Hone Heke – his mana endures

by Danny Keenan

It'd be stretching things to say Maori rolled out the red carpet for the first new settlers.

But it's true, nonetheless, that they were interested in the possibilities that came with the newcomers.

The tangata whenua were happy to trade with the Pakeha, because they could see benefits in that.

They were not so sure, though, about the missionaries, even if some Maori "saw the light".

But there was one item on the agenda of the new arrivals that Maori took a dim view of. That was the settlers' assumption that they'd soon be taking over and running the country.

In the settler mind, it was an open and shut case. The traders needed protection for their growing local investments. And without British law, and the organs of the British empire, how else could they get it?

The missionaries had a similar attitude. They could see that, in those pioneering times, the country could be heading for hell in a hand cart. They wanted British law and order.

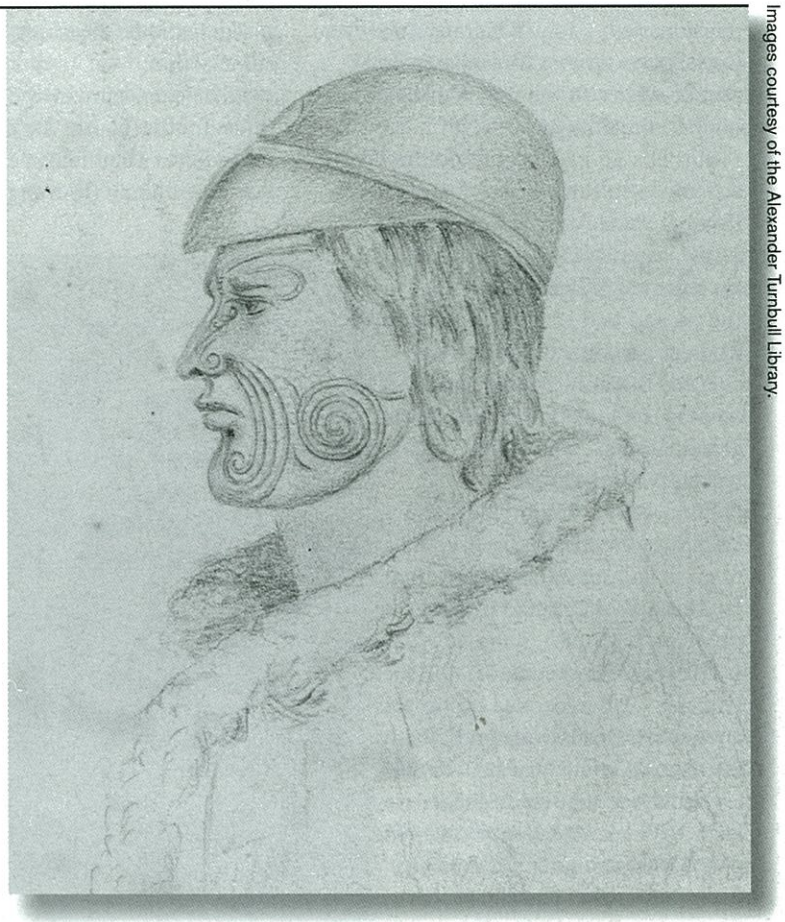
And, before land-hungry immigrants overwhelmed Maori, the missionaries' believed something had to be done.

So British intervention was inevitable, and plans were made for it.

But even though, Maori far outnumbered the settlers at that stage it never seriously crossed the Crown's mind to take into consideration what Maori thought about the prospect of Aotearoa becoming British.

We know the rest. As the 19th century unfolded, many Maori would rise and put the case for Maori autonomy and rangatiratanga. The Kingitanga is just the best known of these efforts.

Perhaps Hone Heke was the first Maori to say: "We're not going to take this any more." He's certainly one of the first to do something about it.



Images courtesy of the Alexander Turnbull Library.

An illustration of Hone Heke, by John Alexander Gilfillan, drawn around 1846.

He's the one who had the British flagpole cut down – and not once, but four times.

That's not his only claim to fame, however. If you scrutinise a copy of the Treaty, you'll see his name there. He was the first one to sign it.

And when he became cynical about the British honouring its promises to observe tino rangatiratanga, he led his people into war against the British Army.

In my book, he was our first Maori radical, our first true rebel.

Hone Heke Pokai – to give him his full name – was Nga Puhi, from the hapu of Ngati Rahiri, Ngati Tautahi and Te Uri-o-Hua Nga Puhi.

