

The Making of New Zealanders

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Author:

Ron Palenski

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Jim McAloon

Ron Palenski has long been recognised in New Zealand as one of this country's more astute sporting journalists. *The Making of New Zealanders* is based on his recent doctoral thesis, and it is pleasing to see that large topics can be dealt with in the context of a PhD. Nor is Dr Palenski afraid to nail his colours to the mast; against a new anti-nationalist orthodoxy within New Zealand historiography – an orthodoxy which shaped the *New Oxford History of New Zealand* even if it was not shared by all the contributors to that volume – Palenski argues at length that the nation, and national identity, mean something and have done so in New Zealand since well before 1900.⁽¹⁾ Whereas previous studies have, he says, argued that episodes like military participation in the South African War (1899–1902) and the All Blacks tour of the British Isles in 1905 established a New Zealand identity, Palenski's argument is that they simply reflected an identity that was already well defined.

What, then, does Palenski suggest shaped a national identity? Four chapters deal with key (the key?) influences. They are the adoption of a New Zealand standard time in 1868, the rapid improvement in communications which made a national news media possible, the proliferation of symbols both tangible (particularly landscape, flora and fauna) and intangible (particularly Thomas Bracken's hymn 'God Defend New Zealand', which is now a national anthem), and distinctive political arrangements. By the 1890s, then, a distinctive New Zealand identity meant that there was never any likelihood this colony would join the Commonwealth of Australia, and the young nation expressed its identity in sporting and martial endeavour. Because Palenski holds that the national identity was clearly established by 1900 he, mercifully, avoids any exposition of the clichés (still reliably trotted out every April 25) about a nation being born at Gallipoli.

Summarised thus, I find Palenski's argument persuasive. My criticisms of his book are not of the core

argument but of much of the detail in it – and I think it unfortunate that he has spent a good deal of space discussing sport, particularly rugby, and the South African War in chapters that traverse too much already familiar ground. The opportunity to explore in real depth what national identity meant for women, for Maori, for workers is therefore often missed.

The importance of a single time-zone is something I need to think about a bit more. A uniform time-zone, in New Zealand as elsewhere, became necessary because of the technological developments of the mid-19th century, particularly rail and telegraph. The importance of trains running on an agreed clock is evident, but is it more than a matter of convenience? Australia, after all, has more than one time zone and that did not prevent federation and the recitation of themes of national identity there. It's plausible to suggest that being the first jurisdiction to do it conveyed a sense of modernity which is a component of the stories New Zealanders like to tell about themselves but what is not pointed out is the circumstance of these islands lying north-south (what would be the consequence of an east-west orientation?) Perhaps a more modest argument, that a time zone was part of the communications revolution, would be as plausible.

Palenski's arguments about the development of a national news media during the 1870s are much better made. The telegraph made it easy to circulate news about New Zealand within New Zealand, so that newspapers ceased to concentrate on the parochial and the British. High degrees of literacy were also important, and newspapers (particularly weeklies) were a vehicle for an emerging national literature until 1914, for all that much of what was printed was derivative and trod well-worn themes (themes, too, which would not always have been foreign to the Sydney literati who mythologised the Australian Bush in the *Bulletin*).

