

Nukutawhiti: Thomas Kendall's drawing

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In July 1824, the missionary Thomas Kendall struggled to complete his account of Maori religious beliefs about the creation of life. As an accompaniment to a long letter,¹ whose contents he had been working on for over a year, he sent a sketch of one piece of carving. He called it Nukutawhiti, 'a Deity in the First State' of existence, and he explained that it was 'emblematical of the Superstitious Notions of the New Zealanders.'² This drawing vanished from the archives of the Church Missionary Society and I could not trace it when, eleven years ago, I published my interpretation of Kendall's work, *The Legacy of Guilt*. It had, in fact, come into the possession of the English private collector, K. A. Webster, and had been misidentified by him. Consequently, its existence remained unknown until the Alexander Turnbull Library acquired his collection and Mrs Janet Paul realised what the drawing was.³ It is an important discovery because it provides new insight into the significance and meaning of Maori carving.

The large figure is Nukutawhiti, the canoe-ancestor of Ngapuhi of the Hokianga and the Bay of Islands. The drawing is of the centre board or carved entrance slab (*kuwaha*) to a storehouse. It is, in fact, the oldest drawing of a carved storehouse known, antedating Augustus Earle's images by some three years. In style, however, the *kuwaha* resembles others constructed in the early nineteenth century. One famous Te Arawa *pataka* (or storehouse), Puawai O Te Arawa, held in the Auckland Institute and Museum, similarly possesses as its central figure their canoe ancestor, Tamatekapua,⁴ who, like Nukutawhiti, was a contemporary of Kupe. In Kendall's sketch, the features of the ancestor, particularly the very slanted eye and eye socket, together with the knob on the protracted tongue, are suggestive of the Bay of Plenty-East Coast carving style.⁵ Te Arawa carvers were particularly famous in the early nineteenth century and it is probable that some of the new and elaborately carved storehouses built at the Bay of Islands were carved by them.⁶ These ornate *pataka* developed there after the introduction of iron cutting tools and were used as the repository for the community's most valued possessions, such as cloaks and weapons. They were tapu.