His mother was Te Kona, and Tupanapana was his dad. Hone was born at Pakaraka, not far from Moerewa, not long after the death of his uncle Pokaia, who'd been killed at Moremonui in 1807. Hone was given his name.

Hone was the third child, with an older brother and sister. Now, if he'd played by the book, he'd have stayed playing second fiddle to his tuakana, throughout his life.

That was the thing about Hone. He didn't always play by the rules – not other people's rules anyway. And perhaps history has vindicated him for that.

But at the time, when he was still a young man, he'd get right up the noses of his elders. During the hot debates before the Treaty was signed, Hone made sure he was heard, loud and clear. Some

kaumatua told him to sit down, and shut up.

In the end, what redeemed Hone was his energy and his confidence. He had the bearing of a rangatira - if not the credentials. His korero was strong too.

In fact, he was criticised by the missionaries for "haranguing the Governor in a most offensive manner". A rebuke which, in the minds of some, was quite a compliment.

But let's go back to his childhood and school days. Hone spent his early years living at Pokaia's pa on Kaikohe Hill. These were wild times, and as a kid he narrowly survived an attack on the pa and had to make a dash for Pakinga pa, some distance away.

Even there he wasn't safe, so he was sent as a whangai to his grandparents, who lived out of harm's way on the coast.

Hone was a bright kid. And in 1824 he was one of the first Maori to go to an Anglican mission school (at Kerikeri) which had been set up by Henry Williams.

Like those kaumatua, Henry Williams also reckoned Hone was an upstart. Headstrong and moody. But the reverend warmed to him. He could see that the teenager was keen to learn and, for a time, the pair developed quite a friendship.

But when the Treaty became an issue, that friendship took a turn for the worse.

After it was signed, Henry Williams had started travelling about, extolling the Treaty's virtues to Maori. Hone wasn't buying it. "Soft soap" he called it. Too slippery, he reckoned. Too tricky. The Treaty may have fine words, yes, but could you trust them?

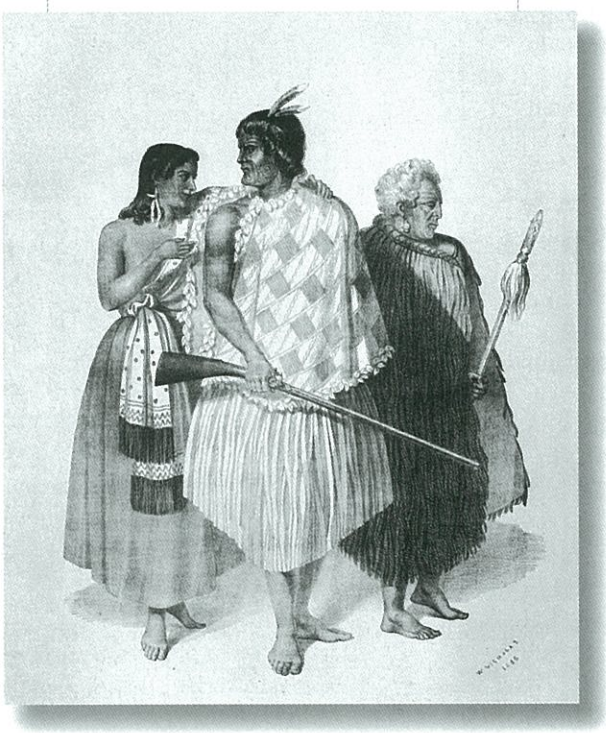
Meanwhile, Hone had married Riria, a daughter of Te Pahi, who'd once lived in Sydney. Hone and Riria had two kids - Hoani and Marianne, named after two of Henry William's children. But both died at a young age.

In 1835, Hone was baptised, and was appointed as a lay preacher with the mission church. A couple of years after that, Riria died.

So Hone married Rongo, a daughter of Hongi Hika. Like her dad, Rongo was made of stout stuff. Like Hone, she'd also tasted European life. She'd once lived with a missionary family and, like Hone, she knew her scriptures.

But never mind his conversion. Hone still considered himself, first and foremost, to be a warrior - and he'd seen some action.

He'd taken part in the earlier musket raids to the south. He'd been severely wounded at Tauranga in 1830, and had to be carried home from the front.



Hone Heke (centre) with his wife and Kawiti, drawn by Joseph Jenner Merrett.

