The National Archives of New Zealand: Its Historical Context

by **RAY GROVER**

People have not lived in New Zealand very long: one thousand years seems to be the limit. The Maori people, however, have been here long enough to be called indigenous. Their history is traditionally oral in medium, genealogical in form, integrated with myth, and tied to the land. As one of their great anthropologists has said, "The love of their own territory developed to an absorbing degree, for tribal history was written over its hills and vales, its rivers, streams and lakes, and upon its cliffs and shores...."[1] The records of New Zealand's development did not therefore, commence only when Europeans came.

Compared with the European settlement of Eastern Canada, New Zealand settlers arrived late. British sovereignty was not proclaimed until the early months of 1840 when a treaty was signed with small groups of Maori leaders at various places on the shores of the North Island and the northern tip of the South Island. The first signing was at Waitangi — a small bay in the northernmost part of the country — on 6 February 1840. Waitangi Day, the anniversary of that signing, is now our national holiday and the Treaty of Waitangi is our premier archive. It is indicative of the state of accommodation of the National Archives of New Zealand and also of our race relations that the Treaty is currently housed in one of the impregnable vaults of the Reserve Bank of New Zealand.

The Maori people have always given great importance to the preservation of knowledge of their past. Some of the early settlers also had an historical awareness and, along with it, an awareness of the need to care for archives. Indeed, our most notable colonization company, the New Zealand Company, in its plan of the town of Britannia to be established on a coastal swamp, had a site designated as a Public Record Office. Like other promises made by the New Zealand Company, this one remained unfulfilled.

Generally speaking, New Zealand settlers, like many other migrants, left Britain and Europe to better themselves materially. Their ambitions fitted the mood of the time which was one of confidence in material progress exemplified by industrial expansion and reflected in the philosophy of Marx and the complaints of Matthew Arnold about philistinism. A few of the settlers came in search of higher things, but most of these, if they did not soon return home, joined the other settlers in deploying

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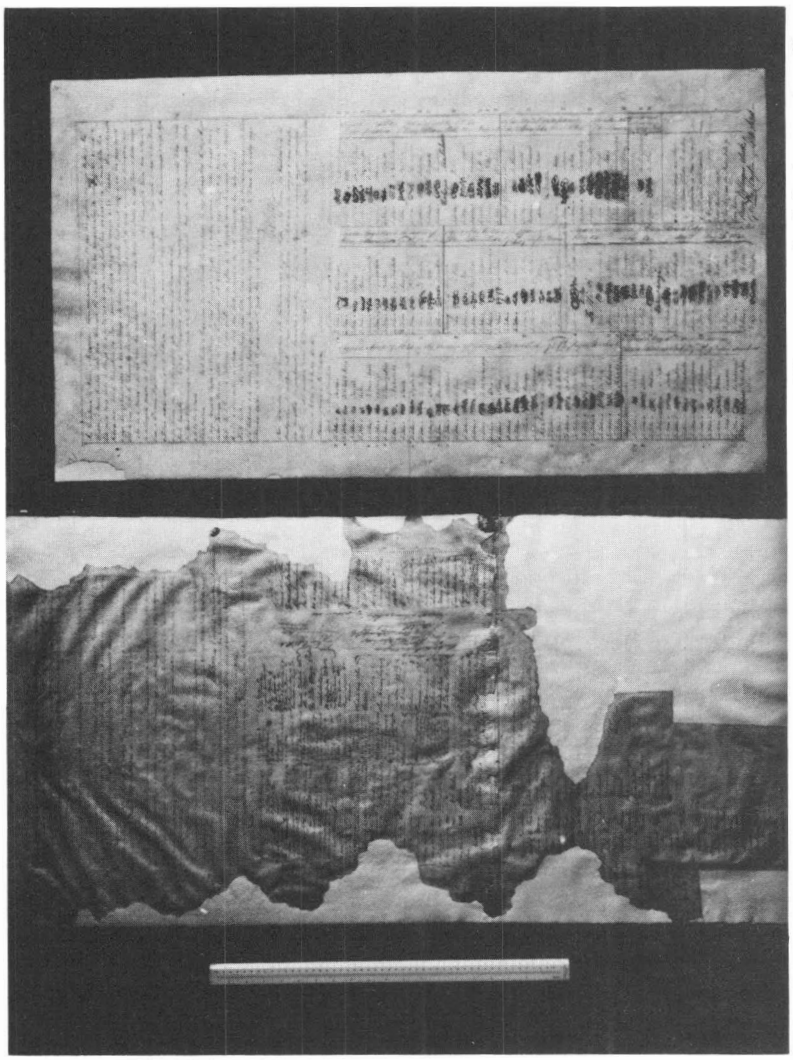
1 Peter Buck, *The Coming of the Maori* (Wellington, 1949), p. 381.



