Apirana Turupa Ngata, 1874 – 1950

Jane Stafford and Mark Williams

James Belich in a recent revisionist reading of colonial history, *Making Peoples*, has argued that Māori did not in fact lose the fierce military engagements over land between Māori and Pākehā in the 1860s. In the sense that there was no final surrender and no utter vanquishing of the Māori forces this is arguably true. Yet Māori suffered a series of local defeats and the outcome of the wars was disastrous for them. From the 1870s until the First World War European society in New Zealand, allowing for economic recessions and set-backs, made continuous progress in settling the land, building infrastructure, attracting capital, exporting timber, wool and meat. By the turn of the century New Zealand was a more comprehensively 'settled' country than Australia and a mood of smug satisfaction at their achievements and prospects was widespread among Pākehā. In the same period, in a reverse mirror image of Pākehā success and growth in confidence, Māori lost much of their population, their land, their economic base, and the sense that theirs was the dominant culture in the land.

This period has been characterized as one of 'despair' among Māori by demographer, Ian Pool, and it is the context in which Sir Apirana Ngata's rise to prominence in the early decades of the twentieth century must be understood. Ngata was more important than any other individual in reversing the calamity that Māori had suffered. His efforts at reigniting Māori self-esteem and improving Māori farming, health and economic outcomes were central to what has been called a 'Māori Renaissance'. In the early decades of the twentieth century. But equally important were his efforts to promote cultural revival. At a time when it was widely assumed that Māori were destined to melt into the dominant white race, Ngata – who shared that view himself – provided a tireless example of improving effort rather than passive decline. At a time when many Pākehā assumed that actual Māori would vanish while their culture was preserved as an antiquarian curiosity, Ngata insisted that modernity belonged to Māori as well as Pākehā. At a time when Māori cultural forms – carving, haka, poi, house-building, song – were languishing, Ngata demanded that the culture be practised with respect and precision.

Ngata was born on 3 July 1874 into the Ngāti-Porou tribe at Te Araroa on the East Coast of the North Island. The Ngata family was prominent in the

region, and Apirana was marked early for leadership of his people. Having accepted Christianity, Ngāti-Porou had in the main supported the Crown during what Belich has called 'the New Zealand Wars' and had retained much of its land. The tribe had also seized the economic opportunities provided by the Pākehā, developing trade and engaging in organized farming during a period when other Māori communities were losing their own land or lacked the economic means to develop what they held. At the time of Apirana's birth, his father Paratene was engaged in systematic and successful economic activity. Ngāti Porou land was cultivated with wheat, maize, and corn. Pigs and other produce were carried to the Auckland markets in vessels owned by the tribe.

While other Māori leased their land to Pākehā farmers or worked as shearers on land no longer theirs, Ngata's family farmed sheep and invested the profits. But Pākehā economic expansion increased at the general expense of Māori, who lacked access to capital to develop their lands to meet the expanding opportunities of international trade. The pattern of raising produce for urban markets in Auckland or Sydney was in conflict with an economy which required ever more land for an industrialized pastoralism directed at the imperial market. Apirana, then, knew as a boy both the determination of Māori people like his father to advance the material life of his people by way of trade, education and modernity and the impediments thrown against that effort by a State which reserved the benefits of prosperity for Pākehā.

The key to the position Apirana took as an adult towards the precarious position of his people in relation to an expansive settler society which he saw as both cruel and well-intentioned is the education he received at Te Aute College. Opened in 1854, the school initially aimed to provide its Māori pupils with a primary education to equip them with basic skills in line with the policy for Native schools at the time. The intention was to lift the race out of its threatened condition at a time when it was widely held to be dying, but not to raise it to the condition of the Pākehā. In 1878, however, John Thornton, whose background was with the London Missionary Society in India, was appointed headmaster and the school embraced a more ambitious purpose for its pupils. Thornton shifted the emphasis of the school to academic learning modelled on the English grammar schools, preparing select Māori students not for jobs as shearers or domestic servants but for the professions. His aim was to educate future leaders of the Māori race to be able to compete with Pākehā on their own terms.

