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CHAPTER NINETEEN

“BEING CUT OFF FROM ALL ONE’S KIND”: SAMUEL BUTLER, NEW ZEALAND, AND COLONIAL IDENTITY

JODIE MATTHEWS

In the autobiographical *A First Year in a Canterbury Settlement* (1863) and in his utopian/dystopian novel, *Erewhon* (1872), both Samuel Butler and the undesignated narrator depart the British metropole and embark on risky sea voyages in order to make a name for themselves on a group of islands almost as far away as it is possible to get.¹ The world of *Erewhon* is usually read as a satire on British Victorian society, but this chapter proposes that it can also be seen as replaying Butler’s arrival in New Zealand and the destabilising effects of colonialism on the colonising subject. A work of fiction and an ostensibly autobiographical text are thus read together to reveal, first, the way that anticipated readership frames that which can be spoken about colonial voyages; second, the traumatic effects of long sea passages; and, third, the ways in which the effects of distance between colony and metropole affect communication and subjectivity.

In “Envois,” a text apparently consisting of the remainders of decayed correspondence, Jacques Derrida’s epistler remarks that “the name is made to do without the life of the bearer, and is therefore always somewhat the name of someone dead.”² Butler and *Erewhon*’s adventurer want to go back to Britain having made themselves; the prospect of “return” is always figured as both physical and financial. However, while they are away on a distant island, their names must be made to do without the life of the person they designate, troubling the project of shoring up one’s identity at home through imperial entrepreneurship abroad. The structure of the name elaborated by Derrida (in “Envois” and throughout his oeuvre) and the identity it confers is true for all names, but is here thrown into sharp relief by the perilous circumstances of travel between islands of the British

Empire. The problem of identity is particularly stark when the key fictional character under discussion is unnamed—should we think of him, in Butlerian fashion, as Namryeve, Enoon or Reltub?—and when the project of colonialism so explicitly involves remaking nations, relations and individuals. Hence, this chapter examines the specific threats to identity engendered by exchanging one set of small islands in the north Atlantic for another in the south Pacific in the nineteenth century, manifested in the ways that letters and other precarious texts represent (by describing and standing in for) the individual. It does not seek to prioritize the psychical impact of the colonial encounter on the British settler, but, rather, examines specific repetitions and distortions of voyage, arrival and communication in a tradition that mines the archives of Empire to destabilize retrospectively the claims to power and authority of colonial discourse.³

Samuel Butler was born in 1835 in Nottinghamshire, the eldest son of the canon of Lincoln and grandson of Dr. Samuel Butler, former headmaster of Shrewsbury school, which the young Samuel went on to attend. Butler was used to travel from a young age, spending his eighth winter in Rome with his family and continuing to tour overseas. He resumed his education at Cambridge, taking a First in Classics, but refused to take orders in the church, despite his family's expectations, as he began to doubt both the institution and his faith. He wanted to become an artist, but this profession was anathema to his father. Several alternatives were considered: farming in England, tutoring, homeopathy, medicine, publishing, the army, law, and diplomacy. In his *Memoir* of Butler, Henry Festing Jones explains that emigration to New Zealand was decided on "finally" (but does not elaborate on how this choice was eventually made over the Cape or Columbia, the other locations suggested).⁴ Despite coming from a family that might almost be a definition of the English establishment, Butler had to leave Britain to have any hope of fitting in and satisfying their expectations of him. From the other side of the world, the communication of his rebirth as a successful colonist (and thus Englishman) was contingent on the texts he wrote and their fraught traversal of the oceans from one island to another. He spent three years in New Zealand from 1859 as a runholder in the headwaters of the Rangitata, and returned to England with a profit, taking up his career in art. His literary reputation, however, far eclipsed his work as an artist through the popularity of *Erewhon*, its sequel, *Erewhon Revisited* (1901), and the posthumously published *The Way of All Flesh* (1903).

