

Kōpūwai and the Clever Girl

*retold by
Brian Potiki*

This story is from Rapuwai, an ancestral iwi of Ngāi Tahu. It is set on the banks of the Mata-Au/Clutha River, in Otago, and comes from a time long ago when moa roamed the land and giant tuna swam in the rivers. Each summer, hunting parties would travel inland to gather this food. Sometimes, people would disappear. Whānau blamed Kōpūwai, the monster from the river who preyed on humans with his ferocious pack of two-headed dogs ...

Kaiamio knew the stories about Kōpūwai and his dogs. Where she came from, all the children did. The kaumātua gave constant warnings. Hunters bragged of close encounters. The girl hadn't meant to wander, but all week her party had been hunting moa, and it was her job to search for the giant bird's nests. She had been distracted. She hadn't noticed the dogs stalking.



It was no use putting up a fight. The dogs took Kaiamio to their master's cave. Kōpūwai was exactly as people said: a monstrous creature with the body of a man, the scales of a fish, and the head of a dog.

"Who have you brought me this time?" he growled to his dogs. "Ah-ha. A girl. You shall be my mōkai. You will do all my chores."





Fearsome though he was, Kōpūwai had one weakness. The warm north-west wind made him sleepy. He would yawn no matter what time of the day it blew. If he nodded off, the monster knew that his new mōkai would escape. So he made a taura from a long piece of plaited harakeke and tied it to the girl's ankle.

"Fetch water for me and my dogs," he said. "Day or night, when I tug on this taura, you will come."

Kōpūwai shoved a gourd into the girl's hands and leant closer. His scales glistened. His breath stank of fish. "Whakarongo. If you try to escape, I will have my dogs rip you to pieces."



Kōpūwai barked constant orders. "Kaiamio," he would shout at first light, tugging on the rope. "He kai. Kia tere!"

The girl would prepare food and take it to the cave entrance, where the monster liked to loll in the morning sun, scratching his dogs' bellies. Kōpūwai would eat. Then he would be thirsty. "Kaiamio. He wai. Kia tere!"

Countless times each day, Kaiamio trudged down to the river. Sometimes she stole a moment to stand and watch the water flow. She would think of her whānau and dream of escape.



Time passed, but nothing changed. One end of the taura never left the monster's hand; the other stayed firmly attached to his mōkai. Then one morning, Kaiamio was down on the rocks, filling her gourd, when she slipped. Her hand grasped a young sapling, as slim as a girl's ankle. Pulling herself up, Kaiamio had a sudden idea.

Over the next few weeks, whenever she had a spare moment, Kaiamio collected the raupō that grew by the river and began to weave a mōkihi. When the raft was finished, she hid it beneath a rocky ledge, marking the place with a sharp stone. Then she waited for the north-west wind.



When the wind came, Kaiamio was ready. She scrambled down to the river and found the stone. Working quickly, she cut through the harakeke rope and tied it to the sapling. Without wasting another second, she launched the mōkihi into the river and let the current carry her away.

Kōpūwai woke when the sun was high overhead. He yanked the taura. Down at the river, the sapling bent, then straightened, bent then straightened. "Kia tere!" he yelled. Twice, three times ... but the girl never came.

Kōpūwai fumed. No one made him wait – and certainly not a mōkai. He called for his dogs. They slithered ahead down the bank, leaping over one another in a tumble of fur and slobber. Down by the river, Kōpūwai found the rope tied to the sapling and the abandoned gourd. Footprints in the mud led to the water's edge. The monster howled in anger. He had been tricked.

It wasn't in Kōpūwai's nature to do nothing. He dipped his snout into the fast-flowing water. He would drink the river dry to recapture his mōkai. Over and over, the monster took enormous gulps. His belly swelled to contain its load, but the river was too big. There was too much water. The clever girl was gone.



