

Lord Bledisloe's gift and the 1934 celebrations

In 1932 Governor-General Lord Bledisloe gifted the Treaty House and grounds at Waitangi to the nation. He hoped that the site would become a national memorial, symbolising that the Treaty of Waitangi had initiated a unique relationship between the indigenous and the colonising peoples.

This partnership was reflected in the membership of a trust board set up to develop the property, which would include representatives of descendants of those involved in making the Treaty in 1840. The first board included Kirihi Te Riri Maihi Kawiti as a representative of their descendants of the northern chiefs of 1840. The partnership was also marked by a decision to build a whare rūnanga to stand near the Treaty House. Northern chief Tau Henare took a leading role in both the trust board and the building project.

In February 1934 Bledisloe's gift was marked by celebrations. A pattern for subsequent events was set. It involved two sites – the Treaty House grounds (where the whare rūnanga would be built) and Te Tii marae close by – several organising bodies (Māori, Pākehā and government), and Bledisloe's prayer that 'the sacred compact made in these waters may be faithfully and honourably kept for all time to come'. A second prayer hoped that the two races might unite as one nation through Christianity – Bledisloe's interpretation of Lieutenant-Governor Hobson's words at the 1840 signing, 'He iwi tahi tātou' (Now we are one people).

Up to 10,000 Māori attended the 1934 celebrations. The events had special meaning for many as they looked back to their independent status before the signing of the Treaty: 1834, when northern tribes chose a national flag at Waitangi, and 1835 when they issued a Declaration of Independence.

Māori and Pākehā perceptions of past and present events were clearly at variance in 1934. Waitangi became a stage on which the interplay of relationships – past and present – was repeated. There would inevitably be clashes.

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