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The Centennial Exhibition - New Zealand Centennial, 1940

Exhibiting a century

Centennial Exhibition souvenir

The New Zealand Centennial Exhibition ran from 8 November 1939 to 4 May 1940. During this time 2,641,043 people went through the main gates with a daily average attendance of 17,149. The exhibition covered 55 acres (22.2 hectares) of land just to the west of Wellington's airport. After the exhibition closed the buildings were used as extra accommodation by the Air Force. Following the war they were used to store wool. The buildings burned down in September 1946.

New Zealand's commemoration of the 1940 centennial was a major event. The centrepiece was the Centennial Exhibition or fair at Rongotai in Wellington. There was also a large ceremony at Petone on Wellington's anniversary and another at Waitangi on 6 February. Communities throughout the country held pageants as hundreds dressed up in colonial costume, and paraded through the streets. Christchurch's procession on 6 April was two miles long.

Pioneering Spirit

On either side of the central tower at the fair were enormous sculptures of a pioneer man and a pioneer woman. This vision of a people of sterling British stock braving high seas, bush and fierce Maori enemies was at the heart of the pioneer ideal. The intention of the fair was not simply to pay a nostalgic tribute, but even more to encourage a revival of the 'pioneering spirit'.

The success of the Exhibition, and the country's support of it under wartime conditions was also seen as representing the very pioneering spirit and ideals that the Exhibition itself was illustrating. When, following the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 the question of postponing the Exhibition arose, it was greeted by heated confrontation on the public front and in Parliament. In the end many decided that the most important thing was to keep up the morale of the 'nation'. To fold in the face of such a challenge was against the very 'national characteristics' that the Exhibition and Centennial were celebrating.

The Exhibition and material progress

The fair was a physical demonstration of the wonders of material progress. The strong lines of the buildings showed the possibilities of modern construction; and the central tower 'symbolised the progress and ambition of the young nation'. The dramatic use of electricity and neon — there were over 37,000 lights expending over a million watts — was a display of the latest source of power. And inside the buildings were endless displays of modern technological wonders. The Dominion Court featured a huge diorama of New Zealand with roads, railways, ports and cities. The miniature transport and city models were out of scale relative to the physical landscape, so exaggerating the human contribution to the land.

Beneath the Dominion Court was a model of the Waitomo Caves, a physical display of 'beautiful New Zealand', illustrating the tension between material progress and natural beauty. The sense of the country as a tourist's paradise was contained in much of the 1940 publicity. William Parry, the minister in charge of the Centennial, encouraged New Zealanders to form a 'strong enduring friendship with forests'.

But most visitors made straight for the Crazy House and roller coaster in Playland. Some visited the Dominion Court and the Waitomo Caves. Perhaps on a third or fourth visit, they might make it to the Government Court, a mammoth display of over 100,000 square feet. There were displays by the Department of Agriculture, Industries and Commerce, and Defence. The Health

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Department's display was 'The Healthy Family', and included a visit to a walking, talking robot doctor, Dr Wellandstrong.

Women's Rights

Since New Zealand was the first nation of the British Commonwealth to grant women the vote, a women's section was made a special feature.

It included two domestic displays of furniture and household knickknacks, one a pioneer hut and the other an affluent Victorian home. It also displayed women's arts and crafts ranging from drawing to needlework and weaving — very much a genteel middle class ideal.

In the lecture hall each day there was a programme of talks interspersed with dress parades. The talks were on 'the latest developments in the solution of the housewife's many problems', such as 'Picnic and camping dishes', 'Simple meals to satisfy the family', 'Children's fears', 'Summer salads and salad dressing', 'What to do for burns', and 'The art of icing'. These were intelligent and helpful attempts to discuss matters of concern to women, whose boundaries were defined by their domestic role.

The Benevolent State

Another ideal of the exhibition, represented by the Government Court, was the beneficence of government activity. The fair received a substantial investment of £75,000 from the government, which also invested heavily in the Government Court. Government was represented as the supporter and promoter of economic growth and the guarantor of social security. The state was a provider in a spirit of public 'service' and the official guide to the display included a detailed description of the manifold services offered to the people of New Zealand by government departments.

A British Nation

Although the centennial was conceived as a way of reinforcing New Zealand nationalism, it is striking how large a part Britain, the 'mother country', played within this national definition. 1940 signified not just the centenary of the signing of a treaty with Maori, nor a century of settlement and government, but also a hundred years of membership in the British Empire. The first building inside the Exhibition was the United Kingdom Court, and there was barely an opening or an unveiling where either the Governor-General or the British Government's special representative at the centennial, Lord Willingdon, were not present. Willingdon commented shortly before his departure, 'Wherever I have been I have found New Zealand as British as ever before.'

Despite Bill Parry's strenuous efforts to encourage the planting of native trees during the year, when the national flower show opened at the centennial exhibition hall, the British High Commissioner to New Zealand Sir Harry Batterbee commented that it was 'a delight to find in New Zealand flowers that were seen in English gardens because they formed a link between Britain and the Dominion.'

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