

## **'Rethinking national identity in New Zealand's history'**

AS WE HAVE HEARD TODAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1907 was an auspicious occasion. For some it was a cause for celebration. From the steps of the general assembly library in Wellington, Prime Minister Sir Joseph Ward read the proclamation of New Zealand's change of status from 'Colony' to 'Dominion'. This first Dominion Day came just six years after the Australian colonies had federated and New Zealand had opted out of that particular union. The change of name signalled a sort of maturity: New Zealand could now 'hold its own' among other former colonies. Dominion status implied the colony had 'grown up'. However, the shift was largely semantic and did not usher in any real transformation: allegiance to empire remained undiminished—if anything, it increased. Real constitutional change was to come with the ratification of the 1931 Statute of Westminster some forty years later.<sup>1</sup> But if little constitutional transformation accompanied this linguistic 'upgrade', how might we consider this event, and today, its centenary? Language was then (as it is now) very important: 'Colony' implied an infant state still dependent on the motherland, while 'Dominion' suggested New Zealand's increased autonomy and authority over its own sovereign territory. The substance of Dominion Day lay, then, in its *symbolic* value. Dominion status entrenched, consolidated and to some extent, 'embalmed' the idea of the nation and its rhetorical mainstay, national identity. In other words, 1907 amplified and underscored appeals to the notion of national identity. The events of 1907 marked a consolidation in the imagery of the unitary nation-state, a state that was borne in the nineteenth century and developed over the course of the twentieth. However, for many of the nation-state's subjects, this was not a particularly liberating notion, but a colonising and a restricting one. If we accept nationhood as a specifically Western construct, then we might see the events of 1907 in less celebratory and more sceptical terms.

Today I intend to present an alternative reading of the proclamation of Dominion status and use this historical moment to focus on ideas of nationhood and national identity. In particular, I argue that ‘national identity’—a phrase which has been excessively mobilized in public discourses in recent years—is not only an artificial construct but is in fact a colonizing tool. The paper seeks to interrogate these notions and argues that 1907 ought to be read as a staging post in a progressive and evolutionary colonizing narrative; and that the nation and national identity are alibis for colonization, devices which legitimate ongoing colonizing processes and practices. The paper will attempt to answer the following questions: What is the relationship between history and national identity? How has the concept been employed in the past? And what are the implications for citizens of the early twenty-first century New Zealand ‘nation-state’? The emphasis placed on the unitary nation-state, with its implicit homogeneity, has I suggest, bequeathed to us a rather problematic legacy.

*What is national identity?*

But first, who or what is the nation? In the broadest sense, the term refers to a group of individuals, usually (but not always) living in a defined and recognised geographical place with some common interests and values. The nation as we know it today is largely a nineteenth-century Western ideal, and a discursive construct, translated into ‘reality’ *usually* by rites/rights of citizenship, *frequently* by geography (land/whenua/place) and *increasingly* by legal and constitutional jurisdictions. Perhaps the most ubiquitous use of the phrase ‘the nation’ is its use as an explanation for the nation-state; indeed, the nation-state guarantees the existence of the nation, preserves its distinct identity, and provides a territory where the national culture and ethos are dominant. Most nation-states also appeal to cultural and historical myths to justify their existence.<sup>2</sup> This fits with Benedict Anderson’s oft-

quoted definition of the nation as an ‘imagined community’.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps a simpler reading of ‘the nation’, though less specific, comes from historian Eric Hobsbawm who defines it as ‘any sufficiently large body of people whose members regard themselves as members of a ‘nation’’, although this prioritises the ways in which people define *themselves* and nations are, of course, also defined by other, external factors and imperatives.<sup>4</sup>

History and national identity have, in the past, enjoyed a fairly intimate relationship. As Stefan Berger has recently argued, history has been central to the construction of the nation and national identity. ‘Nation-builders everywhere agreed: their nation had to have a history—the longer and prouder the better. Creating national historical consciousness was widely seen as the most powerful precondition for engendering true national feeling in the wider population’.<sup>5</sup> This is all very well for ancient cultures, but settler-nations have struggled with the problem of time—or lack of it. New world states could either draw on the past of their mother country, appropriate the history of the indigenous peoples or begin again.<sup>6</sup> As it happened, New Zealand embraced a bit of each.

