Journey of hope

Haare Williams, an influential figure in the revival of te reo, has more than lived up to his grandmother's prophecy when he was a young boy in the backblocks. **by COLLEEN BROWN • photograph by KEN DOWNIE**

Haare Williams is a man of many accomplishments – lecturer, broadcaster, negotiator, researcher, poet, writer, activist and artist among others – yet he describes himself first and foremost as a teacher. He is a listener, too. But for the purposes of this interview, he speaks. I listen.

Haare – Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki, Rongowhakaata (Gisborne) and Tūhoe (Ōhiwa) – is a lyrical man. His sentences flow like the poetry he writes, and inevitably, you are drawn into his childhood memories of speaking only te reo while living with his paternal and maternal grandparents on the shores of Ōhiwa Harbour, 20 kilometres west of Ōpōtiki.

Born in the mid-1930s, Williams has led an illustrious life working alongside Māori and Pākehā. He was one of a group of teachers and academics behind the revival of te reo and Māori self-worth through education, arts and broadcasting. Yet his origins could scarcely have been more humble.

As Williams speaks, you can smell the sea and hear the voices that surrounded him as a child. You can also sense the deep abiding love he holds for whānau and whenua.

He lived with his paternal grandparents, Rimaha and Wairemana, in a whare raupō (thatched house). "My grandfather built it, tucked into the clay bank, affording us warmth in winter and coolness in summer."

The firepit is still there today, formed with clay and hardened by fire into a brick-like structure. "You built your dwellings close to the ecosystem around you, with the harbour in the front and the hill at your back so the wind flowed over the top of where you lived."

When he failed School Certificate he went to work in a woolshed until stern words from his maternal grandmother, Waioeka Brown, who lived at Te Karaka, near Gisborne, sent him back to the classroom. He became the first pupil from tiny Kutarere School to graduate as a teacher and taught in Tauranga, Taupō and Matauri Bay, Northland, before becoming a lecturer at Ardmore and Auckland teachers colleges, teaching Māori studies to future teachers.

The boy from the mudflats was also a pioneer in Māori broadcasting, as inaugural general manager of Aotearoa Radio then station manager of RNZ's Te Reo o Aotearoa in the 1980s and 90s. Working with the South Seas Film and Television School, he helped te reo speakers forge career paths as producers and operators in film and television.

He has worked closely with iwi claimant groups, collecting and preparing oral testimonies for presentation to the Waitangi Tribunal and the courts. He also played a key role in the celebrations to mark the 150th anniversary of the Treaty of Waitangi, responsible for waka construction and assembly at Waitangi as executive director of the New Zealand 1990 Commission.

> **"We all spoke te reo up to the school gate. Then we spoke neither Māori nor English. We knew te reo was banished."**

These and many other contributions culminated in his 2018 investiture as a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit. But it was his childhood experiences that shaped the man, and which are reflected in his poetry, writing, art – and lifelong activism.

"My grans were evicted from their Tūhoe lands," says Williams. "They had to find a place to provide them with shelter. They went to Ōhiwa." Ōhiwa was their refuge and sanctuary, and became the place to nurture their cherished grandson.

That he was taught the old way, orally, is clear to see and hear. The richness of language, waiata, karakia are in every sentence he utters.

Williams is acutely aware that he has been profoundly influenced by the first seven years of his life.

He writes about his grandparents in many formats but an excerpt from one poem, "The Dream Spinner", about his grandfather, reveals unexpected intimacy and tenderness:

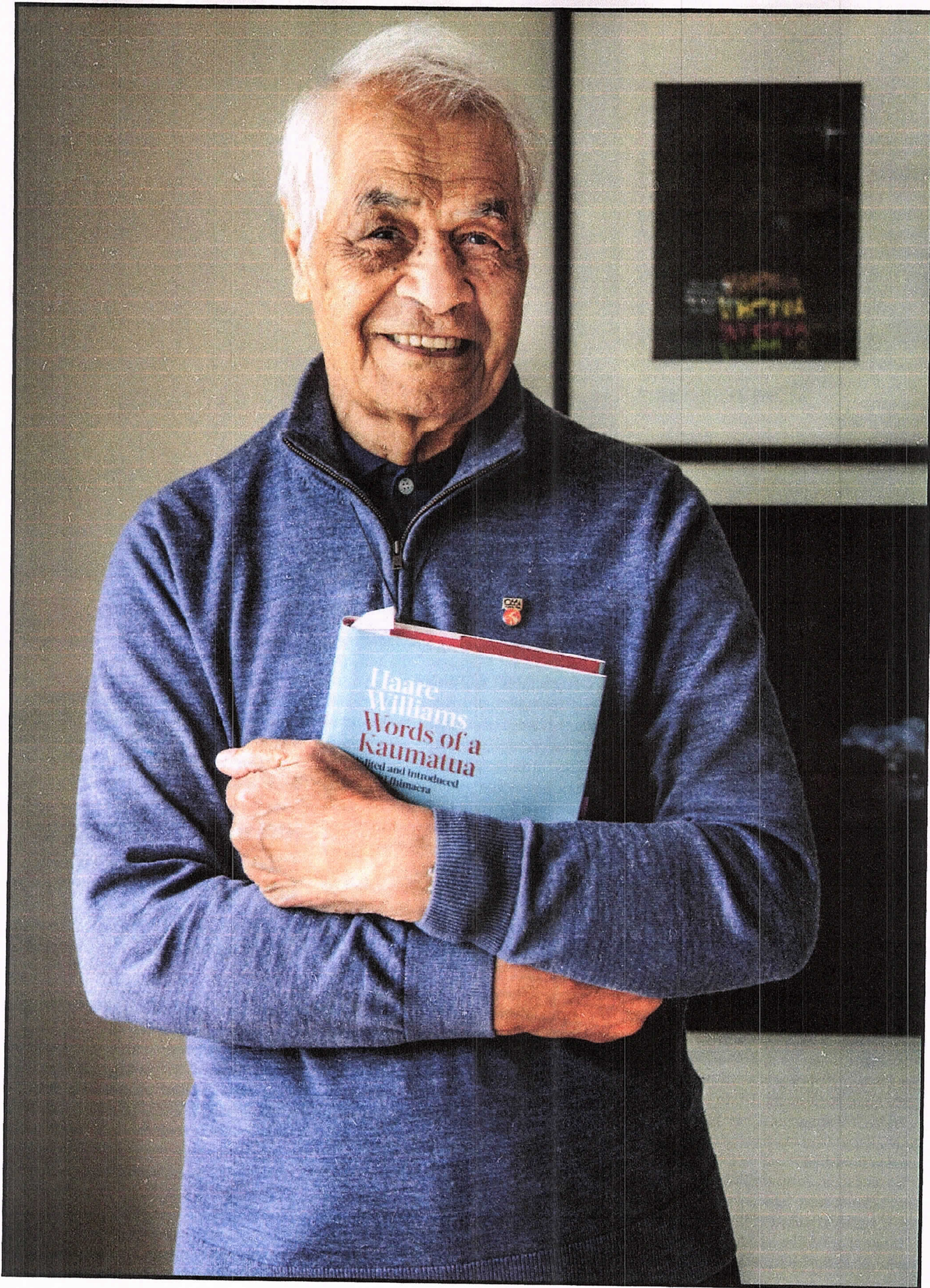
> With big nightmare dreams he stashed them
> One by one into an invisible sack and then –
> "Pull the drawstring.
> Quick, Boy!"
> Afterwards we would look for happy dreams
> He had sequestered away in his pocket
> "Ah, tonight, e moko, we will all dream
> Sweet dreams, only special dreams."
> Rubbed hands against my brow
> And happiness into my head

A DIFFERENT NARRATIVE

With whakapapa to Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Tūruki, Williams grew up being taught his whānau's narrative of the controversial 19th-century leader, rather than the official account. He was inspired by Te Kooti's significant contribution to Māori as founder of the Ringatū religion, and for his many compositions of waiata, karakia and hymns, often based on the songs of David and Solomon. "The Ringatū religion combines aspects of socialism, Judaism and the Old Testament with the age-old stories of Māoridom, which are as ancient as the old *Bible* stories."