Two of the documents which comprise the Treaty of Waitangi. The one on the left shows the effect of water and rat damage after a long term in a government building basement. Some of the signatories were literate, others made their marks in shorthand form representing the *moko* or patterned grooves on their faces.

their energies in seeking to better their lot — particularly when they found they were unable to ignore the reality of a land still largely in its natural state and a resident people who were neither overawed by the new arrivals or willing to be subdued by them.

With a few exceptions, therefore, it was the philistines who set the tone of New Zealand's European community during the first ninety or so years following the 1840 annexation. Land and the money to be derived from it were their fundamental pre-occupations. With such emphasis on private gain, it might seem that government activity would have been kept to a minimum and, as a consequence, relatively few government records would have been produced. This was not the case. Government involvement in the community was high right from the beginning; its purpose was regarded as the advancement of the material interests of the people who elected it.

Because New Zealand is a small country with reasonable but not great natural resources, the government has been the only organization with large supplies of capital or capable of commanding large-scale credit. In relatively early years, it established state-owned functional organizations for, say, railways and insurance; however, throughout its history, it has also tended to use the resources available to it to assist private organizations in the establishment of industries — most recently, petroleum and steel. Farming is our primary industry in all senses of the word, and government capital has been heavily involved in this, from preparing previously unfarmed land for agricultural use to financing purchases by farmers and supporting the production of goods that the rest of the world is sometimes reluctant to buy despite their relative cheapness. At least 90 per cent of our scientfic research has not only been state funded, but done in public service institutions such as the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research.[2] Because of the country's great geographical isolation — our nearest neighbour is 2000 km away — and because of the competition for British and European immigrants from closer and larger countries, immigration was another field where, from the early years, there was very high government involvement. Perhaps as a consequence of immigration and farming assistance, or as part of the same ethos, social security and health schemes were put into practice very early in New Zealand, as was a close government involvement in labour relations. Right from the beginning, the state has been dominant in education, and 90 per cent or more of the patronage of the arts originates with state money. In addition, a high proportion of our housing has been built or financed from state funds. Such has been the extent of government involvement in the life and activities of New Zealand citizens. It is probable that the public archives of New Zealand are as detailed and extensive of the development of a nation and the life of its citizens as any public archives could be.

The close relationship of archives and people in New Zealand is exemplified in the Minute Books of the Maori Land Court. The involvement of the state with the Maori people was spelled out in detail in the Treaty of Waitangi, particularly in Article II in which "the Chiefs of the United Tribes and the Individual Chiefs yield to

