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TE POARI WHAKAPAPA: THE ORIGINS, OPERATION  
AND TRIBAL NETWORKS OF THE BOARD OF MAORI  
ETHNOLOGICAL RESEARCH 1923–1935

CONAL McCARTHY  
*Victoria University of Wellington*

PAUL TAPSELL  
*University of Melbourne*

**ABSTRACT:** In 1923 Apirana Ngata set up the Board of Maori Ethnological Research under Section 9 of the Native Land Amendment and Native Land Claims Adjustment Act. The purpose of the Board, also known as Te Poari Whakapapa, was the “study and investigation of the ancient arts and crafts, language, customs, history, tradition, and antiquities of the Maori and other cognate races of the South Pacific Ocean”. Ngata spoke in Parliament when the bill became law, exhorting his colleagues on both sides of the House to support the legislation to publish manuscripts awaiting publication for many years, “which the scientists of the world are clamouring to see”. Over the next 10 years this Māori-led and -funded body effectively took over the management of government research, and it exerted considerable influence on related bodies, the Department of Native Affairs, the Dominion Museum, the Turnbull Library, and the Polynesian Society and its journal. What were the origins of this remarkable episode in indigenous anthropology and museology? How and why did Ngata, Peter Buck (Te Rangihīroa) and their parliamentary colleagues, tribal contacts and Pākehā ‘European New Zealander’ allies mobilise ethnological research in the service of Māori social, economic and cultural development? In particular we examine the scholarly connections with the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* and the tribal networks with Te Arawa traced through the work of Tai Mitchell.

*Keywords:* Māori, tribal networks, Apirana Ngata, Peter Buck, Tai Mitchell, Board of Maori Ethnological Research, indigenous anthropology

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*Whatungarongaro he tangata, toitū te kōrero*

Men come and go, but the words remain

Apirana Ngata used this *pepeha* ‘proverb’ to express his satisfaction at the establishment of the Board of Maori Ethnological Research (BMER), also known Te Poari Whakapapa, in October 1923 (*Dominion* 1923).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, his friend and colleague Peter Buck (Te Rangihīroa) remarked: “As a result of setting up this research fund, New Zealand ranks high as a patron of ethnological research” (*Press* 1923). In a private letter to Ngata,

Buck had described the acclamation with which this news had been greeted by anthropologists at an international conference in Sydney (Buck 1923a; Skinner 1923: 183, resolutions 8 and 9).

Earlier that year, Ngata had established this new body under section 9 of the Native Land Amendment and Native Land Claims Adjustment Act. The purpose of the Board was “the promotion of the study and investigation of the arts, language, customs, history, and traditions of the Maori and cognate races of the South Pacific Ocean, the collection of records pertaining to any of the said races, and the publication or preservation in any way of any matter or thing in connection therewith” (Polynesian Society 1923). Ngata spoke in Parliament when the bill became law, exhorting his colleagues on both sides of the House to support the legislation to allow the release of manuscripts that had been awaiting publication for many years, “which the scientists of the world are clamouring to see” (Polynesian Society 1950). Over the next 10 years this Māori-conceived, Māori-led and Māori-funded body effectively took over the management of anthropological research in New Zealand, and exerted considerable influence on related bodies: the Department of Native Affairs, the Dominion Museum, the Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL), and the Polynesian Society and its journal. It is a remarkable story of indigenous agency unparalleled in the history of museums and anthropology in settler societies.

Despite the importance of this body, which lay behind many of the groundbreaking Māori initiatives of the 1920s–1930s in ethnology, museums, government policy and related fields, it is only briefly mentioned in the literature and little known or understood today by either academics or tribal scholars (Sorrenson 1982, 1992; Walker 2001; Webster 1998). Our own work has explored other early heritage developments at this time, and the consequences for “bicultural” museum practice in the late twentieth century, without realising that the Board and its funding made possible much activity associated with museum anthropology and tribal cultural development (McCarthy 2007a; Tapsell 1997). So, what *were* the origins of this remarkable experiment in anthropology? How and why did Ngata, Buck and their parliamentary colleagues, tribal contacts and Pākehā ‘European New Zealander’ allies mobilise ethnological research in the service of Māori social, economic and cultural development? What links did the Board’s work in Wellington have with Māori communities around the country in the interwar years? Here we examine the scholarly links between the Polynesian Society and the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, and tribal networks, especially Te Arawa as traced through the work of noted tribal scholar and administrator Taiporutu Mitchell.

