

# The Quest for Hawaiki: Life and Work of Stephenson Percy Smith

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Stephenson Percy Smith was born in Beccles, Suffolk, England, in 1840, and died in New Plymouth, New Zealand, in 1922. Following arrival in New Zealand with his family in 1849, Smith's early schooling and a period of farm work preceded recruitment as a survey cadet and a distinguished career in that field, culminating in appointment as surveyor general and secretary for lands and mines. In the course of that career, and in service in the militia and other military projects during the land wars, Smith worked closely with Maori subordinates and, later, elders, developing fluency in the language, undertaking research into culture and tradition, and intensively pursuing the origins of New Zealand Māori in particular and the Polynesians in general. In 1892 he founded the Polynesian Society and the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, both of which still flourish, and both of which he dominated until his death 30 years later, eventually building around himself an extensive international network of scholars of Polynesia and the Pacific.

Smith's early ethnological researches, first appearing in 1890, were extended and supplemented by ethnographic investigations in the course of six months of voyaging in the central and eastern Pacific in 1897 and a four-month period as a colonial administrator in Niue in 1901, but both approaches largely receded in the face of his increasing preoccupation with genealogies and traditions relating to Polynesian migrations and theories of origins in India and elsewhere. The original account and conclusions of his 1897 voyages, the book *Hawaiki*, published in 1898, were revised in the light of these latter interests in 1904, 1910, and 1921, joining three books on New Zealand Maori subjects as his major publications, supplemented by a multiplicity of shorter journal and transactions articles.

As the title and continuing revisions indicate, the most important product of Smith's Pacific voyages was his adoption and adaptation of the eastern-Polynesian conception of Hawaiki, the homeland carried from island to island by successive migrations. Tracing it back through island Southeast Asia and eventually inclining to the view that it lay in India, in his later researches he sought possible points of contact between the Polynesians and the Aryans without ever really reaching a conclusion as to Aryan origins. Within this quest, it is possible to discern in Smith's conceptions and writings a range of different and even contradictory strands remaining from the past and available at least in the world of the last of the non-institutional scholars at the time of the widespread academic institutionalisation of anthropology.

Elements of the binary opposition of black and white, of a truncated stadialism, of Romantic elegiac nostalgia (with its related impulse to salvage initiatives), and even a hint of polygenism appear, but it is the relationship between lingering traces of diffusionism and aspects of the dominant evolutionism of his earlier years of study that lie at the heart of his

conception of the Polynesians. Smith's researches share with evolutionism a concern with origins and a commitment to the comparative method but his all-consuming quest for an authentic origin and commitment to the unchanging purity of the Polynesian 'race' overwhelmed any interest in tracing stages of evolutionary development. Similarly, while there is some sense of diffusionist progress in his account of successive migrations it is in a form curiously vitiated in embracing, for instance, original invention in the acquisition of sailing skills and in lacking many aspects of that orientation, in particular, eventual decline and degeneration.

Smith's project, formulated in the 1890s and largely unchanging to his death, displaced adherence to any particular disciplinary or methodological approach for his own collation of disparate elements from a variety of sources to support his search for a point of origin for the Polynesians beyond and apart from any of the peoples with which they would come into contact on their migrations and which would guarantee their purity and authenticity. The project was given urgency by the extinction he, initially at least, believed inevitable in the face of colonisation, a fate that would spare his Polynesians from that of decline and degeneration and which lent urgency to his work of salvage of their traditional history. Just as he assembled his own network of Polynesianist scholars outside those of a declining evolutionism and the new anthropological orientation, Smith assembled his own amalgam of sometimes contradictory elements from a variety of sources in the service of his relentless quest for a Hawaiki of his own conception.

While Smith's methods and conclusions have been subjected to stringent critique in academic circles, his narratives live on in the genealogies of some Maori tribes and in the beliefs of a number of New Zealanders and people of other nations. Just as Smith's imprint can still be detected in the layout of a variety of provincial towns and cities, so can it be seen in continuing adherence to such of Smith's mythical constructions as the original settlement of New Zealand by a single Great Fleet and the existence of a particularly Pakeha vision of Hawaiki.