

# waka kuaka

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WHAKAMAUMAHARA:  
TRIBUTE TO DAME JOAN METGE  
21 FEBRUARY 1930–17 SEPTEMBER 2025



Kahurangi Dame Joan Metge passed away peacefully on 17 September 2025. Revered as one of the most significant Pākehā scholars of her generation to give voice to Māori culture and society, Dame Joan dedicated her life to bridging the gap between Māori and Pākehā worldviews to facilitate greater understanding, compassion and social equality.

Dame Joan was from modest beginnings. Her parents, who were both trained teachers, were devoted educators. While Joan was raised mostly in Mount Roskill, Auckland, throughout her childhood she also lived in the Waikato, Pukekohe and Matamata, due to teaching posts that her father accepted during World War II.

Joan completed her secondary schooling at Epsom Girls' Grammar School, where she was named dux in 1947. She considered this prize, of her many awards over her lifetime, one of the sweetest. She then enrolled in Auckland University College to study anthropology. While the course was listed on paper, in practice it was not being taught, so she completed a BA, followed by an MA, in geography. Nevertheless, during this time she began her training as an anthropologist, spending her summer holidays working at Auckland Museum under ethnologist Vic Fisher. She found the

most pleasurable part of the role was working with the korowai and kākahu, inspecting the cloaks weekly for signs of damage and changing the containers of formaldehyde crystals that protected the pieces against insects.

While she worked at the Museum, the director, Dr Gilbert Archey, received a request from Te Rangihiroa, director of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, for photographs of items in the collections for his forthcoming book, *The Coming of the Maori*. Te Rangihiroa was an internationally respected anthropologist and a longtime hero of Joan's, and she delighted in being asked to choose examples from the collection. When the Seventh Pacific Science Congress was held in Auckland in 1949, Joan was thrilled to attend Te Rangihiroa's lecture on the Polynesian outlier Kapingamarangi and to wait on him at the reception.

Although an exemplary student, the young Joan was often overlooked for career-enhancing opportunities given to her male counterparts, which was the norm at the time. However, with unwavering determination and initiative, Joan won a scholarship to attend the prestigious London School of Economics. Here she was supervised by Professor Raymond Firth, a fellow New Zealander who, throughout his career, was committed to the economic organisation of autochthonous societies. This perspective, of course, influenced her PhD work.

Prior to going to the UK, Joan undertook modern-day research on rural and urban Māori communities, resulting in work that continues to be read today. She drew on these data to write her PhD thesis on the Māori urban migration, explaining that this topic was spoken of in negative terms by Māori elders and politicians, who used the word “drift” instead of migration, removing intention from the travel. Joan published her thesis as a book, *A New Maori Migration: Rural and Urban Relations in Northern New Zealand*, with Athlone Press in 1964. The work was a carefully documented comparative study of two Māori communities: one in a traditional rural area and the other in Auckland, Aotearoa's largest industrial centre. The book was a valuable contribution to social studies and to making sense of the world-wide problem of urbanising cultural minorities.

Despite her potential to continue as a professional university academic in the UK after receiving her PhD, Joan never considered herself an academic. Her pursuit of knowledge was not a means to an end, and thus she returned to Aotearoa in 1958, where she lived meagrely on a Carnegie fellowship for two years. The fellowship funds allowed her to undertake further self-initiated domestic social science research.

In 1961, Joan attained her first professional position at the University Extension Department at Auckland University College. Here she worked closely with Māori tutors Matiu Te Hau (Ngāpuhi, Te Whakatōhea) and Te Kapunga Dewes (Ngāti Porou) teaching the non-examination courses Maori

Society Today. For a young Pākehā scholar of the Māori world that Extension Department would have been the best location in New Zealand's universities in terms of learning about te ao Māori given such luminaries on the staff.

In 1965, Joan took up an appointment as a lecturer in the newly established Anthropology Department at Victoria University of Wellington. She spent a memorable year working with Wiremu Parker, who was seconded from Victoria's University Extension, in the inaugural teaching of Māori studies. Through the 1960s, she combined coming to terms with Levi-Straussian structuralism (introduced to Victoria by inaugural Professor Jan Pouter in the late 1960s) with teaching a non-advancing course on Māori history, art and literature in partnership with Bernie Kernot.

Joan remained in this department for 23 years, being promoted to associate professor. In 1987, she was appointed a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in the Queen's Birthday Honours for her services to anthropology, and also received the Elsdon Best Medal for her life commitment to scholarship that uplifted Māori peoples.

In 1988, Joan took early retirement, living her dream of working with Māori communities in the Far North. She gave support to these communities in a variety of ways, including composing Treaty claims submissions and reports, recording and transcribing histories, leading archival work and deciphering government documents for community leaders, kaumātua and kuia. Dame Joan served many Māori communities throughout her life, but she held a special place for the Te Rarawa people of Ahipara.

In 1990, she received the New Zealand Commemoration Medal. Then, in 1997, she was awarded the Royal Society of New Zealand's Te Rangi Hiroa Medal for her research in the social sciences. In 2001, the University of Auckland awarded Dame Joan an honorary doctorate of literature, an acknowledgement of her exceptional work and societal impact. In 2006, she received the Asia-Pacific Mediation Forum Peace Prize in Suva. She served as the president of the Polynesian Society in 2005–2010. As president of the Society she might well have been described as a kuia in the sense that she liked to run a well-ordered meeting and would not hesitate to call Council members back to order, with some firmness of tone, if she thought some of them were straying off the point or getting sidetracked by conversations. Like kuia, such reminders were always made with aroha.

In 2017, she was featured as one of the Royal Society Te Apārangi's 150 Women in 150 Words, celebrating the contributions of women to knowledge in Aotearoa. Her distinction, determination and generous tautoko gave licence to the Dame Joan Metge Medal being established by Royal Society Te Apārangi in 2006, honouring her contributions to the social sciences, renamed the Metge Medal in 2017. These achievements are just a small example of Dame Joan Metge's academic achievements over her very rich life.

Dame Joan is remembered as a kind and gentle kuia, with her students and colleagues appreciating her interest in their work, her encouragement and her intellect. One of the things Joan was admired for was the way she included a rich array of Māori voices within her work, modelling a rigorous scholarship that also showed deep respect for the people who shared their knowledge with her. The work was as much theirs as it was hers. This made all her writings a wonderful treasury of learning and knowledge.

Dame Joan Metge was loved by her whānau, friends and many tauira. E te Rangatira, haere atu rā... in your words and those of your dear weaving friends...

Whiria te tangata, ka puta he oranga;  
Whiria ngā mahi toi, ka puta he tino rangatiratanga.

When people are woven together, there is wellbeing;  
when the arts are woven together, there is true self-determination.

Paimārire ki a tātou.

Peace to us all.

Marama Muru-Lanning, Richard Benton, Michael Reilly,  
Gerard O'Regan and Paul Diamond

President and Council Members, The Polynesian Society

### *Glossary*

These terms, used in the text, are te reo Māori.

kākahu	clothing
kaumātua	male elder
kuia	female elder
korowai	cloak
tauira	student
tautoko	support
te ao Māori	the Māori realm