And what of the land to which Butler (and his fictional hero) would voyage? Polynesian navigators reached Aotearoa/New Zealand at least

seven (and possibly as many as sixteen) centuries before Butler. Europeans were not much active in the archipelago’s narrative until an expedition was instructed in 1758 to go to make observations of Tahiti (recently “discovered” by Samuel Wallis), then to turn towards land described by Dutchman Abel Tasman in 1642 to establish how far it extended to the east—Tasman’s attempt to find wealth and power on a southern continent had been earlier repelled by the tribe Ngati Tumata.⁵ On October 6, 1769, a cabin boy on Captain James Cook’s *Endeavour* famously sighted land. Cook made three voyages to New Zealand, though James Belich has identified a tendency to Anglicise New Zealand historiography and glorify Cook’s role in European encounters with what would become New Zealand at the expense of French, Spanish and, in the nineteenth century, Russian, American and Austrian scientific expeditions.⁶ Sydney merchants proposed a New Zealand Company as early as 1814, and pressure on the British government to colonise began in the 1820s. Until 1839 there were about 2,000 non-Maori immigrants in New Zealand—though a larger figure, incorporating escaped convicts from Australia who were probably absent from statistics, may be more accurate; by 1852 there were more than ten times that number: about 28,000.⁷ In 1840, the Treaty of Waitangi was signed giving the British, from their own perspective, full sovereignty over New Zealand. The treaty was the first official document in which the term “Maori” was used to designate the people who lived in New Zealand before white settlers arrived; previously, they were distinguished by tribal whakapapa (genealogies). Analogously, but not necessarily equally, Scots, Irish, English, Welsh and other European settlers became “pakeha,” though members of those nationalities continued to maintain their difference from other pakeha.⁸ From its documentary institution, “New Zealand” subsumed and altered former understandings of identity and, like all imperial endeavours, began a struggle over rights, land, power and recognition that has been bloody, politically charged, and continues to be a challenge.

In 1848, the Canterbury Association was founded in England by Edward Gibbon Wakefield and John Robert Godley, with the object of planning from afar the settlement where Butler would begin his colonial life. The association’s goal was to replicate a class-based society with the Church of England at its heart, an aspiration emerging from the theories of colonisation Wakefield developed while in Newgate for abducting his fifteen-year-old second wife. Wakefield hoped to create a new nation that answered the problem of “want of room” for all classes in Britain (excluding Ireland), that differed from the spontaneously developed colonies in America and Australia, and where capital and labour were

separated (in part by pricing labouring immigrants out of the land market).⁹ He foresaw increased democracy and reduced servility, with labourers working hard to become capitalists themselves. He conceived fully-planned towns (though had become too ill to participate in the Canterbury Association's detailed planning of Christchurch).¹⁰ These ideas, as with all colonial ambition, were based on acquiring land without recourse to the claims of its current inhabitants, despite Wakefield's assertion that colonization involved the "permanent settlement of . . . emigrants on unoccupied land."¹¹ By the time Samuel Butler arrived in New Zealand, Europeans had been immigrating steadily, but his time there pre-dated the "great migration" from 1871 onwards.

In the era of Butler's migration, the journey to New Zealand might have a duration of 120 days and was, clearly, a dangerous undertaking. Storms in the English Channel or the Bay of Biscay were generally followed by good sailing in the trade winds, but migrants were then likely to suffer from the sun near the equator. Storms became a problem again in the Southern Ocean or Tasman Sea.¹² The danger inherent in these voyages must have been keenly felt by Butler: his passage had initially been booked on the *Burmah*, but alterations to the accommodation meant less space for passengers and caused him to take a berth on the *Roman Emperor* instead, leaving Plymouth in September 1859. As the ship neared Lyttleton, the captain of the *Roman Emperor* asked after the *Burmah*, but it had not been heard of nor was again, probably having encountered ice a few days' sail from New Zealand. She was given up by the underwriters as lost with twenty-three passengers, thirty-two hands, a general cargo, fifteen horses, and nineteen bulls.¹³ Not only this, nearly one hundred years earlier, Butler's great-great-uncle James survived the wreck of the *Vansittart* en route to the East Indies, a tale which no doubt was part of family lore.¹⁴

Butler catalogued his experiences on board ship and when he arrived in New Zealand in letters home to his family. These were collected, edited and published as *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement* by his overbearing father, who "revised . . . and very much transformed" them, to Butler's disgruntlement.¹⁵ In the Rev. Thomas Butler's preface to the collection, he makes an apology for inadequacies of style, blaming "the circumstances of bodily fatigue and actual difficulty" and the youth of its author.¹⁶ The Butler that relays these experiences is constructed as having been compromised by those exertions, and the youthfulness that facilitated adventure is responsible for failings in their representation. How, then, can the colonising subject communicate colonialism? How can colonialism as a discourse and the identity of the individuals that drove it remain stable?

