Zealand Gothic Fiction

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Like any genre or mode, the Gothic is malleable, changing according to time and place. This is particularly apparent when what is considered Gothic in one era is compared with that of another. The giant helmet that falls from the sky in Horace Walpole’s Castle of Otranto (1764) is a very different threat to the ravenous vampires that stalk the novels of Anne Rice, just as Ann Bronte’s置于 may not inspire the fear for a contemporary reader of Stephen King. The mutability of the Gothic is also apparent across various versions of national Gothic that have emerged, with the specificities of place lending Gothic narratives from countries such as Ireland, Scotland and Australia a distinctive flavour. In New Zealand, the Gothic is most commonly associated with Pakeha artists exploring extreme psychological states, isolation and violence. Instead of the haunted castles, ruined abbeys and supernatural occurrences of classics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as those produced by writers as diverse as Charles Brockden Brown, Matthew Lewis, Edgar Allen Poe, Radcliffe, Bram Stoker and Walpole, New Zealand Gothic fiction tends to focus on psychological horror, taking its cue, according to Jenny Lawn, from Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), which ushered in a tendency in the Gothic novel to explore the idea of a divided consciousness. Lawn observes that in New Zealand “Our monsters tend to be interior: they are experiences of intense psychological states, and are involved with sexual undertones within isolated nuclear families” (“Xvi Gothic”). Kirsty Ginns’ novella Rain (1994), which focuses on a dysfunctional family holidaying in an isolated lakeside community, exemplifies the tendency of the Gothic to omit the supernatural in favour of the psychological, with its spectres being sexual predation, parental neglect and the death of an innocent. Brownwyn Bannister’s Haunt (2000) is set primarily in a psychiatric hospital, detailing various forms of psychiatric disorder, as well as the acts that spring from them, such as one protagonist’s concealment for several years of her baby in a shed, while Noel Virtue’s The Redemption of Eladon Bird (1987) is another example, with a young character’s decision to shoot his two younger siblings in the head as they sleep in an attempt to protect them from the religious beliefs of his fundamentalist parents amplifying the intense psychological states that characterise New Zealand Gothic.

Although there is no reason why Gothic literature ought to include the supernatural, its omission in New Zealand Gothic does point to a confusion that Timothy Jones foregrounds in his suggestion that “In the absence of the trappings of established Gothic narratives, Maori characters—castaways, swamps dwellers, swamps spirits” New Zealand is “uncertain how and where it ought to perform its own Gothic” (2003). The anxiety that Jones notes is perhaps less to do with where the New Zealand Gothic should occur, since there is an established tradition of Gothic events occurring in the bush and on the beach, while David Ballantyne’s Sydney Bridge Upside Down (1968) uses a derelict slaughterhouse as a version of a haunted castle and Maurice Gee successfully uses a decrepit farmhouse as a Gothic edifice in The Fire-Raiser (1986), but more to do with available ghosts. New Zealand Gothic literature produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries certainly tends to focus on the psychological rather than the supernatural, but earlier writing that utilises the Gothic mode is far more focused on spooky events and ghostly presences. There is a tradition of supernatural Gothic in New Zealand, but its representations of Maori ghosts complicates the processes through which contemporary writers might build on that tradition.

The stories in D. W. O. Fagan’s collection Tapu and Other Tales of Old New Zealand (1952) illustrate the tendency in colonial New Zealand literature to represent Maori in supernatural terms expressive of anxieties surrounding Maori agency and indigeneity, as well as Western assumptions regarding Maori culture. In much colonial Gothic, Maori ghosts, burial grounds and the notion of tapu express settler anxieties while also working to contain those anxieties by suggesting the superstitious and hence backward nature of indigenous culture. In Fagan’s story ‘Tapu’, which first appeared in the Bulletin in 1912, the narrator stumbles into a Maori burial ground where he is confronted by the terrible sight of “two fleshless skeletons” that grin and appear “ghastly in the shrine” (37). The narrator’s desecration of land deemed tapu fills him with a “sort of nameless terror at nothing, a horror of some unknown impending fate against which it was useless to struggle and from which there was no escape” (39). This expresses a sense of the authenticity of Maori culture, but the narrator’s thought “Was there any truth in heathen devilry after all?” is quickly superseded by the relegation of Maori culture as “ancient superstitions” (40). When the narrator is approached by a hōtihōtihou following his breach of tapu, his reaction is outrage: “Here was I — a fairly decent Englishman who lived and died in the nineteenth century — hindered from going about my business, outcast, excommunicated, shunned as a leper, my servant dying, all on account of some fiendish diablerie of heathen fetish.” The affair was preposterous, incredible, ludicrous.” (40). Fagan’s story establishes a clear opposition between Western rationality and the “heathen fetishes” associated with Maori culture, which it uses to inflate the story with the thrills appropriate to Gothic fiction and which it ultimately caste as superstitions and uncivilised.

