

Te Rata Mahuta Potatau Te Wherowhero

1877-1880?-1933

Ngati Mahuta; Maori King

By *Angela Ballara*

Biography

Te Rata Mahuta was the fourth leader of the Maori King movement. He inherited many of the leadership qualities of his predecessors, with the added support of 50 years of widespread Maori recognition of the special status conferred by his role as king.

Te Rata was born sometime between 1877 and 1880 at his father's home, Hukanui, near Waahi pa, Huntly. He was the eldest of five sons of the third Maori King, Mahuta Tawhiao Potatau Te Wherowhero of Ngati Mahuta. Te Rata's mother was Te Marae, a daughter of Amukete (Amuketi) Te Kerei, a chief killed at the battle at Rangiriri in November 1863. Te Rata is said to have been well educated, but was a chronic invalid as a child, and in adulthood suffered from rheumatoid arthritis and heart disease. Partly because of his physical disabilities his contemporaries tended to regard him as weak, shy and easily led, and attributed his role in many important events to the influence of other King movement leaders. Te Rata usually lived quietly at Waahi, although he sometimes attended race meetings in Auckland. He married Te Uranga, the daughter of Iriwhata Wharemakei and Hira Wati of Ngati Koroki; their two sons were Koroki and Taipu.



Te Rata Mahuta
Potatau Te
Wherowhero
(seated, right) and
others

Te Rata's life was punctuated with controversy. From 1908 Henare Kaihau set up land agencies in Auckland with the aim of raising money to buy back confiscated lands. Te Rata invested heavily in these. By 1911 it was becoming apparent that the investments were losing money and both Te Rata and his father were becoming disillusioned with their agent. That year Te Rata represented Mahuta at an important hui at Parewanui near Bulls to select a candidate for the Western Maori parliamentary seat. This had been held by Kaihau, but leaders from Taranaki were anxious to appoint a younger, better educated man who could help them gain compensation for confiscated lands. Because of the obligations of their position, and because Kaihau was still their agent in selling and leasing their land, Mahuta and Te Rata could not lightly shift their allegiance from him. Te Rata did not openly support the aims of the Taranaki elders, but he demonstrated his considerable talent for diplomacy by asking whether they had a suitable candidate who could renew the ties between Waikato and Taranaki. In this way he cleared the way for the selection of Maui Pomare, the candidate preferred by his father. Although he was later opposed by Te Puea Herangi and others, Te Rata continued to support Pomare as MP, both out of respect for his father's wishes and because Pomare promised to set up a commission of inquiry into the Waikato confiscations.

died on 9 November 1912 at Waahi. There was no doubt that Te Rata was the most candidate to succeed his father, and it was thought that his knowledge of Pakeha a

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would help his people. Some Maori leaders advised Te Rata to abandon the title of king, substituting the Maori supreme title, ariki. Tupu Taingakawa Te Waharoa, the King movement's premier, successfully opposed this, stressing the continuity of the kingship and the fact that Potatau, the first Maori King, had been made king by the Maori people. On 24 November 1912 he invested Te Rata with the kingship beside his father's body. Te Rata then assumed the name Potatau Te Wherowhero.

Te Rata was thought to have inherited his father's personal property, estimated to be worth £20,000, and land to the value of £100,000. It is likely, though, that his financial position was much less satisfactory. Apart from the failure of Kaihau's investments, family members including his cousin, Hera Herangi, and Mahuta had been selling land on their own account for years. In addition, Mahuta's property had been divided among his sons.

In 1913 Te Rata took up Tupu Taingakawa's plans to present the British Crown with yet another petition asking for the restoration of confiscated lands. His mother, Te Marae, sold family land to finance the expedition, and King movement members agreed to support the trip by contributing a shilling each. A hui was held at Waahi on 1 April 1914 at which several speakers, including Apirana Ngata, attempted to convince Te Rata and Taingakawa to cancel their expedition. But they departed on 11 April, with Mita Karaka and Hori Tiro Paora as secretaries and interpreters, arriving in London in late May.

Te Rata had counted on the assistance of Sir John Gorst, government agent in Waikato in the 1860s and now resident in England; he at first refused to see the delegation, and gave them no real support. They were eventually received by King George V and Queen Mary, but the British government reiterated its position that Maori must look to the New Zealand government for the redress of grievances. The expedition, during which Te Rata fell ill, was a failure, but his reception by the British royal family (he was the first Maori King to meet a reigning British monarch) confirmed his pre-eminent status, recognised by Waikato and King Country Maori and Pakeha. He was welcomed back at a hui organised by Te Puea at Te Paina marae, Mercer, and given a reception and ball by the mayor and citizens of the town.

Te Rata was adroit at evading confrontation damaging to his mana. The First World War had commenced while he was still in England, and on his return he was asked whether Maori should assist the British King by enlisting. He is reported to have diplomatically recommended that the matter be left to individual choice: with other King movement leaders he felt that the confiscation issue needed resolution before Waikato men could be encouraged to enlist. Also, the King movement had revived and adopted the Pai Marire religion, whose adherents were opposed to military service.

