

Maureen Heffernan

Maureen Patricia Heffernan was born in Greymouth on the West Coast of the South Island and received general primary education there until aged 11 when her family moved to Rangiora. She attended Sacred Heart Girls' College in Christchurch and later the University of Canterbury and Christchurch College of Education.

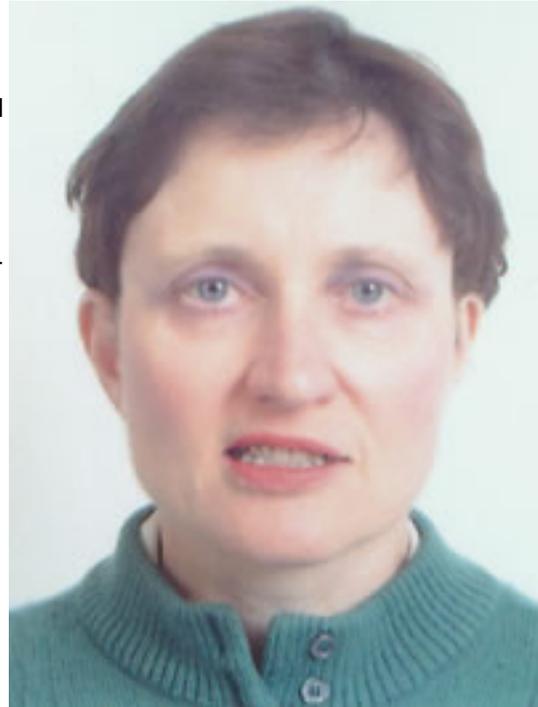
When Maureen was about seven, she went with her grandmother to hear a talk by a local doctor's wife about their trip to Japan, which in those days was a very exotic and faraway place. She still remembers the presenter demonstrating how to use a furoshiki, in which Japanese ladies wrapped up things to carry, and also her explaining the Japanese bath. Later on at school Maureen studied various countries in Social Studies. She was fascinated by the kimono and the writing system of Japan and remembers copying some kanji from a Japanese postage stamp.

Maureen feels that the above experiences stimulated her interest in studying the Japanese language, but it was not available in primary or secondary schools at that time. Her first real opportunity then was to study Japanese at university. Initially the most interesting aspect for Maureen was the writing system with its three different scripts - hiragana, katakana and kanji. Maureen's first textbook was Book 1 of the Young & Nakajima series, which was in romaji and introduced hiragana, so it had to be learned quickly, as Book 2 was all in hiragana.

Maureen thinks that the writing system was and is the most difficult aspect of learning Japanese. She found the only way to learn was to write out kana and kanji many times and try to reproduce it. Flash cards were very helpful and getting together with a friend to test each other was good as well. She feels that there is really no quick way of learning how to write Japanese.

Similarly with vocabulary, repetition and writing out words is the only way, she feels. Also, using them in context and sentences helps to reinforce the meaning. Reading children's stories are also very good for the kana.

The Japanese Department at the University of Canterbury was very new at the time and there was a wide variety of students in Stage 1 - first years like herself, students in the final year of study, teachers wishing to branch into teaching another language, quite mature people learning for interest, and this diversity made it much more stimulating than perhaps it may have been at high school in a class of people all the same age. The staff were mainly Japanese nationals and they were the first Japanese people Maureen had ever met! The department had more of a family atmosphere than other university departments. The class had a language camp which was great fun and the chance to try cooking Japanese food, play traditional games and use the language as much as possible.





In those days the opportunities to meet young Japanese people were limited and it was impossible to buy Japanese ingredients at supermarkets – hard to believe today! Maureen remembers her lecturers visiting a Japanese ship to buy noodles, shoyu (soy sauce) and some essentials to cook for the class. Maureen feels that they were fortunate in having wonderful teachers who taught them not only the language, but also about aspects of the culture whenever the opportunity arose.

When Maureen was in the final year of her undergraduate degree, one of the lecturers told them about the Japanese Government (Monbusho, as it was then known – now it is Monbukagakusho) Scholarships for Research students. As the lecturer knew she was interested in music and played the piano, he suggested she should learn the koto, a 13-stringed zither, and lent her some cassette tapes of the music.

Maureen was fortunate to be granted a scholarship to attend Tokyo University of Fine Arts – Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku – where she learned koto with a young teacher. She found it completely different from her experience of learning the piano in New Zealand for several reasons. First, there was no set lesson time, but the teacher was available at the university on certain days between certain times, so the students would wait their turn which provided a good opportunity to listen in on other lessons. Second, the teacher sat opposite Maureen playing another koto with her. Maureen also attended concerts of traditional music as often as she could. The five other overseas students were all studying some aspect of Japanese traditional music: Gagaku, Noh, Shamisen or Sengen, so they sometimes attended concerts together.

