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STUDIES OF A SMALL DEMOCRACY

*Essays in Honour of
Willis Airey*

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faced of establishing the relation between the course of political events and the medium in which they were formed . . . though a narrative might display only too well the complexity of the subject, it is doubtful whether that complexity could be made comprehensible except by some such process of disarticulation.¹⁰¹

It is through careful research along such lines, not by the too-confident evocation of party labels, that the intricacies of 'provincialism' and 'centralism' become amenable to clarification.

THE MAORI KING MOVEMENT, 1858-1885

M. P. K. SORRENSON

The land does not sin; it is man who sins against the land.

Manuhiri to C. O. Davis, 1870.¹

In June 1858 Potatau Te Wherowhero, aged chief of Ngatimāhuta tribe of the Waikato, was 'elected' Maori King. He had the active support of several powerful inland tribes—Waikato, Ngatihaua, Ngatimaniapoto, Ngatituwharetoa—and the sympathy of Maoris from a majority of the remaining tribes. The rise of such a confederation in the heart of the North Island at a time when Europeans were flooding into the country, demanding more Maori land and, through their representatives in Parliament, control over Maori affairs, was bound to create apprehension and controversy. Potatau's 'election' symbolised the end of a transient period in Maori-European relations, the end for at least a time of what many had regarded as a natural trend towards the amalgamation of the two races. A large and the most important section of the Maoris was going its own way towards separation and this was likely to lead to conflict between the races for supremacy.

Contemporary European observers soon divided into two camps in interpreting the nature and objectives of the King movement. Most of them saw it as a reflection on government policy—or the lack of it—and used the movement as ammunition for their own political squabbles. They adopted their own political and constitutional terminology to describe the movement and generally regarded it, for differing reasons, as an attempt to emulate European forms of government. The official view, suggested first by Native Secretary Donald McLean and adopted by Governor Gore Browne, was that the King movement was a temporary excitement which, if ignored, would soon die out.² When the King movement, instead of dying out, showed every sign of increasing its influence Gore Browne

asserted that it was a dangerous denial of the Queen's sovereignty which must be suppressed by force.³

The opposing view, urged by an assortment of disgruntled officials like F. D. Fenton, politicians out of power led by William Fox, many of the missionaries, and 'philo-Maoris' like Sir William Martin, also assumed that the King movement was essentially imitative.⁴ As Hugh Carleton, the editor of the Auckland *Southern Cross*, put it in 1857:

The imitative instinct of the monkey is at work amongst them; they are even now bent upon aping British institutions, and establishing such for themselves—an *imperium in imperio*—with such modifications as please themselves.⁵

The reasons for the movement, these critics asserted, were plain: Gore Browne's administration had failed to govern the Maoris so they were setting up their own government to provide the law and order they required. John Gorst gave classic expression to this view in his celebrated book, *The Maori King*, published in 1864. 'If we had educated the natives in civilisation,' Gorst claimed, 'and fitted them for the enjoyment of those full rights, as British subjects, which the Treaty of Waitangi promised, nothing would have been heard of "land leagues" and "king-movements".'⁶

This has been an influential interpretation, but as Dr Sinclair's recent studies⁷ have shown, it is also a misleading one. Gorst under-estimated the significance of Maori opposition to selling land, and thought, mistakenly, that they 'were willing to sell their land for civilisation and equality'.⁸ The founders of the King movement were in fact opposed to selling their land on any terms whatsoever. Gorst is even more misleading on the issue of government: the King movement was not a result of the administration's failure to govern the Maoris—though the charge of failure was substantially correct—but of fear that European government would by its very nature deprive them of their lands. Sinclair's two main points: that the King movement was basically a 'land league', and that more government interference would only have increased Maori resistance,⁹ are essential to an understanding of the movement; but the two points require a further elaboration before their full significance can become apparent. Moreover these points are intimately related. In the minds of both Maoris and Europeans

the assertion of 'law and order' or—in the long run—government, meant authority over the land. As the two races were in conflict over the land it was natural that they should set up conflicting authorities to govern the land and the men it sustained.

The term nationalist has often been applied to the King movement, though again there has been dispute over how far it was inspired by and attempted to emulate European concepts, institutions and techniques. Carleton, one of the shrewdest contemporary observers, said that:

The natives thoroughly understand what they want, and it is no plaything that they seek. They are resolved upon making an effort to preserve their existence, not only as a race, but as they understand it, a nation, before they shall be over-numbered and therefore out-mastered by the whites.¹⁰

But Carleton, like Gorst, believed that the King movement was wholly imitative and could have been forestalled or controlled by effective government. Sinclair, however, has pointed out that 'nowhere has good government proved a cure for nationalism'.¹¹ He has also emphasised that, although European techniques were used to resist the European threat, the imitation of European concepts and institutions was superficial; and that the King movement was essentially a reaction against European society, an attempt to shut out European influence and, with the wars and the subsequent confiscation of Maori land, took an increasingly 'reactionary' turn.¹² These opinions are certainly more convincing, but they need qualification. The King movement, though conservative, was neither reactionary nor a reversion to ancient savagery: it did not adopt the extremist policy of the *Hau Haus*. It was conservative in the sense that it sought to reassert and extend traditional ideals, values and practices in an attempt to resist the disintegration of Maori society resulting from contact with the Europeans. It sought to revive unity within tribes by reasserting the *mana*¹³ (authority) of chiefs over individuals, and unity between tribes by asserting the *mana* of a king over chiefs. The Maori nation was to be founded by uniting the tribes against the Europeans and preserving the power of chiefs, subordinate only to the King; not by destroying both as in some other nationalist movements in colonial territories. European techniques were adopted only in so far as they assisted in this objective. Once the tribes had been