Dancing with the King: The Rise and Fall of the King Country, 1864-1885

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After the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi on 6 February 1840, competing British and Maori sovereignties were established in New Zealand due to the contradictory English and Maori translations of the agreement. This would provide the basis for disagreements and tension as the British and later settler state sovereignty gradually usurped the practical levers of power - politically, socially, culturally and economically dominating Maori by the end of the century. One of the last areas in the country that managed to preserve its independence was the Rohe Potae, the King Country. A history of its tenuous co-existence and negotiations with the settler state which gradually eroded its power is examined in Michael Belgrave's illuminating and entertaining book *Dancing with the King: The Rise and Fall of the King Country, 1864-1885*. While it certainly has some faults and limits, this does not detract overall from its value. This review will assess the book for its merits and also attempt to contextualise the examination of this specific historical material and how it relates to current Waitangi Tribunal [\(1\)](#) hearings.

Although there were many contradictions between the Treaty and Te Tiriti, an accurate translation was provided for the Crown's right of pre-emption which granted the government a monopoly on the purchase of Maori land (which was all of the land in New Zealand at 1840). The Crown's mismanagement of its monopoly right led to a disinclination to sell on the part of Maori: massive amounts of land were sought by the Crown, trifling prices were paid and minuscule reserves were offered. Promised benefits rarely if ever eventuated. The resistance to land sales developed alongside the idea of establishing a Māori King to advocate for the retention of Māori land and sovereignty. The Kingitanga or King Movement was established in 1858 with Waikato leader Te Wherowhero crowned as King. Although it was developed to co-exist alongside the settler state, it was unacceptable to the Crown. The movement became enveloped in wars over land and sovereignty in the early 1860s leading eventually to conflict in the Waikato in 1863. Following a tenuous victory on the battlefield the Crown imposed punitive confiscations of land which led much of the Kingitanga (now led by Te Wherowhero's son, Tawhiao) to escape south to the region of its close ally - Ngāti Maniapoto - as well as other smaller groups with stronger connections with the Crown such as Ngāti Hikairo. This area became known as the Rohe Potae or King Country in 1864 and it survived as an independent state for approximately 20 years. It was not a small area, about the size of Belgium. The Rohe Potae was off limits to Europeans although it was largely a one way boundary as most Maori residents

of the King Country could travel in both directions.

It is here that Belgrave picks up his narrative in *Dancing with the King*. The first quarter of the book covers the initial ten years of the Rohe Potae as a political stalemate led to its establishment and acceptance by a colonial state seeking absolute and complete sovereignty. Belgrave recounts the establishment of borders and a capital (which would change throughout its history) as well as the threats to its sovereignty by Maori from outside of the region such as Titokowaru in Taranaki and Te Kooti all around the central north island. The protection of its boundaries was also enforced with violence as any Europeans crossing the border could be punished by death as two Europeans were in 1870 (Richard Todd) and 1873 (Timothy Sullivan). The remainder of the book deals largely with the long-term negotiations that took place to eventually open the area to settlement by a series of political administrations and titans of New Zealand's colonial history starting with Donald McLean and continuing under Sir George Grey, John Bryce, John Ballance and Robert Stout. These are a fascinating look into the progression of the negotiations and the differing power imbalances that gradually developed. Early in the negotiations the Kingitanga was offered sizeable amounts of land and complete power over its governance, but as the Kingitanga's position eroded and they held out for more control the offers became less and less generous. The general structure of the negotiations reflected some of the negotiations over Treaty settlements that would take place over 100 years later, where Maori claimants remained in a subservient position to the Crown's dominance. Belgrave notes that over time the power imbalance was reflected in the manner in which the negotiations were conducted - initially in the Rohe Potae under Maori kawa (protocol) and eventually in European towns under Pakeha tikanga (customs).