The collection seems accurately to represent their vivacious creator, but at the same time points to him as an untrustworthy narrator, unable to express the insights his enterprise offers. The Rev. Butler also describes how, having sent the manuscript to his son in New Zealand, the revisions were lost with the *Colombo*, then “fished up from the Indian Ocean so nearly washed out as to have been with some difficulty deciphered.”¹⁷ In fact, Butler’s mother suggested holding the reverse of the most badly-damaged pages up to a mirror in order to discern the writing. The Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company received a telegram on November 27, 1862 reporting the loss of its ship.¹⁸ Bringing home the Calcutta, China and Australia mail, the ship was wrecked on Minicoy Island, formerly part of the Maldives, on November 19. The passengers, crew and some of the mail (including Butler’s manuscript) were saved. A London newspaper examined the possible causes for the ship being thirty-two miles further north than it should have been: it suggested strong currents and the impact of a cyclone, an error in calculations (particularly as the packet company officers were unfavourably compared to those of the East India Company in this regard), the slow response of the engineer, and poor steering on the vessel.¹⁹ Butler’s revisions to his father’s edition of his letters were thus diverted to Suez after their soaking, before finally arriving in London. The Samuel Butler found in *Canterbury Settlement* is, then, a product of youthful mistakes, physical exertion, his father’s editing, and an encounter with the briny deep. This figure from New Zealand is, and is not, Samuel Butler. Other scholars have certainly noted the bibliographic history of *Canterbury Settlement*, but as an interesting aside.²⁰ By contrast, I posit it as an important indicator of choppy textual identities.

It should not be suggested, however, that Butler would have been surprised by the erasures of text and, consequently, identity that happen when traversing the seas from island to island; he was quite *au fait* with the tenuousness of the written text. He noted, in quasi-Derridean style, that: “the moment a thing is written, or even can be written, and reasoned about, it has changed its nature by becoming tangible, and hence finite, and hence it will have an end in decay.”²¹ This observation comes from his published notebooks, and he kept copious notes throughout his life. They were written in copying ink and a pressed copy was kept with his friend and later editor, Jones, as a precaution against fire (a form of textual destruction which also preoccupies Derrida). This record could never be complete, however, as Butler constantly rewrote and reordered the notebooks, with an indexing project abandoned once because of its complexity and a new version unfinished at his death.²² Butler’s moves

towards textual immortality, or access to his ideas when he is (terminally) absent, also recognise the problematic of writing generally and of autobiography in particular, because of the dangerous possibilities of recontextualisation, the very thing that inspires us to write in the first place. An example of this set of problems comes when the autobiographer wishes to send texts that might stand in for him or her when he or she is located on a distant island: they can never adequately replace the person, particularly when, rather than burned (as Butler feared for his notebooks), they may be soaked, lost on the long journey or otherwise decayed. Their portability is also what threatens their arrival. Despite (or perhaps because of) their inadequacy, these alternative versions of the self might *displace* the identity of the colonial returnee when he or she arrives to reclaim it, as we see with *Erewhon's* narrator later in the chapter. The impulse to preserve an autobiography, a textual self that can exist outside the life of the writer, is also what puts the integrity of the written subject at risk.

The problem of Butler's colonial identity began even before he disembarked the *Roman Emperor*, and only becomes more complicated when we consider its textuality. He (whoever "he" may be) notes in *Canterbury Settlement*: "it seems as though I had always been on board the ship, and was always going to be, and as if all my past life had not been mine, but had belonged to somebody else, or as though someone had taken mine and left me his by mistake."²³ Not only is the physical text of his representation of life in New Zealand threatened by watery erasure, the lived experience of Butler's voyage out seems to prefigure that dunking. The transitional space of the vessel causes those on board to question which parts of themselves, including their Britishness, they left behind, and how they might be refashioned as colonials in the New World.

Butler's first action on reaching dry land is to proceed to the post office and find out if there are any letters for him. In other words, he expects his identity to be confirmed on this strange island by the arrival of something addressed specifically to him, making use of the extraordinary potential of the system of colonial mail to locate individuals as addressees. New Zealand began receiving regular international mail in the 1850s, when a monthly shipping service to Sydney exchanged mail with outbound and inbound London ships. It was not until 1875, however, that a steamer service to San Francisco delivered the islands' mail satisfactorily to London via the new American transcontinental railroad and trans-Atlantic steamer.²⁴

But there are no letters awaiting Butler; he discovers that they have, in fact, been sent "hundreds of miles away to a name-sake."²⁵ He calls this a "cruel disappointment," but it is even more than that. The letter-writer of

