



From: Brown, H. and Stevens, M. J. (eds) (2022) *Tāngata Ngāi Tahu / People of Ngāi Tahu*, Volume Two. Wellington: Te Kūnanga o Ngāi Tahu & Bridget Williams Books.

Airini Ngā Roimata Gopas (1910–1988)

Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāti Tama, Ngāi Tahu

Singer, pianist, broadcaster, wahine toa

Airini (Eileen) Ngā Roimata Grennell (Karenara) was a woman ahead of her time and a role model for the generation of wāhine Māori who followed.¹ Born on 11 February 1910 at Waitangi on Wharekauri (Chatham Islands), Airini was the eldest of five children.² Her father, William Henry Grennell, was a farmer and fisherman at Matarākau on the northern side of the main island. He was of Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāti Tama, Irish and American extraction.³ Airini's mother was Mary Hazel Teripa Tikao, the daughter of Teone Taare Tikao and his wife Matahana Toko Horomona (Hannah Solomon-Score), both Ngāi Tahu.⁴

Around 1920 the Grennells moved to Te Waipounamu, initially staying at Akaroa with Mary's family until their homestead was completed at Koukourarata.⁵ Airini was sent to Sacred Heart Girls' College, Christchurch, where she became a keen sportswoman, representing Canterbury in golf and basketball, and developed an appreciation for music.⁶ She went on to Canterbury University College, and around the age of eighteen travelled to England to study music professionally, gaining an LTCL and LRSM in teaching the piano and singing.⁷ She had, by this time, also won several provincial medals and scholarships at Christchurch music competitions.⁸

On 11 February 1931 at Christchurch, Airini married Hone Wereta (Ngāti Raukawa), a farmer and fellow choir member from Ōhau; later that year their daughter, Marama Grace, was born.⁹ During the 1930s Airini and Hone separated, and Airini went back to studying music full time. Her parents shared in the upbringing of her daughter. Marama later gave birth to a daughter, Teripa Marama, Airini's only grandchild.¹⁰

Airini and her whānau were part of the Koukourarata concert party run by their aunt Rāhera Tainui (née Tikao).¹¹ They performed regularly around Banks Peninsula to raise money for the community during the Depression and, later, for servicemen and their families during the Second World War. In the early 1930s Airini and her sister Hinemoa (Linda) also joined the Methodist Home Mission Party, later renamed the Waiata Maori Choir, organised by Revd A.J. Seamer.¹² Members of influential families throughout Māoridom belonged, including Te Uira Manihera (Ngāti Māhuta) and Inia Te Wiata (Ngāti Raukawa). Other Ngāi Tahu members over the years included Hohepa Tutawhaio (Joe Moss), Taka Ropata, Tony Tikao-Barrett, and siblings Mori and George Ellison.¹³

Airini Ngā Roimata Gopas. Painting by Rudolf Gopas, 1952. Rudi painted portraits of most of Airini's close family.
Private Collection



Methodist Maori Choir, 1933. Back row (left to right): Hohepa Tutawhiao (Joe Moss), Hone Wereta (Manawatū), Teone Piuraki Tikao-Barrett (Canterbury), T. Tuteao (Kāwhia). Middle (kneeling): Linda Hinemoa Grennell, Airini; Front row: Taka Ropata, Raiha Pihama (Waikato), Rangipeka (King Country). *Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives, M.74*

The choir travelled extensively around New Zealand, and in March 1935 made its first foray overseas with a seven-month tour of Australia.¹⁴ One of the aims of the tour was to fundraise for a new school for Māori girls.¹⁵ When interviewed in Sydney during the tour, Airini spoke of the increasing number of Māori girls entering secondary and tertiary education, commenting that 'naturally these educated girls do not feel inclined to devote their lives to domestic service'.¹⁶ This sentiment was borne out in the makeup of the choir, whose women members included nurses, school teachers, church deaconesses and a music teacher (Airini).¹⁷

In 1937 the choir toured Australia again. They then went further afield to perform in England, Wales and Ireland, culminating in a show at Buckingham Palace for the recently crowned King George VI, his wife Queen Elizabeth and their daughter Princess Elizabeth.¹⁸ For the performance, members of the choir wore kākahu loaned by a private collector.¹⁹ The Grennell sisters selected kākahu kererū, and Airini recalled that they were more beautiful than any she had seen in New Zealand.²⁰



Airini broadcasting on the southern South Island non-commercial station 4ZB with John McFarlane (left) and Ian Watkins in the 1930s. She was a familiar and much-loved voice on New Zealand radio for three decades, known for her immaculate delivery in both te reo Māori and English. *Radio New Zealand photographic collection, Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision*

Airini credited her time in the choir with helping her learn and refine her reo Māori, which had till then been rudimentary.²¹ The experience also exposed her to the world of broadcasting: the choir performed numerous live-to-air radio broadcasts in Australia and Britain, and made an early television appearance on the BBC.²² After more than a year of international touring, the choir disbanded on their return to New Zealand in 1938.

