

Getting to know you



Katrina Tamaira

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Who are you and where are you based?

Nō Airangi ,nō Tokaanu ōku tupuna
Ko Pihanga te maunga
Ko Taupō te moana
Ko Ngāti Tūwharetoa te iwi
Ko Katrina Tamaira tōku ingoa

I am Katrina Tamaira, Research Librarian Māori in the Arrangement and Description team at the Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL) in Wellington.

Can you tell us a little about the path that led to your current role?

My first role in the sector was around 2004 at ATL as a fixed-term conservation technician. Even though the contract only lasted 4 months, that experience helped me secure a Library Assistant job at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) library. I worked there for 3 years. Ironically, though, it wasn't until I left New Zealand in 2011 that the concept of 'access to information' governance really sunk in.

For three months I lived in Mae Sot, Thailand, a small city that borders Burma/Myanmar.¹ I flatted with a New Zealand friend, her Burmese husband, and his friends. I also taught English (badly) to economic migrants from Myanmar. You might have read about the human rights abuses committed against Rohingya Muslim populations. These were most brutal in Arakan/Rakine State, the home of my adult students. My biggest learning curve came when I realised my students supported the ethnic cleansing.

For reasons that were probably valid, they held a huge distrust towards information provided by government or aid agencies. The confirmation bias was deeply entrenched and was not helped by the fact they had poor literacy skills and no access to libraries. I suddenly saw information access in a whole new light.

With this in mind, on return home I began working again at ATL as a Library Assistant, taking Information Studies papers through VUW. I quickly drifted towards archival theory, leading to 5 years at Archives New Zealand and my involvement with ARANZ's *Archifacts*. After rāhui 2020 (the first lockdown), I began a secondment role at ATL and I am now a permanent member of the Arrangement and Description team.

What's your biggest challenge in your role?

As 'Research Librarian Māori' I am a Māori specialist. By far the biggest challenge is figuring out where the role specialist stops and the over-extension of my cultural capital begins.

If you could change or enhance any part of your role what would that be?

In te ao Māori the role of archives and collecting libraries is shifting. There is always talk of 'archival power' and the emancipatory potential of archives, but as many iwi re-gain their economic mana this is closer to becoming a reality. I expect to see more iwi and hapū archives in the future. I think there is scope in my role for supporting those initiatives and creating more balance in Tiriti relationships - less gatekeeping and more āwhinatanga.

What is your favourite archive or collection?

It's self-indulgent, but my favourite archives are those that relate to my family. Like this one taken by Walter Burke of my Great-great grandparents – PAColl-10689-1: Portrait of Te Waaka Tamaira and his wife Ngaumu Tamaira (née Runuku), Tokaanu.

Do you have any recent notable acquisitions or taonga that you'd like to highlight to ARANZ members?

PAColl-10760: Photographic prints relating to Māori homes and housing.

The 51 black and white prints were collected by H. B. Turbott (aka. the Radio Doctor) and have been with the Library since 1988. Taken circa late 1920s and early 1930s, the prints show various types and conditions of Māori housing. Some of the dwellings are seriously substandard, but the images are important records of the shocking living conditions of the time. They also include fascinating features, such as circular whare, kumara crops, and hybrid Māori/Pākehā construction techniques. I recently enhanced and re-housed the item level descriptions and the prints are now in the digitisation queue.

Endnotes

1. In 1989 the "Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma" became the "Union of Myanmar". My flatmates considered themselves from Burma and my students, Arakanese from Myanmar.