

Suffrage and Silences: Wāhine Māori and the Vote

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Aotearoa New Zealand was one of the last nations incorporated into Britain's empire, but the first to extend voting rights to women. 1893 will forever be remembered by New Zealanders as the year women won the vote and first went to the ballot boxes. However, it was a privilege that didn't come easy. Women's suffrage activists,

suffragists, spent many years advocating, lobbying and petitioning against the inequality of women's disenfranchisement. An inequality that if overturned could create opportunities for wāhine Māori to amplify their voices. The suffrage petition of 1893 is recognised as an important tool for achieving that goal. Why then did so few wāhine appear to sign them? In this paper I bring together Māori political struggle, the 1893 Women's suffrage petition and archival theory. I begin by providing some context and briefly discuss conditions many Māori communities found themselves following the erosion of their rangatiratanga and mana motuhake, or autonomy, authority and self-determination. This follows with an analysis of petitioning and the inherent contradictions of petitions as tools of liberation. I then discuss inequities connected with the suffrage petition, including archival silences.

Under Crown control

The 1890s are celebrated as a period in which women of Aotearoa made their voices heard and affected change. A decade when women took power and forever altered the country's political landscape. At barely 40 years young, the colony was beginning to find its feet and mature as a nation. Cities were growing, industry and innovation was transforming the political economy, New Zealand was developing its character.

For Māori however, the adjustment from an autonomous society to one living under the thumb of British rule had not been a smooth transition. While the effects and extent of Crown control and settlement were felt unevenly across Māori communities, land sales, land confiscation, and armed violence left deep wounds across the country. The New Zealand Wars, or “sovereignty wars”¹ as Moana Jackson referred to them, left parts of the country devastated and demoralised. Even those who had fought alongside the Crown faced ongoing difficulties. In 1872, just 21 years before women attained suffrage, Major Ropata Wahawaha gives insight to conditions felt by his hapū, for whom starvation remained a real threat;

“E taku hoa aroha kua mate matou ko oku Hapu i te kai, kaore hoki ha parahanga kore rawa atu.

We and my hapu are in great trouble because we have no food. There are not even scraps left, none whatsoever.”²

Throughout these periods of change Māori attempted to regain control, and self-determination, using strategies that suited their various situations. Some, like Wahawaha, cooperated with the Crown. Others, Kīngitanga and Parihaka Pā, for example, took paths viewed by the Crown as oppositional. Another, Kotahitanga, adapted Western political structures to meet Māori needs from within Māori cultural contexts. Kotahitanga established its own pan-tribal Māori parliament to run in parallel with that of the Government parliament. As Keene notes, a central goal of the movement was the expectation “that Māori would be able to control their own land.”³

Although men dominated Kotahitanga, wāhine were a common feature at sittings and held speaking rights. Unlike their European contemporaries, wāhine often advocated for themselves at Kotahitanga parliament. The suffrage petition signatory Ākenehi Pātoka was one such wāhine, another was Meri Te Tai Mangakahia. In 1893, both were members of the newly formed Ngā Komiti Wāhine, a national Kotahitanga network.⁴ That same year they too called for greater voting rights. On 18 May 1893, Mangakahia presented a motion requesting that women be granted voting rights and be accepted as members of the Kotahitanga parliament. Her argument acknowledged the responsibilities placed upon women, some as a consequence of war and widowhood, in managing parcels of land.⁵ Voting rights were not extended to wāhine until 1897, but in 1893 Ngā Komiti Wāhine and Mangakahia had set the agenda. She too, like Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) organiser Kate Sheppard and conservative parliamentarian John Hall, can be considered a suffragist and an active petitioner.

PETITIONS FOR THE PEOPLE?

In his paper, 'Writing Upwards: How the weak wrote to the powerful', Martyn Lyons discusses the relationships between those who use and write petitions, and those to whom they are addressed.⁶ For Lyons one of the defining features of a petition is the power dynamic between the two parties. One group is writing to another about a particular cause and asking for a particular outcome, and those being addressed have the power to say no, and even the prerogative to say nothing at all. An inequality exists. To a cynic's eyes, petition writing is a submissive exercise. Whether they are workers demanding higher wages or suffragists calling for voting rights, petitioners are constrained by rules set and maintained by those with greater power. Because of this inherent inequality petitions often fail, as was the case with the women's suffrage campaign. Between 1888 and 1893 suffragists submitted at least seven petitions to parliament seeking electoral reform.