Derrida’s “Envois” stresses that the post implies a notion of identity in the sense articulated above, by interpellating an addressee at an anticipated location, but that there is always the implicit possibility of the letter “going astray and of forgetting”; “a letter can always not arrive at its destination.”²⁶ Butler’s name, on the envelope of a letter or as a signature inside, stands in for him while he is separated from all those who recognise him. On arrival at this distant island, Butler rushes to check that he has not been forgotten and, perhaps, that he has not forgotten himself (as his past life no longer seems his own); no reassurance is forthcoming. Letters have been delivered to Samuel Butler but he does not know who that is, either at Port Lyttleton or that wrong address hundreds of miles away. Rather than make a name for himself in New Zealand, so far it seems that someone else has taken it. In fact, Derrida’s highlighting of the possibility of misdirected post has a particularly pertinent history in New Zealand; the country’s first postmaster, appointed in the Bay of Islands in 1840, was suspended for continual inebriety and one imagines that more than a few letters went astray on his watch.²⁷ Scholars have identified the ways in which colonial locations are full of strangers and thus the possibility of hiding uncomfortable truths,²⁸ but even the administrative systems of Empire that seem to offer stability end up revealing that identities might circulate as freely as goods, capital and letters. That freedom of movement on which empire relies becomes profoundly troubling when slippage occurs between names and their bearers.

Despite my broad analysis of it, Butler’s comment about feeling as if he has always been on board ship refers primarily to the monotony of a long crossing and, in a tone that chimes with other male writers of the period such as Richard Burton,²⁹ he heroically plays down the risks involved in the journey; his time on board passes “very pleasantly,” with reading, learning the concertina, playing bridge and shuffle-board, organising a choir, and, on one occasion, rowing a small boat around the ship while drinking champagne.³⁰ The risks of a physical, rather than linguistic, non-arrival are alluded to, however, in this text and, perhaps more intriguingly, find a traumatic return in the fictional *Erewhon*.

In the (auto)biographical *Canterbury Settlement*, Butler’s journey begins with a forebodingly “gloomy sky,” contributing to a “half-distressing bewilderment.” In his cabin, Butler immediately sets to domesticating the space by unpacking his books, and advises potential emigrants to consider bringing a chest of drawers for their clothes. Later, he steps up to the poop deck and hears “the clanging of the clocks from the various churches of Gravesend.” No doubt the intention is to communicate the atmosphere of port, but as Butler is about to embark on a voyage that will truly test the

connectedness of man with his fellows, and to an island no less, it is difficult for the reader not to hear echoes of John Donne's meditation and wonder if Butler was also himself thinking: "it tolls for thee." Later, he talks of a return journey, should he live to make it; he is aware of the conditionality of looking forward beyond the current voyage. The next morning, with a "last look at the green fields of old England," the *Roman Emperor* weighs anchor. Once on the open sea, Butler does "not waste time and space by describing the horrible sea-sickness of most of the passengers," and does not share in this malady. He quickly adopts a sailor's vocabulary (of the technical rather than profane variety), relaying, for instance, how they "lay hove to under a close-reefed main-topsail." Gales are described in terms of their effect on their course rather than the fear they must have provoked, though Butler does mention one that "would have forbidden even Morpheus himself to sleep." One instance of being blown off-course is casually shrugged off as an opportunity to see the "Peak of Teneriffe." A fire on board—in reality an extreme hazard—is dismissed as "no real danger." The calms just north of the equator are a region of "sombre sky and sombre sea" and a place which "affects the spirits of all, and even the health of some": one female passenger will never cross the equator and is "lowered over the ship's side into the deep." Butler (or his editor) juxtaposes this tragedy with the excitement of capturing a shark, so the threat to health of long sea crossings is not dwelt on for long. Butler meets a serious storm with the words "a ship, if she is a good sea-boat, may laugh at any winds or any waves provided she be prepared." When the captain calls him to look at the stormy sea, Butler comments, "it was certainly very grand . . . but there was not that terrific appearance that I had expected." The greatest inconvenience, it seems, is the angle of one's soup or tea, but the author does spare a thought for the sailors who must shin up the mast.³¹ Butler takes the enormity of this crossing apparently in his stride, but I would argue that it is, in fact, textually repressed and finds its outlet instead in a distorted form in Butler's fiction. Legitimate hardships are given scant attention in a text compiled from letters "written to please his family."³² Following arguments with his father about his future and his capacity to make a success of himself, Butler not only echoes contemporary expectations of masculinity in the face of discomfort or danger by pointing to then downplaying it, he also assures his domestic readers that all is well. The foreboding beginning to the narrative traced in those letters hints at other, submerged feelings about the journey on which he embarks, but they cannot be expressed in this (auto)biographical medium.

