

CHAPTER 15

CONCLUSIONS

In order to understand what happened to Maori and their lands during the first part of the twentieth century, it is essential to understand what the Maori Land Councils and Maori Land Boards were meant to do, and what they actually did. Until the 1930s, these institutions were the principal instrument by which the policies of successive Governments towards Maori freehold lands were carried out. The common thread running through all of those policies was a determination, usually ardent and occasionally mindless, to put all of New Zealand's lands to productive agricultural use.

At the turn of the century Maori owned a substantial proportion of the 'unused' lands in the North Island, but in most cases lacked the resources to do anything with them. In the political climate of the day, it was imperative that the Government do something about this situation. Basically, three courses of action were open:

- (a) To continue buying Maori land in quantity, as in the 1890s, and pass it on to settlers through the Crown;
- (b) To expedite the leasing of Maori land to settlers; or
- (c) To provide Maori with Government assistance to make productive use of their own lands.

Maori themselves, however, were vehemently opposed to further purchasing by the Crown, while there was little or no support among Europeans for the last option. The result was the compromise which produced the Maori Land Administration Act in 1900, and the Maori Land Council system. But this promising experiment failed. By 1909 the struggling land councils had been converted into the streamlined Maori Land Board system which supervised and facilitated what Brooking has aptly described as 'the ultimate Maori land grab' of the 1910s and 1920s.¹

It is instructive to reflect on what the Maori Land Councils might have achieved if they had been given a few more years to put the land administration system set up in 1900 into operation, and – in particular – if they had been given access to a fraction of the capital made available for Maori land development three decades later. These land councils had their weaknesses, but they were scarcely given a chance to show what could be done with a regime based on voluntary participation by Maori landowners, and administered by institutions in which Maori and the

1. Brooking, 'Liberal Maori Land Policy', p 80. Although he dates this 'grab' to 1912–20, the particular sequence actually started in 1910 and continued into the late twenties after a brief hiatus during the slump which followed the Great War: see Tables II.25 and II.27.

Maori Land Councils and Maori Land Boards

Crown shared in decision-making. They were given no chance at all to show what might have been possible if Maori farming had been given a genuine ‘chance to succeed’ in the early 1900s.²

Active support by the Crown for Maori land development was the one component of the ‘Native Land Board’ system which James Carroll had advocated in the early 1890s, which he was not able to put in place during his distinguished career as New Zealand’s first Native Minister of Maori descent. Its absence was perhaps the fatal flaw in the land administration system which he and Apirana Ngata fought to establish in 1904 to 1909. Although it may well have been inevitable that large quantities of Maori freehold land would be permanently alienated during this period, the absence of a fixed institutional goal of assisting Maori farmers to make productive use of as much of their own land as possible negated most of the benefits which their creators hoped for from the Maori Land Councils and the Maori Land Boards.

2. Brooking, ‘Liberal Maori Land Policy’, p 97