

Mākereti Papakura, the first indigenous woman to study at Oxford, to be awarded a posthumous degree

The School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford has announced that pioneering Māori scholar, Mākereti Papakura, will receive a posthumous degree more than 100 years after she began her studies.

Born in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1873, Mākereti is believed to be the first indigenous woman to matriculate to the University. She enrolled in 1922 to read Anthropology at the Pitt Rivers Museum, where much of the teaching was conducted at the time, and at the Society of Home Students, now St Anne's College. In her groundbreaking research for her studies at Oxford, she explored the customs of her people of Te Arawa from a female perspective. Her scholarship, combined with her indigenous worldview, earned her the respect of many Oxford academics at the time, and has gone on to be celebrated by members of Māori communities and researchers worldwide.

Tragically, Mākereti died in 1930, just weeks before she was due to present her thesis. With the agreement of her family, Mākereti's good friend, Rhodes Scholar, and fellow Oxford anthropologist, T.K. Penniman, posthumously published her work, in a book titled *The Old-Time Māori*. It became the first ethnographic study published by a Māori author and is recognised as such by the New Zealand Royal Society.

The School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography applied to the University of Oxford's Education Committee to request that Mākereti be posthumously awarded the degree of MPhil in Anthropology. The application was supported by St Anne's College and the Pitt Rivers Museum, to which Mākereti and her family donated numerous artefacts and papers both during her lifetime and after her death. The Education Committee's decision to grant the request has been warmly welcomed both in Oxford and in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The degree will be awarded at a ceremony presided over by the University's Vice-Chancellor later this year in Oxford's Sheldonian theatre. Members of Mākereti's family and representatives of the Māori community are expected to attend.

Professor Clare Harris, Head of the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography said:

'We are delighted that the extraordinary achievements of Mākereti, the first indigenous woman to study at Oxford, have been recognised by the University of Oxford with the award of a posthumous MPhil degree. Mākereti is an inspiring figure, not only to many in Aotearoa New Zealand but to students and scholars around the world.'

June Northcroft Grant, on behalf of Mākereti's family and tribe (Tūhourangi – Ngāti Wāhiao), said:

'We are grateful to Oxford University for this tribute to Mākereti's memory and to all those who have supported her story in the years since her passing. It is a testament to the lasting power of

education, culture, and the determination of one woman to ensure that Māori stories would not be forgotten.

We have always known the sacrifices she made to pursue education and the strength it took for her to continue, often in the face of considerable challenges. We are especially humbled that her customary tribal practices and the scholarship she possessed have been acknowledged with such careful and respectful consideration by the University's Education Committee.

This recognition belongs to Mākereti, to our ancestors, and to the Māori community worldwide.

He toi whakairo, he mana tangata (Where there is creative excellence, there is human dignity)'

Notes to editors

For more information, images and media interviews in the UK/worldwide please contact Rachael Rees, Communications Officer, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford news@anthro.ox.ac.uk, +44 7500082362.

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Additional quotes

Evie O'Brien, Chief Executive of Te Wānanga o Aotearoa and former Executive Director of the Atlantic Institute, Rhodes Trust said:

'I owe a great debt to Mākereti as she paved the way for Māori women in Oxford, including me. I had the honour of connecting more deeply with her life during my time at Rhodes Trust, culminating in the inaugural Mākereti Papakura lecture in 2022. More than 200 were in attendance, including 30 Māori who travelled from Aotearoa. Mākereti believed that there was something special about Oxford. Despite her deep connection to her home and people in New Zealand, she requested to be buried in Oddington, Oxfordshire and bequeathed all of her cultural treasures and personal manuscripts to the Pitt Rivers Museum. From a cultural perspective, this was both the greatest gift and sacrifice – a true testament of how much she loved her life in Oxford. This recognition of her work and contribution is therefore truly special.'

Professor Ngaire Woods, Dean of the Blavatnik School of Government and former Rhodes Scholar from Aotearoa said:

'Mākereti is an inspiration. I picture Mākereti sitting in the libraries here, writing her thesis later published as "The Old-Time Maori" which I read as I travelled to Oxford to take up my Rhodes Scholarship. Her scholarship uncovered a world not just of rules, rituals, and community, but of meanings, connections, and boundaries, about which I (and most of the world) know all too little. I am absolutely thrilled to see her scholarly effort recognized in this way.'

About the University of Oxford

Oxford University has been placed number 1 in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings for the ninth year running, and number 3 in the QS World Rankings 2024.

Oxford is world-famous for research and teaching excellence and home to some of the most talented people from across the globe. Our work helps the lives of millions, solving real-world problems through a huge network of partnerships and collaborations. The breadth and interdisciplinary nature of our research alongside our personalised approach to teaching sparks imaginative and inventive insights and solutions.

About the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography

The School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford is the largest anthropology department in the UK. Through our uniquely wide-ranging approach we produce internationally recognised research, and our teaching engages with all kinds of contemporary issues. Our department is highly diverse and international, with over 70% of our students taking graduate level degrees coming from outside the UK. Our work is guided by an ethos of openness, tolerance and respect for all.

About St Anne's College

St Anne's is one of Oxford's largest colleges, with over 800 students. Our Fellows' world leading research ranges across the arts, humanities, social sciences, mathematics, and physical, life and medical sciences. From its founding as the Society of Oxford Home-Students in 1879, St Anne's College has always been about widening access to an Oxford education. It uniquely enabled women from the UK and many other countries to attend lectures and tutorials whilst living more flexibly and affordably than the other women's halls, at home or in lodgings across the city. Since 1952 it has been a full College of the University of Oxford, welcoming both male and female students since 1979.

About the Pitt Rivers Museum

The Pitt Rivers Museum is one of the leading museums of anthropology and archaeology in the world. Part of the University of Oxford, it was established in 1884 and now stewards over 700,000 objects in the collections, including photographs, manuscripts and films. The Museum, which welcomed over 500,000 visitors in 2024, carries out world-leading conservation and research and is renowned for its innovative public programmes and collaborative work with both local and global communities. Recognised for its pioneering work engaging with its colonial past, the Museum is a much-loved Victorian space challenging old perceptions, inspiring new audiences and building lasting relationships, demonstrating the vital role museums can play in contemporary society.