The King provided a unifying role under which the protection of land could be concentrated in one figure, but the Kingitanga was an ambitious undertaking that did not reflect the general political structure of Maori. Independence was paramount and leadership had to be earned. The most power was retained within the hapu (sub-tribe) much less the larger iwi (tribe) or going even further into a pan-tribal movement such as the Kingitanga. Tawhiao and his Waikato allies that had escaped to the Rohe Potae after many of their lands (and even those who had allied themselves with the Crown!) were confiscated, remained in the region as guests and this gradually began to strain relations in the Kingitanga. All around the Rohe Potae the Native Land Court (NLC) was continuing the alienation of Maori land, and the pressure mounted on the King Country.⁽²⁾ Eventually the leaders of the major iwi (Ngati Maniapoto, Ngati Tuwharetoa, and Whanganui) that owned the Rohe Potae brought their lands to the NLC for determination. The Crown made its first penetration into the King Country by requesting permission to have the Main Trunk Line for the railway built to connect Wellington to Auckland. Once work began, this was the signal blow that destroyed the independence of the Rohe Potae.

There is much to admire about Belgrave's *Dancing with the King*. His section on the King's travels to London in 1884 in a failed attempt to gain the audience of Queen Victoria but a successful petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Derby, is especially rewarding. So too are the sections on the King's first travels around the settler towns of the north island in the years before the King Country was opened. Belgrave shows the ways in which the settler government attempted to downplay the King's status as merely a tribal leader in both settings. The reality was that he was feted and courted as 'King Tawhiao' in London and Wanganui, and his constitutional status was certainly elevated in the way he was treated as a cause celebre. There were some strong echoes in the events of the past and present. The New Zealand press criticised Tawhiao for besmirching the reputation of the colony by highlighting their grievances in London. A similar refrain was made earlier this year after acclaimed director Taika Waititi commented publically about how New Zealand remained 'racist as fuck'. He was promptly criticised by some in the media for challenging the image of New Zealand's allegedly perfect race relations. Belgrave's descriptions of bankers clamouring across the Waipa River, waste deep in water, to pitch their lending schemes to King Tawhiao and other rangatira is particularly amusing.

But there are issues with certain of Belgrave's interpretations, his use of archives and some minor editorial mistakes. The section on 'Making the King Country' is perhaps the most disappointing because I was expecting more on how the area functioned as a state, legally, economically and politically. It was probably

beyond Belgrave's purview and there was already a lot to cover in the book (and perhaps the evidence simply doesn't exist anymore), but having some kind of window into the functioning world of the Rohe Potae state would have been fascinating. Belgrave also relies overwhelmingly on newspaper and official published sources from the *Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives (AJHR)*. Both are excellent sources, but there are substantial archives to draw for many of the key players on the Crown side. Donald McLean's archives are available online but did not appear once, neither did anything from George Grey's archives held by the Auckland War Memorial Museum. Other key players such as Bryce or Ballance may not have publically available archives such as McLean but the biography of Ballance by Timothy McIvor is only cited in the introductory section to the chapter involving Ballance. This is another of Belgrave's limitations, his overwhelming reliance on primary sources. Was there nothing on the negotiations with Tawhiao and other Rohe Potae rangatira useful in McIvor's biography? The same can be said for the list of secondary sources referenced in his first chapter but other than a highly relevant research report by Cathy Marr (which will be discussed later) little else is used throughout the rest of the book.

In terms of editorial errors, on p. 43 Belgrave describes 'the period leading up to the Waitara purchase in 1869', but the author actually means 1859 as the Waitara purchase was completed in 1860. Then on p. 18 Belgrave describes the attack on Rangiaowhia as being on '21 February 1861' when it was in 1863. These are minor editorial problems, but more troubling is his extended discussion of the attack on Rangiaowhia. Belgrave attempts to contextualise the attack and warns that 'we need to consider what the term meant in 1863, rather than simply applying the sensibilities of the early twenty-first century to the actions of both Maori and European combatants' (p. 19). This comment refers openly to a concern that has been raised with history writing in the Tribunal process, that the standards of the present are being used to assess actions in the past. Belgrave himself was involved in some of the scholarly debates that began with Bill Oliver's 2001 chapter 'Retrospective Utopias' and were continued by Giselle Byrnes and later challenged by Jim McAloon. Belgrave served as somewhat of a middle point between the different positions of Oliver and Byrnes versus McAloon, and he wrote extensively on the issue in his book *Historical Frictions*.⁽³⁾

