A turbulent time

Danny Keenan

In the early 1860s, Governor George Grey was holding out an olive branch to the new Tainui King, Tawhiao.

It wasn't, as soon became clear, that the Governor was devoted to peace.

He was hoping Tawhiao wouldn't insist on being acknowledged as the Maori King, and lord and master over Tainui territory.

And while the Governor wooed Tawhaio, he was also building the Great South Rd.

This road, like the autobahns in Germany, was being built to speed troops to an anticipated warfront. In this case, a warfront in the Waikato.

Governor Grey was also calling for more British troops. He warned Westminster that the natives were planning a pre-emptive strike on Auckland.

There was an element of truth in that because the Ngati Maniapoto chief, Rewi Maniapoto, was uptight about the colonisers, and muttered about advancing on Auckland and driving the whites back into the sea.

It was probably an idle threat, born of frustration. But it was a good enough for George Grey.

And on July 12, 1863, the Governor's forces struck.

The most significant battle of the war was at Rangiriri on November 20, 1863.

On that day, Tawhiao and his Tainui people carried a terrible burden for all Maori.

It was here that it was decided who would control New Zealand – Maori or Pakeha.

For Maori to have kept at least some vestige of control over Aotearoa, Tawhiao's warriors needed either to beat the British forces, or inflict enough damage on them to force concessions.

They did neither. And on December 8, 1863, General Cameron entered Ngaruawahia and ran up the Union Jack over Tawhiao's home.

Governor Grey's original war objective – to take Ngaruawahia, the home of the King movement – had now been reached. But, flushed with success, the Governor ordered General Cameron to continue driving south, to pursue and destroy the King's army.

The final battle, another British victory, came in April 1864 at Orakau. By this time, most of Tawhiao's people had already withdrawn into the interior of Ngati Maniapoto, to what became known as the King Country, where they would remain for a generation.

So who was this Tawhiao?

He was born at Orongokoekoea on the upper Mokau River, probably in the early 1820s.

His mother was a woman called Whakawi, and his dad was Potatau Te Wherowhero – a leader and warrior of great mana, and a man you wouldn't want to upset.

In 1831, after the siege of Pukerangiora, near what is now New Plymouth, it's said Te Wherowhero's warriors lined up 150 of the captured defenders. And with a single blow to the head with his mere, he despatched them, one by one.

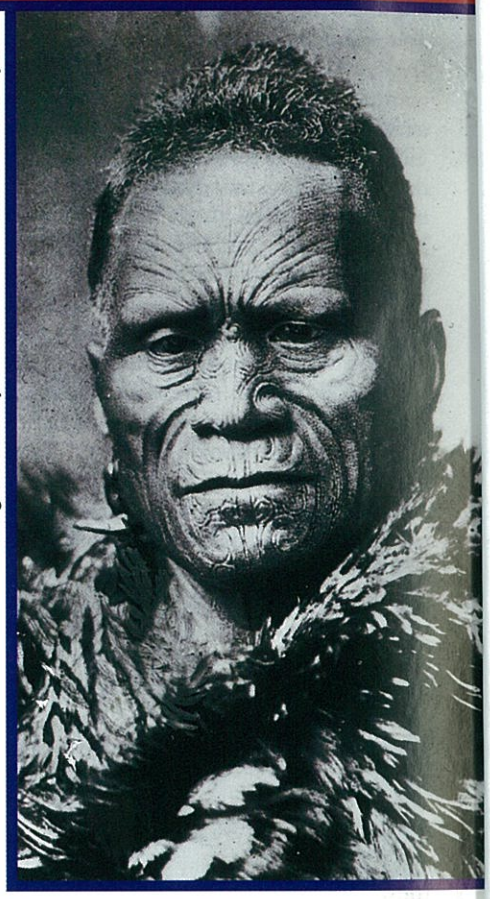
Tawhiao was raised by his grandparents and, during his teens, was encouraged by his father to be a man of peace.

He grew to about 180cm tall and, unusually for his time, took a full face moko.

In 1858, Te Wherowhero responded to pleas and was crowned the first Maori King, by Wiremu Tamihana, of Ngati Haua. His followers hoped the tribes would rally round the old warrior, and this unity would help protect Maori land.

But Te Wherowhero was already well past his prime when he took the job, and he died in 1860.

Tawhiao wasn't a shoo-in for the succession. He didn't have his father's mana and was thought, by some, not to be up to the kingship. There was talk of giving the job to his big sister, Princess Te Paea. But in the end, Tawhiao was the man, and he reigned as the second Maori king for 34 years, until 1894.



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Tawhiao, the second Maori king, reigned from 1860 until his death in 1894.

His reign coincided with the most turbulent era of Maori-Pakeha relations. The settlers were lusting after more Maori land, and Maori were reeling from their confrontations with the European world.

Within the space of a generation, they'd gone from a world in which they were in control, to one where they had little say.

Tawhiao and his people were virtually landless – they'd lost 1.2 million acres to the Pakeha – and here they were, wandering in exile, anxious, deprived and frustrated, hoping somehow for deliverance.

One of Tawhiao's first moves was to declare that an aukati, or boundary line, would run around the rohe of Ngati Maniapoto.

No Pakeha were to cross the line. Above all, no prospectors and surveyors were to set foot there.

The King also banished the Native Land Court. And, for what it was worth, the confiscations which followed the wars weren't recognised either.

Tawhiao could also see that fighting the Pakeha was fruitless. And so, in 1866, he called on all Maori to abandon war.

The Government had decided to let Tawhiao have his aukati area, and the people of the King Movement managed to make some progress.

