

TE RAUPARAHĀ

A conversation with his new biographer Dr Patricia Burns

In Pakeha tradition 5 November celebrates the arrest of one of Britain's most notorious bogeymen — Guy Fawkes, the man who attempted to blow up Parliament and the King in 1605. On the same date last year, however, New Zealand's attention was turned closer to home with the publication of a new biography of Te Rauparaha. He too has been regarded as a bogeyman, in his own lifetime and ever since. Now, with the publication of *Te Rauparaha: A New Perspective* by Patricia Burns, the great leader of Ngāti Toa is viewed in a different, more sympathetic light. Patricia Burns's portrayal is likely to cause a few fireworks too, and we spoke to her about the book, how she came to write it and what she discovered.

Dr Patricia Burns came to her subject more or less by accident. A Pakeha with a degree in English (and a doctorate awarded for a thesis on the New Zealand press), she has no special Maori axe to grind. But her researches into the colonial period of our history whetted her appetite to find out more about the leader who has so consistently been dismissed or denigrated as a sinister, treacherous savage.

Over five years ago she wrote radio broadcasts on the lives and "misleading reputations" of several historical personalities. Queen Victoria was one of them — and Te Rauparaha was another.

On delving into the evidence available, it immediately became clear that Te Rauparaha had been denied a proper hearing in the annals of New Zealand's history.

"Only one full-length book has been written about him before," she says, "and that misinterpreted his life. It was by T. Lindsay Buick, and the very title has contributed to the Te Rauparaha myth: *An Old New Zealander, or, Te Rauparaha,*

Te Rauparaha. A drawing made in 1845



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the Napoleon of the South. It was published way back in 1911, and Te Rauparaha was judged entirely by the then European standards. He was seen through European, not Maori eyes. If we look at him as a Maori living through a time of enormous change, his life and achievements take on an entirely different shape."

It was more a question, Dr Burns insists, of interpreting the facts correctly than of uncovering any startling new evidence or dramatic new discoveries. She worked through the established Pakeha channels, researching in the National Archives. In fact, the most dramatic discovery was that the National Archives contained virtually the whole story from 1839 onwards.

"Anybody could have written the book. The records are all there for anyone who wanted to go along and find out the true story. But people have preferred simply to repeat the same old myths, half-truths and misinterpretations."

She worked through Maori channels too. Waikato, Te Ati Awa, Ngāti Raukawa... even Ngāi Tahu: all were courteous and cooperative in offering their help. And of course Ngāti Toa. "They were so kind. With Takapuwahia being so near Wellington, they are constantly being bombarded by individuals and organisations tramping across their marae and asking the same questions. They weren't to know I would be any different. The first part of my manuscript acted as my passport. I gave it to them to read so they would know I was doing a serious piece of work. Once they had been through the whakapapa tables — and argued about them — I knew it would be all right."

Dr Burns respected the assistance she received from Ngāti Toa, and was careful not to abuse the trust which developed between them.

"Although Te Rauparaha's original grave, complete with European-styled monument and headstone, still remains near Rangiatea Church in Otaki, the tupapaku was removed by Te Rangihaeata and other chiefs and secretly reburied on Kapiti. The elders of Ngāti Toa told me that they didn't know the whereabouts of the true grave. Perhaps they do, perhaps they don't... but it was obviously not a line of questioning they were keen to follow so I dropped it. Some things are more important than the pursuit of blunt historical facts."

This is a view which will be shared by the majority of Maori readers. Some, brought up on generations of anti-Te Rauparaha tradition, may be sceptical of an interpretation of the man which seeks to show him as "a leader as skilled in the arts of peace as the arts of war"; others will argue, as they did when Michael King published his biography of Te Puea Herangi, that Pakeha academics have no business dabbling in Maori matters. But many more will acknowledge that Patricia Burns has matched a sensitive subject with sensitive treatment which, in the words of Bill Parker, "has stripped away many of the myths, stereotypes and inconsistencies perpetuated by both Pakeha and Maori alike".