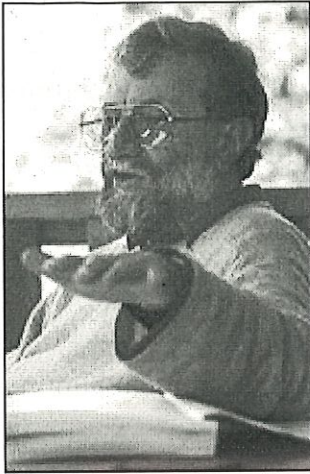


# Michael King: The Penguin History of New Zealand

2003

(Howe, K., n.d.)



Michael King at his home in Opoutere, in the Coromandel.  
Picture / Greg Bowker

Reviewed by K.R. Howe

This is by far the best general history of New Zealand to be published in a generation.

Keith Sinclair's *Short History of New Zealand*, first published in 1959, was the last genuinely accessible and instructive (at the time) version of our past. It was characterised by a proud account of the building of an enlightened and prosperous democracy on remote islands. Of course, it is now long past its use-by date.

The *Oxford History of New Zealand*, edited by W.H. Oliver, with B.R. Williams, in 1981 (and revised under the editorship of Geoffrey Rice in 1992), was a multi-authored work, by academics, essentially for academics.

It reflected the tendency of historians to fragment the past into their now narrow specialisations and to talk in relatively exclusive ways.

Collectively, the chapters mirrored the angst of the Muldoon years, and their inherent grizzling about their present was projected on to the past.

It was as much disturbing as enlightening.

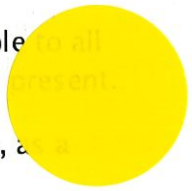
James Belich's two-volumed history of New Zealand (*Making Peoples*, 1996, and *Paradise Reforged*, 2001) was rather too long for general readership.

With its slightly postmodern story-telling and all too vigorous (post-angst) proclaiming of New Zealand's new complexity and diversity, it emphasised discontinuities rather than continuities, and was more descriptive than explanatory.

Michael King has now produced a general history of New Zealand that is both truly accessible to all and also sustains explanatory themes that give instructive meaning to our past and present.

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Like Sinclair's history at the time, King's version will be widely accepted, at least for a while, and



defining historical text for a nation, one that records as well as creates perceived historical trends and the evolution of its citizens' characteristics.

King's History is too long to be called a short history, yet even at 500 pages it has an apparent compactness due to tight organisation and lucid presentation. It covers New Zealand from its geological formation through to the present.

Though extraordinarily well-informed in terms of modern research details, King's account is also notable for its perspectives on time and on the themes that have defined us.

Taking an hour on New Zealand's cosmological clock, he explains how New Zealand was detached from Gondwana at one second past 12, how the dinosaurs disappeared at 12 minutes past 12, how the modern geological shape of New Zealand was not formed until half a second to 1 o'clock, and how Maori and European arrived "within the space of 300ths of a second to 1 o'clock". It's a sobering concept.

The subsequent interaction of humans and landscape (which only began in the later 13th century) concentrated processes that elsewhere in the world have taken place over many thousands of years. Competition between and among human groups to exploit the resources of the land, from moa-hunting to dairying, and the environmental consequences, thus becomes one of his major themes.

Another key theme is Maori-Pakeha interaction, and notably the depicting of Maori as adaptive and increasingly influential survivors, rather than perpetual victims.

Today's negotiating of the bicultural relationship, explains King, has its "seeds" in the earliest moments of culture contact.

Maori-Pakeha relationships are also pleasingly seen in their wider international context. The fashion of applauding everything indigenous means that, for example, the "coming of the West" to New Zealand is often seen as some sort of imperial conspiracy of subjugation.

The simple fact is, says King, that Maori were "the last major human community on earth untouched and unaffected by the wider world". Such isolation could not last forever. It was not so much the arrival of the West, but that Maori were reconnected with the rest of humanity.

Adaptation of cultures in New Zealand to each other and to the ecological, social, cultural, political and economic environments that they created, is the book's organising principle. The story is outlined in a fairly traditional, chronological way. The periodisation is standard.

What is perhaps different from other general histories is the detail given to the Maori experience. The chapter on "Maori Survival" in the period 1850 to 1950 is particularly well done, as is the "Return of Mana Maori" in the post-1950 section. King treats Maori not as bit players, but as integral to the main cast.

King claims that he is writing for "curious and intelligent readers", which he does brilliantly. Complex historical issues, ideas and findings are presented with great clarity. But he also rather disingenuously claims that he is not writing for other historians. Nonsense.

While the book has few trappings of academic history in that there are no references, and there is no bibliography (though there is a short bibliographical acknowledgement), the book is actually highly instructive for historians. While he has relied heavily on other historians' specialist research, which is sometimes acknowledged and sometimes not, his real contribution to history and historians lies in his refreshing approach to the past, and in his attempts at broad generalisation.

His synthesising overview is notable for its judgment and balance, not in the sense that it is by any means neutral, but it avoids extreme positions. There is none of the common postcolonial moralising about good Maori and bad Pakeha, no selective morality, no sneering or snide opinions, no black arm-band views, no assumptions about colonial conspiracies.

Certain people or incidents are certainly dealt with sharply by King, but not on the basis of simplistic judgments about ethnic or cultural behaviour. He rightly acknowledges context, and he explains actions even though he does not always agree with them.

King is a highly perceptive scholar. He sees and accepts complexity and contradiction. The past is often messy and confused, and history should reflect it, though historians often do not do so.

Moreover, King reads history forwards, rather than the all-too-common approach of reading it backwards and judging the past by the values of today. For example, his discussion of the signing of the treaty in 1840 empathetically notes the beliefs and ideals of the times and recognises that certain understandings or misunderstandings were likely to create problems for the future. But he wisely avoids saying that the present contesting of the treaty causes problems for our past.

This is sophisticated history writing. Too often these days New Zealand history is regarded too darkly, something Pakeha in particular should be ashamed of, something in need of fixing. The story is not all good, but neither is it all bad.

Above all, King acknowledges powerful continuities, in addition to the fashionable emphasising of late-20th-century change, for all New Zealanders – Maori, Pakeha, new immigrants, men and women. In this he comes closer than many historians to understanding peoples' and communities' senses of their own heritage, even as their world may change about them. His final section, entitled "Posthistory", is a wonderful reflection on today's intersection of past and present.

His overall message is expressed beautifully in his closing sentences: "And most New Zealanders, whatever their cultural backgrounds, are good-hearted, practical, commonsensical and tolerant. Those qualities are part of the national cultural capital that has in the past saved the country from the worst excesses of chauvinism and racism seen in other parts of the world. They are as sound a basis as any for optimism about the country's future." It's uplifting stuff.

Gordon McLauchlan once wrote, "Without sincerely and, as accurately as possible, respecting the past, we remain rootless in the present and flounder towards the future". We should be indebted to King for intelligently respecting the pasts of all New Zealanders, and for doing it so much better than anyone else in a very long time.

Penguin, \$29.95

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