



TE KURA TUATAHI

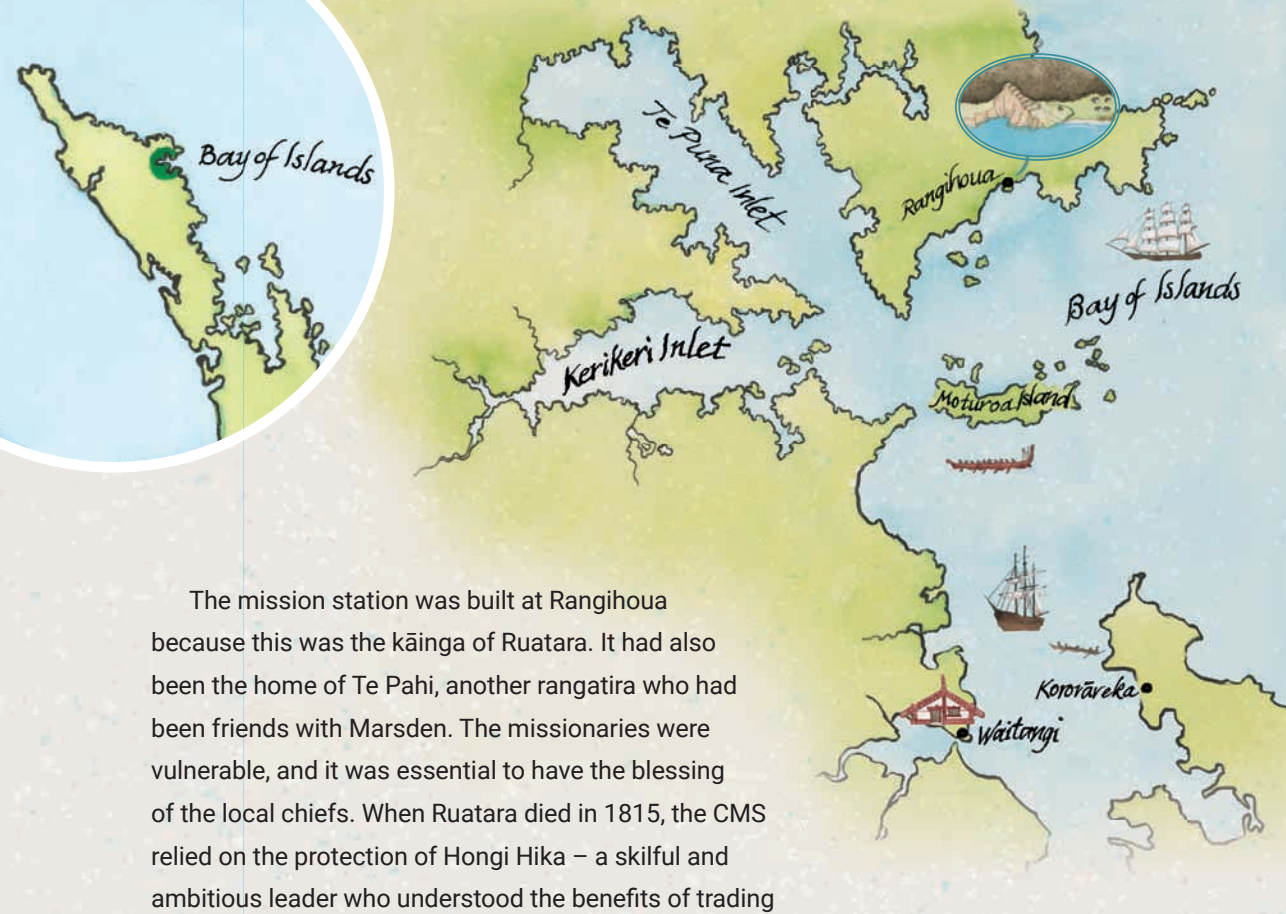
NEW ZEALAND'S FIRST SCHOOL

by Ross Calman

New Zealand's first school opened in 1816, but it wasn't a state school run by the government. We didn't even have a government back then. The school was run by a man named Thomas Kendall, a missionary from England. At the time, there were very few Pākehā in Aotearoa. Most were sealers and whalers, looking to make money. Kendall was different. He had come to New Zealand to teach Māori how to read and write so they could understand the Bible and become Christians, just like him. But Māori had their own ideas about what the missionaries had to offer. They were more interested in the mana that came from being literate. Many were also aware of the advantages a relationship with Pākehā would give them over rival iwi.

KENDALL ARRIVES

Kendall worked for the Church Missionary Society (CMS), which was based in England. The society's purpose was to spread Christianity, and its missionaries could be found all around the world. Kendall asked to be sent to New Zealand, where the CMS was planning a new mission station at the invitation of Ruatara, a Ngāpuhi rangatira who was friends with Samuel Marsden, one of the society's leading figures. Kendall arrived with his family in December 1814. A few days later, on Christmas Day, Marsden preached the first Christian sermon on New Zealand soil. It was attended by the missionary families alongside a large group of local Māori. The sermon was in English, and Ruatara would have been the only Māori there who understood Marsden's message. Afterwards, Ruatara gave his own interpretation in te reo Māori.