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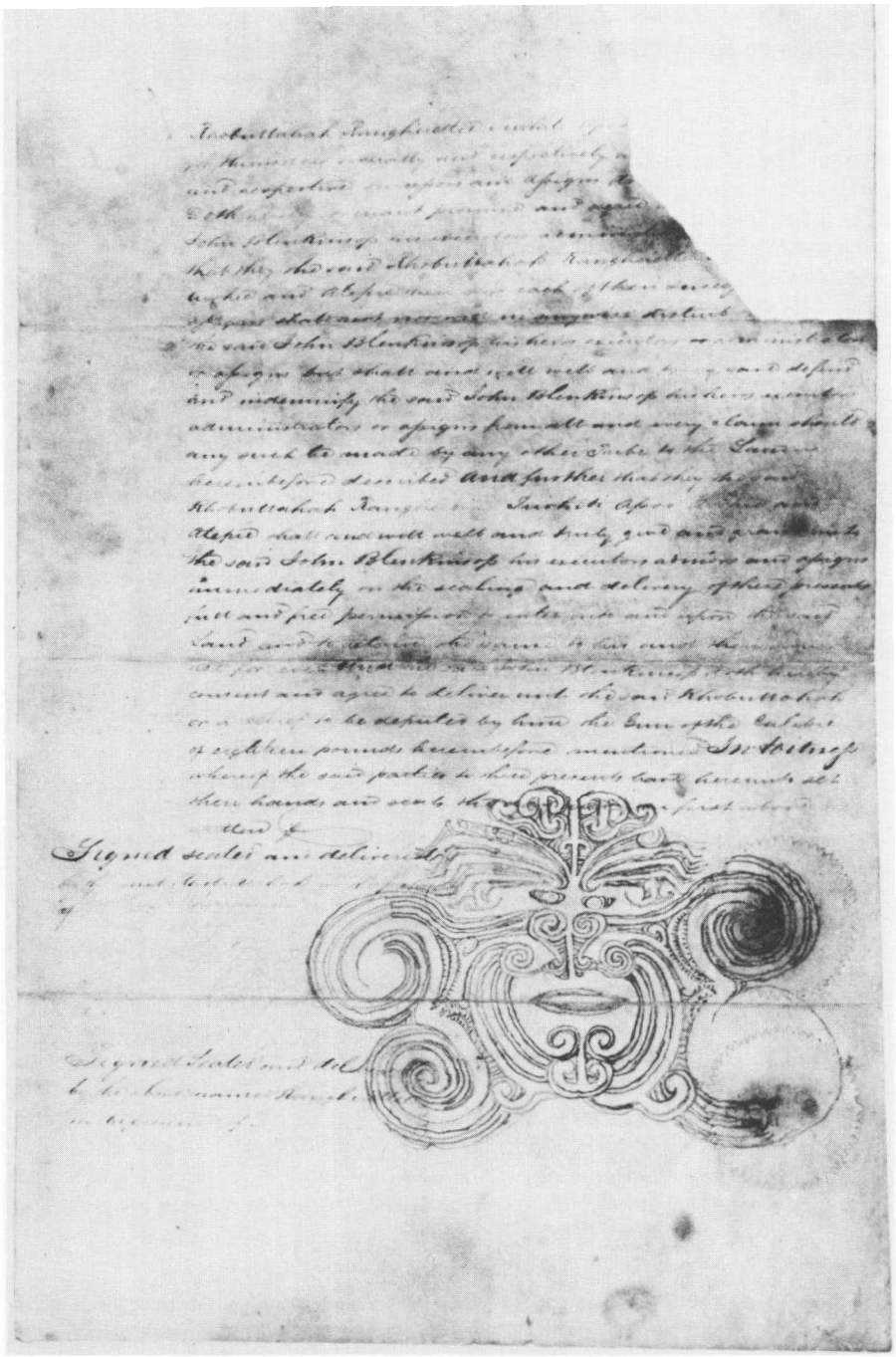
2 For the extent of government science archives, see "Archives of Government Science in New Zealand," a paper presented by S.R. Strachan, National Archives, at The History of Science in New Zealand conference, held at Wellington, 12-14 February 1983, sponsored by the Alexander Turnbull Library and the Royal Society of New Zealand.



A signature to a land deal by the famous Maori leader, Te Rauparaha. The design more closely, and in greater detail, reproduces the *moko* on his face.

