

Bellyboarding in New Zealand. From Māori times to the 1950s



'Tasman rollers pound the shore at Auckland's Piha Beach while swimmers revel in the foaming surf'
Taken from the supplement to the *Auckland Weekly News* 13 December 1939 p044,
'Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, AWNS-19391213-44-1'.



On the right is Reg Watchman's board surfed at Waikanae Waters.
This board was made in 1947 by Henderson and Pollard, a joinery firm
Source: Tairāwhiti Museum, Gisborne.

Accounts of Māori surfing

Bellyboards have had a long history of use in New Zealand. The Māori surfed on small wooden boards (Best 1924). Surf riding (Whakahekeheke) was said to be practised in small canoes and on small boards. Both craft were referred to as kopapa (or a moki in the northern area). Best (1924) wrote: "The board, or piece of plank (also termed a kopapa so often used in this sport was about three feet long. Having gone out as far as

necessary for the purpose, the performer threw himself lengthways on his board with his two hands grasping the front end thereof, just as a large, healthy wave overtook him. On this wave the rider was shot ashore to be left on the sandy beach by the receding wave, whereupon he would go out again to ride another in. This sport was indulged in by both youths and adults, including females, and one might see thirty or forty riders coming in together on a big wave. Sometimes a performer dispensed with the board and rode in on the wave with his arms stretched out before him" (page 21).

In his book Best cites an anecdote by Matutaera (Tuta) Nihoniho (1850-1914) of the Ngati-Porou tribe regarding canoe surfing. Nihoniho is reported to have been born at Whareponga, near Waipiro Bay ([biographical information](#)). Te Haumihia Mason (2011) advises: "The word 'whakahekeheke is a verb meaning to surf ride. 'Kua haere ki te whakahekeheke' means he's gone surf riding'. So does whakaheke ngaru - the word 'ngaru' means waves. 'Kua haere ki te whakaheke ngaru' literally means 'he's gone to ride the waves. The Māori word for a surf board is 'kōpapa'and sometimes just 'papa'. The word 'papa'is also the word for a plank or a slab of timber. They're all related terms really in terms of language. Any sled or toboggan type thing would also have been made from slabs of timber or just a branch really, and in terms of sporting activities used to toboggan down hillsides, probably a practise much like the people of Rapanui have revived in recent times".

Other accounts of Māori surfing include the following:

S. Percy Smith (1921).The use of the Surf Board in New Zealand. *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, XXX, No. 117. Page 50. [305] It has been pointed out to me that nowhere in the literature relating to the Maoris of New Zealand is there any mention of the use of the surf board among them. While the Maoris did not use this form of amusement to the same extent as some other branches of the Polynesians the Hawaiians, for instance it was certainly practised sixty to seventy years ago, and probably is so still when the beaches are suitable. I have myself seen dozens of young Maoris indulging in the sport on the Taranaki coast, and have heard of it being a popular amusement in the Bay of Plenty. The boards used were about six feet long by about nine inches wide. One end of the board was held at the pit of the stomach, with the arms extended towards the other end, the hands grasping the sides of the board. The performer would swim out beyond the breakers and watching his opportunity as the wave broke would be hurled along by the breaking wave into the shallow water. The game was called whakaheke-ngaru, identical with the Tahitian name fa'ahe'e-'aru for the same thing. It is questionable if the Maoris ever used boards so large as the Hawaiians on which a man could stand upright. I can say from experience that it is a most exhilarating pastime.

Beattie, H. (1919). *Traditions and legends. Collected from the natives of Murihiku*. (Southland, New Zealand) Part XI, pages 212-225

SWIMMING.

The question of aquatic sports cropped up in conversation with the old men, and here is what they said:- "When a Maori swam, with his shoulders out, we called it, 'He kau tu.' Sometimes the young people would assemble on the bank and one would call out 'ka ruku taua,' and they would all dive together."

"There were two kinds of swimming our old people did as far as I know. One was with the body upright and working the legs, and the other was on the side with only the side of the head showing. At Ruapuke there were no surf beaches. The people swam in freshwater lagoons; the men and women bathed together."

