

The stories of the exiles

The making of a biography of Te Kooti Arikirangi te Turuki

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IT IS OFTEN ONLY AT THE END of a project that it becomes possible, emotionally as well as conceptually, to articulate how it began. *Redemption Songs* was twelve years in the making. Yet even as recently as five years ago I did not know whether it would, or could, or should be written.¹

There is a famous waiata of Te Kooti, 'Pinepine Te Kura' ('Tiny Precious Child'), which is an adaptation of an old oriori, a lullaby sung to a child, sometimes an unborn child, to teach it its history. Te Kooti composed his song for 1 January 1888, and it tells of the manner in which he would be betrayed by the law to prevent his return home to Gisborne. These events led to his arrest and brief imprisonment in 1889. He sang also of his betrayal by his own people, some of whom were still threatening his life. Yet his theme and the song celebrate the 'new company of travellers', who were setting forth to open the meetinghouse Rongopai, which had been built in Te Kooti's honour in 1887 but which he would never see.

Tenei te tira hou tenei haramai nei.
No te rongopai no te rangimarie.

These were the children of 'faith' and 'peace', journeying across the land. This song is still sung (with its original quarter-tone music) by Te Kooti's followers, and others, on marae today. It is sung partly because it remembers: it keeps history alive, now. It is a portion of the 'other' tradition: the songs and narratives of Te Kooti, which are sustained within sections of the Māori world.

The biography grew inside this awareness, and my theme was also ultimately to become celebratory. The title has several intended references, but the crucial one is the dialogue I had, in 1981, with the Whakatōhea elder, Paroa (Jack) Kurei:

Wherever Te Kooti went – wherever he step foot from one area to another – he's singing. And one song he had

– this concerns the whole of New Zealand, this song: 'Nei ka uru ahau i te ture ai mātua mo te pani mo te rawa kore' – 'I shall join the law to make it a parent for the poor people, for the orphans, for those without'.

This story first conveyed to me the image of Te Kooti as he journeyed from marae to marae – once he was free to travel after his pardon – with songs for each and every place he visited. This, then, is the 'other' history: the songs and stories of Te Kooti concerning the salvation of the people and their land. These stories are still told in Māori communities, particularly in the eastern Bay of Plenty, the Urewera and, until quite recently, in parts of the eastern Coromandel peninsula – communities which, in some cases, were formed by Māori exiles during the mid-nineteenth-century wars. This 'other' history has coexisted, and survived, alongside the 'dominant' history – the received history that was reproduced and perpetuated by most newspaper articles and in the only full-length biography of Te Kooti previously published (in 1966).² The 'dominant' history determined the understanding possessed by most Pākehā families – although, I would also add, not by all. It focused on Te Kooti as the 'rebel', and 'murderer', in that he was often described as the 'only' Māori warrior who attacked European settlements (Matawhero and Whakatane), and some relatively unprotected Māori communities (Mohaka, in Hawke's Bay, and

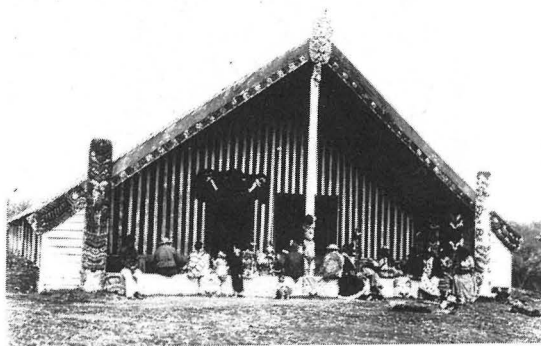


Opape, in the eastern Bay of Plenty). This received history carried and continues to carry significant reverberations in a number of Māori as well as Pākehā homes.

