

**HISTORICAL SKETCHES
OF SAVAGE LIFE IN
POLYNESIA**

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Historical Sketches of Savage Life in Polynesia by William Wyatt Gill

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WILLIAM WYATT GILL

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

THE flattering reception accorded to a former¹ volume has induced me to collect and publish a series of Historical Sketches with Illustrative Songs, which may not be without interest to students of ethnology and others. Some of them have already appeared in a serial publication. During a long residence on Mangaia, shut out to a great extent from the civilized world, I enjoyed great facilities for the study of the natives themselves and their traditions. I soon found that they had two sets of traditions—one referring to their gods, and to the supposed experiences of men after death; another relating veritable history. The natives themselves carefully distinguish the two. Thus, historical songs are called "pe'c;" the others, "kapa," &c. In the native mind the series now presented to the English public is a natural sequence to "Myths and Songs;" the mythical, or, as they would say, the spiritual, necessarily taking precedence of the historical or human.

In such researches we cannot be too careful to distinguish history from myth. But when we find hostile clans, in their epics, giving substantially the same account of the historical past, the most sceptical must yield to the force of evidence. I say substantially, as in some of the earlier stories there is a great air of exaggeration—*e.g.*, "The Story of Mokè," "The Twin Kites," and "The Expelled God." But the reader will observe that in all three stories the national feeling was invoked against other islanders. In the great mass of song and story there exists the wholesome corrective of clan rivalries to prevent such

¹ "Myths and Songs from the South Pacific," with a preface by Professor Max Müller.

self-laudatory exaggerations. I have endeavoured to relate the stories as the natives give them, without improvement or elimination.

When first we settled down amongst these islanders and attempted to acquire their language, I was often puzzled by references to past events, scraps of song, myths, and proverbs—the force of which depended upon an accurate acquaintance with the circumstances which originally led to their utterance. Two courses lay open to me—either to ignore their ancient religion and their undoubted history, or to study both for their own sake, and especially with a view to understand native thought and feeling. I chose the latter course.

The ignorance of these islanders of the art of writing fully accounts for the absence of many really ancient compositions. It was not that they were deficient in natural ability, or in desire to perpetuate the knowledge of the remote past. What race unacquainted with the use of metals ever invented an alphabet or made any considerable stride in civilization? Each clan, as it rose to importance, was assiduous in composing and preserving its own songs and history, but was willing enough to cast into the shade those of its fallen rivals. A few of the prayers in "Myths and Songs" are believed to be of great antiquity, being independent of clan jealousies; constituting, in fact, the liturgy of each succeeding generation. I have been the more anxious to put these things on permanent record, as the correct knowledge of the past is rapidly fading away, and will probably soon become extinct.

WILLIAM WYATT GILL.

Rarotonga, Hervey Group, South Pacific,
16th December, 1878.

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CHAPTER I.

SUMMARY REVENGE.

"ANA-NUI," or the Big Cave, is celebrated in the annals of the "Aitu," or god tribe, as the scene of the first great misfortune which overtook them in the latter days of Rangī.

Their ancestors came from Iti (Tahiti), and settled down on the eastern part of the island where they first landed. On one occasion a grand feast was to come off in honor of the gods. As this tribe were noted fishermen, they were all busy. After spending the day in the sea, the entire tribe, with their wives and children, slept on the sandy floor of the Big Cave. This cavern, as the name implies, is very spacious, but has this drawback: the centre is open to the dews and rains of heaven. The entrance is very narrow, admitting only one person at a time. Near this entrance are great boulders, which render access and egress alike difficult.

A large turtle having been caught, custom required that it should at once be presented to the king, who lived near Rongo's *marae*, or sacred grove, on the western part of Mangaia. This king was Tama-tapu, whose father Tui came from Rarotonga, where the name is still one of dignity and power. By courtesy Tui shared regal honors with Rangī, sitting with him on "the sacred sandstone" (*kea inamoa*), and being appointed by him to guard by his