


- OBITUARY -

Helen May Leach, An Appreciation


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As a tribute to Helen's scholarly breadth and contributions, her influence as an academic leader and mentor and her warm friendship, several former students and colleagues have participated in the creation of this appreciation.



Figure 1: Helen at home in Leith Street Dunedin 1969. Figure source: Foss Leach negative collection Wairarapa Archives Masterton

Foss Leach begins with a brief biography.

Helen May Keedwell was born in 1945 to Peggy and Harvey Keedwell with two sisters, Nancy and Mary. Harvey was the manager of an insurance company, and they were a typical New Zealand middle class family with a stay-at-home Mum. The family lived in Hawera, Wellington and Dunedin as employment opportunities changed for Harvey. Helen attended Otago Girls' High School and was Dux in 1962. She studied at Otago University from 1963 to 1976, and was awarded MA first class Hons 1969, and PhD 1976. She began employment in Anthropology at Otago University in 1972, rising through the ranks to Professor in 2002. She retired as Emeritus Professor in 2008. Helen had an impeccable academic career, recognised internationally with numerous prizes and awards. She leaves in her wake a prodigious publication record in several branches of Anthropology (listed below). She was married to Foss Leach in her earlier career and is survived by two daughters, Janey and Katie and grand-daughter, Sophie. She died peacefully in 2026.



Figure 2: PhD Graduation day, December 1976. Harvey Keedwell, Peggy Keedwell, Helen, Mary Browne. Figure source: Helen Leach slide collection.

Foss recalls Helen's early experience of excavation beginning with Moturua Island in the Bay of Islands in the summer of 1963.

Helen was always the one whom you asked to sort out difficult stratigraphic problems, and she was greatly respected for this. She took part in some really difficult excavations – most notably at Riverton in Southland, where it rained continuously for several weeks. The team of students were entertained in the evening by Austin Mitchell, a charismatic British Labour politician for Great Grimsby. As sometimes happens in archaeology, the person responsible for excavations does not always publish the results. Helen stepped up to the plate and wrote one of her seminal papers on stone technology from the Riverton excavation. In those early years Helen took part in excavations in the South Island at Karitane, Tiwai Point, Oturehua, Long Beach, and in the North Island on Moturua Island and Te Kuri's village, and above all, the programme of research in Palliser Bay.



Figure 3(left): Helen Keedwell took part in the excavations of Paeroa Pa on Moturua Island in the Bay of Islands in 1963-4, led by Les Groube. Figure source: Foss Leach negative collection Wairarapa Archives Masterton.

Figure 4 (below): Helen and Foss shared an office in the original Anthropology Department house in Cumberland St, Dunedin. Helen is working on her Masters thesis on the Poutini Ngai Tahu 1969. Figure source: Helen Leach slide collection.



The first excavation that Helen and Foss jointly led, Oturehua (1969), was the scene of an ancient stone quarry, where pre-European Māori were fashioning large stone blades. Their analysis required collecting all the tiny chips of stone, labelled by their location, and then placing each in the same position in a laboratory back in Dunedin. Then, thousands were fitted back together and glued in place. This revealed what the ancient artisans were doing with the stone. Helen later described this work as a monumental jigsaw, where you could guarantee that a lot of pieces would be missing. Thus began one of Helen's academic passions – stone technology – and she has a well-earned reputation in this field with many publications.



Figure 5: During the excavations at Oturehua in 1969, a wider site survey was undertaken. This photo is of a small stone working floor on the hillside near Waipiata. Left to right, rear row: Peter Pride, Dave Simmons (obscured), Marion Press, Foss Leach, ID?, Helen Leach. Front row: visiting American Fullbright scholar, Simon Knight, Patricia Kinlock, ID?, Julie Park, Stuart Park. Figure source: Foss Leach negative collection Wairarapa Archives Masterton

Helen's influence, however, extended well beyond Aotearoa. Melinda Allen, who was then a student and budding archaeologist, describes meeting Helen in Hawai'i in the late 1970s.

Helen was in Honolulu to give a Bishop Museum seminar on her southern Wairarapa research relating to Māori horticultural systems. Despite the years, her talk has stayed with me. Her study of the Palliser Bay field systems was ground-breaking, a fascinating view of early Māori cultivation

practices and a challenge to simplistic moa hunter narratives. Her research also connected with emerging understandings of Hawaiian dryland field systems where, as at Palliser Bay, extensive stone wall complexes are common. My 20-something self was struck by this scholarly powerhouse, a woman successfully navigating the field of Pacific archaeology—a discipline then dominated by men. Listening to her speak, I felt a rush of possibilities.

