



Creating a Heart Politics for Community Development: The Legacy of Whāea Betty Wark

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Article

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the life and community development work of Whāea Betty Wark (1924-2001). Whāea Betty was a Māori woman who was actively involved with community-based organisations from the 1950s until her death in May 2001. She was one of the founders of Arohanui Incorporated, which was initiated in 1976. Its main purpose was to provide accommodation for young homeless people in need. Betty termed her community development work and activism her 'heart politics'. It was a term that represented her involvement in community grassroots initiatives and the feelings of connectedness she felt with the people and causes she was concerned with.

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a brief overview of the heart politics and community development legacy of Whāea Betty Wark (1924-2001). Whāea Betty's community development work focused on the inner city suburbs of Freemans Bay and Ponsonby within Auckland Central, Aotearoa New Zealand.


Key themes of this paper include how individuals and groups can make a difference to their communities through activism and community development at a grass roots level. The example of Betty Wark's work is very much reflected in this key theme and in particular, her community work with Māori and Māori initiatives. Her community development work and activism were her heart politics. It was a term which represented her involvement in community grassroots initiatives and the feelings of connectedness she felt with the people and the causes she was concerned with.

This article draws from my PhD thesis (Connor, 2006), *Writing ourselves 'home': Biographical texts: a method for contextualizing the lives of wāhine Māori. Locating the story of Betty Wark*. The methodology used throughout the PhD was biographical research. Biographical research acknowledges that the life or lives being researched emerge from a diverse collage of beliefs, socialisations, ethnicities, class backgrounds and cultural meanings (Angrosino, 1989). All personal quotes from Betty that appear in this paper have been taken from interviews conducted for my PhD.

BETTY WARK'S EARLY LIFE AND WHĀNAU 'FAMILY' BACKGROUND

Betty Wark was born on 6 June 1924. Her mother was Māori of Ngā Puhi (a Northland tribe) descent and her father was both Māori and *Pākehā* although he tended to identify as *Pākehā*. Her parents were not married and Betty was raised with several Māori families as a *tamaiti whāngai* and was known by the name of one of her initial foster families, Te Wake. Betty was unclear as to her mother's exact relationship to the Te Wake *whānau*; however, there must have been one for her to be fostered into this particular clan (Connor, 2006). Fostering was a customary extension of the Māori practice of *whanaungatanga* and communal living, and was a relatively common occurrence for many Māori families (Metge, 1995). Betty did not meet her biological parents until her early twenties and she was not familiar with her *whakapapa* until her mid-life.

The ideal of the *tamaiti whāngai* system provided networks where children could belong to the whole *whānau* and be raised in a warm and positive environment. However, as can so frequently happen, the ideal is not always upheld. In Betty's case, she was moved around between various *whānau*, never forming any close and lasting



bonds with mother figures. Her relative isolation placed her at high risk of abuse and the protection she should have experienced as a *tamaiti whāngai* was seriously undermined. Betty was not explicit in stating how many times she experienced sexual abuse. Clearly, it was not a one-off occurrence, and happened several times. What is more evident however, is the ongoing emotional and psychological abuse she experienced in terms of her general neglect and the feelings of being unwanted and unloved. In her later life, she spoke of this abuse as a motivating force for her heart politics.

Betty's sense of cultural identity was fragmented. She knew she was of Māori descent, but as a child her knowledge of things Māori was limited. Although she grew up in the predominantly Māori area of the Hokianga, Northland, and was exposed to Māori language and culture in a peripheral way through practices such as reciting *karakia* in Te Reo Māori and attending functions at local *marae*, the dominant culture was, nevertheless, European. Betty's early childhood was not immersed in *tikanga* Māori as was the childhood of Dame Whina Cooper (also from the Hokianga region), even though one of Betty's initial foster families was connected to Dame Whina.

Betty was raised as Catholic. Māori Catholic leaders in the Hokianga region, such as Heremia Te Wake, father of Dame Whina Cooper and part of the *whānau* in which Betty was fostered as a child, kept the faith alive by instructing children in the beliefs and prayers of the Catholic Church. By the time Betty was born in 1924, Catholicism was an integral element of Māoritanga in the Hokianga region:

I'm Māori and I'm Catholic. In my early years it was the Mill Hill priests who were the main influence on my faith but it was the nuns at Saint Joseph's who were my role models. I used to be quite emotional. If I did any wrong or thought anything wrong, I'd race to the chapel to be forgiven! I learned the answering of the mass in Latin. I tried my best to please them - to be a good Catholic (B. Wark, personal communication, 2 September, 1996).

