

THE "HUCKERY MOLE"

K. Smithyman

(University of Auckland)

A script submitted this year by an Auckland university student produced a locution which had escaped notice of members of the Department of English. The student referred to "a huckery mole", which context showed was animate, animal, female, and held in derogation. Enquiry among first-year students showed that some were quite unfamiliar with the term, some regarded it as still current, and some thought that it had passed out of use.

It was conjectured that "mole" was probably an inaccurate version of moll and this seems to be the case, so "a huckery mole" is correctly a huckery moll. Moll has intermittently been in New Zealanders' vocabulary, with some measure of revival (by report) in recent years under the influence of American films. Three of students offering information claimed that they knew moll, but only as an Americanism, an association which probably influenced their opinion that huckery was also American. There is no obvious support for this; the possibility was tried, that huckery was a mutant from 'huckleberry', which led nowhere, or was remotely derived from a corruption of 'hackleberry', a shortlived American slang item long out of date, but this too was discarded. One more possibility is 'huck' (from 'Huk' [?], ex Southeast Asia, through military men's transmission [?] or ex North America) regarded as an Americanism distinct from a contraction of huckery, but next to nothing could be found about this, as an importation, although the local (even, according to some, their own spontaneous) contracting of huckery to huck was volunteered. From huckery to huck seems established, whereas any expansion from 'huck' to huckery seems most doubtful.

A part of the hundred or so of the students disclaimed knowing the phrase a huckery moll, and indeed denied knowing moll at all. One student who said that he knew the phrase (which was written on a blackboard and not pronounced) recognised the phrase, identified it as what he knew as "a

huckery mole", but stated that he had never thought to equate "mole" with moll. Overall, the script's "mole" was agreed by the majority of the students to be a representation of moll.

Moreover, students showed that transition from moll to "mole" is fairly easy in northern New Zealand, where evidently a degree of uncertainty exists about holding long o apart from short o especially in association with /l/. Two pronunciations of moll are possible for the one understood referent.

The phrase a huckery moll looks like something appropriated or converted from the Australian a boong moll, but discussion showed that difference in what the two phrases signify is so assertive that the likelihood of any borrowing and amending may be discounted. A huckery moll seems to be a coining.

A small minority of the students did not recognise the locution at all. Those who did recognise it divided about two-to-one on having it actively or passively in their vocabulary, the passives dividing further into those who claimed never to have used the phrase and those who formerly did so. The locution is regarded as still current (a view especially supported by the actives) but is regarded as probably if not certainly on the way out. That is, it is obsolescent if not yet obsolete. Its currency is thought to be more of city than rural usage, but more of those answering were city youngsters and thus possibly prejudicial in judgment, although extreme urban fringe dwellers concurred, and students from rural households also concurred more than disagreed. Its currency does not seem to be affected by socio-economic levels, nor (as far as could be judged) by known sectarian divisions. Its provenance is regarded as of the secondary school. Its age is uncertain, suggested by some to be about five years to their knowledge. When I was checking a locution rather like this one about eight years ago, a huckery moll was not then volunteered, so the locution's currency in the city is presumably five years or so. Later I shall show that there is reasonable ground for believing that a huckery moll originated in a rural area and spread north, shifting from adult level down, so the age of its currency may fit with this and with the fact that senior or postgraduate students are uncertain about the phrase.

Students agreed that a huckery moll is a term of disapproval, derogation, or rejection. A huckery moll is 'ugly', 'she's a bag', 'unattractive', 'a rank wench' (this is said to be the term now supplanting, at least at the students' level), or 'she's rank'. While it is agreed that she is one deemed likely to be willing to "oblige" or meet a young man's request rather readily, this does (it was insisted) not imply that she is necessarily promiscuous. This is the understanding of both male and female students. However, two male students separately added a qualification. The huckery moll, they said, is also flighty, featherheaded, and perhaps slatternly or slovenly. Their classmates concurred about these additions, with different strengths to their agreements. The qualification, it will be seen below, is probably significant. From what is said here, it will be seen that nothing at all racist attaches to judgments about a huckery moll which cardinally, critically, distinguishes the locution from the Australian boong moll. It should be said that among the students answering were some part-Maori and two predominantly or full Maori who could be conceivably sensitive to any racist nuance. They were not so, although one boy said that he had always assumed that huckery obliquely referred to or derived from Maori hakihiaki 'itch, skin disease'.

