

Pākehā Tapu Day

Kororāreka, 1828

Mawhiti and Oma found their pāpā on the beach, giving orders to his men. It was early. Tamanuiterā had barely risen above Tapeka Point, his rays catching the first smoke rising from the cooking fires and the masts of the whaling ships anchored in the bay. Although it was Sunday, the whole village was awake. There was work to be done.

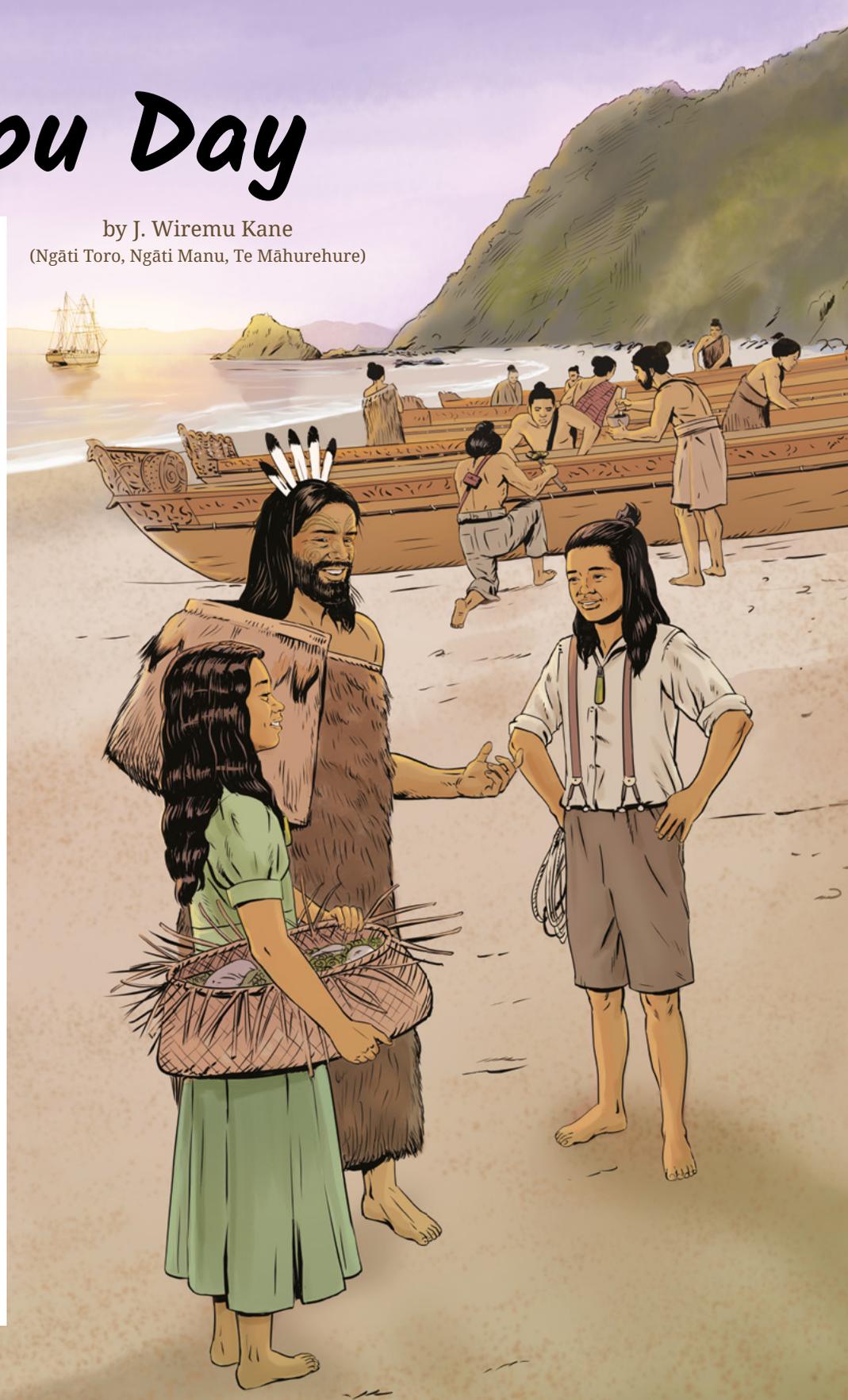
The missionaries across the inlet at Marsden Vale called Sunday the sabbath. The twins' pāpā – the great rangatira Uruti Te Whareumu – called it the Pākehā tapu day, when the Europeans rose late, put on clean clothes, and left off work. Mawhiti and Oma had their own name for such unusual behaviour, but it was too rude to share.