"Swimming was called kau. The younger people would bathe in the sea; the older ones preferred the warmer water of the lagoons. At Ruapuke there was no bathing in the open sea-the people bathed in the Tau-o-te-maku lagoon but not in the one called Wai-o-to-karire." (It was haunted-see supra.)

"The Rapuwai people when swimming lay on their bellies with their elbows close to their sides, and hit the water with their hands-hence their name. The old Maori way was to swim like a walk in the water with the water up to the armpits. You worked with your legs and elbows, and it was surprising how fast one could go. This style was called kau-po."

"When I was a boy I saw three kinds of Maori swimming-kau-tu, swimming upright; kau-tahi, swimming lying on the side; and kau-tuara, swimming lying on the back."

SURF-BATHING.

At least four of the old men mentioned the sport of surfing, as follows:-"The young Maoris would swim out with a short board, put it under the chest and shoot in on the waves. I remember round at Kakararua (Hunt's Beach, Westland) we were at it, and a white man named Baker would try it. He was a big, heavy man, and when he came in his board struck the shore and almost stunned him. His chest was rather severely hurt."

"The board used in surfing was called a papa, and it requires certain practice to use it. You must keep the end of it up just as you reach the beach or it will dig into the sand and perhaps break your ribs. The board was about four feet long perhaps, and came in like an arrow. I was round at the West Coast diggings, and the beaches there are very suitable for it. Another sport was when the boys would take a tawai (a kind of canoe) out and come in through the surf. They would capsize sometimes but that was all the more fun."

"I never saw the sport of surfing, but know that a papa or surf-board was used. I have heard that in the whaling days old Takata-huruhuru went surfing in the bay at Port Molyneux. He was a descendant of the people who came south in the Makawhiu canoe."

The late Tare te Maiharoa said:-"Take kelp off the rocks and dry it as for pohas or kelp bags [to preserve birds in]. Take two of these bags and tie them together about two feet apart. Blow them up, and having got them out beyond the surf, put one on each side of you from the armpits to the hips, lie on the flax connecting them, and come in with the breakers. It is fine sport and you cannot drown. This was an old pastime at Moeraki, Waikouaiti, and other good beaches, and was called para. (He pronounced it pāla) In the old Maori days there were very few sharks about-they have only come in any numbers since the European fishermen throw the fish-heads back into the sea."

The names papa and para are interesting. The collector looked up Tregear's Dictionary, and in it he notes that in Hawaii a surf-board is called papa, and in Tahiti it is named papahoro. As for para the nearest appropriate meaning seems to be "the half of a tree which has been split down the middle" (and hence may be cut down into a surf-board) but perhaps Maori scholars could help to explain the term para.

Skinner, W. H. (1923). Surf-riding by canoe, *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, XXXII, 125, page 35-37.

DURING the Summer of 1884, the writer was engaged upon the survey of the costal lands lying between the Mokau and Awakino rivers-Auckland-Taranaki Coast. A small native settlement, called Te Kauri, was situated on the north bank of the Mokau, adjacent to the ferry route over that river, and here resided what was left, about thirty, of that portion of the once numerous body of the Ngati-Maniapoto tribe that occupied the fertile strip of costal lands between the two rivers mentioned, during the first half of the 19th century, and the generations beyond. The large number of strongly posted old pas, long deserted, and now only traceable by their deep fosses and protective works, bears ample testimony to the large population that once occupied this country, an occupation that went back to the Tangata-Whenua, who were settled here and to the south, long prior to the coming of the "Tainui," with the ancestors of the present native occupiers.

The active head of Te Kauri village was Wetere Te-Rerenga, but the elder brother, Te Rangi Tuataka Takeri, [1] was the real chief of the little settlement, and his final word was law in all matters of ancient Maori rite and custom.

One beautiful day in January, 1884, I had come in from my camp to confer with Te Rangi. The Kauri village was deserted by all but a few old women, who informed me that the people were on the sea beach, a short distance away. On arriving there I found the whole population gathered, taking part in, or watching and encouraging the contending parties, in a most exhilarating sport, or pastime, that was proceeding at the mouth of the river (Mokau). The leader in this animated scene was Te Rangi, a man at this time about sixty years of age, well set up and preserved.