Rangiaowhia was an unprotected village populated solely by women, children and the elderly when it was attacked by British imperial forces. The defenceless inhabitants sought refuge in a church, and after short volleys of fire from both sides the church was set alight. Those escaping the church were shot and those who remained inside were burnt to death. It has commonly been referred to as an atrocity or at least characterised as such since at least the 1980s in James Belich's *New Zealand Wars*, and it continues to be referred to as such by others such as Vincent O'Malley in his *War for the Waikato*, publically by eminent historian Jock Phillips and by this author in a recent article in the *New Zealand Journal of History*.⁽⁴⁾ Belgrave posits that we cannot apply the standards of the present to the past but he neglects to acknowledge the way in which it was condemned at the time by some quarters of the settler press and by many Maori as murders. He states that prior to the adoption of Christianity the killing of women and children captured in warfare was 'commonplace: it was simply part of tikanga' (p. 19). With the arrival and flourishing of Christianity, even among the Kingitanga, he notes that more principled behaviour was expected. His characterisation of the killing of women and children during warfare as part of tikanga is questionable - that was certainly not the case in the late 1820s and early 1830s for Ngai Tahu communities ravaged by Te Rauparaha and his allies before the arrival of Christianity. But the expectation of more principled behaviour between Christian communities surely meant the standards of the time also necessitated a description of the murders at Rangiaowhia as atrocities. After opening the paragraph with the questionable statement above about applying 'twenty-first century sensibilities', Belgrave notes that 'by 1863, according to Maori sensibilities, what happened at Rangiriri, Rangiaowhia, Pukorokoro and following the escape from Orakau were atrocities' (p. 19). This leaves open the question that are Maori sensibilities in 1863 then then not sensibilities worth considering?

In November 2012 Waitangi Tribunal hearings began in the Rohe Potae (King Country) District Inquiry, regarding over 270 claims brought by different iwi (tribes), hapu (sub-tribes) and individuals of Maori descent. Over two-and-a-half years a total of 17 hearings were held around the region in the western part of the central north island covering many different issues dating as far back as 1840. These included the

construction of the main trunk railway through the district in the late 19th century, the operation of the Native Land Court, the alienation and management of Maori land, the Crown's control of waterways, public works takings and the environmental impacts of colonisation. At the core of these matters were major constitutional issues addressed in *Dancing with the King*: the Crown's relationship with the Kingitanga (King Movement), the creation of the Rohe Potae and a seminal 1883 petition to enable the opening of the area to settlement. The Tribunal's final report on the Rohe Potae claims is currently under production.

Belgrave is a Professor of History at Massey University in Auckland, New Zealand. Although his academic works are extensive and overall of excellent quality, his career has predominantly been defined by his involvement in the interrelated Waitangi Tribunal and Treaty settlement processes in New Zealand. He was a research manager for the Waitangi Tribunal early in its history in the late 1980s and early 1990s before beginning his academic career. Since that time he has produced a number of historical research reports as a private contractor for different Tribunal inquiries. He also has been involved in the negotiation of historical accounts for individual Treaty settlements. (These are preambles that provide historical context for formal apologies by the Crown to claimant groups regarding breaches of the principles of the Treaty/Te Tiriti.) Belgrave has co-authored a number of different historical research reports for the Rohe Potae District Inquiry, some of which would have been relevant to the issues addressed in *Dancing with the King*.