National histories that prioritize national identity tend towards insularity too. Ann Curthoys has noticed such a trend in national histories of Australia, where she observes that ‘[n]ational histories generally tend to focus on what is distinctive about the history of the nation, what seems to hold it together ... There is an implicit assumption, that this—the discovery of what makes a nation, a people distinctive—is the task of national history, rather than a focus on what is shared with histories and societies elsewhere’.<sup>7</sup>

So how has the relationship between history and national identity played out in New Zealand? The search for ‘national identity’, along with national exceptionalism, the idea that New Zealand experiences were different and even

unique, have significantly shaped New Zealand general histories over the past century. In these texts, the story of New Zealand is told as a transition narrative, where growth, development, independence and maturity are the central topics and governing motifs. This is a progressive tale, where the themes of discovery, growth, development, independence and maturity loom large, where 'progress' is both natural and innate. The history of New Zealand is recounted in an evolutionary development: from Polynesian homeland to colonial outpost to independent Pakeha-dominated nation-state. 'New Zealand history' may only have been recognised as a 'stand-alone' teaching subject in New Zealand schools since the 1970s,<sup>8</sup> yet these two mythic tropes remained dominant. Many historians bristle at the suggestion of myth infusing history, it is usually seen as the antithesis to history: one implies fable while the other connotes fact. Yet we cannot dismiss or downplay the role of myth-making in national histories. All histories trade in some type of myth, shared values and common assumptions in that they reflect the concerns of their own age. The assumptions, style and mode of analysis all reflect the times and breathe life into the truism that history is really about the writing of the present rather than the past.

The beginnings of a national narrative supporting national identity might be traced back to the 1890s. As in Europe and the United States, the first historians were amateurs; the first professional historians emerged later. The making of an insular past which prioritized national identity was confirmed and perpetuated by Sir Keith Sinclair, whose work in large part picked up on that of William Pember Reeves and put cultural nationalists in the driver's seat.<sup>9</sup> Historians sought a narrative of national experience: and, as in other edges of the Empire, that was framed and define by middle-class white men. But from the 1970s this script began to be questioned as local historians, energized by feminist, indigenous and the 'history from below' approach turned their attention to New Zealand. However, as New

Zealand history embraced difference and diversity, it became more inward looking. At the turn of this century the orthodox narrative of national identity was seriously challenged by the work of James Belich and his 'recolonization' thesis, explicated in *Paradise Reforged* (2001). Since then, another six general histories of New Zealand have been published, including the late Michael King's commercially successful *Penguin History of New Zealand*.<sup>10</sup> With the notable exceptions of *Paradise Reforged* and Philippa Mein-Smith's *Cambridge Concise History*, none of these texts have tackled the problem of national identity.

The observation that national histories have embraced myths of national identity and nation-making might seem obvious: but we do not have to understand our history in this way. New historical scholarship is, I am pleased to report, fracturing the dominance of national identity narratives suggesting alternative ways to frame New Zealand history. A major new history project I am editing takes the idea of national identity and tests this particular myth against the evidence of how people in past lived their lives. 'The New Oxford History of New Zealand', a multi-authored general history, offers a range of new perspectives on New Zealand's past. First, it questions the assumption that New Zealand history can be explained as a quest for 'national identity'. On the contrary, the volume tests the limits of 'national' (and nationalist) history and engages with the work of historian Peter Gibbons, especially his suggestion that national identity disguises continuing colonising practices and legitimises ongoing 'cultural colonisation'.<sup>11</sup> The book therefore probes whether national identity still offers a useful way of explaining New Zealand history and asks if narratives which rely on the 'colony-to-nation' storyline are still relevant in the early twenty-first century. Second, contributors to this book question the notion that New Zealand's history is 'unique', distinct or exceptional, and considers the ways in which events in New Zealand can be understood as a part of trends, practices and structures that are linked to other places, far beyond these physical

shores.<sup>12</sup> It questions the extent to which many aspects of New Zealand life, culture, political activity, economic and social trends were particular to New Zealand, and the degree to which they were part of a much larger canvas. Accordingly, the 'New Oxford History' responds to a recent challenge to re-imagine New Zealand's multiple pasts, to reconsider 'the world in New Zealand, rather than New Zealand in the world'.<sup>13</sup> It takes a transnational approach to history which focuses on the shared ties and common features across, above and beyond national boundaries.<sup>14</sup>

