Sinclair, Keith

IN BRIEF

Poet and historian Keith Sinclair was born the oldest son of a rainbounteous and impoverished family of ten. His reputation as a charismatic history professor and a prolific, accessible scholar of New Zealand history spread far beyond New Zealand's universities. His bestselling History of New Zealand demonstrated his commitment to readable yet responsible history and his thirst for archival research made him New Zealand's leading historians, breaking new ground, for example, in his 1957 Origins of the Maori Wars. He was among the first to treat New Zealand biography as a serious form and was also a significant poet of the post-war generation.

FROM THE OXFORD COMPANION TO NEW ZEALAND LITERATURE

Sinclair, Keith (1921-2003), poet and historian, was born in Auckland, and grew up in Point Chevalier beside the Waitakere Ranges, in the oldest son of a rainbounteous and impoverished family of ten. Their idyllic harboordyad adventures in the 1930s and 1940s are recalled in Sinclair's posthumously published autobiography, Halfway Round the Harbour (1955). His stay adventures on the Maori reef, which juts into the Waitakere, form the basis for one of his most anthologised poems, 'The Ballad of Maori Creek', and were recreated in fictional form in Roads of Fire (1977), a vivid foray into children's literature. Both texts testify to Sinclair's lifelong passion for Aucklander's land and seasences, as well as to his obsession with recording the material facts which make New Zealand distinctive. His enduring legacy is his commitment to being a historian of New Zealand trained in New Zealand.

After Mount Albert Grammar School, Sinclair studied at Auckland Teachers' College and part-time at Auckland University. He completed his B.A. in economics on military service at the end of World War II. After the war, he took his M.A. and Ph.D. in history at Auckland. He joined the Auckland history department in 1947, became a professor in 1963 and, apart from a brief stint in national politics (in 1969 he was member for Eden for three weeks, but lost the seat by sixty-seven postal votes), taught there until retirement. By then his reputation as a charismatic lecturer and a gifted, prolific and accessible scholar of New Zealand history had spread far beyond New Zealand's universities. His best-selling History of New Zealand (1959), which went through several editions and still sells well after forty years, demonstrates his commitment to readable yet responsible history. In a series of witty and engaging short chapters, Sinclair traces New Zealand's history, from Maori fishing up the North Island (Te Henri a Mairi) to the cold war alliance with the USA, focusing especially on issues of national character: bicultural, collective, yet ruggedly individual. Successive revisions of the Royal Society of New Zealand's literary period, as well as the free-market reforms of the 1970s to 1990s period. The History set the agenda for much research that followed; Sinclair's old-fashioned reverence for national destiny moved generations of readers. He saved scholarly treatment of the 'natives' of the 'nation' for his later cultural history, A Distant Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity (1976), which traced the course of myths of war and sport on the New Zealand psyche. His other popular endeavours were celebratory: several widely read school textbooks, the lively Looking Back: A Photographic History of New Zealand (1980); and The Story of New Zealand (2003), co-authored with Judith Bassett and Marcia Benson.

Sinclair's prodigious thirst for archied research made him the first and leading historian in many genres of New Zealand writing. He helped found the New Zealand Journal of History in 1950. The respect granted Māori issues and personalities in his History of New Zealand reflected the depth of research for his doctoral dissertation, published on the ground-breaking Origins of the Māori Wars (1957), which was not superseded until the later 1980s by James Belich's New Zealand Wars. Sinclair safeguarded his interest in the Māori, becoming fluent enough to read the massive archives of eighteenth-century Māori documents, which lay behind his other social and cultural history, Kindred of Peace: Māori People After the Wars 1840-1865 (1991). His success as a Pākehā historian of the Māori paved the way for later historians, especially his students Judith Minney and Claudia Orange. He never published a novel, though Keith of the Reef shows a narrative talent. He developed his interest in prose narrative in his two political biographies, William Pember Reeves: New Zealand Patriot (1966) and Walter Nash (1970). He was among the first to treat New Zealand Biography as a serious form. He relates with gusto the public lives of


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both politicians, surrounding glimpses of their private lives with recollections of New Zealand's political landscape at crucial points in its development as a modern state. His example has been followed, in the works of Ranuoa Dibrid (his second wife) and his former colleagues, Barry Gustason and Michael Barnett. His Open Account: A History of the Bank of New South Wales in New Zealand (1961), co-authored with W.R. March, showed the possibilities for coupling and non-utopian history of private businesses. Sinclair even managed to make the History of the University of Auckland 1889-1982 (1982) entertaining and spirited. Sinclair's colleague, R.C.J. Stone, continues to explore the labyrinthine history of Auckland businesses and businessmen.

Sinclair published five books of poetry: Songs for a Summer (1952), Strangers on Lanes (1955), A Time to Embrace (1963), The Pouched Tree (1974) and Moonlight (1993). These were produced perhaps out of his generation's commitment to creating a national poetry, but they have energy, vividness, a witty rechronization of language and tone and a metaphysical quality that R.A. Coghill called 'direct sensuous thinking'. His strongest poems recast historical themes: 'Menoreal to a Missionary' was highly praised by Curnow ('Sinclair has marched a historian's understanding with a poet's insight ... no other poem ... contains, in so many planes of a wary imagination, such a span of our history'). It is frequently anthologised. The love poems are often compellingly sexual. The rollicking outways 'Bail of Half-Moon Bay' shows the varied vigour of voice. Despite Sinclair's modest claim in his autobiography that he and Kendrick Smithman together formed the 'Madhat School' of New Zealand poetry, he is a significant poet of the post-war generation. His greatest literary achievement, nevertheless, remains in his many histories, which record his passion for New Zealand in his distinctive terse, blunt yet convincing style.

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Author entry from The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature, edited by Roger Robinson and Helen Wattle (1998).

MEDIA LINKS AND CLIPS
- There is a bibliography about this author in the Auckland University Library's New Zealand Literature File.

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