



NEW ZEALAND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



This document is made available by The New Zealand
Archaeological Association under the Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

TRADITIONAL ANIMOSITIES AND THE BATTLE OF MOUTOA ISLAND

Tony Walton
Department of Conservation,
Wellington

The battle of Moutoa Island took place on a small island some 50 miles up the Whanganui River (Fig. 1) early on the morning of Saturday 14 May 1864. The adherents of Pai Marire were defeated by a larger force drawn from the hapu living along the lower Whanganui River.¹ The battle was significant not only because it removed any threat of an attack on Wanganui, but also because news of the event helped to mould Pakeha attitudes to the newly emerged Pai Marire movement (Clark 1975: 16). The interpretation of the events of 1864 has also moulded views of the more remote past. Some historians, looking to bolster their particular interpretations of the events of 1864, have suggested that there is a long history of enmity between the tribes of the upper and the lower Whanganui River (Clark 1975: 15; Simpson 1979: 162; Parsonson 1981: 157). This view has never been argued in any detail but it is, nonetheless, common enough to warrant examination. A contrary view is argued here: that the events of 1864 reflect the circumstances of the period, not long-standing enmities.

Interpretations of the events of 1864 have long been characterised by overstatement. After the battle, the grateful inhabitants of Wanganui erected a monument 'to the memory of the brave men who fell at Moutoa, 14th May, 1864, in defence of law and order against fanaticism and barbarism'. Taylor (1868: 148-50) wrote of the 'demoniacal spirit which possessed those Hauhau fanatics' and contrasted it with the 'courage and devotion' and 'noble conduct' of the 'loyal natives'. Not surprisingly, there has been a reaction against this sort of simplistic interpretation. The argument that 'Maori ways of doing things and Maori reasons for doing them were still paramount in Maori society' throughout the 19th century has become prominent, a fact which is not entirely unrelated to the current debate about the place of Maori in New Zealand society today. The idea that the battle was fought 'for the Pakeha' has proved a particularly uncomfortable one in the current climate as it exposes the lower Whanganui tribes to censure for their 'treachery' and 'disloyalty' (Simpson 1979: 162-3). If, however, the battle was fought for 'Maori' reasons then this problem does not arise.

There have been a number of attempts to relegate the Pakeha presence to the background. Cowan (1983 II: 32) long ago suggested that the lower Whanganui tribes refused passage to the Pai Marire taua (war party) 'not so much out of regard for the pakeha of the Town of Wanganui as for the mana of their river' but similar arguments are now commonplace. Ward (1974: 168), for example, argues that 'command of the navigable river was a traditional goal' of the lower Whanganui tribes.

Ward (1974: 168) also argued that 'the division between "rebels" and those who came to be called "Kupapa" (neutral or pro-Government Maori) followed the

¹ Whanganui is re-emerging as the accepted spelling of the name of the river, and for the tribal group. The practice of the authors quoted below varies.

