



## NIXON MEMORIAL

### South Auckland, New Zealand

-36.9408, 174.8437



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### Executive Summary

The Colonel Marmaduke George Nixon statue ('Nixon memorial') stands at the intersection of Mangere and Great South roads in Otahuhu, a suburb of South Auckland, New Zealand. A contentious figure in New Zealand colonial history, the suitability of the public-nature of the memorial was called into question in 2017 after a petition was launched to relocate it. The petition drew on contested understandings of New Zealand's colonial history and incited community debate. Despite this, the memorial still stands and questions remain as to what this means for the engagement of New Zealand society and politics with the indigenous Māori population.

## Introduction

The Nixon memorial was unveiled on May 13, 1868 to commemorate Colonel Marmaduke George Nixon (1813 or 1814 – 1864), who served in the British Army and the Colonial Defence Force Cavalry. He is considered a controversial figure in modern New Zealand, especially in terms of his treatment and relationship with the indigenous population. In February 1864, Colonel Nixon led an attack on the Māori settlement of Rangiaowhia,<sup>1</sup> 12 Māori were recorded killed and allegedly burned alive by Colonial troops, and Nixon died as a result of his wounds from the engagement.<sup>2</sup>

In September 2017, Aucklander Shane Te Pou launched a petition to relocate the memorial to the Auckland museum, sparking debate over the legacy of Colonel Nixon.<sup>3</sup> Today, the memorial still stands in South Auckland, though it has raised questions in the community about how Māori are represented in New Zealand's history, and how the country's colonial past should be approached in public spaces. The main points of this contestation surround the disputed legacy of Colonel Nixon, the extent to which the statue represents a symbol of oppression or war atrocities for the Māori, and whether the memorial should be adapted to also educate the public about Māori history.

## Background

### *Colonel Marmaduke George Nixon and the Land Wars*

Marmaduke George Nixon was born in Valletta, Malta in either 1813 or 1814. He graduated from the Royal Military College at Sandhurst in 1831, and served in the British Army until 1851, attaining the rank of Major. He arrived in New Zealand in 1852 and farmed in Mangere, a suburb of Auckland, close to where the memorial currently lies. In 1863, he was appointed the commander of the Colonial Defence Force Cavalry as a Lieutenant-Colonel, which saw action in the Invasion of the Waikato.<sup>4</sup>

On February 6, 1840, the Treaty of Waitangi was signed between the British and the Māori chiefs from the North Island of New Zealand. Article 2 stated that the Māori would retain full chieftainship over their lands, villages, and treasures in return for becoming British subjects, selling land to the British government only (the right of pre-emption), and recognising the sovereignty of the British Crown. The clarity of this message, particularly with respect to the degree of sovereignty the Māori

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<sup>1</sup> The term Māori refers to the indigenous population of New Zealand. One in seven New Zealanders identify as Māori and their history, language and traditions are central to New Zealand's identity.

<sup>2</sup> New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "Nixon memorial, Ōtāhuhu," *New Zealand History*, September 30, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Farah Hancock, "South Auckland's uncomfortable memorial," *newsroom.co.nz*, September 8, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Laurie Barber, "Nixon, Marmaduke George," *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, May 2013.

were to cede by signing the treaty, is contested and thus there remain significant questions over the degree to which eventual signature(s) to the treaty were coerced. The right of pre-emption enabled the British government (the Colonists) to buy large swathes of land for immigrant European settlers, which eventually led to Māori resistance in the form of the Kīngitanga (Māori King Movement).<sup>5</sup> This set the stage for the Ngā pakanga o Aotearoa ('The Great New Zealand wars'), the Land Wars of 1845 to 1872. It was in this context that the campaign for the Invasion of the Waikato (1863-64) and Rangiaowhia, where Colonel Nixon was injured, occurred. One of the key motivations for this battle was to drive the Waikato Māori out of their lands to facilitate European settlement.

On February 21, 1864, Lieutenant-Colonel Nixon's Colonial Defence Force Cavalry of 88 men arrived at Rangiaowhia, the economic heartland of the Kīngitanga. Rangiaowhia's fighting men were still at nearby Pāterangi, which Lieutenant-General Duncan Cameron's force had bypassed overnight. Thus, only elderly warriors, women and children were at Rangiaowhia when Nixon arrived. When Nixon approached one dwelling, those inside shot him. Immediately, the dwelling was shot at and torched, with the women and children inside burned to death. Colonial forces fired on any Māori who attempted to surrender or escape the burning buildings. Even an unarmed elderly Māori man who approached the Colonial forces with a white blanket raised (indicating surrender) was shot despite a Colonial officer's order to 'spare him.'<sup>6</sup> Some reports and letters written at the time detail that many villagers took shelter in the Catholic church; Shots were also fired into the church. Other accounts say that General Cameron allowed them to flee. The Colonists later reported that 12 Māori, and five of their troops had been killed.<sup>7</sup> Nixon was evacuated to his property in Mangere where he was promoted to the rank of Colonel in the month before he died from the injuries.<sup>8</sup> Historian Vincent O'Malley, author of *The Great War for New Zealand, Waikato 1800-2000*, said Rangiaowhia was a refuge for women, children and the elderly: 'I argue that the evidence that people were deliberately torched to death is clear and unambiguous.'<sup>9</sup>

On the morning February 21, 2020, a *karakia* (prayer or incantation) was spoken to begin the commemoration of the attack on the Māori village in 1864. During the 156th anniversary of the atrocity, which takes place annually. On the day students were told stories from women who are descendants of females who survived the attack on Rangiaowhia.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the event conducts a silent walk to the Catholic cemetery near where the attack was held.