## ORIGINS: “POLYNESIAN WORKERS THEMSELVES ENTER THE FIELD”

At the time those involved in Māori and Polynesian research did recognise the impact the BMER had made on their work. In 1928 Johannes Andersen, at the ATL, acknowledged the BMER as a “tower of strength ... under the guidance of Sir Apirana Ngata” (Andersen [1928] 1969). Andersen also welcomed the emergence of Māori researchers who would supplant his generation, because “when the Polynesian workers themselves enter the field, as they surely will, we stammering, thumb-fingered pakeha may stand aside and rejoice in the day-dawn” (Andersen 1931: 6). Buck, who fulfilled this prophecy by becoming a world-recognised anthropologist of the Pacific, based at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Hawai‘i, recalled the BMER’s contribution in 1945. “The formation of the BMER, on the strong representation of the Maori Members of Parliament,” he wrote, “was a forward step in encouraging research and providing funds for publication” (Buck 1945: 116). Its support made possible his fieldwork in Aitutaki in the Cook Islands and the subsequent publication of a report, the recording and publishing of Māori songs edited by Ngata, and a revised and corrected version of George Grey’s *Nga Mahinga a Nga Tupuna* (originally written by Te Rangikāheke) for students of the Māori language, which had recently been proposed as a subject for the bachelor of arts degree (Buck 1945: 116; Ngata 1928, [1929] 1961).

As Buck stated, Māori members of the House of Representatives (MHR), both in government and in the opposition, were instrumental in setting up the Board in the early 1920s, but its roots go back further still. From the 1890s, Ngāti Kahungunu leaders at Pāpāwai marae near Greytown, the seat of the Kotahitanga ‘unity’ or Māori parliamentary movement of the late nineteenth century, showed keen interest in history, heritage and museums, and had links with Premier Richard Seddon, Minister of Native Affairs James Carroll (Timi Kara) and Augustus Hamilton at the Dominion Museum (McCarthy 2007b, 2016a). Māori men had been MHRs in four Māori seats since 1867, and while they remained a marginalised minority in national politics, there was an effort around 1900 to introduce some measure of regional self-government through the Maori Councils Act (Hill 2004: 44–47). Before World War I, the Young Maori Party, including Ngata, Buck and Māui Pōmare, espoused the value of ethnological research and agreed to research and write about various aspects of the Māori past (Gentry 2015: fn 88, 90; Ngata 1909; Sorrenson 1982).

Then, as Amiria Salmond has pointed out, the visit of famous Cambridge anthropologist W.H.R. Rivers to New Zealand in 1915 seems to have spurred local interest in field work (Best 1915; Salmond 2005, also this issue). We do not know whether Ngata met Rivers, but there is evidence that soon after his visit, the Māori politician’s attention and prodigious energies became focused on the question of how to record and maintain Māori cultural practices using the new technology employed by James McDonald at the Dominion Museum.

From 1917, J.A. Thomson, the director of the Dominion Museum and an Oxford graduate who had recognised the value of ethnological research, tried to buy “dictaphones” to record speech, music and birdsong (Thomson 1915).<sup>2</sup> In December 1918, Ngata and his Māori colleagues wrote to the Minister of Internal Affairs seeking funding for making sound recordings and films at the Hui Aroha in Gisborne in the coming year when Māori soldiers returned from the European war.

The Maori dances and *pois* [‘action song using round tethered weights’] may be described in writing but no pen-picture can convey a title of the vigour and perfect uniformity of the former or the grace and beauty of the latter. For the perfect record one must go to the picture film ... But no whole-hearted attempt has yet been made to record characteristic scenes from Native life. (Ngata 1918; see also Ngata *et al.* 1920)

At around the same time there were problems with the Polynesian Society, which had been struggling for a number of years with declining membership and a lack of funds to publish the backlog of material in Māori and Pacific languages. In 1920 the president, pioneer amateur ethnologist S. Percy Smith, appealed to Ngata, thankful for his “continual help and confidence in us” since he had assisted with the publication of *The Lore of the Whare Wananga* in 1913 (Smith 1920). The situation reached crisis point the following year with the death of Percy Smith, who had been running the Society from New Plymouth, raising questions about its future. Ngata and his fellow Māori MHRs tried to source government funds for Society publications and Dominion Museum ethnological expeditions through various ministers, with limited success. The breakthrough came in 1921 when, as Ngata later recalled, the Māori politicians discovered that the Maori Land Board held substantial funds derived from accumulated interest. They approached the Minister of Native Affairs (hereafter Native Minister), by this time Gordon Coates, who was sympathetic to Māori causes, and requested that funds from this source be “devoted to some purpose of utility to the race”. He agreed (*Auckland Star* 1923).