And in 1837, he fought against Pomare at Otuihu, where he was, again, badly wounded.

The irony of that stoush, which might have cost Hone his life, was that Pomare was later shelled by the British - for supporting Hone.

In 1840 the new consul, William Hobson, set about signing a Treaty with Maori, in order to extend British sovereignty to New Zealand.

On February 5, a big hui of northern Maori was held at Waitangi. William Hobson read out the proposed Treaty, with Henry Williams translating. Then he invited the chiefs to have their say.

About now, the record gets hazy.

Most missionary diaries record that Hone was "violent in his opposition" to the Treaty - that he spoke strongly, and aggressively.

According to the account of the missionary Samuel Ironside, Hone almost won the day for the opposition. And the worst insult the missionaries could hurl at those speaking against the Treaty was that they were "influenced by the Catholics". As if those sceptical chiefs had a brief from the Pope.

It took Tamati Waka Nene to rescue the proceedings. He spoke in support of the Treaty - if you believe Anglican missionary records - "with a natural eloquence that astounded and impressed everyone".

Of course, it's just possible that the comment reflects wishful thinking by the missionaries, who were anxious to have Britannia ruling the roost.

In fact, it's hard to know what either Hone or Tamati Waka Nene really thought or said. My guess is that both men were suspicious. And edgy. One missionary recalled that the two engaged in a "heated war of words".

So how was it, then, that Hone, with all his "violent opposition", and his "haranguing the governor", became the first chief to sign it?

I've often wondered about that.

And the fact is, historical research doesn't - at this stage, anyway - shed much light on his motives for seeming to change his stance. His strong language and demeanour suggest he was opposed to the Treaty. So why sign?

We can only "connect the dots" - move from what we do know about the events of the time, and Hone's beliefs and character, to hazard reasonable guesses.

And, my guess is that once Hone became convinced there would be a Treaty, he wanted his autograph there, prominently, on the record. A sign to history, perhaps, that he was at the centre

of things. Remember, he was a man who liked the limelight.

Perhaps too, hoping against hope, he decided to suspend his scepticism and subscribe to that solemn promise guaranteeing Maori te tino rangatiratanga – "the full, exclusive and undisturbed possession of their lands and estates, forests and fisheries which they may collectively or individually possess so long as it is their wish...".

By signing, perhaps he was also saying, in effect: "The Treaty negotiations are done. I've said my piece. The debate was robust, but I won this argument. I won the day. I expect my views to be heeded."

By signing, he was holding the Crown to it, if you like.

But we'll never know for sure. Maori was not a written culture, so signing parchments meant little. Maori was an oral culture. Things were said, strong points were made, understandings were reached.

Can you imagine how much we've lost, not only because there's no record of these crucial Maori discussions – but also because the Crown would insist that only the written version would count?

Anyway. That's just my guess.

I once asked Miria Simpson why she thought Hone had put his name at the head of the list. She'd spent 30 years identifying all the Maori signatories and she'd thought heaps about their motives.

As far as Hone was concerned, she had no doubts.

"He jumped the queue," she told me.

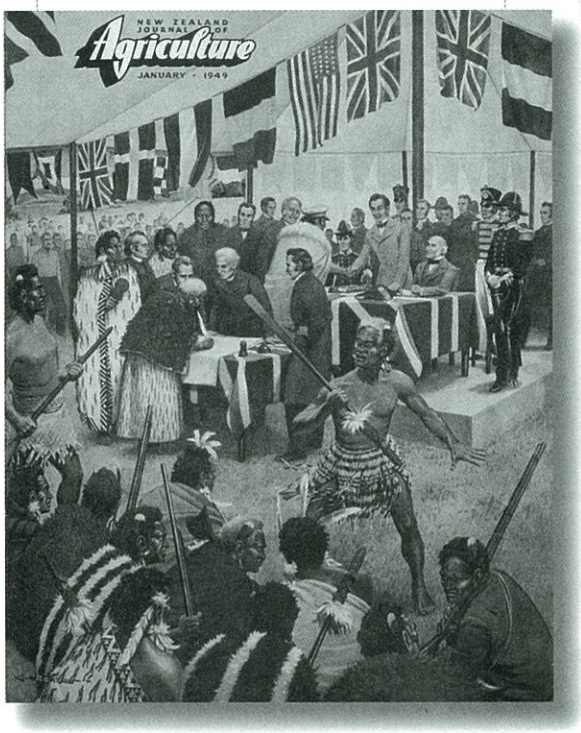
Her idea has the ring of truth. We know that some chiefs, such as Kawiti, refused to sign beneath Hone's signature. They returned later, and asked that their marks be recorded on the document "above that of Hone Heke".