Ngata became Thornton's most distinguished pupil. Te Aute not only prepared him for an exemplary career in law, politics and scholarship, it also

encouraged in him the determination to dedicate his life to advancing the Māori people. None was better suited to Thornton's plan to cultivate Māori leaders than Apirana. As a pupil, like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) he acted as delegate to Thornton after an unjust punishment was levied by prefects on his fellows, winning a measured redress for the wrong. This might seem to indicate a source of his ability as an adult to negotiate with Pākehā authority figures. However, Ngata never needed to adopt Stephen Dedalus's overtly rebellious stance towards authority; he came to Te Aute as one already chosen by his people. The schoolboy with a sense of his status as one singled out by his people became the politician who advocated Māori interests and needs to the powerful of the colony. Ngata thus became an interpreter of his people to Pākehā, and an exemplum selected by Pākehā to represent all that they considered most positive in 'their' native race. To be able to lead his people as he sought to do, Ngata had to prove himself in terms recognised by the dominant culture, and Te Aute provided Apirana with work habits, scholarly success, access to European knowledge, and a command of the English language.

Yet Te Aute could not afford a complete education for Ngata. He required more detailed and extensive knowledge of the Māori as well as the Pākehā worlds if he was to negotiate between his own oral inheritance and the rhetorical, literary, and legal modes of colonial governance. He must immerse himself in kinds of knowledge not available at Anglican Te Aute. Between school and university Ngata, on his father's instructions, spent two years among his relatives where he committed to memory the oral traditions of his people. He was soon to demonstrate his ability to translate one kind of knowledge into the forms of the other.

In 1890 he entered Canterbury University College where he studied for a combined arts and law degree, taking Latin, Greek, English, Constitutional History, Political Economy, Mathematics and Geology. The dominant intellectual figure was Professor John Macmillan Brown, who keenly promoted Polynesian ethnological studies. The field was populated by enthusiastic and sometimes highly gifted amateurs, who collected the lore of the ancient Māori with a mixture of scientific rigor and Celtic Twilight myth-gathering. Ngata's interest in the ethnological study of Māori participated in this world; he joined the Polynesian Society in 1895 and published sporadically in its journal. He shared many of the prevailing notions of racial hierarchy in which Māori were granted a particularly elevated position among the native races. But he was also, like his close friend the anthropologist Te Rangi Hiroa [Peter Buck], an expert bringing Māori understandings of their own culture and its meanings

into the professional realm. Māori had long collaborated in the ethnological interest in their culture. Grey's source for *Polynesian Mythology* (1835) was Wiremu Te Rangikāheke, but his presence was largely invisible in the text. Ngata made the culture visible by way of his spectacular exhibitions of traditional arts of dance and performance at giant 'hui' or gatherings staged before the most distinguished guests in the colony, and through his political career. But he would also contribute to scholarly research, collecting traditional materials, especially songs which he published, and promoting the academic study of Māori culture in the university colleges. In the 1928 Preface to Part I of *Nga Moteatea* Ngata observes that a request to the New Zealand University Senate that Māori be included in the examinations for the B.A. was met with the response: '"Where is the literature suitable as text books for students in the language? What books are there wherein is recorded the classical language of the Maori?"' *Nga Moteatea* addressed that lack.

Among the many social activities of the young, small Canterbury College, Ngata joined the Dialectic Society, a social and debating society founded in 1878 'to promote the fellowship and mental culture of students'. Meetings involved songs, music recitations, and readings as well as formal debates on contemporary issues, including the topic, 'That the society deprecates the idea that barbarous nations may be dispossessed of their lands because more civilized nations may make use of them', which was lost nine to three. In 1892 the society held a poetry competition, and Ngata won first prize with his poem 'A Scene from the Past'.

Written in the high Victorian style on the subject of Māori traditionalism and its difficult place in the modern world, 'A Scene from the Past' indicates his sense of Māori options at this formative stage of Ngata's life. The poem begins with a lament couched entirely in the tones of colonial 'dying race' rhetoric as Māori contemplate a modern world that has no place for them:

> We reck not that the day is past;
> That Death and Time, the cruel Fates,
> Have torn us from the scenes we loved,
> And brought us to this unknown world.