The way was now clear for Ngata to act, and by mid-1923 he was ready to take the next step. In his view, the problem of unpublished material required two things: “an adequate fund and a sympathetic organisation” (*Auckland Star* 1923). In a long handwritten proposal, Ngata outlined the parameters of the BMER. The “circumstances” that led to the “intervention” by parliamentarians included the appeal by the Polynesian Society for funds to publish its journal; the “ever increasing accumulation of valuable material awaiting publication”; the worldwide interest in “ethnic problems of the Pacific”, which New Zealand should be promoting; the existence of funds for Polynesian research; and the

“absence of any organisation sufficiently in touch with probable sources of assistance”. Ngata’s critical assessment of the Society and its current operation led logically to the suggestion that a new body should be established that would better source and use the funds available, managing and distributing them to support a wide range of ethnological research including field work in the “South Sea Islands”. Ngata added some particular “conditions” toward the end of the proposal about publishing in the Māori language, spelling out that “as the fund will be derived almost entirely from Maori sources, ... certain conditions may be attached on behalf of the race by its Parliamentary representatives ... Maori want access to published material on tradition and history, genealogical tables and song etc.” (Ngata ca. 1923a).

After the proposal was discussed in a meeting with Prime Minister (PM) William Massey held at Parliament on the 30 August 1923, Ngata moved quickly to frame the legislation, based largely on his proposal, and to see it through the parliamentary process (Balneavis 1923).<sup>3</sup> The purview and membership of the Board was described in the *New Zealand Gazette*. It included Gordon Coates (chairman and Native Minister, who also became PM in 1925), Māui Pōmare, Apirana Ngata, Tau Hēnare, and Hēnare Uru (the four Māori MPs), Judge Robert Jones (deputy chairman, chief judge of the Native Land Court, Māori trustee and an associate of Ngata’s), James Hislop (undersecretary of the Department of Internal Affairs, which oversaw the Dominion Museum), Archdeacon Herbert William Williams (the respected Pākehā clergyman and scholar of the Māori language), Dr Peter Buck (Te Rangihīroa, then a Māori health officer), and H.D. Skinner (lecturer in ethnology at the University of Otago and curator at Otago Museum) (*New Zealand Gazette* 1923). The secretary was Ngata’s indefatigable private assistant, Henare Te Raumoa Balneavis (“Bal”) from Ngāti Kahungunu ki Te Wairoa.

The mix of individuals, personalities and competing professional and cultural interests had to be carefully managed, and the correspondence shows how skilfully Ngata and Balneavis worked behind the scenes to run the Board, steering it to serve their own objectives. H.D. Skinner—whose father, W.H. Skinner, was a leading light in the Polynesian Society—was the country’s only professional anthropologist, but his lack of Māori language skills and focus on material culture/archaeology set him apart from Buck and Ngata (Cameron and McCarthy 2015). The relationship with the Polynesian Society had to be delicately handled so as not to give the impression that the BMER was “taking over” the Society.<sup>4</sup> The first “informal” meeting with the PM did not include a Council representative from the Society, and Ngata later wrote to W.H. Skinner to smooth ruffled feathers: “The meeting was very enthusiastic and will I am sure mark the turning point in the history of

Maori and Polynesian research work in this country. The following morning Buck and I met your son and also Dr Gregory of the Bishop Museum. They heartily approved the new movement” (Ngata 1923b). Meanwhile Hislop in the Department of Internal Affairs was jealous of the influence the Board wielded over the staff of the Dominion Museum, and there were concerns in other quarters that it cut across the newly formed Board of Science and Art that governed the Dominion Museum. When Department officials tried to obstruct Museum staff involvement in BMER publications, Elsdon Best resorted to various ruses to get his manuscripts completed and put into the hands of the Government Printer (Best ca. 1923a).<sup>5</sup> Best, who later joined the Board, told his friend T.W. Downes, the Whanganui writer, what was going on at its meetings and who was really in control. Pleased that his work was at last being taken “out of the hands of the moribund Museum department” and put into print, he told Downes “not to worry” about the Board:

It is Maori out and out. Williams and I were put on it by Ngata as an act of courtesy, but we have no mana [‘authority’]. It is controlled by natives. I am careful to say nothing at meetings. Skinner’s name was never mentioned even. He was admitted at the last moment by special mention of his father, who came down the coast to meet Ngata for that purpose. The Board does not want us Pakeha to control activities, but highly appreciates the work of the Polynesian Society. Our native friends are disgusted with the apathy and promises of the Govt. (Best ca. 1923b)

Section 9 of the Native Land Amendment Bill 1923 defined the purpose of the Board of Maori Ethnological Research. As summarised later by its secretary, the regulations included the publication, funding, subscriptions or direct purchase of Māori and Pacific material (“books, periodicals, manuscripts, drawings, photographs or articles”) as well as expeditions (Balneavis 1929: 5). As Balneavis explained, “The Board may organise or assist in equipping or paying for the expenses of any expedition to any part of New Zealand or to any Island in the Pacific Ocean, for the investigation and the collection of records regarding any matter or thing which comes within the objects or purposes defined by the said section” (Balneavis 1929: 6). This remit was, needless to say, very broad, allowing ample room for discretion.