Māoritanga, for Betty, meant feeling connected to other Māori. It meant feeling complete, and this is how she felt at Saint Joseph's Māori Girls' School, which she attended as a boarder between the ages of thirteen to seventeen. The irony of such an assertion is, however, that the Māori boarding schools of the era in which Betty attended them (1938-1941) have been highly criticised for undermining Māori cultural identity by promoting a policy of assimilation (Simon, 1998). Such criticisms are well-founded, as an examination of the original motivation for establishing the Church boarding schools reveals the 'civilising and assimilating mission' that underpinned them was to 'ensure regular attendance and Christian habits' (Barrington and Beaglehole, 1974, pp. 43-45). Nevertheless, Betty appreciated the special character of Saint Joseph's Māori Girls' College, and she enjoyed meeting other Māori Catholic girls from different parts of the country. Betty credited the nuns at Saint Joseph's with giving her a strong moral base and pride in herself as a Māori Catholic woman, saying 'The nuns were all strong women and I've found a lot of women that have been to Catholic colleges are very strong women. They had a basis for a good life – they were given a good foundation' (B. Wark, personal communication, 2 September, 1996).


MĀORI URBAN MIGRATION AND THE ROOTS OF BETTY'S HEART POLITICS

During World War II, many New Zealand women became pregnant to American servicemen (Bioletti, 1989). Betty was one such woman. Tragically, before she could marry American serviceman Charles Turner, he was killed in action at the battle of Guadalcanal. Betty and Charles' son, Brian, was born in 1944 and was fostered, while Betty moved to Auckland in search of work. She held a variety of jobs, including a ward's maid at Auckland Hospital, a cook, a waitress and filing clerk at the Farmer's Trading Company:

I don't know whether I was very happy because as a rural person coming to the city, I found it very hard. I guess I understand why these young people who come from the rural areas find it hard to live in the city. I didn't find it exciting. I found it a little frightening (ibid).

After the war the urbanization of Māori increased as many Māori moved into small towns and cities to find work. Betty was part of this influx of Māori urbanization. In 1945 there were around 4,903 Māori living in Auckland and by 1951, there were 7,621. The process of urbanization continued to intensify and by the 1960s, Māori had become a predominantly urban people (King, 1981).

In 1948, Betty's second son, Danny was born. Danny's father, an Englishman, returned to England, but Betty decided to stay in New Zealand. Danny was fostered with a family in Waihi. Betty lived in Waihi for two years following Danny's birth and then returned to Auckland in 1950. In 1952 she met and married a Canadian. When Betty decided not to emigrate to Canada her husband returned to Canada alone, leaving his wife and their infant son, Conrad (born 1952), behind. Betty was entitled to a deserted wife's benefit, so she was able to keep baby Conrad with



her. She found rooms in a boarding house in Grafton, an inner city suburb of Auckland, and set about making a home for herself and her son. While living in Grafton Betty met Jim Wark, who would become her second husband and the father of two further sons: Robert (born 1959) and Gary (born 1961). Jim Wark provided the security Betty craved, and together they created the home and family Betty had yearned for all her life. After a number of moves they settled in Herne Bay, central Auckland, in the 1970s.

In the early days of their relationship, Betty and Jim were happy together, but by her late thirties Betty was growing more into what she termed 'her own person'. She became more involved with her community work, and there was an inevitable conflict between her family life and her public life.

Jim was a good man. We stayed together as a family unit until I found my Māoriness. I got involved in the Māori Community Centre during the 1960s and the time of the urban renewal. Jim didn't understand what was happening, although he was very sympathetic towards Māori and knew a lot about Māori history (B. Wark, personal communication, 2 September, 1996).

As Betty's evolving political activism surfaced, there was a concurrent evolution of identity. Such developmental shifts can be construed as a politics of change and a politics of identity, and they can be visualized as a configuration of identity, home, and community. Throughout her early public life, Betty was recreating herself, and had to face several internal struggles between her commitment to her family life and her developing heart politics. 'I had to go look for myself' (B. Wark, personal communication, 9 September, 1996).

