Roslyn Russell finds in the National Library many accounts of the home of Sir George Grey, nineteenth-century Governor and Premier of New Zealand.

Kawau (Maori for ‘cormorant’ or ‘shag’) Island in the Hauraki Gulf of New Zealand’s North Island lies eight kilometres off the Rodney Coast north of Auckland. Occupied by Maori people before the European occupation of New Zealand, it was a well-known fishing ground for the muaru (spotted shark).

The Maori people left Kawau Island in 1826, after a peace agreement with Hongi Hika, a celebrated chief. European settlement began a few years later, and manganese and copper were mined for over a decade before the island was sold in 1855 after the mine had flooded several years earlier.

The island was bought by Sir George Grey in 1862, on his return to New Zealand for a second term as governor. For 25 years Grey lavished large amounts of his personal wealth on the island’s development, including enlarging and remodelling Mansion House, the former residence of the Kawau copper mine superintendent. Here he planted a huge array of exotic trees and shrubs, acclimatised many bird and animal species, and amassed a celebrated collection of rare books and manuscripts, artworks and curiosities, and artefacts from the Maori people over whom he had ruled.

The name of Sir George Grey figures in the histories of both Australia and New Zealand. As a young officer in the 1830s, he had explored in Western Australia and was appointed Governor of South Australia in 1841. He took over the governorship of New Zealand in 1845, where he served for ten years, then assumed the same position at Cape Colony (South Africa) from 1854 to 1861, returning to New Zealand as governor that year until...
1868, when the Colonial Office decided to put an end to his independent style of governance. Grey then embarked on a political career and was Premier of New Zealand from 1877 to 1879.

Democratic and liberal in politics, the paradoxical and quirky Grey was by nature an autocrat, but had a deep respect for indigenous people and more affinity with working people than with those who sought to exploit both land and labour. His desire to understand and work with Maori people led him to learn their language and transcribe their legends. One of Grey’s biographers, James Rutherford, said of his relationship with Maori people that:

No Governor ever acquired such a mana among the Maoris. He met them fearlessly in their tribal assemblies, where his courtesy and dignity and his firm decisions made a deep impression.

Grey’s occupation of Kawau Island, the environment he created there over his 25 years as its owner, and his life in Mansion House, are documented in a number of works in the National Library’s Collection. The best known of these is the account in J.A. Froude’s book, Oceana, or, England and Her Colonies, published in 1886 in London. This work put the owner of Kawau Island, now an elderly man in retirement from public life, before the British reading public as a benevolent patriarch ruling over a semi-feudal domain. But Kawau Island and Sir George Grey also appear together in other travel accounts, in verse and in works of art and photographs in the Library’s Collection.

In 1879 J. Grattan Grey published His Island Home; and Away in the Far North: a Narrative of Travels in That Part of the Colony North of Auckland, a description of a visit he made to Kawau Island. Sir George Grey and the writer (a handwritten note in the National Library’s copy claims he was a distant relative) travelled by government steamer Hinemoa to Kawau after a parliamentary session in Wellington when Grey was premier. J. Grattan Grey outlined his intention at the outset: he wanted to present his namesake not ‘in his public and political capacity’, but as ‘a private gentleman, retired after the fatigues and turmoil of the session to a place which for loveliness is not surpassed, nay equalled, by any other which it has been my good fortune to visit in this Colony’.

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A tour of the residence and its gardens conducted by their owner confirmed this first impression: ‘we could not help reflecting how bountiful nature had been to this gem of the Southern Pacific, and how much art had done to adorn nature with the lovely mantle she now wears so gracefully at the Kawau.’ An inspection of Sir George’s library, the ‘finest private Library in the colony’ led to the conclusion that ‘A visitor to the Kawau could spend quite a month in the library, and by the end of that time he would find that he had not exhausted all the objects of interest and curiosity which it contains.’ Grey’s ‘philanthropic character’ was attested by his aim to make Kawau an ‘acclimatisation depot for the introduction of foreign plants, animals and birds for subsequent distribution throughout the Colony’ (resulting in unintended negative effects through the introduction of feral pests, such as possums, which persist to this day).

