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## RUMATIKI WRIGHT

1908-1982

One of the first Maori welfare officers, founding member of the Maori Women's Welfare League, and pioneer in Maori pre-school education, Ruth Wright had a passionate desire to understand and support the needs of her people.

Born Rumatiki Gray in 1908, Ruth (as she was generally known) was affiliated to Rangitane, Ngati Awa, Ngaiterangi, and Aupouri. She grew up within Ngati Kurawhatea. Her Pakeha grandfather, Robert Gray, married Ngatoko; their son, Robert, married Ngaraiti Tuatini, and Ruth was their daughter. She was brought up on the Wanganui River by her maternal grandfather, Tuatini Te Waiho, until she was fourteen.

After attending Pipiriki Native School, Ruth worked in the flour mill up the

river, and also as a domestic servant. She married Angus Wright in 1926 at the age of eighteen. They farmed a large area of land between Raetihi and Pipiriki in difficult times, and had four children; William, Douglas, Maria and Angus. Ruth worked in the laundry at the local hospital to pay for her children to go to boarding-school; Angus, the baby, lay at her side in a laundry basket.

Ruth was acutely aware of the widespread effects of the Depression, particularly on the Maori people in terms of land loss and under-development. Her experience at this time led to the belief that solutions had to be provided in Maori terms, working from the grass-roots. Like Te Puea, she had the mental and physical resources to tackle all obstacles, and she also expected great achievements of others - possibly too great for those who lacked her stamina or her vision.

Like many rural women of her time, Ruth had a formidable range of domestic and farming skills which helped to stretch the family's resources and were a useful basis for her future work. She sewed and did handicrafts, fenced and milked, and was a superb horsewoman. Her paid work outside the home honed her organisational skills and made her familiar with conditions in the workplace.

During the Second World War, Ruth was one of a number of women whose abilities were recognised and used in the Maori war effort. After the war, Ruth was appointed as a welfare officer in the Department of Maori Affairs, under the Maori Social and Economic Advancement Act (1945). She was working in Taranaki when Nurse Cameron was forming health leagues in Rotorua. The leagues were a means of imparting health information and skills to women at a time when tuberculosis and other life-threatening diseases were widespread. The need for special attention to Maori health was emphasised, and Maori women were invited to join the leagues. Ruth supported the concept and started forming health leagues in Taranaki for Maori women and their communities.

Ruth then became convinced of the need for a national organisation that could become a vehicle for the larger aspirations of Maori women and also attend to the great variety of local needs. She and other supporters persuaded the Department and the Minister of Maori Affairs that health and other areas of concern to Maori women were best dealt with in ways which were culturally appropriate and which they initiated. With the assistance of departmental staff, Maori Women's Welfare League branches were formed throughout the country, a constitution was drawn up, and the structures for a national organisation put in place.

In September 1951 the first conference of the Maori Women's Welfare League was held in Hamilton and chaired by Ruth, although she declined to be considered for office; Whina Cooper was elected as the league's first president. The department provided administrative assistance and the services of Ralph Love, and later Mira Petricevich (Szasy), as Dominion secretary. This link with the department was later to have disadvantages as the league grappled with increasingly sensitive issues of land, language, and race relations in the late 1950s; however, it enabled the league to establish and implement policy in the early days.

In her work as a Maori welfare officer, Ruth continued to provide support to league branches and to the welfare officers detailed to assist the league in their

areas. Her faith in the capacity of women to tackle sensitive social and national issues was fully justified. For example, the league was quick to appreciate the threat to health and the ocean food-chain posed by nuclear testing in the Pacific; their concern was not, however, shared by many in authority.

The league became independent from the department in 1960. Ruth again became an important anchor during the period of consolidation which followed, despite any qualms she may have had about the league's future security. She worked long hours in a support and planning role at its Hawkestone Street office in Wellington, balancing this commitment with other work in Hamilton.

