

Dancing with the King: The Rise and Fall of the King Country, 1864–1885. By Michael Belgrave. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2017. 452pp. NZ Price: \$65. ISBN: 9781869408695.

BLAME IT ON the Waitangi Tribunal. Without two decades of historical research for four Tribunal inquiries into Te Rohe Pōtae and the lands around it (the Taupō, Whanganui and National Park districts), Michael Belgrave's long, densely packed study of 20 years in the life of Te Rohe Pōtae ('the King Country') would have been improbable. Now, it seems almost inevitable, especially in the wake of Vincent O'Malley's monumental history of the Waikato War, *The Great War for New Zealand* (2016), which made judicious use of research reports prepared for those inquiries. Belgrave shifts the focus from the Waikato War to its aftermath in the Rohe Pōtae, where King Tāwhiao and his supporters took refuge with their Kīngitanga allies.

The title refers to the 'diplomatic dance' that accompanied the 'cold war' (p.3) between the Kīngitanga and the government. Starting where the war ended in 1864, the 12 chapters work through the establishment, maintenance and dismantling of the Rohe Pōtae, up to the turning of the first sod for the North Island Main Trunk Railway at Puniu in April 1885. That event marked the end of what was, as James Belich reminded us in 1986, an independent Māori state 'nearly two-thirds the size of Belgium', the history of which has been neglected.¹

Other than its liberal use of searchable newspapers and parliamentary papers on the Papers Past website, this book could have been written 30 years ago, when it might have been a good first step in addressing the historiographical gap noted by Belich. Now, in the wake of a generation of Treaty claims research and the greater use and understanding of te reo Māori sources (written and oral), it is simply out of time. Te Rohe Pōtae was a critical frontier between Māori and the Crown and requires as much appreciation of its Māori context as it does of the government's perspective. Judith Binney's magisterial treatment of another rohe pōtae (Te Urewera) in *Encircled Lands* points the way; a similar approach to the Rohe Pōtae could have resulted in a richer and more nuanced history.

Much of the groundwork for just that sort of history has been laid in the Tribunal inquiries (the last of which, Te Rōhe Potae, ended in 2015), which, in addition to Papers Past, draw heavily on government archives, private papers, Māori manuscripts, and the oral traditions of Ngāti Maniapoto and Waikato Tainui. This treasure trove is little used by Belgrave. In a bibliographic note (pp.405–406) he pays a back-handed compliment to Cathy Marr (an experienced Waitangi Tribunal historian), noting her 'excellent' six-volume document bank of primary sources while largely ignoring her robust 1300-page report which covers the same period, but rather more comprehensively.²

A wider reading of the sources would have proved valuable. This is evident in the cursory treatment of a central feature of this history: the Rohe Pōtae compact. This series of oral and written agreements between the Crown and the four main iwi of the district in the early 1880s provided for the building of the railway in exchange for the preservation of Māori authority over Rohe Pōtae lands, but the Crown never honoured it. The various agreements and meetings are traversed in the text but the compact is noted only in passing (as at pp.264, 282, 356 and 366). He may not go as far as government historian A.H. McLintock, who in the 1950s dismissed any such compact, but Belgrave does assert it was on looking back in the twentieth century that Ngāti Maniapoto 'became convinced that they had a compact with the Crown'

(p.372). It was not invented after the fact to explain away their fate: ever since the agreement was made the iwi have referred to it as a solemn compact, akin to a treaty.

The book 'relies substantially' on the Papers Past website (p.405), but its Māori newspapers are sadly underused (so too are British papers available online relating to Tāwhiao's 1884 London visit). While such sites are a wonderful resource, excessive use can lead to tempting but needless detail. A long and portentous description of the physiognomy of Native Minister John Bryce in 1884 provides quaint colour (p.173), but is rendered redundant by a full-page photo. Such sources tend to reflect government and settler interests, so care is needed to ensure the Māori context is not overlooked. For instance, a Kīngitanga meeting at Whatiwhatihoē in 1882 is noted as being 'in May, the Maehe hui' (p.202), when Maehe is a transliteration of March not May. The Maehe hui (held each late summer or autumn) became a big political and cultural event on the Kīngitanga calendar from the late 1860s. Government interest in the hui waxed and waned, so only the 1882 event is noted in parliamentary papers, and in this text.

Finally, the production shows signs of haste. The odd typographical error is inevitable, but the book contains more than its share, added to which several significant events such as Rangiaowhia and Waitara are incorrectly dated, and many names misspelled (including getting Kahungunu and Pōrangahau wrong in one line (p.299); 'Kawhia' instead of Kaiwha (p.40), and even his colleague, Giselle 'Burns' (p.378) rather than Byrnes). After drawing attention to the significance of Māori naming the Rohe Pōtae section of the railway after the ancestor Tūrongo, it is poor form to call him 'Turonga' (p.369).

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History Works

NOTES

1 James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1986, p.306.

2 The report is noted in a handful of footnotes: Cathy Marr, 'Te Rohe Pōtae Political Engagement, 1864–1886', Waitangi Tribunal, 2011 (Wai 898, A078): available for download from the Tribunal site: <https://forms.justice.govt.nz/search/WT/>.