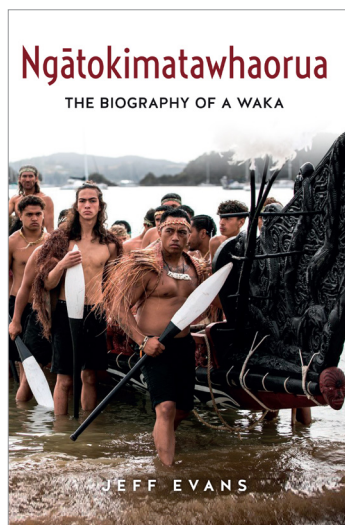




Ngātokimatawhaorua

The biography of a waka

JEFF EVANS



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THE POWER OF MANA WAKA TO INSPIRE A PEOPLE

This is the biography of the mighty ceremonial waka taua *Ngātokimatawhaorua* that rests on the Treaty Grounds at Waitangi.

The inspiration for its construction came from Te Puea Hērangi. In the late 1930s the Waikato leader held a dream to build seven waka taua for the 1940 centennial commemorations at Waitangi. By 1937 two waka had been commissioned. Carved in Northland under the guidance of Pita Heperi (Te Tai Tokerau) and Piri Poutapu (Waikato), *Ngātokimatawhaorua* was one of them.

But it was to be many decades before the true power of the waka to inspire a people was realised. In 1974 *Ngātokimatawhaorua* was refurbished by the late Sir Heke-nuku-mai-nga-iwi 'Hec' Busby for relaunching during Waitangi Day ceremonies. It was then that Te Puea's dream turned into reality. By 1990, The Year of the Waka, 22 waka and their 2000 crew gathered at Waitangi. *Ngātokimatawhaorua* and others became symbols of Māori unity and pride and an important part of the renaissance of the traditions of carving and voyaging around Aotearoa and beyond.

Ngātokimatawhaorua is the story of this great canoe, the longest to be built in modern times, and those who carved and crewed it over the last 80 years.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JEFF EVANS is a writer and photographer based in Auckland. He has written several books relating to waka, including *Ngā Waka o Neherā*, *Polynesian Navigation and the Discovery of New Zealand* and *Waka Taua: The Māori War Canoe*. Between them, these books recall Māori migration traditions, describe navigation skills used by Māori to voyage between the islands in the central Pacific and New Zealand, and introduce the reader to waka taua. His most recent books are a biography of *Hec Busby*, *Heke-nuku-mai-nga-iwi Busby: Not Here by Chance* (Huia), and *Reawakened: traditional navigators of Te Moana Nui a Kiwa* (Massey University Press 2021).

SALES POINTS

- Evocatively written story of an important national taonga
- Vital reading for those who want to understand the power and significance of waka to unite and inspire
- Interviews with the key people involved with the waka from its revival in the 1970s up to today



Caption: The spectacular hiltabaer at Motitihi on the day we were taken to the site. Photo: Frank Thompson. Photo credit: Frank Thompson. Photo credit: Frank Thompson.

design. With a lineage stretching back to the Polynesian ancestors of today's Māori, the design of these single-battled waka was only possible because of what those engineers tried when they arrived in Aotearoa — an abundance of very large, very tall trees, particularly kauri and tōtara.

Access to such massive trees gave the canoe builders in Aotearoa a considerable advantage over their counterparts in large parts of central and eastern Polynesia. Island-based canoe builders were restricted to building upright larger waka by securing large logs together, edge-to-edge, resulting in a relatively lightweight canoe that usually required a second hull or an outrigger, to help stabilise it.

Canoe builders in Aotearoa, however, seem also to recognise trees as big in circumstance that when the logs were hollowed out, a thick, heavy 'backbone' could be left at the bottom of the hull. This extra weight lowered the waka's centre of gravity and drastically reduced the degree of side-to-side roll that the craft might otherwise experience in anything but the calmest of seas. The benefit of that was twofold. Waka could be built without a second hull, an outrigger, and, just as importantly, the inherent strength afforded by the backbone allowed craftsmen to build extremely long waka.

The place of Ngāhinaimāwhara was a cultural icon has been cemented over the years by the hundreds of thousands of visitors who have spent time with it at the Te Papa Grounds or witnessed it being paddled on the water. But more so, its status is due to the many of those who designed and built it, and those who have cared for the design. Add to this list the names of the design process and its makers, politicians and dignitaries who have been entrusted with the waka and you begin to understand its special place in the story of Aotearoa.