The narrator of *Erewhon* does not detail his voyage in late 1868 at all, commencing instead with his arrival at his colonial destination. Looking for prospects over the mountains, he stumbles upon Erewhon, a country whose people look like southern Europeans and dress like Arabs. It is a “civilized” country, with several key differences to the culture the narrator and reader knows: illness is punished, and crime approached as a sickness for which medical treatment should be sought. The narrator catches a cold and is told by Yram that he faces being hauled in front of the magistrate and imprisoned. A merchant with whom he has been sent to stay, meanwhile, is given a great deal of sympathy during his recovery from embezzlement. Poverty is also punishable, and ill luck considered an offence against society. The way that the narrator grapples with the rules of different systems and etiquette is both amusing and illuminating in terms of how social systems continue to work—in many cases reliant on mutual ideological deception. Both Butler’s characters and the narratorial explanations have to work hard to impose a logic on the behaviour of Erewhonians, and the text throws light on the way in which discourse must labour to make certain cultural assumptions seem obvious and natural. It is the narrator’s rarely-discussed journeys, however, that are of most interest here in terms of the threat to identity from travelling overseas between Britain and New Zealand.

The narrative inhabits the same space of tenuous survival as Butler’s book based on his letters. Its conclusion sees the narrator fleeing from Erewhon with his beloved, Arowhena, in a hot air balloon. As they sink, uncontrollably, they jettison all possible ballast, including food and water. The narrator clings to his manuscripts “to the very last,” as they finally sink up to their chests in water having ditched into the sea.³³ The possibility of telling the story seems at risk of either the teller drowning or surviving without proof. As luck would have it, the pair are picked up by a ship, only to find on return to England that the narrator has been declared dead. Chowbok, the narrator’s doubtful native companion to the edges of Erewhon “made up a story about [his] having fallen into a whirlpool of seething waters while coming down the gorge homeward” and word has reached home, presumably by others’ letters.³⁴ His long absence has been the equivalence of death, and his sisters seem inconvenienced by his reappearance proving the contrary. The narrative attributed to his person displaces the identity he wishes to reclaim on return. In addition, in order to find pecuniary benefit from his discoveries the narrator must publish his adventures but ends up in another impasse: if he suppresses detail, his tale may be doubted; if he includes all, those with more means to return to

Erewhon may beat him to it. The desire for financial gain wins out, and the narrative is published.

The narrator's passage from Britain to the colony may go almost completely unremarked (aside from the unhappiness caused by seasickness), but his trek over the mountain range is presented as perilous and formative. I suggest that this is not necessarily because the internal, overland journey is in actuality any more dangerous than the sea-crossing, but because the journey that comes later must, in a literary and psychological sense, stand in for the perils of the sea. One might read the second journey in the narrative as the response of both Butler and his fictional narrator to the ship voyage "rendered legible at another level."³⁵ Leading a healthy yet monotonous life on a sheep station in the colony, the narrator begins to speculate what might lie farther up river and beyond a second range of mountains from the station. If not gold, he thinks he might find workable country if only he can reach it. Eventually, he sets out to conquer the range, persuading a native, Kahabuka (nicknamed Chowbok) to show him the way, despite the latter's fearful misgivings. The narrator's supercilious attitude to the natives of the colony is made clear, and he dismisses these concerns. Unsurprisingly, given the legends his people have of the land over the range, Chowbok deserts the narrator as they enter the valley that will lead to Erewhon. After loudly calling out to him (a "cooey" which marks him as a colonial)³⁶ to no avail, the narrator decides to continue, despite detailing the accidents that might befall the lone adventurer.