They fared better than Maori outside of the aukati, who faced direct losses from confiscations and the Native Land Court.

Meanwhile, Tawhiao remained, in the eyes of the Crown at least, a mystery man. He refused to meet with Crown officials, except low ranking officers of the Native Affairs Department – to whom he would give an earful about their Government.

When high powered meetings were called for, it was often Rewi Maniapoto who would front for the Kingites. And, in time, many Crown officials figured that Rewi wielded the real power, because he exercised the mana of the area.

By contrast, Tawhiao was a refugee, a king without a kingdom.

At the same time, Tawhiao took a high, non-compromising view of his office and his role as King of the Maori people.

Not surprisingly, tensions between Tawhiao and Rewi, and their Tainui and Maniapoto peoples, began to escalate.

At the same time, Tawhiao's power base among his own people was eroding. More Waikato began to drift back north onto their confiscated land, seeking the return of blocks from the Compensation Court.

Some also wanted to reconcile with their Waikato whanaunga who hadn't fought with the King, and who were, in Kingite terms, kupapa.

Matters got worse for Tawhiao when the Crown began to negotiate directly with Rewi over the opening up of the King Country, so that the main trunk railway could go through.

The land was, after all, in Rewi's area; and Tawhiao was proving too much of an obstacle.

In 1881, Tawhiao finally returned to the Waikato, after meeting with the Mayor of Alexandra (present day Pirongia) and pledging peace. He then set up home in Whatiwhatihoe, within a confiscated area.

In 1884, Tawhiao led a delegation to London, over land issues. "I am going," he said, "to see the Queen of England, to have the Treaty of Waitangi honoured."

He petitioned Victoria for a separate Maori parliament and sought the appointment of a special commissioner as an intermediary between the Pakeha and Maori parliaments – and an independent commission of inquiry into land confiscations.

It was, however, a wasted trip. The British referred him back to the New Zealand Government – which dismissed or ignored his proposals.

In 1886, Tawhiao suggested to the Native Minister, John Ballance, that the government should set up an autonomous Maori Council. That would preside over a range of Maori issues, under the King's mana, Tawhiao suggested. Ballance didn't move.

At the same time, efforts were being made by Nga Puhi especially to set up a Maori Parliament. Nga Puhi invited Tawhiao to visit the north, and to discuss a movement of national unity for Maori.

Tawhiao headed north for talks. However, his insistence that the new movement – Te Kotahitanga – should operate under the mana of the King wasn't acceptable in the north.

Te Kotahitanga decided to go it alone, under the leadership of men like Henare Toamoana of Ngati Kahungunu.

Tawhiao returned to Whatiwhatihoe and set up his own council, Te Kauhanganui. It had a constitution, separate Houses, departments, a newspaper – it even had a Minister of Pakeha Affairs.

Tawhiao died in 1894 at Parawera, and was buried at Taupiri.

He'd been in the box seat of New Zealand history for 34 years. He'd been a highly regarded adversary, he was seen as a prophet, and held office as the second Maori King.

Yet, despite his efforts, his people's land hadn't been returned.

Later Maori Kings, and senior people from the Kingitanga, carried the issues of raupatu and rangatiratanga forward, but it wasn't until 1995 that Robert Mahuta, and the Maori Queen, Te Atairangikaahu, were able finally to reach the settlement with the Crown that Tawhiao had long sought.

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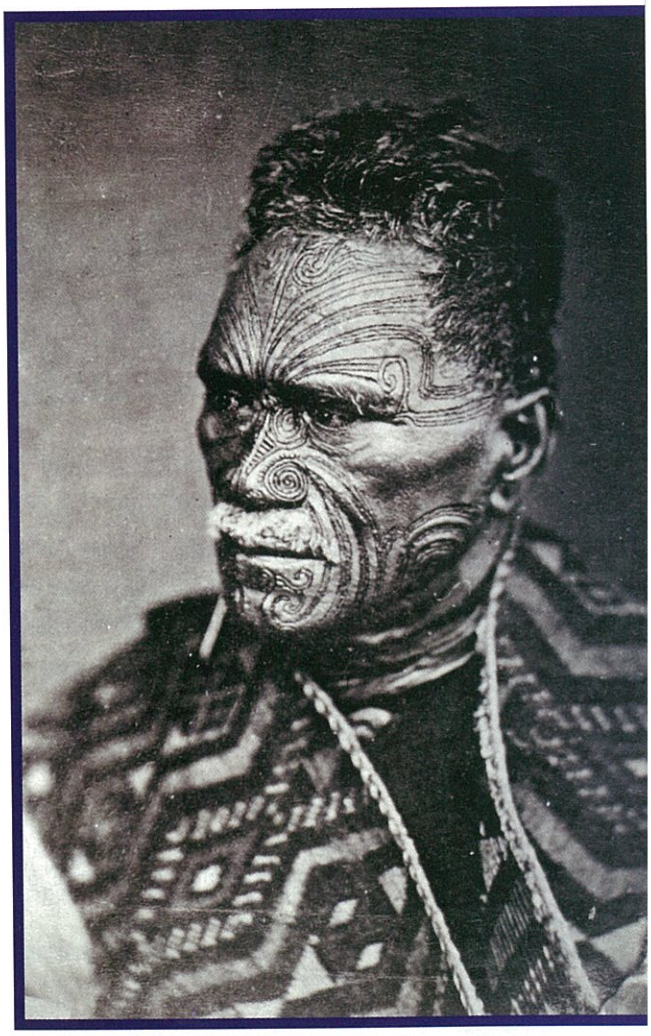

Tawhiao spent most of his reign grappling with the consequences of the raupatu.