

THE STORY OF TARANAKI

by Hone Rata
(Ngāruahine, Taranaki)



Spring is here. I can feel everything waking around me. I can hear the pīpīwharau singing in my korowai. There is cold snow on my head, but it is beginning to melt. I can feel the awa flowing underneath the snow. I look east. A blanket of cloud surrounds me, but I am tall. I can see over it. I can see the dark outlines of Ruapehu, Tongariro, and Ngāuruhoe far away. Tongariro glares at me. His anger still burns strong.

The sun rises behind my love, Pihanga. She looks like a green jewel rising from the land. I smile at her, and then Tongariro rumbles. I can feel it through the earth. Steam rises from his summit. The steam becomes a cloud that covers the rising sun. It covers Pihanga too. Sadness washes over me.

It seems like only yesterday that I lived in the centre of Te Ika-a-Māui with those other mountains. We would tell stories and play-fight. Ngāuruhoe and Pihanga would laugh at us as we made fools of ourselves. I was called Pukeonaki then. I was young and about to fall in love.

I did not know what I felt at first. I just wanted to spend more time with Pihanga. To talk with her more. I was always looking at her. The green cloak of her forest was beautiful. She was beautiful. Then my friend Rauhoto told me, “You love her, Pukeonaki.” She also said, “But you better watch out – Tongariro loves her, too.” Rauhoto has always guided me well.

As time passed, the play fighting got rougher. Tongariro and I would both try to show Pihanga that we were the strongest and bravest. Sometimes Pihanga would shout at us. She didn't like the fighting. She said that she loved us both and wouldn't choose between us.

But my love only grew stronger. Pihanga and I spent more and more time together. And Tongariro grew jealous. One day, he said, "Pukeonaki, we must settle this. We must fight for Pihanga. Whoever wins will marry her!"

Pihanga frowned. "You cannot win me that way," she said. "I will choose the one I marry!" But we did not listen. I was angry and jealous too. So I accepted the challenge of Tongariro. Pihanga turned her back on us as we prepared to battle.

Tongariro drew great balls of fire and molten rock from the earth. He hurled them at me. My sides became covered with deep cuts and burns. I called lightning and storms from the sky and blasted him over and over.

Ruapehu and Ngāuruhoe cheered us on, excited by the fight. But then they grew silent. We struck each other again and again. The fight lasted all day. Finally, we both grew tired. Our blows were slower and weaker. We drew apart and looked at each other. Our anger hid our pain. Ruapehu and Ngāuruhoe seemed frightened. Pihanga still looked away. I was so weary I could barely stand.





I could see that Tongariro was getting ready for one last attack. Lava boiled in his crater, and thick black smoke poured into the sky. He attacked suddenly, and I was too slow to stop him. His fist cracked a great split in my summit. I was dazed, and he kicked me over.

When my head cleared, Tongariro was standing over me. I knew I was beaten, and I could see Tongariro was still angry. Rauhoto whispered in my ear, "We have to go."

She hurried away towards the west. My legs were shaky, but I followed. My steps cut a great valley in the earth. I could hear Tongariro shouting, "That's right! Go, Pukeonaki! You have lost, and if you come back, I will finish the job!"

I looked back at Pihanga. For a moment, she looked over her shoulder. Her face moved from anger to sadness then back to anger. Then, she looked away again, and my heart broke. Tears ran down my slopes and started to fill the valley.

All through that long night, I followed Rauhoto. She moved west, and then south. My tears flowed so much that I could barely see. They created a great river behind me – the Whanganui. If you look, you will see it still follows my path from Tongariro to the sea.

When Rauhoto reached the coast, she travelled north-west. I followed, but as the sun began to rise, I saw two other mountains inland. They were Pouakai and Patuha. I asked if I could watch the sunrise with them. They let me sit, and I began weeping again. Pouakai put her arms around me as I watched the sun come up behind my old friends. Rauhoto continued to the mouth of the Hangatahua River, where she rested.



So it has been for many years. The people who have come to live here have called me Taranaki. It is my duty to watch over them with Pouakai and Patuha. I still love Pihanga, and I think she still loves me. Rauhoto tells me that I must grow stronger and wiser before I can return to her. But one day, I will. Rauhoto says she will tell me when the time is right. I will march straight back to my friends. And I will fight if I have to. For now, though, I rest and gather my strength. Pouakai says she may not let me go, but I think she will. The love of Pihanga calls me.

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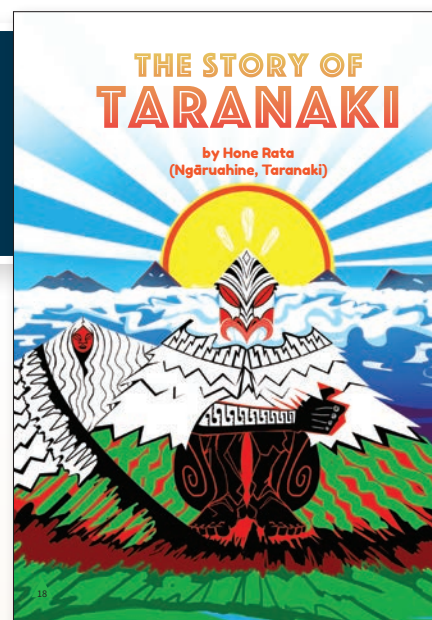
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Published 2020 by the Ministry of Education,
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77663 605 1 (online)
ISSN 2624 3636 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: David Chadwick
Designer: Liz Tui Morris
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 2 AUGUST 2020

Curriculum learning areas

English
Social Sciences

Reading year level

Year 4

Keywords

ancestor, battle, culture, legend, love, Māori, mouna, mountain, myth, Ngauruhoe, story, Pihanga, Pukeonaki, Ruapehu, storytelling, tale, Taranaki, Tongariro, traditional story, volcano