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Story: Ngata, Apirana Turupa

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Ngata, Apirana Turupa

1874–1950

Ngati Porou leader, land reformer,
politician, scholar

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Apirana Turupa Ngata was born at Te Araroa on the East Coast on 3 July 1874. He had connections with the leaders of Ngati Porou. His hapu included Te Whanau-a-Te Ao, Ngati Rangī, Te Whanau-a-Karuai and Ngati Rakairoa. His father, Paratene Ngata, was a storekeeper, a progressive farmer, a Native Land Court assessor and an expert in tribal lore. His paternal great-uncle Rapata (Ropata) Wahawaha had led Ngati Porou troops on the side of the Crown during the wars of the 1860s. Apirana Ngata was greatly influenced by both men and spent some of his early years living in Rapata's household. Throughout his life he followed their policy of loyalty to the Crown and empire. His mother, Katerina Naki (or Enoka), was the daughter of an itinerant Scot, Abel Knox, and Ngata once said that this Pakeha ancestry

was the source of his methodical habits, but otherwise he did not regard it as important. It was his upbringing as a Maori and a speaker of Maori, under the watchful care of Paratene and Rapata, that he valued more. Nevertheless, they were insistent that he be educated in the learning and skills of the Pakeha so that he could turn them to the benefit of Ngati Porou and the Maori people.

Ngata began his schooling at the age of five at the Waiomatatini Native School. It was actively supported by the local community led by Rapata and Paratene. After four years Ngata was sent to Te Aute College where, under headmaster John Thornton, Maori pupils were grounded in the Classics and prepared for matriculation, university and the professions. However, Thornton encouraged pride in their race and imbued them with a mission to save their people from social disintegration, even, as it was feared at the time, extinction. Ngata was an apt pupil in all respects.

Ngata's involvement in Maori concerns and attempts at leadership commenced in his student days. In 1891–92 he travelled the Ngati Porou villages with Reweti Kohere and others giving talks on health reform. These were not always well received. Ngata's ideas were immature, untempered as yet with an understanding of his people's problems. It was almost unprecedented that such a young man should challenge older leaders.

After eight years at Te Aute, Ngata matriculated with such good marks that he was awarded a Te Makarini Scholarship which enabled him to study at Canterbury College. Here he combined arts and law, completing a BA in political science in 1893 (an MA was added later). He shifted to Auckland, where he was articled to the solicitors Devore and Cooper, and completed his LLB in 1896. He was the first Maori to complete a degree at a New Zealand university.

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Ngata was at this time an attractive and engaging young man, with short-cropped hair and a dashing moustache. Like his father he was short, but immensely strong. In 1895 he married Arihia Kane Tamati, also of Ngati Porou, at Whareponga. Theirs was a prolific marriage: 11 of their children, six daughters and five sons, survived to adulthood. Soon after Ngata was articled as a solicitor, he and Arihia returned to the East Coast where he built her a splendid home, Te Wharehou (later known as The Bungalow), at Waiomatatini. Here, during Apirana's many absences on political affairs, Arihia held the family together for many years.

Though he could have become a prosperous lawyer, Ngata did not practise. Instead, with Thornton's imperative upon him to ameliorate the condition of the Maori race, he threw himself into reforming their social and economic situation. This time his efforts were more successful; as a qualified lawyer his mana rose enormously amongst Maori. From 1899 he was sought after for hui throughout the country, and numerous articles by him appeared in Maori newspapers publicising his ideas for social and economic reform and discussing the place of Maoritanga in the modern world. Throughout his earlier career he was forced to work hard to overcome the suspicions of tribal elders, especially outside the East Coast, a result he achieved through charm, clear vision and persistence.

Ngata soon became involved with the Te Aute College Students' Association, formed at an inaugural conference in February 1897. At this conference he was a star attraction; he read four papers and led the discussion of others. In 1899 he became travelling secretary for the association and in later years helped to organise annual conferences.