The Palliser Bay project, led by Helen and Foss, was a landmark research programme that ran for three years between 1969 and 1972. The aims were lofty—to examine the settlement patterns, economics, environment, and social lives of tangata whenua of the Wairarapa region, from initial Polynesian settlement through to the 19th century. It is considered by many to be Aotearoa New Zealand’s first major regional archaeological study and was enormously productive. Along with Helen and Foss’s doctoral theses (both 1976), the project produced five MA theses and a major monograph that remains a New Zealand classic: *Prehistoric Man in Palliser Bay*, (1979). Helen and Foss effectively trained a generation of New Zealand archaeologists, and many of their students became luminaries themselves, assuming important positions in the country’s universities, museums, and heritage agencies. An extensive re-evaluation of the Palliser Bay chronology in 2022 (Leach and colleagues) gives new currency to this remarkable research effort.



Figure 6: Palliser Bay expedition summer 1969. Photo taken at the mouth of the Makotukutuku river, known as the Washpool. Morning tea break. Back row partly obscured

Left to right: Geoff Walls, Julie Park, Stuart Park, Foss Leach, Helen Leach. On the roof top of the landrover: Steve Bagley, Garry McAlpine, Grant Ludeman. Front row: Graham Walsh, Kathy Walls, Gaela Mair, Lucy Ward (toddler), Sue Ward, Graeme Ward, Rupert X, Peter Soskice (Lecturer in Russian Otago University). Figure source: Foss Leach negative collection Wairarapa Archives Masterton.

Helen went on to publish numerous journal articles, chapters, and books, many focused on traditional Polynesian food practices and production systems. Her interests also extended to New Zealand's cooks and gardeners of the historic period, research initially supported by a Rhodes Fellowship at Oxford University (1980-1981).

In 2008, Helen received a Garden History Award from the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture, and 11 years later she became an Associate of Honour in the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture. Her significant contributions to culinary anthropology saw her appointed an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit (ONZM) in 2018 and she was a Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand. One of her most beloved books (and see Dave Veart's comments below) famously laid to rest any questions about the origin of the pavlova: *The Pavlova Story — A slice of New Zealand's culinary history* (2008).



Figure 7: Helen with her medal from the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture 2008. Figure source: Helen Leach photo collection.

Helen was widely recognised as a specialist in Polynesian stone tool technologies, as Foss describes above. As well as publishing on assemblages, sites, and quarries from Aotearoa New Zealand she contributed on Sāmoa, and the broader Pacific. In 1989 she was awarded the Elsdon Best Memorial Medal by the Polynesian Society, in recognition of her “outstanding scholarly work on the New Zealand Māori”. Her award seminar, “Archaic adze quarries and working floors: an historical review”, was memorialized in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (1990), as is the custom on these occasions.

Thinking over Helen’s incredibly productive career, it is challenging to identify her most significant publication. She was an exceptional scholar, thoughtful and exacting, and she routinely placed her ideas within wider disciplinary conversations.

Her popular book *1000 years of Gardening in New Zealand* (1984) was pivotal to archaeological understandings of Māori food production systems at the time and has been foundational to the research that has followed over the last forty years.

Elsewhere she critiqued theoretical ideas relating to “agricultural intensification”, a key disciplinary concept, drawing on Pacific examples to illustrate key points (1999)—an article published in the discipline’s premier journal, *Current Anthropology*.

In “Gardens without weeds?” (2005), Helen considered not only lesser-known plants that accompanied Polynesian colonists across the region, but also explored cross-cultural ideas about what constitutes a “weed”? Other papers examined how Māori turned the invasive native bracken fern into a valuable food resource, one well-suited to travel and storage. She also delved into Polynesian “luxury” foods (2003), analysing the different ways that “luxury” and value are determined and expressed.

Domestication was another area of interest and insights. Often associated with early human activities in the Fertile Crescent, Helen and Chris Stowe (2005) mounted a case for conscious selection, management, and transplanting of karaka (*Corynocarpus laevigatus*) by Māori—hallmarks of domestication and markers of ancestral Māori achievements in the cultivation realm.

In “Human domestication reconsidered” (*Current Anthropology*, 2003) Helen flips traditional perspectives asking, have humans been “domesticated” by the worlds they created? A thoughtful and prescient article traversing ideas that now are widely recognised in important cross-disciplinary frameworks like niche construction theory.

These are but a few examples from Helen’s prolific career. Her research took Pacific peoples and cultures to a global audience and laid the foundations for many important and on-going conversations in the Pacific, including how food histories and stone tool production reveal world views, socio-cultural interactions, and relationships with the natural world.

