

PRINCESS IWA

by Angela Skerrett Tainui

One day, many years ago, I was visiting my pōua when I noticed a photo of a beautiful wahine on the wall. She had long, wavy hair and wore a kākahu around her shoulders and a hei tiki around her neck. She looked to be about eighteen.

I asked Pōua about the photo. He said it was of his sister Eva. I wondered why I'd never heard of her. Pōua explained that she'd gone to England in 1911. She was the lead singer in a Māori concert party and went on to have a successful musical career in Europe. There, she was known as Princess Iwa. "She never came home," Pōua said. I felt the sense of loss travel from his heart to mine.

Many years later, I came across the sheet music for "Hine e Hine". This was a lullaby made famous in the 1980s, when it was played on TV to signal that programmes were over for the night – but it was the caption under the music that caught my attention: "Sung by the New Zealand **contralto** IWA." Surely this was Pōua's sister? But if it was, why did the caption later describe her as obscure? Hadn't she been famous?

With Pōua's sadness fresh in my mind, I decided to learn everything I could about my great-aunt. I wanted my whānau to know more about our tipuna. I would try to bring her memory home.

It took many years to put the puzzle together. I went to libraries and museums to search for Eva's name in old newspapers. I spoke to family, kaumātua, and historians. Slowly, piece by piece, the story of Eva's life began to take shape. This is what I found out ...

contralto: the lowest singing voice for a woman



The Skerrett whānau in Bluff, 1904 (Eva back left)

THE GLORIOUS VOICE

Evaline Jane Skerrett was born on Rakiura in 1890. She was Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Māmoē, and Waitaha and had Irish and English tīpuna. When Eva was about two, her whānau moved to Bluff to live with her pōua. Growing up, she did kapa haka and took piano lessons, and she rowed competitively with her sisters.

Each year, Eva joined her whānau for the annual tītī harvest on Tia Island. Her mother taught her how to make pōhā for storing the birds. They would sing waiata and speak te reo while they worked. Eva's mother spoke her language fluently. Eva's brother remembered that sometimes

“half of Bluff” would be visiting just to hear their mother's beautiful dialect.

The Skerretts were all musical, and each Sunday, Eva sang in the church choir. When Eva was about ten, this choir performed for the visiting **premier**, Richard Seddon. He spoke about Eva and her “glorious voice”, and soon she was singing solo. Eva would be “discovered” many times throughout her life, although she never thought her voice was extraordinary. She'd been surrounded by talented musicians her whole life. Still, she loved reading stories about famous singers on the London stage and longed to be like them.

premier: a name people once used for the prime minister

CENTRE STAGE

When Eva was a teenager, she entered a national singing competition in Dunedin. There were over a thousand entrants, many of whom had formal voice training, but Eva came second. The judge proudly declared he had discovered “a contralto with a future”.

Mākereti Papakura, a well-known tour guide, heard about Eva. Mākereti was organising Māori performers to take part in the 1911 Festival of

Empire – a lavish celebration of the mighty British Empire. She wanted Eva to take centre stage as her lead singer. The festival was planned for the same time as the **coronation** of King George V and would take place in London. To showcase New Zealand, there would be a Māori village with a whareniui and carvings. The concert party would perform waiata, haka, and whaikōrero every day.



The Māori concert party for the Festival of Empire, 1911

coronation: when a king or queen is crowned

INTERNATIONAL DEBUT

Eva left Aotearoa in October 1910. She had no way of knowing then that she'd never return. On the way to England, the concert party stopped in Australia for a ten-week tour. "Princess Iwa" made her international **debut** in Melbourne in front of a crowd of six thousand. The name Princess Iwa had been given to Eva – who was a descendent of Pokene, a Ngāi Tahu rangatira – by the tour's promoters.

In Australia, Princess Iwa quickly became the main attraction. She got rave reviews every time she performed. This success followed her to London,

a place known as "the world's stage". Eva was star-struck by the famous city. Performing in London had been her dream, but one she'd never truly believed would happen. Now, she told a reporter, "like the strange things in a fairy tale, it has all come true".

