

Te Pakimaero o Te Awa o Whanganui THE CREATION OF THE WHANGANUI RIVER

THE CREATION OF THE WHANGANUI RIVER BEGINS AND ENDS WITH TEARS.

The first teardrop was the seed of the river itself, a gift to Ruapehu from an all-powerful god Ranginui. The last tears were those shed by another grieving mountain as it carved its tortuous path to exile. Like all good stories this one has its share of conflict, love and intrigue, but also of bravery and honour. Here it is as told by local iwi.

The Whanganui River is almost as old as the land itself. It all began when the North Island, as we know it today, was drawn from the ocean by the legendary figure of the South Pacific, Māui Tikitiki-ā-Taranga.

On that occasion Māui, ever the trickster, stowed away on his brothers' fishing expedition. He used the magic jawbone of his grandmother to hook and haul up Hāhā-te-Whenua, a heavy landmass that became Te Ika-ā-Māui / the Great Fish of Māui - the North Island.

The great fish had huge mana and it would not be calmed. Ranginui, the Sky Father, was forced to intervene to ease its tremendous thrashing, and placed Matua Te Mana (Mount Ruapehu) at its centre. And so it was that calm came at last to the new land.

However, as time passed, proud and supreme Ruapehu, the only mountain on the land, came to feel his isolation more and more keenly. Ranginui, the Sky Father, was again moved to intervene. He placed two teardrops at the lonely mountain's feet. One teardrop was the beginning of the Whanganui River. The other flowed into the land of the Ngāti Tuwharetoa and the Waikato.

But this gift was not enough and Ruapehu's loneliness grew. Finally, in desperation, he pleaded with Ranginui for company. And so it was, over a period of time, that Ranginui sent Ruapehu four companions.

First came Tongariro, the warrior guardian of the two teardrops. Next to arrive was Taranaki, custodian of the new mountain clan's tapu. Third was Ngauruhoe, who acted as the mountains' servant, a role perhaps not as prestigious today but holding its own dignity in the old order. Last to arrive was the beautiful and fertile maiden, Pihanga. Pihanga was given as a bride to Tongariro, to ensure the survival and future of the mountain clan. So Ruapehu at last found peace in the presence of his new companions.

Peace, however, did not last forever. The harmony of the clan was menaced when Pihanga found herself tempted by the magnificence of the tall and elegant Taranaki. Discovering the attraction, Tongariro exploded in anger. Some versions of the legend tell of a huge battle between the rival mountains, with Taranaki defeated and Tongariro substantially depleted from his efforts.

The version of the Whanganui iwi is less spectacular and more honourable. They say that Taranaki, realising that he was on the point of making an error that might compromise his mana forever, sought counsel from his brother Ruapehu, patriarch of the clan. Ruapehu understood the sacred nature of Taranaki's role as custodian of the clan's tapu. He knew that if his brother turned to battle or to forbidden love, his mana would be tarnished. He also knew that a battle between Tongariro and Taranaki would have terrible consequences. The only alternative was to ask Taranaki to leave.

And so it was, with a heavy heart, that Taranaki drew away from the clan, following the teardrop of the Whanganui River. As he wound his way towards the coast, he widened that river's channel. The path he carved in exile and grief is the river as we know it today. When Taranaki arrived at the coast, near where the city of Whanganui stands today, he turned and continued northwards, finally settling in Te Hau-ā-uru, on the plains.

He remains there today, alone, forever guarding the place of the setting sun. From high points all around the western half of the North Island he can be seen looking towards the centre of the island, at the mountain clan he left behind.

Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au. I am the river and the river is me.