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Overview - NZ in the 1920s

The shadow of war

The Great War cast a long shadow over the 1920s, leaving deep emotional scars. Few New Zealanders had not lost a relative, friend, workmate or neighbour. Many people yearned to contact lost loved ones, sparking an upsurge of interest in spiritualist beliefs. The influential Returned Soldiers' Association lobbied the government to make Anzac Day a sacred, 'Sundayised' holiday, helping to turn war remembrance into a 'civil religion'.



Kaipoi war memorial

The most enduring expressions of New Zealanders' sorrow about and pride in their wartime sacrifices were the more than 500 war memorials erected during the decade (and in some cases in the 1930s). Most were funded by donations from local communities. With almost all the war dead buried overseas, these became surrogate graves for grieving families and friends.

Population

New Zealand's population grew steadily during the decade, climbing from about 1.24 million in 1920 to 1.48 million in 1930. Despite the deaths of 18,000 soldiers during the Great War, the country still had slightly more men than women. Following the revival of assisted immigration from Britain, more than 120,000 migrants arrived from the UK between 1919 and 1930, including 13,000 ex-servicemen and their families. But economic uncertainty meant New Zealand wasn't always a promised land; nor were these so-called 'Homies' always welcomed by locals.



Karitane nurses 'babies in 1929

The New Zealand family was changing: people were marrying later and having fewer children; the 'nuclear' family was becoming the norm. Concern over the birth rate, which had declined steeply since the 1880s, sparked intense interest in subjects like venereal disease, sex education, abortion and contraception.

Pākehā society was increasingly urbanised, with 60% now living in cities or boroughs (a third of the population lived in the four main centres, of which Auckland was already by far the biggest). New suburbs of Californian bungalows were spreading around the cities and generous state loans fostered home-ownership. The proportion of New Zealanders owning their own homes rose from 52% in 1916 to 61% in 1926, giving this country possibly the highest home-ownership rate in the world.

The Māori population grew strongly in the 1920s, from 53,000 in 1921 to 67,000 in 1930. In contrast to Pākehā, Māori were still an overwhelmingly rural people: in 1921 more than 90% lived in the country, especially in Northland and East Coast.

Economy and infrastructure

New Zealand's economic fortunes fluctuated during the 1920s, with a post-war boom followed by a sharp recession in 1921-22 and another downturn around 1926. Much worse was to come in the early 1930s when the Great Depression reached New Zealand. Overall, the 1920s was a period of modest growth, with this country's economy outperforming Australia's. Exports of meat, dairy products and wool to Britain continued to provide most New Zealanders with a comparatively high standard of living, but there was a wide gap between rich and poor.

Farm production flourished thanks to new technology (such as electrified milking sheds and

1934
Maori Purposes Fund Board established

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tractors), the application of artificial fertiliser (superphosphate) and improvements to pasture and stock. The Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (established in 1926) played a leading role in agricultural research.

It was an era of power and speed. Electricity consumption surged by 22% per annum, and total generation in 1931 was more than 40 times greater than in 1911. Major state hydroelectric projects at Mangahao in Horowhenua, Arapuni on the Waikato River and Tuai at Waikaremoana were completed by 1929, by which time the majority of urban dwellers and farmers were switched on.



Railways poster.

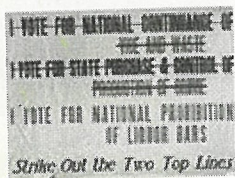
1923

The 1920s was a golden age for rail travel: important new lines were completed and annual passenger journeys topped 28 million a year from 1921 to 1924 – the highest totals ever achieved in peacetime. New Zealanders also took to the roads in increasing numbers. Between 1925 and 1930 the number of private motor cars on the road more than doubled, from 71,000 to 155,000. With one car for every nine people, New Zealand had one of the highest car-ownership rates in the world (and an alarmingly high road toll, with 178 deaths in 1929). The decade was also notable for daring achievements in the rapidly

veloping field of aviation, including Charles Kingsford Smith's first Tasman crossing.

Politics

For most of the twenties New Zealand was ruled by the conservative Reform Party. In 1925 Prime Minister William Ferguson Massey died after 13 years in office. He was succeeded by the much younger Gordon Coates, who won a sweeping victory in that year's election. But in a startling 1928 result, Reform was defeated by a new party, United, with an old leader, Sir Joseph Ward. United and Reform would later join in coalition to combat the deepening economic crisis.



