

MERI TE TAI MANGAKĀHIA 008

// Ngāti Te Rēinga, Ngāti Manawa, Te Kaitūtae

Meri played an integral role in the women's suffrage movement, championing Māori women's rights and political agendas in colonial Aotearoa. Her story is told by Emma Frost (her great-grandniece) and Challen Wilson (her great-granddaughter).

I can assure you that Te Tai are great storytellers but this was not a story that was widely known in our whānau. For many years, we had very little knowledge of Meri. It's only since the 125-year commemoration of the suffrage movement in 2018 that more information has come forth about her. I want more people to know about this beautiful woman.

Meri was born in Lower Waihou, near Panguru in the Hokianga Valley. She is a descendant of three Te Rarawa wāhine: Waimirirangi, Te Rua Pounamu and Ngā Kahu Whero, who inherited supreme reign in lands in Northland.

Her father, Re Te Tai, was a great chief of his time and nurtured his daughter into a leadership role to continue the legacy of her tūpuna.

Meri accompanied her father to many hui with Sir Peter Buck and Sir Āpirana Ngata, some really great leaders at that time. She would have been absorbing all of the nuances of those discussions. It would have been natural for her, then, when she was growing up, to be speaking so eloquently.

Meri attended St Joseph's School and Auckland Girls Grammar School, receiving the best education to fulfil her role as a leader. In her early 20s, she was married to Hamiora Mangakāhia, a prominent Māori chief and the first Premier of Te Kotahitanga. It was an arranged marriage by her father, believed to be strategic in bringing two iwi together and forwarding his ambitions for his daughter.

Meri made the most of her position to advance her agenda in women's political rights. I know that she didn't work in isolation. When she was travelling with her husband to campaign for the Kotahitanga movement, she would hui with the women who came along to these meetings as well. I believe that's where her intent to bring the women's vote forth to parliament would have started.

She had four children who she would have to leave while on these campaign trails — it must have been extraordinarily hard to be away from them. She was also an aunt and a niece to many people. Those relationships were key to keeping her focused on what her purpose was.

At a parliamentary meeting in Hawke's Bay in 1893, Meri addressed the Kotahitanga Parliament in a speech that pledged they move a motion for Māori women to receive the right to vote, but also went a step further than the Pākehā suffrage movement by requesting that women also be able to stand as Members of Parliament. She was only 24 years old at the time. She was the first woman ever to address Te Kotahitanga.

She was bold. I think people would have been afraid of what she was saying. So she needed to believe so much in what she was doing, what she was saying, and have true supporters around her — and there wouldn't have been many.

That same year she was involved in establishing Ngā Kōmiti Wāhine associated with the Kotahitanga Parliament. The group addressed issues confronting Māori women and their whānau — colonisation and land loss were top priority. ♦