Like petitions, letters too can be used as a vehicle for agitation from below – variants of writing upwards.⁷ Both involve those with little control over processes appealing to people in higher positions of power. In 1891 Helen L Nicol wrote to the Colonial Secretary, "I trust you will use... best endeavours to secure for the women of New Zealand the right of voting on all questions."⁸ While this letter shares commonalities with other forms of writing upwards, it is difficult to ignore one key aspect of a petition's potential power; numbers. The same year of Nicol's letter, a suffrage petition with 9,000 signatures was forwarded to the Legislative Executive.⁹ It's probable that a cause with thousands of supporters would have more political power than one with a single signature. Another point of difference between letters and petitions is that of formality; petitions use legal channels and processes. While this requires working within Crown frameworks, there is the potential of turning rules of the State against itself. For those with few options available to them and limited capacity to influence decision-making, petitions are a legal means to express dissatisfaction and provide a platform to have their voices heard.

There is no denying the political agency shown by petitioners, however the inherent inequities of petitions cannot be ignored. Inequalities, when viewed in the context of 18th Century New Zealand, were especially problematic for Māori. Submitting petitions to the Government meant appealing to a young colonial government that reflected British norms and laws. Legal systems that constrained Māori political power and were skewed in favour of settler interests.¹⁰ Lyons points to such power imbalances and specifically refers to the colonisation of indigenous people and the failure of colonial powers to adhere to their agreements.

“Indigenous petitions thus assume the existence of a contract which the colonisers have not faithfully carried out. The contract could not be an agreement between equals, for it rested on forceful dispossession of the indigenous population.”¹¹ Petitions then are not only a request for change or action but can also be a call for accountability and a reminder of agreements that had been made and broken.

Despite these limitations, when viewed in a larger context even failed petitions have their uses. For archivists and historians, suffrage petitions and related documents act as a paper trail. At the very minimum the presence of these records shows that women were politically engaged very early on in the colony’s life, and that this engagement was on-going. Unsuccessful petitions can also be exploited as tools forming part of a larger political campaign. Writing in *Rampant Women: Suffragists and the Right of Assembly*, Linda Lumsden examines the women’s suffrage movement in the United States. Lumsden asserts that “the petition’s true value lay with its tremendous publicity value”.¹² which in turn can play a role in building political momentum. The upward trajectory of signatures accumulated in New Zealand’s suffrage movement supports this theory. Two of the earliest petitions were submitted to parliament in 1888, by Emma E. Packe and J. A. Kelly¹³, both on behalf of the WCTU. The number of signatories supporting Packe’s petition isn’t documented in the public record, but we do know that 778 people, presumably women, supported Kelly’s submission. Three years later in 1891, signatures jumped to roughly 9000 and in the next year, 1892, the numbers again increased, doubled to almost 20,000. When the final petition WCTU was presented to parliament in 1893 almost 32,000 women, and some men, had signed.¹⁴ Lumsden admits that the success of suffrage petitions was not instant, but maintains that although “petitions worked no overnight magic upon politicians, they helped women win the vote.”¹⁵ In a battle of ideas, suffrage petitions provided a tangible focal point for campaigners to promote their cause, raise morale and apply political pressure.

Suffrage Petitions and the Archive

The 1893 Women’s Suffrage Petition, also known as the ‘monster’ petition, comprises 546 sheets pasted together into one roll. Today that roll accounts for at least 24,000 signatures, but government records show when the signatures were submitted to parliament, thirteen petitions were actually received.¹⁶ Twelve smaller documents accompanied the monster roll into the colonial halls of power, and were subsequently lost. On these petition sheets were more than 6,000 signatures and names now missing from the archival record. Almost 32,000 people, mostly women, signed the 1893

Petition¹⁷, and the number of these signatories identifiable as Māori? The current number sits at around just ten, nine of which are listed on the NZ History petition database:¹⁸

- Matilda Ngapua (Napier),
- Mary Bevan | Mere Ruiha Hakaraia (Ōtaki)
- Mary | Mere Cross (Bluff)
- Jane Driver | Jane Tini Riko or Reko, (Pūrākaunui)
- Mrs. Rangiora (Rangiora)
- Rhonda | Rora F. Orbell (Dunedin)
- Fanny Ada Orbell (Dunedin)
- Sarah | PAETAU West (NGAI TAHU)
- Mrs Hassall, Tapanui
- Ākenehi Pātoka (Ngāti Kahungunu)¹⁹