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<sup>5</sup> Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "The Treaty in brief," New Zealand History, May 23, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Vincent O'Malley, "Inglorious Dastards: Rangiaowhia raid and the 'great war for New Zealand,'" Noted.co.nz, February 20, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "The invasion continues," New Zealand History, September 3, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Daily Southern Cross, "Promotions in the Colonial Forces," *Daily Southern Cross*, April 30, 1864, Volume XX, Issue 2115.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Johnston, "Story of Waikato village killings leads to annual commemoration of the New Zealand Wars," *New Zealand Herald*, October 27, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Dean Taylor and Caitlan Johnston, "Crowds gathered at Rangiaowhia to commemorate the attack on the village," *New Zealand Herald*, March 10, 2020.

## *The Memorial*

The Nixon Memorial Committee was established after Colonel Nixon's death and proposed various methods of memorial, ranging from a large stone fountain to naming a university scholarship after him.<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the records of the committee meetings show the members largely intended to honour Colonel Nixon's person with a memorial, and they did not once mention the lands or Māori population of Rangiaowhia. A comment by a committee member, Mr. Holt showed that they intended to respect the memory of a 'fellow-colonist, who had lost his life whilst nobly fighting the battles of his adopted country,' suggesting that the Invasion of the Waikato was viewed as noble by the Colonists.<sup>12</sup>

In May 1865, the Committee decided on Ōtāhuhu as a place for the memorial, the initial design was agreed based on Scotland's Wallace memorial and construction began. Three years later, the memorial was inaugurated on May 13, 1868, by Governor George Bowen. The Nixon memorial also commemorates three Colonial Defence Force corporals who died at Rangiaowhia: Horatio Alexander, Joseph Thomas Little, and Edward McHale. On April 25, 1968, 100 years later on Anzac Day, Nixon's remains were transferred from Symonds Street Cemetery to be re-interred at the base of the memorial, and a headstone was erected.<sup>13</sup>

The stone memorial stands at 13 metres tall and features the engraving 'NIXON' over the four pillars in the centre of the structure. Colonel Nixon's remains and headstone lie in front of the memorial. As pictured above, plaques are embedded into the sides of the structure. The North plaque is dedicated to Colonel Nixon and commemorates those that died on the Colonial Defence Force's side in Rangiaowhia. The West plaque commemorates Corporals Edward McHale, Horatio Alexander, and Joseph Thomas Little of the Colonial Defence Force, who also fell in battle at Rangiaowhia. The East plaque is dedicated to those who served in the Colonial Defence Force in the Waikato Campaign of 1864.<sup>14</sup>

## *Legacy of the Treaty of Waitangi*

It is undeniable that the Māori people have suffered under the rule of colonial authorities, especially in regards to how the Treaty of Waitangi was used as a justification for the Colonists to seize land and engage violently with the Kīngitanga in the Land Wars. Though some action has been taken recently to address this (i.e. the 1975 Waitangi Tribunal which heard claims of breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi), tensions continue between the Māori and the descendants of European

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<sup>11</sup> "The Nixon Monument movement. Public meeting," *Daily Southern Cross*, June 30, 1864, Volume XX, Issue 2167.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "Nixon memorial, Ōtāhuhu," New Zealand History, September 30, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "Nixon memorial, Ōtāhuhu," New Zealand History, September 30, 2020.

Colonists surrounding the degree to which colonial legacies are being redressed. Significantly, a number of European descendants have claimed that events such as the Waitangi Tribunal amount to race-based preferential treatment.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, these grievances permeate discussions of race relations in New Zealand, and were catalysed in August 2017 by media coverage of white supremacist and Black Lives Matter rallies in the United States of America.

## History of the Contestation

### *The Petition*

In September 2017, Aucklander Shane Te Pou launched a petition to Auckland's then-mayor Phil Goff to relocate the Nixon memorial to the Auckland museum.<sup>16</sup> In the petition, he claimed that the statue glorified a man who embodied the 'worst of colonial brutality.' Citing the events in Rangiawhia, his petition claims that Nixon 'pursued Māori as prey' in 'one-sided fighting,' and notes that the memorial only pays tribute to the Colonial forces who died in Rangiawhia. He called for the memorial to be relocated to the Auckland museum as it represents a 'Eurocentric historical worldview that inhibits a full reckoning with New Zealand's past.' The petition also rejected any claims that 'removing the statue diminishes our collective historical consciousness.' Noting how Confederate monuments in the United States of America had recently been scrutinised and debated in public, he concluded by asking readers: 'why do we celebrate the life of men like Colonel Nixon who sought out war, and not those who seek peace?'<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Dr. Diane Menzies, a Māori and former president of the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects states that 'the celebration of Nixon as a hero by the obelisk and his burial more recently under it is a very contested matter. Upholding him as a hero seems to applaud his attacks on undefended villages.'<sup>18</sup> Mayor Phil Goff convened a council team to discuss and determine what to do with the memorial and expressed openness to hearing both sides of the story and opening the discussion to the community.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Public's Reaction*