The biography evokes and describes the 'encounter' of histories: different ways of remembering, recording, and understanding what is important from the past. It was born out of first listening to this 'other' discourse: the oral narratives retained by Māori families. It grew not by design but by a kind of inevitability, over time. It owes its

existence to the patience and the support of crucial elders within the Ringatū faith, the faith founded by Te Kooti. I wish to mention two men in particular, although there are others whose significance I have recognized in the book. Here I acknowledge the late Sir Monita Delamere, son of Paora Delamere, the former Poutikanga (head, or chief pillar of authority) of the Haahi Ringatū (Ringatū Church), and the late Boy Biddle, the secretary of the Haahi and son of Robert Biddle, the previous secretary. Both men generously gave me access to papers belonging to their respective fathers. Both felt that it had become appropriate to talk about the ‘founder’, as they call Te Kooti, in his own historical times, and to separate him, historically, from developments and evolutions within the faith. As Boy put it, ‘otherwise it gets cloudy’.

I have not written a history of the faith. A conflict of traditions within the Ringatū exists, and it arises (in part) from rival claims of different leaders in the early twentieth century to be Te Kooti’s predicted successor. There has also been a tendency (by some elements) to deify the founder as a part of this evolution. Texts have evolved within the different branches of the faith to support particular claimants. Thus, it seemed important to two leaders within the registered Haahi that I went back to the earliest sources, particularly those recorded by Te Kooti’s three secretaries, who are known as the ‘three cornerstones’. But it was equally important, as Reuben Riki, the former assistant secretary to the Gisborne branch of the faith, commented, that the sharing of his knowledge had to have purpose for him and his ‘next of kin to come’.



Opposite: A panel from the meeting house ‘Rongopai’ at Waituhi (Gisborne) depicting the ancestress Hakirirangi, who is remembered for bringing the kūmara to Turanganui a Kiwa. The meeting house was built during 1886–87 ‘to keep the words which Te Kooti said’: Te Kooti had addressed the song ‘Moe huri huri ai taku moe ki te whare’ to a gathering at this house. Te Papa, Our Place.

Above: The meeting house ‘Te Whai a Te Motu’ at Ruatahuna (Urewera) became the great Council Hall of Tūhoe. Tūhoe wished to make the house tapu but Te Kooti said, “Well, the only results you get from anything sacred or tapu, is spiders! ... The house will be inhabited by air and spiders. But it will be remembered for the gambling of the people!” Here Te Kooti sang his song warning of the loss of Tūhoe land. Photo by Augustus Hamilton, 1898. Te Papa, Our Place.

This book, and the responsibility which grew with it, began, albeit unknowing at the time, on an occasion in 1978, when I was sitting in the sun on the marae at Matahi – a most appropriate name in retrospect, for it means ‘to open your eyes wide’ (there, to the beauty of the place) – in the Waimana valley, and talking with Mau Rua, son of the Tūhoe prophet Rua Kenana.³ Mau narrated a story of Te Kooti’s gun: how Te Kooti turned its barrel down towards the ground, prophesying, ‘War won’t reach New Zealand. It is a holy land’. With this narrative, I became aware of the greater man who stood behind Rua. Te Kooti set the tasks and quests for others to fulfil, most particularly, to walk the paths of lasting peace, te maungārongo, after 1883. Te Maungārongo was, therefore, one of the names which Rua’s followers took for themselves, stemming from Te Kooti’s pardon of that year. This pardon was seen as a binding compact of peace – by himself, and his followers. This vision of an end to fighting was at the heart of the ‘other’ tradition – it explains, for ex-

ample, Tūhoe’s refusal to volunteer in the First World War – and it was unknown in the Pākehā world.

