The Wairau Affray

The Wairau Affray of 1843 was the first of many land wars in New Zealand, leaving 22 European settlers and between 4-9 Maori dead following a brief but bloody battle on the banks of the Tuamotina River in Marlborough. It was caused by dubious land sales between Ngati Toa and the New Zealand Company. The consequences of the Wairau Affray still affect New Zealanders today, and it remains a significant event in New Zealand history.

Cause of the Affray

The Nelson settlement, situated at the top of the South Island, was planned in England to consist of 221,100 acres of land suitable for farming. Despite many warnings of insufficient quality land in the upper South Island, the settlement to be implemented by the New Zealand Company (established by Edward G. Wakefield and brothers William H. Wakefield and Arthur Wakefield to settle New Zealand) went ahead. When the Company realised that they were around 70,000 acres short, surveyors were sent to the Wairau Plains in Marlborough. They believe that they owned the land after purchasing the deed from the widow of whaling Captain John Blenkinsopp, who in turn had allegedly bought the land off Ngati Toa. In fact a letter to the New Zealand Company in England written by Edward Wakefield in March 1843 stated "I rather anticipate some difficulty with the natives!"

Unsurprisingly, the Maori took the matter very seriously. A hard lesson was about to be learned by the settlers. The attitude that land which appears to be unused doesn’t matter to the local Maori and must be available for purchase, and the attitude that a swift, perhaps not-quite-legal land purchase deal would do, was to bring catastrophe. Te Rauparaha and Te Rangihaeata, of Ngati Toa, who owned the land, were adamant that the Wairau was still their property and had not been sold. In the past Te Rauparaha had allowed people to cross, camp, and take water and firewood from the area, however he did not allow the land to be surveyed. In early 1843, they and other senior members of Ngati Toa, travelled to Nelson in order to convince the New Zealand Company to withdraw from the Wairau Plains. Te Rauparaha appealed for support to Land Commissioner William Spain, who had been sent from London to investigate the land sales undertaken by the New Zealand Company. However, this did not influence the Wakefield brothers, and in April 1843 they pushed on with preparing the land for settlement. When survey pegs starting going in along the Wairau River, the local Maori people promptly removed them. By the end of May Te Rauparaha and Te Rangihaeata crossed over the Cook Strait from their North Island base bringing 100 men, some of whom were armed with muskets, as well as women and children...

The incident

Tension quickly escalated and a series of incidents quickly led to tragedy. When Chief Constable Thompson moved to arrest Te Rauparaha in hand-cuffs, Te Rangihaeata became furious. Shots were fired, though varied accounts and sources indicated differing views on who the initial shots were fired by. The most common viewpoint was that a musket was accidentally fired by one of the Europeans, most likely by one of the untrained labourers who were added to the European party as reinforcements. While all sources state that Te Rongo, Te Rauparaha's daughter who was married to Te Rangihaeata, died in the Wairau Affray, some state that she was the first to die. Fighting broke out between the well-armed but outnumbered Europeans and the Maori. The Europeans attempted a disorderly retreat up the hill behind the battle site after four deaths then Arthur Wakefield ordered them to lay down their arms and surrender. While 18 Europeans stayed and surrendered with Wakefield, the remaining members of the party continued to retreat further up the hill, while being pursued by some Maori. Those who continued retreating, despite initially being chased by some Maori warriors, managed to escape. Following the initial bloodshed, a short parley was held between the defeated Europeans and the Maori. However, Te Rangihaeata, whose wife was killed in the Affray, demanded utu (Maori custom of revenge) for the death of such a high ranking Maori in the tribe. Incensed by the lack of justice after the brutal murder of his close relative Rangiawa Kuika and her son by a European earlier in January 1843, the 13 Europeans who had surrendered (including Wakefield) were summarily executed. Te Rauparaha later claimed that he did not participate in the slaughter of the prisoners, but he did not intervene either. In all, 22 deaths were sustained by the Europeans, and while the exact number of Maori killed is not known, it is usually...
estimated to be between 4 and 9. Had Wakefield’s party had some understanding of the place in Maori society of an ariki such as Te Rangihaeata (and of a woman who was his wife) and some understanding of how Maori justice system worked perhaps the tragedy could have been avoided...

Consequences
The Wairau Affray had many consequences, both immediate and long-term.

The shocked white settlers of Nelson demanded retribution but they were to be deeply disappointed on that score. In early 1844 the new Governor Robert FitzRoy (successor to Governor William Hobson) visited the Cook Strait settlements and gave judgement, despite all of the conflicting statements that had been published in the aftermath of the event. He upheld the Maori side of the battle and said that the blame for the Wairau Affray lay with the settlers of Nelson themselves, because the land in question belonged to Ngati Toa. In fact he even upbraided the Europeans for their behaviour, and warned them that 'not an acre, not an inch of land belonging to the natives shall be touched without their consent'. He condemned the killing of the men who had surrendered, and he also demanded the resignation of the magistrate who issued the arrest warrant, however he was already dead.

This decision was very unpopular in Nelson but from hindsight history has come down on the side of the Maori, just as FitzRoy did. At the time many in New Zealand and England called the governor 'cowardly' and his decision eventually led to FitzRoy being recalled back to England. However in the modern day, his actions are seen as prudent and pragmatic and the right course of action under the circumstances, because the alternative - open warfare with Ngati Toa - would have probably made the situation far worse for the new settlers of New Zealand. FitzRoy knew that it was improbable that the British government would dispatch soldiers to wage war on Maori, and the settlers were outnumbered 900 to 1. The authorities ended up blaming the event on systemic failures with regard to land acquisition...

Significance today
The Wairau Affray remains a significant battle in New Zealand history for a number of reasons. Firstly, depending on the source, it was the first, or the precursor to the series of events known collectively as the 'New Zealand Wars' and it was the first serious clash between Maori and Europeans after the Treaty of Waitangi, signed 3 years prior. Misunderstandings here were to be tragically repeated throughout the North Island over the next three decades. As well as this, it was the only major clash in the South Island.

As views have changed over time, the term 'Massacre' used by the settlers at the time of the Wairau Affray has been changed to other names including Incident, Affair and the most commonly used one, Affray. This is because the word massacre was an emotive one used by the settlers of the time, whereas nowadays the emotion is not attached to the incident to the same extent. It also acknowledges that it was not a one-sided slaughter - instead it was a result of some Europeans disobeying the law and ignoring Maori requests. But it took a long time for acceptance by pākehā New Zealanders that perhaps the settlers were the ones in the wrong and that what happened is what happens when outsiders collide with an indigenous culture.

At the time the Wairau Affray caused significant problems for the New Zealand Company. Just when it was working hard to spread its propaganda to potential settlers that New Zealand was the land of milk and honey and the ‘natives’ friendly, this event happened. The settlement plan was almost ruined by news headlines in Britain such as 'British citizens being murdered by barbarous natives'. As well as alarming the nearby colonies of Nelson and Wellington, it also worried the settlers in New Plymouth and Wanganui, which were other New Zealand Company settlements, as the land had been purchased under not dissimilar circumstances.

The Wairau Affray continues to have a lasting effect today because it altered the way that the Europeans and the authorities dealt with land sales, by attempting to regulate and maintain proper land trading. It was also one of the first cases that upheld the Maori side, instead of the Europeans, and this is still noticeable in Waitangi land disputes today.

Modern day historian Matthew Wright writes 'Today it is easy to condemn [Arthur] Wakefield's behaviour - patronising, laced with colonial-age morality. But the real question is whether his actions were out of line by 19th Century standards. And the answer was simple. They were.'