While this book is presented as a general history, it aims to challenge and even undermine the genre of general history-writing: in other words, the book attempts to destabilize this genre of history-writing, but from within that genre. 'The New Oxford History of New Zealand' suggests that history and identity are more likely to have been made (and remade) along the lines of culture, community, family, class, region, sexuality, and gender, among other factors, and that these are and have been more important than ideas of evolving nationhood and appeals to national exceptionalism. This book reflects trends in recent historical scholarship. Since the 1980s onwards, there have been seismic shifts in New Zealand historiography: the rise of social history, gender history, cultural history, indigenous histories and environmental history, among others, has linked New Zealand experiences with the rest of the world. The recognition of Maori history, either on the marae or before the Waitangi Tribunal has also questioned western ways of knowing and remembering.

From a postcolonial perspective—that is, an approach which critically engages with colonisation and its aftermath—the idea of the nation with regard to history is deeply problematic.<sup>15</sup> After all, those who have been adversely affected by colonising processes and those who see history through other interpretive and cultural frames may well see the nation as a particular Pakeha construct from which

they feel excluded or marginalised within. But perhaps the greatest weakness of the idea of 'nation' is that it assumes a singular shared identity, whereas, in multicultural New Zealand, the reality is quite different: we all partake of multiple many identities and none of these are necessarily fixed. Scholarship that has blossomed in the wake of what is known as the 'imperial turn' (described as 'the accelerated attention to the impact of histories of imperialism on metropolitan societies in the wake of decolonization, pre- and post- 1968 racial struggle and feminism in the last quarter century'),<sup>16</sup> the nation has been increasingly exposed as a falsely homogeneous entity.<sup>17</sup> The nation-state's emphasis on homogeneity rather than difference, the assumptions around the indivisible nature of power and its relationship with constitutional 'bounded-ness' further underwrites the dominance of the nation. Scholars beyond New Zealand have long called for such interrogation of the nation.<sup>18</sup> Indian scholars have been at the forefront of this criticism.<sup>19</sup> At best, the nation may be defined as an historical category and a matrix through which to view and explain the past, while at worst, it is seen to be implicit in continuing, rather than addressing, the colonial project.<sup>20</sup>

In New Zealand, the relationship between history and the nation is complicated by the rhetoric of biculturalism alongside claims for alternative ways of seeing the past. In New Zealand there are indeed many 'nations', in the sense of Hobsbawm's and Anderson's terms, yet despite claims to acknowledging diversity, there is one recognised nation-state.<sup>21</sup> We might look, for instance, at the Treaty of Waitangi, now considered by many as New Zealand's 'de facto' founding constitution. What was promised in 1840 was a sort of bifurcated vision of the future: while in effect the English language version has been 'historically' dominant, the Maori language version is now being accorded some legitimacy. But in terms of the nation, the Treaty might be seen as a sort of limiting instrument; a tool of control and submission rather than one promising possibilities. Those who call for Maori

sovereignty might wish to use the Treaty to control and call into question the primacy of the nation-state itself, and with it, the legitimacy of settler nationalism. Claims for self-determination—articulated since the arrival of Pakeha on these shores and accelerated after the signing of the Treaty—remind us that sovereignty need not be indivisible and there are other ways to conceive of holding and sharing power. Pakeha historians have long attempted to co-opt the Treaty into the nation. But we might see the Treaty and the nation as incompatible and at odds with each other. The nation (and nation-state) is a settler creation.

Many criticisms have been levelled at what we might term the ‘bicultural project’, not the least its insistence on binary difference, contestability and for some, exclusivity. Biculturalism itself is a flawed notion. It has been described as a colonial construct because it posits Maori in a (junior) position with the Crown and assumes that the cultural and political constituencies of Maori and Pakeha are homogeneous.<sup>22</sup> Biculturalism is a seductive concept because it promises liberation by respecting difference—but in reality it can be a sort of ideological straitjacket. Clearly, modern claims to plurality suggest that ‘the nation’ as a composite and singular body is a fiction. At the constitutional level at least, the *idea* of the nation in New Zealand is up for debate.<sup>23</sup>

So, if the nation and national identity are so problematic, why bother? And why should historians be concerned? There are two possible answers. First, recent issues which relate to or invoke the past, such as the public debate over the Foreshore and Seabed legislation and claims that serious social injustices stem from ongoing colonisation, have exposed a deep sense of anxiety about the past and, more importantly, its relationship with the present. In settler societies such as New Zealand, it is fair to say that public discomfort about New Zealand’s history has fuelled debates examining the ways in which Europeans came to occupy New