The sport engaged in was "surf-riding" in canoes, something quite new to me. Two small handy canoes, varying in length from eighteen to twenty-five feet, were being used, in each of which were two paddlers, the steersman, and one in the prow. The position chosen for the "surf-riding" was ideal for the purpose, and here, doubtless for generations past, the old time Maori had indulged in this sport. This canoe running had to be taken at a certain time of the tide-about three-quarter flood-to fit in with the locality chosen (or similarly situated positions). The condition of the sea, too heavy, or insufficient break, also had to be considered. This in fact was essential.

On the occasion I am writing about-January, 1884-the day was beautifully fine, the tide about three-quarter flood, and the sea comparatively smooth outside, with an accompanying light break or roll over the bar, a quarter to one-third of a mile seaward. The bar had the effect of breaking up and reducing the ocean roll to a negotiable size for the small canoes to ride on, by the time the wave reached the "surfing" course which ran along abreast of the sand spit, forming the north side of river bank in this locality.

I arrived on the scene just in time to witness Rangi and his partner launch out for a "run." Having got his canoe into the desired position, he awaited a suitable oncoming roller, just keeping a slight forward movement on the craft until the roll had approached within a few yards of the stern of the canoe, when the steersman gave a short word of command, and the two plunged their paddles into the tide, and with a few powerful strokes got the required "way" on to enable it to be taken up by the roller as it caught the stern of the canoe. The rest was left to the action of the wave, and the steersman. The canoe, if properly handled, was now rushing through the tide, keeping just roughly a little short of its own length in advance of the wave, with a cascade of water thrown off from either side of the prow, its expert helmsman, as rigid as one cast in bronze, watching intently the gradual curling of the roller (the bowman inactive, with paddle drawn in), until at the moment he judges the time has come, with a swift twist or turn of his paddle (a movement so deft and graceful that it could scarce be detected by those watching close at hand) the canoe was turned sharply to the right, the wave breaking as it passed beneath its keel, and riding gracefully down the outer slope of roller, turned seaward to repeat the manoeuvre. Had the steersman misjudged his time for turning by a fraction of time, disaster would have followed, and herein lay the skill of the surfcanoer. Rangi never made a mistake in this respect, but time and again the other less skilful gamesters, some of whom were women, misjudged the time when the wave would break, and running on just a fraction too long, were driven prow under and swamped, or caught on the turn by the breaking wave and capsized, in either case the occupants of canoe receiving a thorough ducking, to the great amusement of the crowd of onlookers. The swamped canoe was brought ashore, bailed and refitted, and set off again with another pair of "surfers" to try their skill, or luck, in this exciting game.

The most lasting impression made on my mind in this surfing incident, was that of the poise and skill of Te Rangi Tuataka Takere, the high-born rangitara, as he sat statue like, steering-paddle firmly grasped, his fine muscular figure and clean cut tattooed features, reproducing, with the general surroundings, a grand picture of pure Maoridom as it had been for centuries prior to A.D. 1884. Alas! that we were to witness such a scene never again.

[1] For the genealogies of these brothers see page 667 (Appendix) of Tregear's "*Maori-Polynesian Comparative Dictionary*."



Photo by Stanley Davis.
Alexander Turnbull Library collection,
Wellington, New Zealand.



Piha 'bathing girls'
From the supplement to the Auckland Weekly News
13 December 1939 p.42.
Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries.

Duke Kahanamoku and after

In 1915 Duke Kahanamoku visited New Zealand and gave surfing demonstrations at New Brighton (Christchurch), Lyall Bay (Wellington) and Muriwai (Auckland). A photograph from this trip shows him lying prone at New Brighton beach. The board ridden at New Brighton was reported to be "almost a plank, used by lifesavers and the waves were very very poor and sloppy for standing" (Sandra K. Hall e-mail communication March 20, 2012). For more on the trip see Hall, S.K. (2008). *Mana, Rangitira. The Legacy of Duke Kahanamoku's Visit to New Zealand*. *The Surfers Journal*, 17, 2, 10-11 and Osmond, G. (2010). 'Honolulu Māori'. *Racial dimensions of Duke Kahanamoku's tour of Australia and New Zealand, 1914–1915*. *New Zealand Journal of History*, 44, 1, 22-34.