Eva continued to shine, and her talent attracted the attention of an Italian **composer** and two leading opera teachers, one of whom said "there is no more beautiful voice in the world than Iwa's". With their encouragement, Eva decided to stay in London to further her career.



Eva with a fellow musician in Australia, 1910

debut: a person's first appearance or performance

composer: a person who writes music



Princess Iwa in London, 1919

PRIDE

In the years that followed, Princess Iwa performed across Great Britain and in parts of Europe. She sang national anthems, English ballads, and waiata, including “Hine e Hine” and “Waiata Poi”. Eva was proud of her whakapapa, and she spoke openly about wanting to share Māori history. “It is curious how little is known of my people,” she told a reporter. Eva liked to plan her own shows. She designed costumes and backdrops and used skills from

childhood to make korowai, poi, and mats. If Eva was to educate people about her culture, it was important that the details were correct.

Eva met many famous people and performed in front of royalty and the British prime minister. It was an exciting life, suddenly interrupted by the First World War. Sadly for Eva, the war also stopped her from taking a planned trip home to spend time with her whānau.

WARTIME

Like everyone, Eva had to adapt and find new ways to make use of her talents during wartime. She performed during both the First World War (1914–1918) and the Second World War (1939–1945). Sometimes her audiences included soldiers from home.

Eva sang to ANZAC soldiers waiting to be sent to the Western Front and to soldiers in hospital. She also sang at farewell parties and in concerts held to raise money for the war effort. She hosted groups of New Zealand servicemen and women in England on leave, and she even delivered Red Cross food parcels that had been sent all the way from Southland.



Eva with an ANZAC soldier, May 1916

WHĀNAU

Times were tough in England between the wars. Eva had always enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. In 1916, she had married Samuel Wilson Thornton – another opera singer – and people said they made a glamorous pair. “We always called her Princess Iwa,” remembers her friend Molly.

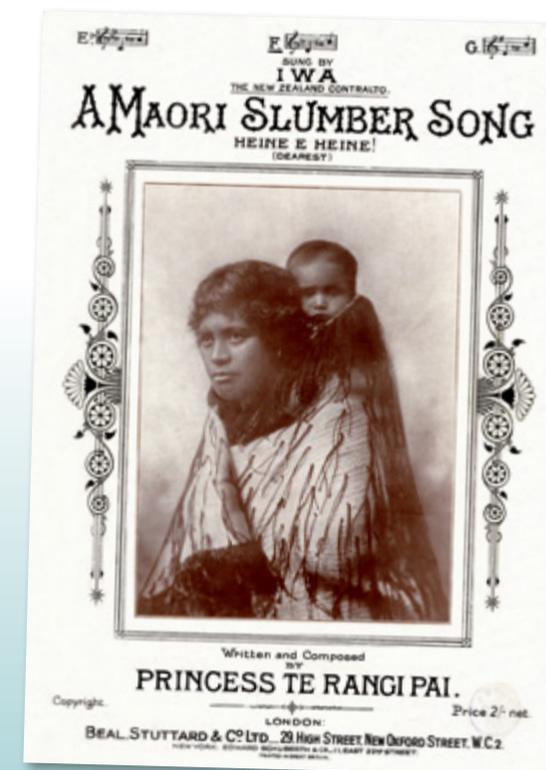
Eva could afford a nice house with servants and a nanny for her two sons. But then came the Great Depression. Life changed. Eva helped make ends meet by teaching the piano.

Eva stayed in touch with her whānau over the years, and sometimes news of her reached New Zealand with a newspaper article celebrating her success. She died in London in 1947, just a few months after her mother. Letters from opposite sides of the world, sharing the sad news, crossed paths in the mail.

It seemed this would be the end ... but Eva’s whānau never forgot her. Five decades later, a granddaughter and great-granddaughter made the trip to Aotearoa. They would visit Te Rau Aroha, Eva’s marae in Bluff, to remember their tipuna who had so proudly represented her people and shared Māori culture on the world stage.



Eva with Samuel Wilson Thornton and their son



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