Zealand and forced them to reconsider what the conditions of continued occupancy might be in the future. At the heart of this unease is the status of national identity. This process of self-reflection is by no means new: colonial nationalist movements in settler colonies like New Zealand can be traced back to the 1890s and beyond. But this public disquiet has become more intense in recent years, and is, I propose, part of the impulse to explain the past in order to better understand the present. Second, it is true that claims shoring up the nation's durability and relevance have multiplied in response to critiques of it; this is certainly the case in New Zealand too. It is no coincidence, therefore, that political rhetoric around a 'one people, one nation' vision have been made in the face of increasing social, cultural and ethnic diversity.

New historical research is revealing that, here in Aotearoa New Zealand, people in the past participated above and below the nation—at global *as well as* local and regional levels. Nation has not been the overriding identifier for New Zealanders. Rather it has been just one of a number of associational structures that shape the lives of individuals or are shaped by them. Nation ought not to be seen as the dominant factor in shaping the past, but understood alongside class, gender, race, community, iwi, family, ethnicities and so on, all of which operate across as well as against the nation. The difference is that the nation can be very easily rhetorically mobilised and readily co-opted for political, jingoistic and patriotic purposes. Put simply, a focus on the nation obscures diversity; the nation is a master narrative that silences as much as it potentially empowers.

In conclusion, my task here today has been to unsettle and destabilise the nation, and to question the implications of the events of 1907. The 1907 'shift' did not so much create as augment the conceptual scaffolding for nation; it created the discursive space where narratives of the nation could be written. 1907 thus offers us

a moment in which we might pause and reflect on the idea of the nation state and its rhetorical partner-in-crime, national identity. Ultimately, New Zealand's shift from 'colony' to 'Dominion' status was important in terms of *perceptions* of evolving nationhood. *Yet nations are not just historical constructs: they survive into the present. So the resilience of the nation validates the need for ongoing scrutiny. Perhaps instead of 'questing for' a national identity which does not exist, we need to accept that the end-point is the process, where vigilance, examination and constant questioning of the centrality of the nation ought to be the goal; but in such a way that does not valorise its centrality and thus its power.* Clearly, then, there is no one monument, one single place or a universal theory to explain the history of New Zealand: rather, we have a fragmented past which has produced an equally diverse present. So when, in his 1936 *New Zealand: A Short History*, historian J. C. Beaglehole declared New Zealand 'the most over-written of all the British Dominions,'<sup>24</sup> he was only partially correct: New Zealand has indeed been thoroughly written over and written about, but from the perspective of what we ought to admit as a colonising narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> This removed the right of the British parliament to legislate for the dominions, unless requested. From 1946, the term 'Dominion' was officially abandoned in favour of the 'Realm of New Zealand': thus, 'Dominion' status technically lasted just 39 years.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth remembering that while 'country' refers to a geographical territory the term 'state' denotes a recognised administrative and decision-making institution.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780: programme, myth, reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p.6. See also Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism*, New York University Press, New York, 1997 and Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: theory, ideology, history*, Polity Press, Malden, Mass., 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Stefan Berger, *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2007, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> A third option was to disavow history altogether and start afresh, see Gerard Bouchard's comparative study of new world nationalisms, *Genese des Nations et Cultures du Nouvelles National*, Montreal, 2001.

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<sup>7</sup> Ann Curthoys, 'Losing our way after the imperial turn: charting academic uses of the postcolonial', in Antoinette Burton, *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Alison Derbyshire, 'Anyone's But Our Own: The Teaching of New Zealand History in New Zealand Secondary Schools 1925-2000', Thesis, MA History, University of Auckland, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> See especially Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity*, Allen and Unwin/Port Nicholson Press, Wellington 1986. Sinclair's vision of the nation, as espoused in this text, largely excluded women and Maori.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, Penguin, Auckland, 2003; Matthew Wright, *The Reed Illustrated History of New Zealand*, Reed, Auckland, 2004; Gordon McLauchlan, *A Short History of New Zealand*, Penguin, Auckland, 2004; Tom Brooking, *The History of New Zealand*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 2004; Philippa Mein-Smith, *A Concise History of New Zealand*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005. In 2004 a new revised edition of Ranginui Walker's *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou Struggle Without End*, which first appeared in 1990, was published.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Gibbons, 'The Far Side of the Search for Identity: Reconsidering New Zealand History', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 37, no. 1, April 2003, pp. 38-49.