F. E. Maring’s Old New Zealand (1863) includes an episode of Maori women grieving that is represented in terms that would not be out of place in horror. A group of women are described as screaming, wailing, and quivering their hands about in a most extraordinary manner, and cutting themselves dreadfully with sharp flints and shells. One old woman, in the centre of the group, was one clod of blood from head to feet, and large clots of coagulated blood lay on the ground where she stood. The sight was absolutely horrible, I thought at the time. She was singing or howling a dirge to the memory of her right hand she had a piece of tuahua, or volcanic glass, as sharp as a razor: this she placed deliberately to her left wrist, drawing it slowly upwards to her left shoulder, the spouting blood following as it went; then from the left shoulder downwards, across the breast to the right side, and so the operation went on all the time I was there, the old creature all the time howling in time and measure, and keeping time also with the knife, which at every cut cut it from one hand to the other. As she had described. She scored her forehead and cheeks before I came; her face and body was a mere clot of blood, and a little stream was dropping from every finger — a more hideous object could scarcely be conceived. (Maring 120–21)

The gory quality of this episode positions Maori as barbaric, but Patrick Evans notes that there is an incident in Old New Zealand that grants authenticity to indigenous culture. After being discovered handling human remains, the narrator of Maring’s text is made tapu and rendered untouchable. Although Maring represents the narrator’s adherence to his abjection to the monstrous other, his interaction with a local population, when a hōtihōtihou appears to speak with Spanish moss and possessed by terrible spirits” New Zealand is “uncertain how and where it ought to perform its own Gothic” (2003). The anxiety that Jones notes is perhaps less to do with where the New Zealand Gothic should occur, since there is an established tradition of Gothic events occurring in the bush and on the beach, while David Ballantyne’s Sydney Bridge Upside Down (1968) uses a derelict slaughterhouse as a version of a haunted castle and Maurice Gee successfully uses a decrepit farmhouse as a Gothic edifice in The Fire-Raiser (1986), but more to do with available ghosts. New Zealand Gothic literature produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries certainly tends to focus on the psychological rather than the supernatural, but earlier writing that utilises the Gothic mode is far more focused on spooky events and ghostly presences. There is a tradition of supernatural Gothic in New Zealand, but its representations of Maori ghosts complicates the processes through which contemporary writers might build on that tradition.

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discussion the story “The Disappearance of Letham Crouch”, which appeared in the *New Zealand Illustrated* Magazine in 1901. The narrative recounts the experiences of an overzealous missionary who is received by Maori as a new tohunga. In order to learn more about Maori religion (so as to successfully replace it with Christianity), Crouch inhabits a hut that is tapu, resulting in madness and fanaticism. He eventually disappears, only to reappear in the guise of a Maori “stripped for dancing” (qtd. in Wevers 206). Crouch is effectively “turned heathen” (qtd. in Wevers 206), a transformation that is clearly threatening for a Christian European, but there is also an element of desirability in such a transformation for a settler seeking an authentic New Zealand identity. Colonial Gothic frequently figures mysterious experiences with indigenous culture as a way for the European settler to essentially become indigenous by experiencing something perceived as authentically New Zealand.

Colonial Gothic frequently includes the supernatural in ways that are complicit in the processes of colonisation that problematizes them as models for contemporary writers. For New Zealanders attempting to produce a Gothic narrative, the多名 immediately available tropes for a haunting past are Maori, but to use those tropes brings texts uncomfortably close to nineteenth-century obsessions with Maori skeletal remains and a Gothised New Zealand landscape, which Edmund G. G. King notes is a way of expressing “the sense of bodily and mental displacement that often accompanied the colonial experience” (36). R. H. Chapman’s *Mitiwahena* (1888) provides an example of tropes particularly Gothic that remain a part of colonial discourse, not easily transferable into a bicultural context. Chapman’s band of explorers discover a cave strewn with bones which they interpret to be the remains of gory cannibalistic feasts:

“Here we might well imagine, the clear waters of the little stream at our feet had sometime run red with the blood of victims of some hideous carnival, and the pale walls of the cavern had grown more pale in sympathy with the shrieks of the doomed era was put to their tortures. Perchance the owners of some of the bones might have scattered in careless profusion on the floor, the had, where – with strong with life and being, struggled long and bravely in many a bloody battle, and, being at last overcome, their bodies were brought here to whet the appetites and appease the awful hunger of their victors. (qtd. in King)

The assumptions regarding the primitive nature of indigenous culture expressed by reference to the “horrid carnival” of cannibalism complicates the processes through which contemporary writers could meaningfully draw on a tradition of New Zealand Gothic utilising the supernatural.