The symbols of nationhood, as Palenski reminds us, are important in making people a nation when they identify with common symbols. The common symbols of identity which Palenski identifies as important include Bracken's aforementioned 'God Defend New Zealand', around which a consensus developed fairly rapidly. As anthems go, it's not too bad in its sentiments, although it was not until 1977 that it became officially recognised as a national anthem (God Save The Queen is still the other one) so perhaps the case for a subordinate nationalism could still be made – as it could around flags as well. Palenski suggests that the early enthusiasm for a flag like the current one demonstrates a healthy sense of national identity; it could equally be argued that the persistence of the Union Jack in the corner demonstrates the reverse. Other unofficial symbolism emphasised landscape, flora and fauna, and a number of environmental historians like Thomas Dunlap have demonstrated how shaping national identity around the indigenous biogeography is common ground to a number of settler societies.⁽²⁾ Adopting Maori symbols and motifs was also commonly done before 1900, and postcolonial scholars like Gibbons have been severely critical of the cultural appropriation inherent, as they say, both in identifying with the landscape and in adopting indigenous symbols.⁽³⁾ I regard Gibbons' arguments as well overdone but there is some merit in the point. Indigenous symbolism could be thoughtlessly and carelessly adopted. Palenski might sensibly have distinguished between landscape/flora/fauna and indigenous images or artefacts. Tourism promotion was of course closely related to this symbolism in the natural and cultural (i.e. Maori) landscape. Domestic tourism is perhaps the underrated bit of the story, for domestic tourists, one imagines, reinforced their sense of themselves as New Zealanders through gazing on well-known scenes.

The discussion of New Zealand exceptionalism is also wide-ranging. Much of the discussion deals with political arrangements; from 1876 a strong central state supplanted provincial governments and was often regarded as the result of a New Zealand identity which had supplanted provincial or old-world identities. One of the first acts of the new central state was to legislate for a national system of education, 'free, secular and compulsory' at primary level. If this inculcated national identity, as Palenski argues, what were the component parts of that? What was the national identity inculcated in schoolchildren?

While I'm readily persuaded that the idea of New Zealand as a reformist state was significant in New Zealanders' views of themselves, we must remember that Pember Reeves, Albert Metin, and others who extolled the virtues of antipodean reformism usually emphasised the Australasian story, not the New Zealand alone. Palenski is right to emphasise the often-forgotten insistence of the early 1890s Liberal

premier, John Ballance, that the appointed Governor must act on ministerial advice as a key moment in national independence – and it is also significant that the Colonial Office in London upheld Ballance.

The connection with progressive reform is not just in the rather complacent representations of Pember Reeves, which became a conservative orthodoxy. Sometimes a radical edge was evident, as when John Ballance declared that

our policy should be formed and matured to suit the interests of the people in New Zealand and of the people who will not leave New Zealand ... we should make New Zealand a place for New Zealanders to live in ... I care little for the mere capitalist. I care not if dozens of large land-owners leave the country ... the prosperity of the colony does not depend upon those classes. It depends upon ourselves, upon the rise of our industries, and upon markets being secured in other countries.⁽⁴⁾

If settler ideology did and does too easily become self-congratulatory about the alleged excellence of ‘race relations’ in New Zealand, Palenski is correct to emphasise the significance of guaranteed Maori representation in the settler parliament from 1867 (albeit in numbers less than the population would have justified). His discussion of the South African war highlights the strongly expressed desire of some Maori to take part (a suggestion vetoed by the Colonial Office). The New Zealand government’s desire to accommodate these wishes, says Palenski, indicated the extent to which Maori were ‘absorbed and embraced’ in the national identity. This of course was very selective and partial; Maori were ‘absorbed and embraced’ if they did what settlers wanted them to do, and were denigrated as backward, superstitious obstacles to progress if they expressed a continuing desire for autonomy. The same Premier Seddon who championed Maori participation in that war sent gunboats to enforce a dog tax against northern Maori communities. Further, of course, while Maori were ‘absorbed and embraced’ at least on certain conditions, it’s at least arguable that the odious anti-Chinese rhetoric deployed by many good Liberals was, as has forcefully been argued in the Australian context, a key component of the emerging New Zealand identity. National identity may be inclusive, but it may define by exclusion. Damon Salesa has recently gone further and argued that Pacific imperialism – annexing the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, and, in 1914, Western Samoa – was also integral to the New Zealand national story, and cannot be relegated to a footnote.