It is important to distinguish the Board of Maori Ethnological Research from the Maori Purposes Fund Board that was set up in 1924, and with which it was merged in 1935. The purpose of this latter body was the more general health, education and welfare of the Māori people, but its funds and activities were interlinked with the BMER, leading to much confusion among politicians at the time and researchers today.<sup>6</sup> The Māori aims of the BMER can be discerned from the documentary record. The Māori title in the *Gazette* captures its specific tribal objectives: “Poari uiui i nga korero mo nga mahi

o nehera e pa ana ki nga iwi Maori” (Board to investigate accounts about the ancient work relating to Māori tribes). In the Māori newspaper *Te Toa Takitini*, Balneavis’s notice about the Board called it Te Poari Whakapapa, and emphasised the collecting, recording, maintenance and revival of cultural practices and traditional knowledge, including genealogies, and their wider dissemination (Balneavis 1924, and see below). Even the books, though of a more anthropological nature, were seen as serving the needs of Māori audiences. There was strong support from the Māori members of the Board for the publication of Best’s magisterial history of Tūhoe and for other tribal histories like it.<sup>7</sup> “As regards Best’s Tuhoe History,” wrote Buck to Balneavis, “I agree the publication of a series of tribal histories would . . . meet the needs of the Race” (Buck 1924b). “The Māori beneficiaries, whose funds have been made available for the Board’s purposes,” wrote Balneavis in a later report, “would probably regard these tribal records of greater value than the more extended scientific studies” (Balneavis 1927a: 4).

#### “PRACTICAL ANTHROPOLOGY”: THE BOARD AT WORK, 1923–1935

“I look forward to the first meeting of the board,” wrote Buck to Ngata from the Science Congress in Sydney in September 1923, “when we will get down to practical work” (Buck 1923a: 1). There was plenty to do. With the BMER up and running, there was a spate of activity over the next four or five years. Buck and Ngata, in their voluminous later correspondence, often referred to their New Zealand experiment as “practical” or “applied” anthropology (see Salmond this issue). Buck told Ngata that his land development schemes demonstrated their success as “empirical anthropologists advocating cultural adjustments” (Buck in Sorrenson 1987: 211; McCarthy 2014).

The first official meeting was held in October 1923 (*Evening Post* 1923). In the early years, the priority was to clear the backlog of unpublished manuscripts and provide financial support for the Polynesian Society. The minutes of meetings from 1923 to 1926 show the Board spent over £3,000 on grants to the Society alone (which allowed it to expand the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, include more images and publish a series of memoirs), and another £3,000 on the printing of Best’s Dominion Museum Bulletins and his *Tuhoe*, Williams’s bibliography of printed Māori-language publications and several other titles.<sup>8</sup> Files show that many other proposals were considered and rejected, including submissions by Pākehā scholars Herries Beattie and G.H. Robley, but also by tribal scholars.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting three remarkable books in the Board’s own series: a well-known volume by Andersen on string games (1927); an overlooked study of Māori “artistry” by English expatriate William Page Rowe (1928), which was years ahead of its time in recognising Māori carving as art; and an innovative study in cultural adaptation, *The Changing Māori* by anthropologist Felix Keesing (1928), who worked closely



with Ngata before going on to publish similar work on Native Americans and Sāmoans (McCarthy 2016b).

As well as a full publication schedule, the Board “encouraged research work in other directions”:

There is also a tremendous amount of field work to be done, the survey of old pa sites in various localities, the recording of ancient place names, the collection and tabulating of genealogical, historical and other records of the various tribes, and the recording of *hakas* [‘posture dances’] and incantations. The Board has already directed its attention to the collection of designs of Maori carving, reed panels, and rafter patterns, data which will be of great value should a school of Maori art become practicable. (Balneavis 1926)

By 1927, Balneavis was able to report “splendid results” (Balneavis 1927b).<sup>10</sup> The published output was impressive. Nearly £3,000 had been spent on getting Best’s work into print: the Dominion Museum Bulletins (*Maori Religion and Mythology*, *Maori Agriculture*, *Maori Games, Exercises and Pastimes*, *The Maori Canoe*, *The Pa Maori*) and popular volumes (*The Maori As He Was*, and two volumes of *The Maori*), as well as *Tuhoe* and a reprint of his book on Waikaremoana. The Board had also assisted with Buck’s and Andersen’s publications (Buck 1924a). “Our aim is to make the recording of Maori Ethnology as complete as possible in every branch,” Buck declared in a letter to “Tarawhai” (Andersen) (Buck 1923b). “Ngata and Bal are doing great work [through the BMER] and all our combined efforts will result in an Ethnological record that few races will equal,” he said in a later letter (Buck 1924c). There were gaps, however. The Board had not been involved in any more field work apart from funding Buck’s trip to the Cook Islands and a planned Dominion Museum ethnological expedition to Taupō in 1926, the latter of which was postponed due to the weather and then cancelled when McDonald resigned (Director 1926). A subcommittee of the BMER (comprised of Pōmare, Ngata, Best and Buck) did meet in late 1923 to advocate for an expedition to the South Pacific using Navy vessels, but it came to nothing (Board of Maori Ethnological Research 1923). It would appear that the Dominion Museum expeditions were thought of as something of a rehearsal for a more extensive programme of field work that did not eventuate but rather, as we see below, later took on other forms.

