

## **Völkner and Mokomoko: a 150-year quest for justice and reconciliation**

Title: Völkner and Mokomoko: a 150-year quest for justice and reconciliation  
Author: Earle Howe  
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### **Book Reviewer: Peter Lineham**

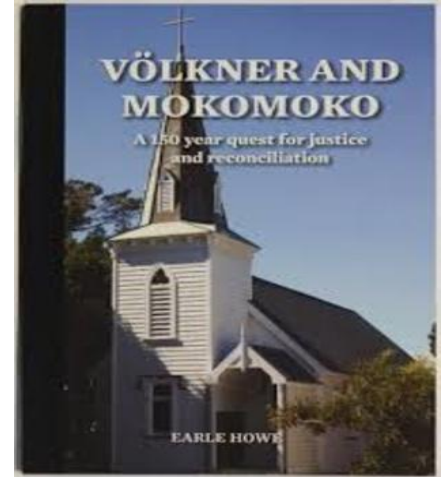
Earle Howe's engagement with the issues surrounding the death of Carl Sylvanus Völkner began many years ago while serving in the Bi-Cultural Education Unit of the Anglican Church. At that point feelings were running high about the execution of Mokomoko, found guilty by a jury in Auckland in 1866 along with three others of Völkner's murder, despite no evidence that he was present at the time. Moreover, Mokomoko chose to be baptised a Christian just before he was hung.

After his death, there were severe consequences for the people associated with Mokomoko in land loss. Meanwhile the Anglican Church was aware that he was the only missionary to New Zealand to be killed, and in 1972 his name was added and the ascription "priest, martyr" was placed in the list approved in 1972 of local commemorations. The campaign to clear Mokomoko's name had a major success in 1989 when Mokomoko's body was disinterred from Mount Eden gaol and reburied in the tribal cemetery.

Meanwhile the death of Völkner was cast in new light when his correspondence with the governor was printed. The New Zealand Prayerbook of 1989 lists his name but does not describe him as a martyr. Earle Howe produced his little book, *Bring Me Justice* on behalf of the Bicultural Education Unit, and his proposal that Mokomoko deserved recognition alongside Völkner was accepted by General Synod in 1994, when they amended the list of commemorations and mentioned Mokomoko and Völkner together as symbols of reconciliation.

Earle Howe's new book has come about to help make that hoped-for reconciliation more genuine. It has been needed because the pendulum has not stopped swinging on the case. The powerful invective of Peter Wells, in his book *Journey to a Hanging* (2014), has dramatized the case of Kereopa te Rau, whom the government also held as responsible for Völkner's killing and was hung after being found guilty by a court in 1871. Wells wrote with passion and dramatic intensity and had nothing but contempt for Völkner. On the other hand, Mary Tagg set out to defend the reputation of Völkner in her brief 2006 biography named after the sermon of his that she reproduced: *The Martyr's Crown*. Furthermore, Mokomoko's family was not content with his reburial and at their behest an act of parliament was passed in December 2013 in which Mokomoko was not just pardoned but rehabilitated.

Earle Howe's book is very well suited to the needs of the hour. It is an excellent exploration of the complexities of the evidence not just of Völkner's death but also its aftermath. The issue is not just Mokomoko's innocence but the need in today's climate to find ways to turn the tragedy into something that brings healing. Howe reproduces the letters that Völkner wrote to the governor, which clearly indicate him anxious to conceal his role as an informant. Howe argues that the letters were not known



to local Maori, and Howe is cautious about the accusation that he was a “spy”, although clearly so embroiled in politics that he compromised his mission. Earle Howe looks at both sides with compassion and generosity. Howe holds still the position he maintained in 1991, that we need to appreciate both sides, and the strength of this book is that he shows sensitivity to the sheer complexity of the war period, by showing the struggles and uncertainties of both sides.

This book completes the work begun by Howe’s short book of 1989, but it also reflects a continuing evolution of church approaches to bi-cultural issues. So much has changed since 1972, and even since 1994. Reconciliation has begun to make a difference in key local communities. This book is the result of an initiative by the vicar and vestry of the church in Opotiki and a positive response by Mokomoko’s descendants. The church has as a result paired its original name Hiona with its later dedication to St Stephen, and a pare or headboard was installed at the entrance to the church at Easter in 2014, showing Völkner and Mokomoko in a hongi. This book is a further aspect of that rethinking. Earle Howe was asked to produce an updated and comprehensive record of the history of Hiona St Stephen’s and this book shows how history can aid in steps of understanding and reconciliation.

We owe Earle a debt of gratitude for the tone of this book in which he steps back from either accusing or exonerating either party. Consequently, I am left wondering about the language and circumstances in which martyrdoms are claimed. The other martyr of the New Zealand church, Bishop J. C. Patteson, was always thought to have been killed in the Solomons because he had been mistaken for a blackbird, although a recent article in the *Journal of Pacific History* has suggested that his mission was disliked by some islanders because it took young men to Norfolk Island to be trained as priests. In the cases, then, of both Völkner and Patteson, and in other cases of religious killings, there are generally other factors beyond anti-Christian violence. Given that the language of sanctity is entangled with the language of martyrdom, we may wonder whether the languages of martyrdom or sanctity are useful to us anymore. While this is too big a subject for this modest book, the case of Völkner surely is a superb example of these complexities, and Earle Howe’s book, a fine tool as we move from defensiveness to reconciliation.