Looking at the figures and names above it is easy to be disheartened by the small number of wāhine Māori who signed the 1893 petition. Why so few? Did they not want the right to vote? Although the suffrage petitions were mainly organised by European women, notably lobby groups of the Womens' Christian Temperance Union, Salvation Army and Dunedin Tailoress' Union, it was a medium that Māori had become accustomed to. Finny estimates that between 1871 and 1900 the Native Affairs Committee reviewed 2,300 petitions, the vast majority from Māori, both tāne and wāhine.²⁰ Petitioning was not an unknown concept and Māori were not strangers to 'writing upwards'. As Lyons remarks, "dispossessed and disenfranchised, indigenous people adopted the medium of white colonialism – writing – in order to be heard."²¹ When searching for the names of Māori on the suffrage petitions, it is worth asking how are we looking and through which cultural lens do we see, or not see the wāhine who signed them?

Archival institutions the world over contain gaps of knowledge, information holes often referred to as 'archival silences'. These silences cast shadows over specific sectors of society whose contribution was or are undervalued and whose presence are likely to be obscured. Women, poor, non-European and indigenous people, the disabled and LGBTQI are often delegated, even if unintentionally, to the sidelines. Australian historian Yvonne Perkins contends that "if the archival records were taken at face value they would reveal a distorted view of the past", and the suffrage petitions are proof

of this.²² It was common practice in the 1890s for women to sign using their husband's names rather than their own, as has been observed on the 1893 Petition. It was also not uncommon for Māori to use anglicised versions of their names. Maybe they felt these Pākehā words gave them more authority and respect, or made it easier to get by in the European world. Some of the European-sounding names on the petition are only known to belong to Māori women because someone recognised them as being Māori and subsequently identified them as such. Ngāi Tahu woman Sarah PAETAU/West is one such example. West's whakapapa Māori was only publicly identified in 2018 by a descendant through comments on the NZ History website.²³

It is not only the 1893 petition where the experiences of wāhine have been overlooked in the suffrage story. Another is the date celebrated as the first day women went to the polls; 28 November 1893. On that momentous day 90,290 women cast their votes, including so-called 'half-castes'. Only Māori classified as half-caste or less than, were allowed the option of which electoral ballot to vote on. For those Māori considered more than half-caste, their only option was to vote in the Māori election for Māori candidates standing in one of four seats.²⁴ The Māori day of universal suffrage didn't occur for wāhine until three weeks later on 20 December. Perhaps this day was chosen for reasons of logistics, organising elections can't have been an easy task during the era of horse and cart. Regardless, the day is a significant milestone in the nation's suffrage story. It and the 4000 or so wāhine who voted deserve to be celebrated. Unfortunately, the number of wāhine voters was not recorded in 1893, and as a consequence the actual number of women who voted that first year will never be known.

Conclusion

Whether it consists of a single letter and a lone signature, or scroll with the names of thousands, a petition represents a desire for change. The 1893 suffrage petition remains a powerful symbol of progress and possibilities; the under-dog can win. However, this era also serves as a reminder of the differences between wāhine and European women's political experiences. In 1840, at least thirteen Māori women were signatories to the Te Tiriti o Waitangi | Treaty of Waitangi. At that time they could hold a status so high they were entitled to sign international agreements on behalf of their people, but after the colonial government assumed control not only were they barred from speaking within the settler house of power, they were also prohibited from participating in the decision-making processes. This

isn't to say that before colonialism Aotearoa was a women's paradise, but wāhine, including takatāpuhi, generally enjoyed more freedoms as gender roles were more fluid than those of Victorian England. Unlike their European counterparts, the ability of wāhine to own and control land, and pass these privileges to the next generation, was an accepted and common practice.

While archival records are varied and tell us many things about our pasts, they are not culturally or politically neutral. It's an important point to make because in the world of archives, context and provenance are everything. Viewing the 1893 suffrage petition alongside activities of Te Kotahitanga gives us a fuller picture of electoral franchise in Aotearoa at that time and potentially suggests some reasons why so few wāhine appeared to have supported the WCTU petition. For some wāhine the suffrage petition, assuming they had the opportunity to sign their names, may have represented an opportunity to reclaim fragments of political power they had lost through colonialism. Others may well have been occupied with circumstances occurring in their own communities. Eria notes that wāhine representation "is not solely about women or their misrepresentation, but is a wider discussion about land and the continuation of whakapapa."²⁵ And, despite the importance of individual's agency, Ballara reminds us that "the disadvantages suffered by Maori society as a whole through its domination by colonial authority and legislation were always more important".²⁶

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