



DANCING WITH THE KING

The Rise and Fall of the
King Country, 1864–1885

MICHAEL BELGRAVE

*A riveting account of the twenty years after the New Zealand Wars
when Māori governed their own independent state in the King Country.*

When Māori were defeated at Orakau in 1864 and the Waikato War ended, Tāwhiao, the second Māori King, and his supporters were forced into an armed exile in the Rohe Pōtae, the King Country. For the next twenty years, the King Country operated as an independent state – a land governed by the Māori King where settlers and the Crown entered at risk of their lives.

Dancing with the King is the story of the King Country when it was the King's country, and of the negotiations between the King and the Queen that finally opened the area to European settlement. For twenty years, the King and the Queen's representatives engaged in a dance of diplomacy involving gamesmanship, conspiracy, pageantry and hard headed politics, with the occasional act of violence or threat of it. While the Crown refused to acknowledge the King's legitimacy, the colonial government and the settlers were forced to treat Tāwhiao as a King, to negotiate with him as the ruler and representative of a sovereign state, and to accord him the respect and formality that this involved. Colonial negotiators even made Tāwhiao offers of settlement that came very close to recognising his sovereign authority.

Dancing with the King is a riveting account of a key moment in New Zealand history as an extraordinary cast of characters – Tāwhiao and Rewi Maniapoto, Donald McLean and George Grey – negotiated the role of the King and the Queen, of Māori and Pākehā, in New Zealand.

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Tāwhiao's appearance was always deliberately chosen for the occasion, mixing Māori and European dress to create a costume that was informed by cultural and political objectives. *G. M. Preston, Album of Maori photographs, Alexander Turnbull Library, PA1-0-423-01-1.*

Stalemate

1864

IN LATE MARCH 1864, REWI MANIAPOTO OF NGĀTI MANIAPOTO AND RAUKAWA was one of the leaders of a small band of fighters who were caught defending an ill-chosen and poorly prepared position at Ōrākau.¹ They faced well-trained, better armed and more experienced troops led by Duncan Cameron, one of the British Empire's most respected generals. The defenders possessed shotguns and some rifles but were also armed with pounamu and whalebone mere and taiaha. They had little ammunition, resorting to using peach stones and wooden projectiles for bullets. With little food or water, outnumbered six to one, these supporters of the Kīngitanga (the Māori King movement) held out for three days, suffering heavy casualties when breaking through the lines that encircled them. In the escape, Akumai of Raukawa took four hits to her body and one that blew away her thumb. She escaped with one of her brothers, but her father and another brother died in the siege, as did around 150 of the defenders. Some had been protecting their homes, such as those from the related tribes of Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Apakura and Raukawa. Others had come from much further afield, Ngāti Whare and Ngāi Tūhoe from the Urewera, and Ngāti Porou from the East Coast.

Heroism, defiance and defeat soon became enshrined in the mythology of the country's origins, defining Ōrākau as 'a place of sadness and glory, the spot where the Kingites made their last hopeless stand for independence, holding

heroically to nationalism and a broken cause', as the war's most important early historian, James Cowan, put it.² According to the myth, when Cameron offered them surrender, the defenders replied, 'E hoa, ka whawhai tonu ahau ki a koe, ake, ake!' ('Friend, I shall fight against you for ever, for ever!'). When the women and children were offered safe passage, a voice from the pā called out, 'Ki te mate nga tane, me mate ano nga wahine me nga tamariki' ('If the men die, the women and children must die also'). That their escape was marked by rape and the brutal killing of the surrendered played no part in the myth that emerged. The battle became the defining event of the campaign, the one that proved most useful in creating a nation-making image of valiant but doomed Māori pitted against the inevitable force of a superior European world. George Grey used the events at Ōrākau to describe Māori resistance as 'an act of unconquerable courage upon the part of . . . adversaries, who fell before superior numbers and weapons – an act which the future inhabitants of New Zealand will strive to imitate, but can never surpass.'³

'Rewi's last stand', as the battle was soon labelled, marked the end of the Waikato War. Over a million acres of confiscated land in the Waikato was now available for settler towns and farms, and hundreds of thousands more quickly fell into the hands of Auckland speculators through land purchases. Cameron's troops moved on, to Tauranga and the East Coast and back to Taranaki where the war had begun. Historians, like camp followers, have moved with them, finding new heroes or villains in later war leaders, in Kereopa Te Rau and Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Tūruki, in Tītokowaru and in the passive resisters to military aggression, Te Whiti-o-Rongomai, Tohu Kākahi and Rua Kēnana.⁴ The one recent exception has been Vincent O'Malley's locally focused, history of the invasion of the Waikato, which explores the consequences for the region from that time until the present.⁵

For the Waikato people, Ōrākau signified the end of one form of resistance and the beginning of another. The defeat expelled them and their allies southward to beyond the points of navigation of the Waikato and Waipā rivers. Led by Tāwhiao, the second Māori King, they retreated into an armed exile in the Rohe Pōtae, the King Country, in the midst of their Tainui relations and allies, Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Apakura, Ngāti Tūwharetoa and the iwi of the upper Whanganui. It was a massive area from the Pūniu in the north to the Whanganui in the south, and from Taupō west to the sea. From 1865 to 1886, Māori and

Pākehā recognised the aukati – the border between the Queen’s authority and the King’s. South of the aukati, the King’s people were contained, but they remained an independent state beyond the control of the New Zealand government’s police and land surveyors, tax collectors and railway builders. Europeans travelled into the area at their own risk, and a few met violent deaths. Their killers, in a constant reminder of the limits of colonial power, remained at large within the King’s court and defiantly beyond the grasp of colonial law. The Rohe Pōtae also became the refuge for Māori who had taken up armed resistance to the Crown, most notably Te Kooti from 1872. For years, he sat audaciously beyond the legal authority of the Queen and the vengeance of those communities he had ravaged on the East Coast.

The war had turned the Kingitanga into a secessionist movement. Prior to July 1863, the tribes of the Waikato and central North Island retained political independence, while recognising the mana of both Governor and Queen. The establishment of the Rohe Pōtae, in the aftermath of the war, created an independent constitutional entity with its own borders and its own centralised authority. The Waikato war was in effect a civil war and, like the American Civil War, it led to the creation of an independent breakaway state. Yet unlike the American South, this state was as much the creation of a successful war against the Kingitanga, as it was a deliberate act of secession by the Kingitanga itself.

For twenty years after the war, while most of the country’s remaining Māori land passed through the Native Land Court and was opened up for settlement, the King Country remained beyond the reach of the court.⁶ The authority of the King, Tāwhiao, and his allied rangatira extended over the King Country while the Queen’s authority did not.⁷ The end of the Waikato Wars marked the beginning of a cold war between King and Queen.

Dancing with the King is a history of this cold war and the diplomatic dance that accompanied it. For twenty years, neither the forces of the King nor the Queen were prepared to return to active warfare, but neither side recognised the legitimate authority of the other. Negotiations between King and Queen took place as a form of dance. The Rohe Pōtae leaders and their settler counterparts engaged in acts of diplomacy that involved gamesmanship, conspiracy, pagantry and hard-headed politics, with the occasional act of violence or threat of it thrown in.

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