

THE BAPTISM OF TE PUNI

The Rex Nan Kivell collection of early Australian and New Zealand pictures in the National Library of Australia includes an oil painted by Charles Decimus Barraud generally entitled *Baptism of the Maori chief Te Puni in Otaki Church, New Zealand*. It is signed and dated 1853 and the catalogue records that Sir George and Lady Grey were in the congregation. The baptism was performed by Archdeacon Hadfield. This painting is historically significant in that it gives expression to the ideal of British colonial policy of the day which saw the peaceful and successful colonisation of New Zealand achieved through the rapid assimilation of the Maori race into the pattern of civilisation accepted by Victorian England. The work, commissioned by Sir George Grey, graphically supports his despatches, which unfortunately concealed as much as they revealed, reporting success to the Colonial Office towards the achievement of this aim. The central figure, an aged and influential chieftain, had facilitated the establishment of the New Zealand Company settlement in the Wellington area to the advantage of both the settlers and his own tribe. He had gained the affection and respect of the settlers from their first landing near his pa at Petone. Sir George Grey must have held Te Puni in high regard as he was one of the retinue of chiefs with whom he surrounded himself and was, with Tamati Waka Nene, chosen by Grey as an esquire on the occasion of his investiture as KCB by the Chief Justice, Sir William Martin, in November, 1848. Rangiatea Church would have been a fitting background for Te Puni's visible acceptance of Christianity. Completed in 1851 it was the largest native church in the country and revealed the skill and artistry of the Maori in building a Christian edifice while employing his traditional means of decoration.

However history poses queries as to where the baptism actually took place and research, sparked off by a continuing study of Bishop Hadfield, soon reveals that the artist built up a composite picture. It is only in recent years (probably no earlier than 1950) that the venue of the baptism has been cited as being at Rangiatea Church in Otaki. Mr Nan Kivell when he acquired the painting only identified the church and not those portrayed and considered that 'the very interesting painting by C. D. Barraud dated 1852 showing a tattooed chief being baptised . . . was apparently painted at the same time as the picture of the interior of the Otaki Church which was lithographed and coloured'.¹ There is no doubt that the carving on the Altar rail, the tukutuku panels, the rounded pillars and the placing of the windows are those of Rangiatea. But Archdeacon Hadfield made it impossible to accept that the baptism took place there. This indomitable missionary struggled valiantly to see the colony established on a firm basis where Maori and