I was sent by Tūhoe to see Te Kooti’s family. His great-granddaughter is Tihei Algie, whose mother was the child of Te Kooti’s only known son, Wetini. Tihei only learnt who she was as a schoolgirl, about the age of fourteen:

I didn’t know anything about Te Kooti. I used to hear how he was a rebel and all that, and I didn’t think I was connected with him. ... But then we were asked to write about Te Kooti at school. I was in Standard Six. And I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything about him. I went home and talked about it, and was told to forget it. ‘Don’t worry about it! It is over! Finished!’ I went back and told my parents that my headmaster was threatening to strap me. Because I didn’t know anything about Te Kooti. I asked them – then. My mother said, ‘Oh well, it is too late now’. And she started telling me who we were, who he was. My grandfather was there and she said, ‘That is his son sitting over there’.⁴

Tihei’s story is narrated in the book *Ngā Mōrehu: The Survivors*, which was first published in 1986. *Ngā Mōrehu* grew out of dialogues I, together with the photographer Gillian Chaplin, had with eight women in the Ringatū world. The women included (as well as Tihei) a daughter of Paora Delamere, Te Maaka Jones, who died only recently and who was one of the few women tohunga of the faith. It was from the women that I first began to hear the whānau stories, the family narratives which connect the

families, through their elders, to Te Kooti. It was from Heni Brown, another of the women in *Ngā Mōrehu*, that I first learnt of Meri Puru, Heni's great-grandmother, who, as a child was sent, with her father Hori Puru, as a political prisoner to Wharekauri (Chatham Island) in 1866. The two participated in the collective escape from the island orchestrated by Te Kooti in July 1868. It was from Heni's husband, Ned, in his turn, that I first heard one of the crucial quest stories: how Te Kooti set a riddle which had to be resolved to enable their escape. This is the often-told story of the white stone revealed to the prisoners by the archangel Michael (as they believed). This story is still remembered on Chatham Island today. Te Kooti instructed them to eat the stone, and the solution came to one of the prisoners in a dream: the stone was crumbled and they all ate a portion of it. The story draws directly on two oral traditions, scriptural and Māori. The underlying scriptural text is Revelation 2:17: 'To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone'. But it is also a whakahoro (tapu-lifting) ritual: the fixing of learning by finding and eating a small white pebble (whatu kura), a practice of the whare Wānanga (the tribal schools of learning). Here the learning they had to absorb was the escape strategy, planned in every precise detail by Te Kooti. In this ritual, too, they were all bonded together.

The regional oral narratives about Te Kooti portray him as a guardian of the people, and their lands. There are regional stories about the diamond which he placed in a secret place, a lake perhaps – or, sometimes, he covered it over with his shawl (hōro) – on the sacred mountain of the people. The story of Te Kooti's diamond concerns Maungapōhata, for Tūhoe, or Pāparatu, for Rongowhakaata, or Whakapūnake, the mountain belonging to the inland Wairoa tribes. Not coincidentally, all were mountains where Te Kooti took his shelter during the wars. Pāparatu was where the first military encounter occurred after the prisoners' escape in 1868. Reuben Riki told the story this way:

They say the diamond came from India, on the Rifleman⁵ itself. That's one story. The second story is – it refers again to *The Bible*. One of those gems that used to go about, travel, with other people. They say this location of the diamond – if it's a diamond – some say it appears at night. People that go out opossum hunting, they could see this luminous light coming up from one area, only one area, at night. This one, here, it's at Pāparatū. ... This one here, it's a diamond. He [Te Kooti] came here with a

purpose – as the story goes – that he came here to hide all the wealth. If they were to find the wealth of this country, they will ruin this country. He says, 'It's better to be hidden'. But there is a day coming. Some one, or somebody, will [be] bound to find this and there will be plenty for all.

These stories are about the protection of the mana whenua, the knowledge, and the hidden wealth of the local people, and they all have one common element: Te Kooti as guardian. The stories vary in many of their details because they are regional and tribal – but Te Kooti is always the central, protecting figure. These oral narratives have evolved as statements about future changes in power relations for those who were colonised. Essentially, the stories are of freedom: they deny that human authority, especially secular authority and Pākehā government, controls the people's lives. They offered other sets of truths, and foresaw an end to the Māori experience of being colonised. Some consider that the narratives – especially those that emphasise working through the law to recover an internal autonomy in a complementary relationship with the Crown – are beginning to be fulfilled.