<sup>12</sup> Miles Fairburn has recently asked why New Zealand historians have not focussed on New Zealand exceptionality and argues this is because, in general, New Zealand history was not; apart from our adoption and pastiche of other cultures, notably Australian and American, see Miles Fairburn, 'Is there a Good Case for New Zealand Exceptionalism?', in Tony Ballantyne and Brian Moloughney, eds, *Disputed Histories: Imagining New Zealand's Pasts*, Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2006, pp. 143-67.

<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly the most ambitious historiographical challenge presented to historians of New Zealand in recent years has come from Peter Gibbons. In 2003, Gibbons argued that that for too long New Zealand history has been written around the notion of New Zealand 'national identity'. Peter Gibbons, 'The Far Side of the Search for Identity: Reconsidering New Zealand History', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 37, no. 1, April 2003, pp. 38-49. It built on his previous work interrogating what he termed 'cultural colonisation'. He challenged New Zealand historians to dissolve or decentre 'New Zealand' as a subject, arguing 'those histories which propose national identity/nationhood/nationalism as the normative narrative, which consider national identity to be a natural, even organic growth rather than an ideological construction, and which conceal how national identity is fabricated within the broader processes of colonization, are themselves colonizing texts, not "representations" of the past but *practices* with real and continuing consequences.' Peter Gibbons, 'Cultural Colonization and National Identity', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 36, no. 1, April 2002, pp. 5-17 (p. 14).

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<sup>14</sup> See further Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and the Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867*, Polity, London, 2002, p. 9, and Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhaba and Dipesh Chakrabarty, eds, *Cosmopolitanism*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> The term 'post-colonialism' does not signal an end to colonization or imply that we have somehow left the colonial past behind; rather, it suggests a critical engagement *with*

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colonisation, a perspective that critiques and seeks to undermine the structures, ideologies and institutions that gave colonisation meaning. Claims to postcolonial status (or 'postcoloniality') are often motivated by the desire of the colonised (as well as the descendants of the colonisers) to restore cultural and political integrity, granted not by the colonial power, but on their own terms. Postcolonialism thus engages with ideas of plurality and the co-existence of multiple discourses.

<sup>16</sup> Burton, *After the Imperial Turn*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Burton, *After the Imperial Turn*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Jon Stratton and Ien Ang have called for scholars to problematize the nation in studies of 'national culture'. Jon Stratton and Ien Ang, 'On the Impossibility of a Global Cultural Studies: "British" Cultural Studies in an "International" Frame', in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, pp. 361-91. Imperial historian A. G. Hopkins has noted that 'most history continues to be written within a national framework that derives its inspiration from nineteenth-century state-building and state-reforming movements in Europe' because 'preoccupation with the national epic has also endorsed a degree of insularity that has tended to marginalize international audiences'. A. G. Hopkins, 'Back to the Future: From National History to Imperial History', *Past and Present*, vol. 164, 1999, pp. 202-03.

<sup>19</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 2000; Kumkum Chatterjee, 'The King of Controversy: History and Nation-making in late colonial India', *American Historical Review*, vol. 110, no. 5, 2005, pp. 1474-75. See also Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995. National identity is also being questioned in relation to the law, see Nan Seuffert, *Jurisprudence of national identity: kaleidoscopes of imperialism and globalisation from Aotearoa New Zealand*, Ashgate, Aldershot, Hants, England, Burlington, VT, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Scholars in North America have been grappling with these issues, see Don H. Doyle and Marco Antonio Pamploma, eds, *Nationalism in the New World*, Georgia, 2006. Thomas Bender's has been unpicking assumptions around ideas of American exceptionalism, see Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History*, New York, 2006; Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, California, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> James Liu et al, eds, *New Zealand Identities: Departures and Destinations*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> See further Dominic O'Sullivan, *Beyond Biculturalism: The Politics of an Indigenous Minority*, Huia, Wellington, 2007, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Yet the nation has a surprising durability, both in terms of public rhetoric and institutional practice. Antoinette Burton has discussed the inadequacy but indispensability of the nation and laments that obituaries of the nation are premature. Burton, *After the Imperial Turn*, pp. 1-23.

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<sup>24</sup> J. C. Beaglehole, *New Zealand: A Short History*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1936, p.10.