

A Tribute to Keith Sorrenson

KEITH SORRENSON and I met 40 years ago researching about Maori land. In 1956 it was considered rather odd to be writing a history thesis on such a topic. Certainly one was working outside the mainstream in Wellington; few Victoria University people then knew or cared much about the field. So when Keith, a young Auckland academic, hunted me out and launched an animated discussion about Native Land Acts and such matters I was both surprised and encouraged. I was also greatly challenged by Keith's command of the data, his careful interpretations, and his insights into Maori understandings. Years later our correspondence over the Kingitanga (King movement) and the complex shifts of power in the 1860s helped shape my own doctoral work.

It helped, I think, that we shared a rural upbringing: in his case childhood on a farm in Upper Papamoa behind Tauranga and primary schooling at Kaiate Falls, and, in mine, inland Poverty Bay. In such places one grows to love our land and the people of the land, to respect them and their tough demands, while not always agreeing with them, and to recognize and detest humbug. Then, too, we were of a generation where the larger country towns had good secondary schools, with teachers wearing MA gowns and communicating a respect for scholarship and a love of language stemming from a British heritage. Otherwise it was a no-frills education where rural habits of tenacity and self-reliance stood one in good stead. Keith Sorrenson graduated as dux of Tauranga College and as captain of the first fifteen.

In the New Zealand of the 1940s and 1950s many Pakeha had scarcely glimpsed the richness and complexity of the Maori heritage, where the poetry and precision of language were equally valued and where the richness of human relations had not been hardened by the dourness of competition in a commercial-industrial world. That, as a Pakeha, one could discover in upper Papamoa or inland Poverty Bay. But for Keith Sorrenson apprehension was more direct and personal. He is of Ngati Pukenga descent and has always identified with his Maori as well as his Pakeha heritage.

No doubt this dual heritage has shaped his lifelong scholarly interests: for example, his studies of race relations and cultural interaction in New Zealand, of the Kingitanga, of Pakeha myths about Maori origins and migrations, and of the Polynesian Society. All these are marked by careful, professional scholar-

ship, by a perceptiveness that reflects Keith's biculturalism, by a sympathetic understanding of commonplace human folly and a willingness to be forthright and tenacious when hypocrisy and gross manipulation need exposing. His early writings endure and would require little if any modification today. He has published consistently, as the bibliography in this volume shows. As an author and as an associate editor of the *New Zealand Journal of History* from its foundation in 1967, and as co-editor from 1987, he has been one of the principal architects of a corpus of scholarship about New Zealand Maori history and race relations. Almost none of these areas, except for Keith Sinclair's pioneering study of *The Origins of the Maori Wars* (1957), had been explored when Keith Sorrenson started writing. The 1960s and 1970s were therefore exciting decades, during which New Zealand history grew from strength to strength and Keith, Judith Binney and I, and many others soon to follow, made contributions to the study of the Maori-settler interaction. The work which Keith contributed has rightly become standard reading for Maori and Pakeha students of the complex history of this country.

Despite this it has been a matter of regret that historians have not been able to present their work in such a way as to attract many Maori research scholars into history — until recently. But this must be offset in Keith's case by one of his major works: *Na To Hoa Aroha; the Correspondence between Sir Apirana Ngata and Sir Peter Buck, 1925-1950*. It was of course a tribute from the families and from the world of Maori scholarship that Keith was asked to edit these letters. The care and integrity behind the three-volume work show that the trust was not misplaced.

At Oxford (1959-62) and at Makerere University, Uganda (1963-4), Keith Sorrenson extended his interests in colonial and inter-racial history to East Africa. New Zealand was soon to draw him back, however, to a lectureship at Auckland University in 1964 and thence to a Chair in History, which he held from 1968 to 1995. He had meanwhile married Judith; their children are Richard, Monica and Julian.

In New Zealand, Keith's African connection took on new aspects. For these were the decades of controversy over sporting tours with South Africa. Despite his love of rugby there could be no compromise for Keith Sorrenson with racism. He became an active member of CARE (Citizens Association for Racial Equality) and was its president from 1971-3. From petitioning Prime Minister Norman Kirk against the 1971 All Black tour to joining the protests in the street against the Muldoon government's infamous hosting of the Springboks in 1981, Keith was not afraid to show his commitment to principle. But his enthusiasm for rugby emerged intact from the hard years of protest; it is reported that, in the Auckland University common-room, sports-mad visitors could always find a happy controversialist in Keith Sorrenson.

In New Zealand, especially after the Land March and the Treaty of Waitangi Act of 1975, to be a teacher of New Zealand history from Maori perspectives is of itself an engagement with public life. The review of historical grievances by the Waitangi Tribunal depends absolutely upon historians who understand and respect the Crown's complex obligations under the Treaty and the Treaty

jurisprudence enunciated authoritatively by the Court of Appeal in 1987. It is therefore very fitting that Keith has been a member of the Tribunal since 1986. As well as his vast experience he has brought to the office his professionalism and integrity, without the likes of which the institution will founder. He has carried out other duties in public life as well as in his work in 1986 for the Electoral Commission considering Maori parliamentary representation.

There is likely to be considerable call on Keith's services in the years ahead, for in many ways New Zealand is only now coming to grips with its bicultural heritage and the past attempts to deny it. I am glad to be able to report that, some 43 years after he began his studies of Maori land issues, Keith's energies show no signs of flagging.

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