

Carved Histories:

Rotorua Ngāti Tarawhai Woodcarving

Review by Arapata Hakiwai

This book is both a personal journey and a record of over three decades of dedicated research by its author, Roger Neich and we are indeed fortunate to have this research published.

Māori carving has been the object of fascination and intrigue for over two hundred years, and continues to be the subject of ongoing research by ethnologists, anthropologists, art historians and Māori scholars today. For Māori, the whakairo, or carving art form, is a powerful language of communication, and one of the richest artistic expressions of the Māori world. It contains a profound body of knowledge and tradition that speaks of tribal and sub-tribal histories, traditions, narratives and world-views.

However, this is more than just a book on Māori tribal carving. Turning the pages, you discover a richness and depth that is often lacking in other Māori tribal carving publications. You are reminded, too, of its importance to the Ngāti Tarawhai people. The Foreword, written by Joseph Te Poroa Malcolm, Chairman of the Ngāti Tarawhai Trust Board, affirms the confidence and trust that he has in author and scholar, Dr. Roger Neich. For the descendants of Ngāti Tarawhai, this research will be an enduring legacy of the past and a guiding light for the future.

Neich also reminds us of the importance of working closely with the Ngāti Tarawhai people. He notes, in the Preface, that key people helped him throughout his research work. This should not be underestimated, as there are many examples where researchers enter into Māori areas of research without ever consulting the people who are being studied. The book is an invaluable treasure and will have enduring relevance for descendants, Māori carvers/artists and historians alike. The meticulous attention to detail in the text is a strength that future researchers should take note of. Recently, the Te Arawa master carver Lyonel Grant, speaking at the National Museum in Wellington about Anaha Te Rahui and the Ngāti Tarawhai carving traditions, reinforced the respect that he had for Roger Neich and his research work documenting the Ngāti Tarawhai carving traditions.

The book comprises twenty chapters, beginning with the history of Ngāti Tarawhai and their first settlement at Okataina. It describes the influence of missionaries, the New Zealand wars and the various religious, political and economic factors that affected Ngāti Tarawhai, and the wider Rotorua region. The lives of Ngāti Tarawhai woodcarvers and their relationships with related Ngāti Pikiao carving traditions are detailed, along with chapters that consider the nature of art, Māori carving, and the impact and influence on Ngāti Tarawhai Māori carving practice of a changing patronage. The identification and examination

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of individual carvers and their styles reveals the strength and depth of carving in this tribal region.

The book has a freshness, and delivers a welcome insight into the artform known as whakairo Māori, or Māori carving. If you are unaware of Ngāti Tararua, then reading this book will give you a good understanding and appreciation of this tribe, their history and their established carving traditions. The mana and reputation of Ngāti Tararua carvers is apparent when you discover that their master carvers travelled all over New Zealand – including Waitangi, Otiria and Hawke's Bay – to carve meeting houses. The title is appropriate too, because the depth of scholarly research on Ngāti Tararua carving, history and life is, in fact, the history of its people as carved out by its leaders, men such as Anaha Te Rahui, Neke Kapua and Tene Waitere.

Although the text is dense in parts, in particular the chapters on the theoretical approaches to art, this does not detract from the readability of the book. It is rich in photographs and visual representation, with carvings identified in museums throughout the world. Identifying Ngāti Tararua carvings held in museums, and in private collections around the world, is an enormous task and Neich has done a superb job bringing this information together to sit alongside the historical record. Through the visual record, and the depth of social and historical context provided, one is reminded that what is being presented here is the lives of real people through time.

Neich not only identifies these carved treasures, but brings them to life through the art historical process, identifying the actual carver(s) who carved them and the date(s) as well. A benefit of this research methodology, as Neich has shown here, is that we can now document changes in style over time. Changing patronage and historical circumstances have certainly impacted on the carving traditions of Ngāti Tararua. As Joe Malcolm says in the Foreword: "The burgeoning European market gave rise to an entrepreneurial spirit within the Ngāti Tararua carving community so that opportunities for individual enterprise were readily available". The impact and influence of Tourism in the Rotorua region on the Ngāti Tararua carving traditions, as mentioned in Chapter 15, was also significant. As Neich says: "'Tourist' carving, defined by reference to its patronage and its public, represents the ultimate end-point of commodification and commercialisation of ethnic art" (p.232). Dr. Roger Neich is well known in Māori and Pacific art circles and his publications carry a reputation for integrity, thorough research and impeccable scholarship. This is true of this publication.

Regrettably, there are still many taonga, including carvings, that have not been reconnected with their tribal descendants, and remain on shelves in museum collection storerooms. At a time when Māori are advancing their cultural heritage initiatives, and reclaiming and reaffirming their art heritage foundation, these carved treasures are extremely important for Māori tribal identity and belonging. This art historical publication is an excellent example of contemporary research and has the power to make a considerable difference to the Ngāti Tararua people. It will have great value, too, for present day carvers and carvers yet unborn, by providing an opportunity to study and analyse the rich carving traditions of this tribal region. As well, it provides a good model and template for others to follow. We are indeed fortunate that Dr. Neich has given us this book, as without it, all of us would be denied an important treasure.