey of labelling in the *Otago Witness* was carried out by Lyn Tuohey (1990) as part of a fourth-year sociolinguistics and New Zealand society course at Otago. However, this provided detailed coverage only of the period from the 1850s through to 1927, when the *Witness* ceased publication (Table 1). Later material from the *Otago Daily Times* (*ODT*), Otago's principal newspaper, was only very scantily reviewed (Bayard 1995: 153-154).

Method of the present study

This gap was remedied by Carolyn Young's study carried out for the same fourth-year course in 2000, which not only considered the *Witness*, but provided thorough coverage of the *ODT* from 1945 to 1995 (Table 2). In addition to ethnic terms for Māori and Pākehā recorded by Tuohey, terms for

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[1] The use of the term was particularly common in accounts of the New Zealand Wars (e.g., Belich 1996: 325).

[2] Bayard frequently contributed to the *ODT*'s Letters to the Editor pages during this period (see Bayard 1998), and his capitalised spelling of Pakeha was always changed to a lower-case spelling when published.

Chinese and Pacific Islanders, and references to Britain as 'Home' were also tabulated. At least 32 pages of the *Witness*[3] and 118 pages of the *ODT* were examined for each of the 11 time periods covered. Overall 530 pages of the *Otago Witness* and 838 pages of the *Otago Daily Times* were surveyed, and a total of 1831 ethnic terms recorded (907 in the *Witness* and 924 in the *ODT*).

Table 1. Māori and Pākehā labels used in Otago Witness, *1851-1927.*

(After Tuohey 1990, Bayard 1995: 153)

	1851-3	1864-5	1880-2	1894	1900	1907	1917	1927
(Pakeha) NZer			3		276	5	36	4
colonist	10	16		1				
settler	2	5	4	7		3		
European	4	71	23	68	1	11	4	4
Maorilander				3	36	1		
Pakeha	1	13	16	3		6		
white	1	1	2			3		
Kiwi			1	1				
TOT PAK REFS	18	106	49	83	313	29	40	8
nigger/brave		1		1		1		
Native	24	122	93	43	1	65	11	6
Maori	12	47	62	27	6	83	16	13
(Maori) NZer	7	3	3	4				
TOT MAO REFS	43	173	158	75	7	149	27	19
TOTAL REFS	61	279	207	158	320	178	67	27

Trends in Pākehā labelling 1860–1995

Belich (2001) has recently made a rather controversial division of Pākehā history in New Zealand into three periods: a *progressive colonisation* period (18401880), which saw rapid population and economic expansion; a *recolonisation* period (18801973), during which dreams of New Zealand becoming a 'Greater Britain' were abandoned in favour of becoming Britain's loyal market garden, 'more British than the British'; and a *decolonisation* period beginning in 1973 which saw New Zealand begin to assume a true independence from Britain as a South Pacific nation. While it is unrealistic to expect any really close fit between Belich's three periods (which some might dismiss as impressionistic, although they seem quite convincing to us), we think it is possible to discern some correlation between labelling trends and the focus of Pākehā orientation toward New Zealand.

[3] The totals are lower for the *Witness*, as it appeared only weekly and thus provided a considerably smaller amount of text overall than the daily *ODT* did.

Table 2. Ethnic labels in the Otago Witness *and the* Otago Daily Times, *1860s to 1990s (Young 2000).*

	Otago Witness					*Otago Daily Times*					
	1860	1880	1900	1915	1930	1945	1955	1965	1975	1985	1995
No. of pages surveyed	32	64	136	146	152	118	124	126	118	172	180
Anglo-New Zealander		1									
Pakeha-Maori		2									
white	4	1	2		14	1		1	1	3	1
European	12	5	8	2	7	3		3		2	2
P/pakeha	1	11		2	4	4	5	3	3	4	7
colonist	4	3	9		1						
settler	33	36	26	9	19						
New Zealander (P)		2	18	89	23	76	37	22	34	39	71
Kiwi						17	4	4	6	17	26
Maorilander						2					
non-Maori					1						2
total Pakeha refs	54	61	63	102	69	103	46	33	44	65	109
black			1								
brown	1				2						
coloured	1										
half-caste		1			1	1					
non-Pakeha									1		
Maori	49	30	51	36	63	111	34	57	44	79	137
New Zealander (M)	1										
N/native	111	28	86	5	13	8					
savage	2				3						
treacherous race	1										
total Maori refs	166	59	138	41	82	120	34	57	45	79	137
Asian									2		26
Chinaman	2	14	3	2	2						
Chinese	1	14	21	3	4	1			5	2	3
Celestial	1	1									
Mongolian	1	1									
Oriental			1								
'Heathen Chinee'		1									
Islander									3		
Pacific Islander									1		
Polynesian									2	6	1
Total other refs	5	31	25	5	6	1	0	0	13	8	30
TOTAL REFS	225	151	226	148	157	224	80	90	102	152	276
Britain as 'Home'	6	15	29	26	18		1	1			

A) *Progressive Colonisation*. This period saw the most intense contact and often conflict between the Māori tangata whenua and the arriving Pākehā settlers, typified in the New Zealand Wars of the 1860s. It is not surprising that some of the stronger terms for Māori like 'savage', 'nigger', 'treacherous race' are limited to this initial period, reflecting what Belich refers to as the 'red Māori' and 'black Māori' stereotypes of Māori as vicious savages (1996: 21, 75).