The narrator's route causes him to cross and recross the stream several times, then the creek that has worn its way into a chasm, and finally the river itself: this is an accident of geography but also, in a literary sense, a compulsive repetition of his repressed, perilous crossing of the ocean. As the narrator finally reaches what he thinks is the pinnacle of the main range, he looks down to see "an awful river, muddy and horribly angry, roaring over an immense river-bed." He realises that this river is next to the one he has followed up from the station, that his luck led him "up a wrong river in search of a pass." My contention is that the reader has also, to an extent, been led up the wrong river. Butler sends his narrator through a "frightful rush of water," detailing its every terror, having neglected to describe the character's sea voyage or recognise the risks of his own in *Canterbury Settlement*. Is the narrative as temporally orthodox as it first appears, or does this river crossing reveal more about the effects of an earlier experience? The comparison the narrator makes on reaching a chasm in the rocks is with Twll Dhu (Devil's Kitchen) in Snowdonia—his thoughts are directed back across the Atlantic to Britain, a psychological return voyage. Having jumped down a waterfall and nearly drowned, the narrator

knows that to return the same way he came is impossible. Again, the narrator has crossed the water and finds himself "cut off from all one's kind" a situation that means "one begins doubting one's own identity," in a mirror of Butler's arrival in New Zealand. He repeats, "each moment I felt increasing upon me that dreadful doubt as to my own identity—as to the continuity of my past and present existence."³⁷ A similar set of circumstances occurs in the non-fictional *Canterbury Settlement*; in fact, Jones points to it as one of the few events that finds itself directly paralleled in the fictional work.³⁸ He explicitly links the narrator's reaction to the river crossing to the potential for seaborne shipwreck, suggesting that Butler uses the word "Providence" in *Erewhon* in relation to his escape as a dig at his father's preface to the earlier work. In *Canterbury Settlement*, Butler describes how he ended up in the river water, but dismisses it as "nothing." He suggests that people's first experiences of New Zealand's rushing rivers instil fear, which is replaced by callousness as their colonial skin hardens. Drownings are frequent, but this is because of a devil-may-care attitude: "there is no real danger in [the rivers] whatever."³⁹ Once more, as drowning is dismissed as a mundane but manageable threat, Butler's attitude is in part, perhaps, bravado, and in part that of the distant son hoping to convince his family that he has become a knowledgeable colonial. The risk of drowning in *Erewhon* might be read, then, as the return of Butler's anxiety about his voyage to an island colony and who he becomes when he gets there. He is still unable to replay it in the river crossing of his letters because of their intended audience, so it must wait for a fictional retelling. The fear finds another return when Chowbok tells his colleagues back at the station that he witnessed the narrator drowning; during his absence in an unknown place, he may as well have done.

After a few more water borne adventures, the narrator finds himself in the company of the Erewhonians, where the culture is seen as being both the same as home but different (like New Zealand is to Britain), and back to front but not exactly (just as Erewhon is not quite "nowhere" backwards). The world of Erewhon is usually read purely as a satire on Victorian society, but it can also be seen as replaying the colonialist's arrival. The profound ideological (almost) reversals are as disorientating as the rules of a settler society where the usual cultural markers have been left behind in the metropole. The narrator, in noting how everything is "slightly different," compares the feeling with his arrival in the colony where the flora and fauna are "not quite the same as English but still very like them."⁴⁰ In *Canterbury Settlement*, one of Butler's early observations is that "the scenery reminded [him] much of Cambridgeshire," and so the

fiction of *Erewhon*, in constructing a simulacra of metropolitan and colonial homes, replays and distorts the (auto)biography of Butler's collected letters.⁴¹ The strangers in this uncanny simulacra of home "were very dark in colour, but not more so than the South Italians or Spaniards."⁴² Zemka points out that the reader seems to have materialized in a New Zealand colonial advertisement which, appealing to settlers looking for European resemblances, described the land as being "like Italy, like Spain, like England, like Europe, familiar in its lush and tameable beauty."⁴³ Certainly, Butler's *Canterbury Settlement* attempts as much as possible to assimilate this new world into European frames of reference (partly for his domestic readers' benefit) and *Erewhon* echoes this process in a textual repetition of the confusion caused by a place that is both like and unlike Britain, but there is also a third strand to analyses of the ethnicity of the Erewhonians. James Belich describes the persistent stories of Portuguese or Spanish "discoveries" of New Zealand before Tasman. As well as the romance of the lost tribe (and Butler's narrator gets hot with the excitement that these might be one of the lost tribes of Israel), "New Zealanders were a little embarrassed about the shortness of their history and like to lengthen it."⁴⁴ Perhaps this desire for a longer history had already begun to manifest itself in the colony by the 1850s, and the Erewhonians mark the desire for a European colonial prehistory. Certainly, the narrator of *Erewhon*, in likening a woolshed to a cathedral, notes that "it always refreshed me with a semblance of antiquity (precious in a new country)."⁴⁵ It is the psychical prehistory for *Erewhon* that I wish to highlight, however: it may not have been quite the form for a nineteenth-century colonial adventurer ("real" or fictional) to state explicitly how difficult it was to leave behind a known world, risk one's life at sea and then have only the frailty of the written text to stand in for one's life at home, but the difficulties of reaching, understanding, and escaping from *Erewhon* might be read as an expression of these challenges. Its narrator concedes (though lacking a Freudian frame of reference) that we are psychically protected from hardship precisely because we do not recognise "what we are suffering, and what we truly are," and, further, that he "can assure the reader that [he has] had a far worse time of it than [he has] told him": there are multiple layers of repression at work, and the trauma of colonial identity fashioning is just legible throughout the text (not held up to a mirror, but viewed through a refracting lens).⁴⁶ Hence the self-assurance of Butler and his narrator in *Erewhon* as they set out to subdue new worlds cannot be taken for granted.