3 Tradition and ceremony

IT IS CLEAR from my research that Mimi Mangahangā, seen from Whakapu Te Pahi, was almost certainly the last master canoe builder alive in 1930. What I didn't immediately appreciate was the disconnect caused by his arrival in the north. According to some documents, a large gathering of northern rangatira descended on Kaitiaki's modest courthouse in October 1932 to listen to Te Uru-māta Kaitiaki Riri Whangā address the court in one of a series of meetings called to discuss Te Pahi's waka plan.

Whangā advised Judge Adams that a 'very big and representative gathering of natives' had been invited to build two waka. These waka would represent the five northern iwi — Ngāiwhā, Ngāi Whaka, Te Kaitiaki, Te Aupōri and Ngāti Kahurangi — and were to be called Ngāhinaimāwhara and Māhara. The visit of Te Pahi from Whakapu, he continued, had stirred up the people from Tamaki to Te Kaitiaki.

Te Pahi passed through our territory like a hawk. We were badly shaken. We had heard that he had been to the north. We had heard that he had been to the north. We had heard that he had been to the north. We had heard that he had been to the north.

Adams's reply to Whangā suggests that he was surprised by what he heard. Perhaps he was formulating a response even as Whangā's words echoed off the wooden courthouse walls.

It was clear that a compromise was necessary, and ultimately Adams could see no reason why another canoe, named and built entirely by local iwi, should not be built 'if the people wish it'. The only concern he expressed was that work on any waka would need to be completed, and that the waka were to be properly launched and holed after, with 'proper conditions put in place to guard against damage by the ocean waves'.

In his closing summary the judge acknowledged the two waka-building projects and repeated 'the arrangements previously settled' to support Te Pahi. 'People will be consulted from time to time', he said, 'even though certain things of Māori appear to wish to break away from the Northern Tribes.'

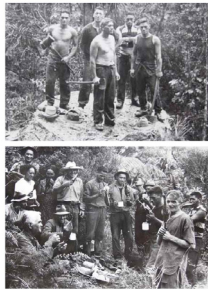
The dispute between the northern iwi, some of whom claimed Te Pahi had offended their mana by sending her craftsmen south without full consultation, would not be resolved until late January 1934, at another meeting of the Native Land Court. Three additional court cases followed: *Tauhira v. Te Pahi*, *Te Pahi v. Te Kaitiaki*, and *Te Pahi v. Te Kaitiaki*. It was one time a balm to himself. But in the northern settlement of Ngāhinaimāwhara or Te Pahi, Whakapu was a direct descendant of

creation of the hiltabaer there at once a specially appointed kōwhiri. Sea water, gullied around the open fire in their oaks, who are at the rear left, supplied as a gift by coastal fishermen Henry Thomas, who is seated third from left, wearing a hat and holding a white man's hat. Two sugar bags full of these and other produce, as beloved of Māori sailors have been brought over that day from coastal village at Motitihi Bay some 25 miles away. Every one of the group who carried out this great work were Māori with sole exception of the English member of the hiltabaer, second from right. From left to right: white-headed Hōhoro Hōhoro, father of Peta Hōhoro, supervising the undertaking.

The photograph, almost certainly taken by English George Harwood (Bill Harty), was one of a number of images in a publication government printed in 1840 that formed part of the archives of the Waitangi Museum. Gazing at the photograph almost after my trip to Motitihi Bay, I wondered about the unusual business between the canoeists. Not great detail has been written about them or their daily lives. The waka had had five visitors, given kaitiaki status, and three who came to write about the hiltabaer typically focused their previous column inches on the waka itself.

There was one notable exception, and that was Frank Adams. Describing the hiltabaer's construction in a letter to the Waitangi National Trust Board he wrote:

The great majority of the Māori workers, many of whom filled the hiltabaer in the boat, belonged to the North and gave their services free and without payment other than their food. Their leader, Te Hōhoro Hōhoro, worked on the canoe for over twenty months, supporting himself and his family on his 'Waka Pahi'.



Caption: The spectacular hiltabaer at Motitihi on the day we were taken to the site. Photo: Frank Thompson. Photo credit: Frank Thompson. Photo credit: Frank Thompson.

4 Reviving lost skills

THERE HAD BEEN TALK of lowering the three hull sections to Whangā since they had finished working in the tidal waters at Kaitiaki. But the more did not come. Instead, it was decided to complete the waka, built near Waipapa Landing, where the Waipapa Stream enters Kaitiaki. The site would be large, and this relatively secluded location would allow the construction crew a semblance of privacy. Whangā was still within reach for the paddlers, at a distance reckoned to be eight miles.

