

Keith Sinclair, 1922-1993

KEITH SINCLAIR died on 20 June 1993. He was the founding editor of the *New Zealand Journal of History* in 1967, and he remained its editor for twenty years. In the April 1987 issue of the Journal, on the occasion of his retirement, we published a festschrift in his honour. The essays written at that time reflected the extensive range of his historical abilities, for they were all chosen to represent areas of historical analysis in which he had been personally involved, as well as providing an opportunity for colleagues and former students to express their affection and respect for him. Keith continued to write after his retirement, and his last major historical work, *Kinds of Peace, Maori People after the Wars, 1870-1885*, was published in 1991.

This issue of the *Journal* is devoted to women's history. It is not inappropriate that we include within it the obituaries for Keith, for he was a woman's man too. It was he who ensured that women were appointed as historians at Auckland University, long before it became an issue of equity at that institution. It was he who ensured that women run the *New Zealand Journal of History*, along with the men, as co-equals. This issue is edited by his wife. It seems therefore, while it is a sad occasion, also proper that Keith be here too.

JUDITH BINNEY
M.P.K. SORRENSON

There is a kowhai in the blood,
Which knows no autumn where it thrives,
An image in the garden we design,
And live with our reality inside.

Waitara, 1948

KEITH SINCLAIR

The following obituaries are adapted from two of the speeches given at the commemoration service for Keith Sinclair held at the University of Auckland, 2 July 1993.

KEITH SINCLAIR never taught me, but I learnt a lot from him. Paradox in many ways defined him. He made an art form of indiscretion; yet could be the soul of discretion. He decided. He could be brutally frank; yet he could cry unashamedly when reading a poem. In all of his many moods and modes his zest, energy, curiosity, and honesty stood out. He brought the same characteristics to his writing and teaching. It has been said that he wanted always to be the best, but that is hard to believe of someone who took up boxing, poetry, and history, fields in which the claim to be the best can at best only be true for a moment, in one weight class. Nobody can doubt, however, his unflinching desire and determination to do his best.

Keith also brought to his work — indeed it made his work possible and shaped his vision — a great ambition for himself, New Zealand, and especially the literature and history of New Zealand. That ambition, forged at a young age, had him playing a large part in destroying the pervasive belief in New Zealand's inferiority, which crippled so many of this country's intellectuals during his youth. In his life and writing he largely fulfilled that ambition. His marvellous certainty about himself and his identity helped him. 'I had a clear idea', he wrote in his autobiography, 'of who I was and of my goals, over a wide range of issues, by the time I was twenty.' He was a man of his time and place, obviously, but accepted these limits with comfort and delight. I remember him, for instance, being berated by a 'young Turk' at a New Zealand Historical Association Conference for having written a history of New Zealand without mentioning Colin Meads. Although everyone was somewhat the worse for alcoholic wear, he bore this with great good humour, refused to respond — except by encouraging his critic to write his own history. That inner belief in himself, those marvellous sea legs which allowed him to walk steady in any context and be himself, we doubtless owe not only to the mudflats of Point Chevalier but to his parents.

He completed his first degree while serving in the Navy and commenced his MA on a topic in New Zealand history when he found himself in London on leave in 1945. His PhD followed. Published as *The Origins of the Maori Wars* it, despite its title, transformed the wars and helped to free the tangata whenua from an oppressive Pakeha stereotype. Two years after *The Origins* he published *A Short History of New Zealand*. It is hard now to realise the importance of these two books. The prose alone is astonishing. Whenever I go back to either to see what he then thought, I feel a headache coming on, like Owen Marshall's 'Supper Waltz Wilson' (although the gleaming white thighs of a young girl produced Wilson's headache). I trust that nobody will take offence for I thought Keith

would have liked the metaphor as much as the compliment. Not the prose alone, however, for the content transforms these works into classics. Maori became central to New Zealand after 1840; European settlement a minor key. His verdict on the great staples of the previous generation's historical view is not immediately apparent, because so utterly persuasive, but I once looked to see what he had done with the old organizing themes: the sealers and whalers got a short paragraph; the gold miners and their rushes a handful of lines; the runholders scarcely a mention (until they had become a 'pest').