In 1915 Te Rata was criticised for his failure to encourage Waikato volunteers. Later he undertook to protect a Maori recruit who deserted and came to his house at Waahi. This action provoked a request from a senior army officer for his prosecution, but the action did not proceed. When James Allen, minister of defence, visited Waikato in 1916, Te Rata absented himself from the meeting, nominating Tupu Taingakawa as his representative. Taingakawa repeated Te Rata's opinion that the decision to volunteer was a matter for the young men concerned. Te Rata's younger brother Tonga was repeatedly prosecuted for failing to report for territorial duty; and the youngest brother, Te Rauangaanga, was taken forcibly for training at Narrow Neck, Auckland, in July 1918.

In March 1919 a new building for Te Rata's parliament was opened in Ngaruawahia; he was too ill to attend. In April 1920 Te Rata, through Pomare, asked the government for the opportunity to show Waikato's loyalty to the Crown by welcoming the visiting prince of Wales in the new house. Incensed at his attitude to conscription, and as a discouragement to the King movement, the government denied his request. Te Rata went ahead with preparations, and on 27 April he stood on Ngaruawahia station with his supporters, but the prince's train passed through without stopping. Offended by this humiliation, Waikato remained aloof from the Maori welcome at Rotorua.

Plans to re-establish the centre of the King movement at Ngaruawahia, according to the wish of Te Rata's grandfather, Tawhiao, continued. Te Rata's adviser, John Ormsby, purchased for him a 10-acre site on the east bank of the Waikato River. Turangawaewae was to be a marae for his tribe, and also for all those who acknowledged his authority and that of his successors.

From 1922 Te Rata was subject to pressure from all sides on the subject of the new Ratana faith. His cousin, Piupiu Te Wherowhero, was strongly Ratana, as were many of his Tekau-ma-rua (council of 12), and they made frequent attempts to draw him in. Te Puea was as strongly opposed to Ratana affiliation. Te Rata, committed to supporting Pomare as his best hope for the redress of Waikato's grievances, refused to sign Ratana's covenant.

A breach developed between the two movements over the issue of the parliamentary candidate for Western Maori. A meeting at Ngaruawahia in September 1922 between T. W. Ratana and Te Rata was intended to heal the breach; Ratana and 300 followers arrived, but what was seen as a slight to the King's mana prevented the meeting from taking place. A hui in March 1929 for the opening of the Mahinarangi meeting house at Turangawaewae marae was attended by Ratana and a large group of followers. This resulted in more friendly relations but little increased co-operation between the two movements. On subsequent visits, there were times when Te Rata crept out of his house, disguised, to avoid meeting Ratana. In 1930, on the death of Pomare, Te Rata successfully supported Te Taite Te Tomo as the Western Maori candidate against Ratana.

In 1928 Te Puea was instrumental in arranging a visit by the governor general, Sir Charles Fergusson, to Ngaruawahia. However, the King movement leadership were still resentful of the government's conscription tactics against members of Te Rata's family and people, and at its failure to restore the confiscated lands (the royal commission eventually obtained by Pomare offered compensation in the same year). Te Rata refused to meet Fergusson when he visited Turangawaewae on 30 April.

In the 1920s, as his illness progressed and formerly trusted advisers such as Tupu Taingakawa turned to Ratana, Te Rata abandoned his parliament, known as Te Kauhanganui, as an instrument of his policy making and leaned more on Te Puea, who became his mouthpiece to an increasing extent. Apirana Ngata's schemes to develop Maori land through government loan money, initiated in November 1929, were enthusiastically accepted by Te Puea, but many Waikato people resisted involvement because of lingering suspicion of the government. Ngata and Te Raumoana Balneavis discussed land development with Te Rata at the opening of Mahinarangi in 1929, and subsequently the King came to accept their ideas. In 1931 and 1932 Te Rata and his brothers gave Te Puea their support on land development. Te Rata's sanction of the schemes ensured their success and he successfully persuaded many formerly suspicious landowners to allow their blocks to be developed. With his brothers he developed 600 acres on his own account. Ngata was later to say that Te Rata's death removed a great influence for progress; had he lived he would have been the greatest champion of land settlement.

Te Rata had been ill more or less continuously from 1927. In the last three years of his life he suffered from acute rheumatism. He died at Waahi on 1 October 1933. Te Urunga died in December 1935. Their younger son, Taipu, had died in 1924; the elder son, Koroki, aged only 24 at Te Rata's death, succeeded him. Te Rata's tangihanga lasted a week. Te Puea was in charge of the arrangements; the thousands of mourners were accommodated in marquees, and hundreds of sheep and cattle were slaughtered to feed them. Ratana arrived on 8 October, and at last paid his respects to Te Rata face to face.

Te Rata was buried on Taupiri Mountain on 8 October; the funeral procession included Ngata, J. G. Coates, and H. E. Holland. The weather had been fine throughout the tangihanga, but as the coffin was borne up Taupiri rain fell heavily in a sign of mourning from the land itself.

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