

Page 1. Naming the country and the main islands Introduction

New Zealand's non-Māori place names tell the story of its settlement by Europeans and others. Place names were a way the newly arrived culture imprinted itself on a changing landscape.

New Zealand

Dutch explorer Abel Tasman sighted New Zealand's western coasts in 1642. Tasman did not circumnavigate the country and he called his discovery Staten Landt, thinking it might be linked to a Staten Landt in southern South America. This was soon discovered to be false.

On a 1646 world map Joan Blaeu, official Dutch cartographer to the Dutch East India Company, conferred the name 'Nova Zeelandia' – the Latin equivalent of the Dutch 'Nieuw Zeeland' – on the land discovered by Tasman (the Dutch also named the western coasts of Australia as Nieuw Holland). It was by that name – 'New Zealand' in English – that the country came to be known. Intermittent dissatisfaction in the colonial era that the name was 'foreign' – in other words, not English – never led to a name change.

Islands

James Cook recorded Māori names for two islands as he had heard them pronounced – 'Eaheinomauwe' for the North Island and 'Toai Poonamoo' for the South Island – perhaps He-mea-hī-nō-Māui (the things Māui fished up), and Te Wai Pounamu (greenstone waters). Stewart Island (Rakiura) was identified as a separate island in 1804.

The names 'North', 'Middle' and 'South' for the three islands had appeared on a map by 1820. In 1840 Governor William Hobson named them New Ulster, New Munster and New Leinster after three Irish regions, but these names were abandoned after the provinces, which had taken the names of the first two, were abolished in 1852. The South Island was recorded as an alternative to Middle Island in the 1830s, and has been the official name since 1907.

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