

Sheep or eels: The battle for Wairarapa Moana



Palliser Bay & sandbar of the Wairarapa, Samuel Brees 1844 engraving, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington

Troubled Waters 1860 – 1896

The 'Battle of the Lakes' was one of wills rather than arms. It took half a century to resolve, and its repercussions are still evident today. in the recently released report by the Waitangi Tribunal. Tension arose out of the conflict of interests of the Maori owners of the lake, and the settler farmers of the surrounding land.

The settlers did not welcome the annual cycle of natural floods in late summer/autumn when the spit was closed (the hinurangi) that made the lake and surrounding wetlands such an abundant source of food for Maori. Flooding of their land meant loss of grazing for autumn and winter, and they became increasingly intolerant of Maori control of a situation that threatened their livelihood.

Maori did not want their rights superseded by those of Pakeha. The hinurangi was the time of the annual harvest, yielding 20 to 30 tonnes of eel. They feared their fishery would be destroyed if the lake was kept open to the sea.

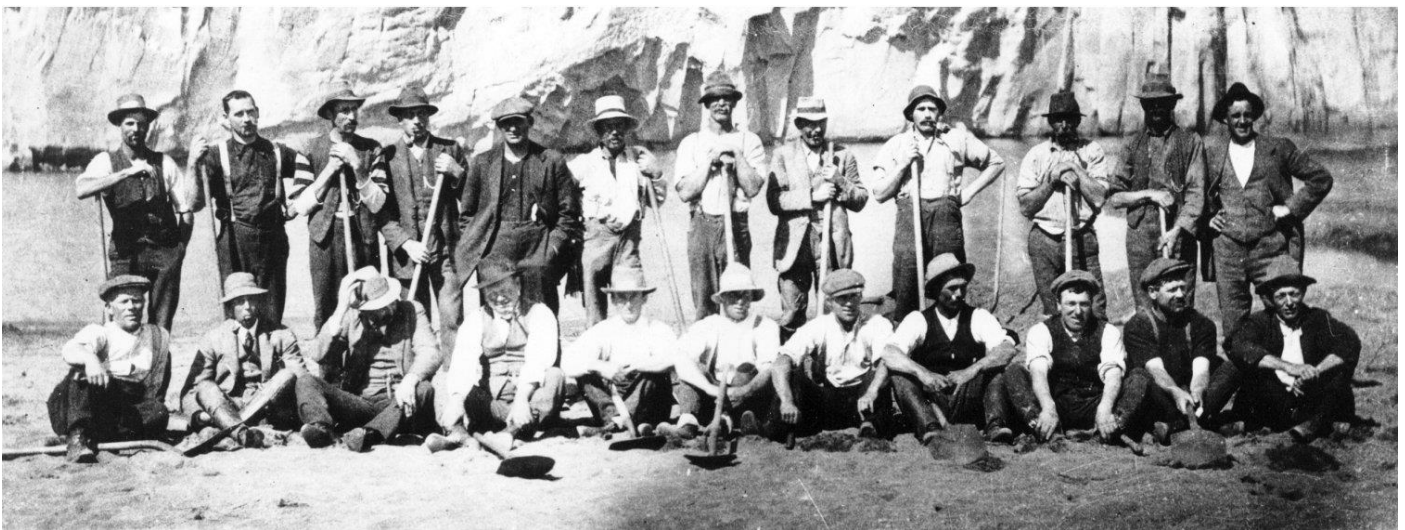
Settlers unsuccessfully lobbied the government to keep the lake open. Maori sought assurances that McLean's 1853 promise would be honoured – that they as owners of the lake would retain control of the opening at Onoke.

The Crown made many attempts to gain control, first by trying to purchase the right to open the lake, and when that failed, trying to purchase the lake itself. In 1876 17 of 139 owners signed a dubious deed negotiated by Government agent Edward Maunsell, giving the government their rights in the lake for £800.

In response Piripi Te Maari, Raniera Te Iho, Te Whatahoro Jury, Te Manihera and other rangatira petitioned Parliament, objecting to a purchase that so few owners had agreed to. The focus of the wrangle shifted to the courts, as legal answers to the question of rights and ownership were sought.

