POROPOROAKI FOR
TE ARIKINUI DAME TE ATAIRANGIKAAHU 1931 – 2006

From the President of the Polynesian Society

Ko Potatau te tangata
Ko Taupiri te maunga
Ko Waikato te awa
He piko he taniwha, he piko he taniwha

Te Arikinui acknowledges her people after the formalities of her Silver Jubilee Celebrations.
The tangihanga for Te Arikinui Dame Te Atairangikaahu was marked by an unprecedented outpouring of affection and respect from all over New Zealand and beyond. On behalf of the Polynesian Society’s Council and members, I have been asked to record our appreciation of her service as Patron from 1981 to 2006, and to pay tribute to the part she played in bringing New Zealanders together as a nation.

Te Arikinui Dame Te Atairangikaahu was a significant figure in my life from the early 1960s, when Koro Kapunga Dewes and I were tutor-organisers with Auckland University’s Department of Adult Education and escorted classes of Maori and Pakeha students to gatherings at Tainui marae. A happy young mother, Princess Piki (as she then was) was usually present in the circle surrounding her parents, King Koroki and his wife Te Atairangikaahu, acting as support and increasingly as understudy to her father. In the communities we visited she was clearly liked and respected for her unassuming manners, her loving care of her parents, and the competence and commitment with which she carried out the duties assigned to her. It was no surprise to us when Tainui accepted the advice of the other tribes attending King Koroki’s tangihanga and named her to lead the Kingitanga as Queen.

Over the next 20 years I caught glimpses of Dame Te Ata and occasionally met her at public functions. With many others I watched as she made the office of Maori Queen her own, growing in grace and assurance while standing apart from the hurly-burly of politics. In those years Turangawaewae became an accepted port of call for important visitors from within New Zealand and overseas, the annual Coronation Celebrations grew in stature as a highlight of the Maori calendar, and Pakeha visitors were impressed by Tainui organisational capacity. Increasingly, Dame Te Ata represented New Zealand on visits overseas, particularly in the Pacific.

My first opportunity for personal contact came in 1986 when her adopted brother Robert Mahuta, an anthropologist by training, arranged for the New Zealand Association of Social Anthropologists to meet in conference at Waahi Pa. When we visiting anthropologists were called into the dining hall for our first meal, I was startled to realise that Dame Te Ata herself stood in the middle of the line of servers, serving spoon poised over the kumara. I recognised then that her reported humility was no pose: she really was one with her people, ready to stand with them whenever and wherever they had need, in council room or kitchen. Later Dame Te Ata, with her husband Whatumoana, relaxed in our company for a couple of hours, revealing a quirky sense of humour and an infectious laugh. It was a rewarding insight into the quality of the woman behind the public persona.

Four years later, in August 1990, I was present when Dame Te Ata was guest speaker at the Tenth Capital City Prayer Breakfast sponsored by the Council of Wellington Churches in the Michael Fowler Centre in Wellington. Of all the many public speeches I have heard in my life that is the one that stands out for its perfect marriage of content and delivery. Dame Te Ata began by holding up three leaf-blades of New Zealand flax. One blade, she said, represented “our nation’s Pakeha who in 1840 signed a pact with the Maori of Aotearoa”; the second blade was her own family, the Kahui Ariki of the Kingitanga, and the third symbolised “Christianity and all the religions of the world”. Throughout her speech her hands were busy, first dividing the blades into strips and then weaving these into a rourou, a small basket with two
loops to hold it by. Speaking without notes, she traced the history of the Kingitanga
from its own perspective, explaining the reasons for its establishment, the intentions
and hopes of its leaders that “the Maori King and the British Queen should be one”,
and the realisation of that dream when her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and His Royal
Highness Prince Philip walked on to her father’s courtyard at Turangawaewae in
1953. She recalled the message of the first Maori King, Potatau Te Wherowhero,
gave to his people 132 years ago—“Kotahi anō te kōhao o te ngira e kuku ai, te miro
whiro, te miro mā, te miro pango”, translating it—“There is but one eye of the needle
though which all threads must pass, whether red, white or black.” “In other words”,
she commented, “all are equal in the sight of God.” She spoke of the founding of
Turangawaewae under her aunt Te Puea and the symbolism of the Kingitanga flag
Te Paki-o-Matariki. Stressing “the need to sew all our churches, faiths, beliefs and
peoples together and to God”, she held aloft the finished rourou, saying “in it is my
offering of aroha and goodwill” and inviting her listeners to “hold one handle of our
rourou while I and my people hold the other, forever.”
Those who seek to understand the Kingitanga and its place in New Zealand’s
national life would be well advised to read the published form of this speech.∗
Watching Dame Te Ata’s hands busily weaving the rourou as she spoke, it was
abundantly clear that this was no exercise in diplomacy, calculated to please. While
she had obviously spent time crafting the words of the speech, the vision it expressed
came directly from her heart.
From February 1996 to February 1997 I was fortunate to serve on the Waitangi
National Trust Board in company with Dame Te Ata, who was representing the
Maori people of the southern half of the North Island. A gracious presence in and
out of meetings, she shared with other Board members and management a passionate
love for Waitangi the place and the Treaty that was first signed there. We missed
her calm presence and wisdom when she handed that responsibility on to Tumu Te
Heuheu. Looking back, we can understand her decision to concentrate her energies
in the service of her people. She did not forget Waitangi; she and Whatumoana often
returned as private visitors.
Along with the rest of New Zealand, the Polynesian Society mourns the passing of
Te Arikinui Dame Te Atairangikaahu. We salute her as the loved and respected leader
of Tainui, the Kingitanga and te iwi Maori generally, a builder of bridges between New
Zealand’s ethnic groups and that jewel beyond price—a truly good woman.

Te Arikinui ko hoki atu koe ki nga ringa o Te Atua me o matua tupuna, runga i to
maunga tapu a Taupiri, i te taha o to awa a Waikato. Moe mai, moe mai, moe mai.

Dr Dame Joan Metge

pp.59-68.
Bruce Grandison Biggs was the most influential figure in academic Maori studies in the 20th century, and is widely recognised as one of the founders of modern Oceanic descriptive and historical linguistics. These 1992 Macmillan Brown Lectures the author draws upon his deep knowledge of Maori language and culture, and his studies in Oceanic linguistics to explore “the inner culture of the pre-19th century Maori”. This work is an exquisite example of Bruce Biggs’s unique and wide-ranging scholarship and the singular flavour of his expression.

Published by The Polynesian Society in association with
The Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury

Available from The Polynesian Society, c/- Maori Studies, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019 Auckland. Email: jps@auckland.ac.nz
$NZ30 / $NZ24 for Polynesian Society members (plus postage and packing)