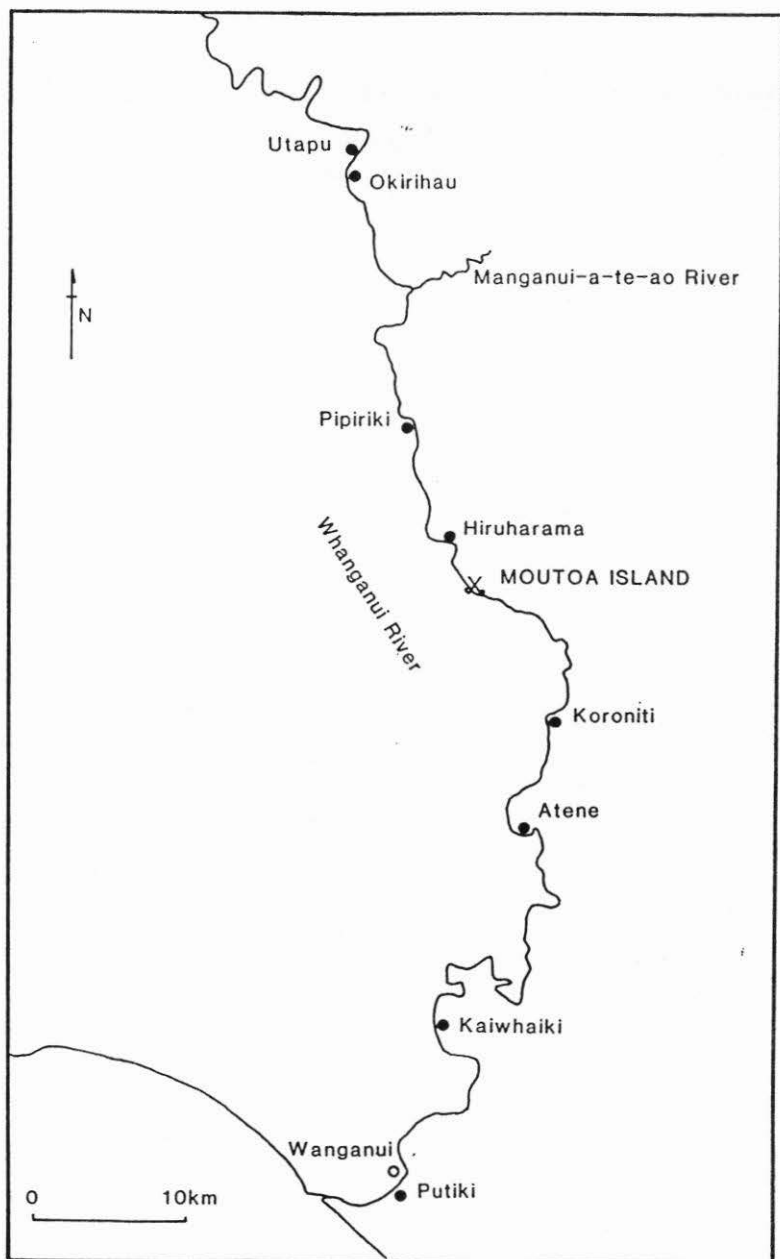


Fig. 1. Whanganui River: places mentioned in the text.

lines of traditional enmities'. He stressed that 'the pattern was by no means clear-cut', but his conclusion has, nonetheless, helped to create an expectation of traditional enmities lying behind the divisions of the 1860s.

Some historians, picking up on these themes, have suggested that the battle of Moutoa Island was, therefore, just one more event in a long history of conflict between the tribes of the upper and lower Whanganui:

'...tribal animosities seem to have played a larger part than a desire to threaten or protect the Pakeha settlers of Wanganui. The battle was an illustration of generations-old enmity' (Clark 1975: 15).

'For several hundred years the upper and lower Wanganui tribes had been disputing for control over certain reaches of the Wanganui, the battle of Moutoa was the most recent of these disputes' (Simpson 1979: 162).

'In May 1864, the lower Wanganui tribes made a dramatic stand on Moutoa Island, to defend their territory against their old up-river enemies, converts to Pai Marire who wished to expell the Pakehas of Wanganui' (Parsonson 1981: 157).

None of these authors document their claims of long-standing enmities. A casual reading of the relevant traditions (Smith 1905; Downes 1915) might suggest persistent conflicts between upper and lower Whanganui tribes, but this is an ambiguity of the language. Along a river any group can usually be characterised as 'upper' or 'lower' in relation to another, but such terms are convenient labels which mean different things in different contexts. Instead, the traditional evidence suggests a pattern of generalised warfare with no long-standing divisions between the groups on the upper and lower river.

It is arguable, too, that the 'Maori reasons' interpretation has been pushed too far (Ballara 1982) and that it ignores too many of the new factors which were being forced on the attention of Maori by the 1860s. In the mid 1840s the Government had little influence in the Wanganui area. The town of Wanganui itself was a small, largely defenceless, Pakeha enclave. By the 1860s, however, Government control was increasingly being extended into every part of the district and this is reflected in the way the different groups lined up in 1864. Yet some proponents of 'Maori reasons' see Maori acting in a make-believe world in which Pakeha played little part.

The increasing power of the Government, and its impact on the Whanganui hapu, can be demonstrated by comparing the situation in 1846-7 with that of 1864. On both occasions, Wanganui came under threat.

On 19 October 1846 a taua arrived at Wanganui. A small group of up-river chiefs, centred around Mamaku, led the taua. Te Anaua, leader of the Putiki Maori, offered the settlers help if the need should arise and at one stage a party of Putiki men was posted in the town to protect it (Wards 1968: 323-4). The following year a larger taua was raised. Men from many of the settlements along the river were involved. On 16 May 1847 a settler (Wilson) wrote in his Journal that 'natives from all parts are joining [the taua] ...and Mamaku is en route to join them. Maketu, Ngapara, and Pehi-turoa (Pakaro) are the present leaders' (Downes 1915: 293). The taua was reported to be the largest ever to have gathered in the

area (Taylor Journal 4 June 1847) and included parties of Ngati Maniapoto and Ngati Pehi from the Waikato and Taupo respectively (Wards 1968: 343; Downes 1915: 310). The inhabitants of Putiki were in an invidious position as many of their relations were with the taua and they attempted to take a middle course, much to the annoyance of both sides. Taylor (Journal 29 May 1847) reported that Captain Laye, the Resident Magistrate, expected the inhabitants of Putiki 'to fight the rebels, although he knows they are nearly all related'. After a series of minor engagements around Wanganui over a period of nearly three months the taua disbanded.