The book is constructed as an arena within which there are juxtaposed truths, and concentric narratives. Different stories and accounts touch, jostle and meet. Some narratives tell of the same occasions, the same sets of events, but the remembered stories and the written texts and reports will have had quite different original purposes. Te Kooti composed or adapted over 90 waiata: songs of warning (waiata tohutohu), songs of premonition



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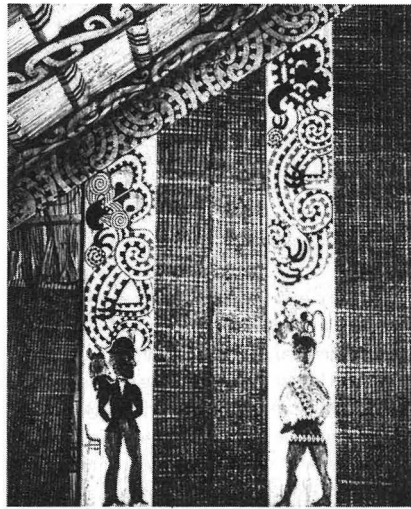
Above: An officer in the Armed Constabulary chasing Te Kooti. A shadowy, bearded face, part painted out, is visible to the left of the officer. Tutamure meetinghouse, Omarumutu. Reproduced by permission of Te Riaka Amoamo, Opotiki. Photograph by Roger Neich. Te Papa, Our Place.

Opposite: During the 1870s and 1880s many new, large meeting houses were built under Te Kooti's programme of Maori nationalism. The Ringatū religion he founded fostered poetry, song, and oratory, while the interiors of his meeting houses were decorated with contemporary paintings. The house 'Rongopai', built during 1886-87 was described as 'a brightly painted garden ... Inside there is a wondrous, and populated, Eden'. Reproduced by permission of Mahanga Horsfall.

tion, songs of joy, songs of despair. They are all spun from particular historical moments. Many of the oral narratives are similarly predictive in their style: they tell of quests that may now be seen to have been fulfilled, or may yet remain to be fulfilled. These quest-narratives have themselves set history in motion. 'History' has thus been created, indeed structured, by the spoken words: new deeds and actions have occurred which are seen to be consequential of the predictions. The twentieth-century history of Rua Kenana is spun from these predictions. Thus Te Kooti has 'sung into existence'⁶ new histories, whose 'intentional' inner meanings only his followers could have understood, but by which they chose to live and act, and so engendered new histories.

Te Kooti directed the building of many new meeting-houses, whose brightly painted (as well as carved) ancestral figures (including the living and the dead) brought history into the present, across and through time. The houses memorialised crucial historical events for Māori. They were, however, all constructed for one primary purpose: to build the spiritual unity of the people. Their erection was to establish the

unity, the 'Kotahitanga', of God's words amongst all the tribes, as Te Kooti's secretary Matiu Paeroa described their purpose. Among the more famous houses that were built for Te Kooti, on his directive, and which still stand, is Te Whai-a-te-motu, the great painted and carved house of Tūhoe at Ruatāhuna. Te Kooti formally dedicated it in 1891 (although it had been originally opened a few years earlier), and its name remembers his pursuit across the land in the wars. Its purpose is as a shelter (tāwharau) for Tūhoe. Another is Rongopai, built for his hoped-for return to Gisborne; 'Pinepine Te Kura' was composed for its opening in his absence. The house is indeed a wonderful, but no longer innocent, 'Garden of Eden', as Witi Ihimaera has evoked it in *The Matriarch*.⁷ Rongopai – the gospel, or the good news – was erected to fulfil a command of Te Kooti's to a party of elders and kinspeople who had ridden to see him while he lived in exile and was sheltered by Ngāti Maniapoto in the King Country. Te Kooti told them: 'Go back. Proclaim the gospel, the gentler faith, and the love of God' ('Hoki atu. Whakahaungia te rongopai i runga i te ngāwari me te aroha'.) As a consequence, four houses were built, each bearing a name from this injunction, to hold Te Kooti's word. All four stand today in Poverty Bay. Rongopai is one; Whakahau and Te Aroha are others, while Te Ngawari, at Mangatū, is the third



house erected in that place with this name. It stands for the new and gentler faith, te ngāwari, which Te Kooti constructed after the wars and after his pardon.

