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# Moriōri: Still setting the record straight

by **Maui Solomon** | Dec 15, 2019 | 35 | 13 min read



Tommy Solomon's statue on Rēkohu.

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**P** *The myths and misunderstandings around Moriiori have proved remarkably resistant to evidence. **But, as Moriiori leader Maui Solomon writes, that's only one of the battles Moriiori continue to face in their long struggle for peace and justice.***

*“Those who discovered the law of nonviolence in the midst of violence were greater geniuses than Newton.” — Gandhi.*

In 1983, I was appointed by the wider Solomon family as the chairman of the Tommy Solomon Memorial Trust Foundation. I was only 23 and didn't have a clue what I was letting myself in for.

Our hunau (family) had decided to erect a statue of our grandfather as a memorial to all Moriiori people on Rēkohu (Chatham Island). I'd just graduated with a law degree from the University of Canterbury and had helped organise the family reunion. Perhaps these two things had helped convince the family that I was “qualified” to take on this job.

I wasn't convinced myself but, being a determined sort of person, I applied myself to the task. The first thing I did was to read all I could about Moriiori history and culture by spending many hours at the Turnbull Library and National Archives in Wellington, where I

**The voice of the writer won through**



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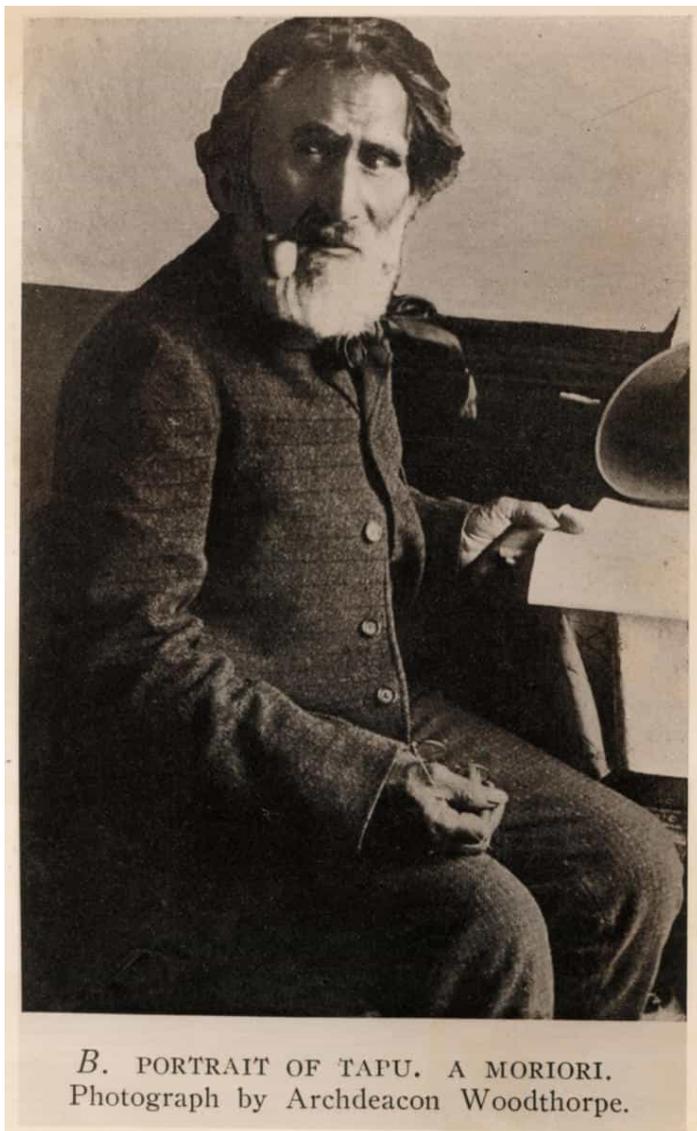
was living and working as a law clerk in 1984.

What I learned made me feel great sadness and some anger at the fate suffered by my ancestors after their islands were invaded in 1835 by two Māori tribes, Ngāti Tama and Ngāti Mutunga. Moriōri were slaughtered (many were cannibalised) or enslaved.

They had offered peace, food and shelter to the recent immigrants who had arrived on an English sailing ship, the *Lord Rodney*, from Port Nicholson in Wellington, on a mercenary expedition. But the Moriōri had their offer of peace thrown back in their faces and, from 1835 to 1866, they were held as slaves on their own island, treated brutally, and forced to do menial labour for their Māori slavers.

During this 31-year period of trauma for Moriōri, their population fell dramatically — from about 1700 in 1835 to only 100 survivors by 1870. The Crown knew what was happening but stood by and did nothing to help, despite their obligations to protect Moriōri as “British citizens”, as guaranteed in Article 3 of the Treaty of Waitangi.

