

A History of New Zealand

Keith Sinclair

Penguin 2000

A book review by [Danny Yee](#) © 2002 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

It is easy to see why Sinclair's history, first published in 1959, has survived to five editions, the last one posthumous. Though scholarly (Sinclair was a distinguished academic), it is nevertheless lively and readable; and while sometimes idiosyncratic it is also broadly embracing. I found *A History of New Zealand* while looking for a general history to read while travelling around New Zealand, and it fitted the bill perfectly.

A History of New Zealand is broadly chronological, beginning with a fifteen page prologue, "The Fish of Maui", on the Maori before European arrival. Part one covers early traders, whalers, and missionaries, the creation of a formal colony in 1840, conflicts between governors and settlers, and the relationship between Europeans and Maori — the treaty of Waitangi, the Maori Wars, and struggles over land. Part two runs from 1870 to 1914, focusing on issues of debt and land tenure, the emergence of parties and a labour movement, the long Liberal ascendancy and the unique features of the New Zealand state, and the relationship between Britain and New Zealand. In part three, economics takes centre stage, with chapters titled "Insecurity", on the First World War and the Great Depression, "Social Security", on the creation of the modern welfare state, "The 'Cold War' Boom", and "Relatively Hard Times". A final chapter covers the Lange government and its neo-liberal economic reforms; for this edition it has been extended by Raewyn Dalziel down to the 1999 election.

This summary, however, exaggerates Sinclair's focus on economic and political history. He touches throughout on broader topics, such as the social backgrounds of settlers, the development of a distinctive New Zealand dialect, and (in an epilogue) "the search for national identity". There are vivid biographical portraits: quite detailed ones of politicians such as Grey and Seddon and just a telling sentence or two about others. G.W. Forbes, for example, was "New Zealand's most improbable premier"

and "a good honest man whose political merits will doubtless, one day, be uncovered by some dogged researcher". And Sinclair, who was a poet as well as a historian, finds room for regular brief overviews of New Zealand literature and art.

Obviously there's much that isn't covered — I would have liked something about the rise of the environmental movement (only Lange's nuclear-free policy is covered) and the increasing economic importance of tourism — but there's plenty to whet the appetite and five pages of "suggested reading" notes to help one satisfy it.

March 2002

External links:

- buy from [Amazon.com](#)

Related reviews:

- books about [New Zealand + New Zealand history](#)
- more [history](#)

%T A History of New Zealand
%A Sinclair, Keith
%I Penguin
%D 2000
%O paperback. 4th edition, index
%G ISBN 0140298754
%P 396pp

[Subjects](#) | [Titles](#) | [Authors](#) | [Best Books](#) | [Search](#) | [Latest Book Reviews by Danny Yee](#)