The man who intends to make something of himself in the colonies must trust to the letter to communicate who and what this self is

becoming. How can one possibly expect to be understood, to have one’s word trusted, if one’s name stands in for a transitional identity, if one’s experience paradoxically becomes a distorting lens through which one tries to show those at home what colonial life is like, and if the writing itself is half washed away by sea water? In short, how can one be signatory to a letter that communicates who one is, now? Butler’s own novel, in its explication of a parallel culture, considers similar questions: in *Erewhon*, the signature as a guarantee of identity is profoundly problematic, as performed in the construction of “birth formulae.” In Erewhonian society, babies are believed to have entered the world from the kingdom of the unborn and, in line with the punishments meted out to the sick and unfortunate, must accept responsibility for any “blemishes and deficiencies which may render him answerable to the laws of his country.” In lieu of a christening, the birth formula is publically presented, and the child’s cries on being tweaked are taken as assent to the written declaration of guilt. Something like a godparent, one of the assembled adults signs the document on the child’s behalf, and this “is held to bind the child as much as though he had signed it himself.”⁴⁷ I do not suggest that Butler was consciously considering his own letter-writing when he conceived of the birth formulae, but the concept shares with his own experience and the one he wrote for *Erewhon*’s narrator the difficulty of writing for oneself. The birth formulae example concentrates on this (im)possibility when we are born into a system of language that constructs us as we take our first breath, and the examples on which I have drawn throughout this chapter focus on the impossibility of a colonial identity wholly knowing, writing and communicating itself. When the remaking of nations and the individuals who constitute them are at stake—a project predicated on transition and leaving (for Butler, many of his fellow colonialists, and theorizers of colonialism such as Wakefield) the problems of the old world behind—fully communicating the success or otherwise of that venture becomes almost impossible. The discourse of colonialism must elide threats to life (such as drowning) and the fear they engender in order to bolster the claims to moral, physical and intellectual superiority of the white British male, but that discourse was largely constructed in texts that performed the risky business itself, by frequently ending up underwater.

Butler left British shores in order to find the means to make a name for himself and this he did in some ways, returning to Britain with a financial profit and ostensibly setting himself up to pursue his interests in art and literature. It is intriguing, however, that in his fictional writing a character whose early experiences were modelled on his own is left without a name

at all, and that *Erewhon* was published anonymously. How fragmented was Butler's identity by his sojourn in New Zealand? Did he lose his claim to the certainty a name is supposed to bestow? While he was away, fashioning both a colony and a colonialist, what did "Samuel Butler" come to mean in Britain? As Derrida explains, for writing to be at all possible, there must be some form of distancing, so that the mark is legible to another.⁴⁸ In the island context, with Butler separated from Britain, that distance was pushed to extremes and all the paradoxes of the post creep into the texts that ought to communicate a unified, confident colonial adventurer in fiction and (auto)biography. The notion that Britishness, or class identities, or even individuals with a stable sense of self, could be exported, reproduced and returned in and from island colonies is seriously undermined when readers consider the specific linguistic, textual, physical and psychical effects of voyages and arrivals, as seen in Butler's *Canterbury Settlement* and *Erewhon*.

