Overview of NZ in the 19th century: 1870-1900 - NCEA 3 History

A significant demographic milestone was reached in 1886 - for the first time the majority of non-Maori people living here were New Zealand-born rather than immigrants. Most continued to see themselves as British and referred to Britain as 'home'. But there were signs that they were also beginning to identify with this place. The term New Zealander now had a wider application. At the 1896 census the non-Maori population was just over 703,000. The Maori population was under 40,000. The transformation of New Zealand from a Maori to a non-Maori world was complete.

Gold and sheep

As New Zealand entered the final third of the 19th century the South Island dominated the economy, largely due to the impact of wool and gold. Canterbury lived literally on the 'sheep's back' to became the country's wealthiest province. The discovery of gold in central Otago in 1861 helped Dunedin become New Zealand's largest town. Thousands of young men rushed to New Zealand hoping to make their fortune as they followed the gold from Otago to the West Coast and later to Thames in the North Island. Few struck it rich on the goldfields but the collective value of the gold that was discovered kick-started the economy.

A young, mobile and male-dominated population was typical of many frontier societies. Provincial and central governments believed that the country's future growth and progress required the order and stability offered by family life. Various schemes were developed to attract women migrants and families to New Zealand in a bid to help society mature.

The Vogel era

The 1860s drew to a close gold production fell and wool prices slipped. One solution to the boom-bust nature of New Zealand's economy was to develop the national infrastructure. The Colonial Treasurer, Julius Vogel, believed that New Zealand could only grow if it was able to attract people and capital. In 1870 he embarked upon a massive loans-funded programme of public works which invested heavily in railways and roads. Government assisted immigration schemes also saw the settler population double during the 1870s to around 500,000.

Improved internal communications increased the sense that New Zealand was a single nation rather than a collection of separate settlements. The provincial governments that had been established in the 1850s were abolished in 1876 and national politics began to assume greater importance. Complementing this increasingly singular political vision was the conviction that New Zealand's future prosperity lay in the conversion of bush to farmland. There was an acceptance that the government had a responsibility in helping settlers realise their dreams and access to land became an important part of the political agenda. This was more than a matter of self-sufficiency. Owning land was an obvious sign of success.

The 'Hungry Eighties'

The confidence of the Vogel era was undermined by the economic depression that began in 1879. While the impact and pace of this depression was uneven across the country some argued that it had been made worse by the borrowing of the 1870s. Despite a brief revival in the mid-1880s, most farm products suffered from low prices. The market for land dried up. Unemployment grew in urban areas. Woman and children were exploited and evidence emerged of sweated labour and poor working conditions in a number of industries. People voted with their feet by leaving for places like Australia.

Hopes for a brighter future were raised with the first successful shipment of frozen meat to England in 1882. New Zealand was now able to position itself as 'Britain's farmyard' by exporting meat, butter and cheese. With confidence restored in an economy based on agriculture, the transformation of the landscape from forest to farmland intensified.

The 'Hungry Eighties' and concern over problems associated with the Old World saw the emergence of movements and people seeking social reform. There was no state welfare and questions were asked about what support could be offered to New Zealand's poor. These concerns also reflected the development of a more settled urban society. As a result questions were asked about the place of the family and women in New Zealand society.

A recurring theme in this debate was the place of alcohol in New Zealand society. Alcohol, it was argued, caused men to forget their responsibilities to their families. The temperance and prohibition movement gathered momentum here as calls were made to address the impact of alcohol on the lives of New Zealand families. From this movement grew the campaign for women's suffrage. This keenly fought and at times bitter debate culminated with New Zealand women becoming the first in the world to gain the right to vote in national elections in 1893.

'God's own country'

By 1890 an export-led economic recovery was taking hold. The North Island was beginning to assert itself economically, especially the cities of Auckland and Wellington. The general election

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that year brought New Zealand's first political party, the Liberals, to power. The Liberal era is synonymous with Richard John Seddon, Premier from 1893 until his death in 1906. The Liberals promoted themselves as the champion of the 'ordinary New Zealander'. The large run-holders of the South Island in particular were taxed heavily in a bid to free up more land for settlement. The Liberals' vision for 'God's own country' also saw more Maori land obtained for settlement. By the end of the century Maori held less than 15% of the land that had been in their possession in 1840.

New Zealand now gained a reputation as 'the social laboratory of the world'. In addition to women's suffrage the Liberal government introduced a number of social welfare measures to protect New Zealand's most vulnerable. The 1898 Old-Age Pensions Act offered a small means-tested pension to destitute older people 'deemed to be of good character'. But Seddon's image of 'God's own' excluded 'Chinese or other Asiatics'. He viewed the Chinese with considerable dislike, as did many in New Zealand's mining communities.

Maori had continued to resist the loss of land. From 1879 the Taranaki settlement of Parihaka became the centre of opposition to confiscation. The settlement's leaders Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi encouraged their followers to uproot survey pegs and plough up roads and fences erected on land they considered to be theirs. There had been arrests and ongoing peaceful resistance before the government decided to act decisively in November 1881. An armed force ran amok in the undefended settlement. Te Whiti and Tohu were imprisoned and exiled to the South Island to serve their prison sentences.

Dominated by the values and the ambitions of the new settlers, New Zealand now resembled a nation in the modern sense of the word. It is the nature and consequences of these changes that are the basis of this broad survey of New Zealand in the 19th century.

Further information

- New Zealand Wars
- The Māori King movement 1860-1894
- Pai Marire
- Te tango whenua - Māori land alienation

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