Redemption Songs moves away from being primarily a political history. Its focus is not the state, nor its agents and their impact on Māori, which has been the main organising framework of almost all historical writing about the colonial experience of Māori. During the long process of research, what emerged clearly to me was the autonomy of the Māori world, rather than its subordination to and

submersion within the settlers' state. This awareness emerged from reading the Māori written records, as well as from listening to oral accounts. It was that skilled statesman Rewi Maniapoto's intervention which brought the wars to an end, in 1872, when he created a place of sanctuary for Te Kooti – and Rewi set the terms, too. It was not the actions of the military men and fighting forces, who had manifestly failed to capture Te Kooti. An independent Māori leader brought about the resolution. Similarly, it was the woman Te Paea, famous as a mediator, who in 1870 had negotiated the neutrality of Ngāti Kahungunu of coastal Hawke's

Bay, thereby pulling one major Māori kūpapa contingent out from the government alliance. Te Kooti's history intersects with all these other, crucial, Māori leaders. These autonomous Māori decision-makers populate the later period of peace equally visibly and they exist far beyond the end of the nineteenth century, and they exist today. Certainly the state and society has impacted upon their lives, but their decisions and actions – and their analysis of what mattered – is still independent.

The most infamous episode associated with Te Kooti was the executions in November 1868 at Matawhero, Poverty Bay, and any biography has to deal with that event. The common term 'Poverty Bay massacre' has connotations of a loss of control and mindless brutality. The historical emphasis has been on the settler families, including women and children, killed in their 'own' homes. This emphasis is misconceived: it is pure settler historiography. By systematic archival research (the necessary hard labour behind any significant historical reassessment) it became clear that the attack on Matawhero was first and foremost a military situation. It was also a highly controlled attack, which did not extend geographically. Fifty-two people died, 22 of whom were Māori, and 18 were Māori chiefly figures. Māori and Pākehā (and their children of dual descent) died at Matawhero. They died be-

cause it was land which had been illegally sold (some as early as 1843), and was known to have been illegally sold. All the evidence got buried and forgotten in the war. At heart, the killings were forms of summary justice. They stemmed from unlawful dispossession, the key issue in all colonial situations.

Matawhero was land in which Te Kooti had ownership rights, and which he had been defending, with tactics that had indeed included arson, a strategy of the 'social bandit' when no other civil action served, for over 20 years. There were, in fact, two land disputes at Matawhero. One of the more significant documents which emerged from National Archives in Wellington was the land deed Te Kooti had signed in 1865 to uphold one properly conducted gift of land (*tuku whenua*), which had been made at Matawhero.⁸ The discovery of this document altered the perspectives completely. It showed an agreed transaction, while on its obverse side it also revealed the manipulations that had occurred during the prisoners' exile on Wharekauri. The attack on Matawhero was anticipated by Māori and Pākehā alike at Poverty Bay because the area also had a known history of a land sale which had not been agreed to by a segment of the original owners in 1843. Donald McLean, the general government's agent, knew about it from his first visit to Poverty Bay, in 1851, and this purchase had not been upheld by the Old Land Claims' Commissioner when he had investigated it in 1859. The killings at Matawhero were acts demanding repossession by men stolen from and then illegally exiled as 'political prisoners'.

