

A Nineteenth Century Tuhoe Waiata Tangi

COMMENTARY AND TRANSLATION BY
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Most of the waiata composed in the late nineteenth century have been forgotten, yet the words of some of them await discovery in manuscripts and early publications. A beautiful waiata tangi recorded among Elsdon Best's papers in the Alexander Turnbull Library was composed in 1897 by Tukua-te-rangi Tutakangahau on the death of his daughter Marewa-i-te-rangi.¹

Tukua-te-rangi and his family lived at the remote settlement of Maungapohatu, deep in the densely forested mountains of the Urewera. He and his wife, Te Kura, had three children. His father, then an old man, was the famous Tutakangahau who was rangatira of the Tamakaimoana hapu of Tuhoe and a leading authority on the traditions of his people.

A school had recently been opened at Te Whaiti, and Tutakangahau, wishing his grandchildren to acquire the new knowledge as well as the old, decided they should be sent to study there. At that time it took at least a day and a half to walk from Maungapohatu to Te Whaiti. Tutakangahau arranged for the three children to stay with people at Te Whaiti, and he also asked Elsdon Best, a Pakeha friend and student of Tuhoe tradition who was living there, to concern himself with their welfare. The children were constant visitors at Best's home, attracted, he suspected, by the biscuits he always had for them.

But then tragedy came to the Urewera. An influenza epidemic struck down one person after another, and scarcely a day went by without the sound of rifle fire which announced a new death. Tukua-te-rangi's daughter Marewa-i-te-rangi became ill, and she died soon after her parents came to her.

Tukua-te-rangi's waiata tangi for Marewa laments her death and farewells her, tracing the journey to her ancestors which she must make. In the first lines, he also laments the deaths of relatives of Marewa who have died as well.² He blames their deaths, in the traditional way, upon Hine-nui-te-pō, the Great Woman of the Night who was said to have brought death into the world; but he also blames Satan, and he expresses, again in traditional terms, his wish to avenge Satan's action. Then in a traditional metaphor he honours the dead by speaking of them as 'te whetū me te marama', the stars and the moon.