

Story: Mahuta Tawhiao Potatau Te Wherowhero

(Ballara, A., 1996a)

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Mahuta Tawhiao Potatau Te Wherowhero

1854/1855?–1912

Ngati Mahuta; Maori King, politician

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Mahuta Tawhiao of Ngati Mahuta was born at Whatiwhatihoe, Waikato, probably in 1854 or 1855. He was the eldest son of Tawhiao, the second Maori King, and his senior wife, Hera. She was the daughter of Tamati Ngapora (Manuhiri) of Ngati Mahuta, Tawhiao's adviser, and his wife, Hera. Mahuta's elder sister was Tiahuia, the mother of Te Puea Herangi. Mahuta had many half-brothers and -sisters from his father's other marriages and connections.

The family's selection by many central North Island tribes to serve as kings reflected its senior lines of descent and important kin connections to other tribes. Mahuta could trace his descent from the crews of Tainui, Te Arawa, Mataatua, Tokomaru, Kurahaupo, Takitimu and other canoes. It also reflected the family's

early wealth: fertile lands on the banks of the Waikato River, itself a source of food, were complemented by nearby forests and lakes. Since part of the king's role was similar to that of the traditional ariki, it was essential for him to have the means for ample hospitality. The course of Mahuta's reign was shaped by this expectation; the established sequence of hui and ritual events, the manifestations of the functioning King movement, had to be supplied by a people impoverished by the confiscation of their lands.

Mahuta grew up during the wars of the 1860s and the period of isolation that followed. As a result, although trained in Waikato tradition and whakapapa, and in the composition of waiata, he received little if any European education. He spoke almost no English, and his handwriting remained shaky and unformed throughout his life. As an adult he was his father's heir apparent, and made use of the literacy and numeracy skills of others such as T. T. Rawhiti and Henare Kaihau to an extent that left him dependent on their services and integrity. Partly for this reason, Mahuta has often been seen as a figurehead within his own kingdom, pushed this way and that by strong leaders of different factions. But he had a clear perception of his role as the custodian of Tawhiao's political and religious legacy, and often set the factional leaders against each other, achieving his own ends through the blunting of theirs.

Probably in the 1870s, Mahuta married Te Marae, a woman of strong, independent character who became a King movement leader in her own right. Mahuta and Te Marae had five surviving sons: Te Rata (eventually the fourth King), Taipu, Tumate, Tonga and Te Rauangaanga.

When Tawhiao died in August 1894, Tupu Taingakawa Te Waharoa, known as the king, appointed Mahuta as the third King while his father's body lay in state at Taupiri. Mahuta

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deemed to have become King on 14 September 1894. On 15 September he, accompanied by other members of the royal family, made a formal entrance into the house of his parliament, Te Kauhanganui, and was seated on his father's throne. His younger brother, Te Wherowhero Tawhiao, announced that Mahuta was to be known as 'King Tawhiao III', a title later used on some occasions. He was also known as Kiingi Tawhiao Te Aaha-o-te-rangi. Mahuta spoke, promising to hold on to Tawhiao's sayings and teachings. Out on the marae three volleys were fired in honour of the new King.

Allegiance to Mahuta, based on that given to Tawhiao, was regarded partly as a covenant with him to hold the lands of those tribes acknowledging the authority of the Maori King. The movement had attracted its greatest support in the 1860s; even in 1881 Wahanui Huatare had been able to plant 34 poles at Hikurangi representing supporting tribes, including Taranaki and Whanganui tribes, Ngati Awa, Ngati Kahungunu, some Te Arawa and even one small group of Nga Puhi. But the erosion of this support had been rapid in the 1880s, and some tribes only nominally acknowledged his authority. Of these, many had abandoned the full Kingite programme: they were not withholding their lands from the colony's land courts and were permitting government committees to be set up in their regions according to legislative provision. Ngati Maniapoto had allowed the main trunk railway to proceed.

But although the kingdom was shrinking in size and influence, in many ways it was assuming a more formal organisational shape. When Mahuta succeeded to the throne, many of the plans of Te Kauhanganui were being formalised for the first time and mana motuhake (local autonomy) was being realised to some extent. Soon after Mahuta's succession, Taingakawa, as leader of the King's government, announced the setting up of the kingdom's own courts for land, civil and criminal cases. Judges, registrars, police and clerks were appointed; dog taxes and fines for non-payment were organised. A minister of lands was appointed, to whom the kingdom's subjects could apply if they wished to lease out their lands. Land court block hearings were 'gazetted' in *Te Paki o Matariki*, the King movement's newspaper. Spokesmen were appointed to mediate tribal disputes. There was also a plan to set up King movement schools.