'Native' occurs almost as often as 'Māori', but tapers off after 1907. 'New Zealander' in its original sense of 'Māori' is also largely limited to this period, although the term continues to be used occasionally in this sense into the 1890s (Table 1).

B) *Recolonisation*. 'Colonist' is the dominant term in the Witness over the period 1851–1865, but 'settler' also occurs, and grows gradually more frequent in the post-1880 *recolonisation* period. 'Settler' is dominant in Young's data from 1860 on, while 'Colonist' dies out after 1900. As one of the themes of New Zealand as a 'Better Britain', Belich identifies a pride in the 'purity' of its 'racial stock' as greater than the mother country (2001: 122-124). Concern with this purity is clearly expressed in the anti-Asian sentiments which came to prevail in New Zealand society during the period 1880–1920, typified by the infamous poll tax and 'King Dick' Seddon's efforts to hold back the 'yellow agony' (Fig. 1). Reflecting this, terms like 'Chinese' and 'Chinaman' are common in the *Witness*, along with rarer oddities like 'Celestial' and 'Heathen Chinee'. These linger on to World War II, but then vanish until the onset of the decolonisation period and the resumption of large-scale Asian immigration in the 1970s, when terms like 'Chinese' and 'Asian' appear again.

The recolonisation period also saw the permanent and emphatic shift of reference for 'New Zealander' from Māori to Pākehā; this was in line with the prevailing 'grey Māori' stereotype of Māori as a dying race (Belich 1996: 21). This left the term 'New Zealander' free for appropriation by the Pākehā as the 'normal', 'usual' inhabitants of the country. This referent is of course alive and well today, and the term continues to function as one of the chief 'us' vs. 'them' markers in use: 'us New Zealanders' vs. 'those Māori/Chinese/Polynesians' etc. — i.e., as one of the chief Pākehā terms for 'Pākehā' (Bayard 1995: 152-155; Bayard 2001). Tuohey's data shows a massive 276 occurrences of the term in 1900, reflecting the Anglo-Boer War, while Young's data shows a clear dominance of the term from 1900 onward, with a peak in 1915 during World War I. It is tempting to see the first flush of 'New Zealander' in 1900 as representing the rise of Pākehā nationalistic feeling for the new country (cf. Bayard 1995: 153-4; Sinclair 1986:125-42). However, Belich believes that what is represented here is simply the rise in 'Better Britainism' (2001: 80) rather than a rise in New Zealand nationalism per se. If so, it seems the 'Better Britons' felt a strong need to distinguish themselves as New Zealand 'Better Britons' rather than ones from 'Home'.[4] This latter term predictably saw its peak use during the 18801930 period in the pages of the *Witness*, with only two occurrences in the *ODT* after World War II, and none after the onset of decolonisation in the 1970s (Table 2).

C) *Decolonisation*. With Britain's final cutting of the apron strings and linking to the European Community in 1973, New Zealand was willy-nilly forced to be a nation on its own, and this is reflected in the rise of terms for ethnic groups now coming to have importance in the new Pacific nation, namely Asians and Pacific Islanders. 'Chinese' reappears, and 'Asian' appears only from 1975 on; 'Asian' reaches a marked peak of 26 in 1995, reflecting increased immigration. The term 'Maori' also peaks in 1995 with 137

[4] The brief rise and fall of 'Maorilander' shown in Tuohey's data in the 1890s–1900s might have served a similar purpose.

occurrences, reflecting the importance of Treaty claims and the settlement process, as well as what is hopefully something more than a politically correct interest in this country's tangata whenua. This is also suggested by a marked increase in borrowing of Māori terms into NZE, many of which relate to Māoritanga and tikanga Māori (Macalister 1999: 47; Bayard 2000: 12).

'KING DICK: The wall's got to go up a bit higher, If a £100 poll-tax won't keep the yellow agony out, then we'll have to slap on another hundred.' This 1905 cartoon indicates the intensity of European feeling against Chinese immigration at that time. [*Free Lance*. 7 January 1905; Hocken Library]

Figure 1. A common view of Chinese immigration during the 'recolonisation' period (from Ng 1999: 189).

Conclusion

This is only a brief summary of a search through two Otago newspapers, seen in the light of just one interpretative framework of New Zealand history. We are certain that further research based on newspapers in the North Island and Christchurch would give a fuller picture of changing trends in ethnic issues in New Zealand society. But even this brief survey has shown some interesting reflections of New Zealand society as it changed through time.

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