Combined, the principles Ringatū espouses have created a powerful, enduring philosophy for Williams' life. "I grew up in a generation thinking that Māori was a

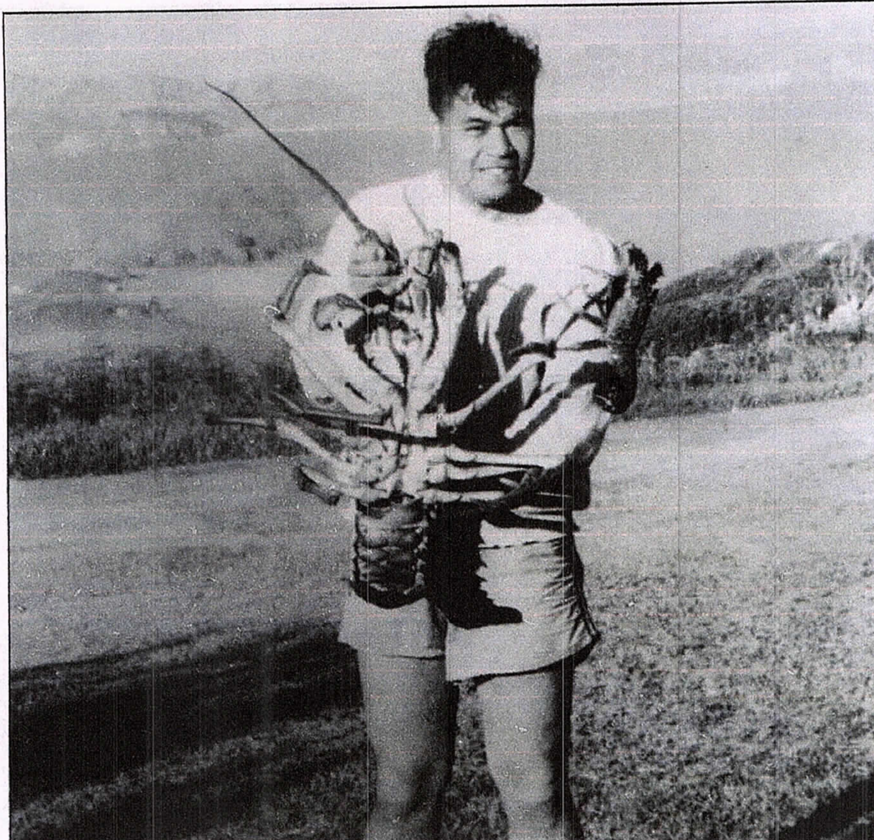
Haare Williams with his 2019 autobiographical book of poetry and prose: "Even Māori leaders feared te reo would die."


Haare
Williams
Words of a
Kaumatua

Both his grandmothers, Wairemana and Waioeka, had an abiding influence on Haare Williams. He can recall with great clarity their teaching and wisdom. He shares that knowledge in this poem about Nani Waioeka:

Koha

Our Nani Wai
sang
to the orchard trees
calling each
by name
we really didn't know
why
"You give little
when you give things,
give of yourselves
like trees
that's living,
learn from trees."
Trees give their best,
for trees
to hold back is to
die
with Earth
for Mother
Sky
for Father,
they hold back
nothing!'
The year
Nani Wai went
the fruit trees grew old
and died
We didn't really know
why



HAARE WILLIAMS COLLECTION

declining language. I spoke only te reo. Nan Wairemana knew three English words – Michael, Joseph, and Savage. A photograph of Michael Joseph Savage, Prime Minister from 1935-1940, had place of honour in all our homes around the harbour."

His grandmother didn't go shopping because of her lack of English. At the time, he notes, even Māori leaders such as Sir Āpirana Ngata feared the language would languish and die.

"When I went to school, walking eight miles each way, we all spoke te reo up to the school gate. Then we spoke neither Māori nor English. No one said anything, you just knew not to speak te reo. I didn't see anyone punished for speaking it, but the threat was there all the same. Instinctively, we knew te reo was banished."

He was a fast learner. He could already read Māori before he went to school, aged seven, and soon picked up his new language.

When Nan Wairemana heard him speaking English, she laid a hand on the side of his cheek and said, "You have bees in your mouth, moko", and cried at the changes she could see emerging in her grandson.