Local affairs began increasingly to occupy Ngata's time. At home he was gradually taking over from Wahawaha and his father the leadership in land development and reform. Ngati Porou had been more fortunate than other tribes in preserving their land: while they had leased some of their hill country to Pakeha, they retained most of their better land in tribal ownership. Under Wahawaha and Paratene Ngata they had started sheepfarming in the last two decades of the century. The young Apirana greatly expanded this activity, and by 1916 Ngati Porou had 156 flocks and a total of 180,919 sheep. They invested heavily in pasture improvement, buildings and equipment, including mechanical shearing machines, although Ngata was careful to control their level of debt. Ngati Porou wool was bringing top prices.

He also took over from his elders and further developed a system of incorporation. This kept the title in tribal ownership but allowed the farms to be developed as viable units; managers (sometimes Pakeha) were employed and local owners were used as farm labour and also paid a dividend from any net profits. The incorporations were brought under the control of the Maori land councils in 1903. At the same time Ngata was experimenting with another land reform measure, designed to overcome excessive fragmentation of titles caused by decades of individualisation through the Native Land Acts and Native Land Court. Ngata began to exchange and consolidate individual fragments of land to form contiguous holdings, starting with the Waipiro block on the East Coast in 1911. Later that system was applied to other Ngati Porou lands and to other tribal territories.

Although acutely aware of the danger of excessive indebtedness, Ngata realised the need for credit if Maori owners were to develop their land. He believed that they should manage their own credit and marketing of produce in place of the Pakeha stock and station agencies. In 1912 he founded the Waiapu Farmers' Co-operative Company, which was owned and financed by Ngati Porou farmers and their incorporation; shares were also held by Te Whanau-a-Apanui and Ngai Tai. It began with an initial subscription of £12,000. Ngata

combined an intimate knowledge of farming with his legal expertise to promote progressive farming and land tenure reform. He was determined to demonstrate that with skill, leadership and management, Maori could farm their land as successfully as Pakeha. Although he began all his reforms with Ngati Porou, Ngata always tried to encourage other tribes to follow their lead.

Ngata was also making his way in national affairs, particularly through his association with James Carroll, a minister in the Liberal government since 1892 and minister of native affairs from the end of 1899. Ngata assisted Carroll with the drafting of two important pieces of legislation, both designed to allow Maori a greater say in their affairs. The Maori Lands Administration Act 1900 provided for the establishment of land boards, controlled by Maori, to administer the sale or lease of their land. The Maori Councils Act 1900 provided for elected councils to undertake a number of local government and health functions. Although their powers were quite limited, the councils were received with enthusiasm by Maori communities. Altogether 19 were established, including a Horouta District Maori Council of the East Coast with Ngata as chairman. However, some of the other councils got into difficulties, largely due to excessive enthusiasm and to inexperience in accounting. In 1902 Ngata was appointed organising inspector to try to sort out their troubles, but he resigned the position in 1904. He had decided to return home and to prepare for a larger task.

In 1905 Ngata contested the Eastern Maori parliamentary seat against the long-standing incumbent, Wi Pere. With solid support from Ngati Porou, Ngata won by over 750 votes. He was to retain the seat, surviving challenge after challenge, until 1943, becoming in that time 'father' of the House. He was a superb parliamentarian. A skilled debater, he could fill the parliamentary galleries whenever he rose to speak. He took his duties very seriously and shunned much of the social side of parliamentary life. He was a diligent member of the Native Affairs Committee and soon became Carroll's right-hand man. He served with the chief justice, Sir Robert Stout, on the 1907–8 Native Land Commission. They were critical of the government's use of pre-emption to purchase Maori land below value, and recommended that tribes with very little remaining land should have it permanently reserved. However, they conceded that other tribes with ample lands, for instance in the central North Island, could be encouraged to sell or lease some of it. Finally, they castigated governments of the past for having done nothing to encourage or assist Maori to farm their own land.

Ngata also assisted John Salmond in drafting the Native Land Act 1909, a massive consolidating measure. In that year Ngata was rewarded by appointment to the Executive Council as member representing the native race and was given a minor cabinet post in charge of Maori councils. He lost these positions when Sir Joseph Ward's ministry was defeated in 1912. Because he remained faithful to the Liberal party, Ngata did not again attain cabinet office until 1928.