With the encouragement of Methodist missionary and radio broadcaster Colin Scrimgeour ('Uncle Scrim'), Airini turned her attention to radio.²³ Her trained voice and excellent diction in both te reo Māori and English suited her to the role. In October 1938, she joined 4ZB in Dunedin as a programme assistant, becoming one of several Māori broadcasters appointed to the newly formed commercial radio network.²⁴ While there was a degree of tokenism to the new roles, Airini and her Māori colleagues had an on-air charisma that elevated perceptions of te ao Māori, and paved the way for the Māori-medium broadcasting conducted by Māori, for Māori, that followed.²⁵ Airini also

"WE WILL
MARCH,
MARCH,
MARCH
TO VICTORY..."



MISS AIRINI GRENNELL.

Rally round "AIRINI" THE POPULAR ARMY QUEEN!

Manufacturers, Allied Trade Unions, Professions, Banks, Insurance
Offices, Public Service and all Government Departments—give your
support and make sure YOUR Queen wins!

BE SURE YOU BUY AN **ARMY QUEEN** BADGE DURING TO-MORROW'S PROCESSION



A family snapshot annotated on the back by Airini as 'Droopy auntie and three dear little nieces.'
From left: Linda Grennell, Airini Lewis, Elizabeth Grennell, and their beloved aunt, Airini, c.1950s.
Courtesy of Elizabeth Cunningham

Opposite: In 1940 Airini was 'Army Queen' in the Otago Queen Carnival fundraiser for the rehabilitation of returned servicemen. The carnival was a grand affair with dances, fetes, a sports gala and a procession through the streets of Dunedin. As part of the festivities, Airini organised a Māori concert in the Dunedin Town Hall with performers from the Ngāi Tahu kāinga of Ōtākou, Puketeraki and Moeraki. *Evening Star*, 5 September 1940, p.10, *Hocken Library, University of Otago, S21-534a*

worked for the station as an accompanist.²⁶ When the Second World War broke out, she became a self-described 'jack of all trades', delivering a weekly programme called 'Glimpses of Maoriland', conducting interviews, and collaborating with her colleagues and the local operatic society to deliver a programme of entertainment on Sunday evenings.²⁷ Her 'Songs of the Islands' session was also hugely popular.²⁸ Throughout the war, Airini travelled with radio announcers to sing and play the piano for community concerts and to raise money.²⁹ A talented soprano, she was known affectionately as the 'Chatham Islands Nightingale', echoing the moniker of her Ngāi Tahu whanaunga, Eva Skerrett, who was known a generation earlier as 'the Maori Nightingale'.³⁰

Around the end of the war Airini moved to Auckland, where she worked at 1ZB as a programme assistant.³¹ By 1949 she had returned to Christchurch, working with both 3YA and 3ZB as an announcer.³² She helped to organise a series of radio programmes for women on 3YA, and was one of the women who pioneered a network of programmes on National Radio focusing for the first time on issues of importance to women.³³ Airini was also the commentator for five royal tours, including the Coronation tour of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953–54.³⁴

In 1952, Airini returned to Dunedin to work for 4YA.³⁵ There she met Rudolf (Rudi) Gopas, a well-known painter and photographer from Lithuania.³⁶ A year later, when she moved to Christchurch to take up the role of Assistant Programme Officer (children's sessions), Rudi followed her. The couple shared a love of sport and the arts, and were both public figures. They spent time at Kōukourarata with Airini's extended whānau.³⁷ Airini played golf at the Waimairi Beach Golf Club where she was Senior Club Champion for three consecutive years.³⁸ Known for her effervescent character, she sometimes played the piano in the clubhouse to accompany singalongs.³⁹ Rudi and Airini married in 1958, and soon after Rudi began working as a lecturer at the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts.⁴⁰ The couple lived in the central city and were renowned for their soirées attended by artists, academics and young people, including Airini's nephews and nieces who were regular visitors.⁴¹

Airini made a brief appearance on television in 1965, one of the first Māori women to do so: she interviewed fellow former choir member, Inia Te Wiata, who had a lead role in George Gershwin's musical *Porgy and Bess*, then touring New Zealand with a majority Māori cast.⁴² In 1966, after nearly three decades in broadcasting, Airini retired. She became a respected leader of Banks Peninsula Ngāi Tahu and Taranaki–Wharekauri Ngāti Mutunga.⁴³ She played the piano at whānau gatherings and was vigilant about her family's standards of speech in both languages. She also played golf for as long as she was able, and took many family photographs.⁴⁴

Rudi suffered from mental illness in later years, and the couple separated for a period, though Airini continued to support him to the end.⁴⁵ Both he and Airini's daughter Marama predeceased her, and after her death at Christchurch on 8 December 1988 Airini's ashes were interred with theirs in the family urupā at Rāpaki.⁴⁶ Charismatic, intellectually curious and proud of her cultural identity, Airini was a trailblazer for Māori women, and her legacy endures.

Airini Payne, Elizabeth Cunningham and Helen Brown

Airini, c.1950s. Radio New Zealand photographic collection, Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision

