

Notes

The Online Encyclopedia of New Zealand

TE ARA



IN JULY 2001 the Ministry for Culture and Heritage received government funding to begin work on a new encyclopedia of New Zealand to be progressively published online over the subsequent nine years. A happy coincidence of factors brought about this event. The most obvious, of course, was the support of a government that has committed itself to an energetic programme to encourage and make visible the country's culture and heritage. Initially promoted by a graduate of the University of Auckland's History Department, Judith Tizard, the project was warmly supported by another who had studied history at that university, Helen Clark, and received endorsement from a former member of the University of Otago's History Department, Michael Cullen.

There were also professional reasons why this new project was timely. Since 1984 there had been a major national project putting together the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (DNZB) under the leadership of Bill Oliver and Claudia Orange. By 2000 five volumes had been published outlining the achievements of those who flourished in the years 1769–1960. You have to be dead to find a place within the dictionary, and there were not yet a significant number of figures who had died from the next period (1961–1980) to warrant work progressing at full pace to a sixth volume. The project needed to tread water for about a decade. In addition a second major national project, the *New Zealand Historical Atlas*, had been published in 1997. So by 2001 there was a large body of experience and research material available in the ministry that might be used for another major reference work; and both within the ministry and in the scholarly community there was the energy and resource available for another big project such as the encyclopedia. Another Labour minister and former graduate of the University of Auckland's History Department, Michael Bassett, had promoted the idea of a new encyclopedia in 1990. With the DNZB and *Atlas* in full swing it was decided at that time that launching an encyclopedia project was simply asking too much.

Demand for an encyclopedia was also coming from the wider community. The last two decades has seen a striking increase in interest about this country and its history; and the development of a rich infra-structure which feeds off this knowledge. There is a growing desire by New Zealanders to provide themselves with 'a home in thought'. Cities have developed with an urban culture and a university-educated middle class. The politics of identity has encouraged groups — Maori, Pacific Islanders, Chinese, gays, women, etc. — to look to their own histories and cultures for affirmations of identity. Increasing numbers of tourists wish to do more than gaze at Alpine peaks or golden beaches. 'Cultural tourism'

has become as effective a slogan as 'adventure tourism'. These developments have produced new ways in which the 'heritage' of the country is articulated — through film, museum exhibitions, television programmes, historic trails, novels, plays, tourist guides, signage. All of these media depend on the availability of accurate, interesting information about New Zealand, and would clearly draw upon a high quality encyclopedia of New Zealand.

Further, the growing interest in this country has found expression within the educational system. Forty years ago when A.H. McLintock was preparing the *Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, universities were only just introducing courses on New Zealand history; and it was normal for students to go right through a degree in English literature without once studying a book written in their own country.¹ Professional journals, such as the *New Zealand Journal of History*, were still in the future. In schools the curricula largely assumed that we were an off-shore island of Britain. Today New Zealand novels and history, not to mention geography and science, have become the core of the student experience. Accurate and accessible summaries of recent research about this country would find a ready market here.

Other evidence, too, suggested a demand for an encyclopedia of New Zealand. Even in the mid 1960s, before all the social changes already noted, McLintock's *Encyclopaedia* received a remarkable response. Thirty-one thousand copies were snapped up within two months of publication in November 1966; and although when the full print run of 34,000 was sold the volumes were never reprinted, this said more about the lack of commercial drive of the Government printer than any lack of public interest.² Similarly the *Bateman New Zealand Encyclopedia*, which first came out in 1984, has now gone through five editions and several compact disks. Reputedly sales have reached six figures.³ More recent reference works have also sold well. When the Historical Branch went out to tender for the *New Zealand Historical Atlas* the hope was to sell about 5000 copies, but publishers said that it was really too 'academic' to expect such returns. In fact the volume has now sold over six times that figure.

Why do these existing publications not satisfy the need for reference works about New Zealand? *Bateman* is a useful resource, which sits happily in a car glove box, but it is very much a once-over-lightly, and was originally produced almost 20 years ago. McLintock is, even now, a most impressive work. It remains an essential source of reference for students and scholars of New Zealand. If you want to find out about sheep breeds or natural disasters it is hard to beat. But it is very much a creature of a particular time and place. Produced by a committee of government officials, it is heavily institutional with long lists of prize-winners, such as those who won events at the national athletics championships. Since the early 1960s, when it was written, there has been a revolution in New Zealand's research culture and social attitudes. Universities have increasingly expected their academic staff to publish the findings of specialized investigations and to supervise doctoral students. There has been a huge amount of new and original research on this country that we need to digest and synthesize. Subjects once not deemed worthy of scholarly interest now attract students. New ideas about race or gender or the nature of knowledge open up areas of debate. Scanning through all the richness of McLintock it is interesting to discover notable absences — no

entries about social institutions such as the beach or the Christmas holidays, nothing on New Zealand food or toys or childbirth, no coverage of New Zealand iwi; and when one starts to read the entry on subjects such as ‘the Maori Wars’ it is hard not to wince. The first sentence runs: ‘It has become increasingly difficult for an historian to know what he means when he speaks of “cause”, in view of the subtle and contradictory analyses of historical explanation by modern philosophers’.⁴ McLintock has continuing value, and in fact it is our intention to give it a new life by digitizing the complete three volumes as part of the new project. But we will present it within a frame, as a time capsule, a document of how we were. As an encyclopedia for twenty-first century New Zealanders, it will not do. Not surprisingly then, as the *Historical Atlas and Dictionary* came to fruition, we began to get increasing demands from a number of sources — from schools, publishers, not to mention unemployed writers — for the third leg of the trifecta, a new encyclopedia.

The timing was fortunate too with respect to the technology. When we first seriously scoped a new encyclopedia of New Zealand in 1998, we envisaged it as primarily a print publication. Perhaps in time there might be a spin-off compact disk, but the major output would be a successor to McLintock, a set of three volumes in cold print. Between these first thoughts and the eventually successful budget bid, things changed. The world-wide web exploded in the scholarly world. The web itself was a very new phenomenon. In June 1993 there were a mere 130 sites in the world; two years later there were 23,500. By 1997 the number was approaching 100 million.⁵ At first there was considerable suspicion of the web. Because all that was needed to set up a website was a computer, a telephone line and some minimal programming skill, there were no effective gate-keepers. The result was an extraordinary variability in the quality of sites. This was made more evident by the lack of distinction in internet searching. As Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote, an internet search was likely to ‘produce a comic strip or advertising slogan as readily as a quotation from Shakespeare. Every source appearing on the screen has the same weight and credibility as every other.’⁶ Many sites were shot through with errors. This is true even now: a recent glance at the internet to find out about the history of radio uncovered a site which assumed that the National party had governed New Zealand in the late 1930s. Historians used to the unfolding of an argument on the printed page found the web flashy, full of the visual equivalent of ‘sound bites’, and very hard to read on screen. However, particularly in the United States, the last years of the century saw the emergence of sites of real value to historians. Some were simply collections of primary material, such as the Library of Congress’s *American Memory* project which now contains more than seven million digital items,⁷ or the marvellous collection of American periodical literature *Making of America* which includes 8500 books and 50,000 journal articles from nineteenth-century America,⁸ all of which are word-searchable. Some sites involved more creative use of the web by historians, such as the University of Virginia History Department’s magnificent site on two communities immediately before, and after, the Civil War, *The Valley of the Shadow*.⁹ These examples suggested that the web was especially good in three respects: for data-bases of primary sources; for reference works; and for small multi-media exhibitions with little text.