In the meantime, Ngata's career was diverted by the First World War and its aftermath. Ngata, who was 40 and the father of a large family when the war started, could hardly have served. But he threw himself into the Maori war effort, working with Maui Pomare and other Maori MPs to recruit Maori troops and agitating to have them grouped together – after the disaster of Gallipoli – into a Maori battalion. Ngati Porou lived up to their tradition of loyalty to the Crown by providing more than their share of Maori volunteers. Ngata also worked to provide land for returned Maori servicemen, although, with his approval, this was taken from blocks of Maori land.

After the war Ngata never lost an opportunity to remind Pakeha New Zealand of the debt the country owed to Maori who had served or died in the empire's foreign war. Working with Pomare, a minister in the Reform government, Ngata obtained inquiries into many long-simmering Maori land grievances, most notably the 1927 royal commission of inquiry into the confiscation of Maori lands following the war with the Pakeha in the 1860s.

Although Reform remained in office until 1928, Ngata had a great deal of influence, especially after Gordon Coates became native minister in 1921 and prime minister in 1925. He and Coates had a very high regard for each other, and Ngata was often able to initiate important measures from his side of the House. An example was the establishment through legislation of the Board of Maori Ethnological Research in 1923 and the Maori Purposes Fund Control Board in 1924 to administer funds from unclaimed Maori rentals and other sources. Ngata had been a member of the Polynesian Society since 1895 and in the early 1920s used the resources of the two new boards to support the society and its publications. Later in the 1920s the Board of Maori Ethnological Research began a publishing programme of its own, on Ngata's initiative, including Ngata's own annotated collection of Maori waiata, *Nga moteatea*, and the journal *Te Wananga*.

From this time Ngata was involved in a host of social and cultural activities. He encouraged Maori sport through various inter-tribal competitions, including rugby for the Prince of Wales Cup, a tennis competition for men and women, and a women's hockey tournament for the Lady Arihia memorial trophy. Ngata promoted the performing arts, again through tribal competitions in haka and poi (he was himself a notable performer of haka), and encouraged the decorative arts, especially carving and tukutuku work. He was instrumental in the establishment of a Maori school of arts at Rotorua in 1927 and the construction of decorated meeting houses around the country. He remained prominent in the Anglican church and in 1928 helped to persuade the General Synod to create a Maori bishopric, partly to combat the rising tide of the Ratana movement.

Yet, for all his social and cultural activities, Ngata remained preoccupied with the land reform movement. At home he arranged a subdivision of Ngati Porou consolidated holdings in the Waiapu valley so that his people could move into dairying. His eldest son, Makarini, a graduate of Te Aute College and Hawkesbury Agricultural College in New South Wales, took over one of the holdings; Ngata hoped that he would lead the new dairy farming movement. Makarini's holding made impressive progress, thanks to the introduction of graded cows, new milking machines, and the establishment of a co-operative dairy factory at Ruatoria. As ever, Ngata had larger aims in mind: to encourage other Maori communities to follow Ngati Porou's lead, and to persuade the government to support Maori land development. His first success with other tribes came in 1922 when he persuaded Tuhoe to consolidate their titles. Others soon followed suit, as, on Ngata's initiative, teams of consolidators, usually younger educated men, took up the work. But consolidation of titles was only a beginning; it was necessary to break in the land on a large scale in development schemes, as they were called, prior to the establishment of pastoral or dairy farms.

So far Ngata had relied on Maori resources, both labour and capital, but he needed government aid if the snowballing developments were to succeed. In 1926 he invited Coates to the East Coast to open the impressive decorated church at Tikitiki, a memorial to Ngati Porou troops who died in the war, and to show off the new dairy farms in the Waiapu valley. Coates was so impressed that he promised government funds for Maori land development. In

1927 Ngata received a knighthood, thus following in the footsteps of the only previous Maori knights, Carroll and Pomare.

In December 1928 Ngata was suddenly propelled into office as native minister when the United Party surprisingly won enough seats in the general election to form a government. He was ranked third in the cabinet, chaired important committees and occasionally acted as deputy prime minister. He was now 54. Always a hard worker, frequently far into the night, Ngata could get by with very little sleep, often mere catnaps. He entered into his new ministry with a ferocious energy that left men half his age, especially his hapless staff, trailing in his wake.