Prohibition poster

from 1920s

There were other political flashpoints in the 1920s. Sectarian tensions between Protestants and Catholics flickered early in the decade, and there was a flurry of industrial unrest between 1922 and 1924. The prohibition debate still divided the country, and the triennial licensing referendums rivalled general elections for political fervour and campaign colour. In 1922 and 1925 the prohibition vote came close to a majority, but in 1928 it slipped to 40%, signalling the issue's long descent into political irrelevance.

Māori politics was dominated by the influential MPs (and sometime Cabinet ministers) Māui Pōmare and Āpirana Ngata, the rise of Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana's religious movement, and the emergence of Te Puea Hērangi in Waikato. Ngata worked hard to foster Māori scholarship and education and preserve traditional arts and culture. He convinced the government to establish a Board of Maori Ethnological Research (1923), a Maori Purposes Fund Control Board (1924) and a School of Maori Arts and Crafts in Rotorua (1927).

The Reform government also took the first, tentative steps towards settling longstanding Māori grievances. Agreements with Te Arawa in 1922 and Ngāi Tūwharetoa in 1926 recognised their respective rights over the Rotorua lakes and Lake Taupō, and led to the establishment of trust boards with some government funding. Commissions of inquiry which examined Ngāi Tahu grievances (1920–21) and the Waikato and Taranaki confiscations (1926–27) recommended that modest compensation be paid.

Popular culture and fashion

Technological innovations in recreation and media – especially radio, gramophone records and

cinema – helped fashion a new, and increasingly Americanised, popular culture in the twenties.

This was the era radio broadcasting began: New Zealand's first stations went on air in 1922. Gramophones and local bands blasted the latest American jazz music and dances like the Charleston became hugely popular. But the real entertainment sensation of the twenties was silent (and later 'talkie') movies. Cinema attendance exploded and palatial 'Picture Palaces' like Dunedin's Empire De Luxe and Auckland's Civic were opened.

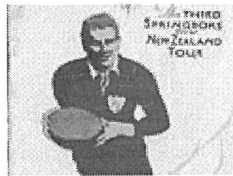


[1920s movie poster](#)

But some people objected to the growing influence of Hollywood – 350 out of 400 features screened in 1927 were US-made – and feared the moral perils of darkened 'Sin-emas'. The heavy hand of state censorship regularly snipped suspect scenes from movies. Modern dancing was also 'morally dangerous': in 1926 *NZ Truth* complained that 'young girls of 15, who should be at home in bed, can be seen any night of the week stepping to the rhythm of King Jazz.' Groups like the YMCA sniffed that 'dancing is not a Christian past-time'.

Women's fashion, the era was dominated by Hollywood glamour and the sleek 'flapper' look. At the 1925–26 [New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition](#) even the Governor-General's wife, Lady Alice Fergusson, wore a short, bobbed hairstyle and a sleeveless low-waisted dress. The beauty, cosmetics and advertising industries flourished, and the first Miss New Zealand contests drew big crowds. Many men were also becoming more fashion-conscious, especially the growing numbers of clean-shaven, sharp-suited urban professionals.

Sport and leisure



[Springbok Tour programme from](#)

1921

Participation in organised sport and recreation by both men and women expanded in the 1920s. New Zealand sent its first national teams to the [summer Olympic Games](#), and the All Blacks' triumphant Northern Hemisphere tour in 1924–25 confirmed rugby's status as the national game. Huge crowds attended sports fixtures and race meetings, while radio coverage brought the exploits of sportsmen like [boxer Tom Heeney](#) into New Zealanders' living rooms.

The 1920s also saw an expansion of the leisure and beach culture that had emerged in the late 19th century. Smaller families, shorter working hours (and paid annual leave), slick tourism marketing, cheap holiday train fares and motor cars encouraged more people to take family holidays at the beach or lakeside. Sportswear, skimpy swimsuits and suntans were all the rage. Alpine recreation also thrived, with a number of tramping clubs founded during the decade.

The twenties in retrospect

While the 1920s has often been overshadowed by the Great War and the Depression, this was a crucial era in the making of 'modern' New Zealand. The word itself was widely used at the time, as in this *Ladies' Mirror* story from 1926:

The modern girl has, during the past dozen years, either acquired or increased her regard for:- Drinking and smoking; Paint and powder; Slang; Pastimes demanding physical vigour; Work, apart from the household variety; Individual independence and freedom of action; Speed; Late hours.

Many of the trends evident in the twenties – suburban drift, high home-ownership rates, consumerism, American cultural influences, mobility and leisure – foreshadowed the prosperity and stability of the 1950s and 1960s. To get there, however, New Zealanders would have to

endure their greatest economic crisis and another terrible world war.

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