On 17 February 1848 a meeting was held at Putiki. All the chiefs of the taua, except Pehi Turoa and Ngapara, were present. There were appeals for the Whanganui tribes not to quarrel amongst themselves. Mamaku is quoted as saying that 'there is one pa: but many families, one tribe but many minds' (Taylor Journal 17 February 1848). A Waikato chief summed up the feeling of the meeting when he said 'Whanganui is but one river, but has many branches'. This is a different picture from the one presented by the historians but, like all rhetoric, it has to be seen in context.

By the 1860s the people along the river were divided between those who supported the Government and those who sympathised with the King movement. In 1861 Richard Taylor (AJHR E7: 29-30) reported that 'the Upper Wanganui chiefs appear generally to side with the disaffected, and to sympathise with the King movement ...The lower Wanganui Natives are decidedly attached to the Government'. In 1863 White, the Resident Magistrate, reported that the 'tribes Ngatitai and Ngatituawhiti who reside at Okirihau and Manganui-a-te-ao and the tribes Ngatiruru and Ngatikahu who reside at Utapu' had requested that they might be allowed to join the 'friendly natives'. He reported that this was a significant extension of Government influence up the river (White to Native Minister 29 April 1863 - National Archives, JC Wanganui 4). The support for the Government on the lower part of the river was not solid, however. Doubts were regularly expressed about the loyalties of some of the chiefs. Taylor (Journal 24 December 1863), for example, noted that 'Haimona the chief [of Koroniti] is a very unsettled wavering character, it is a question whether he will go to war on the King's side'. (Haimona Hiroti played a prominent part in the battle of Moutoa Island as one of the leaders of the lower Whanganui forces.) White reported that men from settlements right along the river were involved in fighting Government forces in Taranaki. The inhabitants of settlements such as Kaiwhaiki and Atene, both of which were on the lower river and within the Government sphere of influence, were a constant source of concern because of their Kingite sympathies. Taylor (Journal 1 October 1862) described Hamarama, chief of Atene as 'a very bitter King's man'. In 1864, in the aftermath of the battle at Moutoa, Featherston (Superintendent of Wellington) noted that there were two settlements at Atene, one occupied by friendly natives the other by 'the rankest Kingites and scoundrels, headed by old Hamarama' (AJHR E3: 81). Other settlements, such as Hiruharama, were split between supporters of the King Movement and the Government (White in a report dated 28 November 1862, JC Wanganui 4). Pakeha were only a part of the Whanganui equation, but they were a very important part.

Pai Marire added another element to what was already a mix of new and old loyalties. Many who had sympathised with the King Movement felt threatened by Pai Marire. A missionary stationed at Pipiriki reported that 'the King natives

above and below Pipiriki with the exception of Hamarama [at Atene] have taken a decided stand against this movement. Pehi's [Pehi Turoa, one of the leading chiefs] dignity being offended [he] has taken part with the Govt. natives to oppose these men on their way to town.' (Statement of Mr Booth, Catechist, in connection with the Church Missionary Society stationed at Pipiriki - JC Wanganui 5).

When Pehi Turoa met Matene, the leader of the taua, at Pipiriki he is reported to have 'used every argument in his power to preserve the peace of the district ...the Governor and he had agreed that peace should remain in the district of Whanganui, and not be broken.' (Statement of Koroneho Te Karipa to Resident Magistrate - JC Wanganui 5). In a letter to various 'loyal' chiefs dated 7 May 1864 Pehi Turoa wrote 'this house has become leaky on the ridgepole this day: "The water leaks into the house of Tunui a Taiki" (or my order for peace in this district is broken). How do you look at your relative Matene: he has broken the order for peace ...we cannot plead for him now (let him take the result of his folly).' (Original letter and translation, with explanatory interpolations, forwarded by White to Colonial Secretary 10 May 1864 - JC Wanganui 5). The taua that was denied passage consisted largely of men from Pipiriki and other settlements in the vicinity. As war spread up the river after the battle of Moutoa Island, however, more groups were drawn in. At the time of the battle Pehi Turoa 'kept out of the way, while most of his people had joined Matene' (AJHR E3: 83), but he eventually joined those opposing the Government, at least partly because Hori Kingi was offering to sell land in which he claimed an interest (Ward 1974: 169). Mamaku, whose hapu lived far up the river in the vicinity of the Ohura and Retaruke confluences (Walton 1987), also came in against the Government. The war quickly fizzled out. In 1869, when a large force went upriver to intercept Te Kooti, it was composed of men who had only a few years previously been on different sides.