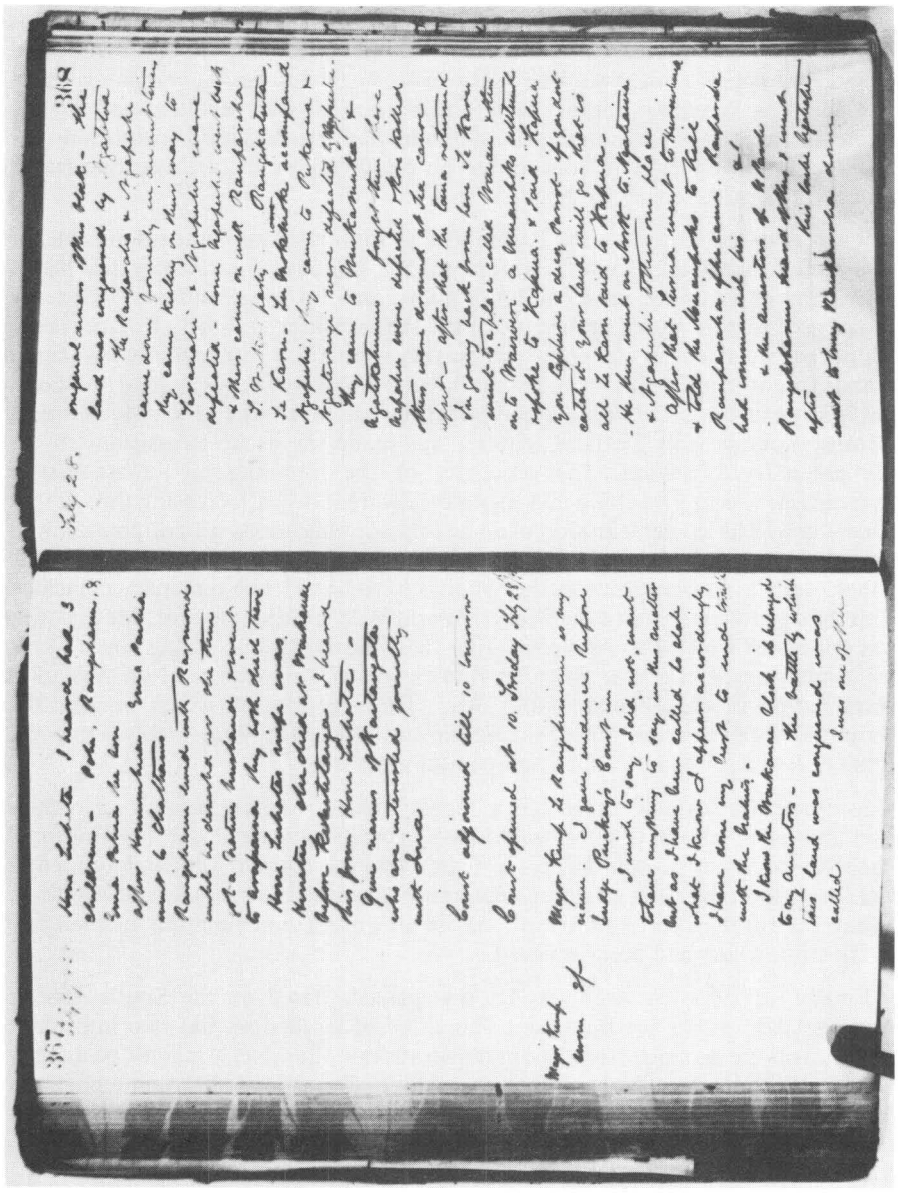
Her Majesty the exclusive right of Pre-emption over such lands as the proprietors thereof may be disposed to alienate, at such prices as may be agreed upon between the respective Proprietors and persons appointed by Her Majesty to treat with them on that behalf...." Article II was intended to protect Maoris from unscrupulous private European purchasers and to give the government an income by selling to settlers at a profit.[3] Almost immediately, the latter principle prevailed over the former, and the government bought land for a song. In a brief period, too much was sold too quickly, and the majority of the Maoris became a landless people. There was, however, one small positive spin-off and it was an archival one. When the government bought land, it had to know whom to pay. Maori land ownership was complex and, since the Maori record of it did not exist in written form, the government set up what they called Land Courts to hear oral evidence to prove titles. All evidence was written down, and most of the minute books of the Maori Land Courts have survived. The result is an unsurpassed record of Maori history prior to, and just after, European settlement.

Unfortunately, few other important archives relating to Maori people have survived. In 1907 the Parliament Buildings burned down and took with them the inward letters of the Department of Maori Affairs from 1840 to 1891 — the most crucial and formative period of Maori-European relations. Also lost were the records of the Marine and Education Departments. The burning of Parliament, however, was not the first loss. This occurred in 1862 with the wreck of a ship with the records of the Colonial Secretary in its hold. The Colonial Secretary's Department was the founding government department and, in the nineteenth century, dealt with a very wide range of matters. Twenty-five years later, the Wellington Post Office went up in flames burning not only Post Office records, but those of several smaller departments. Most of the Post Office records created later were lost in another Post Office fire in 1960. One of the worst fire losses happened in 1952 when most nineteenth-century Lands and Survey Department records were destroyed. Given the significance of land development in New Zealand and the high degree of government involvement in it, this loss was grave indeed. Other important early archives lost included those relating to the Ministry of Works, the builder of all major roads, bridges, railways, etc., and Labour and Agriculture.