WORDS AND ACTION

Williams credits both his grandmothers for having a huge impact on his life. They gave him direction and provided a reality check at critical times, which he calls serendipity. For him, serendipity is about being in the right place at the right time. It also reveals his ability to not only listen to advice offered by those he respects, but to reflect and act on it.

He recalls how Wairemana taught him through stories and actions. On one occasion, she asked the young Williams to take her to the top of a nearby hill. As he tells it, he had to take her by horse and hold her on, because the pathway was so steep and unforgiving. Once at the top, she made him look out into the distance at the land they had lost – land that had been confiscated due to alleged disloyalty to the crown. The pain she experienced was obvious to the boy:

"Moko. Whakarongo mai." (Child, listen to me.)

"I'm listening. What?"

She sat silent awhile. Anger rising and dropping on her face, eyes closing, with each line the lash and scorn of time that left her people damaged, derailed, and happiness just a dream in a Treaty promise. In that moment, I saw a face blanched with her mortality. She holds back her outrage. Then she opens tear-filled eyes – the contours on her face a timeline/chronology of disappointments.

"E moko, you will one day leave this sheltered valley and your journey will take you to a window through which you will see the strangest of sights a thousand times beyond here. One day, you'll find your level of excellence, and when you do, you'll find your mission in life. Your journey starts here."

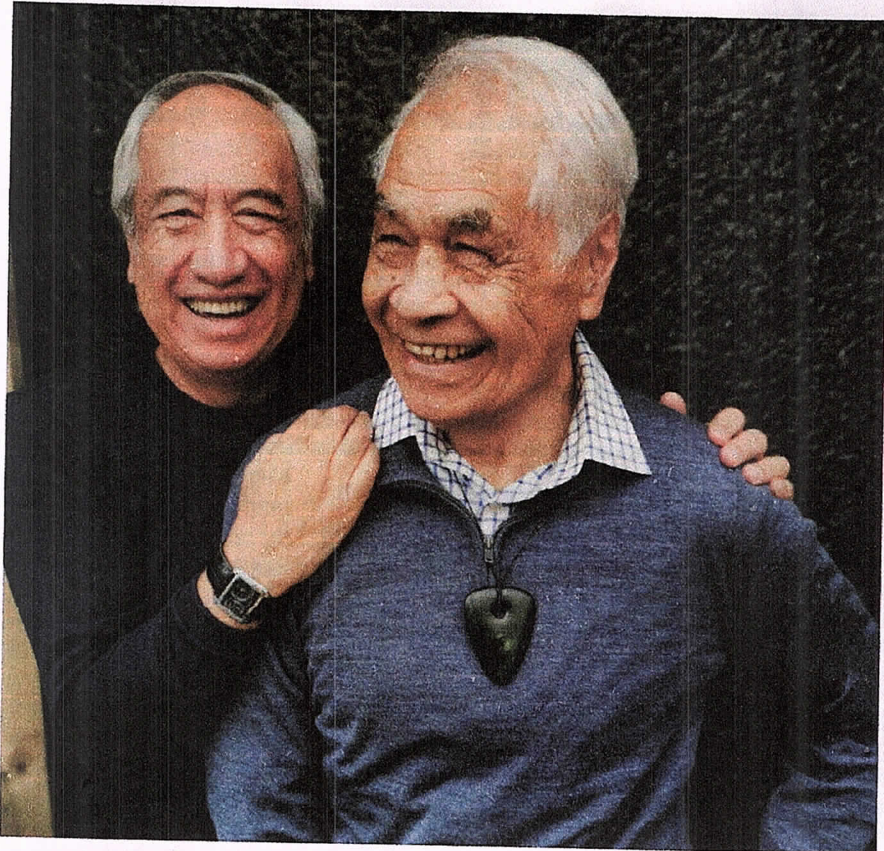
She made him look out into the distance at the land they had lost. The pain she experienced was obvious.

"And then?"

"Ma te wa. Kua oatitia koe hei kura mahita, hei roia, hei takuta, tu paremata, aha whawhai mo te whenua mate noa ranei. Ko wai ka mohio?" ("One day, you will become a teacher, a lawyer, a doctor, or maybe a politician over this land. You might have to fight for these lands. You might have to die for them.")

