

Woven by Water: Histories of the Whanganui River

by David Young.
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TWO PAKEHA WRITERS HAVE written notable histories of the Whanganui river and the Maori whose river it has been for centuries. T.W. Downes knew the river better than any other Pakeha during the early part of this century. His *Old Whanganui* (1915) and *A History and Guide to the Whanganui River* (1921), became the standard references for the traditions of Te Atihaunui a Paparangi, the interrelated hapu whose rohe extends from the river mouth to the junction of the Whakapapa and the Whanganui. David Young is his spiritual heir. He grew up in Wanganui, but it was as a returning adult in search of understanding that he began to discover the river, its people of both cultures and, particularly, the spiritual traditions of Ngati Haua, the up-river members of Te Atihaunui. Downes wrote as a man of his time, and so does Young. Downes thought of the Maori of the river in the past tense and set out to record what he could of their culture before it was too late. Young is equally interested in that past but it is a past that lives on in a continuing present.

Woven by Water is rich in insight into the numerous ways by which the wairua of the river and the mana of its people are bound together. Its linked histories trace the transforma-

tion of the river during the last 170 years under the cumulative effect of Pakeha commercial, political, and economic influences. It fills a gap in Pakeha historiography by focusing on the people of Hinengakau, the strand of Te Atahaunui living in the upper stretches of the river, and writing them into the inter-hapu and inter-racial history of the Whanganui. It brings the prophet Te Kere out of the shadows of Pakeha history and, by giving him a central place in the book, emphasise the importance of the prophetic tradition in Maori culture and Te Kere's place in it. It explains how Pakeha notions of progress and economic development have turned the river and its tributaries into a threatened ecosystem, and that provides Young with the context for his deeply-felt argument that its restoration calls for a fusion of Maori concepts of wairua, mauri, and kaitiaki with their secularised equivalents in Pakeha ecological thought and practice.

But *Woven by Water* is much more than the sum of its parts. Also weaving their way through the book are Young's accounts of his relationship with his principal informants, Titi Tihu and Hikaia Amohia, their relationships with their tipuna, especially Te Kere, and their long-standing kaupapa for

reasserting rangatira-tanga over the river in the name of Te Atihau-nui. Listening to Titi and Hikaia gave David Young access to oral histories of leading Ngati Haua figures of the last two centuries.

Te Mamaku, their great fighting chief, was a dominant presence on the river for most of the last century. He and Te Kere had their famous stand-off at Maraekowhai in 1857 and, as peacemaker, healer, and prophet, Te Kere exerted great personal influence until his death in 1901. He was a source of spiritual enlightenment to Tawhiao and to Te Whiti and Tohu. His followers link him with the Ratana movement through prophecy and through Meri Rikiriki, the spiritual healer who whakapaped both to him and to Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana. Titi Tihu was a grandson of Te Kere, and a seer and healer. When David Young first met Titi and Hikaia in 1984, they were the last of the kaumatua of their generation who from the early years of this century had led Te Atihaunui's struggle to reclaim their traditional control of the river.

The perspectives of Young's Maori histories are thus those of the Hinengakau strand of Te Atihaunui. He has a journalist's nose for a good stories and, to single out one highlight from many, his chapter on William Moffatt, the gun-running, Pakeha-Maori, double agent, is a gem of painstaking research and reconstruction.

There are so many good things in this book that one could wish for more. *Woven by Water* is, however,

stronger on narrative than on analysis. There is more that could have been said to establish Te Atihaunui's identity as an iwi bound together through its three kin-related strands of Hinengakau, Tamaupoko, and Tupoho, covering between them the upper, middle, and lower reaches of the river and the rohe. The military activities of their fighting chiefs are examined largely in terms of the oppositional categories of Kingite-kupapa, but it must be questioned whether such an analysis is capable of providing an adequate explanation of inter-hapu relations.

Kupapa is a tricky word. Young, following other historians, gives it the sense of being aligned with the Queen during the wars. Among Whanganui Maori at the time, however, kupapa probably had a meaning much closer to their day-to-day circumstances. In the first two editions of his Maori dictionary, Williams listed kupapa as a verb meaning to stoop in the sense of a thief stooping so as not to be seen. The third edition, published in 1871, after a decade of warfare, gave the additional meanings of 'go stealthily' and 'be neutral in a quarrel'. On those meanings of the word all the leaders of Te Atihaunia were kupapa during the 1860s irrespective of whether they were aligned with the Queen, the King, or with neither. Their prime concerns

were to protect their own people, prevent inter-hapu warfare from breaking out within the rohe and, if it did, to restore the balance as speedily as possible, and they all employed stealthy diplomacy to that end.

To take the prime example, there



Titi Tihu, Taumaranui, February 1984. Photo: Bruce Connew.

is no reason for supposing that Te Pehi Pakaro was other than deeply embarrassed by Matene Rangitauia's unannounced arrival at Pipiriki in May 1864 with a party of Pai Marire. His dilemma was how to see Matene off without upsetting relations between his people and Te Anaua's. His people were deeply divided and, as Young records, he had great difficulty getting agreement on what to do. But Young does not mention the emissaries he sent down the river to warn Te Anaua, and one way of interpreting Te Pehi's changes of mind is as temporising to give Te Anaua time to get his warriors up to Moutua island, Tupoho's up-river boundary, to confront Matene. An interpreta-

tion that emphasises what was done to keep the tribal canoe afloat by keeping disruption within Te Atihaunui to a minimum also explains why Te Mamaku, though supporting Kingitanga, did not become involved. There was no challenge to Hinengakau and he could remain neutral.

One of the many strengths of *Woven by Water* is its emphasis on the traditional means by which the leaders of Te Atihaunui are able to bring about peace and reconciliation after times of inter-hapu strife. In a book that highlights Ngati Haua perspectives, however, it is surprising that there is no account of the six-year-long process of reconciliation that culminated in Te Mamaku's visit to Putiki in 1872 with

its highly symbolic exchange of gifts that finally righted the canoe.

These quibbles aside, *Woven by Water* is a fascinating book. It is written with verve and empathy, a deep understanding of the importance of the Whanganui to its Te Atihaunui guardians, and an equally sure grasp of what non-Maori now need to do to cooperate with them to maintain the river as a life-giving element. Huia publications have served the author well with a handsome, well-illustrated book. ☞

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