The 'sturdy oak' of European society is compared to the 'flaxen bark' of the Māori:

> Your iron clad, our humble reed,
> Made sorry company, and you glided
> Well equipped the whilst we trembled.

How should Māori exist in this 'unknown world', especially when any negotiation with the present, the poem suggests, can provoke the charge that the modernizer is 'traitor to the past'. 'Traitors!' Ngata responds, 'when our hearts are beating,/ Thrilling stirred by recollections?' It is the memorialising function of the poem that paradoxically earns the poet his right to engage with the modern:

> Leave us with the past
> In mem'ry let us wander back
> Amid the scenes we loved of yore.
> There let us roam untrammelled, free!
> For mem'ry, like that herb, embalms,
> Preserves, endears our recollections.

This generalized rhetoric places the poem in the conventions of colonial writing, among those ethnographical epics, such as Alfred Domett's *Ranolf and Amohia* (1872, revised 1883) which Ngata may well have encountered in Macmillan Brown's classes at Canterbury College. But the poem proceeds not as memorialising nostalgia but by presenting a transliteration of a performance – dance, song and ceremonial – very much located in a vigorous, confident present. The performers may be '[e]mblem of a race that's speeding/ Sadly onward to oblivion', yet the description of the karanga (call), the assembly of the tribes, the 'Maiden's Welcome' ('Softly and gently, and chanting most sweetly,/Uplift them their welcome, "Haere mai! Haere mai!"') works against the conventional frame. What is described is given its own dignity and consequence, and it is linked to other noble pasts. The men performing the welcome are depicted as graceful rather than savage, and their nobility is reinforced by a reference to ancient Greek culture:

> Heads erect and bodies stately,
> Proud, imperious, yet be graceful;
> Arms and limbs in rhythm moving,
> Mars, Apollo, are reviewing.

The women are praised both for their natural grace, and for the way in which their beauty can be compared to that of classical antiquity:

> How nimbly they foot it, how supple their bodies;
> Ye nymphs and ye naiads, beware of your laurels!
> These children untutored, by Nature endowed,
> May charm yet Apollo, the god of all graces.

Here, as elsewhere in the poem, the classical education of Thornton's Te Aute and Macmillan Brown's Canterbury College provides Ngata with a literary language familiar to his European readers. But set alongside that is the formal shape of the ceremony he is describing, a powhiri (wecome) in which warriors and maidens perform in the Māori language rather than the language of Victorian metaphor:

Ko te iwi Maori e ngunguru nei! Au, au, au e ha!

In 'A Scene from the Past' Ngata sees the Māori people as threatened by modernity; their world is fragile by comparison with that sturdy confidence exhibited by Pākehā. Yet he also invests great and positive significance in the traditions of the past, giving them life in the poem which is a performance of haka, poi, and choral traditions as much as an English literary exercise. The poem, then, is caught between the worlds it describes: written in the style of the education he had received at Te Aute and Canterbury College, 'A Scene from the Past' claims the modern world for Māori even as it laments the passing of old Māori ways. At the same time those ways are given vigorous life in the poem as an enactment of the past. As well as winning the Dialectical Society Prize, 'A Scene from the Past' was published in the 1908 publication, *Souvenir of Maori Congress, July 1908: Scenes from the Past with Maori Versions of Popular English Songs*, and in an elaborate 1903 publication, *Royalty in New Zealand: The Visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York to New Zealand 10th-27th June 1901: A Descriptive Narrative* by R. A. Loughnan. Ngata along with his friend James Carroll was involved in organizing a 'great Hui' (meeting) which greeted the royal visitors at Rotorua, in which carefully crafted archaism.

Having completing his B.A. in political science in 1893, the first Māori to complete a degree at a New Zealand university, Ngata moved to Auckland University where he gained an LLB in 1896. He began his career by working for a law firm, and was soon involved with the Te Aute College Students' Association which from 1897 held annual conferences. Ngata was secretary from 1899. Returning to his family land with his wife Arihia Kane Tamati and their children, Ngata chose not to practise law, and instead dedicated himself to the improvement and modernization of farming methods, writing numerous articles for Māori newspapers. Achieving in his social and political activities the balance between cultures he showed in 'A Scene from the Past', Ngata also encouraged a revival of Māori crafts and establishing a means of signifying, vivifying, and profiting from traditional culture without bastardizing or corrupting it. He encouraged not only traditional performance arts – haka

and poi – but also decorative arts. In 1927 a Māori school of arts was established in Rotorua with his support. Ngata was exacting in the standards he expected of all those who worked with him, whether as carvers or haka performers, but did not object to the introduction of modern methods of production into traditional activities.