The mission station was built at Rangihoua because this was the kāinga of Ruatara. It had also been the home of Te Pahi, another rangatira who had been friends with Marsden. The missionaries were vulnerable, and it was essential to have the blessing of the local chiefs. When Ruatara died in 1815, the CMS relied on the protection of Hongi Hika – a skilful and ambitious leader who understood the benefits of trading with Pākehā and establishing an alliance with them.

A SCHOOLHOUSE FOR A MUSKET

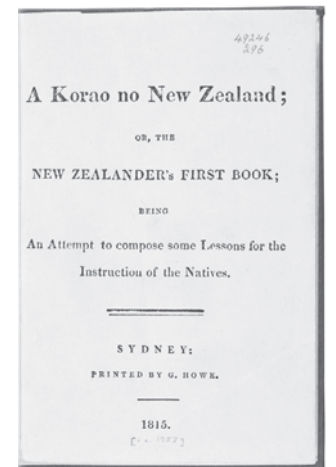
Kendall purchased the wood to build the schoolhouse in exchange for a musket. The schoolhouse was built by William Hall, a missionary settler, and finally opened on 12 August 1816. Twenty-four pupils crowded into the school's only room on the first day. Over the next few months, the roll would grow to more than seventy. Kendall guessed that his youngest student was six, the oldest twenty (a guess because Māori didn't follow the Western calendar at the time).

The school had more girls than boys. The girls were attracted by the chance to learn how to sew clothes, helped by Kendall's wife, Jane. Fewer boys attended because many were busy learning traditional martial arts, which started at a young age. The pupils slept at the school, and this meant they could begin lessons first thing each morning. They took a long break in the middle of the day, when they would spend time outside playing and gathering food. There were more lessons in the late afternoon.

KENDALL THE STUDENT

Before Kendall could begin teaching, he first needed to learn te reo Māori – the language he would use in the classroom. This included working out a system for writing te reo down so that he could make schoolbooks. So Kendall became a student. He was taught by a young Ngare Raumati chief named Tuai. Through Tuai's lessons, Kendall was able to write New Zealand's first book: *A Korao no New Zealand*. It was, as the author described in the subtitle, "the New Zealander's first book; being an attempt to compose some lessons for the instruction of the natives". The book, which was largely written in te reo Māori, was published in Sydney in 1815.

Kendall never lost interest in the Māori language. For the rest of his life, he continued to study and record it. In 1820, he travelled to England with Hongi Hika and another rangatira, Waikato, to finish and publish a book on Māori grammar. This was another first of its kind.



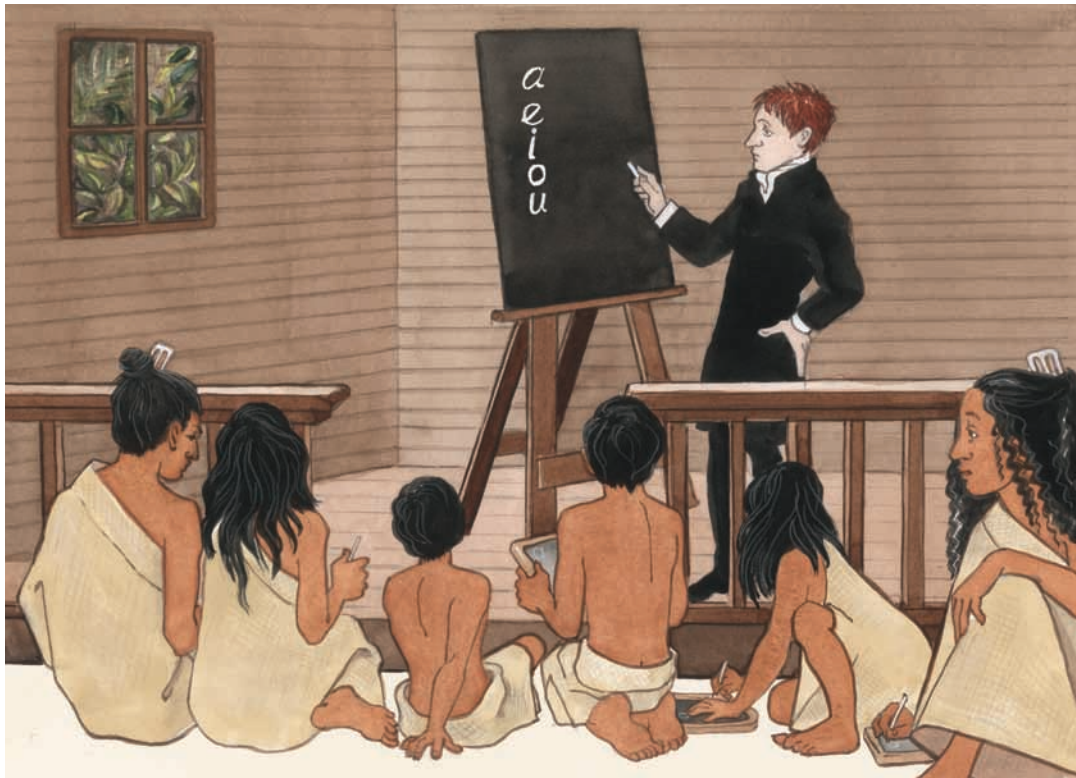
The only surviving copy of Kendall's first book, *A Korao no New Zealand*



