

Story: Taiwhanga, Hirini Rawiri

1882

(Orange, C., 1993)

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Taiwhanga, Hirini Rawiri

1832/1833?–1890

Nga Puhi petitioner, politician

This biography, written by Claudia Orange, was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, vol 2, 1993.

Hirini Rawiri Taiwhanga was born probably at Kaikohe, west of the Bay of Islands, in 1832 or 1833. His mother was Mata Rawa of Te Arawa. His father, a mission worker and farmer, was Rawiri Taiwhanga, leader of Ngati Tautahi and Te Uri-o-Hua hapu of Nga Puhi. Rawiri's influence on him was of major importance.

Hirini was educated at the Waimate mission school and at St John's College, Auckland, showing ability in theology. He trained and worked as a carpenter, and was said to be an expert workman, having built several bridges in the north. In 1850 he served as a crew member on Bishop G. A. Selwyn's mission schooner, *Undine*, which voyaged to Melanesia. Later he studied

surveying, was licensed under the Native Lands Act 1865, and was engaged to do survey work in the Bay of Islands. However, when he surveyed and laid claim to land that had already been sold to Europeans, the licence was revoked. According to his own account, in order to make a living he then turned to gum-digging.

In 1868 Hirini Taiwhanga married Mere Pohoi, the daughter of a Kaikohe leader, Wi Hongi. This union with a family of some influence increased Taiwhanga's mana and brought contacts with the Rotorua area where he already had links through his mother. The couple were to have several children before Mere died, at Kaikohe, in May 1876.

At Auckland, on 8 March 1877, Taiwhanga married Sarah Ann Moran, a recent Irish migrant with a child from a former marriage. Taiwhanga claimed that this was the first legal marriage of a Maori to a European woman. Hirini and Sarah were to have three children, including two sons, George John (named it seems after George Grey and John Sheehan), and Tiriti Waitangi. Also in 1877, while living at Kaikohe, he established a day and boarding school for Maori students. Government subsidies were paid on the basis of attendance, and after a short period official reports alleged that Taiwhanga was inaccurately recording figures in order to increase his revenue. The school was closed.

From about 1875 Taiwhanga had begun to make his mark at tribal gatherings with vigorous denunciations of government policy and demands for redress of grievances relating to the Treaty of Waitangi. Reasonably fluent in English and experienced in business, he was not popular with government officials. However, among Maori increasingly frustrated with government policy he began to attract a following, keeping the treaty alive for a considerable number whose knowledge and understanding was somewhat vague. At the same time he picked up ideas on Maori protest through attending large hui at Orakei and elsewhere.

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Taiwhanga proposed to present to Queen Victoria, whom he regarded as the 'sole authority' concerned with the treaty, a Nga Puhi petition, asking, principally, for a royal commission to investigate and take steps to amend any laws that contravened the principles of the treaty. He also requested that permission be given to establish a Maori parliament which would restrain the New Zealand government in what Taiwhanga claimed were its endeavours to set aside the treaty. An initial lack of funding was resolved when Parore Te Awaha, a senior chief of Kaihu, agreed to back the plan. Taiwhanga was to be the main spokesman and was to be accompanied by Parore's grandson, Hakena, and his nephew, Wiremu Reweti Te Puhi Hihī Te Awaha. Government agents in the north believed that Taiwhanga was out to further his political career – it was said that he had sought election to Parliament on several occasions – although they admitted that he also had a commitment to Maori welfare. Several Bay of Islands chiefs involved in convening meetings at Waitangi endorsed the appeal and the group departed, arriving in England on 25 June 1882.

Taiwhanga and his two companions were welcomed and assisted by members of the British and Foreign Aborigines' Protection Society. They were not allowed to present their case to the Queen, but were received by the earl of Kimberley, secretary of state for the colonies. Kimberley, influenced by the hostile attitude of the New Zealand government, denied any responsibility for alleged treaty breaches on the part of the British Crown or government, which he noted had held no right to interfere in New Zealand's internal affairs since the 1860s. It was a polite but firm dismissal.

Taiwhanga and his group were generously entertained by London sympathisers before their departure in September. They also received advice from well-meaning politicians who recommended that a second, properly constituted appeal be made, and that a company be established to handle Maori land transactions to the benefit of both non-Maori shareholders and Maori. Taiwhanga reported this to a meeting at Waitangi on 8 December 1882. The meeting rejected the land scheme but accepted the proposal for a second petition, and by April 1883 it was printed. It included a request that the Native Land Court be replaced by committees of chiefs to investigate land ownership, and that the mana of foreshores and fisheries be returned to the Maori.

Throughout 1883 Taiwhanga travelled with the petition to marae around the North Island. The response was not great, perhaps because Taiwhanga's public standing was not high. Moreover, during his absence overseas there had been adverse publicity in the colonial press concerning his personal life. At one time Sarah Taiwhanga was forced to appeal to the police court for assistance to support their children. In April 1883 the government formally dismissed the petition. By the year's end Taiwhanga knew that he could not expect support from Tawhiao, the Maori King, who was himself planning to take a petition to England. The Aborigines' Protection Society had also made clear that they did not favour any further appeals.

Taiwhanga now began to promote a treaty-based bond of union between tribes. In early 1885 other Nga Puhi leaders seem to have supported the idea. An 'everlasting covenant' was signed by Tawhiao, and by Taiwhanga, Maihi Paraone Kawiti and a number of other Nga Puhi leaders. Most northern Maori were critical of Tawhiao signing as 'King': the term implied an unacceptable subordination of Nga Puhi to his leadership. Taiwhanga's efforts to promote unity failed in the face of tribal differences, but contributed to the establishment of separate Maori parliaments in the 1890s.