When I visited Kaitiaki to see if I could find where the waka had been built and then launched from, it was a chilly, misty day, and the large carparks at Waipapa Landing was empty.

Newspaper reports I had read named the launch site simply as 'Kaitiaki', and the only clues I had were in a couple of screenshots I'd grabbed while watching Māori's movie, both of which included glimpses of the remaining landscape. I hoped that these scenes, shot from nearby opposite angle, would help me pinpoint the site.

The first photo showed five Pōhoro's men preparing to attach the keel to the outrigger. To their left, partly hidden behind the hull, was a stream, and across the water in the distance was open farmland terminating in a small block of bush and what appeared to be a bluff dropping down to the sea. When I looked out from my car across the inlet, past some steeved boats, I could see several low hills that had once been covered in grass. They now housed a well-established subdivision, but there was no doubt the underlying terrain was a match for the grass-covered hills in the photos.



Caption: The spectacular hiltabaer at Motitihi on the day we were taken to the site. Photo: Frank Thompson. Photo credit: Frank Thompson. Photo credit: Frank Thompson.

present at Whangā and the media focus on the couple, security for the waka had been at all-time high. Kōwhiri Hōhoro, the father of three, had spent years of Māori protest, noted that the police in attendance were suited up in full riot gear and that almost one hundred protesters, Māori and Pākehā, were lined up before my eyes even occurred.

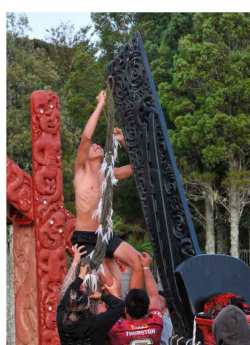
Indeed, the police were taking no chances. They had demanded a full list of Ngāhinaimāwhara's crew prior to the waka's arrival, and when looking through the names their attention was drawn to one name in particular — that of a gang leader who had only joined the crew. Hōhoro told me that as soon as the police recognised the name, they put a crew captain in. 'His commitment was fantastic,' Hōhoro recalled, 'but he was well known to the police and they told me they didn't want this guy on the waka.' Rather than show sufficient promise, Hōhoro stepped up the man and declared that if he wasn't in the crew then the waka wasn't going to be launched.

I told them that I had enough faith in this guy and I was sure to want going to play up while we were on the water. I knew he was trying to get back on the straight and narrow, and that if I had to remove him from the crew that it would be a disaster.

Hōhoro's status was non-negotiable, and the eventual launch of the waka with the gang leader among its crew was indicative of the high standing Hōhoro had with his community. That Ngāhinaimāwhara was the catalyst for change, even for one man, was significant, and would have delighted Te Pahi. How strange those waka seem to split Māori was still delivering results four and a half decades after the ceremonial commission.



Caption: The spectacular hiltabaer at Motitihi on the day we were taken to the site. Photo: Frank Thompson. Photo credit: Frank Thompson. Photo credit: Frank Thompson.



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when I got the entire picture, began to chant the timing call as he paddled his imaginary waka. When he was sure that I understood the gist of his lesson, Bertie leaned forward, rested his forearms on the table, and explained that the crew got up to speed in the first seven or eight strokes, and then focused on keeping up the momentum. There were a number of other strokes for the hiltabaer to master, he added, mostly for turning the waka one way or the other, or for stopping it quickly.

As Bertie's manual finished, Counsel joined the conversation. His eyes focused on me, as if to ensure that I took in everything he was about to tell me. He was, I was about to find out, not at all happy with the amount of time being made by hiltabaer while on the water those days.

We were caught over to look out back on the waka. We never used to go like this, but Bertie had changed, we were not used to it. We were not used to it. We were not used to it. We were not used to it.

Before I could ask him what he thought had prompted the change to allow one-man solo on the waka, Counsel had his hand and reached towards the great-looking hiltabaer. He told me to listen to the tempo of the commands issued by the hiltabaer. Even to my uneducated ears there was a definite rhythm to their calls. They were not, he said, before commencing that some other hiltabaer's accents vary the rhythm of the commands they gave. He had mentioned this frustration in an earlier interview, saying that there was a good reason commands were called with a specific rhythm, and nothing should be left to the whim of the hiltabaer on the day.

Bertie, who began his waka career as a hiltabaer in 1979 and graduated to section commander alongside Stan General and Felix Davis in 1983, jumped in to explain that the reason they give commands in a certain rhythm is that the delivery of these hiltabaer's instructions helps to set