Although Palenski’s argument is that national identity was only reflected, not created, in the South African war and in sporting endeavours like the 1887 Natives and the 1905 All Blacks, three chapters are devoted to what are largely familiar accounts of these matters. This is unfortunate for an inattentive reader could think that Palenski has little new to say. It is the more unfortunate because there is a great deal more on which some new thinking is urgently required. Rugby and war are, as Jock Phillips argued long ago, key elements of a New Zealand masculinity and if national identity is to be thought of in fresh ways then we need to move beyond those old standards. Although Palenski gives some attention to New Zealand nurses in South Africa, it is largely in terms of the expressed desire of New Zealand soldiers to be cared for by ‘their own’. Palenski’s national identity is a male affair, and it is not sufficient to note that men, and white men at that, dominated the society. I’m afraid that this masculinized identity is quite explicit, as when Palenski observes that the war ‘consolidated a feeling of national identity for New Zealanders. It showed in their ability as soldiers...’ Moreover, the ‘distinctive New Zealand identity that had been coalescing for thirty or more years was given full rein on the veld of South Africa’ (p. 237).

How then did women identify with ‘New Zealand’? Did universal suffrage, won in 1893, mean that women, as well as men, celebrated progressive reform as part of their New Zealand identity? Women were far from invisible in the labour agitations of the late 1880s; male trade unionists appealed to a rhetoric of avoiding ‘old world evils’ in their fight for better working conditions. So did female activists. How did this relate to a developing national identity? It is often and plausibly suggested that some middle-class women found the rigors of colonial farm life liberating, for women became economically useful in a way they could not have been in English circumstances.⁽⁵⁾ Did this mean that usefulness contributed to women’s sense of

themselves as New Zealanders? Most of Palenski's discussion of sport is of male sport; it is clear that girls and women involved themselves in sport to a considerable extent and I would have wished for some innovative thinking on the relationship between sport and identity for women.

It is easy enough to identify 'loyalist' Maori rhetoric of adherence to crown and empire – particularly among the parliamentarians and leaders of certain tribes – but that is far from the whole story. Other Maori leaders were far from enthusiastic about the settler state and actively resisted involvement in the First World War. Much depended on the experience of particular tribal groups. Apirana Ngata was a leading exponent of crown and empire, and Te Puea Herangi was at best suspicious of the settler state. When Ngata encouraged Maori to volunteer in the First World War, Te Puea actively advocated resistance to conscription; the Empire's confiscation of her people's land was within living memory.⁽⁶⁾ Te Puea's perspective is the perspective of too many Maori for me to feel confident that Palenski's national identity was widely shared by Maori. Even among white settlers and their native-born children, the meanings of 'New Zealand' were contested, and increasingly so after 1900. In 1909–10 the Liberal government became considerably more militaristic, donating a Dreadnought to the Royal Navy and then imposing peacetime conscription. For the supporters of such measures, and there were many, this reflected an understanding of New Zealand in the empire; the increasingly vocal anti-militarist movement, which was based in the radical trade unions, objected to the government's measures precisely because they conceived of New Zealand as independent, anti-imperialist, and, as we would now say, non-aligned. Palenski's national identity is consensual, and to that extent a rather partial view. There is, then, much to be said about national identity in New Zealand, and Dr Palenski's clear exposition of his argument is to be welcomed. As he says in his conclusion, people do live in a country and are of it for good or ill. What that means, however, can be very contentious.

Notes

1. *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. Giselle Byrnes (Melbourne, 2009).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Thomas R. Dunlap, *Nature and the English Diaspora: Environment and History in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (Cambridge, 1999).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Peter Gibbons, 'Cultural colonization and national identity', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 36, 1 (2002), 5–17.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, 73, 1891, 372–3.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See, for instance, Raewyn Dalziel, 'The colonial helpmeet: women's role and the vote in nineteenth-century New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 11, 2, 1977, 112–23. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. M. P. K. Sorrenson. 'Ngata, Apirana Turupa - biography', from the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/3n5/1> [2]> [accessed 22 September 2012]. Ann Parsonson. 'Herangi, Te Kirihaehae Te Puea - biography', from the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/3h17/1> [3]> [accessed 22 September 2012].[Back to \(6\)](#)

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[5] <http://craccum.ausa.auckland.ac.nz/?p=1740>