

## Coat of arms

by Stephen Levine

New Zealand's coat of arms features a Māori warrior and a European woman facing one another on either side of a British crown and a shield with symbols of New Zealand's identity. The first New Zealand coat of arms was introduced in 1911, but many departments continued to use the British royal coat of arms. The current coat of arms was adopted in 1956.

### Coat of arms overview

#### National symbols

Every nation has symbols which serve to represent the country both to its own people and internationally. These symbols include a national flag, an anthem and a coat of arms. While a national flag is generally better known, coats of arms are widely used. The New Zealand coat of arms can be found on public buildings such as courthouses and on official documents such as passports. The coat of arms may also appear on business cards used by people representing the country abroad, such as diplomats.

#### The Crown and New Zealand

The New Zealand coat of arms is a visual representation of the country's heritage, landscape and population. A crown is at the top, representing the country's historic ties to the United Kingdom, which continue in the 2000s, with the reigning British monarch being New Zealand's head of state. At the bottom are the words 'New Zealand'.

#### The shield

At the centre is a shield, with three ships in the middle, indicative of the country's reliance on trade and recalling the 19th-century settlement of the country by European migrants, principally from Great Britain. At either side of the shield are concise symbols of New Zealand's identity:

- the Southern Cross (also found on the New Zealand flag), representing the night sky over the country



- a sheaf of wheat, in recognition of the country's agricultural production
- a lamb's fleece, in acknowledgement of the pastoral economy, for so long crucial to the nation's prosperity
- two crossed hammers, representing mining, or industry more generally.

Below the shield and behind the words 'New Zealand' are two fern leaves, representations of the native vegetation.

## A warrior and a woman

At either side of the shield, facing it (and each other), are two figures. One is a Māori warrior or chief, representing the indigenous people of New Zealand. Holding a taiaha (a ceremonial spear) and dressed in a traditional Māori cloak, he displays strength, dignity and loyalty to his people's traditions.

At the other side is a European woman holding a New Zealand flag, representing the non-indigenous citizens of the country. The two figures represent a partnership between two peoples, building one nation.

## Legal status

The coat of arms is the official national symbol of New Zealand and can only be used by the state. Representing New Zealand as a sovereign entity, it is used exclusively for public purposes.

## The coat of arms and the constitution

The current coat of arms was granted in 1956 by Queen Elizabeth II. As New Zealand has no formal written constitution, the coat of arms does not have constitutional status or protection (as coats of arms do in many other countries). None of New Zealand's national symbols – the flag, the anthem or the coat of arms – are mentioned in the New Zealand Constitution Act 1986.

## An uncontroversial symbol

Unlike the national flag – and, to a much lesser extent, the national anthem – the country's coat of arms has not become a source of controversy. While other symbols affirming the link to the British Crown have been questioned as New Zealand's identity has evolved, the coat of arms has escaped much scrutiny. Attention to the flag and anthem reflects their more conspicuous display on public occasions, such as sporting events. The coat of arms, by contrast,

## Female nation

The idea of using a woman to represent a country was common in the 19th century. France adopted Marianne, the United States Columbia, and Great Britain was represented by Britannia. At the end of the 19th century Zealandia, daughter of Britannia, became a symbol of New Zealand: in poet Denis Glover's perhaps whimsical words, 'the mother-mistress symbol of young nationhood'.<sup>1</sup> Zealandia can be regarded as the inspiration for the woman on the coat of arms, representing people of European descent in partnership with Māori.

remains in the background. It embodies New Zealand history and sums up features of the country which, apart from the Crown, remain outside of public debate or partisan concern.

Nonetheless, should New Zealand ever become a republic, the design of a coat of arms intended to represent the country would no doubt be revisited.

## Footnotes

1. Denis Glover, 'Zealandia.' An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, edited by A. H. McLintock, originally published in 1966, <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/1966/zealandia/1> (last accessed 14 November 2011).  
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## British and 1911 coats of arms

### The British coat of arms

When New Zealand became a British colony, its coat of arms was the royal coat of arms of the United Kingdom. Used in both 19th- and 20th-century New Zealand, its most conspicuous features were a lion and a unicorn – creatures wholly symbolic, one seen by most New Zealanders only in zoos, the other not found anywhere at all.

### A coat of arms for New Zealand

With the evolution of New Zealand self-government, especially the granting of dominion status in 1907, it was considered appropriate for New Zealand to be represented by its own distinctive coat of arms. A competition in 1908 attracted 75 designs, and three entries were sent to Britain for consideration.

### 1911 coat of arms

In 1911 New Zealand was for the first time granted its own coat of arms, an act recognising the country's national identity and state institutions distinct from those of Great Britain. The royal warrant authorising the coat of arms was issued on 26 August 1911 and published in the New Zealand Gazette on 11 January 1912.

The 1911 coat of arms was not frequently on display. It was not affixed to the exterior of public buildings, and was even overlooked for official correspondence. By continuing to use Great Britain's royal coat of arms, cabinet ministers were acting in accordance with the idea that they were, after all, 'His (or Her) Majesty's ministers'.

### James McDonald

The winning entry in the 1908 competition was designed by James McDonald, a draughtsman in the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts. McDonald was an artist, a distinguished photographer of predominantly Māori subjects, and a maker of ethnographic films. He was active in promoting Māori arts and crafts.



The design for New Zealand's coat of arms drew upon images already in use in the country's civic emblems. Since 1878, for instance, the city of Wellington's seal included, on a shield, the lamb's fleece and the wheat sheaf, as well as a ship. Several cities had insignia presenting a Māori warrior as one of two figures on either side of a shield.

