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Mangakāhia, Meri Te Tai

1868–1920

Te Rarawa woman of mana,
suffragist

This biography, written by Angela Ballara, was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography in 1993.

Meri Te Tai was of Ngāti Te Rēinga, Ngāti Manawa and Te Kaitūtae, three hapū of Te Rarawa. She is said to have been born on 22 May 1868, near Whakarapa (Panguru) on the Hokianga Harbour. She was the great-grandchild of the woman of mana, Ngākahuwhero. Her father, Rē Te Tai, was an influential chief of Te Rarawa in the Hokianga district in the 1890s and later; her mother was Hana Tēra. Hana's marriage to Rē Te Tai was her second; three children had been born of her first marriage, to a member of the Parore family. Meri was the eldest of the four children of Hana's second marriage.

Family tradition suggests that Meri Te Tai was well educated. She is said to have studied at St Mary's

Convent in Auckland, and was an accomplished pianist. In the late 1880s or early 1890s she became the third wife of Hāmiora Mangakāhia, of Ngāti Whanaunga and other Coromandel hapū. He was an assessor in the Native Land Court, and was working at Waimate North in 1887. He was also at the Bay of Islands in 1889, attending the meeting at which Te Kotahitanga, the Māori parliament movement, was formally initiated.

Hāmiora and Meri built a homestead on his land at Whangapoua on the Coromandel Peninsula. During the following years Meri gave birth to four children: two sons, Mohi and Waipapa, and two daughters, Whangapoua Tangiora Edith and Mabel Te Aowhaitini. Mabel Mangakāhia became a registered nurse and midwife, and is thought to have been the first Māori to gain the postgraduate diploma in public health nursing in 1939.

Hāmiora Mangakāhia was elected premier of the Kotahitanga parliament in June 1892. In 1893 both he and Meri attended the second session of the parliament at Waipatu in Hawke's Bay. The women's suffrage movement had been gaining strength from the 1880s, and it is likely that Meri had knowledge of this. She may, like many Māori women, have come into contact with the New Zealand Women's Christian Temperance Union, which campaigned for women's suffrage. On 18 May 1893 the Speaker of the lower house of the Kotahitanga parliament introduced a motion from Meri Mangakāhia, requesting that women be given the right to participate in the selection of members. It was suggested that she come into the house to explain her motion, and later that day she addressed the parliament – the first woman recorded to have done so.

She requested not only that Māori women be given the vote, but that they be eligible to sit in the Māori parliament, thus going a step further than the contemporary aims of the European suffrage movement. She argued on the grounds that many Māori women owned and administered their own lands, either because they had no male relatives or because the

women were more competent. She claimed that although chiefs had appealed to Queen Victoria over Māori problems, Māori women had received no advantage from these appeals, and suggested that the Queen might more readily respond to representations by women.

Meri was followed in the debate by Ākenehi Tomoana, wife of Hēnare Tomoana, the host at Waipatu. Ākenehi suggested that discussion of the issue be postponed until the men had 'achieved their goal' – until, she appears to have meant, they had succeeded in achieving recognition for the Kotahitanga parliament. The matter then lapsed.

Little further is recorded of Meri Mangakāhia's participation in the Kotahitanga movement, but she continued to be active in Māori politics and welfare. An oil portrait painted about this time, preserved by her family, shows a beautiful young woman dressed in the height of European fashion. It is likely that she was a member of one of the women's committees of the Kotahitanga movement. These committees, early forerunners of the Māori Women's Welfare League, organised the activities of young people attending Kotahitanga meetings, and undertook massive catering. They also held meetings and debated political issues.

Meri and Hāmiora Mangakāhia spent most of their last years together at Whangapoua. When Hāmiora died in June 1918, Meri became one of the two executors and trustees of his complicated estate. He left his property at Whangapoua to their four children, with the proviso that Meri had the right to live there and be maintained by them. She returned, however, to her own people and lands at Panguru, taking some of her children with her. According to family information she died of influenza on 10 October 1920, aged 52, and was buried at Pūreirei cemetery, Lower Waihou, near her father.

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