Betty first became involved in heart politics when she was living in Freemans Bay in the 1960s. The term heart politics is used provocatively. It is a term which denotes courage and challenge; overcoming one's fears and taking risks. To become involved in heart politics is to become involved in community and grassroots initiatives with a one-pointed commitment to social transformation. Heart politics also means having a feeling of connectedness with the people or the cause you are fighting for. American political activist Fran Peavey elaborates on this with regards to her own heart politics:


Later in my work I began to think of connectedness as a political principle. Even some of our seemingly noblest efforts have a kind of delusion at the centre because they lack heart. If we aren't connected to the people we think we're fighting for, there's an emptiness, a coldness that's at the heart of prejudice - the coldness of separation (Peavey, 1986, p. 8).

Peavey's sentiments can be applied to Betty's work. She felt a connection to both the architecture and the community of Freemans Bay, and this connection prompted her entry into heart politics. Indeed, Betty's biographical narrative politicizes the geography, demography and architecture of the Freemans Bay and Ponsonby communities:

When I was living in Pratt Street, Freemans Bay, I became involved in a group called Freemans Bay Advisory Committee. It was an adviser to the Auckland City Council and one of its major roles was to represent the interests of Auckland City tenants in negotiations, overall rental policies and housing policies generally. In the early 40s and 50s Freemans Bay was very run down - there were a lot of immigrants living there - you had the Irish and a lot of Māori who had come from country areas - it was very much a working class area. Old houses were pulled down and Council promised the people would be allowed back there after they cleaned it up. But it didn't happen. We lost our house. We weren't allowed to put a new roof on because we wouldn't have been compensated for it (B. Wark, personal communication, 4 October, 1996).

Betty spoke of feeling very connected to the Freemans Bay community, and her heart politics was in many ways 'shaped' in relation to the buildings and streets in which she lived at this time. As Mohanty (1988) points out, architecture and the layout of particular towns provide concrete, physical anchoring points. This was the case for Betty. Initially, she felt secure and happy in Freemans Bay, but the very stability and security of her home was undermined by the discovery that the buildings destined for demolition obscured particular race and class struggles. This realisation meant that Freemans Bay became a 'growing up place' for Betty, and came to symbolize her politicization. Her membership on the Freemans Bay Advisory Committee was the catalyst for her future work as a community worker and people's advocate.

During the transition process of the 1950s to the 1970s, when Freemans Bay and other areas of the inner city were experiencing urban renewal, there were also a number of changes to demographic patterns. The common residential unit of the nuclear family was no longer dominant, and there was an overrepresentation of the single person household. The inner city also became a place of high tenancy, with a large percentage of rental



accommodation. The populace also tended to be a transient population of immigrant groups. Māori (who had increasingly become urban dwellers since 1945), and Polynesians (who began immigrating to New Zealand in large numbers in the 1960s) made up a significant proportion of inner city inhabitants during this period (Dodd, 1973).

Betty, Jim and their family had moved into Freemans Bay at a time when it represented to Aucklanders the nearest thing to a slum the welfare state could produce. However, its proximity to employment in the city was noted as an important element in its location, and was a motivating factor behind the rejuvenation of the residential function of the area. By the late 1970s, professional people were buying properties in the area for restoration and renovation, and consequently the property prices rose sharply. Private ownership became more usual in the area, and the supply of rental accommodation declined. Accordingly, many of the working class families were forced to relocate.

Prior to the rejuvenation of the area, however, Freemans Bay was a close-knit community of mainly working-class people. During the 1960s, Betty's heart politics continued to expand as her involvement with the community of Freemans Bay grew. The more she became involved with the Freemans Bay Advisory Committee, the more politicized she became:

It was during that time I got involved in a little politics. I used to go to a lot of Council meetings. I learned a lot. I didn't know much about politics, but through the people I met around Freemans Bay who were very political because most of them worked on the waterfront, I started to look at local politics. I also got involved in the Napier Street School. It was so easy to be involved in Freemans Bay because it was a very close-knit community (B. Wark, personal communication, 4 October, 1996).

