

John Cuthbert Adams: A Collector of Culture

Many regional museums in New Zealand have grown from the bequest of one or two important collectors from the surrounding area. Their lifelong collections form the core of the Museum's research holdings, often telling us more about the life of the collector than the actual objects themselves.

The Tauranga Heritage Collection is fortunate enough to care for such a collection which represents the lifework of John Cuthbert Adams (1854 - 1932). It includes many Maori artefacts including toki (adzes), mahe (fishing sinkers), mere and kotiate (weaponary), a pounamu tiki (greenstone), flax kete and amokura feathers. Fourteen watercolours by the soldier artist, Horatio Gordon Robley are also part of the precious assemblage. In addition, the Museum received Adams' library of over 150 books. The titles reflect his passion and that of his son, Edward Lionel, for researching local Maori history and genealogy.

A recent local history research project carried out by Delwyn Walker, a third year student with the University of Waikato, has helped Museum staff begin to piece together the reasons behind Adams' collecting and his motivation to acquire the objects that remain with us today. Adams, originally a shoemaker from Northampton in England, migrated to New Zealand in 1874 and settled in Tauranga in 1876. Having started in the building trade in Auckland, Adams continued this work during a time of increasing European settlement, building schools, offices, churches in the Bay of Plenty. In 1882 Adams married his second wife, Helen Hirini Edwards and eventually fathered a large family of eleven children. He became involved in the local borough and was Mayor of Tauranga in 1917.

No notes or diaries remain to guide us through his collection but Adams' network of friends and art collectors indicate that he was one of a number of enquiring pakeha, eager to learn about Maori art, culture and history. He was a founding member and Rangatira (president) of the Tauranga Savage Club in the 1900s where a fraternity of such men met to discuss art and history. Adams also wrote to other collectors such as Gilbert Mair and Horace Fildes and must have been one of a number of amateur archaeologists that fossicked for artefacts along the Waihi and Mount beaches purposefully searching for Maori artefacts. This 'hobby' of collecting was prevalent throughout New Zealand in the latter half of the nineteenth century and is responsible for significant contributions to Museum collections.

Adams became a keen Maori genealogist, researching his wife's whakapapa and his own lineage. From around 1890 he regularly corresponded with Robley and his letters illustrate his interest in the land wars, Maori papakainga, traditions and cultural history. It is not known exactly how Adams acquired his total collection of Robley watercolours but he must have visited Robley on one of his trips home as a note, penned by Adams, pertains to Robley's portrait of Tomika Te Mutu and how he 'procured the painting from Robley in 1923' . The collection also includes watercolours whose subjects depict Tauranga in 1864 and 1865 including local Chief Hori Ngaitai, Henare Taratoa and scenes from the Battle at Pukehinahina or Gate Pa.

Adams' son, Edward Lionel, appears to have continued his father's interests and was instrumental in placing the 'Adams' collection with the Tauranga Museum. Family members have kindly supported the wish for the collection to remain in Tauranga as part of our cultural treasures, guarded today for future generations to enjoy.