Thomas Kendall with Hongi Hika (middle) and Waikato in 1820

FISH-HOOKS AND MARBLES

On fine days, Kendall found it difficult to keep his pupils inside. Most didn't like being confined to the classroom, and Kendall soon learnt that feeding his students was essential if he wanted to keep them in class. Describing his school in a letter, he wrote: "with a handful or two of potatoes daily, and occasionally a fish-hook, the children do at present very well". The students were also rewarded with trinkets, such as beads and marbles.



Daily lessons involved learning the Māori alphabet. Kendall was helped by Tōwai, the son of Te Pahi. As the son of a rangatira, Tōwai's presence in the classroom would have encouraged the children to want to attend school. Because attendance was voluntary, Kendall needed to have a good relationship with the parents of his students. This meant not using the strap – at the time a common way to keep English schoolchildren in line. Kendall knew that Māori would never tolerate corporal punishment.

THE LEARNING CONTINUES

The school at Rangihoua became famous, and groups of travelling Māori – curious about Pākehā ways and what the missionaries had to offer – often called in. But in the end it became impossible to keep the pupils fed. Ngāpuhi were only interested in trading food for muskets and gunpowder, and the CMS refused to allow Kendall to continue trading these items with Māori. This meant Kendall had to rely on shipments of food from Sydney. Marsden and the CMS eventually lost interest in paying for the school's expenses, and Kendall had to use his own money. When he could no longer afford to do this, the school closed in 1818.

Māori and Learning

Before Europeans arrived in Aotearoa, Māori had their own reasons for learning and their own ways of teaching. Instead of schools, they had whare wānanga. These "houses of learning" had different roles. Some were for the sons of chiefs, who were taught the rituals needed to please the atua before activities such as hunting, fishing, and warfare. Other whare wānanga were used for teaching children how to carve (whakairo), weave (raranga), and tattoo (tā moko). Ngā mahi a te rēhia (games,

songs, and storytelling) were also formally taught. Māori used these arts to record and pass on information. But to ensure their survival, children also needed practical skills. Finding and preparing food took up most of the day, and it required knowledge and cooperation. Children were taught how to garden, fish, hunt, and forage. Boys also learnt how to fight. These skills were picked up through play, through watching and imitating adults, and through formal lessons.



Over the next two decades, other schools were started by missionaries from different religions. Many Māori learnt to read and write – so many, in fact, that the literacy rate was higher among Māori than Pākehā. Most of these schools closed during the early 1860s because of the New Zealand Wars, and in 1867, the government set up a native schools system for Māori children. A decade later, the Education Act of 1877 was passed. This made education widely available for all children and was the start of the state system we know today. At first, state schools allowed te reo Māori to be spoken, but this attitude changed, and Māori students were punished for speaking their language. The government believed that if Māori were to be successful, they needed to adapt and fit in to a Pākehā world. This way of thinking continued for many decades.

Important changes happened in the 1970s. Many Māori communities felt that the education system wasn't doing the best for their children. Māori were especially concerned about the survival of te reo. In 1913, over 90 percent of Māori schoolchildren could speak their language; a number that had plummeted to less than 5 percent by 1975. This led to the establishment of kōhanga reo (preschool language "nests") in 1982. The first kura kaupapa Māori (Māori-language school) opened three years later.

MISSIONARIES' LEGACY

Thomas Kendall and the missionaries had a huge impact on the people of Aotearoa. They helped Māori learn skills such as reading, writing, and farming, but at the same time, they stifled Māori traditions. They believed that the Christian way of living was superior to the Māori way of living and that in the end, Māori were better off being like them. This attitude was widely held among Pākehā of the time. Today, Māori are reclaiming many cultural practices that were banned by the missionaries, including tā moko, taonga puoro (Māori musical instruments), and rongoā (healing).

The Marsden cross at Rangihoua, marking the site of Samuel Marsden's Christmas Day sermon



Young children learning in te reo at a kōhanga reo in Wellington



Te Kura Tuatahi: New Zealand's First School

by Ross Calman

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