After the Treaty signing at Waitangi, copies were taken around New Zealand. Other Maori were encouraged to sign. Many did. Many more did not.

At first, Hone gave Governor Hobson the benefit of the doubt over the Treaty. But he was still sceptical – and when the promised good times didn't show up, he and his people became disillusioned.

There were other developments, too, that ticked him off. William Hobson had moved his new government away to Auckland, to the heartland of the traditional enemy, Ngati Whatua.

What's more, the Crown tried to stop the people of the north from felling their kauri. Hone's old sparring partner, Tamati Waka Nene, had some direct advice on that score: "Just try to stop me," he challenged the Governor.



A reconstruction of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, by Leonard Cornwall Mitchell.

Hone, meanwhile, was cruising the streets of Kororareka. His attitude reminds me of a badge I once saw: "If you're looking for trouble," it said, "I can offer you a wide variety."

He was angry that an English magistrate, Thomas Beckham, had been appointed. Did this mean that Maori authority now took second place to English law? And when Maketu was hanged for murder in 1842, it was clear that customary law was being disregarded.

It's likely, too, that Hone had heard how the British were dealing to the Aborigine people in Australia. He was also seen "consorting" with the American consul James Clendon – and he knew as well that, in 1843, a government committee in England had reported that the Treaty was "injudicious". A mistake, in other words.

All in all, the signs didn't look promising for Maori.

The Union Jack, fluttering on a flagpole over Maiki Hill above Kororareka, became a focus for his dissatisfaction. It riled and provoked him.

Where once the flag of the independent united tribes had once proudly flown, here was this sign of empire, in his face, reminding him who was the new boss.

So Hone's men cut down the flagpole. Not just once, but four times, from July 1844 to March 1845.

It was hardly a devastating military blow. But as a symbolic act, the axing of the flagpole was powerful.

In fact, Hone himself didn't do the chopping. His men did. Men such as Te Haratua, who acted on his orders.

Most Nga Puhi agreed with Hone's reasons. But the British and the settlers? They read it as a blatant act of defiance.

The settlers held the Americans partly to blame. The magistrate, Thomas Beckham, was so toey he wanted their flagpole cut down.

By this time, William Hobson had died. The new Governor, Robert Fitzroy, ordered troops in from Australia.

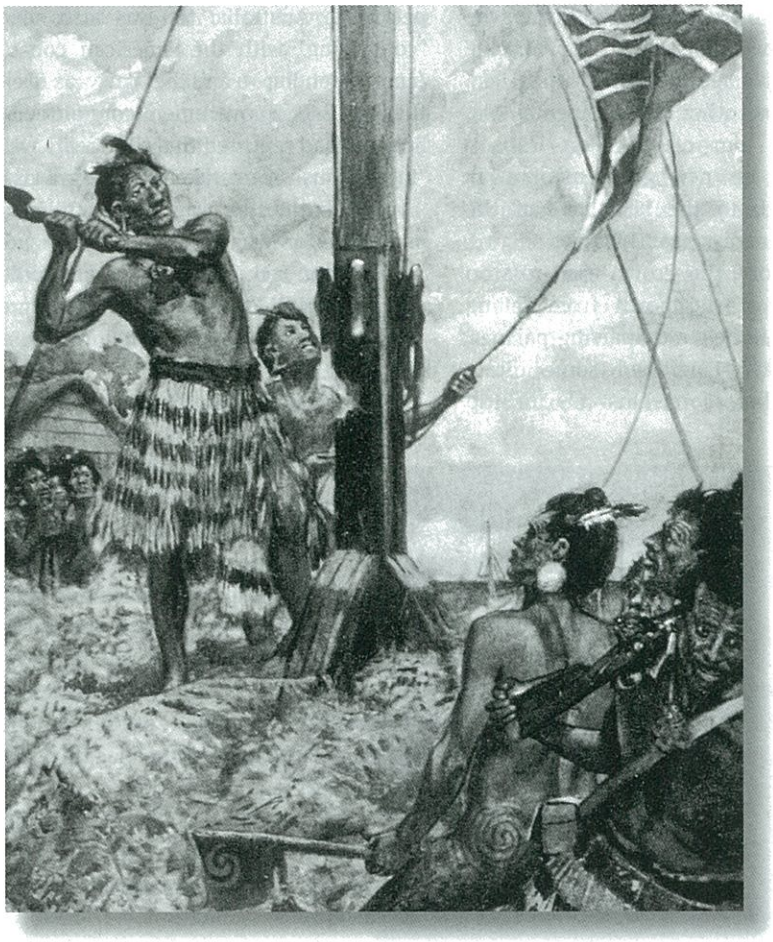
And at midnight, March 11, 1845, after the pole was felled for the last time, Hone's men were attacked by patrolling British soldiers. The fight spilled over into Kororareka.