In an earthquake-prone and timber-producing country, it is not surprising that fire has been an ever-present risk to the wooden buildings which often housed the archives, but this risk would have been alleviated if the few non-philistine voices during the last hundred years or so had been heeded. For example, in 1890 the Government Engineer under the heading "Important Buildings under Consideration" recognized the need for archives buildings when he stated, "The possible loss to the colony should any disaster by fire occur in the Government Buildings has long been recognised, and the accumulation of State papers, documents and registers now severely taxes the accommodation of the safes, and crowds out many records, plans and papers which should not be exposed to risk...."[4] He also listed the need for a

3 Great Britain, Colonial Offfice, Original Correspondence, CO 209/4, pp. 262-69. Originals held in the Public Record Office, London; microfilm copies in National Archives, Wellington, and elsewhere.

4 New Zealand, Parliament, House of Representatives, *Journals, Appendix to the Journals* (1980) D1, p. 37. Thanks to B.S. Francis, National Archives, for identifying this item.



Record of the evidence given before the Maori Land Court, Wellington, 28 February 1890, by Te Rangihiwinui Kepa, known to the settlers as Major Kemp. He attained the rank when he fought on the government side during the wars of the 1860s. An old enemy of Te Rauparaha's people, he is here claiming that his own tribe was not defeated by them.

Parliamentary Library and alterations to Parliament Buildings, a central lunatic asylum, a museum, and a gaol. All were built except for the archives. Others advocating the need for archives preservation included senior civil servants, such as the head of what is now known as the National Museum, the more educated politicians, and prominent book collectors who, by their devotion and public spirit, founded what are now notable research libraries for New Zealand and Pacific studies. As a result of the founding and activities of these and similar institutions, the National Archives tends to concentrate on preserving public archives and leaves collecting private archives to them.

It was not until 1926 when the Parliamentary Librarian was made responsible for "Dominion Archives" that officialdom took a tentative first step which had a permanent effect on the preservation of public archives. The result was that some choice groups were stored in the attic of the Parliamentary Library. Not much else happened, but at least it was known where they were. Later, other archives were put in another government library and in the basements of some departmental buildings. In 1938, the first positive step in archives staffing was taken when E.H. McCormick, a future notable New Zealand scholar, was made the archives assistant to the Parliamentary Librarian. The centenary of the founding of European-style government was approaching and historical awareness was increasing throughout the country. The implementation of an historical publications programme demonstrated to those involved that the sources then available were inadequate to make the publications as authoritative as they should have been.[5] The centenary coincided with the opening months of the Second World War. During the War, McCormick was appointed Chief War Archivist. After the War, he was one of those involved in the establishment of a War Histories Branch created to document New Zealand's participation in the Second World War. The organization which became the National Archives arose out of the administration of the War Archives and the Branch. It was, however, a slow and painful process.

In 1946, McCormick presented a report[6] which, modest though its recommendations for resources were, would have provided a sound basis for a National Archives for the next three decdes. Instead, there was a policy which amounted to little more than the most grudging acceptance of the need for a National Archives. Events such as the disastrous fire of 1952 did little more than maintain the snail-like momentum which had been achieved.

Finally, in 1957, an Archives Act was passed. Based on the South African Archives Act, it was for the time a fair piece of legislation, but two important provisions were dropped from its original draft: that the Chief Archivist be directly responsible to his Minister, and that an Archives Commission be appointed. Even though the Act established the position of Chief Archivist, it was not filled until four years later — at a grading well down the bureaucratic hierarchy.

The 1960s were years of expansion in New Zealand as they were elsewhere in the western world but, despite the dedication of the staff during those years and the

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5 E.H. McCormick, *Sketch Plan for the Development of the National Archives* (Unpublished report to New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington 1946), National Archives file 1/1 23, August 1946, p. 1.