These plans of 1894 and 1895 were not Mahuta's personal work, but he encouraged and endorsed them by his presence at hui at which they were adopted, and by his constant exhortations to the members of Te Kauhanganui. The plans foundered through official resistance to King movement assumption of government or local government functions, and also through lack of means. Mahuta's kingdom had none but moral pressure to exert; without the power to enforce its taxes and fines it was without funds to pay its officers and finance its schools and had to depend on traditional, voluntary support.

These weaknesses and the desperate state of his people forced Mahuta to attempt to find redress for the Waikato confiscations of the 1860s. These were the root of a deepening economic crisis which was producing a vicious cycle of poverty, disease and depopulation at a time when Maori in some other areas were beginning to recover. Some tribes were coping by selling or leasing land; Mahuta's people had none to spare. Kauri gum and rabbit skins provided income for some, but both sources had ceased by 1903. Flax milling required back-breaking labour in swamps and was plagued by fluctuating demand. Mahuta's people were surviving by raising a few sheep and through subsistence farming on their remaining lands. In an effort to end the downward spiral Mahuta consulted a tohunga, who advised that the

bodies of King Potatau and his ancestors be exhumed and reburied on Taupiri Mountain, a ceremony carried out on 23 January 1903.

In 1895 Mahuta briefly considered a union with Te Kotahitanga, the movement for an independent Maori parliament. United Maori pressure on the government might produce redress for grievances. Representatives arrived from the fourth parliamentary session in Rotorua, armed with deeds setting out the aims of Te Kotahitanga to which they hoped he would give his agreement. Mahuta sanctioned the setting up of a committee including Tureiti Te Heuheu Tukino and T. T. Rawhiti to explore ways of uniting the efforts of both groups, but Taingakawa quashed this development by setting up a rival deed, later known as Mahuta's deed, for King movement followers to sign. It was circulated in Waikato and on the Kawhia coast, and signed – it was claimed – by 5,000.

Eventually Mahuta was forced to turn to the colonial government for help. At a meeting at Waahi pa, Huntly, on 4 April 1898, Premier Richard Seddon brought up the idea of Mahuta accepting a seat on the Legislative Council. Some leading King movement supporters warned that the government would expect Mahuta to abandon his independence, but negotiations proceeded. Encouraged by his reception at Waahi, in 1900 Seddon worked on detailed proposals suggesting a measure of Maori self-government and bills to enable Maori to manage and conserve the remnants of their land and to return some of the confiscated land. The proposal to return land was later replaced with an offer to talk in general terms about landless Maori. Mahuta was also offered a seat in the cabinet, so that he could deliberate over all matters affecting Maori. An offer of a yearly pension was replaced with a promise to discuss how the dignity of Mahuta's high position was to be maintained. The amended version was sent to Mahuta on 31 August 1900.

It must have seemed to Mahuta that he was being handed, all at once, recognition, redress and future sustenance for his people. After a flurry of telegrams, he met Seddon in Wellington on 17 September. Mahuta told Seddon that he would accept his offers after discussion with his people. He said that at the same time they should settle the boundaries of the Waikato District Maori Land Council, planned to be set up under the Maori Lands Administration Act 1900; Mahuta wanted its district to include most of the central North Island. When he laid the offers before his people and Te Kauhanganui, opposition to the plan centred on concessions Mahuta would be expected to make and the fate of the independent Maori kingdom. Mahuta asked Seddon to hold over the proposal for a while.

Seddon's legislation of that year met with mixed success in Waikato. Although implementation of the Maori Councils Act 1900 did not get off the ground there, with Mahuta's encouragement the Waikato District Maori Land Council held its first sitting on 15 April 1903 at his settlement at Waahi. Nearly 300 Maori attended, and on 16 April Mahuta brought the first case, asking the council to recommend the removal of restrictions on alienation of land he and his wife owned at Kawhia.

Encouraged by this sign of Mahuta's support for land settlement, Seddon renewed his offers; Mahuta accepted, and was appointed to the Legislative Council and sworn in as a member of the Executive Council on 22 May 1903. His appointment was widely regarded as the end of Waikato Maori isolation and intransigence; in fact it was the beginning of a short-lived experiment in co-operation with Pakeha authority.