J. Grattan Grey concluded his ‘hurried sketch of the Kawau’ on a prophetic note:

I am puzzled to understand how any human being can give up the repose that is to be found there in exchange for the cares and troubles inseparable from active public life. Politics may have their attractions, but to my mind the amount of happiness to be derived from a residence at this sublunary paradise far outweighs all other consideration.

Not long after this visit Sir George Grey, unsuccessful as premier, retired from active public life to the comparative solitude of Kawau, among his books and manuscripts, artworks and curiosities, local and exotic plants, and his deer, wallabies,
Froude's initial encounter with Grey, whom he had met in England some years before, was in Auckland at the Northern Club. There he renewed his acquaintance with the man whose career he described as 'a romance'. Grey invited Froude and his two travelling companions to stay with him on Kawau: they needed 'no pressing' to accept. After a journey to Ohinemutu and the fabled Pink and White Terraces (a silica formation destroyed when Mount Tarawera erupted not long after Froude's visit), the party made its way to Kawau, where its steamer docked at the jetty that Sir George Grey had built 10 years before in front of Mansion House.

The National Library holds a number of pictures of Mansion House and its bay—from the drawing Froude himself included in *Oceana*, to photographs and an oil painting by A.E. Aldis, one of those who was waiting on the jetty to greet Froude and his party as they landed. A talented mathematician, Aldis had been unable to obtain a post at Oxford or Cambridge because he held nonconformist religious beliefs at a time when members of these universities were obliged to subscribe to the doctrines of the Church of England. Conversation with Grey, and with Aldis and his wife, was a bonus to the intellectual stimulation provided by Grey's matchless library and other treasures during Froude's week-long stay on Kawau.

Froude's account of those treasures, and the breadth of ancient and contemporary reading material Sir George Grey could command on his island outpost, further enhanced his host's reputation as a literary figure as well as an imperial statesman. Souvenirs of his career as a governor were also on display, and were enlisted by Froude to enhance Grey's reputation as a benefactor of the Maori people:

a cabinet of Maori weapons—not ordinary knives or lances, but axes of jade, as rare as they were precious. They had been heirlooms in the families of great chiefs; and had each killed no one could say how many warriors in battle. They were never parted with in life, and had been bequeathed by their various owners to Sir George, as the father of the Maori race.
Froude did not spend all his time on Kawau closeted with books and treasures or deep in conversation with Grey; he explored the island and encountered (and sketched) the grove of intertwined Pohutakawa trees where Maori had held feasts of human flesh earlier in the century; he took part in a shark hunt, though he admitted 'the carnage was sickening'; and a fishing trip led to an unscheduled stay in a farmhouse on shore during a gale. He concluded his account of his visit to Kawau with high praise but on a melancholy note:

The week which we had passed at Kawau was one of the most interesting which I remember in my life, and our host certainly was one of the most remarkable men. It is sad to think that in all human likelihood I shall never see Sir George Grey again. When he dies, the Maori and the poor whites in New Zealand will have lost their truest friend, and England will have lost a public servant, among the best she ever had, whose worth she failed to understand.

(Grey in fact outlived Froude; he had left Kawau and was living in England at the time Froude died in 1894.)

Later that year Grey laid the foundation stone of the Auckland Free Public Library and Art Gallery, which was to receive his collected treasures. In 1886, on his 74th birthday, he was honoured with a musical tribute at the Auckland Opera House, when 'The Kawau March', composed by Alfred Pooley, was performed by the Band of the Auckland Artillery Volunteers. The National Library holds a copy of the sheet music. The transfer of Grey's treasures to the Auckland Library was accelerated when he sold Kawau Island in 1888 and moved with his niece and her family to Auckland, then returned to England in 1894. He died there in 1898, and was buried in St Paul's Cathedral.

Kawau Island is now part of Hauraki Gulf Maritime Park, and Mansion House is a house museum restored to the style of the period of its occupation by Sir George Grey. Fast catamarans take visitors to his former 'Island Home'. In Auckland itself, at the highest point of Albert Park in the central business district, is a statue of Grey. Its plinth carries this tribute: 'Lover of his fellow men whose wisdom, eloquence and strong personality gave the people of this colony a large measure of the liberties they now possess.' There is a matching inscription in Maori.

ROSALYN RUSSELL is a partner in Marsden Russell Historians and is currently undertaking doctoral research on travel writers, museums and collections in the nineteenth century.