His historiographical impact proved to be decisive, even if some South Island historians grumbled about the Auckland viewpoint. He appeared at a time and with an agenda which allowed him not only to create an historiographical revolution but to create New Zealand history as a legitimate field of study. The next generation simply assumed that it was normal to study New Zealand history. Even when they took his advice — advice he did not take himself — and went abroad to do PhDs, they often looked at the world through distinctively New Zealand eyes. As Paul Bourke once noted, America seemed to be full of New Zealanders trying to explain why that great nation lacked its own version of the New Zealand Labour party! He attracted students, and the brighter they were the better he liked them, especially if they would debate and argue. The mealy-mouthed he could not stand. It was part of our debt to the mudflats, for he not only helped create and people a field of study, our own history, but forged a distinctively 'mudflats' style of academic leadership. This may have been less clear to those who saw him each day than to those southerners who nervously disdained what they called his 'larrikin style'. This is not the place to characterize that style, but it had great appeal to some younger academics as an indigenous foil to the stultifying gentility of some popular imported styles. Not that Keith was ever the prisoner of a style, even a style which he had helped to create. One has but to remember his remarkable ability to listen best when he shouted loudest to realize that.

And book followed book (not to mention the essays and articles and the arduous task of editing the *New Zealand Journal of History*). Despite this rich harvest of scholarship and leadership he also played an active role in the life of any community he belonged to, for he had none of the scholarly recluse about him. His history grew out of his enthusiasm for life, not out of any nostalgia for the past. And so did his political commitments. I only observed these from a distance but his long-standing interest in New Zealand's foreign policy and international relations reflected his nationalism. The New Zealand government's decision to support the United States in the Vietnam war saw him assume a prominent public role which led to his candidacy for Eden in 1969. He showed a remarkable capacity for winning publicity for himself. One can only recall his brother Jack's anecdote: when 'flu attacked the Sinclair children, Jack got a lemon drink — but Keith got deliriums! But he worked to be the centre of

attention, to have deliriums when others got lemon drinks: he was trenchant, blunt, colourful, and could be outrageous (if he thought it would help). Like most of his colleagues I am grateful that he joined that select club expelled from Eden, for it spared him to write five more history books (not counting his autobiography), to edit two others, and to continue editing the *Journal*. Besides, he continued to give himself generously to many professional bodies, to his Department and University, and to younger scholars.

We are what we are in part because he lived and gave so much, and we stand upright more easily because he knew himself so surely, lived flat-out, and unashamedly remained a boy from the Point Chev. mudflats. He showed that such boys could be themselves, pursue excellence, and achieve it. Clio was kind to us when she captured Keith.

ERIK OLSSSEN

University of Otago

I SUPPOSE I am not the only one who picked up Keith Sinclair's autobiography and leafed through it with just a little anxiety. For he and I, and again I am sure I am not alone in this, had differed, sometimes seriously, over this and that from time to time, and he was not one to take such matters lightly. In the event, in the book and in general all proved to be well, or mostly well. (There are one or two details I would correct, or at least supplement, if ever the time came to write a similar book!)

The news of Keith's death was a shock to very many people. He had been around for so long and if, seen from a little distance and at increasing intervals, there were signs of frailty now and then, they did not seem to be signs of age and decline. His writings, for certain, were as vigorous as ever; the idea that this energetic voice had fallen silent was as hard to accept as to avoid. His friends will have their own reasons for their grieving; it is likely that these reasons will cohere around the experience of enjoyment, of pleasure and often delight in that emphatic personality — his impulsiveness, his warmth, his generosity and, it must be added, his abruptness, his impatience and even his dismissiveness. I have found myself recalling a perhaps trivial but perhaps revealing trait: his mounting impatience at Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Policy Committee meetings as some of its members droned on and the time for catching the early plane to Auckland drew near and sometimes, to his manifest displeasure, passed by.