One answer to this dilemma is to use supernatural elements not specifically associated with New Zealand. In Stephen Caín’s anthology *Anthropodan Tales: Stories from the Dark Side* (1996) there are several instances of this, such as in the story “Never Go Tramping Alone” by Marriot Watson-Moorock, which features a creature called a Grassvatt. This grass frondation of this anthology demonstrates, there are two problems arising from this unprecedented monster: firstly, the story does not seem to be a “New Zealand Gothic”, which a review in *The Evening Post* highlights by observing that “there is a distinct ‘Kiwi’ feel to only a few of the stories” (2); secondly, the Grassvatt’s appearance in the New Zealand landscape is unconvincing. Jones argues that “When we encounter the wendigo, a not dissimilar spirit to the Grassvatt, in Ann Tracy’s Winter Hunger or Stephen King’s Pet Sematary, we have a vague sense that such beings ‘exist’ and belong in the American or Canadian landscapes in which they are located. A Grassvatt, however, has no such precedent, no such sense of belonging, and thus loses its authority” (251). Something of this problem is registered in Elizabeth Knox’s vampire novel *Daylight* (2003), which avoids the problem of making a vampire “fit” with a New Zealand landscape devoid of ancient architecture by setting all the action in Europe.

One of the more successful stories in Caín’s collection demonstrates a way of engaging with a specifically New Zealand tradition of supernatural Gothic, while also illustrating some of the potential pitfalls in utilising colonial Gothic tropes of menacing bush, Maori burial caves and skeletal remains. Oliver Nicks’s “The House” focuses on a writer who takes up and, being at last overcome, their bodies were brought here to whet the appetites and appease the awful hunger of their victors.

There was more in this darkness, something from which I felt a greater need to be insulated than the mild horror of mingling with a few wetas, spiders, bats, and other assorted creepy-crawlies. Something was subtly wrong here – it was not just the oddness of the dimensions and angles. Everything seemed slightly off, not to add up somehow. I could not quite put my finger on whatever it was. (10)

When the narrator escapes the claustrophobic house for a walk in the bush, the natural environment is rendered in spectral terms. The narrator is engulfed by the “bare bones of long-dead forest giants” (11) and “crowding tree-corpses”, but the path he follows in order to escape the “Tree-ghosts” is no more comforting since it winds through the “subterranean silence” of the house provokes anxiety in the first-person narrator who admits his thoughts “grew increasingly dark and chaotic” (8). The strangeness of the house is only intensified by the isolation of its surroundings, which are fertile but nevertheless completely uninhabited. Alone and unremedied by the oddness of the house, the narrator listens to the same “inexplicable night screeches and rustlings of the bush” (9) that furnish so much New Zealand Gothic. Yet it is not fear inspired by the menacing bush that troubles the narrator as much as the sense that there was more in this darkness, something from which I felt a greater need to be insulated than the mild horror of mingling with a few wetas, spiders, bats, and other assorted creepy-crawlies. Something was subtly wrong here – it was not just the oddness of the dimensions and angles. Everything seemed slightly off, not to add up somehow. I could not quite put my finger on whatever it was. (10)

I gave myself a stern talking to and advanced on the shadow. It was about my height, angular, bony and black. It stood as it now stands, as it has stood for centuries, on the edge of a swamp deep in the heart of an ancient forest high in this remote range of hills forming a part of the Southern Alps. As I think of it I cannot help but shudder; it fills me even with inexplicable awe. It snaked out of the ground like some malign fern-frond, curling back on itself and curling into a circle at about head height. Extending upwards from the circle were three odd-angled and bent protuberances of unequal length. A strange force flowed from it. It looked alien somehow, but it was man-made. Its power lay, not in its strangeness, but in its unaccountable familiarity; why did I know – have I always known? – how to fear this… thing? (12)

This terrible “thing” represents a return of the repressed associated with the crimes of colonisation. After almost being devoured by the malevolent tree-like object the narrator discovers a track leading to a cave decorated with ancient rock paintings that contains a hideous wooden creature that is, in fact, a burial cave. Realising that he has discovered a burial cave, the narrator is shocked to find more chests that have been broken open and bones scattered over the floor. With the discovery of the desecrated burial cave, the hidden crimes of colonisation are brought to light.