"Taku aroha ki a koe, e Moko." (My love to you, Moko.)

I was 12 when she died, but her words kept coming back. I went back there not so long ago with daughter Arena. Still there is the



Williams, left in 1963, with a packhorse cray caught off Matauri Bay, Northland, where he taught; and above, with Witi Ihimaera, who edited Williams' autobiographical *Words of a Kaumatua*.

mountain, Hiwarau, the hills and karaka trees, the harbour, the gutted tracks clinging to the hillside, and pine trees have almost displaced all the native trees.

But the indentations across those five acres, the wild primroses, the kūmara pit on the side of the hill, the bends in the stream – all gone. But not the emanations of life in the whare raupō, the gardens, and mudflats there speaking only in silence of another time. Their songs and memories are as effervescent as the occasions. As I drove away, her words kept returning over and over.

SCHOOL DROPOUT

And so, Williams became a teacher. The journey was not a straightforward one due to his lack of qualifications. "I thought I was a failure, so I went to work in the woolshed."

He was pulled up short when Waioeka said to him, "Boy, if you want to be a school teacher, get back on the bus to Ōpōtiki and get your exams." He followed her advice, and was amazed to find that the attitude of the teachers and principal changed towards him as he immersed himself in achieving his educational goals. He gained entrance to Ardmore Teachers' Training College, near Auckland, and graduated with honours two years later.

In the early years it wasn't easy, as Williams transitioned from immersion in a rural life dominated by Māori culture – known, connected, with many reference points to call on – to living a life in the uncertainties of urban New Zealand.

"I remember being at a bus stop near Auckland Hospital. I was with a friend, we'd missed the bus and had some time to wait. I was in my second year at training college. My mate wandered off and I stood there in that bus stop just watching the people around me. I felt like an alien in my own country, an exile. I had no sense of belonging to this country. All these Pākehā people and who was I? It was a very deep feeling."

> **"Education is the only antidote I know to deal with fear, hopelessness and failure."**

Serendipity struck again – this time from Archibald Scott, head of teacher education at Ardmore, who gave him hope. "He said to me, 'Williams, you have great potential.' I believed him. Being a teacher is a title I bear with honour. It enables and ennobles young minds to develop their creativity and find their place in the world. My two grandchildren speak te reo with enthusiasm and excitement. It's contagious, their excitement makes me excited."

After nine years' teaching, he returned to Ardmore as a lecturer. "By the time I left there, Māori studies had gone from being part of the social studies curriculum to being an area of study in its own right."

He continued to lecture in Māori studies at Auckland Teachers' Training College and as a tutor and dean at Unitec, where he became Māori adviser to the chief executive. (Later still, he was Māori adviser to former Auckland mayor Phil Goff.)

FIRE IN THE BELLY

Williams has always been an activist, fighting initially to keep the Māori language alive, then grow it through the careers he has followed and by influencing others with his poetry, oratory and art.

He is a quiet, reflective man, but appearances can be deceptive – always, there is fire and passion in the belly.

He is also an optimist: the future lies in rangatahi Māori and Pākehā, who together can make New Zealand the most liveable small democracy in the world.

"One of the most important things that takes place in the hearts of the offended is the release from unresolved grief. Education is the only antidote I know to deal with fear, helplessness and failure.

"Look to rangatahi, Māori and Pākehā, fluent in our founding cultures, to craft a vision drawn from the ideological furrows left by Savage, Ngata, Te Puea, Whina Cooper, Walker, Kirk, and Wētere.

"Build a bicultural conversation around the Treaty, kaitiakitanga and manaakitanga – a generosity of spirit and trust."

RESTORATION – TE WHAKAHOU

We hold in our hands
The tools the materials
Wisely to rebuild our house
Rangatahi and a future
Now all together
Tāhuhu in a single action
Lift

Nan Wai's prophecy was fulfilled. Williams sees it in his four children, who have become a teacher, a lawyer, a doctor and a politician. However, for those who know him, it is obvious that he, too, realised Nan Wai's prediction as a peacemaker, legal expert in land matters, healer, diplomat and, above all, a teacher. ∎

SAM ELWORTHY