Having cleared much of the backlog of publications by the late 1920s, the Board now turned its attention to publishing Māori-language manuscript material and to “field work”, not through the Museum but by direct engagement with the tribal homelands. By late 1928 Ngata had become Minister of Native Affairs, and Buck had left for the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. Despite being very busy with government work, Ngata, ably

backed up by Balneavis and key tribal allies, continued to push the BMER's agenda, largely through his own interests and contacts, but also employing the machinery of the Department of Native Affairs (see below). The focus now was on visual and performing arts and other aspects of cultural heritage increasingly referred to by Māori in this period as *taonga* 'treasures', and regarded as an essential aspect of what was now being called *Māoritanga* 'Maoriness/Māori cultural heritage'. The *Evening Post* reported that:

The Board is preparing equipment for recording songs in several districts. As soon as the heaviest publications are out of the way ... the board will devote its attention to publishing Maori manuscripts in the original language, to the preparation of well illustrated books on Maori rafter and panel design, carvings, cloaks, floor-mats, and other features of Maori decorative art. (*Evening Post* 1925b)

In addition to an ambitious programme of recording tribal history and culture, the BMER's impact on the Polynesian Society was significant. Sorrenson has documented this, but in our view he perhaps underestimated what was effectively a *Māori* intervention into anthropological research (Sorrenson 1992). In sum, the support of the Board from late 1923 resulted in better funding, increased membership and a higher profile for the Polynesian Society, while the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* became larger and better produced. The Society and its library were moved to Wellington, where they shared offices in the Druids' building on Woodward Street with the Board, who paid the rent, not far from Parliament, the Dominion Museum and ATL. Despite some misgivings from the Polynesian Society's aging membership about the changes, most appreciated the "active interest and practical help" of the BMER and acknowledged that the now healthy finances were largely due to its assistance (*Evening Post* 1925a, 1928; Polynesian Society 1924). It is also possible to discern a subtle shift in the direction of the Society. While Pākehā such as Best and Andersen continued in key roles such as editing the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, Pōmare, Ngata and Balneavis took leading roles on the Council and encouraged Māori membership.<sup>11</sup> From the mid-1920s the Polynesian Society gradually tilted away from its traditional audience of Pākehā amateurs towards greater engagement with both a younger readership, including professional anthropologists, many of them overseas, and Māori readers.<sup>12</sup> This connection with Māori readers was undoubtedly part of Ngata's wider plans for Māori social and cultural development. The BMER's influence peaked as this programme gained pace in the late 1920s and early 1930s, interweaving customary heritage with modern technology and reconciling top-down government bureaucracy with bottom-up tribal efforts to preserve and maintain their identity.

THE BOARD'S LINKS WITH TRIBAL RESEARCH:  
 “NGĀ KŌRERO NEHERĀ” (ANCIENT TRADITIONS)

Soon after the BMER came into existence and before its first official meeting, Apirana Ngata wrote to Balneavis from Waioamatatini during a parliamentary recess. Among news about farming and *whānau* ‘family’, he related his plans for the Board, which were clearly interconnected with his own research into Ngāti Porou history and traditions. On his way home he had stopped in Napier and seen “Fred” Bennett (soon to become the first Māori Anglican bishop), who duly applied for £50 from the Board in order to publish a monthly supplement of Māori songs and other material in the newspaper *Te Toa Takitini*, which he edited. Ngata aimed to “use the ‘Toa’ for advertising the Board’s work” and to invite contributions from readers. Ngata himself had already been writing short pieces in the paper on “Nga Korero Nehera” (Ancient Traditions), which had “created great interest” among Māori readers (Ngata 1923c). This supplement, particularly the *waiata* ‘songs’, became very popular and led eventually to Ngata’s own edited collections of *mōteatea* ‘song poetry’, which drew on the knowledge of many tribal experts from around the country.<sup>13</sup>