Betty was secretary for the Napier Street School Committee for approximately five years. The 1960s also saw Betty become involved in the Māori Women's Welfare League, the Ponsonby Māori Community Centre and the Tenants' Protection Association, an organization set up to advise tenants of their legal rights.

The period of the 1960s when Betty's heart politics was evolving was also a time when her identity as Māori was strengthened. She was an active member of the Ponsonby branch of the Māori Women's Welfare League, an organization established in 1951 with Dame Whina Cooper being the foundation Dominion President (Rogers and Simpson, 1993). The League provided charitable services with the aim of enabling its members to play an effective part in the cultural, social and economic development of the community. It also sought to preserve, revive and maintain the teaching of Māori arts and crafts and the Māori language and culture. Another aim was to promote understanding between women of all ethnicities, and to liaise with other women's organisations, local bodies and government departments on issues of concern to the League such as Māori health, education and housing. Several of the *kuia* at the centre supported and taught Betty, and she formed some very deep and significant bonds with these women who went out of their way to *awhi* and mentor her:

I wanted so much to learn and be with Māori people. I felt the Māori Women's Welfare League was important. It supported the whānau and it was concerned about Māori Health. Whina Cooper had got it going and she came from Pungaru, the next settlement around from where I grew up in the Hokianga. I met her again during the Māori Women's Welfare League survey on housing in the Freemans Bay area. She initiated the survey because a lot of people lived in a transit camp down at Victoria Park and she got people to apply for either a Māori Affairs housing or State Advances housing loan and she got a lot of them houses in Glen Innes. Glen Innes was the place at the time. Whina pushed me to help raise money for Te Unga Waka Marae. I wasn't confident at all you know but she used to pull me in (B. Wark, personal communication, 4 October, 1996).

Betty's involvement with Te Unga Waka, Catholic Marae, provided an effective way for her to participate in the Catholic Church as it was another way of nourishing her Māori identity and at the same time her identity as Catholic. Betty's links with the Church were also helpful in accessing charitable assistance for the increasing number of young, unemployed people for whom she continued to find accommodation.

In 1974 Betty helped set up Arohanui Incorporated, a community based organisation which provided housing and assistance to young persons referred from the courts, prisons, Social Welfare and other sources. In 1976 Betty left her marital home and moved into one of the Arohanui Trust hostels as a house-mother, though she maintained an enduring friendship with Jim Wark for the remainder of her life. When Betty left the marriage, her three younger sons were no longer overly dependent on her and Jim. Conrad was aged twenty-four and had already left home; Robert and Gary were aged seventeen and fifteen respectively. Betty maintained very close contact with Jim and the boys and her youngest son Gary eventually joined his mother in her work at Arohanui.

Arohanui was formed as a community development response to a community problem. The main focus for Betty and the other trustees and workers at Arohanui was to maintain a positive environment for the residents. One of Betty's closet work colleagues during the 1970s and 1980s was Fred Ellis. Fred and Betty would patrol the streets during the winter nights taking creamed mussel soup and scones to 'street kids' urging them to make contact with Arohanui. Many would follow up on the invitation and would contact Betty or Fred. Some were either reunited with whānau or alternative accommodation was found for them.

As Arohanui grew and began applying for government funding, the Trust also began offering formalised programmes such as instruction in literacy and numeracy. In addition Arohanui strengthened its Māori culture and language programmes and introduced some innovative health and exercise programmes which used Eastern martial arts and Māori weaponry training. Betty maintained an avid interest in alternative learning and ways to turn Arohanui residents on to education. She also maintained an interest in reviving traditional Māori models of teaching, as well as learning about new developments within Māoridom. Betty's openness to exploring and trialling alternative education also extended to investigating alternative treatments for drug and alcohol addiction. Over the years a large proportion of Arohanui's residents had problems with addiction and the abuse of solvents, drugs and alcohol. Various programmes were investigated to assist the residents including the Scientology programme, Narcanon, which appeared to offer some practical and productive solutions.

Betty's growing media profile publicised her work and widened her networks, and she became skilled at gaining publicity for causes dear to her heart politics. In February 1976, there was wide media coverage of the occupation of Tole Street Reserve in Ponsonby by tent dwellers. This was a protest organised by Betty, and succeeded in highlighting housing issues and securing further hostel accommodation. Housing the homeless and utilising buildings to their full extent became a passion of Betty's.