Convinced by these models, the ministry went in two directions. First, we began a small website in early 1999: nzhistory.net.¹⁰ It was intended as an experimental site and as a way of promoting publications of the History Group. It gave us experience in presenting history on the web, including how to structure material and how to make the most of supporting material such as moving images or oral histories. More importantly, the site convinced us that the web opened up new audiences that we had never reached through our books. By 2002 the site was attracting between 40,000 and 50,000 visitors a month, an astonishing and unexpected response. Among the audience were two significant groups: the schools whose use was obvious from the enquiries which began to flood in from pupils; and interested people overseas, ranging from scholars to prospective tourists. Second, we decided to repackage the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* as a website. Originally the digitization of the dictionary had been seen as likely to produce a compact disk. But when the website appeared in 2001 as a millennium project with the support of the New Zealand Historical Association, it became another great success, signalled by its award of the Australia and New Zealand ‘Yahoo site of the year’ for 2002.¹¹ The success was due partly to the fact that images and sound files helped bring the subjects to life. The greatest value of the new medium, however, was the searching capabilities that opened up new uses for the dictionary. Searching by occupation or place of birth provides a quick route in for people interested in the history of a particular activity or of an ethnic group; and if you search by word it is remarkable how much you can quickly find out about a subject. Just try searching the word ‘prostitution’, read the relevant biographies, and you are already a good way to piecing together the outlines of a history of prostitution in New Zealand.

With these two examples in mind, we decided that the new encyclopedia should be a web publication. We still plan to publish an A–Z print version at the end of the project, since not everyone wishes to read off a computer screen; but the website will be the primary output. The advantages of web publication for the encyclopedia over a pure print publication have become obvious. The most significant is that the encyclopedia can become a multi-media experience. At the heart of every entry will be an accurate scholarly and engaging text that will take users to the boundaries of recent knowledge about a subject. The total word length will be between about two million words (slightly longer than the McLintock *Encyclopaedia*) organized in about 1000 entries. Around this text will cluster a set of multi-media resources. Our estimates at this stage are that there will be 10,000 to 15,000 images in the form of photographs, paintings, cartoons, ephemera and so forth; about 500 sound files in the form of oral histories, radio excerpts, music, bird songs; some 120 moving images, both film and television footage; about 300 primary documents such as newspaper reports or extracts from diaries; about 100 scholarly articles or research reports; probably 500 items of newly prepared graphic material such as maps, diagrams and drawings; and, if we can afford them, 60 interactive experiences. The aim of these multi-media resources is partly to attract the users by giving colour to the site and adding a human richness to the text. But, as we are telling our contributors, these resources should be chosen to add real intellectual value.

They should not be conceived simply as illustrative material. They will be an integral part of the communication; and an indication of further primary material that might be found in the nation's repositories.

The other major advantage of web publication is searchability, as shown up by the *Dictionary* website. A book encyclopedia is searchable by alphabetical arrangement of subject or by index. With the online encyclopedia, users will be able to browse the site through major themes or look for entries alphabetically. They will also be able to enter the site in other ways — searching, or pulling together all the relevant entries by region, or time period, or iwi, or author. As with the *Dictionary* site, they will be able to search by word, backed up by a thesaurus.

The online encyclopedia is also less time-bound than a print version. We are planning that this project will take nine years. If we were simply doing it in print form, then users would have to wait almost a decade for the full work to be published in A–Z form. By that time the initial entries would look very tired. By publishing on the web we can post entries progressively. Some will appear within two years of our beginning the project. This has obvious advantages from a political perspective, and it will help to build up momentum for the project. Our plan at this stage is to publish one theme a year from early 2004. In this way we can cluster expertise, bring specialists on particular themes into the project for short periods, and focus our publicity on the interest groups who will be particularly attracted to particular themes. If, for example, we dedicate one year to preparing entries on sport and recreation, we will draw on researchers of sport and launch that theme in an appropriate sporting context.

The online encyclopedia is less time-bound in another sense. When McLintock was published in 1966 (and never reprinted), it became in a sense fossilized: the interpretations and the mistakes stand for all time. The online encyclopedia can constantly evolve. As new discoveries are made they can be incorporated. If we suddenly discover that indeed the Chinese did reach New Zealand before Tasman, then this fact can be added to our coverage of the early history of the country. Furthermore, when people discover mistakes in entries they will be invited to send in the reference and after checking out the suggestions we will be able to correct the errors. This does not mean that we will skimp on checking, but it does mean that we will encourage people to respond in this way and, hopefully, provide an automatic system on every screen so that people can e-mail in responses.