In September 1924, Balneavis wrote a short piece promoting Te Poari Whakapapa in *Te Toa Takitini*: “He inoi ki nga iwi, kia utaina te waka o te Poari ki nga taonga ano e rite ana: ki nga korero o nga tangata matau, ki nga whakapapa, ki nga karakia, ki nga waiata: ki te moni hoki, e taea ai aua korero te whakapukapuka, hei titiro ma te Ao katoa” (Balneavis 1924). This referred to the Board’s seal which showed a *waka* ‘canoe’ under sail, with the word “*utaina*” under it, a plea to the tribes to load on board “the precious freight”, “taonga” such as *kōrero*, *whakapapa*, *karakia*, *waiata* ‘traditions and stories, genealogies, prayers, songs’—not to mention money “to make it possible to publish this information, so that it may be seen by all the world”. Later issues of the paper praised the work of Te Poari Whakapapa as “he mahi rangatira” (chiefly work) (*Te Toa Takitini* 1924).<sup>14</sup> A review of Ngata’s first volume of *Nga Moteatea* was warmly welcomed as a true taonga published under the mana of the Board: “He tino taonga te pukapuka nei, he mea perehi i raro i te mana o te Poari Whakapapa” (*Te Toa Takitini* 1928).

Meanwhile Ngata and Balneavis were busy editing and publishing the Board’s own magazine, *Te Wananga*, which was also intended for a Māori readership, evidenced by the fact that articles in Māori were not translated into English. Balneavis described “a quarterly periodical with a memoir supplement . . . . The material for the latter is assured well ahead with the manuscripts of Te Matorohanga, Nepia Pohuhu and other priests of the Whare-Wananga [‘house of learning’]” (Balneavis 1929: 9). In the event, only a handful of issues appeared between 1929 and 1931, but they contained

a range of interesting material in English and Māori, from dairying and schooling to whakapapa and *whakataukī* ‘proverbs’. In the first issue a fascinating account written by Pei Te Hurinui Jones described the major *hui* ‘meeting’ at Ngāruawāhia in March 1929 when the Mahinaarangi meeting house was opened. Concepts such as *kotahitanga* ‘unity’ and Māoritanga were discussed, the latter in terms which were to be echoed in speeches on the *marae* ‘community gathering place’ for decades: hanging on to Māori customs and language, looking after traditional music, genealogies and other taonga, copying and learning (so as to retain) carving, painting and *tukutuku* ‘latticework panels’:

Ko te pupuri i nga tikanga Maori ...  
 Ko te pupuri i te reo Maori.  
 Ko te tiaki i nga waiata, patere, whakapapa me era atu taonga a te Maori.  
 Ko te whakatauirā me te ako, kia mau tonu ai nga whakairo, tuhi, tukutuku a te Maori. (Jones 1929)

These published accounts were fleeting glimpses into the many complex networks that Ngata maintained with tribal scholars around Aotearoa, feeding into the work of the BMER, the Maori Purposes Fund Board, the Board of Maori Arts and Crafts, the Native Affairs Department and numerous related projects (Anne Salmond 1980; Maori Purposes Fund Board 1924–34). Ngata kept up a running dialogue with Pei Te Hurinui Jones about waiata and Tainui tribal history, for instance (Maori Purposes Fund Board 1924–34). Jones worked for the Maori Land Court in Auckland but clearly did much research work with and for Ngata in the Waikato region, which will be explored in future publications. He was not the only one. Files of the BMER and the Department of Native Affairs reveal a whole network of knowledgeable men and women who were paid for “ethnological research” of various kinds, including Henare Ruru, Rongowhakaata Halbert, Hemana Pokiha and W.M. Awarau (see for example Loose Papers 1933). The minutes of the BMER meeting in July 1926, for example, show payment of £14-7s in expenses to Ngakura Pene Haane, an “expert employed in rendering the text of and annotations of old Maori waiatas of the Nga Puhī tribe” (Board of Maori Ethnological Research 1926).

#### CASE STUDY: TE ARAWA AND TAI MITCHELL

One of Ngata’s closest collaborators was Henry Taiporutu Te Mapu-o-te-rangi Mitchell. Of the many tribal leaders in his network, Tai Mitchell was one of Ngata’s closest and most trusted, and has been underestimated as a scholar in his own right. Mitchell was born in 1877 at Ōhinemutu, of Ngāti Pīkiao and Ngāti Whakaue descent, the product of *taumau* ‘strategic marriages’