Meanwhile the settlers tried another strategy. A small group formed the South Wairarapa River Board to manage the flooding. The River Board had the lake opening declared a public drain, implying that it should be kept open at all times. There were tense confrontations at the spit, when the River Board organised the opening of the lake, and Maori opposed them.

Piripi Te Maari, the rangatira who led the resistance to selling the lake, died in 1895. With his death, the Maori resolve to hold on to Wairarapa Moana seemed to crumble in the face of the overwhelming force of the colonial government.



A group of farm workers assembled to open the spit at Lake Onoke c 1912, Martinborough Museum

The gifting of the lake

‘When I listened today to the incantation, to the song of farewell, sung by the chief in bidding adieu to that lake which they have loved so long, which is vested with so many historical associations for them, and which has been to them a living necessity, I realised that that song came from the heart, and I could feel my spirit joining with theirs.’

Premier Richard Seddon, speaking at the picnic at Pigeon Bush January 1896

On 11 January 1896 Wairarapa Moana Maori agreed with Native Minister Sir James Carroll that the lakes would be gifted to the Crown. On 13 January an agreement was signed at Papawai whereby the lakes were ‘surrendered and assured to Her Majesty the Queen’. In return the Crown was to pay £2000 to

compensate for the expense of lawyers and court petitions. They were also to ‘...make ample reserves for the benefit of the Native owners...’ out of the thousands of acres of dry land acquired by the Government as part of the title to the lakes. Maori were to retain their customary rights to the lake fishery, as promised by the Treaty of Waitangi.

Statements from both sides at the time were unequivocal in their understanding that the lake was given, not sold, however ambiguous the wording of the agreement.

‘We deliberately of our own free will handed over the lakes. We gave them as a present from one chief to another, and we therefore hope the Government will also treat us liberally in this matter as we do them.
Tamahau Mahupuku in a speech at the Pigeon Bush picnic, January 1896

(The lake) was not sold at all; in a sense it was simply given away. There were legal technicalities, however; there were expenses incurred which we considered ought to be reimbursed and we had the sum mentioned. But the lake was not bought for £2000. It was given to the Government, and was accepted in that spirit, and in that spirit shall be ever dealt with.

Premier Richard Seddon, in a speech at the Pigeon Bush picnic



The gathering at Papawai on the day of the signing of the Deed gifting Wairapa Moana to the Crown People are holding hinaki and other fishing gear. Photographer unknown. Wairapa Archives

[A celebration at Tipapakuku \(Pigeon Bush\)](#)

‘To the European mind the idea of commemorating the ending of 30 years of acrimonious squabbling – squabbling of annual recurrence – by a monster picnic of the rival factions would never have occurred, and it is not to the credit of the European that such is the case, for a more charming means of bringing together in a friendly concourse the erstwhile disputants it would be difficult to perceive.’

Evening Post 20 January 1896

To celebrate the gift, a great picnic for about 1,000 people was held at Pigeon Bush on the western shore of Lake Wairarapa on 18th January. The guest list was a who's who of important people – Premier Richard Seddon, James Carroll, Tamahau Mahupuku, Hoani Paraone Tunuiarangi, Te Whatahoro Jury and other rangatira, politicians A. W. Hogg and Walter Buchanan, farmers Alfred Matthews, J. O. Bidwill, and Charles Hume, government officials, judges, press and clergy. There were speeches, group photographs and a feast.

Though many fine words were spoken on the day, the Crown did not honour its obligations. Maori never received the promised reserves in exchange for the lake as the government declined to pay the asking price for Wairarapa land. They were given instead, much later, an inaccessible block of land at Pouakani in the Waikato, many miles from their homelands



The picnic at Pigeon Bush to celebrate the gifting of Wairarapa Moana. Those present include Richard Seddon (far left, wearing a hat and Maori feather cloak), Tamahau Mahupuku (right of Seddon, also wearing a cloak), and James Carroll (right of Mahupuku)

Why did Wairarapa Maori gift the lakes?

The real battle for the lake was one between chieftainship (te tino rangatiratanga) and the sovereignty of the Crown. Gifting the lake was a noble and honourable gesture that preserved Maori mana, showing that they had not surrendered to the pressure to sell. It was a dignified solution to the difficulties the lake's owners were facing. The expectation was that there would be a proportionate response from the Crown in providing suitable land for reserves, but this obligation was not met.