What happened to our people has been, and to a large extent remains, an inconvenient truth and stain on the history and conscience of our nation.



Hirawanu Tapu, also known as Taputehara Maitarawai, was born about 1823 and died in 1900. This photo was taken by Archdeacon Woodthorpe (Canterbury Museum Collection)

In 1862, Mori elders led by Hirawanu Tapu wrote to Governor George Grey petitioning him for justice, emancipation and restoration of their land rights. They had been convinced by missionaries, who had settled on Rēkohu from the 1840s, that their pleas for justice would be well received by the colonial government.

But they were to be dramatically disappointed. In 1870, a Native Land Court was set up, which proceeded, in just

one week of sittings, to award 98 percent of all the land on and around the Chatham Islands to Ngāti Mutunga.

Ngāti Tama, who had returned to their homes in Taranaki by 1868, didn't make any claims to land. By 1870, a significant majority of Ngāti Mutunga had also returned to their traditional home in Taranaki.

Judge John Rogan, who had sat on the Taranaki courts in the mid-1860s and had "fixed ideas" before he even arrived on the island, presided over the court hearings. He determined that Moriōri had been "conquered" by Māori and therefore had forfeited their right to practically all of their lands — even though, by 1870, Moriōri outnumbered Māori living on Rēkohu.

Judge Rogan paid no regard to the ancient custom of peace that Moriōri had lived by on Rēkohu for many centuries, or to the fact that they had made a conscious decision, at a large gathering in early 1836, not to fight and kill the Māori invaders by way of retaliation. Many of the young men present at that meeting wanted to fight back but the leading elders, including my own rapuna (ancestor), Torea Takarehe, forbade it.

But worse was to follow for Moriōri. Having lost their lives, lands, liberty, and language — they were forbidden to speak their language by their captors — they

were then subject to widespread slander and deliberate mythmaking by some historians and the education system.

As historian Michael King wrote in his 1989 book *Mori: A People Rediscovered*:

***Nobody in New Zealand — and few elsewhere in the world — has been subjected to group slander as intense and as damaging as that heaped upon the Mori. They were regarded by many Victorians as the lowest in God’s hierarchy of created beings; and by non-Christians as negative proof of the Darwinian precept that only the fittest survived.***



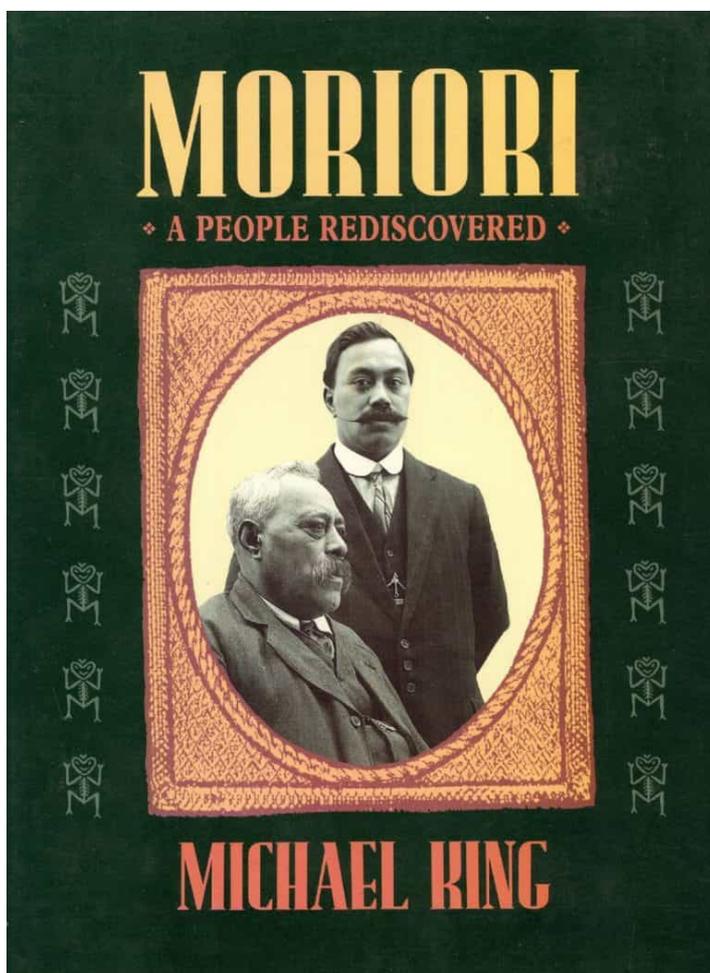
Mori karāpuna (ancestors) at Manukau, Rēkohu (Chatham Island), in 1884. Back row, fourth from left, is Rangitapua Horomona Rehe, Maui Solomon’s great-grandfather. Sitting in front on his right is his wife Ihimaeara. The man holding the staff is Hirawanu Tapu, the Mori leader and author of the 131-page petition to Governor George Grey in 1862.