Notes

1. In "Erewhon and the End of Utopian Humanism," *ELH* 69, no. 2 (2002), 439–472, 440, Sue Zemka examines the ways in which the novel engages with the myth of idyllic expansion, but also how it pronounces the death of the humanist subject that animates this very myth.
2. Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 39.
3. See, in particular, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).
4. Henry Festing Jones, *Samuel Butler: A Memoir* (London: Macmillan, 1920), 69.
5. See James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders, from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Auckland and London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1996), 119.
6. Belich, *Making Peoples*, 121.
7. See "Origins and Arrivals" on *TeAra.govt.nz: the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*.
8. For the creation of "pakeha" see Lynda Dyson, *Traces of Identity: The Construction of White Ethnicity in New Zealand* (PhD diss., Middlesex University, 2001), 44; and Adriann Smith, "Home Land or Homeland?: Taking Root in the Land of Aotearoa/New Zealand," *Australasian Drama Studies* 55 (2009), 59–74, 60. For the divisions within that category, see, for example, Butler's use of "English" rather than "British" in relation to flora, fauna and character, and descriptions of an "uncomfortable prickly shrub, which they call 'Irishmen'." *First Year in a Canterbury Settlement*, ed. A. C. Brassington and P. B. Maling (Auckland and Hamilton: Blackwood and Janet Paul, 1964), 105; 34. See also a letter from an Irish Catholic farmer to his brother in New Zealand urging him to support the Maori in their quest for self-determination, quoted in Angela

- McCarthy, “A Good Idea of Colonial Life,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 35, no. 1 (2001), 1–21.
9. Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *A View on the Art of Colonization: In Letters between a Statesman and a Colonist* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1914), 66.
10. See *Edward Gibbon Wakefield and the Colonial Dream: A Reconsideration* (Wellington: GP, 1997).
11. Wakefield, *Art of Colonization*, 16.
12. “Origins and Arrivals,” *TeAra.govt.nz: the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*.
13. *Leeds Mercury*, May 8, 1860. The newspaper sources for this chapter are selected from digitised publications available through <http://newspapers.bl.uk/blcs/> and reflect the practice of regional newspapers taking stories from their London counterparts, rather than a particular regional interest in the events.
14. Jones, *Memoir*, 70–1.
15. *Ibid.*, 72.
16. Butler, *Canterbury Settlement*, 11.
17. *Ibid.*, 11.
18. *Hampshire Advertiser*, December 13, 1862.
19. *The Examiner*, May 16, 1863
20. See, for example, James Smithies, “Return Migration and the Mechanical Age: Samuel Butler in New Zealand 1860–1864,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 12, no. 2 (2007), 203–224.
21. Henry Festing Jones, ed., *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler* (London: Fifeild, 1912), 93.
22. *Ibid.*, preface.
23. Butler, *Canterbury Settlement*, 28.
24. Donald Reid, “The Symbolism of Postage Stamps: A Source for the Historian,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 2 (1984), 223–249, 228.
25. Butler, *Canterbury Settlement*, 31.
26. Derrida, *Postcard*, 33; 65.
27. <http://www.nzpost.co.nz/about-us/who-we-are/history-of-new-zealand-post>.
28. See, for example, Tamara Silvia Wagner, “Returning the Returnee’s Narrative: Charlotte Evans’s Domestic Fiction of Victorian New Zealand,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 33, no. 3 (2011), 247–266.
29. En route to West Africa, for example, Burton finds little of which to complain but the quality of the claret, despite tornados, consumptives, and the usual ship-board privations. *Wanderings in East Africa: From Liverpool to Fernando Po*, 2 vols, (London: Tinsley, 1863).
30. Butler, *Canterbury Settlement*, 26–28.
31. *Ibid.*, 15–32.
32. Jones, *Memoir*, 73.
33. Samuel Butler, *Erewhon: or Over the Range*, repr. of 10th ed. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924), 311.
34. *Ibid.*, 316–7.
35. Carl Plasa, *Textual Politics from Slavery to Postcolonialism: Race and Identification* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 34.

36. Richard White, "Cooees across the Strand: Australian Travellers in London and the Performance of National Identity," *Australian Historical Studies* 32, no. 116 (2001).
37. Butler, *Erewhon*, 31; 41,
38. Jones, *Memoir*, 151.
39. Butler, *Canterbury Settlement*, 58.
40. Butler, *Erewhon*, 54.
41. Butler, *Canterbury Settlement*, 37.
42. Butler, *Erewhon*, 49.
43. Zemka, "Erewhon and the End of Utopian Humanism," 449.
44. Belich, *Making Peoples*, 118.
45. Butler, *Erewhon*, 11.
46. *Ibid.*, 19; 33.
47. *Ibid.*, 183–9.
48. Derrida, *Postcard*, 29.