Responses in favour of relocating the memorial point to how the history of New Zealand should include the Māori perspective, and how the memorial is emblematic of a single narrative of history.<sup>20</sup> Further, an online commentary notes how the monument endorses and 'sanitises' the 'atrocities' that occurred in Rangiawhia.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, according to first-hand accounts, Colonial troops deliberately set

<sup>15</sup> "Herald readers debate special treatment for Maori", *NZ Herald*, February 23, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Change.org, "Remove Nixon Memorial, Auckland, NZ," *Change.org*, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Diane Menzies, Case Study Reviewer Comment, June 19, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Farah Hancock, "South Auckland's uncomfortable memorial," *newsroom.co.nz*, September 8, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Maria Slade, "Marmaduke Nixon's statue isn't the problem, it's how we overlook Maori history," *Noted.co.nz*, September 7, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> James Robb, "Marmaduke Nixon and 'Our History'," WordPress, October 16, 2017.

alight buildings, harming innocent Māori individuals.<sup>22</sup> Building on this interpretation, members of the community argue that the memorial holds a symbolic meaning, not only in terms of the regulation of historical narratives, but over the continued control of New Zealand territory and society by European descendents in the present. For them, the memorial represents the power imbalance inflicted on New Zealand society, and arguably, 'the reluctance to consider such a removal is driven by a fear that removal constitutes a challenge to the power of the rulers.'<sup>23</sup>

There was also sentiment for the memorial to remain where it is. A common argument looks to the history of the events in Rangiawhia and seeks to outline how the battle was not an 'atrocity' and/or that Colonel Nixon was not responsible for these events. In particular, such arguments seek to undermine the other side by (re)telling history; one source focused heavily on Mr. Te Pou's comments on New Zealand TV that Colonel Nixon 'rounded up Māori women and children, put them in a church, locked the church and burnt them' and attempted to disprove this by adducing historical accounts of the battle at Rangiawhia which recorded the contrary.<sup>24 25</sup>

Perhaps a more tempered argument against the removal of the memorial is the position that New Zealand's colonial history would be 'sanitised' by moving the memorial into a museum. Paul Moon, a History professor at the Auckland University of Technology, likened removing the memorial to 'burying our heads in the sand' and argued that the past should not be judged by the standards of the present.<sup>26</sup> A descendant of one of the war's survivors (though from which side he descended from is not elaborated), Tom Roa, did not support removing the obelisk so that 'these hidden parts of our history are brought to light' and that conversations about it can be had.<sup>27</sup>

## Decision-Making Processes

As it stands, no decision has been made. The memorial has not been relocated, though the media coverage generated by the petition did create debate about the fate of the memorial and the wider historical legacy of colonialism in New Zealand. In an interview on June 11, 2020, Mr. Te Pou called for a national dialogue about New Zealand's colonial history and noted that New Zealand has very few monuments to its Indigenous culture.<sup>28</sup> Expressing frustration at the pace of developments, he noted that since the Council was convened 3 years ago, he had not been contacted. In particular, he

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<sup>22</sup> Vincent O'Malley, *The Great War for New Zealand: Waikato 1800–2000* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2016), 337–338.

<sup>23</sup> James Robb, "Marmaduke Nixon and 'Our History'," *WordPress*, October 16, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Doutre, "Shane Te Pou, Marmaduke Nixon memorial," September 9, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> James Cowan, *The New Zealand Wars: a History of the Maori Campaigns and the Pioneering Period* (Wellington: Government Printer, 1983), 354–357.

<sup>26</sup> "Removing monument to colonial commander who led attacks in NZ Wars like 'burying our heads in the sand' professor says," *stuff.co.nz*, September 6, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Shane Te Pou, interview by Indira Stewart, *First Up*, Radio New Zealand, June 11, 2020.

noted that whilst his suggestion of an alternative 'narrative' had yet to be displayed in Ōtāhuhu, he remained optimistic that New Zealand was becoming more open to recognising its past.<sup>29</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

Beyond questions of relocating or maintaining the statue, the debate that was sparked by Mr. Te Pou's petition raised questions about how and to what extent Māori history is represented in public spaces, and the place for and purpose of memorials like the Nixon statue, which commemorate key colonial figures and events. It is undeniable that the Māori people have suffered under colonial rule and that the Nixon Memorial pays a one-sided tribute to the fallen in the Colonial Defence Force. However, as there has been no follow-up between Mr. Te Pou and the Auckland authorities about the statue since 2017, the memorial remains in South Auckland, unchanged and unmoved.

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

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## Figures

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[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Otahuhu\\_War\\_Memorial.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Otahuhu_War_Memorial.jpg). (Cover Image)

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