

Two Art Treasures and Taonga travel to the Capital This Month

by Scott Pothan



In New Zealand/Aotearoa we have never celebrated beautiful talented and noble women as we should. Artists in Europe and America in the late 19th century and early 20th century queued and bribed to have the most famous beauties of their day sit in their studios for a portrait to exhibit in their annual exhibitions. Actresses and divas like Lily Lantry, Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt were painted often by equally sought after artists like George F. Watts, Giovanni Boldini and John Singer Sarjeant.

Captain Gilbert Mair's wife, Eleanor Katherine Sperrey, 20 years younger than the dashing and decorated soldier, was a well known beauty in her brief life. And in her long and distinguished life too, Harata Rewiri Tarapata was a women of *mana* and beauty, wife of a paramount chief of Auckland Tuhaere and painted at least 11 times by Charles Goldie right up until she died in 1911. This is the story of two historical beauties of authority and wisdom, an artist and an artist's muse, and their journeys and connections to the Whangarei Art Museum collection.



Two of our district's famously manly 'swash-buckling' war heroes were also connected to the two foundational gifts of art to the city collection in the 1920's. Captain Gilbert Mair NZC was one of our most famous sons in Whangarei, certainly one of the first *pakeha* to be born in the early pioneer settlement at the family homestead 'Deveron' in 1843. Mair was to become Te Kooti's most celebrated opponent and the saviour of Ohinemutu. He gifted two significant paintings to the Whangarei Borough in 1922 by his late wife, the artist Kate Sperrey had who died tragically in Gilbert's arms. He bequeathed these in her memory and in regard for the city of his birth.

Lt.Colonel Charles Mackesy CB DSO CMG was a survivor of the first Allied landings at ANZAC Cove Gallipoli in April 1915 and led the Auckland Mounted Rifles in that suicidal horror. He owned a very large farming property near Whangarei and was courting the Whangarei artist Adele Youngusband in the early 1920's. She chose not to accept his marriage proposal for the sake of her two sons as she did not want them packed off to boarding school by a regimental step-father. He was an elected member of the Whangarei Borough Council at the time she founded the Whangarei Arts and Literary Society in 1921 and may have been responsible for encouraging the other two founding gifts made by the society in 1923 to the city of paintings by Robert Procter and George Woolley. Youngusband herself later made a substantial gift of paintings to the city in 1954 and again a larger gift in 1969 by her son Terry Youngusband in her own memory. Later in life he spoke of his mother's celebrated lover, how she had saved her sons from the boisterous outspoken Colonel and

subsequently declined a fortune in inheritance just as the Great Depression was about to bite so deeply into the national psyche.

This month two highly important paintings from the Heritage Collection at the art museum are receiving high profile treatment and exposure, being raised from relative obscurity at home to celebrity status in Wellington. One of these paintings appears on the new TVNZ **Tales of Te Papa** program and the other features prominently in a major exhibition due to be opened in November by the Prime Minister the Rt. Hon. John Key at the **New Zealand National Portrait Gallery**. These two paintings include one of the earliest in the collection and a much more recent acquisition. The first of these, "Sir George Grey" by Kate Sperrey is signed in her married name E.K. Mair and was painted in 1891. The other painting which was filmed for the second series of **Tales of Te Papa** this month, is Charles F. Goldie's "Maori Woman – Harata Rewiri Tarapata" 1904. Neither of these paintings have received much public exposure nationally before, although they are both prized cultural objects and are portraits depicting significant protagonists of our national identity in the late 19th century. The portrait of Sir George Grey, Premier and Governor of New Zealand painted in his seventies, was one of the very few portraits he is known to have actually sat for in a studio. He reportedly hated sitting for artists and it is indicative of the regard he had for Captain Mair and his wife that he did so.

Having been invited in the past to talk about these two paintings and their fascinating journeys over the past century it seems appropriate to share their stories.

Eleanor Katherine Sperrey (1862-1893), as she was known, was a remarkably dedicated and able artist and one of our first New Zealanders to study art professionally abroad. In fact she was only the second to do so. Dorothy Kate Richmond was the first, gaining a scholarship to study at the Slade in London in 1878, and a couple of years later Sperrey followed her lead to study in Rome under Giuseppe Ferrari. Both these women pre-empted a legion of artists to study overseas from that point on including Frances Hodgkins. Another of those to follow her career path to study in the high citadels of art in Europe was Charles Frederick Goldie who sailed to Paris to study in 1892. Both Goldie and Sperrey had the good fortune to have been born into affluent family circumstances, but Sperrey endured all the Victorian prejudices borne of her gender too.

It seems to be one of our great kiwi myths that the pioneer period was a male-dominated domain of stoic anti-intellectual disdain. Aspects of *tikanga maori* which to some today, seem so far removed from contemporary *pakeha* understanding, are in fact indicative of how far we have removed ourselves from our own Victorian values of our colonial past. Respect for the wisdom of age and experience and ancestry, and the rituals of mourning, familial integrity, philanthropy and the concept of heirlooms passed from generation to generation have been subsumed by relentless and recklessly acquisitive contemporary values. The values of custodianship, respect for the life-force of the natural and spiritual worlds were actually core Victorian values for our ancestors, and were not so far removed from very similar values of *tangata whenua* in New Zealand then and now.