This interaction with the audience, which the online medium encourages, can also be used in other ways. It is our intention to choose one subject every six months and then encourage the community to contribute their stories about that subject. We trialled this on nzhistory.net, inviting people to send in stories about the Royal Tour of 1953–1954.¹² The results were both amusing and intriguing. We see this as way of engaging New Zealanders in the preparation of the encyclopedia. In a wider sense too, an online encyclopedia is 'interactive' in that it allows users to interact with the material by surfing at will on the site and 'turning on' interactive devices or video footage. In this way an online encyclopedia gives users a greater sense of ownership and involvement than a book encyclopedia.

A central aspect of online experiences is the link. This can be internal links across related entries where the hyperlink functions rather like a 'q.v.' in a traditional encyclopaedia. But whereas a book version is limited by its covers, the online encyclopedia will be able to make bridges to other relevant material. The closest of these will be our own resources — the biographies of the *Dictionary* site and the exhibitions on nzhistory.net. It is exciting for us to discover in trial entries how beautifully the biographies and the entries work together. The one gives human detail to the entry, the other gives context to the biography. This also frees the encyclopedia team from the obligation of preparing potted biographies (about a quarter of McLintock was biographical). We will also provide a new internal resource with our plans to digitize McLintock and make this available from the first theme. The aim here is both to ensure that there is a complete encyclopedia, even if outdated, from the first publication, and also because the comparison of the 1966 version of a subject and the 2003 version will be an immensely rewarding lesson on the temporal nature of scholarship. Beyond our own resources the online encyclopedia will link to other sites within New Zealand. Where there are relevant collections of digitized images or documents or where institutions such as Crown Research Institutes have put together databases, then there will be an instant link from the appropriate entry. In this way the online encyclopedia can be both a resource in itself and also a portal to other scholarly aids. The links will be international as well as local. This is to be a New Zealand encyclopedia: there will not be generic entries on 'class' or 'butterflies', only entries on class or butterflies in New Zealand. But it is important that New Zealand users be able to locate quickly material on the international context of New Zealand subjects. The view from this country can only be understood in the light of comparison and difference.

The international character of the web also brings the advantages that it will open up scholarship about New Zealand to the international community. In 2000 it proved impossible from Ireland to access print copies of both the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* and McLintock's *Encyclopaedia*. Copies of neither were to be found in or around Belfast. Once they are available on the web, they are accessible for anyone with an internet connection. The nature of search engines makes it likely that many people will be led to New Zealand material who would not otherwise find it. Our experience with nzhistory.net has been that up to 45% of visitors come from outside New Zealand's shores. We expect a similar response to the encyclopedia.

The final advantage of web publication over the printed book is that it provides the potential to layer the material for different audiences. A resource such as a national encyclopedia needs to satisfy a very diverse range of audiences who bring with them quite different needs and knowledge. The book encyclopedia is forced to choose one target audience and run the risk of frustrating others. For the online encyclopedia we have identified five major audiences. Probably the largest audience will be secondary school pupils for whom the encyclopedia will be an essential resource for school projects. Teachers now report that school students choose to refer to the web before exploring the books in the school library, and unfortunately, despite the growth in interest in New Zealand content, there remains precious little high quality New Zealand material available on

the internet. Younger children in primary school will also undoubtedly turn to the site and their particular needs should be addressed. Second, there are New Zealand families wanting a quick point of reference, perhaps to plan a trip to another part of New Zealand or check an answer to a crossword clue. Third, there is a large potential audience within the Maori community, and especially Maori schools, hungry for contemporary and accurate information about their own culture. Fourth, there is the international audience, who may range from researchers to tourists thinking about a forthcoming trip here. Finally, there are the local scholars, writers and researchers. These include experts who are not likely to look up entries about their own speciality, but who are always looking for reliable information about subjects that sit on the border of their own researches. This group also includes the museum curators and writers who, as we have already noted, staff the cultural infrastructure of New Zealand.