The British fled to their ships and shelled the town, setting it on fire.

The northern war was under way.

Kororareka was wrecked. After it had been destroyed, Hone moved his men inland to Te Ahuahu, east of Lake Omapere, and they built a new defensive pa nearby at Puketutu.

Meanwhile, British troops began to



Hone Heke fells the flagstaff at Kororareka, illustration by Arthur David McCormick.

gather at Kerikeri for the pursuit.

Tamati Waka Nene followed Hone inland too – and the two groups skirmished. Tamati said, in effect, he'd had a gutsful of Hone's jibes.

Button it – or else, he said. He warned that he'd carry out taua muru – plunder without bloodshed – against Hone, if he carried on.

Threats weren't likely to reduce Hone to a quivering wreck. He didn't back down.

Feelings between the two groups became seriously strained. Missionaries such as Robert Burrows tried to intervene, but made no headway.

On May 8, 1845, a force of 460 British soldiers attacked Puketutu, with bayonet charges and rocket fire, and with tactics and weapons that Maori had not seen before.

Neither side could get the upper hand, and the battle ended when Hone withdrew to Te Ahuahu, and prepared to build a new pa at Ohaeawai, a few miles away.

The following month, Te Ahuahu was attacked by allies of Tamati Waka Nene. Their intelligence had led them to believe the pa was all but empty and unguarded.

But Hone and his men came back, and fought fiercely to retake Te Ahuahu. During the battle, many of Hone's kaumatua were killed. Te Kakaha was one. Hone's men tried to save him, but in the process, they were either killed themselves or, like Hone himself, severely wounded. Yet again.

After the battle, Hone was carried to Kaikohe, where he was tended by tohunga, including Tamati Pehikura. He was also visited by missionaries, and his earlier mentor, Henry Williams.

Hone recovered slowly. He often wrote to British officials, demanding that the country "should not be sliced up". He rejected their suggestions that he give up land as compensation for the fighting.

Meanwhile, the fighting between Nga Puhi and the British continued. At Ohaeawai, the British were whipped by Maori. They'd dug themselves into a concealed trench system, which had been devised by Kawiti to neutralise the British artillery.

The war ended at Ruapekapeka. The British bombarded the huge pa there for two weeks, off and on, and rushed it on January 11, 1846.

But by this time, the warriors had ghosted away. The pa was empty, except for a few elderly men, including Kawiti, who was about 70. The warriors had withdrawn to the bush behind the pa, hoping to lure the British into the ngahere.

Hone didn't take much part in the fighting. His injuries saw to that. He wasn't at Ohaeawai at all, and showed up only briefly at Ruapekapeka.

After Ruapekapeka, Tamati Waka Nene told the Governor that Nga Puhi had had enough. They wanted peace. Hone and Kawiti agreed – and both of them were pardoned.

The Crown thought about confiscating Nga Puhi land, but decided against it.

True to form, even at this late stage in his career, Hone wasn't a picture of pathetic gratitude. For two years, he stood clear from any gestures of reconciliation.

Eventually, in 1848, he met Governor Grey at Waimate. They exchanged gifts. They showed respect for each another.

Hone retired to Tautoro and Kaikohe, and kept writing to officials and missionaries. By this stage, however, his health was packing up, and the veteran warhorse died of tuberculosis in 1850.

In his lifetime, Hone saw changes that would've astounded his koro and kuia.

His generation was the first to grapple with the Pakeha encroachment – and Hone was consistently at the centre of the challenges facing Maori.

He stood by his principles. He stuck to his guns. And that's why his mana endures.

A new display at Te Papa explores the life of Hone Heke Pokai. **Conflict and Reconciliation** ***runs until the end of July.***