## The Mori myth

As a 23-year-old, I struggled to reconcile this portrayal of my Mori ancestors as weak and inferior because of their decision to abandon warfare and cannibalism and to live in peace on their island home for over 600 years.

Surely, it took great strength of character and courage to do what they had done? And even more courage and commitment to stand by those ancient principles in the face of the greatest provocation they would ever face following the 1835 invasion of their homelands?

It seemed to me that something was seriously wrong with this picture. Not only had Mori suffered genocide and loss of all their lands, but they were now being deliberately used by the “system” in New Zealand to justify colonisation of Māori in Aotearoa and their displacement from their lands by European settlers: “If Māori can do it to Mori, then the British can do it to Māori.”



Michael King's book, published in 1989, intended to clear away all the "nonsense, rumour and vilification" that surrounded Mori. The cover photo shows Rangitapua Horomona Rehe (sitting) and his son Tame Horomona Rehe (Tommy Solomon).

And so the myth was created and taught to generations of New Zealand school children. According to that story, Mori arrived on mainland Aotearoa before Māori but were pushed out to the Chathams by later and more dominant Māori migrants arriving from Polynesia. To add a touch of colour, the mythmakers also described Mori as red-headed and of Melanesian "stock".

Many still believe that myth today, despite many efforts by Mori writers — and Pākehā writers, too, such as Henry

Skinner (writing in the 1920s) and Michael King — to set the record straight. But the myth was a powerful political weapon to justify European colonisation of New Zealand and so it stuck fast in the consciousness of Pākehā New Zealanders.

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For the record, **the first Moriōri ancestors, according to our own traditions, arrived directly from Eastern Polynesia to Rēkohu. Later waka came over from mainland Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu (it's a three- to five-day sail) about 500 or 600 years ago. Some stayed and settled and intermarried with ngā uri o Rongomaiwhenua, our founding ancestor from whom all Moriōri descend today.**

Moriōri acknowledge two streams of settlement. The first is our tuākana line direct from Eastern Polynesia via Rongomaiwhenua and Rongomaitere. The tēina or later migrants, such as Kahu and Moe and other waka, came from mainland New Zealand.

But for 600 years, the people we now know as “Moriōri” — before colonisation we were known only by our various hapū names — lived in splendid isolation from the rest of the world and developed their specialised culture, becoming highly adapted to their island environment and its many marine and avian resources.

When I was reading much of this history for the first time back in 1984, I made a promise to my karāpuna (ancestors) that

I'd do all I could to have the truth told about Moriōri and to have *justice* done by them, so as to honour my Moriōri ancestors and ourselves, their living descendants.

From that day to this, I've dedicated my life to seeking justice for Moriōri and to ensuring that our stories are told.

They are the stories of a people who once were warriors but who made a decision to become warriors for peace. A people who've been unjustly and unfairly maligned by New Zealand history for political gain at the expense of the truth — which is an inconvenient truth for many Pākehā and for many Māori.

I still read social media comments from Māori such as “Moriōri are just another Māori tribe, so what happened to them is only what happened to other Māori tribes.” Wrong. We are not another Māori tribe. We are Moriōri, the indigenous peoples of Rēkohu and Rangihauē (Pitt Island), with our own unique language (70 percent of our surviving *re Moriōri* differs from *te reo Māori*) history and traditions.

And then there are the Pākehā who are still voicing the perspective we heard from Don Brash on the Kim Hill show last year: “What have Māori got to complain about? Moriōri were in New Zealand first and look what happened to them.” (To her

credit, at that point in the interview, Kim Hill disconnected Mr Brash.)



Kōpinga Marae on Rēkohu

## **A centre of peace**

Since the 1980s, Moriōri descendants have been rebuilding and reclaiming our place on Rēkohu and within New Zealand, as a living people. We did not die out or become extinct upon the death of my grandfather Tommy Solomon in 1933, which was another popular myth peddled by journalists and misinformed schoolteachers all over the country.

In January 2005, Moriōri opened our beautiful marae, Kōpinga, on Rēkohu. As I said at the time, it was our aspiration to develop Kōpinga Marae into a national and international centre for peace and conflict studies. It turned out that there was another group on mainland New Zealand, headed by people of goodwill belonging to the Quaker movement and the Anglican Church, who wanted to do likewise.