Much of our energy over the first six months of the project has been focussed on designing a mode of presentation that works for these diverse audiences. There are very few models available. Although there are a number of web-based encyclopedias most of them have been developed by the digitizing of existing printed works and adding a few images. The Canadian encyclopedia is a good example of this.¹³ Few projects have started from scratch to think about how a web encyclopedia should work. In a sense we have had to pioneer an appropriate language and style of communication. The closest models we have had have been the television sites such as BBC online or the Public Broadcasting Service site from the United States.¹⁴ So far we have devised the following system. Each entry will have a home page, where the subject is evoked visually with perhaps a few lines of enticing text, and where users will find a map of the entry. This map will allow different audiences to choose their own routes through the material. One route, available at the click of the mouse, will be aimed at the primary school audience, although others may well find it useful. This will be the 'nutshell' option (working name) where users will find a lively simple summary of the entry with selected images. Another obvious option, if we can find the financial support necessary, will be for Maori audiences, who will be able to access a full version of the entry in te reo. The ability to toggle between the English language and Maori language versions of an entry should provide a valuable tool for the teaching of te reo.

The main entry will be targeted at the secondary school and family audience, and will be divided into smaller units, called sub-entries, of no more than 500 words — enough to fit on a screen. Both the home page and each sub-entry page will include a tree of all the other sub-entries in the full entry, so that users can locate themselves and decide what parts they wish to read. The language in these sub-entries will be clear and free of technical jargon, comprehensible to an intelligent and literate 15 year old. Alongside the sub-entry text will be the relevant resources. A screen of 500 words might be accompanied by two images, one sound file and a graphic or moving image. There will also be links to relevant biographies and McLintock articles. In addition, alongside the main text will sit the occasional 'topic boxes', short 'gobbets' of material on particular themes such as relevant New Zealand words or appropriate whakataukī. The text will be printable for those who do not want to read it on a screen. For those

who prefer visual communication, there will a different trail from the home page. They will be able to take a tour through the resources. In this option, the various multi-media elements in the full entry will be accessed in sequence and the short captions accompanying the resources will provide a succinct summary of the entry. If users taking this resource trail become interested in a particular subject, then they will be able to click to the full text. International users will find their needs catered for with a glossary and maps of places mentioned.

The scholar and researcher can go further. Each entry's text will include scholarly footnotes, and, either accessible from the home page or at the end of the text, there will be a list of up to six items of suggested readings and up to five relevant and high quality websites. In addition the resources attached to the entry may include primary documents or databases that will provide further information for the scholar. In other words we are hoping that each entry will provide further pathways into the wider research community. The scholar will also find the search options of huge assistance. We intend that this searching function should include McLintock and the eDNZB as well as all the elements of the new encyclopedia. In sum, we have been trying to devise a design that is both reasonably simple to prepare and rich in navigational choices for the user.

Turning from how the encyclopedia will be presented to the issue of what is to be presented, decisions are still somewhat tentative. Our planning at this point assumes that there will be about 1000 entries that will include all aspects of New Zealand: 'a comprehensive guide to the natural environment, history, culture, economics, institutions, peoples and social development of this country', as the budget bid put it. As already noted, we are intending to organize the material into eight themes, one prepared each year. A number of principles have determined our thinking about the themes. The first is that there will be no separate Maori theme. Rather, Maori material will be included within all the themes and a Maori team will be present throughout the project. The reason for this decision is a sense that we did not want to isolate the Maori content; and that by having a Maori team throughout the project the major issue of engagement between the two peoples and the shared histories of Maori and Pakeha, which are so easily ignored in such projects should be fully included.¹⁵ A second working principle, perhaps rather more questionable, has been that the natural history of the country should be prepared alongside the story of the human interaction with that environment. The thinking here is that it is important to see that the way people have treated the environment has had significant effects on that environment. It also points up the extent to which understandings of the environment are culturally determined. Thus the story of the geology of the country will sit alongside entries about gold-mining and oil exploration. Entries about kiwis will sit beside an entry about the use of natural icons as symbols of national identity. A third principle is that the gazetteer function of an encyclopedia will be contained within a regional theme that will be prepared alongside the preparation of the main entries. The idea here is that the country will be divided into 20 regions, each with an entry prepared sequentially over the first five years of the project. These regional entries will provide a guide to the natural history, economy, culture and peoples of the region and an introduction to the main natural features. In addition it is our intention at this point to take

