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**Writing Ourselves 'Home'**

**Biographical Texts**

**A Method for Contextualizing  
the Lives of Wahine Māori**

**Locating the Story of Betty Wark**

D. Helene Connor

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
Faculty of Arts, University of Auckland, 2006

# The University of Auckland

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of two sections. The intention of Section One, 'Biographical Texts: Theoretical Underpinning', is to explore and discuss the theoretical underpinnings of Māori feminism and Kaupapa Māori as they relate to biography as a research method into the lives of Māori women. Biography, as a literary genre is also examined with particular reference to feminist, women of colour and Māori biography. Section One is a wide-ranging section, encompassing a broad sweep of the literature in these areas. It both draws from existing literature and contributes to the discourse regarding Maori feminism, Māori biography and Māori research. It is *relevant to but unconstrained by* the content of Section Two.

The intention of Section Two, 'Locating the Story of Betty Wark: A Biographical Narrative with Reflective Annotations', is to provide an example of the biographical method and what might constitute Māori biography. The subject of the biographical narrative, Betty Wark, was a Māori woman who was actively involved with community-based organisations from the 1950s until her death in May 2001. Several major themes which emerged from Betty's biographical history occur throughout her narrative and provide a framework in which her story is located. One of the most significant themes was the notion of 'home'; both literal and metaphorical. This theme is reflected in the title of the thesis, *Writing Ourselves Home*.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beautiful, extraordinary daughter:

**Carabelle Tangiora Connor**

To you, my darling, I dedicate this thesis. May the story of Betty Wark and the courageous path she chose inspire you as it has me, and may you too seek to benefit your world, as Betty did hers.

Me kimihia te ara totika  
hei oranga mo to ao

Seek the right path  
To benefit your world (Tai, 1992, p. 29)

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This thesis was researched and written over a period of years during which, biographical research and Māori feminist scholarship developed significantly. Maintaining a sense of these developments has involved

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
Title Page	i
Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	x
List of Figures, maps, photographs, images, etc	xii
List of Tables, charts, whakapapa, pepeha, etc	xiv
Chronology of Betty Wark's Life	xv
<b>Section One – Title Page</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One</b>	<b>2</b>
Creating Context: Introducing Themes, Issues and Methodology	
<b>Chapter Two</b>	<b>34</b>
Biographical Research as an Appropriate Methodology for Māori Feminist Research	
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<b>62</b>
Biography as Genre and a Form of Cultural Production	
<b>Chapter Four</b>	<b>80</b>
Māori and Auto/Biography: Writing Ourselves 'Home'	
<b>Section Two – Title Page</b>	<b>103</b>
Introduction to Section Two: Locating the Story of Betty Wark: A Biographical Narrative with Reflective Annotations	104
Map of the Hokianga Harbour District	106
Chart showing Betty Wark's tupuna	107
Whakapapa for Elizabeth (Betty) Wark	108
Pepeha for Betty Wark	109

	<b>Page</b>
Prelude Korero Purakau Whakataki - Preliminary Story	110
Embracing Papatuanuku - Symbolic Mother And Home. An Introduction to Major Themes	111
<b>Chapter Five</b>	113
Nga Aka - The Roots	
<b>Chapter Six</b>	157
Te Katua - The Trunk, The Woman Sustained	
<b>Chapter Seven</b>	180
Nga Kaupeka – The Branches	
<b>Chapter Eight</b>	211
Nga Hua Rakau – The Fruits	
<b>Korero Tapiri – Epilogue</b>	277
Learning to Receive	
<b>Conclusion</b>	287
<b>Appendix i</b>	297
Interview Themes	
<b>Appendix ii</b>	299
Awards Betty Wark was Honoured With	
<b>References</b>	300
<b>Glossary</b>	323
Māori Words and English Translations	

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Maps, Photographs, Images, etc</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Image of Ngapei Ngatata, tupuna of Helene Connor	8
2. Map of the Hokianga Harbour district	106
3. Totara tree roots	113
4. Totara tree	114
5. Nau (Mabel) Rini Te Wheao, Betty Wark's biological mother	117
6. Cyril Chapman, Betty Wark's biological father	117
7. Saint Mary's Church in Motuti, Hokianga, Northland	121
8. Interior of Saint Mary's Church in Motuti.	121
9. Motuti Parish Hall	126
10. Betty in her Saint Joseph's Māori Girls' College uniform	132
11. Totara tree trunk	157
12. The Māori Madonna and Child	165
13. Totara tree branches	180
14. Betty aged about 18 years old, c. 1942	181
15. Betty at the Civic Theatre, Auckland, c. 1950	193
16. Betty with infant son, Conrad, 1952	194
17. Betty's brother, Kane Mutu, on his wedding day	196
18. Betty and Jim Wark, c. 1958	197
19. Betty and Jim Wark with their sons Robert and Gary, 1964	198
20. Totara tree fruits	211
21. Betty comforting Mr and Mrs W. Wilson	221
22. Tent protest, Tole Street, Ponsonby	223
23. Map of the Ponsonby and Freemans Bay area where Betty lived and worked	227
24. Betty and Fred Ellis	230
25. Betty and Fred Ellis	230
26. Betty and Trish Stewart	235
27. Betty and Master Shim	237
28. Dawn Paratini and Tim Pahi	247

	<b>Page</b>
29. Auckland City Councillors, October 1989	257
30. Betty Wark aged 45	259
31. Betty being comforted by Lee Waho	266
32. Betty as she appeared in the documentary, <i>Give Me a Love</i>	271
33. Betty, February 1986	274
34. Betty being presented with the Senior Achiever's Award, 1996	276
35. Betty, June 2000.	277
36. Motuti Marae, Hokianga	285
37. Totara tree	286