Pāpā and his men were with the waka taua. The great canoes lay in wait above the high-tide line while Pāpā readied his people for war. His mana was so great the Europeans called him King George, the name of their own king on the other side of the world.

“Tēnā koe, Pāpā,” Mawhiti called.

Pāpā smiled. “Tēnā kōrua,” he said. “About time! We’re hungry.”

by J. Wiremu Kane
(Ngāti Toro, Ngāti Manu, Te Māhurehure)



For the next hour, the twins ran between the beach and the kāinga, relaying messages and fetching tools and kai. At thirteen, Mawhiti was on the cusp of being assigned her own duties, but for now, she ran the errands of a child. Her māmā had given her a kete filled with cooked fern root and fish to hand out to the men. She went to Pāpā first.

“Are our Pākehā still asleep?” he asked. Mawhiti nodded, then waited while Pāpā sucked at the fern root’s jelly and spat out the clinging fibres. “Tino pai, but keep an eye on Mr Earle. I think he’s starting to suspect something.”

“His house was quiet when we went past,” said Oma.

“Good,” said Pāpā. “It will be a while before he stirs. We’ll take our tea on the beach. If you could bring it to us, please.”

Mawhiti gave a nod, but she saw a worried look flash across her brother’s face. “Āe, Pāpā,” she said.

As soon as Pāpā went back to work, Oma turned to his sister. “Pāpā’s tea set!” he hissed. “We left it at Mr Earle’s last night.”

“Then we’ll just go and get it,” said Mawhiti. “Me haere tāua.”

The artist's house lay at the far end of the beach. It was the largest of the whare built in the European style, a three-roomed cottage with windows and doors. The men in the kāinga had helped to build the house – they considered it as much their property as Mr Earle's, and King George and the other rangatira visited every night. They drank tea while the Europeans enjoyed their wine and rum, and they all smoked pipe after pipe of tobacco. Mawhiti would carefully pour the tea while Oma sneaked sugar cubes from Mr Earle's china bowl.

On any other day, the twins would have walked in and taken the silver teapot and milk jug and the mismatched cups with their saucers after a polite knock on the artist's kauri door.

But Mr Earle had been exhausted the night before. The circular conversation – in its rough combination of English and te reo – had gone on and on. Mawhiti remembered the way the artist's eyelids had drooped as the evening wore on.

"Surely you men need your rest," Mr Earle said at one stage. It was the closest he'd come to asking his nightly visitors to leave. "You have much to do tomorrow."

But Pāpā had shaken his head. "Tomorrow is your tapu day, so we leave off work out of respect to our Pākehā friends."

"You are too gracious," Mr Earle replied, bowing slightly. Oma had glanced at Mawhiti and smirked.



Now they stood uncertainly at the front door. "Do you think Mr Earle meant it when he said he'd teach us to draw?" Oma whispered.

"He was just being polite," said Mawhiti. "You know he and Pāpā like to out-do each other. And Mr Earle is still making up for his hen."

A few days earlier, the artist had needed tinder for his fire. He had taken tōtara shavings from the beach, not realising they came from a waka taua and were tapu. Mr Earle had apologised profusely. He was pardoned, and that would have been the end of it ... only one of his hens had also turned some of the shavings into a nest and hatched a brood of chicks. Mr Earle was mortified further, and the hen duly sacrificed and eaten.

"He'll be missing his eggs," Oma said, sniggering at the memory.

"Shh!" Mawhiti hissed as the front door swung open.

Mr Earle stood bleary-eyed in his trousers and shirtsleeves. Mawhiti had never seen him without a jacket and hat; he looked almost naked.

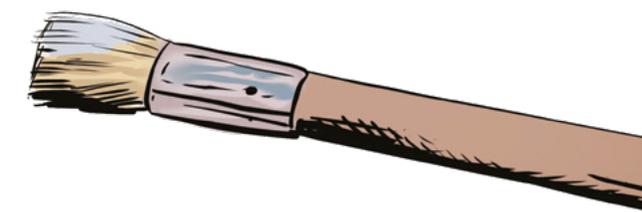


"Oh," he said. "Tēnā kōrua, my good prince and princess. Why are you up so early on a Sunday?"