In fact Whangarei was bustling with cultural activity and creativity in the early 20th century, with the Whangarei Operatic Society and the Whangarei Arts and Literary Society hosting regular events. The Robert Mair and Eugene Caffer household among others regularly held cultural events which were enthusiastically reported in the Northern Advocate at the time. Beatrix Dobie and Jane Mander and Kate

Sperrey's daughter the Hon. Kitty Vane were strong-willed women like Adele Younghusband, all from Whangarei who travelled the world and repeatedly returned in determined pursuit of their art and fame. Thomas Loudon Drummond was a famous artist of his day too, and a host to many equally famous artists who visited his home to paint. He was a founding member of the Auckland Society of Arts in 1875 as were Younghusband, Dobie and Goldie a few decades later.

On the 19th of November a remarkable exhibition opens at the New Zealand Portrait Gallery in Wellington. '**The Cabinet Makers: New Zealand Prime Ministers**' curated by Gavin McLean a Senior Historian with the Ministry of Culture and Heritage is the first exhibition publically staged to tell the story of every Prime Minister from Henry Sewell's leadership to the present day "every individual office holder from Sewell 160 years ago to John Key... take us on a pictorial journey through our political history by way of painted portraits, photographs, cartoons and memorabilia" says exhibition curator Gavin McLean. Sourcing images and personal objects has been his mission and finding a major work never shown nationally before since it was gifted to the Whangarei district by Gilbert Mair was something of a coup for the curator and the NZ Portrait Gallery. The exhibition which is at the gallery until 10 February (see www.portraitgallery.nzl.org) will spotlight this important painting by Kate Sperrey who ran the first portrait studio in Wellington at the time her husband was the Maori Interpreter to Parliament. Within this milieu, and with her father and husband's close political connections she was uniquely privileged to paint not only Sir George Grey but Premier John Balance and other ministers of the Crown in her short illustrious art career. However, many of her most famous paintings were lost in a fire in her studios in Wellington after her death, and this contributed to her fame fading over the following century. The Whangarei portrait gifted in 1922 suffered neglect, damage and antipathy from local council staff for long periods of its care, and it was only the ardent admonitions of local historian Mim Ringer in the 1980's that the painting was not thrown into a trig bin! It is shocking to think that such a heritage rescue mission was necessary. This very rare artwork and window on our past is now a pivotal portrait in a major exhibition to be opened by the current Prime Minister in November 2009. McLean is also writing a history of the New Zealand Prime-Ministership which will include the portrait in a publication which follows his previous 2006 book 'The Governors: New Zealand Governors and Governors-General'. Sir George Grey like Keith Holyoake was both a Prime Minister and a Governor of New Zealand.

The painting of Harata Tarapata by Charles Goldie was a magnificent gift to the Whangarei Art Museum in 2001 by another Prime Minister of the time, the Rt. Hon Helen Clark in which she announced that the art museum would receive three major works from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade art collection from Embassies and High Commissions around the world. Helen Clark said in this statement 'the art museum has an extremely active exhibition and publication program and is acknowledged as a lively and vibrant institution.....it is appropriate that the Goldie portrait of Harata Rewiri Tarapata returns to Northland as she was Nga Puhi....I am delighted that the Whangarei public will now be able to see them (Goldie, Hotere and Mrkusich paintings) in their own gallery'. I signed the Deed of Gift documents for these three paintings in Wellington in February 2002 and the Goldie was the first to be repatriated from its 40 years overseas service in London back to Te Tai Tokerau. This splendid portrait is one of nearly a dozen he is known to have painted of the sitter, the most famous of which is 'The Widow' painted one year earlier in 1903 one

of a pair (the other being 'Darby and Joan') in the Te Papa art collection. These two paintings were very controversially acquired by the NZ government for the National Art Gallery in 1990 for close to a million dollars. Both the Whangarei Art Museum's Goldie painting and the two major works at Te Papa which all depict the two Northland cousins Harata Tarapata and Ina Te Papatahi were brought back to New Zealand after very long sojourns in the United Kingdom. The painting now in the art museum collection was prominently displayed at the High Commission Residence in London for over 40 years and she must have observed many important and famous visitors to the High Commission in her tour of duty! The painting was anonymously gifted to the government in 1965 and shortly after travelled to London to do diplomatic service representing New Zealand until Helen Clark decided to repatriate to paintings in its diplomatic missions to regional museums who could not have otherwise afforded such artworks.

This painting is now a venerated work in the Whangarei collection and is one of the most beautiful images of her. Unlike so many of Goldie's paintings which are over-adorned with sentiment and theatrical devices and almost pastiche *maori* costume, in this painting she floats before a shimmering and simple turquoise background, dressed in clothing of the day with a scarf around her neck, a *pounamu kuru* in her left ear and a *kauae* carved into her chin representing her *rangatira* status. She is simply and empathetically portrayed for once. This is the reason I pressed for the art museum to be able to acquire this particular painting from the 75 available works.

Harata Rewiri Tarapa was the daughter of the Hokianga chief Te Wharerahi and his wife Tari Tapua. Her uncles were the famous brothers Tamati Waaka Nene and Eru Patuone. Her cousin Ina Te Papatahi, was another of Charles Goldie's most favoured sitters whom he painted at least 20 times. Harata was married to the Ngati Whatua chief Paora Tuhaere of Orakei, Auckland and lived much of her remaining years there and at the Maori Hostel in Mechanics Bay together with Ina Te Papatahi, where Charles Goldie 'discovered' them as his muses. Together these two women take a rightful place in our history, evoking respect and pride in their *mana* and beauty and a vital and 'living face' to their *tipuna* who visit them after their long journeys abroad to a final resting place at Te Papa and the Whangarei Art Museum.

Tales of Te Papa

Production by The Gibson Group

TVNZ Tv6 freeview is a series of short form programs which lead viewers on an insiders tour of significant treasures from Te Papa and other collections. Co-presented by Simon Morton and Northlander Riria Hotere from Matapouri.

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