

Leg irons reflection of sad Maori history

Dr Danny Keenan

The recent attempted sale of leg irons once used to incarcerate Taranaki Maori in Dunedin has drawn attention again to our government's sorry history of arresting and detaining Maori, especially Maori from Taranaki.

After their arrest and trial in New Plymouth in 1881, Te Whiti O Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi were sent to Addington jail in Christchurch whilst Parliament debated how long they should be incarcerated, and with what justification.

This was not the first time Taranaki men had been sent south to be imprisoned.

In November 1869, 74 men who had surrendered with their whanau near Patea were sent to Dunedin. These captives were men of the Pakakohi and Tangahoe hapu of Ngati Ruanui, supporters of Titokowaru. The prisoners were kept at Mt Cook Barracks in Wellington before being sent on to Dunedin.

Whilst they were in Wellington, Te Atiawa chief Wi Tako Ngatata asked the government not to send them to the South Island, saying "their being left to remain in our presence is in itself a great punishment for them".

The Government refused; the proposed detainment in the South Island was about deterrence as well as punishment, aimed at discouraging further "rebellion". These people had committed great offences, said the government, for which they deserve death, and therefore they would not now be pardoned.

One elderly prisoner named Waiata died almost immediately. By July 1870, seven more Maori prisoners had died. From mid-1871, the Maori deaths began to appear in the Dunedin Register of Deaths. Some of the names of the deceased were Tamehana (aged 60), Ruka A Te Onekiwa (70), Ruka Taramua (65), H Te Ngohi (70), HR Karangona (53), RA Tukurangi (25), Wiremu Tupito (32), and Netana (17).

During their period of imprisonment, those prisoners who were fit enough were sent to projects like building roads, earthworks and breaking rocks. Thousands of hours were worked on these projects. While the prisoners were working on the Anderson Bays causeway, they used the caves at Shore Street for shelter and housing at night. Reports from Dunedin jail suggested that one quarter of the men were unable to work.

The first batch of prisoners was released in March 1872 and returned home to southern Taranaki, arriving at a time when turmoil was again affecting the coastal Maori communities over confiscations and prospective land losses.

This time, protests were centred at Parihaka, which was now a thriving village. However, as Dr Hazel Riseborough reminds us, Te Whiti O Rongomai was predicting that "days of darkness" were

approaching. Imprisoning Parihaka men started in 1879.

A party led by Te Ika was arrested on July 3, offering no resistance as they were taken into custody. Te Ika's party, comprising 11 ploughmen, was sent to trial in New Plymouth on July 5, 1879. The charges included the "inflicting of malicious injury, forcible entry and riot".

Later that month, a further 90 ploughmen were placed into custody. The next day, 105 arrests were made. One of the ploughmen, named Porana, declared that, whilst his weapon had been the plough, those of the arresting officers had been firearms.

Other ploughmen arrested were sent directly to Wellington to await trial and were held in Mt Cook prison.

On August 21, 1879, 46 more of Te Whiti and Tohu's people were sent to prison in Dunedin. In January 1880, a further 91 prisoners arrived, again sentenced to indefinite detention whilst Parliament prevaricated as to their fate.

Like all Maori MPs, South Island Maori MP HK Taiaroa strongly condemned the legislation being passed in Parliament after 1879 which enabled Maori to be kept in prison indefinitely. This legislation included an Indemnity Act whereby the government protected itself against legal action since it had knowingly transgressed Maori civil rights.

Kai Tahu from Otakou and Puketeraki also assisted the prisoners with food and news from home. Kaumatua from Kai Tahu were regular visitors to Parihaka at this time. Kai Tahu support for the Taranaki cause came principally from Raniera Ellison whose mother was Te Ika A Raua of the Ngati Moeahu hapu of Te Atiawa. Raniera was a strong supporter of Te Whiti and held religious meetings in his house on the 17th of every month.

Interestingly, Raniera's son, Tom Eliason, would later introduce the silver fern to the All Blacks, possibly influenced by the raukura, the feather of Parihaka, which he had seen in his home when Te Whiti and Tohu visited for meals.

Much later, on March 23, 1987, a special one ton rock memorialising the Taranaki prisoners was unveiled near the site of the Shore Street caves in Dunedin.

The special stone, with ancient spiral carvings, was named Rongo, after the first peace Pa (the first Parihaka) once situated near the coast at Pungarehu, Cape Egmont, and named Te Maunga a Rongo o Te Ika a Maui a Tikitiki A Taranga, or 'The beginnings of Peace throughout the Great Fish of Maui Tikitiki A Taranga'.

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