In 1958, Ruth visited the Soviet Union as a member of a goodwill party of New Zealand women. This gesture of détente was quite bold in view of the Cold War ideology prevalent in New Zealand at that time, and was to have later repercussions for her career. She bore the criticism stoically. Meanwhile, she was determined to use the insights she had gained on her trip to improve early childhood education for Maori children, so that they could flourish intellectually and culturally.

Her opportunity came with the growth of the pre-school work of the Maori Education Foundation. Under its auspices Ruth formed and nurtured a large number of independent pre-school groups in remote areas of the Waikato and Maniapoto, and encouraged each group to express the style and values of its own community. The success of these autonomous models made them the focus of educational research in the 1970s, and led to visits by Maori pre-school organisers and league members to Aboriginal communities in Australia to discuss an indigenous approach to pre-school education.

Despite her practical skills and the huge areas she covered, Ruth never learned to drive: she had no affinity with cars. In the early days she rode or walked everywhere. Later, she became an adept user of public transport, with an extensive network of helpful drivers and contacts. She was noted and admired for the compactness of her luggage at hui or on journeys. She was never without her writing materials and diary, and assiduously recorded requests, events, the day's work, and future plans. She wrote while travelling or waiting – anywhere there was space or time – and took teasing about her addiction to scribbling in good part.

Ruth's small, chunky, neatly suited figure – hair in a bun, hands gloved – hid an enormous energy and charisma. She seemed to expand at meetings and with women. She liked sharing knowledge and ideas, and invested those of others with significance. She left women feeling confident and purposeful, enlarged with the gift of their own extended insights.

Ruth wore her Maoriness with confidence and pride, while also acknowledging her dual heritage. She strove for knowledge and excellence in both cultures and was at home in both. She enjoyed being 'correct' in the protocol and etiquette of Pakeha society, and disliked sloppy preparation or dress for important gatherings. While she was at ease anywhere, she especially enjoyed the excitement of large formal events.

She had a deep throaty chuckle and a habit of reinforcing a point by touching one's arm or leaning forward to share a confidence. She was a wonderful mentor and travelling companion – informative, supportive and



Rumatiki Wright. Taini Jamieson

resourceful; impressive as a speaker, and an astute observer and commentator. While she radiated warmth, she was also a very private person who did not readily talk about her personal life and feelings. She had a few cherished familiars, among whom was her relative and friend, Iriaka Ratana MP, who was often seen with her, head to head, deep in conversation.

While she gave loyalty where it was due within organisations and hierarchies, Ruth had a slightly sceptical attitude to those exercising authority. A keen sense of the ridiculous often helped to blunt the frustration she felt both as a worker and as a woman. At the same time, she was deeply respectful of 'sanctified' authority and treasured her awards: the MBE and OBE she received for her services to the Maori people.

As she had advised others to do, Ruth worked to consolidate family land and to ensure its future management. Wherever she worked she paid regular visits to her home at Raetihi, returning to it as a well-spring and a refuge – and keeping an eye on things.

Ruth had planned another of her working holidays in Australia, but she collapsed and died at a tangi at Pohara, Tokoroa, on 14 December 1982. She was seventy-four.

Her obituary spoke of Ruth as the 'Mother of the League'. From her work over the years she gained an appreciation of the challenge facing Maoridom, and of the strength and resilience of Maori women. She called on that strength and directed it towards the well-being of Maori women and children, and the future of their race.

Ruth Wright was an exciting, innovative, supportive colleague and friend, who remains part of my life.

*Wright*

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*Who shines the stars to light the way,  
Who weaves the cloak to warm the land,  
Who sets the mind to slake its thirst,  
Who links the hands that rock the world.*

*Joan Stone*

*Unpublished Sources*

Information was provided by Marama Laurenson (Ruth Wright's granddaughter), Bill and Taini Wright (her son and daughter-in-law), Anne Delamere, Sir Ralph Love, Geraldine McDonald, John Booth, Marion Antonievich.

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