

HE WAHINE TOA:

A Māori Heroine:

This pūrakau written by James Cowan in 1902 relates to the Ngāti Manuhiri chiefteness Rāhui Te Kiri and her husband Tenetahi Pohuehue from Ōmaha. Both were well known mariners who plied the Mangawhai coast in their cutter Te Rangatira. The Rangatira, built to the order of Tenetahi by Mr A Matheson, was launched on Monday 30 October 1876 in the presence of a large number of European and Māori.

When interviewed by a reporter from the Auckland Star, Tenetahi stated that on the 2nd of September 1883 he arrived in the Rangatira at Māori Bay, Aotea, in order to take away some 'Try pots' which were needed to melt down some whales.

The Rangatira set sail that same evening to reach the eastern side of the island., but was forced to return to its previous anchorage because of a strong wind. The following evening, the wind having changed, Tenetahi and Rāhui set sail and reached the place where the whales were to be found. After taking on about 15 ton of firewood, they again set sail.

On the 8th September 1883 Rāhui and Tenetahi were sailing off the coast of Aotea when the wind changed,

'It was pitch dark and there was no room in which to 'tack' so as to get the Cutter out to sea. From 1am till nearly 5am, they beat about under shortened sail, struggling to get the vessel out to sea, but the captain saw that all efforts were hopeless, and told the men to swim for their lives, as they were going on the rocks. This was on the morning of the 5th inst, and shortly after, the crew, embracing the captain, his wife, and three men, had taken to the water, the vessel struck the rocks.'

Hone Palmer took the survivors to his settlement on Aotea, but the belongings of the crew which had washed ashore were rifled in their absence. Some of the inhabitants of the island were blamed for the thefts, but Tenetahi did not attribute any blame.

On the 10th, at night, Tenetahi, Rāhui and the crew set out in a whale boat to reach their home on Little Barrier Island, about 20 miles distant. Not long at sea, the wind rose so they decided to attempt to reach Whale Island. The storm increased in violence with the sea breaking over the boat, finally swamping it.

The boat continued to stay afloat with the survivors clinging onto it. Tenetahi called to the others to hold on while he swam to retrieve the oars. Rāhui dissuaded Tenetahi from making the attempt as he was heavily weighted, she then made the attempt to recover the oars. Rāhui recovered an oar and placed it in the partly submerged boat.

The survivors reboarded the boat, but again it was in danger of sinking. For hours they attempted to stay afloat, but exhaustion became a factor in staying alive. Two of the crew succumbed to the elements and died. Rāhui managed to get hold of the jib and haul it aboard the boat. They continued to bail out the boat, and managed to make the shore at Hauturu.

Tenetahi would have drowned except for the endurance of his wife. She supported him by floating and swimming until they made land. Tenetahi later referred to his wife 'as a good old woman, a wahine toa.'