Our relationship goes back to the 1950s, to the time when I was living in Christchurch and we exchanged houses in the summer, he to look up Reeves and I to read Auckland New Zealand history theses having, perhaps unwisely, allowed myself to get high-jacked into the job of writing a short history —

'Shist', as he called the genre. But in later years we were chiefly connected through the *Dictionary*. He had advocated a new biographical dictionary for many years before the project was set up in 1983. I think it was in some measure thanks to his advocacy that the project immediately gained the support of the country's historical profession.

He was, very properly, a foundation member of the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Policy Committee. That committee, thanks to governmental delays, did not get going until the best part of a year after the work began. Keith was, I think, a little irritated that this lapse of time allowed me to get the main lines of policy and organization well in place before the committee met. But it was also perfectly clear that in my place he would have done exactly the same. On the committee and elsewhere he was unflinching in his support, especially of the efforts we made to enhance the representation of Maori and of women. I remember him saying, with that great capacity he had to cut through abstraction with a concrete example, that though he would not expect the *Dictionary* to include every male nineteenth-century high school principal, he did expect to find every female one. Others could elaborately justify this kind of positive discrimination; he simply said, 'Do it'.

But though he was a constant friend to the *Dictionary*, he was not a wholly uncritical one. As a contributor, he did not care for editors 'improving' his prose, but he was not alone in that. His essay on George Grey in volume I was either the first or the second received in the office (the evidence, as is often the case with such claims, is inconclusive); what may well have been the last piece he wrote for publication was an essay for volume III received shortly before he left for North America.

Though Keith's death would have been the sharpest for those who had lived with him day by day, week by week, year by year, in many cases since early childhood, it was also severe for those who had mostly known him on the town in Wellington and places further south, in libraries and pubs, at conferences and on committees. Much as he was a quintessential Auckland, he was also a bona fide New Zealander, one of the self-awarely 'native born', and not just ideologically. Certainly in Wellington, and I am sure in other places, when the news broke a rich store of memories rose to the surface and a host of stories were recalled. One of the pleasures of reading the autobiography is catching up on a number of these, and sometimes noting how they differ from and have improved upon earlier versions.

When the first shock was over there came, at least to me, a feeling that there had, after all, been an element of 'rounding off', not at all to be welcomed but rather to be accepted. Keith in fact retired twice, from the University some years ago, and more recently from his Wellington network of public bodies, the National Library, the Book Council, the 1990 Commission and the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Then his writing appears to have taken over again

— his last academic work, his selected poems and his autobiography. These three books, *Kinds of Peace*, *Moontalk* and *Halfway round the Harbour*, appeared fairly close together and brought, at least in retrospect, a feeling of fulfilment with them. They sum him up pretty well — the academic, the poet and the story teller. You can hear his personal voice in all of them, that rapid irregular flow, like clear water over stones, all in a bit of a hurry, a characteristic music. They take you back to the man talking, to the aural signature.

This is his mark as a writer; the conventional distinction between kinds of writing is here much more apparent than real. It makes nonsense of the all too pervasive distinction between ‘creative’ and ‘non-creative’ writing. Keith Sinclair, the writer, has left three works which are already New Zealand classics — *The Origins of the Maori Wars*, *A History of New Zealand* and *William Pember Reeves* — as well as a handful of poems which will go on from anthology to anthology. They are all very much of a piece.

A youthful journalist who phoned me for copy when Keith died had not done much homework. ‘Was Sir Keith Sinclair’, he asked, ‘important as an *historian*?’ The question was so unexpected that I answered without thinking: ‘He *made* New Zealand history’. Of course I did not mean that quite literally; many others had a hand in it, and many of them benefited from his encouragement. Often (perhaps especially) some whose direction was quite unlike his own. Still, the statement may stand. Keith’s published writings go back to the 1950s and his last appeared in the 1990s. For 40 years he was constantly engaged with the past of his country, in monograph, general history, review and commentary, story and verse. In at least two senses of the word, history would not be quite the same again.

W.H. OLIVER

Wellington

KEITH SINCLAIR MEMORIAL TRUST FUND

This Trust Fund has been established by the family of Keith Sinclair and the Department of History at the University of Auckland. It will be used to support graduate students researching in New Zealand history. Donations from Keith’s friends, students and readers are invited and can be forwarded to the Administrative Assistant, Department of History, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand. All donations will be acknowledged.