6 *Ibid.*

decade which followed, the expansion of resources and activities necessary for fulfilling the responsibilities of National Archives was not allowed. It is not unfair to claim that for most of the time it was unclear who was running National Archives, the Chief Archivist or the Department of which it was part. As in all cases of divided responsibility, however, the result was weakness and confusion. National Archives performed its functions with difficulty.

In 1977, the Archives and Records Association was formed. Previously, the only body of private and professional people interested in archives had been the Archives Committee of the New Zealand Library Association. In its own way the formation of ARANZ was as necessary to National Archives as the first appointment of an archivist. From the start, ARANZ, though small, has had an enthusiatic membership and forceful leadership. One of its latest achievements has been the inclusion of an archives policy in the manifestos of all three political parties. It was ARANZ which organized the visit of Canada's Dominion Archivist, Dr. Wilfred Smith, to New Zealand to report on the country's archives.[7]

Although completed six years ago, Dr. Smith's report is still the premier document for anyone seeking information on the archival situation in New Zealand. The recommendations relating to the National Archives made by Dr. Smith stressed improving the status of the institution and direct access to the Minister by the National Archivist (title changed from Chief Archivist) with a salary commensurate with the responsibilities carried by the position.

The government took note of the Smith report which it had financed and set up a management audit team (which included a senior archivist from the National Archives) under the chairmanship of the government Chief Historian to investigate and report on the National Archives.[8] Thorough, comprehensive, and able to examine the National Archives in greater detail than Dr. Smith's brief allowed, the *Report on National Archives 1979* expanded on points made by Dr. Smith including the need for direct access to the Minister by the National Archivist, full management responsibility for him, and a clearly defined identity for the organization. It went through each activity of the National Archives in close detail and made a series of recommendations which would ensure an effective institution.

As a result of these two reports which, along with the McCormick report, are the most significant documents relating to New Zealand's archival history, the government has been taking measures to upgrade the National Archives. These have included the creation of a new position of Director of National Archives and a number of other new positions, including staff sufficient to establish branches in two major cities outside Wellington. Just as important, a new Archives bill has been prepared for presentation to Parliament in 1984. Because its nature and enactment is dependent on Parliament, it can be discussed only generally — in the sense that it ought to achieve full professional responsibility for National Archives if not complete independence. There will be little chance of an archives council or authority however, as both government and the opposition are averse to the

7 Wilfred I. Smith, *Archives in New Zealand: A report,* Archives and Records Association of New Zealand (Wellington 1978).

8 I. McL. Wards, (Chairman), "Report on National Archives 1979," (Unpublished report to the N.Z. Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1979).

establishment of further quangos, but a major advance towards effective functioning of the National Archives will have been achieved nonetheless. In the meantime, the National Archives will be identified in the government's Annual Estimates effective 1 April 1984.

The Act will do much, but, like all legislation, it will only be as good as the resources made available to implement it; what has happened to National Archives since the 1957 Act is clear enough evidence of that. Resources do not appear by magic or the kindness of whoever happens to be public paymaster. One of the most basic tasks of any archival institution is, therefore, to set about gaining those resources. It is a chore which is essential and which never ends, is difficult even in times of affluence, and is always done in competition with other organizations which tend to be larger, better known, and highly skilled in extracting money from the public purse.

There is also the problem of what might be called government ambivalence, and in this case government includes all branches, executive, legislature, and the public service. In the final quarter of the twentieth century, it probably is not too difficult to get legislation passed provided you keep at it long enough. Most of the problems such as gaining resources occur afterwards. A major danger to archives is the public servant who forgets that it is the National Archives and not himself or his organization which has the power to approve the destruction of records. Looking back on the development of public archives in New Zealand, the only way, it seems, to remedy this is to make archival awareness in government one of the basic functions of an archives administration. In Canada, it appears the importance given to records management in the federal archival structure should go a long way towards maintaining archival awareness in the federal public service. Then there is the problem of the public servant or politician who deliberately destroys the record so that no one will be able to know for certain what happened. This occurs less than we might suspect, but it does happen now and then. The only real defence against it is to raise a high level of archives awareness in the public generally so that an outcry will occur when such actions are discovered. It is this raising of archival awareness both inside and outside the government that must be made a high priority by New Zealand's National Archives.