
BACKGROUND BOOKS

NEW ZEALAND

"It may well be that we are on the very brink of an astounding new era of spiritual and aesthetic growth, a period when the heart shall count as the head. In this wiser dispensation, like to the scriptural grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all seeds, but when it is grown it is the greatest among herbs, so shall a new New Zealand adorn the Pacific."

This hope, that New Zealand might be freed from the "binding . . . chains of custom [and] the tight stranglehold of use and want," closes one of New Zealand's greatest literary creations, Herbert Guthrie-Smith's **Tutira, the Story of a New Zealand Sheep Station** (Blackwood, 1921). Faithfully recording the natural and human history of 61,000 acres near Hawke's Bay from its geological beginnings to the 1920s, speaking sternly of weeds as "burdens of sin . . . dropped by many pilgrims," Guthrie-Smith testifies to New Zealanders' passionate, but ambivalent, love of their land.

Unlike Guthrie-Smith, who cherished the countryside as it was, many British colonists were bent on domesticating both the wild bush and the native Maori. In archivist Ray Grover's **Cork of War: An Historical Narrative** (John McIndoe, 1982), a fictional Scottish settler, moving through real history, watches as English and Australian speculators in 1839 buy one-acre plots of land from the Maori with "the usual assortment of slops, firearms, and gewgaws" and then sell them to eager white buyers, "although nobody . . . knew if these sections would be swamp, bush, or goldfield."

Most newcomers toiled on small farms, but some led a harsh, nomadic existence. In **Station Amusements**

in New Zealand (William Hunt, 1873), Lady Barker, an English aristocrat, describes the lives of these itinerant "swaggers"—men who subsisted on game and fern roots, only occasionally leaving the wilderness to beg for jobs, food, or lodging from settlers.

"It's a damn' bloody hard country wherever you live in it," concludes a settler in John Mulgan's famous novel **Man Alone** (Selwyn & Blount, 1939). Unlike the swaggers, who took only what they could find, the settlers struggling to bring order to the outback produced what Mulgan describes as "desolate country. . . Blackened trees still standing, blackened, unrotted logs on the ground gave the hills the derelict air of a battlefield."

New Zealanders no longer wage war on the bush, but the modern-day landscape—well described in the **New Zealand Atlas** (A. R. Shearer, 1976), edited by Ian Ward—retains its monumental, and sometimes threatening, proportions. So rugged is the mountainous back country that much of it remained unexplored until this century. And although the rivers have been harnessed, providing 75 percent of the country's electricity, earthquakes remain a constant hazard.

While swaggers and settlers contended with the wild, men such as Henry Sewell, New Zealand's first Premier, began constructing a new government. Unfortunately, like many works chronicling New Zealand's colonial period, **The Journal of Henry Sewell, 1853-7** (Whitcoulls, 1980), edited by David McIntyre, is not readily available in the United States. American readers may turn to the **Oxford History of New Zealand** (Oxford, 1981, cloth; 1983, paper), whose 16 authors paint with a broad brush,

beginning before British annexation, touching on the politics of the Lib-Labs of the 1890s and the Red-Feds of the 1920s, and ending with the "society of 'fair shares'" during the 1970s.

The book's authors largely ignore New Zealand's international ties, particularly the cozy relationship with Britain that heavily influenced the country's military and economic decisions. **Beyond New Zealand: The Foreign Policy of a Small State** (Methuen, 1980), a collection of papers edited by John Anderson et al. and written by academics and defense officials, conveys the growing sentiment among New Zealanders that the "interests of the large industrialized Western nations and . . . a small, isolated island nation do not always coincide." Historian M. P. Lissington, in **New Zealand and the United States, 1840-1944** (A. R. Shearer, 1972), focuses on World War II, when New Zealanders looked to America for help against the Japanese menace and provided a way station for more than 100,000 U.S. Marines and other servicemen who passed through the islands between 1942 and 1944.

On the home front, the welfare state, described in detail in **Social Welfare and New Zealand Society** (Methuen, 1977), edited by A. D. Trlin, expanded rapidly before the war, helping to cushion the economic hardships that afflicted New Zealand no less than the rest of the West. But, as economist John Gould reflects in **The Rake's Progress?** (Hodder & Stoughton, 1982), the affluent 1950s and '60s were followed by the topsy-turvy '70s, bringing hard times, anti-

nuclear protests, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and the video store next to the corner dairy.

The 1970s also brought on a Maori renaissance. Maori remained an unwritten language until missionaries began to transcribe it during the 1820s, and Maori literary tales—as opposed to oral ones—have only recently flourished. The "indissoluble tie of kinship" and the *mauri*, the life force shared by the human and natural worlds, that anthropologist Margaret Orbell describes in **Natural World of the Maori** (Sheridan, 1985) take literary form in stories like those in **Into the World of Light: An Anthology of Maori Writing** (Heinemann, 1982, cloth; 1983, paper), edited by Witi Ihimaera and D. S. Long and written in both Maori and English. A reverence for kin and community pervades Ihimaera's **Whanau** (Heinemann, 1974, cloth; 1983, paper), a tale about a rural Maori wedding, as the *mauri* does in Keri Hulme's award-winning **The Bone People** (Spiral, 1984; La. State Univ. Press, 1985).

Despite the ferment of recent decades and the Maori literary efflorescence, most white writers are still stuck in the old themes. With exceptions such as Janet Frame (*A State of Siege, Owls Do Cry*), Maurice Gee (*Plumb, Meg, Sole Survivor*), and a few poets and novelists excerpted in **New Zealand Writing Since 1945** (Oxford, 1983), most remain haunted, as editor Vincent O'Sullivan puts it, by "the old but potent fact of this country's isolation—of writer from community, [of] community from its parent and from [the] indigenous culture."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Most of the titles in this essay were suggested by Ray Grover, director of the New Zealand National Archives in Wellington.