Whāea Betty Wark: Celebrated Community Worker and Activist

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Elizabeth (Betty) Wark

Betty Elizabeth Wark, (1924-2001). Betty was of Māori and Pakeha (European) descent. She was the mother of five sons - Brian, Danny, Conrad, Robert and Gary, grandmother of ten and great-grandmother of five.
Betty Wark

Aged about 18 years old
Context of Betty’s Activism

• Betty Wark became involved in Māori activism during the late 1960s, with the emergence of the Māori Renaissance, a period of rebirth of indigenous power, language, culture and identity where issues such as Māori land rights and the revival of te reo Māori (Māori language) and tikanga Māori (Māori culture) were central to a resurgence of Māori identity.
Māori Women’s Welfare League

• As Betty’s heart politics and activism evolved her identity as Māori was strengthened.
• She was an active member of the Ponsonby branch of the Māori Women’s Welfare League which 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.
Mentors

• I wanted so much to learn and be with Māori people. I felt the Māori Women’s Welfare League was important. It supported the whanau (family) and it was concerned about Māori Health. Whina Cooper pushed me to help raise money for Te Unga Waka Marae (urban Catholic Marae or meeting place) I wasn’t confident at all you know but she used to pull me in (B. Wark, personal communication, October 4, 1996).
Community Work

• Betty became involved in community work finding accommodation for Māori youth who had moved to the city and couldn’t find anywhere to live.
Homeless Māori Youth

• I used to see a lot of young people having a wash in public toilets. They’d come from different rural areas, trying to look for jobs, and a lot of them lived in abandoned old houses or on the streets because there was no place to live. I helped set up a hostel for some of the young people, particularly the kids that came from the country. (B. Wark, personal communication, October 4, 1996).
Public Profile

• By the early 1970s Betty’s reputation as a community social worker was well publicized and she received referrals from the Courts, probation and the police. A newspaper article of 1973 describes how a young homeless couple with their two children were referred to Betty via the Department of Māori Affairs:
At 6. am, tired and dejected, Willie and Rose Wilson, with their two children were on the road to 'fend for themselves'. With no-one to turn to, the couple, with suitcases in hand walked to the Otahuhu Police Station. A woman constable contacted the Department of Māori Affairs, which in turn referred the couple to Mrs Wark (Auckland Star, August 14, 1973).
Betty Wark, 1973

Betty comforting a Māori whanau that had to move out of the flat they were living in and were referred to Betty via the Department of Māori Affairs.. (Photo appeared in the *Auckland Star* on August 14, 1973)
Betty Wark aged 45

Photograph appeared in the *New Zealand Herald* in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
• In 1974 Betty helped set up Arohanui Incorporated, a community-based organization which aimed to provide guidance and assistance to young persons referred from the courts, prisons, Social Welfare and independent sources.

• Arohanui Incorporated, had a distinctly Māori response to the urban environment, fostering Māori values and responding to the needs of Māori youth.
‘Ma Betty’

- Betty became known as ‘Ma Betty’ to hundreds of street kids over the years she worked as a house-mother at the Arohanui Trust hostels, Auckland
Of course by gathering all these young people up to protect them, well, I did take on a job! I did take on a job! All I thought, well let’s give them a lot of loving care and a place to sleep and good meals. That was it. I mean, they were maimed before I even got them. And I took on a big thing then and I couldn’t stop because it was there, eh? It was there (B. Wark, personal communication, October 4, 1996).
Media construction as an idealised universal mother-figure

- Betty was never comfortable with the media construction of her as an archetypal mother-figure.

- One media representation of Betty was as someone who has a ‘religious’ vocation. Indeed, one of the more provocative headlines in her media history called her, the ‘Mother Teresa’ of Auckland.
• ‘Like Wendy - Mother to Lost Boys’ (New Zealand Herald, 8 August 1969)
• ‘A Haven Where Love is a Mother who Really Cares’ (Auckland Star, 21 June 1978)
• ‘Ma to Homeless City Youngsters’ (New Zealand Herald, 2 February 1985)
• ‘Mothering Plus Māoritanga’ (Auckland Star, 8 January 1986)
• ‘Mother with a Big Heart’ (New Zealand Herald, 12 August 1986)
• ‘Mother Teresa’ of Auckland Helps ‘Pull Up’ Māori Outcasts’ (Memphis, 9 May 1991)
The construction of 'Ma Betty'

• The construction of ‘Ma Betty’ can also be viewed as the central paradox of Betty's life. As her political activism grew along with her mothering of Auckland's street kids, Betty gradually became an absent mother to her own children.
For Betty

• as with many other activists who are also mothers, parenthood took second place to her political commitment. It is a dilemma that goes to the heart of the problem of activism for women who are mothers.
Absent Mother

• There was a lot of conflict between my family life and the work I was becoming involved in. I made a choice. I left the boys with Jim and moved into Tole Street Park. I imagine my boys would have been highly neglected looking back at it now. They thought I had deserted them (B. Wark, personal communication, September 9, 1996).
Activist and Protestor

• Betty’s decision to move in with the Tole Street protestors reflects her growing political and social consciousness. The Tole Street Park protest occurred in 1976. Its intention was to raise public awareness of housing needs.

• Her definition of responsibility was changing. It was no longer enough to be a responsible parent, looking after her family and having dinner on the table at a certain hour.
Tent protest, Tole Street, Ponsonby, Auckland, 1976
Narratives of Motherhood

- Motherhood was a central theme in Betty’s life narrative. Her narrative also illustrates how the constructions of femininity and discourses of motherhood and daughterhood impacted on the emergence of her maternal voice and her identity as a mother. Motherhood was something that Betty had to learn and she found it challenging.
Paradoxically, though, it was her media construction as ‘Ma Betty’ that became a marker of her public identity as a universal mother-figure and it was her work as a house-mother that was to form the base of her heart politics.
The paradox of her public persona as the ‘Mother Teresa’ of Auckland did not escape her.

It was an ironic twist that the motherless child who believed she was not equipped to mother others became so widely known to thousands as their ‘spiritual and surrogate mother’, Ma Betty.
Betty Wark, 1991
Betty being comforted by Lee Waho
The photographer has managed to capture Betty in a moment of acute vulnerability with raw emotions exposed. Media representation of Betty began to liken her Mother Teresa of Calcutta. It conveys an image of Betty as both human enough to cry over a wayward youth and saintly enough to want to.
Public identity and self-perception

• Having struggled with issues around her lack of being mothered and her own experiences of motherhood Betty always felt ambivalent and detached about motherhood and her public construction as ‘universal mother’.

• "I didn’t know what being a mother was as I’d never had one" (B. Wark, personal communication, September 9, 1996).
The construction of Betty

• as someone verging on saintliness was an enduring one. In 1986 she was the subject of a television documentary, *Give Me a Love*. Directed by Bill Saunders, the programme was a record of one month in the life of Arohanui.
• It showed Betty as being a person of immense dedication and aroha. Yet, at the same time the programme did not attempt to sanitize her image. It also showed her as someone who is realistic, who demands respect and who hands out a good deal of old-fashioned discipline.
Betty Wark

Reference