Jock McEwen was a member of the Polynesian Society for more than 60 of his 95 years, including 21 as President. He was a highly respected civil servant and administrator, a fluent speaker of Māori since childhood, and deeply involved in Māori and Pacific Island cultural and community affairs. He was fifth generation New Zealander of Highland Scottish ancestry; in the 1840s three of his great-great grandparents and four of his great-grandparents were already resident in the Hutt Valley, where he himself eventually made his home. Jock was born in Feilding and had his secondary education in Palmerston North, before studying law at Victoria University College.
More important perhaps was the education in Māori language and culture which he received from members of the Durie family and other elders in the Horowhenua. His consuming interest in Te Ao Māori led him to sign on as a cadet with the Department of Native Affairs in 1932 for the princely sum of 15 shillings a week. He soon attracted the interest of Sir Apirana Ngata, and after his receiving a permanent position with the Department in 1935 advanced on a career which was to bring him into close contact and collaboration with most of the leaders of Māoridom over the ensuing decades.

By the mid-1940s he was also Secretary of the Maori Purposes Fund Board, and a member of the Council of the Polynesian Society; in 1946 he was appointed a member of the Editorial Committee appointed to take over from the long-serving editor of the Society’s Journal, Johannes Andersen, from the beginning of 1947. It was around that time that he also assumed responsibility for co-ordinating the work on the sixth revision of the *Williams Dictionary of the Maori Language* (completed in 1957). This was a somewhat turbulent period in the Society’s history, with a quick succession of Presidents (and a year in which the office was left vacant) and Council meetings marked by considerable acrimony. His colleagues wanted to nominate Jock for the Presidency in 1952, but he declined the honour. It was at this time that he transferred to the Department of Island Affairs and became Resident Commissioner on Niue Island in 1953, following the assassination of his predecessor. This was not an easy assignment, but Commissioner McEwen managed not only to restore the authority of the government and secure local acceptance of this, but also to become a proficient speaker of Niuean and produce the first published dictionary of the language. After his (reluctant) return to New Zealand in 1956 to be Assistant Secretary he became permanent Secretary for Island Affairs (1958), and played an important role in negotiating Niuean self-government (including a 1965 visit to discuss a timetable for independence), while also writing on land tenure in which, along with constitutional affairs and language, he had taken a special interest. His *Niue Dictionary*, prepared by the Schools Publications branch of the NZ Department of Education and published in 1970 by the Department of Maori and Island Affairs, caused a political controversy, and almost brought down the Niue government when a motion condemning the use of the digraph ng instead of the letter g, as in Samoan, to denote the velar nasal was passed in the Assembly against the government’s wishes.

The same year that he became Secretary for Island Affairs, Jock was elected President of the Society, a post that he held for the following 21 years, handing over to Professor Bruce Biggs when the Society’s administration was shifted to Auckland in 1979. Two years later he was awarded the Society’s Elsdon Best Memorial Medal (1981). The Society’s historian, M.P.K. Sorrenson,
noted that Jock McEwen brought a “much needed stability” to the Council and the Society, along with financial consolidation. Council meetings were not without occasional bursts of drama, however. Jock, along with other southern council members vigorously and successfully opposed attempts by the “Auckland Faction” to get the Society’s library transferred there in the early 1960s, rather than to the Turnbull Library which was favoured by those from south of the Bombay Hills.

Jock’s commitment to the Society throughout his Presidency was quite remarkable considering the wide range of official and community activities in which he was involved at the time. In 1963 he became Head of the Department of Maori Affairs, but earlier that year as Secretary for Island Affairs he had recommended changes to secondary education in Cook Islands, including improvements in teacher training, to prepare the country for independence. He regained responsibility for Island Affairs when that Department was merged with Maori Affairs in 1968. Although a loyal administrator of governmental policy, he used his influence to modify the “one people” integrationist policy developed in the wake of the 1960 Hunn Report, essentially assimilation under another name, to take more account of the views of Māori people on this issue, and their rights to retain their own identity and make a contribution to NZ society on their own terms.

In the 1970s he was appointed a member of the governing Council of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, and was an active supporter of the research effort which I initiated into the state of the Māori language, and the initial attempts to stimulate “partial immersion” bilingual education in selected schools to assist with Māori language revitalisation. I remember him in this period as a vigorous campaigner, totally committed to both the mission of the Polynesian Society, of Te Wāhanga Kaupapa Māori of NZCER, and to the wider task of stimulating increased public interest, understanding and support for Māori language, culture, expressive and visual arts, and tradition, both within the Māori community and as part of the heritage of all peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In 1937 he was one of the founders of the Ngāti Poneke Maori Club, but in the 1970s he was President and tutor of Mawai-Hakona, which at the time was considered one of the most significant Māori cultural groups of its day. This group won the National Cultural Competitions in 1973 and thereby gained the prestigious task of singing at the opening of the Sydney Opera House. Jock’s work with Mawai-Hakona went hand-in-hand with his plans for an urban marae in Upper Hutt (where he had established his family home). McEwen retired from the Public Service in 1975. The Government honoured him with the royal award of Companion of Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George (CMG), but he almost certainly gained
more satisfaction when, a year later, the Orongomai Marae officially opened, replete with carvings in the various regional styles of Aotearoa along with others representing parts of the Pacific.

Jock’s retirement from the Civil Service and the Presidency of the Society was not accompanied by any diminution of activity. He completed his book *Rangitane: A Tribal History* in 1986, and was active as a master carver. His work notably included an on-going commitment to teaching prisoners at the Rimutaka prison, for which he was awarded a Rotary International Paul Harris Fellowship by his fellow Rotarians. Some of his *taurira* (pupils) from the prison produced the two six-metre *pou* (poles) at Wellington City’s Michael Fowler Centre. He strongly believed that this kind of intimate connection with their cultural heritage would help reorient and heal the broken lives of many of these people. Significantly, he insisted that the prisoners working on the Michael Fowler Centre *pou* be allowed to do so at the Technical College in Petone, rather than at the prison. This was just one of many such projects for marae and schools in many parts of the country.

In addition to his carving and writing, Jock McEwen was also a noted composer of *waiata* (songs/laments), under the *nom de plume* “Te Oka”. He was also a gifted raconteur, and in 1965 he presented a *waka huia* (intricately designed container for storing valuables), which he had carved as a *taonga* (treasure), to be awarded to the runner-up in the English section of the annual “Nga Manu Kōrero” speech competition.

His beloved wife Ruth died in July 2005. Jock is survived by his three sons, eight grandchildren and 13 great grandchildren. To them we extend our deepest sympathy for their loss, which is shared by the Society and all of us who had the privilege of knowing and working with this truly great man:

*He mata mahore nō te ara whānui a Tāne.*

Richard Benton

NOTE: Material for this obituary has been drawn from M.P.K. Sorrenson, *Manifest Duty: The Polynesian Society Over 100 Years*; Linda S. Crowl, “Politics and book publishing in the Pacific Islands”, PhD thesis, School of History and Politics, University of Wollongong, 2008; and obituaries appearing in the *Dominion Post* (29 May 2010) and the *Upper Hutt Leader* (19 May 2010).