The Tole Street tent 'village' kept going for several months while Betty continued to look for suitable accommodation to house the group. The group also actively sought work:

While we were in the tents we formed a group called the Ponsonby Labour Co-op and we had people that lived in Ponsonby, people from different church organisations - we had the Baha'i, the Young Catholic Workers and some others who decided to do something and we went out looking for jobs; every morning the work co-op would sell their labour so we could eat (B. Wark, personal communication, 4 October, 1996).

Figure 1. Tole Street Tent Protest, Ponsonby, Auckland 1976. Private collection of Helene Connor. (Photo appeared in the 8 O'clock Newspaper, February 21, 1976).

Betty's commitment to ordinary working class people on lower and moderate incomes and her involvement in the local affairs of the Freemans Bay and Ponsonby communities led her to stand for election on the Auckland City Council. Betty served on the Auckland City Council from 1986 to 1989.

Betty was sixty-three years old when she stood for Council. At a time when most of her peers were thinking about retirement, she had taken on another challenge. Her venture into local politics in later life was, however, something that was relatively predictable. As Sheehy (1978) states, 'secondary interests that have been tapped earlier in life can in middle and old age blossom into a serious lifework. Each tap into a new vessel releases in the later years another reservoir of energy' (p. 497).

Betty's interest in local affairs had developed in her late thirties as her heart politics evolved. Heart politics requires courage and overcoming one's fears and taking risks. During the early heart politics years, when she was becoming involved in community initiatives such as the Tenants' Protection Association, Citizens' Advice Bureau and the Māori Women's Welfare League, she was literally paving the way for her more serious life's work: Arohanui Incorporated. The move into local politics seemed like a natural progression at this phase of her life and a way to



promote Arohanui. To use Sheehy's analogy, by tapping into the new vessel, which in Betty's case was local government, this, in turn, released another reservoir of energy in Betty's later years.

Figure 2. Betty Wark in Western Park, Ponsonby, Auckland. Photographed by Helene Connor, June 4, 2000. Private collection of Helene Connor.



CONCLUSION

Betty's narrative, like all biographical narratives, is filled with multiple stories and layers of stories within stories. A significant personal narrative which underpinned much of Betty's biography was the story of the childhood abuse she experienced. The anger and shame she felt about her childhood never left her. Throughout the interview sessions she would say: 'It's always there, it's always there' (B. Wark, personal communication, 12 August, 1996). These experiences left an indelible mark on her psyche and were part of who she was, though Betty rarely spoke about them. She did not belong to the therapy generation, and in her own words: 'I never heard the word "abuse" as a child' (ibid.). During the interviews for the biographical research project which formed part of my PhD, she began reflecting on the point in her life when she learned to channel her anger. Throughout the biographical interview sessions, Betty retrospectively relived these experiences as she narrated her story. She felt it was important for readers of her biography to know the history of her life in order to make sense of who she was and what motivated her to do the work she did. By locating herself within a narrative that outlined the triumph of the human soul in the face of adversity, Betty wanted to give hope to others who had similar personal experiences. It was important for her to share these experiences within the Māori community where she had been a role model to many; it was important for her to share her heart politics and the legacy of her community development work.

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GLOSSARY OF MĀORI TERMS AND ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

Arohanui	Literal rendering signifying deep affection and love
Aotearoa	A general Māori term for New Zealand – sometimes translated as ‘land of the long white cloud’. The Māori name for the North Island of New Zealand is Te Ika-a-Māui and the Māori name for the South Island is Te Waipounamu.
Awhi	Support and assist
Iwi	Tribe, extended kinship
Karakia	Incantation, prayer, chant
Kuia	Older woman, woman elder
Māori	Māori are the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa
Māoritanga	Māori culture and perspectives on Māori values and society
Marae	Area in front of the wharenui, (large house) where formal greetings and discussions take place
Pākehā	New Zealanders of European descent
Tamaiti whāngai	Foster child, adopted child
Tikanga	Cultural practices
Wāhine Māori	Māori women
Whāea	Mother or aunt
Whakapapa	Genealogy, genealogies
Whānau	Family, group of people connected by kinship
Whanaungatanga	Extended family, relationship through working together

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