which made him a favoured son of Te Arawa (*Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* 1996). It is no coincidence that one of the centres of Māori cultural heritage was located in the area around the Rotorua lakes, where access to unlimited geothermal energy provided the resources for tourist attractions and the time to develop skills in visual and performing arts. Educated at a local primary school, and later at Wesley College in Auckland, Taiporutu also received instruction from his Ōhinemutu elders, Pango, Rotohiko, Te Paemoe and Te Taupua, especially in karakia, waiata, haka and *whaikōrero* ‘speech making’, as well as carving and house building. The private Māori boarding schools promoted youth leadership exchanges through sport and culture, and it was during these joint activities that Tai likely first met Peter Buck, Hone Heke Ngāpua, Māui Pōmare and Frederick Bennett. Mitchell had a lifelong friendship with Apirana Ngata, which probably began in 1905 when Ngata visited Ōhinemutu to test out his plans for Māori farming. Mitchell and Ngata worked together over many years to promote tribal land tenure in the Bay of Plenty region, incorporating lands previously fragmented by the Native Land Court, including those for Tūhoe in Te Urewera, Ngāti Kea/ Ngāti Kahungunu at Horohoro, Ngāti Whakaue/ Ngāti Pikiao at Maketū and Ngāti Pikiao/ Ngāti Tarāwhai at Tikitere.

Tai was a farmer, surveyor, land development officer and tribal leader, but also a scholar in his own right. As chair of the Arawa District Trust Board, he was intimately involved in a huge range of local community affairs from the 1920s to the 1940s and closely acquainted with people, places and events across the *rohe* ‘district’. His cultural work included organising Māori welcomes for royal tours in 1927 and 1934, the 1940 centennial, designing and building churches and meeting houses, the restoration of Whakarewarewa village in 1929 and the setting aside of scenic reserves. Not surprisingly, given its wealth of skill in carving, weaving and music, Ōhinemutu became central to Ngata’s vision of reviving Māori heritage. Significantly, Tai set aside land passed down from his mother on which the first carving school was established in 1926, and later in 1933 he and Fred Bennett provided the land for the Maori School of Arts and Crafts at the former Anglican church hall Te Aomarama (Neich 2001). Many more carving projects followed, and today’s Te Puia: Māori Arts and Crafts Institute at Whakarewarewa eventually evolved out of the Ōhinemutu carving school.

There is ample evidence of Tai’s involvement in Ngata’s ethnological research in association with the BMER. On the establishment of the BMER, Mitchell sent a telegram of congratulations; he provided its Māori name; and he arranged for financial support through the Te Arawa Trust Board. In return Ngata nominated Tai for membership of the Polynesian Society. On his many trips to Rotorua, Ngata stayed with Tai at his home, and Tai accompanied him

on his visits to local historic sites (Ngata 1926). Taiporutu's intricate tribal relationships within and beyond Te Arawa provided the networks through which Ngata's research in the Bay of Plenty was able to take shape. Taiporutu also gathered, analysed, wrote up and forwarded mōteatea, tribal histories and other material to Ngata in Wellington. For example, in Ngata's ethnological file in the ATL, there is a folder which includes a letter from Tai along with a proposed publication, "Te Ure-o-Uenukukopako kaupapa" and an unidentified page of verse (see Ethnological file and other papers 1923–31). We believe that this is just one example, in one region, of the tribal research networks that lay behind the work of the BMER.

Like Ngata, Tai was a tireless worker for his people in economic, political, social and cultural spheres, but he chose to operate on the ground amongst his community. Whereas Ngata, Buck, Pōmare and Bennett became high-profile leaders who were nationally and often internationally recognised, Taiporutu remained the Ōhinemutu anchor to whom Ngata in particular often turned for assistance, guidance and help behind the scenes in the Bay of Plenty. After a lifetime of service, Mitchell died in 1940 at the age of 67. But to his descendants he lives on, represented by the bell hanging on Te Papa-i-Ouru marae at Ōhinemutu. Every time his male descendants ring the bell it is as if Taiporutu is himself summoning Ngāti Whakaue to gather: Ahakoa kua mate ia e kōrero ana anō (Although dead [Taiporutu] still speaks) (*Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* 1996).

\* \* \*

In 1931, J.C. Andersen paid tribute to the work of the BMER in documenting and disseminating tribal traditions, which demonstrated that Māori themselves wanted this heritage preserved:

[W]hat is the reason for the comparatively recent energy displayed by the Maori in putting on record the history and poetry of his own people? I do not particularly refer to the thousand page history of the Tuhoe tribe written at their request by Elsdon Best; but to the material being printed by the Maori Board of Ethnological Research; the original manuscripts of Nepia Pohuhu in *Te Wananga*, and the two hundred annotated songs ... edited by Apirana Ngata. These are all in the Maori tongue, and practically without English notes. Does this not indicate an ardent desire on the part of the Maori for the preservation of the best in his literature, and its preservation in his own tongue? (Andersen 1931: 13)