[Duke Kahanamoku - A surfing demonstration](#). 'During his New Zealand tour, Duke Kahanamoku gave surfing demonstrations at Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. This photograph shows him either body surfing or preparing to stand on a board in the surf at New Brighton beach, Christchurch'. 1915. *The rise of surfing* (Page 4). Reference: 1923.53.434, Canterbury Museum, Canterbury Times Collection

In 1917, Colonel Charles Guy Powles while serving in the New Zealand Mounted Rifles was photographed with a wooden surfboard at Marakeba. Marakeba doesn't appear on modern maps but is likely to be on the El Arish - Rafah Road, Palestine (Steve Butler - e-mail December 12, 2011).

[Colonel Charles Guy Powles surfing at Marakeba](#). 'Part of: Powles family :Photographs / Album recording World War 1914-1918 campaigns in the Middle East. Photograph taken September 1917 by an unknown photographer. Toned silver gelatin print 7 x 11.5 cm. Ref: PA1-o-813-20-1. Alexander Turnbull Library.

From the 1930s and 1940s numerous photographs survive of men, women and children with surfboards. Photographs survive of surfing at Otaki Beach (near Wellington), Christchurch, Gisborne, Tahunanui (Nelson), Waipu Cove and Piha. An interesting 1929 photograph of Russell Middlebrook with a board is accompanied by a note: "The mill houses were gradually demolished by visitors who used the twenty-inch wide boards for surfboards." (Piha : a history in images by Sandra Coney, 1997, p.73). While the board appears to be an unshaped rectangular piece of wood (about neck height) by 1937 boards had rounded noses and scooped, fish tails. The Tairāwhiti Museum, Gisborne contains a redwood bellyboard with scooped deck (and scooped-fish tail), hired out by Gisborne surf club in the 1930s. The board was reported to have been given to the club by a surfer who had lived in Hawaii.

On-line photo archives are a rich source of information about early surfing. In New Zealand libraries and museums have on-line photo collections. The links below are to collections from New Zealand. Because some photos have copyright restrictions, links are provided rather than the actual photos.

[Swimmers in the surf, possibly at a Wellington beach](#). Henry Thomson lantern slide, circa 1900. File Reference CCL PhotoCD 3, IMG0010. Christchurch City Libraries

[Through the wonder country. New Zealand invites you](#). 'Shows young woman in bathing costume, hands resting on surfboard, looking over bay with cliffs. Gannets stand at left foreground, a yacht sails on the sea, and a train winds around the clifftop. Name of artist given on last page of booklet. Quantity: 1 colour photo-mechanical print(s) on brochure'. Davis, Stanley, 1882?-1938 :Through the wonder country, New Zealand invites you. New Zealand Railways. [1924]. Ref: Eph-A-RAIL-1924-01-cover. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

[Body surfing, Port Waikato, 1925](#). 'Body surfers on the ocean beach at Port Waikato, February 1925. The man on the right is holding what seems to be a short custom-made body board with a chrome handle.' Photo by Bettany, Arnold C. ('Bet'), 8 February 1925. Auckland Libraries.

[Otaki Beach](#) 'Otaki Beach (between Wellington and Levin) - December 1926-January 1928'. Photographer: Adkin, Leslie 26.12.1927. Registration Number B.022122, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

[Russell Middlebrook outside school](#). 'Russell Middlebrook standing outside a wooden building at Piha with surf board' - 1929. "The mill houses were gradually demolished by visitors who used the twenty-inch wide boards for surfboards." (Piha : a history in images by Sandra Coney, 1997, p.73. "Russell Middlebrook was king of the old school-house". (ibid. p.72). Middlebrook, Russell, 1908-1999 (photographer) and John Middlebrook. J. T. Diamond Collection, Waitakere Central Library (Henderson, Auckland)

[Surfers and swimmers. New Brighton beach, Christchurch](#). 'Photographer unidentified, circa 1930. The Press (Newspaper) :Negatives. Ref: 1/2-040808-G, Alexander Turnbull Library

