Dame Evelyn Stokes: Distinguished New Zealand Geographer

Ma wai e to te waka o te matauranga? Who will bear the canoe of knowledge? Professor Evelyn Stokes has devoted almost 30 years of her academic life to filling and bearing a canoe full of knowledge about the movements, settlements and lands of the tangata whenua of Aotearoa. Evelyn, through her active participation in Maori society, through her encouragement for the academic development of Maori students, for her leadership in fostering the development of Maori geography, and for her painstaking research into Maori lands and communities, has encouraged and empowered many Maori as well as pakeha to treasure their heritages.

One of her historical geography contemporaries of the 1950s, Emeritus Professor R. Gerard Ward, observes: “It has been a pleasure for me to find how often our academic interests have intersected along with personal attachments to particular regions. This includes her work on early plantations in Fiji; her historical studies of Tauranga where I have had family links; and her work on Maori land in the Taupo country”. Clearly Ward’s understanding of our land and people has been greatly enriched by Evelyn’s canoe of knowledge.

Another of her historical geography contemporaries advised me that Evelyn Dinsdale, “was the complete Canterbury geographer of the 1950s, evenly poised between physical and human geography”. Garth Cant goes on to observe that “she proved herself as one of the best of the Jobberns and Packard graduate students in Geomorphology and Biogeography, and then came home to Tauranga to do a Masters thesis on the spread of settlement in Tauranga County”. Evelyn completed her MA with First Class Honours in Geography at the Canterbury University College of the University of New Zealand in 1959 and followed this with a Postgraduate Teacher Training Course at Christchurch Teachers’ College and several months of classroom teaching at Te Kuiti High School in 1960.

In 1960 Evelyn obtained a Fulbright Travel Grant and a Smith-Mundt Grant from the US State Department which enabled her to undertake a PhD at Syracuse University in New York, where Preston James was her mentor. Her dissertation was on the lumber industry in northern New York, and two papers on this research were published in North America’s leading geography journals (Economic Geography and Annals, Association of American Geographers in 1965 and 1966). This thesis was completed with despatch – in 1963 she was back teaching for a few months at Te Kuiti High School before taking up a lectureship in Geography at the University of Auckland with duties at that university’s newly formed Waikato branch. In 1964 she moved to Hamilton, where she has lived for the past 37 years.

Evelyn, assisted by a Junior Lecturer, Michael Selby (now Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Waikato), were the foundation staff members of Waikato’s
Department of Geography. She became Senior Lecturer there in 1969, Reader in 1975, and obtained a Personal Chair in 1994. Evelyn is widely recognised, by both Maori and Pakeha, as Waikato Geography's "kuia", although both her own University and her colleagues have been slow to acknowledge her contribution to her discipline and to the New Zealand Geographical Society.

It is a little ironic that we are awarding Evelyn the New Zealand Geographical Society's Distinguished Geographer Medal after she has been recognised twice in national honours for her contributions to tertiary education, Maori and New Zealand. In 1990 Evelyn received the New Zealand 1990 Commemoration Medal and in 1999 became Dame Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit. Before commenting further on some of the things that have contributed to this national recognition, I want to say a something about her contributions to the New Zealand Geographical Society.

Michael Selby reminded me of one of Evelyn's first significant contributions to both her professional society and her university in 1964. Evelyn loves maps. Indeed, her passion for maps has kept a tradition of cartography very much alive for almost 40 years in Waikato's Geography Department. Tangible evidence of this love came in 1964 when she and Michael transferred the New Zealand Geographical Society's collection of maps from the University of Auckland's Geography library to the University of Waikato. Evelyn decided these maps, which were essentially unused and uncatalogued in Auckland, would make a very useful contribution to the Waikato campus's fledgling library collections, where they would be properly housed and catalogued. The University of Waikato thus became the deposit library for the New Zealand Geographical Society's considerable map collection, and Evelyn was the Society's Map Librarian from 1966 until 1983 when its administration was taken over by the University Library.

Evelyn's love for maps is revealed not only in her stewardship of the Society's collection. She has been a great creator of maps - her publications are renowned for the meticulous and innovative cartography, much of it expertly produced by Max Oulton at the University of Waikato. Her mapping skills were recognised very early in the planning stages for the New Zealand Historical Atlas. From 1991 to 1997 she served on the Editorial Committee and the Maori Advisory Committee for this Atlas. The Deputy Editor of the Atlas, Dr Russell Kirkpatrick, recalls Evelyn's contribution to that atlas - she is directly responsible for at least 8 of the plates dealing with Maori history. He, along with other members of the editorial team, certainly gained enormously from Evelyn's "te waka o te matauranga".