In the end, how do I assess Te Kooti? I assess him by displaying the sources upon which I drew. I have made them transparent, revealing their biases, their purposes and their hopes. Through juxtaposition, the limitations of the narrow views and stereotypes are exposed; by juxtaposition the alternative visions and ideas and the extent of the autonomy of the 19th-century Māori world emerges. After the mid-19th-century wars, Te Kooti became a major spiritual leader for Māori at their time of greatest trouble, a time when the law was applied systematically to dispossess them. Te Kooti's principles of teaching in these later times reveal his growing stature. Of his many famous oral statements I would emphasise three, which he uttered again and again in meeting-houses across the land. War-experienced, it was he who urged the use of the law to defeat the law:

Ko te waka hei hoehoenga mo koutou i muri i ahau, ko te Ture, ma te Ture ano te Ture e aki.
'The canoe for you to paddle after me is the Law. Only the Law will pound the Law'.⁹

The second was his statement to go towards the new and gentler faith, the faith of tolerance: 'hei ko te ngawari'. 'Kia ngawari ngā whakahaere inaianei'.¹⁰ At least four meeting-houses have been built and named to fulfil this

concept. The third is the understanding, which Mau Rua was the first to convey to me, that these are the days of peace. The instruments of war, the swords, or the gun, had been buried in the ground in Aotearoa, even under the mountains themselves (as some versions tell).

It is for all these reasons that 'in our end is our beginning': the occasion when the completed book was returned to the eastern Bay of Plenty in October 1995. It was brought to Boy Biddle, the 81-year-old secretary of the Haahi Ringatū, who died only late last year, and a gathering of Ringatū elders whom he had called together from the Urewera, the Bay of Plenty, and Te Whānau-a-Apanui of the East Coast. The ceremony was at Te Wainui, the land belonging to the Haahi, and it was held in Te Ohaki, the meeting-house named for the dying words of Te Kooti. This house is built on the land which he had named 'the eye of the island' ('ko te Wainui hei kanohi mo te motu nei').¹¹ The land had been given by the government to the Ringatū as a form of compensation (although only after tortuous negotiations and the gift was confirmed, in actuality, only after Te Kooti's death). Two of the nine presentation copies I brought to Wainui were wrapped in hand-made paper of pressed flax and were bound by red muka (finely prepared flax ties). There was no publicity, and no review copies were made available by the publishers until after the book went back. In this manner *Redemption Songs* entered into 'te ao marama', the arena of public debate. Eighteen months later, the new edition was launched in Wellington and taken, the following day, to Tūranganui-a-Kiwa – the birthplace to which Te Kooti was never able to return after the wars, but to whose people the book went home, with *aroha*.

NOTES

- 1 *Redemption Songs*, Auckland University Press, with Bridget Williams Books, 1995. The text published here is a modified version of talks given at the conference 'Focus on Aotearoa/New Zealand', 30 May 1996, New Zealand House, London, and to the Stout Research Centre and the National Library, Wellington, 22 April 1997.
- 2 *Kooti Rikirangi, General and Prophet*, Auckland, 1966.
- 3 See, Judith Binney, Gillian Chaplin, Craig Wallace, *Mihaia: The Prophet Rua Kenana and His Community at Maungapōhatu*, Wellington, 1979, 4th ed., Auckland, 1996.
- 4 Judith Binney, Gillian Chaplin, *Ngā Mōrehu: The Survivors*, Auckland, 1986, 4th ed., 1996, pp.93-4.
- 5 The ship on which the prisoners escaped from Wharekauri.
- 6 A phrase of Professor John Pocock's, when commenting on *Redemption Songs*, in a paper given at the conference, 'The Politics of History', Tulane University, 22-24 March 1996.
- 7 Auckland, 1986.
- 8 Wainui 2, 9 October 1865, Old Land Claims 4/21, National Archives, Wellington. For a full account (and photograph) of the deed see *Redemption Songs*, pp.110-11.
- 9 Quoted, for example, in *Te Whetu Marama o Te Kotahitanga*, 29 August - 5 September 1931, p.9. See *Redemption Songs*, p.490.
- 10 17 March 1889. Quoted in full in *Redemption Songs*, p.422.
- 11 See *ibid*, p.496.