So we joined forces — and, in 2006, the Hokotehi Moriōri Trust (the mandated organisation representing Moriōri people) and the Aotearoa New Zealand Peace and Conflicts Studies Centre Trust established Te Ao o Rongomaraeroa, the national peace centre based at the University of Otago.

The centre, which opened in 2009, was set up to be a bicultural place of study and research based on tangata whenua histories and traditions of peacemaking — such as Waitaha, Moriōri and Parihaka — as well as western academic peace research practices.

It was heralded as a unique and groundbreaking bicultural model for co-operation and learning between Moriōri, Māori and Pākehā. Sadly, this vision took almost 10 years to see the light of day as the “bicultural” practices of the predominantly Pākehā power brokers (who were in control of the purse strings and direction of the centre) didn’t extend beyond learning a waiata and occasionally attending a local marae.

But three months ago, the newly appointed director of Te Ao o Rongomaraeroa, Professor Richard Jackson, brought a group of eight post-graduate students down to Rēkohu on a study visit that showed what can be gained from genuine engagement between tangata whenua and academia.

The students had come from all over the world, some from war-torn and violent countries. To a person, they told us that they had been inspired by the fact that, despite all that Moriōri had endured, we have not given up, and our commitment to peace and justice is as strong today as it was for our ancestors.

In the words of one student:

*The rich and unparalleled culture of peace that has come to define the Moriōri was in full expression in every part of the marae. . . . It seemed that every site at Rēkohu has a story and symbolic peace message attached to it.*

Many students also noted the resilience of Moriōri:

*Despite hardship, Rēkohu's people find ways to survive and remain afloat. This drive to survive, to innovate, and to coalesce, is worth remembering in conversations over climate change and conflict. In the face of historical and political abandonment, communities can still thrive, and Rēkohu is a prime example of that.*

We were inspired and heartened by the students' response. And last month, at the tenth anniversary of the peace centre's establishment at Otago University, we had keynote speakers here, including

Moana Jackson, Moana Maniapoto and Oscar Temaru, the former president of Tahiti. Each of them reinforced the need to re-examine our colonial past (and present) as a necessary first step to moving towards a more peaceful and tolerant future that doesn't keep suppressing the indigenous voice.



Rēkohu/Wharekauri/Chatham Island (Photo: Hokotehi Moriōri Trust)

## **Still battles to be fought**

Moriōri have made considerable progress over the past 30 or 40 years in terms of receiving recognition from the Crown (we are about to sign a deed of settlement) and also from nga iwi Māori in Aotearoa (we are members of the National Iwi Chairs Forum).

But there are still battles to be fought.

Some of these are with our Ngāti Mutunga neighbours and relations on Rēkohu/Wharekauri. Only a few months ago, we were confronted with an

application to the High Court by Ngāti Mutunga o Wharekauri Iwi Trust (NMOWT), to stop Mori initialling our deed of settlement with the Crown.

The basis of their argument is that Mori have no mana whenua (that's no authority over land) on Rēkohu and Rangihau because Ngāti Mutunga "conquered" Mori — and, as the Native Land Court in that 1870 decision had awarded *them* all the land, the Crown would be acting in breach of *their* rights if they awarded Crown lands to Mori as part of any Treaty settlement. That argument overlooks the fact that Ngāti Mutunga sold or leased much of the land to European settlers immediately after receiving it in 1870 — and then returned home to Taranaki.

To make matters worse, NMOWT don't want the land for themselves (because most of it is held as reserves by DOC) but say it shouldn't be returned to Mori as a "matter of principle". The "principle" being that Mori have no mana on our own island and therefore can't receive Crown land as part of our settlement.

Fortunately, the Crown hasn't bought into this untenable argument and neither did the High Court judge, Justice Francis Cooke, the son of Lord Cooke of Thorndon. The case has been thrown out.

But the legal battles go on. NMOWT is also seeking to prevent the transfer to

Moriōri of a block of DOC land of special cultural and ecological significance to Moriōri. In addition to arguing that Moriōri lack “mana whenua”, they claim that the minority rights of NMOWT will be violated under the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 if the transfer goes ahead.

Interestingly, Justice Joe Williams, who was sitting on the Appeal Court which heard that case in April, made a couple of concerning observations in open court to the effect that *what happened on the Chathams was no different from what happened elsewhere on the mainland among Māori tribes.*

Actually, what happened on Rekohu in 1835 was a clash between two different Polynesian peoples and cultures — and applying mainland *tikanga Māori* at the expense of, or in ignorance of, the more relevant *tikane Moriōri*, fails to acknowledge that. We’re still awaiting a decision from the Court of Appeal on that.