His research reports on environmental impacts and Crown policy with respect to Maori land in the second half of the 20th century may not have been of much use but the reports on Maori experiences in the Native Land Court, and oral and traditional history reports for a number of different tribes would have provided some insight. The matters discussed in his book were addressed in more detail by different authors, one commissioned by the Crown Law Office (in its role representing the Crown in Tribunal hearings) and another by the Tribunal. Donald Loveridge, a Canadian historian employed by the Crown since the late 1980s, wrote on the Crown's opening of the King Country from 1882-5 for an adjacent inquiry (the National Park District Inquiry) which was used in the Rohe Potae District Inquiry. Cathy Marr, a historian involved mainly in the Tribunal process and for a shorter time in the Treaty settlement process, was commissioned by the Tribunal to write a report on political engagement in the Rohe Potae from 1864-86 that corresponds chronologically and thematically with Belgrave's *Dancing with the King*. In many ways Belgrave has provided somewhat of a middle point between the arguments of Marr and Loveridge, at least in the specific area that Loveridge addressed on the opening of the King Country.

Michael Belgrave's *Dancing with the King* is a welcome addition to the historiography of the aftermath of the Waikato war. There are some questionable arguments made at times, and wider use of archival material other than newspapers and the *AJHR* would have been beneficial, but overall Belgrave's work has expanded our understanding of the Rohe Potae's rise and fall. It will be interesting to see what kind of findings the Waitangi Tribunal's Rohe Potae District Inquiry Panel make in relation to some of the key issues examined in *Dancing with the King* and whether it plays any part in the Treaty settlements negotiated for the various iwi in the Rohe Potae. There is no denying the legacy the Rohe Potae has left to those still seeking mana motuhake (independence) in their own ways throughout Aotearoa New Zealand.

Notes

1. In 1975 a permanent commission of inquiry, the Waitangi Tribunal, was established to investigate and make findings on claims by Maori of breaches of the principles of the Treaty/Te Tiriti. At first it was limited to investigating contemporary claims only, but in 1985 it was given retrospective powers to examine historical issues dating back to the signing of the Treaty/Te Tiriti - 6 February 1840. Eventually due to legal challenges in the Court system, the Tribunal was strengthened further with binding powers to provide remedies. As a result the Crown (the NZ Government) began developing Treaty settlement policies on providing its own remedies so it could retake control of the process. Over 70 settlements have been signed since the early 1990s.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The NLC was established following the failure of the Crown's monopoly on land purchasing which led to war and conflict in the 1860s. It provided a process under which the title to Maori land could be

converted from customary title to fee simple title, and could then be purchased privately. This system was ultimately even more destructive in terms of total lands alienated in the North Island than the Crown's monopoly in the first 25 years, and even the confiscation that followed the wars. It was run by European Judges who with the aid of Maori Assessors determined Maori custom and awarded lands on often dubious and uninformed rationales. Land speculators and money lenders were prevalent and swarmed around sittings of the Court like a horde of locusts.[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Michael Belgrave, *Historical Frictions: Maori Claims and Reinvented Histories* (Auckland, 2005); Jim McAloon, 'By which standards? History and the Waitangi Tribunal', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 40, 2 (2006), pp. 194–213; Giselle Byrnes, 'By which standards? History and the Waitangi Tribunal: a reply', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 40, 2 (2006), 214–29; Michael Belgrave, 'Looking forward: historians and the Waitangi Tribunal', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 40, 2 (2006), 230–50; W. H. Oliver, 'A reply To Jim McAloon', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 41, 1 (2007), 83–7.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (Auckland, 1986); Vincent O'Malley, *The Great War for New Zealand: Waikato 1800–2000* (Wellington, 2016); Martin Fisher, 'The Politics of History and Waikato-Tainui's Raupatu Treaty Settlement'. *New Zealand Journal of History*, 50, 2, pp.68–89, 2016; Emma Cropper, 'NZ statues linked to genocide, racism' <<https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2016/04/nz-statues-linked-to-...> [2] [accessed 13 June 2018].[Back to \(4\)](#)

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