Unlike colonial Gothic that tends to represent Maori culture as threatening, Nicks’s story represents the forces contained in the cave as a catalyst for a beneficial transformative experience:

I do remember the cyclone of malign energy from the abyss gibbering and keening; a flame of terror burning in every cell of my body; a deluge of shrieking unreasoning threatening to wash away the bare shred that was left of my mind. Yet even as each hellish new dimension yawned before me, defying the limits
Although the story replicates colonial writing’s tendency to represent indigenous culture in terms of the irrational and demonic, the authenticity and power of the narrator’s experience is stressed. When he comes to consciousness following an enlightenment that sees him acknowledging that the truth of existence is a limitless space “filled with deep coruscations of beauty and joy” (20) he knows what he must do. Returning to the cottage, the narrator takes several days to search the house and finally finds what he is looking for: a steel box that contains “stolen skulls” (20). The narrator concludes that the “Trophies” (20) buried in the collapsed out-house are the cause for the “Dark, inexplicable moods, nightmares, hallucinations – spirts, ghosts, demons” that “would have plagued anyone who attempted to remain in this strange, cursed region” (20). Once the narrator returns the remains to the burial cave, the inexplicable events cease and the once-strange house becomes an ideal home for a writer seeking peace in which to work.

The colonial Gothic mode in New Zealand utilises the Gothic’s concern with a haunting past in order to associate that past with the primitive and barbaric. By rendering Māori culture in Gothic terms, such as in Maning’s blood-splattered scene of grieving or through the spooky discoveries of bone-strewn caves, colonial writing compares an “uncivilized” indigenous culture with the “civilized” culture of European settlement. For a contemporary writer wishing to produce a New Zealand supernatural horror, the colonial Gothic is a problematic tradition to work from, but Nicks’s story succeeds in utilising tropes associated with colonial writing in order to reverse its ideologies. “The House” represents European settlement in terms of barbarity by representing a brutal desecration of sacred ground, while indigenous culture is represented in positive, if frightening, terms of truth and power. Colonial Gothic’s tendency to associate indigenous culture with violence, barbarism and superstition is certainly replicated in Nicks’s story through the frightening object that attempts to devour the narrator and the macabre burial chests shaped like monsters, but ultimately it is colonial violence that is most overtly condemned, with the power inhabiting the burial cave being represented as ultimately benign, at least towards an intruder who means no harm. More significantly, there is no attempt in the story to explain events that seem outside the understanding of Western rationality. The story accepts as true what the narrator experiences.

Nevertheless, in spite of the explicit engagement with the return of repressed crimes associated with colonisation, Nicks’s engagement with the mode of colonial Gothic means there is a replication of some of its underlying notions relating to settlement and belonging. The narrator of Nicks’s story is a contemporary New Zealander who is placed in the position of rectifying colonial crimes in order to take up residence in a site effectively cleansed of the sins of the past. Nicks’s narrator cannot happily inhabit the colonial cottage until the stolen remains are returned to their rightful place and it seems not to occur to him that a greater theft might underlie the smaller one. Returning the stolen skulls is represented as a reasonable action in “The House”, and it is a way for the narrator to establish what Linda Hardy refers to as “natural occupancy,” but the notion of returning a house and land that might also be termed stolen is never entertained, although the story’s final sentence does imply the need for the continuing placation of the powerful indigenous forces that inhabit the land: “To make sure that things stay together somehow, and reassembled in novel configurations. To each even of imagination, the fragments of my shattered sanity were being drawn - kaleidoscopic truth.” (19)

References


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Gothic, New Zealand Gothic literature, supernaturalism, New Zealand colonial Gothic, contemporary New Zealand Gothic literature

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Gothic fiction on the other hand was a mode of literature that combines both elements of horror and romance. Three common and important tropes in this genre are 'terror' in both the psychological and physical sense, the 'supernatural' including ghosts, curses and haunted houses, and 'architecture' which includes castles, dungeons, secret passages, cathedrals, crypts and graveyards. It was considered a dangerous, magical and foreign religion. The Act of Settlement (1701) stated: ‘it hath been found by experience that it is inconsistent with the safety and welfare of this Protestant Kingdom to be governed by a Papist Prince.’ Walpole blends the new and old style romances in this novel. The ‘old’ romance is what is considered pre-novel fiction – that which is fantastic in nature. Gothic fiction's wiki: Gothic fiction, which is largely known by the subgenre of Gothic horror, is a genre or mode of literature and film that combines fiction and horror, death, and at times romance. Its origin is attributed to English author Horace Walpole, w... Female Gothic and the supernatural explained. See also. Notes. Images & Videos. References. See Also. ×.