"We've come to fetch Pāpā's tea set," Mawhiti said.

"Of course, come in."

Mr Earle was their pāpā's favourite Pākehā. Many of the rangatira in the north had Europeans living under their protection, but King George of Kororāreka was the only one to house a renowned artist. He was also special to Mawhiti. The whalers were coarse-tongued, and the missionaries had no time for children, but this Englishman was different. In the evenings, as the shadows grew long, he would sketch the taua returning from their waka or the gardeners from the māra kai. He'd set up his easel in a quiet spot, and he always welcomed Mawhiti to sit alongside him and observe. She marvelled at the way the artist was able to capture the slaves pounding fern root with just a few deft strokes of his pencil.



Oma found the tea tray and started looking for stray cups and saucers. But Mawhiti was distracted. Every surface was covered in sheaves of paper. Some had beautiful, flowing handwriting; the rest were sketches and paintings. Mawhiti recognised a drawing of her older sister, Arihia, her lips shaded, and another of the tattoo artist Arangi. The lines and spirals on his mataora had been copied exactly.

There was also the drawing of the slaves Mr Earle had started on a few days before. He'd added low huts and raupō fences and had begun to colour the sky, using watercolours in soft blues and white. The hills were now gold and green.

Mr Earle noticed her inspecting the painting. "What do you think?"

"The colours are too dull," Mawhiti said after a moment.

Mr Earle laughed. "You're right. I can't seem to capture the intensity of the light here. I doubt the people of England would believe it even if I could." He tried, unsuccessfully, to hide a yawn. "Well, you two had better be off back to bed."

Mawhiti blushed. Why did the man look so amused? Was Pāpā right – had he guessed?

"Sorry to wake you, Mr Earle."

"Not at all," he said. "Your father needs his teapot, especially on the sabbath! In all my travels, I've never met a king quite like him."

Back on the beach, the tāne were busy patching and caulking the waka taua. Then there were muskets to be cleaned and oiled and barrels of powder and cartridges to be counted. In the fields beyond the kāinga, the wāhine had kūmara and corn to harvest, peaches and melons that needed picking. There was flax to

be dressed, potatoes and hogs to be prepared for sale to visiting ships, fish to be dried and fowl preserved for the upcoming voyage of the toa. But all that work would stop the moment the first Pākehā stirred ...

Carefully, Mawhiti poured the tea.

"Everything in order?" Pāpā asked. Mawhiti nodded. "Tino pai."



illustrations by Andrew Burdan

Note: This story is based on fact. The author is the great-great-great-great-great grandson of Uruti Te Whareumu. The English painter Augustus Earle really did live in Kororāreka in 1828 under Te Whareumu's protection, and the rangatira was called King George. Earle is thought to be one of the first artists to travel the world independently. He was definitely the first European artist to visit Aotearoa. He'd met Māori in Sydney and was curious to learn more. Te Whareumu had good relationships with the missionaries and traders. He welcomed all Pākehā, regardless of their status, to live on his beach.

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by J. Wiremu Kane

illustrations by Andrew Burdan

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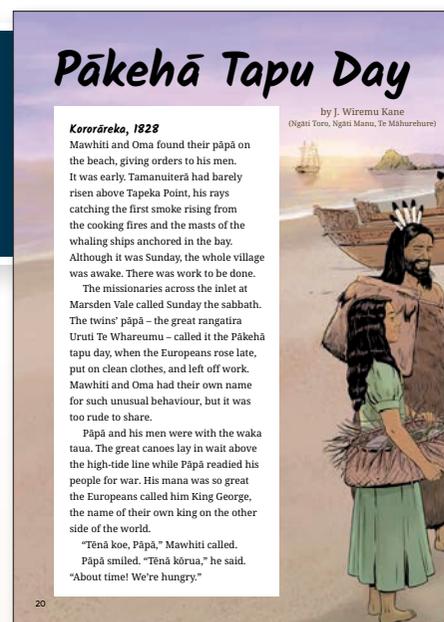
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