Questions about human behaviour and motivation are always difficult, but in 1864 many of the lower Whanganui tribes saw their interests being advanced most by lining up with the Government. Belich (1986: 212) stresses economic ties: 'the Lower Wanganuis may have fought their kin at Moutoa in 1864 to protect their valuable entrepot of Wanganui Town.' Yet this seems inadequate. As Ward (1974: 169) notes, in these situations, 'there was a good deal of changing sides, most chiefs in fact being pulled by conflicting emotions and trying pragmatically to gauge which side to support to secure or advance their own position best'. The lower Whanganui River tribes were 'vociferously loyal' and anticipated being rewarded by the Government for their loyalty (Clark 1975: 45-6). Hori Kingi Te Anaua is quoted by Featherston (AJHR 1864 E3: 82) as saying 'we have killed in the battle of Moutoa many of our nearest relatives and friends. We have taken others of them prisoners. Have we not done enough for the Queen and our friends the Pakehas?' White went so far as to say that the battle was with 'men not their own hereditary enemies - but their nearest relatives' (White to Colonial Secretary 20 May 1864 - JC Wanganui 5).

Clark (1975: 45) suggests that the decision to oppose the passage of the taua cannot have been an easy one, for loyalism

'was a tenuous position, exposed to Pakeha prejudice and suspicion. That the indignities of loyalism were suffered is an indication that the aim of the

"friendlies" was frequently similar to that of the Pai Marire adherents. Both groups wanted to ensure the survival of their land, and the culture which rested on possession.'

Nonetheless, Clark (1975: 15) refuses entirely to let go of 'tribal animosities' as an explanation for the battle.

The interpretation of the battle of Moutoa Island has got caught up in a debate among historians about continuity and change in 19th century Maori society. Inevitably this debate impinges on archaeologists for, as Kennedy (1970) has pointed out, many of the assumption underlying our current views on the prehistory of New Zealand are not derived from archaeological evidence. The findings of historians intrude upon the way archaeologists think about the past, whether archaeologists know it or not.

In 1846-7 the inhabitants of Putiki helped protect a small Pakeha enclave against a taua made up largely of their own relatives. In 1864, the situation had changed out of all recognition. The Government's influence extended well up the river and many hapu found themselves in the same invidious position that the inhabitants of Putiki had previously been in. By 1864 there were not a lot of choices left. Most fought: some for, some against. The motives in both cases, as Clark recognised, were much the same. The battle of Moutoa Island was the result of the particular set of circumstances which existed in 1864: it would be a mistake to see in it the shape of history in earlier times.

REFERENCES

Abbreviations:

- AJHR Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives.
JC Wanganui 4 Resident Magistrate Wanganui Outward Letterbook 1863-4.
 National Archives.
JC Wanganui 5 Resident Magistrate Wanganui Outward Letterbook 1864-5.
 National Archives.

- Ballara, A. 1982. The pursuit of mana? A re-evaluation of the process of land alienation by Maoris, 1840-1890. *Jnl Polyn. Soc.* 91 (4): 519-541.
Belich, J. 1986. *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict*. Auckland University Press, Auckland.
Clark, P. 1975. *Hauhau: The Pai Marire Search for Maori Identity*. Auckland and Oxford University Presses, Auckland.
Cowan, J. 1983. *The New Zealand Wars*. Government Printer, Wellington.
Downes, T.W. 1915. *Old Whanganui*. W.A. Parkinson, Hawera.
Kennedy, J. 1970. Settlement and subsistence in Northland, New Zealand. *NZAA Newsletter* 13: 27-33.
Parsonson, A. 1981. The pursuit of mana. In W.H. Oliver (ed.), *The Oxford History of New Zealand*. Oxford University Press, Wellington.
Simpson, T. 1979. *Te Riri Pakeha: The White Man's Anger*. Alister Taylor, Martinborough.
Smith, S.P. 1905. Some Whanganui historical notes. *Jnl Polyn. Soc.* 14: 131-158.
Taylor, R. Journals 1833-1873. Typescript, Alexander Turnbull Library.

- _____. 1855. *Te Ika A Maui, or New Zealand and its Inhabitants*. Wertheim and MacIntosh, London.
- _____. 1868. *Past and Present of New Zealand*. MacIntosh, London.
- Walton, A. 1987. Maraekowhai: a mid-nineteenth century settlement on the upper Wanganui River. *NZAA Newsletter* 30: 249-262.
- Ward, A. 1974. *A Show of Justice: Racial 'Amalgamation' in Nineteenth Century New Zealand*. Auckland and Oxford University Presses, Auckland.
- Wards, I. 1968. *The Shadow of the Land*. Government Printer, Wellington.