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Te Puea Herangi and her Influence in the Waikato, 1883-1952

Fetuunai Varea

Te Puea Herangi (1883-1952) is well known as one of the most influential female leaders in New Zealand. She was a tribal leader and was seen as a prophet for the Māori community. She is also known as Princess Te Puea. This given title of the Māori Princess was never accepted by Te Puea. She believed that the term Princess was a Pākehā (English) reference, and since she was Māori she saw no point in adopting it. Herangi helped many people throughout her life, mainly in her goal of developing Māori society and teaching them to take back their rightful place in New Zealand. Being brought up in a high position in Maoridom, Te Puea had to learn pretty quickly how to make a name for herself.

Te Puea Herangi, also known to her family as Te Kirihaehae, was born on 9 November 1883 at Whatiwhatihoe, which neighbours the small town of Pirongia. Born into the Māori royal family, Te Puea came from a long line of noble ancestry. She belonged to Kāhui ariki, also known as the family of the first Māori King, Pōtatau Te Wherowhero. Her mother was Tiahuia, the first daughter of King Tawhiao Te Wherowhero of Ngāti Mahuta and his second wife, Hera. Te Puea’s father, Te Tahuna Herangi, was altogether from an opposite lineage line, and King Tawhiao Te Wherowhero saw him as an unsuitable husband for his daughter. This was because Te Tahunga Herangi was part Pākehā. Te Puea’s grandfather (Te Tahunga Herangi’s father) was William Searancke; he was a well-educated English surveyor. Te Puea was slowly accepted into the Māori royal family due to her natural skills and intellect, which she gained from her Kīngitanga side and also from her English grandfather. Between the years of 1895 and 1898 Te Puea and her family moved to Pukekawa, a small rural community positioned in the Lower Waikato. She also moved to Mangatawhiri. One of the first well-known actions Te Puea took to prove her worth occurred in 1911, when she supported and assisted Tawhiao’s successor, King Māhuta (also her uncle), in his movement to replace Henare Kainui as the Member of Parliament for the ‘western Maori seat with American-educated doctor Maui Pomare’.¹ Te Puea’s core focus throughout her influential years was to help out the Māori community, mainly that of the lower Waikato regions. She did this with multiple movements and stances: ‘Te Puea’s work encompassed all spheres of life as she pursued goals relating to health, social and economic welfare, cultural revival and political recognition.’²
Te Puea is well known for serving and helping the Māori community throughout New Zealand, but she was also significant in the Waikato community. Te Puea’s most memorable role was her part in the Kīngitanga movement — also known as the Māori King Movement — which continues to be an essential element in Māori culture. Founded in 1858, the aim of Kīngitanga was to unite the Māori people under a single sovereign. Te Puea wanted the lands that the government had confiscated from the Māori people during the ‘difficult years following the wars of the 1860s and the extensive confiscation of Tainui lands’, and the anti-conscription movement during the early years of the First World War:

Te Puea was now determined to rebuild a center for the Kingitanga at Ngaruawahia, its original home before the confiscation, in accordance with Tawhiao’s wishes. In 1920 Waikato leaders were able to buy 10 acres of confiscated land on the bank of the Waikato River opposite the township and by 1921 Te Puea was ready to begin moving the people from Mangatawhiri to build a new marae, to be called Turangawaewae.4

Te Puea was recognised as one of the leaders of the Kīngitanga Movement. Building a new centre was not the only way in which Te Puea helped the Waikato community. She was very concerned about the influenza pandemic in the early 1900s, as she did not want her people to suffer another big loss:

She was dissatisfied with the swampy conditions at Mangatawhiri and wished to make a new start in the wake of the tragic influenza epidemic of late 1918, which had struck the settlement with devastating effect, leaving a quarter of the people dead. Te Puea gathered up 100 orphaned children from lower Waikato and placed them in the care of the remaining families. But she needed a better home for them.5

This memorable act of getting together 100 orphaned children was seen by the Waikato community as an important example of what Te Puea stood for: the people. The Māori people of Waikato saw her as a leader and looked up to her for her knowledge and wisdom. Te Puea’s services and expertise never went without use, as she was in constant need to fight
for the Māori people. One of her most pivotal moments of leadership was her stand against the conscription of Māori men in World War I.

On 28 July 1914 Austria declared war on Serbia, which in turn started World War I. This also caused a ripple effect that made it to the small country of New Zealand. With wars come the need for manpower, and the King Country was looking towards the New Zealand public, mainly the native people, for assistance. At first the ‘outbreak of the war did not allow “native peoples” to fight in a war among Europeans,’ but authorisation was later approved for a ‘Maori contingent to form part of New Zealand’s war effort’. Te Puea had a major role in this issue, and it was one of the most influential stances that she would take. The Native Contingent Committee had given out a quota for 150 men and this was to be reached every four weeks. Many refused to respond to the demand, mainly those in the Waikato region. Te Puea’s main premise for standing against the dispute to use Māori men in the war was simple:

Kingitanga leader Te Puea Herangi maintained that her grandfather, King Tawhiao, had forbidden Waikato to take up arms again when he made peace with the Crown in 1881. She was determined to uphold his call to Waikato to ‘lie down’ and ‘not allow blood to flow from this time on’. Te Puea maintained that Waikato had ‘its own King’ and didn’t need to ‘fight for the British King’.

Te Puea’s movement was seen as ‘[t]he best known resistance to World War One conscription [which Te Puea did] on behalf of her Waikato people.’ Not only did Te Puea lead the anti-conscription movement but she also used her pa (fortified village) as a refuge for those who elected not to join the war. This caused much of the uproar against them:

When police entered the pa to arrest those who’d been conscripted, no one stood up when their names were called. The police arrested seven random men – one was 16 years old, and another 60 – and sent them to military training camp, and none went overseas. Those who continually refused to follow orders were sentenced to hard labour or put on bread and water diets.
It was also suggested that Te Puea herself was arrested at one point. The resistance was maintained even after a direct appeal from Maui Pomare, a politician and highly influential figure in the Māori community, and by the end of World War 1 no Tainui conscripts were sent overseas.

Te Puea carried out her life finishing what she set out to do, protecting and developing the Māori culture and people. She married Rewi Tumoko Katipa, but they did not have any children; instead, Te Puea adopted many children. She also prepared and groomed the Māori Queen Te Arikinui Dame Te Ātairangikaahu, who reigned for 40 years and was also known as one of Māori’s most respected leaders. Te Puea received many awards and gained many achievements — for instance, in 1937 she was made Commander of the British Empire in 1937. Te Puea Herangi passed away on 12 October 1952. There was a five-day mourning period, during which iwis (tribes) throughout New Zealand traveled long distances to reach her final burial ground at Taupiri, the sacred burial ground of the Māori Kings.\(^{11}\)

**Notes**

4 Parsonson.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
11 I would like to thank Cathy Coleborne and the HIST380 class for their guidance during the process of writing this article.