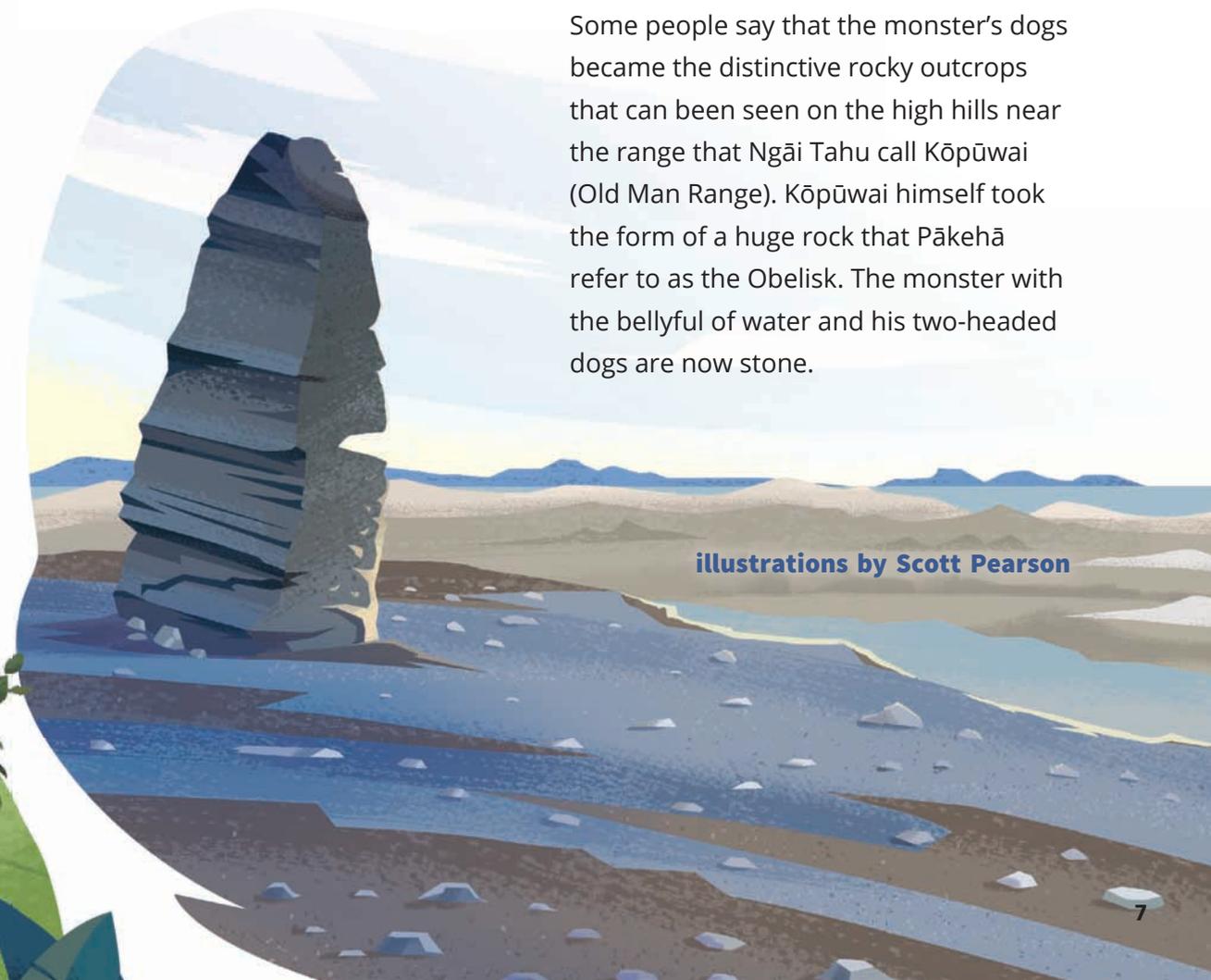
Kaiamio escaped back to her people on the coast. After hearing her story, several of the bravest planned revenge. They would kill the monster while he slept – his dogs too. They would show no mercy.

Together the hunters travelled the familiar route inland and waited for the north-west wind to blow. When they were sure that Kōpūwai was asleep, they carefully laid bundles of dry brush and kindling in the cave entrance. Finally they set it alight with a flaming torch.

As the fire took hold, the first dog, both heads howling in terror, burst from the dark. It flew through the bush and leapt into the river, quickly followed by a second dog, then a third. Those left in the cave, including their owner, perished.



Some people say that the monster's dogs became the distinctive rocky outcrops that can be seen on the high hills near the range that Ngāi Tahu call Kōpūwai (Old Man Range). Kōpūwai himself took the form of a huge rock that Pākehā refer to as the Obelisk. The monster with the bellyful of water and his two-headed dogs are now stone.



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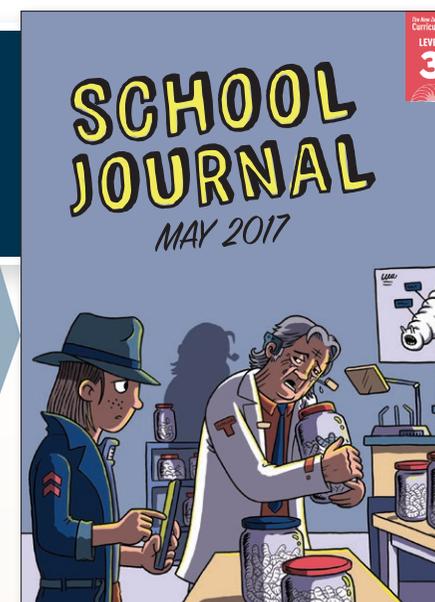
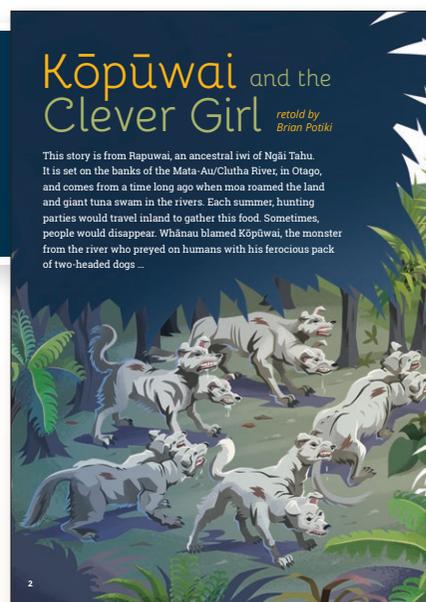
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