In late 1934 Ngata resigned in the wake of a government commission into the land development schemes run out of the Department of Native Affairs, and in 1935 the BMER was absorbed into the Maori Purposes Fund Board,

which had also received criticism over its financial arrangements and been referred to as an “Eastern Potentate” (*Auckland Star* 1934). While this scandal blunted Ngata’s political influence, it allowed him more time to get involved in arts and culture projects, and for his own research into whakapapa, tribal history and waiata. He was president of the Polynesian Society from 1938 to 1950, continued to publish in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, led the building and decoration of many meeting houses around the country through the School of Maori Arts and Crafts, and delivered numerous talks and lectures (Sorrenson 1996). In all this work, he articulated a vision of a new world based on historical arts, culture and heritage, much of which had been collected, recorded and preserved by or through the auspices of the BMER, which remains one of his many enduring legacies. The outcome of the Board’s work, led by Ngata and mobilising his tribal networks around Aotearoa, was an extraordinary cultural revitalisation project that was unique in the discipline of anthropology and unmatched in other British colonies in terms of its impact on settler society and its institutions.

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#### NOTES

1. This pepeha is an interesting modern reinterpretation of an older customary saying referring to land remaining when people disappear.
2. See the correspondence at Te Papa Archives (Wellington), filed under: Maori ethnology: Ancient Maori Chants (Wax cylinders), file 18/0/12, series MU2/058/0008.
3. Pōmare, Ngata, Hēnare, Uru, Hislop, Best and Judge Jones were present. H.D. Skinner may also have been present, though there is some doubt about this (Ngata 1923b). Though often in opposition rather than in government, Ngata wielded considerable influence in framing legislation.
4. See the correspondence in “Polynesian Society Further Records”, MS-Papers-80-115-04A/05A, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
5. For government politics, see the correspondence between J.A. Thomson, the director of the Dominion Museum, and officials of Internal Affairs and Education: MU000001/017/0064 11/1/15 Maori Ethnological Board, Te Papa Archives, Wellington. For Best’s description of the interference, see Best (ca. 1923a).
6. The aims of the Maori Purposes Fund Board included education, scholarships, exhibitions, contributions to Māori secondary schools, contributions to the BMER and support of the Polynesian Society, or “such other purposes as the Native Minister may on the recommendation of the Board from time to time appoint” (see Maori Purposes Fund Board 1924: 5).

7. It was published in 1925 under the title *Tuhoe: The Children of the Mist*. Jeffrey Paparoa Holman argues, due to extensive consultation and quotation, that this work was effectively co-authored by the tribal scholar Tūtakangahau (Holman 2010: 195).
8. For minutes of BMER meetings see “Maori Ethnological Research Board (drafts etc.) 1920–25”, ACIH 16068 MA51/2 22, and “Maori Ethnological – Reports”, ACIH 16068 MA51/3-23, Archives New Zealand, Wellington. By 1927 the Board had spent more than £2,700 on Best’s writings alone, hastened by Ngata’s observation of his “failing powers” (see Ngata 1927: 1–4). For appreciation of the Board’s publications see *Evening Post* (1926).
9. The rationale for rejecting manuscripts reveal the priorities, and biases, of the Board members, who favoured historical Māori-language material that they believed came from recognised *tohunga* ‘priests’ and *whare wānanga* ‘schools of learning’. See the correspondence with Eruera Hohepa Tauhuroa, from Tauranga, in 1931: MS-Papers-0189-B143 Correspondence, Maori Purposes Fund Board, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
10. The money came from multiple Maori Land Boards, the Native Civil List, the Native Trustee and the Maori Purposes Fund, as well as from Māori beneficiaries (tribal trust boards); see Balneavis (1929: 9).
11. For correspondence about Māori subscriptions see “Polynesian Society Records: Correspondence”, MS-Papers-1187-215, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. See also the proceedings of the Polynesian Society in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 1924–28.
12. Scrutiny of the contents of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* suggest that more Māori-language articles were published, probably with a Māori audience in mind. See for example two articles “collected” and translated by Best in vol. 36 (1927), and four East Coast narratives in vol. 37 (1928) based on manuscripts in the Alexander Turnbull Library written by Hēnare Pōtae and Mohi Ruatapu. It should be noted, however, that in the early years of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* much Māori-language material was provided by Māori authors and was translated/edited by Smith and Best (see Amiria Salmond 2007).
13. This was not unprecedented as Māori writers had used newspapers for decades to disseminate customary knowledge and debate matters of cultural identity and history (see Curnow *et al.* 2002, 2006; McCrae and Jacob 2011).
14. For the phrase “precious freight”, see Apirana Ngata, “He Whakamarama / Preface”, in Ngata ([1928] 1959: xiv). See also Maori Purposes Fund Board (1920–34).

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#### AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

Corresponding author: Conal McCarthy, Museum and Heritage Studies, Room 101, 14 Waiteata Rd, Stout Research Centre, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand. Email: Conal.McCarthy@vuw.ac.nz

Paul Tapsell, Australian Indigenous Studies, School of Culture and Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC 3010, Australia. Email: paul.tapsell@unimelb.edu.au