Te Ana o Nunuku, the cave of Nunuku Whenua, the revered Moriōri ancestor and spiritual leader who

laid down the peace covenant 600 years ago.  
(Hokotehi Mori Trust)

In recent years, Mori have also been faced with culturally-motivated attacks on our sacred miheke (taonga) on Rēkohu. This includes having the eyes of one of our prized rakau momori (sacred tree engravings) attacked with a machete back in 2011, and others shot at with .22-calibre rifles.

As well, the entrance to the cave of Nunuku Whenua, our revered Mori rapuna and tohuk (spiritual leader) who laid down the peace covenant 600 years ago, has been defiled with graffiti and signs claiming that Nunuku comes from Taranaki — a thoroughly basely and offensive claim.

These incidents are a direct attack on Mori and deeply upsetting — which is the point of the attacks in the first place. But these miheke Mori are not just important to Mori but to the local community as a whole. They are rare cultural treasures of national and international significance, and key visitor attractions.

NMOWT also insist that visitors — especially the Crown and ministers — must always be first welcomed at their marae (Whakamaharatanga), as they claim that they are the “mana whenua” iwi. The Mori position is that while we can, with greater justification, claim “pole

position” on Rēkohu as tangata whenua tuturu ake and mana(wa) whenua, and equally insist that Crown officials first come to Kōpinga Marae to be welcomed, the sensible and respectful stance is to share that responsibility, and to support each other at each other’s marae when welcoming visitors. So far that position has been rejected by NMOWT.

Despite our differences with the trust representing Ngāti Mutunga o Wharekauri, Moriōri have a very positive relationship with Ngāti Mutunga people and families on the island, which is as it should be.

I’ve often said that we have more that unites us going forward than divides us looking back, so we need to co-operate with one another. We all live together on the island and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. It behoves us all to find a more peaceful way of living together and respecting each other and our differences. It shouldn’t be a competition of who has the most mana. That’s not a recipe for harmony anywhere, let alone on a small island community — something that our karāpuna recognised centuries ago when they first laid down the covenant of peace on Rēkohu and Rangihau.

### **A legacy of peace and hope**

I’ve recounted these negative experiences here not as a source of complaint —

although there is much to complain *about* – but to highlight that the struggle for peace and justice is never-ending.

But it would be a mistake to focus too much time, energy and resources into fighting these battles and neglect the greater work that must be done to uplift and move forward with the kaupapa of shaping a better future for all the peoples of Rēkohu/Wharekauri/Chatham Islands. That's Moriōri, Māori, *and* Pākehā.



Maui and Susan (right) on their wedding day in January 2019, with Maui's niece Caitlin Hamilton. The couple's five children hokopapa/whakapapa to both Moriōri and Ngāti Mutunga o Wharekauri.

Ninety percent of Moriōri live off Rēkohu these days, but most of our people now on the islands also have Ngāti Mutunga hokopapa/whakapapa. So it doesn't make sense to create divisions.

Having said that, nor is it acceptable to expect that, in order for peace to prevail, Moriōri must agree to unreasonable and untenable positions and proposals put forward by others — whether that's the Crown, NMOWT, or mainland institutions such as the Peace Centre.

There cannot be peace without justice, and justice must not only be seen to be done but must, in fact, be done. Even if it takes another 200 years to accomplish.

Such was the commitment of my Moriōri karāpuna to living in peace and sharing the resources of their islands, that they refused *as a people* to ever fight to the death again. They had developed, here on their home island, a greater respect for the sanctity of human life, and had agreed to observe the law of peace, literally through life and death. In doing so, they suffered greatly, and many died.

But they did not die in vain. Their legacy of peace and hope lives on through the thousands of descendants living today — many of whom are just learning the truth. For, when all the wars and battles have been fought, what then? Humans must learn to live in peace with one another and with their environment if we are to survive and thrive as a species. That's the bottom line.

To quote Gandhi: “Nonviolence is not a garment to be put on and off at will. Its

seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our being.”

*Maui Solomon is the executive chairman of the Hokotehi Moriōri Trust and has been a legal and political advocate for Moriōri, Māōri, and indigenous peoples' rights and responsibilities at a local, national and international level for the past 35 years. He and his wife Susan (who between them have five children of Moriōri and Ngāti Mutunga o Wharekauri hokopapa/whakapapa) live on Rēkohu, on Maui's hunau lands at Manukau, in the south eastern corner of the island.*

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