

## **Freeing the slaves or enslaving the rangatira? The British in nineteenth-century New Zealand**

Abolitionist sentiments were at a peak in the 1830s when Britain began to take a serious interest in the annexation of New Zealand. However, despite their eagerness to end indigenous 'slavery', there was little recognition of the differences between the Māori system of bondage and the Trans-Atlantic trade in Africans.

It is probable that Māori had enslaved war captives for centuries but the evidence indicates it was on a small scale until the nineteenth century. Changing economic conditions and the advent of the musket appear to lie behind a dramatic growth in the taking of captives. However, an equally dramatic reversal in this trend occurred within one or two decades. Older historiography tended to ascribe this to missionary teachings whereas more recent work has suggested economic or political motivations.

This paper will discuss the suggested motivations for the increase and subsequent decrease of 'slavery' in Māori society and reasons why Māori rangatira may have feared and subsequently claimed that the British had reduced them to slavery.