In the absence of any pointer to American sources for huckery, or Australian, or metropolitan British, and in view of the seeming lifetime and provenance of a huckery moll, a possible source in Maori was a notion early entertained. Hakihiaki was one possibility, suiting the suggested ugliness or undesirability of huckery. Another, since the huckery moll was reputedly comparatively generous in her giving, was hakari, primarily 'gift, present'; another possibility, hakere 'stingy, or grudging' was considered, and set aside; and hakiri 'to hear indistinctly' was rejected.

The likeliest source in Maori is hakurara, alternatively hakirara, 'slovenly, lazy' but also 'idling, trifling, lying' with the suggestion of 'flighty, featherheaded'. Mr Matiu Te Hau, who was consulted about this point of hakurara-hakirara, thought that he had known the phrase a huckery moll at one time but had not heard it for some years. Trying to recall more about it, he offered another recollection which, if a huckery moll is actually a New Zealand coining, may lead back to the very occasion when the

locution had its original form. As Mr Te Hau recalled it, the time was indefinite, some "years ago" and the occasion was a Maori party at Ruatoria, in the East Coast district of the North Island. A singing and teasing game developed, in which people present were mildly satirized or teased through impromptu song. One woman was singled out in a parody of a once popular song, of which Mr Te Hau remembered the last couple of lines, ending "...she's a hakurara doll." The tune, which Mr Te Hau did not identify, was called Scatterbrain, appropriately. He added that to his knowledge the parody was sung about the Ruatoria district subsequently.

This may be coincidental, but the line of transmission is, from Mr Te Hau's account, set up from the source occasion to dissemination through the song, a transmission however of "a hakurara doll", emphasising through the tune itself the connotation of 'flighty, featherheaded' which, it will be recalled, was attached by two students to a huckery moll. Hakurara and hakirara overlap in their significances, so passage from a suggested flightiness to an imputed slovenliness or from what is tolerable to what is derogatory is not a difficult shift. Given such possibility, the way to a shift from the inoffensive "doll" to moll is open. That the -rara ending could be transformed to -ry is plausible, in New Zealand experience, especially so when we remember that we are considering an aural transmission. The shift from the a of haku- or haki- to a short u, and the resultant hucker- is again plausible. Given Mr Te Hau's circumstantial story, and we may glimpse 'a hakurara doll' setting course to become a huckery moll.

We may. If 'a hakurara doll' mutated into a huckery moll there is, presumably, a linguistic trail, south and north from the Ruatoria district. Indeed, one possible pointer to dissemination south has been volunteered: in the Gisborne area farmers speak of a huckery cow 'one undesirable, likely to be culled'.

The complication in this is that seemingly huckery may be known (actively or passively) to students who disclaim knowledge of a huckery moll, both city students and those from rural areas, including areas north of Auckland. The tendency among these students is to agree about a structure — "X is huckery" — and that this reflects a disparaging

judgment which is not necessarily a derogatory or condemnatory judgment. The structure "X is huckery" seems more narrowly, positively, held than a flexible or variable "a huckery X". Huckery apparently has a (dying?) currency now independent of a huckery moll, even if from the same stem or stems. Its currency, from judgmental, and therefore prejudicial, report is seemingly from a like period of years; but this may be a false impression. At present, huckery on its own is apparently more widespread than a huckery moll.

I have to thank my colleagues Mr C. C. Bowley who recorded the phrase, and Mr M. Te Hau who offered his recollections and his opinions of hakurara-hakirara; and the students who gave information and opinion. The meanings attached to the Maori words cited are taken from H. W. Williams, A Dictionary of the Maori Language (seventh edition, revised and augmented, 1971).