Ngata pressed ahead with his land development schemes, using state funds, shifting his consolidators straight on to development work, and initiating schemes all over the country – wherever he could find underdeveloped Maori land and local communities willing to work it. There was seldom any lack of enthusiasm, since the new schemes provided work for unemployed or under-employed men, women and children, who worked as communal groups as of old. The land was cleared of bush or scrub, ploughed, grassed, fenced and stocked – on the assumption that it could be sub-divided into individual farms at a later date. Ngata did not hesitate to bring in machinery and equipment whenever it was available, and mechanics to service it; at Horohoro, near Rotorua, for example, he used tractors for ploughing and brought Tumokai Katipa from Waikato to keep them running. Ngata even shifted colonists from one tribe onto the land of others, using them as ginger groups; his use of Ngati Kahungunu at Horohoro and Ngati Porou at Tikitere in Te Arawa territory was, for Maori, a somewhat controversial decision.

Ngata was even successful in persuading tribes who had long remained unco-operative, because of the confiscation of their land, to embark on land development. His most notable success in this respect was with supporters of the King movement in Waikato. Ngata persuaded their remarkable leader, Te Puea, to take the lead in developing the few pieces of land remaining in their ownership. That agreement was sealed at a grand hui to mark the opening of the Mahinarangi house at Ngaruawahia in 1929. But there were tragic consequences for the Ngata family. At the hui Ngata's eldest son, Makarini, contracted dysentery and Ngata's wife, Arihia, nursing him at home, caught it too. Both died before they could get proper medicine. Ngata was devastated, and for a time there was bad blood between Ngati Porou and Tainui. But Ngata's close working relationship with Te Puea continued and her land development schemes survived. When she had a row with one of the Pakeha supervisors of a scheme, Ngata sided with her, sacked the Pakeha, and put Te Puea in his place.

Elsewhere the development schemes proceeded apace. Ngata described them at length in his departmental annual reports and his monthly letters to his close friend Peter Buck. His native land development report for the year 1931 was a masterpiece which went far beyond the details of individual schemes. It expressed much of his own philosophy on the need to work through traditional chiefly organisation and turn old tribal jealousies into friendly rivalries in land development, as in education, arts and crafts, and sport. He saw these forms of competition as a means of reviving tribal pride and culture, and the new development schemes as providing an opportunity to revive old marae or build new ones.

To support his philosophy Ngata quoted the young Pakeha anthropologist, Raymond Firth, and recent letters from Buck. Despite a lack of formal training in anthropology, Ngata had a

keen and critical appreciation of the subject, although, like Buck, he believed that Pakeha anthropologists lacked the ability to understand the inner emotions, heart and mind of Maori. Unlike Buck, Ngata published little on the subject, apart from a paper, 'Anthropology and the government of native races in the Pacific' (1928). But his land development schemes were anthropology in action: not an end in themselves but a catalyst for community regeneration.

Although Ngata had the support of a tiny band of Pakeha intellectuals, and some politicians, the Pakeha community at large was far from sympathetic. Ngata was thrusting ahead with Maori land development and increasing the expenditure of state funds when the country was slipping into depression and his government cutting expenditure to the bone in other directions. Impatient with red tape, Ngata made decisions over all manner of things – equipment, vehicles, fertilizer, seed, livestock and labour – on the run or on the phone, and his officials in the Native Department were quite unable to keep up with the paperwork. Moreover, much of the development was being carried out on difficult, marginal country, including the pumice country of the central plateau, and promising developments soon turned sour. The Native Department, and even some of the land development schemes, were controlled by Native Land Court judges who knew little of practical farming. On the other hand, Ngata's supervisors on the ground, who did have practical knowledge, knew little about keeping records and accounts.