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Tables, Charts, Whakapapa, Pepeha, etc</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Chronology of Betty Wark's life	xv
2. Pepeha for Helene Connor	8
3. Chart showing Betty Wark's tupuna	107
4. Whakapapa for Elizabeth (Betty) Wark	108
5. Pepeha for Betty Wark	109

## CHRONOLOGY OF BETTY WARK'S LIFE

<b>Dates</b>	<b>Significant Events</b>
6 June 1924	Betty is born at Omanaia, Hokianga, Northland, New Zealand.
June 1924	Betty is fostered by various members of the Te Wake whanau (family). She is known as Elizabeth (Betty) Te Wake.
1932	Betty, aged eight, goes to live at the settlement of Motuti in the Hokianga with Mary Te Wake and her family. New Zealand was experiencing the Great Depression and the Hokianga district was feeling the full impact of this economic disaster.
February 1938	Betty, aged fourteen, leaves the Hokianga and attends St Joseph's Māori Girls' College in Napier.
1941	World War II has begun. Betty, aged seventeen, leaves school and begins nursing training at Waiora Hospital in the Hawkes Bay.
1942 -1943	Betty leaves Waiora Hospital after completing the first six months of nursing training. She takes on several jobs as a housekeeper.
1943	Betty meets American marine Charles Turner at a dance in Napier. She has a war-time romance and becomes pregnant.
1944	Charles Turner is killed in action at Guadalcanal.
1944	Betty's first son, Brian Turner (Te Wake), is born. He is fostered by Mary Te Wake.
1944	Betty moves to Auckland.
1946	Betty meets Henry Smith who fathers her second son.
1948	Betty's second son, Danny Smith (Te Wake), is born. He is fostered by Mary Te Wake who lived in the small town of Waihi. Betty moves to Waihi to be closer to her son.
1950	Betty returns to Auckland and finds clerical work.
1951	Betty meets Conrad, a Canadian man who becomes her first husband.
1952	Betty's third son, Conrad junior, is born. Her husband leaves her and his infant son and returns to Canada.

- 1952 Betty was entitled to a deserted wife's benefit so is able to support herself and her son. She finds cheap accommodation in a boarding house in Grafton.
- 1956 Betty meets Jim Wark who fathers her sons Robert and Gary and becomes her second husband.
- 1959 Betty's fourth son, Robert Wark, is born.
- 1960s The 1960s marks a period of politicization for Betty.
- She becomes involved in the Freemans Bay Advisory Committee which helped tenants affected by urban renewal which saw many old houses in the area being demolished.
- She also becomes involved in the Napier Street School (now known as Freemans Bay Primary School) Committee.
- Her identity as Māori becomes more important and she becomes involved in the Māori Women's Welfare League, the Māori community centre at Ponsonby and Te Unga Waka, the Māori Catholic urban marae in Epsom, Auckland.
- 1961 Betty's fifth son, Gary Wark, is born.
- 1966 Betty marries Jim Wark.
- 1969 Betty's community work had begun attracting media attention and on 8 August 1969 the *New Zealand Herald* writes an article entitled, 'Like Wendy – Mother to Lost Boys' about her work with young homeless people.
- 1970s Betty has begun running hostels to accommodate young Māori and Pacific Island men who were homeless. She begins receiving referrals from the courts, probation and the police. She is also involved in the Ponsonby Citizens Advice Bureau and the People's Union and becomes interested in prisoners' rights and prison reform.
- The Wark family purchase a home in the inner-city suburb of Herne Bay. Herne Bay, Ponsonby and Freemans Bay are adjacent to one another and Betty remains in close contact with her Freemans Bay and Ponsonby networks.
- 1972 She helps form the Tenants' Protection Association.
- 1976 Betty helps organise the Tole Street Park protest which aimed to bring the plight of the homeless to public attention.
- May 1976 The first of the Arohanui Incorporated homes is set up in Ponsonby and Betty takes up a position as a house-mother. The central aim of Arohanui was to provide accommodation for homeless 'at risk' youth.

- 1976 Betty's community work has begun to impact on her family life and Jim takes on more of the domestic and childcare responsibilities. Betty leaves her marriage but maintains an enduring friendship with Jim Wark.
- 1978 Betty is the winner of the Suburban Newspapers Limited Community Worker of the Year Award.
- 1981 Betty is awarded the Altrusa Silver Apple for her voluntary work.
- 1982 Betty travels to England and stays with Father Hollings a priest who worked with the homeless.
- 1984 Betty is awarded a Nuffield Scholarship to visit Great Britain to study their probation accommodation systems. She also visits China.
- 28 February 1986 Betty is awarded the Queen's Service Medal for her community work. Investiture of the Queen's Service Medal is by Queen Elizabeth II.
- August 1986 At the age of sixty-three Betty stands as an independent candidate for the Ponsonby Ward. She is elected and is the only Māori woman on the Auckland City Council. She serves on the council until 1989.
- August 1986 Betty and Arohanui are the subject of a television documentary *Give Me a Love*.
- 1989 Betty helps found the Hine Hou Kohanga Reo which initially runs from one of the Arohanui homes in Herne Bay.
- October 1996 Betty is presented with the Senior Achiever's Award in recognition of her fifty years of voluntary work.
- July 2000 Betty is diagnosed with lung cancer shortly after her 76<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- 16 May 2001 Betty dies peacefully at 12.40am, surrounded by her whanau.
- 18 May 2001 As she had requested, her body is taken back to Motuti Marae in the Hokianga to await burial in her papakainga.