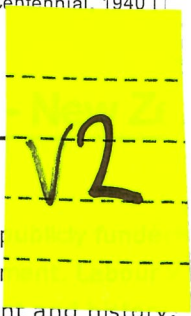


[Skip to main content](#)

The Centennial and progress

New Zealand grows up

The 1940 Centennial, planned for five years and a national self-definition by the first Labour government through commemorations of collective achievement and history, historical themes (such as revised versions of the pioneer myths, memorials and a big exhibition. It was a gigantic rewriting of the



~~1940~~ 1939

Centennial Celebrations

MCH, 2012j

The New Zealand pioneer

Labour ministers had a number of concerns. Some feared that younger New Zealanders had lost the pioneering values and ideals on which these older men liked to think New Zealand had been founded. Complacency had replaced an earlier vitality, they complained. Others felt that an overly imperial mother complex towards Britain had replaced Julius Vogel's erratic but more assertive foreign policy of the 1870s and 1880s.

Those who worried about declining national spirit thought that people needed to rediscover some of the hardiness and resourcefulness of the pioneers. In this stereotype lay a story of courage, industry, vision and faith, a heritage to be celebrated and a source of comfort and inspiration in times of recession and war fever.

As Governor-General Lord Galway preached when laying the Exhibition's commemorative tablet in October 1938, 'the self sacrifices and physical hardships of the early pioneering days must be followed up with continuity of effort, accompanied by corresponding sacrifices in other directions, if necessary to ensure the progress of this fair dominion. I feel sure that the present generation is capable of tackling whatever is demanded of it as effectively as the early pioneers.'

Labour's aspirations went beyond simply paying nostalgic tribute; it wanted to encourage the revival of these imagined qualities.

The spirit of the pioneer was an old national foundation myth, but some modern tweaking was deemed necessary. To make it more relevant, the 'Britishness' of the first immigrants was downplayed in favour of the mythic qualities of the rural New Zealand-born settler. The hope was that this would obscure regional, class and ethnic differences, and simplify the message - the strengths and ideals of the pioneers were part of the make-up of every Pakeha New Zealander.

The other artful modernising of the stereotype was placing the pioneering woman/mother alongside the pioneering man. This was a big advance on earlier times when, for example, groups such as the Otago Early Settlers' Association, who championed the celebration of the first pioneers, had restricted membership to men.

Christianity still found a place in the imagery and the celebrations championed the contribution of the missionaries and the early churchmen to the transformation of the country from a 'pagan, cannibal land' into a 'civilised Christian community'.

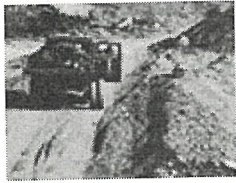
A national affair

The Centennial Exhibition in Wellington captured the most attention, but more money was spent constructing monuments and memorials throughout the country, consolidating the image of national unity and collective achievement.

Timeline 1
1939
Page 133



The government preferred utilitarian memorials to purely symbolic ones. Parks, Plunket rooms, rest rooms, community halls and swimming baths added to the image of progress and maturity and reinforced Labour's message that it was pulling New Zealand out of the Depression.



Construction of the Centennial Highway

Some memorials were the very epitome of modernity. While not initially conceived as monuments, in Wellington, the Ngauranga Gorge, Hutt Road, and in particular Coastal Road developments, were rebranded as symbols of progress. At the opening of the Coastal Road in November 1939, much was made of the fact it had been constructed alongside the pre-1848 coastal route. 'How few will realise or ever know as they speed in comfort along the new road of the difficult journeys made by our early mailmen and travellers on foot along this same path and difficulties they

encountered', the *Evening Post* trumpeted.

Not everything went the government's way. Anxious not to lose government funding for projects, Gisborne and Taranaki fell into step with government requirements, but Nelson, Otago and Canterbury, decided to hold back the grandest of their celebrations to the anniversary of their own provincial centenaries, even if that meant digging into their own pockets.

Writing New Zealand's past

By the early 1930s it was also felt that the dominion needed a more thorough historical record of its past. There were books, but most local histories were principally concerned with the pioneers and the building of prosperous communities out of the wilderness. At the professional level, historians who had come of age in the 1930s preferred to write about Empire and New Zealand's 'Englishness' to the neglect of the country's own history. Efforts had been made to give New Zealand history greater prominence in the school curriculum, but without much effect. Academics argued that creating a lectureship in New Zealand history at any university college would only emphasise a narrow and parochial view of history.

With its emphasis on plotting the country's progress over the previous 100 years, the Centennial presented the perfect opportunity for a historical stock-take. Joe Heenan, the Under-Secretary of Internal Affairs, made publications a cornerstone of the celebrations. The flagships were the 11 historical surveys, profiling in detail the evolution of the country since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. At the popular level, the pictorial *Making New Zealand* series, and a raft of journal, periodical and newspaper articles got the message across. These included the 'one hundred years ago' series, which traced the social, economic and religious steps to colonisation, and the 'fifty years ago' pioneer reminiscence. Twenty-six regional and provincial histories were also completed as official memorials.

All in all, the centennial publications broke new ground in stimulating interest in New Zealand history. They ultimately replaced old myths with new. By focussing on European settlement and progress, for example, the centennial publications marginalised Maori history, which was usually limited to a skimpy prologue. There was also little criticism of current government initiatives or processes, presenting instead a history in which state experiments worked harmoniously.

Inevitably, the blatancy of the government's historical re-engineering drew some criticism. The poet Denis Glover got in the best shot:

In the year of Centennial splendours,
There were fireworks and decorated cars,
And pungas drooping from verandas,

- But no-one remembered our failures.

The spirit of progress

In 1940 New Zealanders still thought of themselves as primarily a rural people, dependent economically upon the produce of their farms and distinguished from the old world by their more innocent, less urban way of life. They still suspected that city life made people soft and immoral and that Anglo-Saxon vigour thrived best under the tough conditions of the frontier. By the 1930s, with many of them now townies, that view was becoming less comfortable and doubts were being expressed about the nation's true identity. The Centennial became a way of re-injecting some of the pioneer spirit.

The great contradiction, of course, was that this desire for a revival of the pioneer spirit was not accompanied by any harking after the physical conditions that had given birth to the spirit. The constant contrast of old and new celebrated progress and modernity. The country was a paradise, but it had become so only after progress in the form of the pioneer man had taken his axe to it.

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