Helen has left a legacy of academically rigorous and accessible accounts of the archaeology and history of kai in Aotearoa New Zealand, initially with her work on Māori gardening and later with equally rigorous analysis of our more recent foodways.

Dave Veart takes up this thread about Helen’s contributions to horticultural heritage and culinary anthropology.

Our paths first crossed when Helen assessed my MA thesis on the māra kai of Tamaki Makaurau. Then her later book, *1,000 Years of Gardening in New Zealand* became a hugely useful tool during

our work with DOC and others to protect the 100 hectares of archaeologically important Māori gardens at Ihumātao.

She also published jointly with her sisters, Mary Browne and Nancy Tichborne, the series beginning with *The Cook's Garden – for Cooks Who Garden and Gardeners Who Cook* (1980). While not directly archaeological these books give an indication of the direction Helen's interests were taking. In the early 2000s initially unknown to either of us, we began working in parallel on the wider history of cookery in New Zealand, Helen as part of her Marsden Grant project, me working independently. My book *First Catch Your Weka* and Helen's *Pavlova Story* were both finalists in the 2009 Montana Book Awards and I recall the pair of us sitting together musing that this was probably the only time two archaeologists with books on cooking history would ever be in a similar situation.

Helen's Marsden Grant work culminated in *From Kai to Kiwi Kitchen* and subsequently *Kitchens; The New Zealand kitchen in the 20th century*, the latter book being described as "...the first detailed exploration of the kitchen as a functioning hub within the New Zealand home."

Two of Helen's Marsden Grant scholars, Jane Teal and Raelene Inglis, who, along with Helen, Janet Mitchell and Michael Symons, comprised the Marsden Grant Team sketch in their experience.

As well as the usual rigorous academic expectations, it was three years of indulgence in research in the area which we were all passionate about—New Zealand food history. We were sent drafts of each current piece of research and were always encouraged to comment or make suggestions. There was the opportunity to attend conferences, and we will never forget the trip to Adelaide when we introduced Helen to the delights of Subway, but in return we received an education about four and six wheel bogies on trains and their couplings.

Dave Veart concludes this thread:

Whether it was Māori gardens in Palliser Bay, modern māra kai, sugary desserts or how we structure our cooking spaces, Helen helped create the story of the foodways of Aotearoa New Zealand. She made the domestic part of a wider archaeological discourse, artefacts, spaces and ingredients emerge and reveal parts of our past we may not have noticed. Her special talent was to write influential popular books on these subjects while retaining an objective and data-based point of view. She took archaeology and used it to expand her readers' world view and to explain the past and its relationship to the present to a wide public. A rare talent.



Figure 8: Helen talking to Television crew, Makotukutuku valley, Palliser Bay, summer 1970. Left to right, TV crew 1 and 2, Helen, TV Crew 3, Kevin Jones, Doug Sutton (roof of landrover), Nigel Prickett (obscured), Atholl Anderson, ID?, Steve Bagley. Figure source: Helen Leach slide collection.

On Helen as mentor and long-term friend and the atmosphere of joint endeavour that she and Foss created for the students of anthropology at the University of Otago, several former Otago students have much to say.

Nigel and Kath Prickett begin:

We count ourselves lucky to have been archaeology students in the Anthropology Department, Otago University, in the early 70s, when Helen and Foss Leach were the department heart of New Zealand archaeology, taught and carried out.

In those years was their Palliser Bay project, Kath taking part in the first summer fieldwork 1969-70, the next summer both of us, after Stage 3. The year later, after MA papers, there was fieldwork by us, and by Atholl Anderson, written up for MA theses, and along with theses by Gaela Mair and Doug Sutton, published in the Palliser Bay report.

In Dunedin was interesting and quality research and scholarship, and an inspiring and enjoyable archaeological community, both led by Helen and Foss. In this we met regularly at their St Leonards home for presentations in turn on current work, then supper and more talk.

Others we remember of the community are, the year or two ahead of us: Rosemary Buchan, Kevin Jones, Bruce McFadgen, Stuart Park and Graeme Ward: of our year also Rachel Baskerville and Steve Bagley; and following, Jenny Cave, Neville Ritchie and Rod Wallace, among them, lasting friends.

Our Dunedin lives we owe enormously to Helen and Foss, and our fellow students of the time. Helen is remembered for her sharp mind, good humour and generosity of ideas and spirit. Kath would also emphasise Helen's leadership in women's participation in university scholarship and teaching, at a time when change was needed. She is a great loss, and sorely missed.