### The shield

The 1911 coat of arms was the basis for the later coat of arms that replaced it in 1956. Both coats of arms have a shield in the centre, flanked by a Māori warrior on one side and a European woman on the other. While the contemporary shield has a more rounded shape, the items within the shield are identical.

One view – perhaps not altogether serious – of the 1911 coat of arms is that the word 'ONWARD' represented then Prime Minister Joseph Ward, a participant in imperial conferences and a strong supporter of New Zealand's enhanced status as a dominion with its own coat of arms.

## A new coat of arms, 1956

The coat of arms was redesigned in 1956.

### The lion and the motto

The principal revisions to the 1911 coat of arms were the replacement of the word 'Onward' by the more straightforward (and less ambitious) 'New Zealand' and the removal of the British lion (holding aloft the British flag) at the top of the shield. These changes allowed the new coat of arms to be more clearly identified as New Zealand's.

### The warrior and the woman

The two figures at either side of the shield were repositioned – facing each other across the shield, rather than gazing outwards – and redesigned, the Māori made more decorous, the woman more decorative. They no longer stood on an elaborate scroll, but instead were positioned gently atop two fern leaves.

### Why was the coat of arms changed?

The change of coat of arms in 1956 was welcomed by New Zealand diplomats wanting a coat of arms less closely linked to Great Britain. Officials had been reduced to writing the words 'New Zealand' below the 1911 coat of arms in order to identify the country with which it was associated.

### An appropriate symbol?

In 1999, in his final speech to Parliament, Sir Douglas Graham, who as a cabinet minister had been involved in many negotiations over breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi, stated, 'We are not the same. Maori are Polynesian; they do not regard themselves as European. ... [W]ith all of the differences – differences that we should value rather than decry – we nevertheless are all New Zealanders, and we are all proud to be. The coat of arms of this

There were also aesthetic issues. John Marshall, attorney general at the time, described the old coat of arms's features as 'rather banal and uninspiring. It was due for an overhaul. The female figure which featured as one of the supporters was a rather plump matron with her hair done up in a bun on top of her head, gazing into space and holding a disproportionately large New Zealand flag'.<sup>3</sup> Marshall thought New Zealand could be more attractively represented, and had the woman redesigned.

## Footnotes

1. New Zealand Parliamentary Debates, vol. 580, 5 October 1999, p. 19,721. Back
2. John Marshall, *Memoirs*. Volume 1. 1912 to 1960. Auckland: Collins, 1983, p. 250. Back
3. *Memoirs*, p. 248. Back

country has a Maori and a non-Maori looking to the future. That is the symbol for us.'<sup>1</sup>

## A star of two nations

When the coat of arms was redesigned, Attorney General John Marshall wrote, 'The first redraft of the design showed the woman ... still with what I believe is known in polite society as the fuller figure. I sent it back with the instruction to the designer to make her look like Grace Kelly, then a very superior film star.'<sup>2</sup> That year, Kelly married Prince Rainier of Monaco. She is the only former Hollywood star to contribute directly to symbols of the national identity of two countries – New Zealand and Monaco.

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## The seal of New Zealand

The seal of New Zealand is an instrument of sovereignty representing the legal authority of the state and is used to authenticate official government documents. The seal currently in use was introduced in 1959 and is the first to use the New Zealand coat of arms (accompanied by the words 'Elizabeth The Second Queen of New Zealand'). In 2002 custody of the seal was formally transferred to the clerk of the Executive Council (part of the Cabinet Office in Wellington).

## The colonial seal

A public seal was sent to New Zealand for use on documents requiring the signature of the governor (later the governor-general). Captain William Hobson used a small seal, with sealing wax, on the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. This seal bore the royal arms with the words 'New Zealand' below.

All colonial government documents from 1841 onwards were affixed with the public seal of New Zealand. The design of the seal changed periodically. The first seal (1841) showed Queen Victoria, with a group of Māori chiefs. A second seal (1848) dispensed with the chiefs. Subsequently, seals were sometimes replaced to acknowledge a new sovereign coming to the throne.

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## Provincial and local governments

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Seals were also used by territorial authorities. New Zealand's provincial governments (in existence between 1848 and 1876) were able to affix a seal to their public documents.

### The sixth and seventh seals

The sixth seal, reflecting the accession of King George VI in 1936, remained in use until 1959 despite the King's death seven years earlier. He was described as the Emperor of India despite India and Pakistan having become independent in 1947.

The seventh seal (1959) is the only one to be issued during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II.

### Seal of New Zealand Act

The Seal of New Zealand Act 1977 provides for a seal of New Zealand to be used by the Queen or the governor-general on the advice of a minister in the New Zealand government 'or on the advice and with the consent of the Executive Council of New Zealand'.

The seal – like the coat of arms – is an expression of the authority of the Crown, applied in accordance with advice from the New Zealand government. There are no legal barriers to a future New Zealand government's advising its head of state to issue, 'by Proclamation', a new or revised public seal.

### Royal flag

The seal is also the basis for the Queen's Royal Standard of New Zealand, her personal flag as the country's monarch. The flag, adopted by the Queen in October 1962 for use on her tour of New Zealand the following year (and also used subsequently), includes the principal items from the shield on the coat of arms – the Southern Cross, the wheat, the fleece, the crossed hammers and the ships – with the middle ship replaced by the letter 'E' and a crown, surrounded by roses.

Acknowledgements to Phillip O'Shea

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## External links and sources

### More suggestions and sources

Kumarasingham, Harshan. Onward with executive power: lessons from New Zealand, 1947–57.  
Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, School of



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