

## The Rebirth of Aroha Wainui

by  
Judith Hoch, Ph.D.



The Waitaha are the peaceful people who inhabit and story the land where Aroha and I live. Their historic way of life required no weapons of war or fortified villages, like the North Island Maori peoples, who conquered the Waitaha. The Waitaha are successful gardeners who grow *kumera* (a delicious sweet potato), even in tough South Island conditions, and raise sea gardens of fish and plants. They also have powerful *tohungas* (healers and ceremonialists).

Aroha's mother, Netta, was a direct descendant of the Waitaha and a maker of fishing nets. Her own Waitaha parents drowned in a fishing accident off the coast of rugged Kaikoura in rough seas. Aroha knew very little about her Maori roots when she was growing up, because her Netta had her Maori stomped out of her by decades of living in a Catholic orphanage after her parents drowned. When I began this series of works, Aroha was sad and depressed, trapped in an identity that didn't feel right. (#1) Shortly after, she began to walk in the direction of her ancestors. On the journey, she left behind the name and identity of "Alison", which white teachers made her adopt in school, and readopted her birth name and *tupuna* (ancestral) name, Arohanui, which



means in English, “Much Love.” A decade after her search began, Aroha graduated with distinction in Maori Studies and Language at Nelson Polytechnic College. Fifteen years later, she has become a distinguished and respected weaver in New Zealand with many exhibitions and commissions.



On the day of Aroha’s graduation ceremony at the Whakatu Marae (Maori meeting house), she told everyone that she had done it all for her mother. Officials removed Netta to a Catholic orphanage after the drowning of her parents when she was fifteen years old, and from that day onward, she was not allowed to participate in Maori culture or language. The nuns at the orphanage punished Netta and her siblings if the children spoke Maori, and they treated them as secondary citizens compared to the *pakeha* (white) children who were considered superior to the indigenous Maori, who were conquered by the British in the nineteenth century. Because they were Maori, the nuns trained Netta and her siblings to be maids and servants. They got a lot of practice because they had to serve the nuns and the English children at the orphanage, who were taught regular school subjects, unlike the Maori children.

The nuns forced the Maori girls to wear shoes that were too small because they said that “Maori feet are too big.” They repeatedly told the Maori girls they were “dirtier” than the white girls. When Netta’s sister became sick with tuberculosis and threw up blood on her night dress, the nuns made her wash her garment outside on the frozen bricks in winter, announcing to all the children that “Maori women had their monthly period through their mouths.” The sister died.

For fifteen years, Netta assumed responsibility for her nineteen siblings and travelled between the two orphanages, one for the boys and one for the girls, both located in Nelson, on the South Island of New Zealand. In the morning, she woke the children up, and in the evening, she put them to sleep. The nuns made the children spend their nights in the passageways of the dormitories and eat at separate “Maori” tables, so Netta’s courageous nurturing (and long walks daily) helped to balance this cruel treatment. Netta had a long day of work serving the nuns, in addition to this voluntary

care of her brothers and sisters, and her youngest sister, Kate, was only eighteen months at the time.

Netta and her family were punished for speaking Maori and learned to feel shame and embarrassment about their Maori roots. In Netta's words, she was "stripped" of her Maori identity. For this reason, Aroha grew up without any sense of her own Maori roots. On Aroha's graduation day in December 1999, her mother entered the Whakatu Marae in Nelson for the first time. As the elders greeted her after an absence of six decades, emotion and love swept her away.



Netta attended the opening of *Evolution* and witnessed the transformation of her daughter from "Alison" to "Aroha" in the paintings and text on the walls. She greeted the guests and talked with the Maori kuia (elder woman) who had blessed the exhibit, both of them sitting side-by-side at a table the whole afternoon. (#3) Netta died a year later, and at her funeral in Nelson, I heard her remaining siblings pay moving tribute to her for her protection of them, when they, without parents or home, had to survive in the rough, colonial conditions of the Nelson orphanages.

- 1) *A Beggar like Christ with Aroha* who posed for this drawing

- 2) *Aroha Kete* A small carry bag made by Aroha
- 3) *Maori Kuia At Waitangi Day*