

Story: Hongi Hika

Ballara, 1990

Page 1: Biography

Hongi Hika

1772–1828

Nga Puhi leader, trader, military
campaigner

This biography, written by Angela Ballara, was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, vol 1, 1990.

Hongi Hika was born near Kaikohe, in northern New Zealand: he told French explorers in 1824 that he had been born in the year of Marion du Fresne's death, which was in 1772; and he was a mature man at the height of his powers when he died in 1828. He was the third son of Te Hotete, born of his second wife, Tuhikura, of Ngati Rehia. He was descended through nine generations from Rahiri, the ancestor of Ngati Rahiri, who was in turn descended from Puhi-moana-ariki, the ancestor of Nga Puhi. In addition to Ngati Rahiri and Ngati Rehia he was most closely associated with Ngati Tautahi and Ngai Tawake.

The defeat of Nga Puhi by Ngati Whatua in the battle of Moremonui, at Maunganui Bluff, in 1807 or 1808, was an important event in Hongi's early life. Pokaia, the uncle of Hone Heke, had been at war with Te Roroa and two closely related Ngati Whatua hapu for a long period. Although some Nga Puhi were armed with muskets, Murupaenga, leader of Ngati Whatua, successfully ambushed them, taking advantage of the time they needed to reload their weapons. Pokaia was killed, together with the fathers of Te Whareumu, Manu (Rewa) and Te Koikoi, and two of Hongi's brothers. Hongi and Te Koikoi saved themselves by hiding in a swamp. At nightfall they and a handful of others were able to escape. After this battle Hongi appears to have succeeded Pokaia as war leader. These experiences left Hongi with an obligation and strong personal wish to avenge the Nga Puhi defeat. In campaigns against Te Roroa, Te Rarawa and Te Aupouri in the north he became convinced of the usefulness of the new muskets, if employed in sufficient numbers. By 1815 Hongi was the undisputed leader of his people. His oldest brother, Kaingaroa, born to their father's first wife, Waitohirangi, died in that year.

Hongi eagerly sought contact and trade with European visitors; he went to Sydney on the *Active* in 1814, a visit which encouraged Samuel Marsden, the chaplain of New South Wales, to go ahead with his plan to establish a Church Missionary Society mission at the Bay of Islands. The mission was set up in the same year, under Hongi's protection, and as a result ships came in increasing numbers. In this way the missionaries served Hongi's purposes. Hongi protected missionaries and seamen alike against his own people. He knew that a reputation for peace and security would draw Europeans into his sphere of influence and increase his opportunities to trade food and supplies for European technology, including tools and weapons. Other mission stations were established under his protection at Kerikeri and Waimate North.

But Hongi's relationship with the missionaries brought him difficulties as well as advantages. Other leaders began to protest to Marsden about Hongi's monopoly. The missionaries, for their part, angered Hongi by refusing to trade in muskets or even to repair them, and by

shunning the missionary Thomas Kendall for his affair with a Maori woman. Nevertheless he continued to protect them. If they were to withdraw, the reputation of the Bay of Islands as a safe anchorage would suffer, and Hongi's opportunities for trade would decline. He was pursuing his own interests, not those of the missionaries.

Although Hongi Hika preferred muskets and powder as trade goods, he also appreciated the iron tools offered by the missionaries. Agricultural implements, put to use by the great numbers of captives taken in the south in Hongi's campaigns from 1818 on, enabled him to bring about an agricultural revolution in terms of crops and productivity. Hongi experimented with the growing of wheat and corn on his Waimate land. But his main effort was to grow huge crops of potatoes to exchange for muskets and powder with the European ships. The prices of the desired goods gradually altered in his favour, but there are accounts that some of his people died of starvation while others were still selling pork and potatoes.

Hongi visited England in 1820, with Kendall and the young chief Waikato. At Cambridge they assisted Professor Samuel Lee with the compilation of a Maori dictionary; they were made much of in society, and introduced to George IV. But Hongi's main aim, in which he was eventually successful, was to acquire muskets. He was also given a suit of armour, which gained him a reputation for invulnerability, and helped to demoralise his foes.

These acquisitions altered the balance of power in the Bay of Islands, and prompted an arms race, with important consequences for the greater part of New Zealand over the next two decades. First, other Bay of Islands communities armed themselves with muskets in self-defence against Hongi's hapu. Then, the heavily armed northern tribes attacked those to the south, who had few or none of the new weapons. The muskets were often faulty and inefficient, and the numbers of their victims exaggerated in many accounts, but tribes who had only heard of these terrible weapons lived in great fear; panic contributed much to Nga Puhi victories and the disruption of social life. Captives were used to produce more supplies to exchange for more weapons. The spiral of war, trade and more war reached a high point in the early 1820s.