Ngata's friendship with the politician and Liberal party minister of Native Affairs James Carroll led to his involvement in legislation in 1900 which set up councils through which Māori could exercise some measure of control over their land. In 1905 he stood for parliament in the Eastern Māori seat which he won and subsequently held until 1943, serving as a member of the Native Affairs Committee, on the Native Land Commission, the Executive Council and in cabinet as Native Minister in 1928. He was knighted in 1927.

Ngata's grasp of tradition is everywhere informed by his complex sense of the presence of the past within modernity. The dominant view was that Māori had no future in that modernity. In explaining to Parliament the aims of the political movement called the Young Māori Party that grew from the Te Aute College Old Boys' Association, Ngata – who was travelling secretary for the Party – outlined his views on assimilation, accepting as Ranginui Walker notes that eventually 'a fusion of the two races' would occur. But this did not mean extinction. In that conjoining Māori pride would be preserved and each would respect the other. When Michael Joseph Savage proposed a model of equality between Māori and Pākehā, Ngata, as Walker recounts, argued that equality 'was not to be equated with cultural absorption'.

Ngata resisted the merely decorative use of Māori cultural display by government whenever overseas visitors needed entertaining. He supported the huge welcome given to the Duke and Duchess of York, but resisted offering the same kind of welcome to visiting American sailors. His sense of occasion demanded high dignity on both sides. Impressed from an early age by the greatness of traditional carving of houses, an art disappearing in the late nineteenth century, Ngata moved to revive traditional arts and crafts by decorating his own house in the ancestral fashion and opened it with a great hui, inviting the governor and the Prime Minister. Here he demonstrated his sense of appropriate cultural display, not as tourist kitsch but as dignified performance by Māori as a sign of their character and status as a race. He understood culture in terms of the prevailing racial hierarchy of the time and the dying race theory, but within these he saw the Māori race as able to present itself with pride and assertion.

Ngata used his influence as a Member of Parliament not only to modify laws about land tenure but also to support the publication of Elsdon Best's monographs on Māori life, notably *Tuhoe*, and to record Māori songs on an early Dictaphone. These recordings became the basis of the four volumes of *Nga Moteatea*, Ngata's most significant contribution to the establishment of a Māori literature available in both Māori and English. In the introduction he wrote that he felt 'happier and freer in his own language. It was the language of the texts he fondled. It was the language of that noble generation of singers who sang with their hearts and interpreted that which they sang with shimmering hearts and eloquent eyes, after the manner of their race'. *Nga Moteatea* is not simply an act of cultural recovery or preservation, the collecting of the songs of a dying race; it is both a veneration of that past, a determined effort to record it accurately, and the basis of systematic study of Māori culture in the present in the most rigorous terms available. He himself collected the songs on his travels around the country and the volumes were published over almost century, the last appearing posthumously. Ngata also published waiaita in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* and, as a prominent member of the Anglican Church, he revised the Māori Bible. His Māori grammar had gone through five editions by time of his death.

Ngata was awarded an honorary doctorate in literature from the University of New Zealand in 1948, citing him as 'one of the most distinguished of Māori scholars … [who] had devoted himself to the study of Māori poetry and his collection of Māori poems was already a classic.… His systematic and creative scholarship would go far to help forge our common destiny'. Ngata would not have quibbled with the inclusive term of settler nationalism, but his priority as scholar, editor, interpreter and advocate of his people to Pākehā audiences, performer, author, and speaker was always that those who had lived so long in the country should possess the means of cultural expression rooted in their own past that would assert their difference within that 'common destiny'.

LINKS

Te Ara – 1966 Encyclopaedia of New Zealand
New Zealand Electronic Text Centre
New Zealand History on line
New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship
Search Te Ao Hou for Apirana Ngata
Dictionary of New Zealand Biography

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