After finishing the scholarship, Maureen found an English teaching position in Yuzawa City, Akita Prefecture in Northern Honshu at a small privately run school which taught English and Maths to junior and senior high school students, as well as English to adults. She really enjoyed living in Yuzawa, as it was rural and much more traditional than Tokyo. Being about the only non-Japanese meant Maureen had to use her Japanese language much more and she found people helpful and friendly. Each season brought different festivals, foods and opportunities to meet people whom she would never have met in a large urban setting.

Fortunately, through the introduction of the teacher in Tokyo, Maureen was able to meet a wonderful koto teacher. Mrs Enomoto was already over 70, but full of energy and with plenty of time for her. Every first Sunday, Mrs Enomoto invited all the pupils to her home for the afternoon. A programme of pieces was decided by her in advance and whatever the students could play, they joined in. These benkyokai, (study sessions) were excellent for playing in ensemble and hearing new pieces, as well as the social aspect of meeting other pupils of all ages.

Maureen also learned minyo, (Japanese folk songs) with another excellent elderly teacher. She was fortunate to be able to take part in the annual Folk Song Contest in Yuzawa city that year. During her time in Yuzawa Maureen lived with a family with a 6-year-old daughter and 2-year-old son, so she learned lots of Japanese in their home. The parents were very good at correcting her mistakes. She filled about 6 notebooks with vocabulary and expressions, as every time she heard something she didn't understand she would look it up or ask someone and write it down. Maureen thinks her experiences in Japan enriched her personally and in every way, made her more independent. She learned very much about Japan, the language and people by living there, which she could not have learned from textbooks, so she strongly encourages students of Japanese to go to Japan to live or study.

The unique challenge Maureen thinks all non-Japanese face when living in such a homogeneous society as Japan is feeling as if you really stand out and will never fit in. Sometimes this can seem daunting and overwhelming, but it is a challenge to put lots into your life in Japan and reap the rewards.

Maureen currently works co-ordinating projects in the Consular Office of Japan and has been there for the past 26 years. She works with cultural and educational matters, including Monbukagakusho Scholarships, JET Programme and Japan Foundation programmes.

How did she get the job? It really came to her, as they were looking for an extra person and one of the local staff telephoned her, which was very lucky.

As for a daily work routine, Maureen really wonders if there is such a thing as an "average day". The job can vary greatly depending on what is happening at different times of the year. For instance the JET Programme, Monbukagakusho Scholarships and The Japan Foundation programmes, all work on extended timetables throughout the year: publicising, recruiting, interviewing and preparing candidates for departure or processing applications for programmes. Once a year the Consular Office has a Japanese Film Festival and sometimes there are cultural events, such as an exhibition or performing artist or group which comes to Christchurch, so Maureen helps arrange these events.

Sometimes Maureen visits schools or groups of older people to talk about Japan and show slides and also demonstrate the koto. This is very rewarding, particularly when it is the very first time some have ever seen or heard a koto.

Many Japanese visitors come to or telephone the Consular Office, so even if it is not Maureen's work to help them, being able to speak to them in Japanese and direct them to the right person is vital. She likes the variety of work and the people she meets.

Maureen has been playing and studying the koto for about 30 years and, as mentioned above, began learning at Tokyo and continued when she moved to Akita. Her teacher was a real inspiration and lived until she was 97 years old. Maureen met her again when she was 90 and also at the age of 95 and she was still very sharp mentally. She told Maureen that she had begun learning the koto at 5 years of age and had memorised many pieces, so surely that was the reason her mind was so sharp. After Maureen's teacher died, four years ago her daughter and

son-in-law came to New Zealand and brought one of her sungen, a 3-stringed lute, as a gift for Maureen, so she began learning to play.

It is most fortunate that there is a teacher in Christchurch from whom Maureen can continue to learn and also that there are others who learn. Eleven years ago her teacher formed Koyukai, a group which performs traditional Japanese music on koto and sungen and incorporates other instruments such as flute, drum and violin where necessary. Maureen thinks that the connection between koto and sungen music and the Japanese language is there in the lyrics of the songs, some of which are ancient poems.

As mentioned earlier, Maureen found that writing out and repetition were the ways to learn the language, but now with the internet, there are many interactive sites and CDROMs which help language learning, she thinks.

For the speaking aspect, having good Japanese friends who will frankly point out your mistakes, is very good, Maureen advises. Also, it is good to ask native speakers about usage, new words, etc, as their explanations may be easier to grasp than a grammar book. She states, "Take the opportunity to speak to Japanese people of different generations, too, as older people's correct use of keigo (honorific language) is very educational. Watch Japanese movies and attend concerts of music and take every opportunity to do so in New Zealand. We are fortunate now that performers come here and movies are more available on DVD. The Japanese Language Proficiency Test is also an excellent means of testing your level and being an international standard, most useful".

Profile by Nancy Earth (2007)