Hongi's military genius flowered. In 1818, in an enormously successful campaign, Hongi and Te Morenga had led their separate forces against different objectives. However, from 1821 to 1823, inspired by Hongi, combined expeditions of hundreds of warriors left the Bay of Islands and Hokianga, each section led by their own leaders but aiming at a common goal. In 1821 Hongi led an expedition against Te Hinaki of Ngati Paoa at Mau-inaina pa, on the Tamaki isthmus, and moved on to attack Ngati Maru at Te Totara pa, near present day Thames. The next year the northern tribes again combined to attack the Waikato tribes, gathered under their chiefs, including Te Wherowhero, at Matakita pa, near Pirongia, which was taken; many died when a rush to escape the shooting resulted in panic. In 1823, after hauling canoes overland for 12 days, the combined forces attacked Ngati Whakaue and other Te Arawa on Mokoia Island, Rotorua.

All these campaigns were highly successful. Directly or indirectly they caused a considerable loss of population; on some occasions the casualties among the defeated were very great. Further, the campaigns placed intense pressure on the peoples of the Waitemata, Bay of Plenty, Tauranga, Coromandel and Waikato regions. This, combined with similar pressure exerted on the west coast by earlier Hokianga expeditions, began a series of wars and migrations which, in the 1820s and 1830s, set almost the whole of the North Island on the

move, caused numerous wars and expeditions in both the North and South Islands, and eventually brought about a major redistribution of population.

Hongi, of course, had not planned all of these results. Although some missionaries had encouraged the idea of Hongi as a Maori king, he was not a conqueror, and made no effort to occupy the territory of those he fought against. Although the means he adopted to gain his goals were new and had unprecedented success, the goals themselves were not new. They were set firmly within the traditional framework of intertribal relations.

Hongi was not exclusively a man of war. At home he was a mild, gentle and courteous man. He supervised the planting and harvesting of crops; he worked alongside his people with their fishing nets. He had two or more wives; he treated his blind senior wife, Turikatuku, with kindness, and was said to take her advice on strategic as well as on everyday matters. Her sister, Tangiwhare, was another of his wives. He was a loving father to his children, five of whom survived him. The death of his eldest son, Hare Hongi, in 1825 left him depressed and disturbed. Although missionary witnesses were horrified by the killing of captives when the expeditions returned to the Bay of Islands, Hongi was performing a traditional action, to sustain the mana of those who had been lost on his own side.

Hongi's ambition to redress the balance between his people and Ngati Whatua was partly fulfilled in 1825 when Nga Puhi, despite the loss of their canoes, set on fire by the enemy, won decisively at the battle known as Te Ika-a-ranga-nui, at the junction of the Kaiwaka River and the Waimake Stream. Some accounts say that 1,000 Ngati Whatua died for the loss of only 70 Nga Puhi. But Hongi himself said that only 100 of the enemy were killed. And among Nga Puhi dead was his own son. To avenge his death Hongi led further expeditions against Ngati Whatua remnants scattered deep in Waikato. His own people began to complain that he would never be satisfied.

From that time on his life was a troubled one. He was laid low with a growth on his knee; one of his wives committed adultery with his son-in-law; he was still grieving for his son. As one misfortune followed another some of his own people came to believe he was the victim of witchcraft. The missionaries thought he was very unsettled and 'always seeking for some new object'.

He decided to move from Waimate to Whangaroa in 1826, asserting the rights of his father's people. He had, in any case, a number of reasons for taking action against the people there, Ngati Uru and Ngati Pou. They had plundered the brig *Mercury*, and constantly harassed the Wesleyan mission at Whangaroa with threats and pilfering. Hongi valued the presence of Europeans; to protect them he decided to punish the Whangaroa people.

In 1827 his war expedition reached Whangaroa. Some local inhabitants fled immediately; others were driven off. As they left, Ngati Uru sacked the Wesleyan mission. But Hongi himself was the chief casualty; a ball from a musket, the weapon he had helped to introduce, passed through his chest. To make matters worse, Turikatuku, his wife, died a few days after he was wounded.

The last year of his life was even more troubled. There were frequent struggles between those of his people who had stayed at Waimate and those who had gone to Whangaroa. He was still feared by people who expected him to attack them; but some of his own people called him 'an old woman' and said that they cared nothing for him.

He still planned for the future. He tried to tempt the missionaries James Kemp and George Clarke to come to Whangaroa, believing that their presence would attract shipping. He planned a Waikato expedition to avenge the death of Pomare I in 1826. He schemed to capture the anchorage at Kororareka (Russell), popular with the visiting ships. He died from his bullet wound on 3 March 1828, at Whangaroa. The missionaries at Waimate and Kerikeri thought the fact that he had died at Whangaroa would spare them from a plundering expedition. His successors, however, concealed his death for fear of such an expedition, until Patuone reassured them. Then, this fear removed, his people paid him honour for some days before burying him. The final resting place of his bones was a carefully guarded secret.

How to cite this page:

Angela Ballara. 'Hongi Hika', first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, vol. 1, 1990. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/1h32/hongi-hika> (accessed 9 October 2017)