By the beginning of 1932 Ngata and his department were being roundly criticised in Parliament and the press. He was required to accept a reorganisation of his head office, but the controller and auditor general refused to pass the accounts. Irregularities were found in some of the district offices of the department. A civil servant from the office of the public service commissioner was put into the head office in place of R. N. Jones, who was both chief judge of the Native Land Court and under-secretary for the department. But the crisis was not yet over, and one of Ngata's trusted lieutenants on the East Coast was found to have falsified accounts. Ngata offered his resignation, but instead of accepting it George Forbes, the prime minister, adopted a recommendation from the Public Accounts Committee to appoint a commission of inquiry into Ngata's handling of his department and the land development schemes. It reported in 1934 and was critical of Ngata's administration, especially his personal style and contempt for bureaucratic regulations, alleged that he favoured his tribe, Ngati Porou, and his family (although providing little evidence to support either allegation), and pointed, correctly, to the corruption of some of Ngata's subordinates. Ngata honourably accepted responsibility for the shortcomings and immediately resigned from cabinet. His downfall had a powerful impact on Maoridom, which regarded it as a Pakeha attempt to undermine the success of his land schemes.

Ngata retained his seat in Parliament and, on Labour's victory in the 1935 election, had to watch while his erstwhile critics in the House carried on his land development schemes with an even greater expenditure of funds. Ngata's parliamentary career finally ended when, as the last of the Maori members who had no Ratana affiliations, he was defeated by the Ratana-Labour candidate, Tiaki Omana, in 1943. Ngata tried but failed to regain the seat in 1946. He remained influential as an elder statesman, coaching Peter Fraser, who became minister of Maori affairs in 1946, and then E. B. Corbett, when he assumed that office in the new National government in 1949.

Ngata was far from a spent force. He helped to organise the celebrations for the centennial of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1940, and the construction and opening of a commemorative carved house at Waitangi. He contributed four chapters to a survey edited by I. L. G. Sutherland, *The Maori people today*, published in 1940. Once again, with a new world war in progress, he helped to recruit and supported another Maori battalion. Two of his sons, Wiremu and Henare, served in that force. Another Ngati Porou, Moana-nui-a-Kiwa Ngarimu, was posthumously awarded a Victoria Cross and in 1943 Ngata organised a hui at Ruatoria where the decoration was presented to his parents.

Ngata continued to take part in cultural and academic activities, contributing to Auckland University College adult education courses during the war and organising Rauru-nui-a-Toi lectures for his own people at Ruatoria. He serialised the publication of more waiata in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (later they were published posthumously as further volumes of *Nga moteatea* by his protégé, Pei Te Hurinui Jones). And he remained active in the affairs of the Polynesian Society, serving as president of its council from 1938 to 1950. He was prominent in Anglican church affairs and was actively involved in a revision of the Maori Bible. His wide-ranging scholarship, well known in Maoridom, was finally recognised by the Pakeha academic establishment with the award of an honorary LittD in 1948. At the capping ceremony, attended by a strong contingent of Ngati Porou, Ngata had the added satisfaction of seeing his youngest son, Henare, graduate with a BA.

Ngata's illustrious life was now drawing to a close, although his frailty was of the body and not the mind. In 1949 he had the pleasure of meeting his old friend Peter Buck, now suffering from cancer, and conducting him around the country on what both of them knew would be a last reunion. When they parted at Whenuapai, as Ngata prepared to fly back to the East Coast and Buck to Honolulu, they exchanged 'a long look which carried a message of the love and affection which had existed between us', as Buck put it, 'for over fifty years of unclouded friendship.' Although now very frail and having digestive trouble, Ngata kept working at numerous projects: the Rangiatea Church restoration, a memorial house for his beloved Arihia, the Te Aute College centennial, and a planned sexcentenary celebration for the coming of the legendary Great Fleet.

After Arihia's death Ngata had married Te Riringi Tuhou in 1932. She died in 1948 and he married Hene Te Kira not long before his own death at Waiomatatini on 14 July 1950, following a brief illness. He was buried beside Arihia on the little hill behind The Bungalow.

Apirana Ngata made a vital contribution to the revival of the Maori race in the early twentieth century. He used his knowledge of the Pakeha world and his professional skills to assist his people to develop and farm their land while also encouraging them to preserve their culture and maintain their own identity. His intelligence, tact, persistence and political skill brought him considerable success in this mission.

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