about 20 places in each region that illustrate broader national themes and to cover these sites in more depth. Thus for example the Northland region may include a larger exhibition about Waipoua forest with links to entries about kauri trees and gum-digging. The intention is both to provide a depth of geographical detail to supplement the major entries, in the same way as the biographies enrich the entries from a human perspective; and also to encourage people to visit these places, making the learning experiential. Finally, a general principle has been that the sequence of themes should be relatively obvious and easy to organize and be able to accommodate the need to bring discipline-based specialists into the project.

At this point we have decided to begin with a relatively short theme on the peoples of New Zealand. This will allow us to trial our systems and to provide a mihi to everyone in the country as the encyclopedia begins its long journey. There will be entries about the major immigrant groups of the country alongside those on the iwi of New Zealand; and essays giving the context such as on immigration policy. From there it seems likely that we will move on to examine several themes covering the natural environment and people's relations with that environment. Later will come themes on society, economy and government, before we conclude with examining the popular culture and creative life of New Zealand.

This is indeed the beginning of a long and exciting journey. To achieve it we will be dependent upon engaging and enthusing the scholarly community of the country. The entries will be done partly in-house by a team of writers and partly by scholars in universities and in the community. Theirs is a difficult but exciting challenge since we will be encouraging them to write an up-to-date scholarly text, and also to suggest suitable images, oral histories and other resources that might add value to the text. In-house, we will also have a team to check, edit and translate and a group who will work closely with libraries, archives and other repositories to obtain digitized resources. One spin-off of the project is the hope that it will encourage such repositories to begin digitizing their own collections, and our particular hope is that they might give priority to those subjects that we are covering in any one year.

Of course it is easy to lay out a vision and raise expectations. The challenge is in the delivery; and we fully expect that along the way there will be compromises and disappointments. If we achieve 80% of the vision laid out here, the online encyclopedia of New Zealand, or Te Ara (the pathway) to give it the Maori name, will make as much difference to the intellectual life of this country as have its illustrious predecessors McLintock's *Encyclopedia*, Oliver and Orange's *Dictionary* and McKinnon's *Historical Atlas*.

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NOTES

1 A.H. McLintock, ed., *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, 3 vols, Wellington, 1966. The word 'encyclopedia' can either be spelt with 'ae' or with 'e'. We have chosen to use the 'e' form, partly to distinguish the new work from McLintock.

2 Ian Wards, 'Feasibility Study for a New Zealand Encyclopaedia', prepared for Government Printer, 1983, p.57

3 Gordon McLauchlan, ed., *Bateman New Zealand Encyclopedia*, Auckland, 1984.

4 McLintock, *Encyclopaedia*, II, p.476.

5 Figures from Michael O'Malley and Roy Rosenzweig, 'Brave New World or Blind Alley? American History on the World Wide Web', *Journal of American History*, 84, 1 (1997), p.133.

6 Gertrude Himmelfarb, 'A Neo-Luddite Reflects on the Internet', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 November 1996, p.156.

7 <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ammemhome.html>

8 <http://moa.umdl.umich.edu/>

9 <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/>

10 <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/index.html>

11 <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/dnzb/>

12 <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/Gallery/royal-tour/record-memory.htm>

13 <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com>

14 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/>; <http://www.pbs.org/neighborhoods/history/>

15 Te Papa's permanent exhibits are good examples of public histories where the engagement and shared histories of Maori and Pakeha get little coverage.