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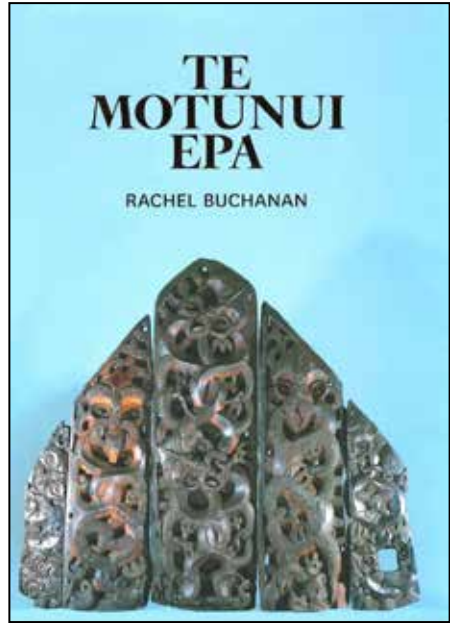
# Award-winning account of a Taranaki taonga's long journey home

*Te Motonui Epa*, by Rachel Buchanan. Wellington: Bridget William Books, 2022. 251 pages. ISBN: 9781990046582.

**T**HE *MOTONUI EPA* is a brilliant account of how five carved panels that were smuggled out of New Zealand were recovered after a long struggle and prompted major reassessments in official attitudes towards preserving Indigenous artefacts.

The story begins during the Musket Wars when Ngāpuhi and Ngāti Whātua rivalry led to clashes in which warriors armed with European weapons fought for dominance in the North Island. As war spread to the Taranaki, Te Ātiawa hapū dismantled their most important public buildings and hid significant pieces in the Peropero swamps.

Among the taonga that were buried were the epa, serpentine figures carved in five tōtara panels, which are at the centre of this story (Figure 1). In Dr Buchanan's telling of this remarkable and complicated story, the epa come alive, watching and waiting as they are whisked around the world by the



people who took them and the auction houses that try to sell them.

It is a testament to the author's writing skills that this conceit works, making the taonga living things and far more than just artefacts. (Indeed there is room here for a consideration of how taonga now fare in museums in New Zealand where their custodians increasingly accord Māori treasures the status of objects imbued with mana and the life they carry on behalf of their iwi. The story of how museums have learned to treat taonga in line with Māori values—and the effect Māori curators have had on museum practice—parallels the long struggle to bring the Taranaki carvings home.) By according the Taranaki carvings the status of witnesses, Buchanan also gives them agency.

In brief, after 150 years in the swamp, the five boards, which once



**Figure 1: The Taranaki epa, serpentine figures carved in five tōtara panels.**

formed part of a storehouse, were re-discovered by accident. A local Māori, Melville Manukonga, took possession of them and after a while sold them to people from overseas who managed to take them out of the country, perhaps hidden in a wardrobe,

Once outside Aotearoa New Zealand they became the object of collectors and were subject to the attentions of auction houses. They eventually passed into the hands of George Ortiz, scion of a wealthy Bolivian family now living in Switzerland. He had amassed a huge collection of objects. All sorts of ludicrous stories were put up to explain the provenance of the objects and justify his possession.

Sharing the centre of the story with the taonga is the New Zealand government and Dr Buchanan's skills as a researcher come to the fore as she traces the story of the government's long fight to recover the Taranaki

material through a trail of documents and papers.

The story is long and complicated, but she manages to present clearly the many legal twists and turns as the government fought its way through the English courts, ultimately going all the way to the House of Lords before failing. Further legal action was planned, but something else occurred: all the publicity meant that when Ortiz tried to sell the Taranaki treasures, nobody would buy. They were locked away in the Geneva Freeport, a notorious and highly protected storage shed for the very wealthy, who use it to hide their Picassos from the tax man (Deutsche Welle, 2019).

The government's initial failure was not for want of trying, but the law at this stage was inadequate and, as the pursuit of the taonga continued, New Zealand found itself at the forefront of the drive to develop legislation that

would protect culturally sensitive material and provide frameworks in which countries might hope to have material returned to them. New Zealand's then Attorney-General, Jim McLay, told a meeting of the Commonwealth Law Ministers in Colombo that effective legal machinery and international co-operation were the only ways to protect cultural property.

The UK opposed such legislation, perhaps mindful of what might happen if they introduced laws that might allow the Greeks to have their day in court in their even longer fight to claim back the Elgin Marbles.

It must be noted that in recent years the British have been willing to hand back other significant treasures, such as the Benin bronzes, which were taken during the British invasion of the Kingdom of Benin (now in Nigeria) in 1897 (Sherwood, 2020).

To find out how the remarkable detective story of the Taranaki epa ends, you will have to read the book.

*Te Motunui Epa* was the joint winner of this year's Ernest Scott Prize.

The prize is awarded annually to the most distinguished written contribution to the history of Australia or New Zealand, or to the history of colonisation.

Dr Buchanan (Taranaki, Te Atia-wa) shared the A\$13,000 prize with Australian historian Alan Atkinson, author of *Elizabeth and John: The Macarthurs of Elizabeth Farm*. The judges said Buchanan's book was grounded in Te Ao Māori and a fine example of modern New Zealand writing.

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