

The Wairau Affray [edited text]

The Wairau Affray of 1843 was the first of many land wars in New Zealand, leaving 22 European settlers and between 4-9 Maori dead following a brief but bloody battle on the banks of the Tuamarina River in Marlborough. It was caused by dubious land sales between Ngati Toa and the New Zealand Company. The consequences of the Wairau Affray still affect New Zealanders today, and it remains a significant event in New Zealand history.

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Cause of the Affray

The Nelson settlement was established by the New Zealand Company, the brain-child of Edward Gibbon Wakefield, and the shortcomings of that Company eventually led to the Wairau Affray. The Nelson settlement, situated at the top of the South Island, was planned in England to consist of 221,100 acres of land suitable for farming. Despite many warnings of insufficient quality land in the upper South Island, the settlement to be implemented by the New Zealand Company (established by Edward G. Wakefield and brothers William H. Wakefield and Arthur Wakefield to settle New Zealand) went ahead. When the Company realised that they were around 70,000 acres short, surveyors were sent to the Wairau Plains in Marlborough. They believe that they owned the land after purchasing the deed from the widow of whaling Captain John Blenkinsopp, who in turn had allegedly bought the land off Ngati Toa. In fact a letter to the New Zealand Company in England written by Edward Wakefield in March 1843 stated 'I rather anticipate some difficulty with the natives'!

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Unsurprisingly, the Maori took the matter very seriously. A hard lesson was about to be learned by the settlers. The attitude that land which appears to be unused doesn't matter to the local Maori and must be available for purchase, and the attitude that a swift, perhaps not-quite-legal land purchase deal would do, was to bring catastrophe. Te Rauparaha and Te Rangihaeata, of Ngati Toa, who owned the land, were adamant that the Wairau was still their property and had not been sold ...

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The incident

Tension quickly escalated and a series of incidents quickly led to tragedy. When Chief Constable Thompson moved to arrest Te Rauparaha in hand-cuffs, Te Rangihaeata became furious. Shots were fired, though varied accounts and sources indicated differing views on who the initial shots were fired by. The most common viewpoint was that a musket was accidentally fired by one of the Europeans, most likely by one of the untrained labourers who were added to the European party as reinforcements. While all sources state that Te Rongo, Te Rauparaha's daughter who was married to Te Rangihaeata, died in the Wairau Affray, some state that she was the first to die. Fighting broke out between the well-armed but out-numbered Europeans and the Maori. The Europeans attempted a disorderly retreat up the hill behind the battle site after four deaths then Arthur Wakefield ordered them to lay down their arms and surrender. While 18 Europeans stayed and surrendered with Wakefield, the remaining members of the party continued to retreat further up the hill, while being pursued by some Maori ... Had Wakefield's party had some understanding of the place in Maori society of an ariki such as Te Rangihaeata (and of a woman who was his wife) and some understanding of how Maori justice system worked perhaps the tragedy could have been avoided...

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Consequences

The Wairau Affray had many consequences, both immediate and long-term.

The shocked white settlers of Nelson demanded retribution but they were to be deeply disappointed on that score. In early 1844 the new Governor Robert FitzRoy (successor to Governor William Hobson) visited the Cook Strait settlements ... In fact he even upbraided the Europeans for their behaviour, and warned them that 'not an acre, not an inch of land belonging to the natives shall be touched without their consent'. He condemned the killing of the men who had surrendered, and he also demanded the resignation of the magistrate who issued the arrest warrant, however he was already dead.

This decision was very unpopular in Nelson but from hindsight history has come down on the side of the Maori, just as FitzRoy did. At the time many in New Zealand and England called the governor 'cowardly' and his decision eventually led to FitzRoy being recalled back to England. However in the modern day, his actions are seen as prudent and pragmatic and the right course of action under the circumstances, because the alternative - open warfare with Ngati Toa - would have probably made the situation far worse for the new settlers of New Zealand. FitzRoy knew that it was improbable that the British government would dispatch soldiers to wage war on Maori, and the settlers were outnumbered 900 to 1. The authorities ended up blaming the event on systemic failures with regard to land acquisition...

Significance today

The Wairau Affray remains a significant battle in New Zealand history for a number of reasons. Firstly, depending on the source, it was the first ...

As views have changed over time, the term 'Massacre' used by the settlers at the time of the Wairau Affray has been changed to other names including Incident, Affair and the most commonly used one, Affray. This is because the word massacre was an emotive one used by the settlers of the time, whereas nowadays the emotion is not attached to the incident to the same extent. It also acknowledges that it was not a one-sided slaughter - instead it was a result of some Europeans disobeying the law and ignoring Maori requests. But it took a long time for acceptance by pākehā New Zealanders that perhaps the settlers were the ones in the wrong and that what happened is what happens when outsiders collide with an indigenous culture.

At the time the Wairau Affray caused significant problems for the New Zealand Company. Just when it was working hard to spread its propaganda to potential settlers that New Zealand was the land of milk and honey and the 'natives' friendly, this event happened. The settlement plan was almost ruined by news headlines in Britain such as 'British citizens being murdered by barbarous natives' ...

The Wairau Affray continues to have a lasting effect today because it altered the way that the Europeans and the authorities dealt with land sales, by attempting to regulate and maintain proper land trading. It was also one of the first cases that upheld the Maori side, instead of the Europeans, and this is still noticeable in Waitangi land disputes today.

Modern day historian Matthew Wright writes 'Today it is easy to condemn [Arthur] Wakefield's behaviour - patronising, laced with colonial-age morality. But the real question is whether his actions were out of line by 19th Century standards. And the answer was simple. They were.'