[Surfing enthusiasts entering the West coast breakers](#) Taken from the supplement to the Auckland Weekly News 11 December 1935 p055'. 'Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, AWNS-19361223-42-1'

[Enjoying the surf and sunshine at Piha, favourite Auckland west coast beach](#) Taken from the supplement to the Auckland Weekly News 23 December 1936 p042'. 'Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, AWNS-19361223-42-1'

[Woman with surfboard](#) 'Female surfer on beach with surfboard in hand'. Photograph by Adkin, Leslie: 01.01.1937. Registration Number A.006267. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

[Woman with surfboard](#) 'Female surfer on beach with surfboard in upright position'. Photograph by Adkin, Leslie: 01.01.1937. Registration Number A.006269. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

[Woman with surfboard](#) 'View of female surfer (holding surfboard) and other people by the water'. Photograph by Adkin, Leslie: 01.01.1937. Registration Number A.006270. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

[A view at the Mouth as surfers enjoy the breakers](#) Taken from the supplement to the Auckland Weekly News 18 January 1939 p048'. 'Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, AWNS-19390118-48-1'

[Surfing girls at Piha](#) Taken from the supplement to the Auckland Weekly News 13 December 1939 p042'. 'Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, AWNS-19391213-42-1'

[Tasman rollers pound the shore at Auckland's Piha Beach while swimmers revel in the foaming surf](#) Taken from the supplement to the Auckland Weekly News 13 December 1939 p044, 'Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, AWNS-19391213-44-1'.

[Solid wood surfboards](#) Before the Second World War, some people attempted to surf using rudimentary boards made of solid wood. These men were photographed at Tahunanui, Nelson. Ministry for Culture and Heritage. Reference: 160970/6, Nelson Provincial Museum, Kingsford Collection

[Piha](#) View out to sea, figures swimming in the surf. 1940s. From original cellulose acetate negatives, N.Z. Herald collection. Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira.

[Piha](#) View out to sea, figures swimming in the surf, Lion Rock in the distance. 1940s. From original cellulose acetate negatives, N.Z. Herald collection. Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira.

[Piha](#) View out to sea, figures swimming in the surf, Lion Rock in the distance. 1940s. From original cellulose acetate negatives, N.Z. Herald collection. Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira.

[Fun in the surf at Bethell's](#) 'Fun in the surf at Bethell's, on Auckland's rugged west coast'. Taken from the supplement to the Auckland Weekly News 28 January, 1942 p026. 'Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, AWNS-19420128-26-1'.

[Soldiers enjoy a swim in the surf during an off-duty period](#) Taken from the supplement to the Auckland Weekly News 24 March 1943 p017. AWNS-19430324-17-1, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries.

[New Zealand soldiers enjoy surf bathing in New Caledonia. Surfer is riding a board with "No parking" on it.](#) Taken from the supplement to the Auckland Weekly News 30 June 1943 p01. AWNS-19430630-19-10, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries.

[Girl surfer with board.](#) 'A woman surfer holding her surf board is standing in shallow water on the sea edge at Piha', 1944 . Photographer: Hooker, Isabel, 1915-1948. J. T. Diamond Collection. Image ID JTD-04K-03134, Waitakere Central Library (Henderson, Auckland)

[Russell trip.](#) 'Swimmers riding waves behind surf boards' Waipu Cove, 1947. N.Z. Herald Collection, Negative Number: H749. Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira.

[Russell trip.](#) 'Swimmers riding waves behind surf boards' Waipu Cove, 1947. N.Z. Herald Collection, Negative Number: H749. Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira.

[Summer Child Studies series, unidentified boy, with a surfboard.](#) Photograph taken by Whites Aviation, 1947. Ref: WA-10164-G, Alexander Turnbull Library.

[Some members of D company photographed on Nissan](#) Sugden, A. H. L. Pacific Saga: the Personal Chronicle of the 37th Battalion and its Part in the Third Division's Campaign. Chapter Nine - Garrison Duty on Vella Lavella. New Zealand Electronic Text Centre. Victoria University of Wellington Library of Victoria University.

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