Figure 9: Book launch of *Comparatively Speaking*, University of Otago Press, 1974. Left to right: Linden Cowell, Foss Leach, Helen Leach (pregnant with daughter Katie), and H.D. Skinner. Figure source: Foss Leach negative collection Wairarapa Archives Masterton.

Jenny Cave, coming a few years later, describes that Helen became her Honours supervisor, guide and friend.

She was sympathetic, tolerant, and encouraging, shaping both research structure and content. My work with her led directly to an innovative scanning electron methodology, deepened by Engineering colleagues at the University of Toronto for Master's level use-wear analysis of Arctic ulus.

She was wise, generous with ideas and warm. I recall sitting on the floor behind a large armchair at their home - a beer in my hand, surrounded by fellow post-graduates, sharing ideas and fellowship. I couldn't believe my luck, to be part of this group of new knowledge creators. Helen was pivotal to my life, as role model and mentor.

Julie Park recalls what an inspiration Helen was to her as a beginning anthropology student in 1965:

Although social anthropology was my main interest, in Otago anthropology at that time we studied archaeology and biological (physical) anthropology too. Helen and Foss welcomed interested graduate students into the Thursday seminars at their home and were as encouraging to us 'socials' as to her own students. The seminars started with a varied selection of classical music, progressed to presentation and much disputation and ended with supper. We became friends. I experienced her leadership at freezing Oturehua for the blade industry excavation and enjoyed the subsequent three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle as we tried to reassemble the cores in an empty, and almost as freezing, space. Later at Palliser Bay where, in addition to the intriguing archaeology noted by others, I recall that we were plied with crayfish by the generous lighthouse keeper.



Figure 10: The stone assemblage from the Oturehua excavation laid out in the original squares in the Anthropological Laboratory, Otago University, 1969. Helen and Foss spent many hours re-assembling flakes and cores to uncover the stone flaking techniques of the artisans. Figure source: Foss Leach negative collection Wairarapa Archives Masterton, published in *Tuhinga* 2019: 9(2): Figure 22.

Helen as woman scholar and, from 2002, a Professor, was an inspiration and a very encouraging presence on excavations and in seminar rooms to those coming after her. And as Foss Leach wrote in his eulogy for Helen's commemoration at the University of Otago: "Helen also had a commanding personality when it was required, and she never shied away from polemic. Look at her mighty defence against the tyranny of those kangaroos over the ditch that tried to claim the pavlova from us. The force of good scholarship was always safe in Helen's hands."

Tricia Laing and I attribute the value we place on research teams and any skills we have in leadership of them to this remarkable woman. And with Kathy Prickett and others we see Helen as a trailblazing feminist scholar who demonstrated that domestic life, everyday cooking and growing of food was just as worthy of critical scholarship and as revelatory as other activities--and that women can be academic leaders.

About Helen as a friend and academic collaborator with wide interests, Jane Teal and Raelene Inglis write:

Raelene collaborated with Helen and Mary Browne In "The Twelve Cakes of Christmas" and spent some years as Helen's research assistant. Lunch times were often spent discussing the genealogy and family relationships of the birds that were fed sugar water on the fence outside the door. Helen also had an interest in family history, not the leaves on the tree kind of interest, but rather the in-depth enquiry that can be seen in the various research papers that she, with other members of her extended family, contributed about the Pavitt Cottage in Akaroa and the surrounding area. <https://www.pavitt.co.nz/>

Jane and Raelene recall: Jane's trips from Lyttelton to work with Helen included afternoon tea and were always accompanied by brisk walks around the surrounding area. We both enjoyed occasional evening meals with Helen. Sometimes it was a pizza at Filadelfio's and on other occasions we were the recipients of one of Helen's experiments. On the list of enjoyment sago does not rate highly -- if only we had asked for the recipe for that delicious apple dessert!



Figure 11: Helen with her daughter Katie and grand-daughter Sophie. 2013. Figure source: Katie Leach photo collection.

Acknowledgements

Permission to publish has been obtained from the owners of each figure as specified. In cases where the owner is Helen Leach (deceased), her surviving daughter Katie has given permission.

The authors would like to acknowledge all of those who contributed informally to this appreciation. We thank Foss Leach for contributing the photos and for the work they entailed and to Foss and Helen's family for her list of publications, attached.

Helen Leach's Publications

Leach, B.F.; Leach, H.M.; Law, R.G. 2022. The Chronology of Pre-European Settlement in Palliser Bay, A Re-Evaluation of Radiocarbon Dating Fifty Years On. *Heritage New Zealand Archaeological Reports Digital Library*, ID: Leach7

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