Evelyn has had a formal association in one way or another with the Geographical Society's Council since 1965. Between 1965 and 1987 she was a member of its Editorial Board, editing for 10 years the New Zealand Journal of Geography which she created out of a pamphlet published by the Society (New Zealand Geographical Society Record). Between 1965 and 1979 she published 20 articles in the New Zealand Geographer and the New Zealand Journal of Geography that were specifically oriented towards the interests and curriculum needs of secondary school geography teachers and pupils. Garth Cant again recalls, with regard to Evelyn's contribution to geography in New Zealand's schools, that she served on the National Geography Curriculum Committee between 1976 and 1987.

Since 1989 she has been the Society's nominee on the New Zealand Geographic Board which has responsibility for researching and determining official place names in New Zealand. Her knowledge of Maori places and the histories surrounding these places also ensured she was an obvious candidate for appointment to the Waitangi Tribunal. She has been a member of this Tribunal since 1989, and has been an author and contributor to many of the major reports published under its auspices.

Two of the Tribunal's inquiries related particularly closely to Evelyn's long-established research interests. The first of these was the Tribunal's documentation of the confiscation of Maori land in the Tauranga area - she edited a volume collection on Te Raupatia o Tauranga Moua which has become the major repository of written knowledge on Tauranga's lands. It was noted earlier that Evelyn's Masters thesis was on settlements in Tauranga County. In 1980 she published a history of Tauranga County to mark a century of local government in the area. This book received the J.M. Sherrard "Major Award" in regional history - it remains the definitive study of Tauranga's economic and social transformation since the settlement of Maori.

The second Tribunal inquiry that is particularly relevant here concerned the Rotokawa geothermal resources between Taupo and Rotorua. Evelyn was on the Ngati Tahu Tribal Trust for 11 years between 1980 and 1991, appointed by the Maori Land Court. She was heavily involved in the tribal's negotiations with the Ministry of Energy, amongst other Government Departments, over the use of geothermal resources for power generation in this area. Her experience with the Ngati Tahu Tribal Trust has ensured she has an on-going role to play in inquiries into the use of geothermal resources.

I have only touched on Evelyn's very rich contribution to the literature on Maori land and community issues. She has written over 30 books, monographs and substantive research reports that contain significant findings on Maori resource use. Many of these have been published from the Department of Geography at the University of Waikato where they have been invaluable resources for successive generations of students taking courses in the Maori geography programme. The final aspect of Evelyn's career that I want to comment briefly on is her innovative contributions to curriculum development in the Department of Geography at the University of Waikato.
One of the most important academic appointments that Evelyn facilitated at the University of Waikato was getting Ann Magee onto the staff in the late 1970s. Ann and Evelyn were instrumental in establishing gender and later feminist studies at the University of Waikato. At the same time as she was battling with some of her male colleagues in other New Zealand universities about the place for and meaning of gendered geographies, she was also arguing the case for a Maori geography - a geography written by Maori, about Maori, for Maori. One of her early students, later to be the first Maori lecturer in the Waikato Geography Department, Tikitu Tutua-Nathan (now a senior policy manager in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries) recalls the significant mentoring role she has played for all of the Maori students and staff the Department has had since its foundation.

I would like to conclude with an observation contained in a message I have received from Associate Professor Louise Johnson, Head of the School of Contemporary Arts at Deakin University, and a former Lecturer in the Waikato Department.

“Evelyn gave me a great academic insight which I have used with myself and students ever since - and that was to ‘write to express not to impress’. As someone who likes to perform to an audience and to write with lots of long words, this was a revelation. It was also wonderfully typical of someone whose professional life was to express - her commitment to Maori rights - not to impress anyone. And that humility is also very special.”

Humble people often get missed in the clamour made by those who like to perform and impress. It took the award of the country’s highest national honour to remind colleagues of Evelyn’s remarkable contribution to geography and the New Zealand Geographical Society. Garth Cant captures this most concisely when he notes that “no one within geography has made a more substantial and sustained contribution to the wholeness and wellbeing of this nation we call Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 1980s and 1990s than Dame Evelyn Stokes.” It is with great pleasure, Evelyn that we present you with the New Zealand Geographical Society’s highest honour: the Distinguished New Zealand Geographer Medal.

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