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Keith Sinclair and the History of Humanitarianism*

IN 1968 KEITH SINCLAIR was studying at St John's College, Cambridge University,[1] where he presented a paper that was later published under the title, 'Why are Race Relations in New Zealand Better than in South Africa, South Australia or South Dakota?'.[2] Sinclair took it for granted that the statement implied in the question was correct. While he understood that race relations were not perfect – the high preponderance of Māori in negative statistics was evidence enough of that – he believed they were demonstrably better than elsewhere because there was 'no apartheid, no social colour bar, no segregation in public transport or in living areas' in New Zealand and no difference in pay for Māori or Pākehā. There was also a high degree of intermarriage and 'relatively little social prejudice against Maoris and even less open expression of prejudice'.[3]

The reason for New Zealand's exceptionalism lay, according to Sinclair, in British 'attitudes at the time New Zealand was annexed'. Specifically, it lay in the 'humanitarian imperial ideology' that then governed official British thinking. Humanitarianism had emerged as a force at the end of the eighteenth century driven by what was a renewed Christianity and a determination to see British society and the empire as a whole governed by moral politics. It was based in particular on the Christian belief in equality – that God 'hath made of one blood all nations of men' – and by the 1830s its greatest success was the abolition of the slave trade and the establishment of missions. Humanitarians then turned to the issue of how best to protect aborigines in the empire, and what they sought to achieve in New Zealand in 1840 was something Sinclair believed to be exceptional at the time: a bicultural society based on an equality of rights for both peoples. While Sinclair understood that this vision was never properly fulfilled, he nonetheless believed that it had continued to influence New Zealand society down to his present. It was for this reason, he concluded, 'as an act symbolic of this new spirit in race relations', 'that the Treaty of Waitangi merits the importance traditionally attached to it by New Zealanders'.[4]

Sinclair was certainly well qualified to be considering such a question in 1968. He was not only New Zealand's leading historian at the time but also the only historian to have assessed British humanitarianism and its impact on New Zealand history in any detail.[5] Most of that research had been undertaken for his 1946 Master's thesis that examined the Aborigines Protection Society and upon which he relied in his later and widely acclaimed, *The Origin of the Maori Wars* (1957). Cambridge University was also an appropriate venue for

Sinclair to be considering such a question. Not only was it then dominated by the so-called 'Cambridge School' of historians with its emphasis on ideas as constituent elements of history, but the university had also been a crucial source of the very people and theology that had fuelled nineteenth-century humanitarian thinking (and the earlier anti-slavery movement and missionary societies), with many of the most influential men in New Zealand attending Cambridge, including George Selwyn, William Martin and Charles Abraham.

It was also an appropriate time for Sinclair to consider such a question. In 1968 the first work in what was to become a new orthodoxy in New Zealand historiography was published: Ian Wards's *The Shadow of the Land*. Wards's work was a highly empirical analysis of the historical documents surrounding the making of the Treaty that departed from all former histories in its interpretation of New Zealand's early origins. As Judith Binney wrote in a review of the work at the time, Wards presented what was 'a radical reinterpretation of the intentions embodied in the Treaty of Waitangi', arguing that, by the time the Treaty was drafted, it was 'nothing more than a legal device to acquire sovereignty, its guarantees simply an "accident" of drafting' – a 'last-minute solution to the legal problem of arranging the cession' and 'cheaper than distributing gifts'[6]: 'There was no matter of moral principle, no pledge for the future'; humanitarian concern for the welfare of native peoples was in the end 'no more than flirtation'.[7]

The work began as a military history and, according to Binney, Wards wrote with the conviction that these military origins gave him an insight or 'realism previously unknown among historians of early New Zealand'. 'Freed from the "quixotic" visions of those who found in the decisions of the Colonial Office an attempt to create "some other Eden"',[8] Wards sought to prove that New Zealand was 'no exception to the normal nineteenth century British pattern of territorial acquisition' – that there was no experiment in 'practical idealism', no attempt to create a harmonious bi-racial society. What had once been seen by historians such as William Pember Reeves as a 'new and noble beginning in British colonial policy' was now portrayed by Wards as little more than political expediency.

Binney for one did not agree, but many historians were to. Indeed, the work was to find a ready audience, coinciding as it did with what was a broader postcolonial movement that was becoming increasingly militant both internationally and in New Zealand by the later 1960s. In tandem with the process of decolonization then occurring, and particularly with the dismantling of the British Empire in Africa, the impact of colonization and the role of religion in its expansion were rapidly being revised, and by the later 1960s

that process had entered what Brian Stanley described as an 'increasingly polarized and highly charged ideological context'.[9] As anti-colonial reaction set in and as newly formed nationalist governments began voicing increasingly bitter criticism of colonialism, Europeans were 'exposed as agents of cultural assimilation and oppression'[10] and the missionary movement in particular was seen as 'the ideological expression of the total imperialist aggression of the West'. The notion that 'the bible and the flag went hand in hand' quickly became established 'as one of the unquestioned orthodoxies of general historical knowledge',[11] as stereotypes of the Victorian missionary abounded: superior, paternalistic and puritanical, they were now targeted as the agents of imperialism and destroyers of indigenous culture. Binney certainly described them as such in her 1967, *The Legacy of Guilt*. Focused on the disgraced missionary Thomas Kendall, the work provided her with a case study with which to systematically pull apart not only the man but also the mission and religion to which he belonged. Just as Kendall was afflicted by the 'fearful tension that Calvinism can create in a soul' – that a man dedicated to God is still 'unable to escape the general corruption of his kind' – so too were the missionaries generally afflicted by a central paradox in their mission: that in order to save the souls of Māori, they had to 'destroy their culture' and 'transform, indeed eradicate … the existing structure of Maori society'.[12]

International events of the time further added to a hardening of views and created a new awareness of race and discrimination. Nineteen sixty-eight was a watershed year internationally. It marked the height of the Vietnam War – widely perceived as an 'imperialist venture'[13] – and saw widespread radical protest over civil rights in the United States, Europe and throughout Africa, and the continuing struggle in South Africa for an end to apartheid. The international spread of anti-colonial and American Black Power ideologies that followed in the wake of these events re-formulated notions of racial discrimination and provided a new language with which to counter it. As elsewhere, groups and individuals within New Zealand responded with the formation of organizations such as CARE (Citizens Association for Racial Equality) and MOOHR (the Maori Organization On Human Rights).

Such events necessitated new historical perspectives. As the editor of *The Oxford History of the British Empire* commented at the time, historians around the world were engaged in an 'international stock-taking': 'Nations newly born are striving to find a national identity through searching the past. Societies not yet nations are using the anvil of their history to beat out their claims to a separate history. Old and powerful nations alike, with traditions already rich in historical knowledge, are experiencing everywhere an age of re-evaluation.'[14]

In continuing to assert the good intentions of British humanitarians, Sinclair knew himself to be out of step with this emerging historiography: 'To emphasize the influence of ideology, to stress the power of hope, may be unfashionable', he acknowledged. 'But', he insisted, 'in New Zealand it is hard to ignore.'[15] His insistence was notable. Renowned for his secularism,[16] he was in effect claiming a unique role for certain Christian beliefs in the history of New Zealand, and at the very time when those beliefs were being increasingly disregarded. Famous for his revisionism, he was also endorsing the view of an older generation of historians at the very time when they, too, were being increasingly dismissed. His conclusion was all the more surprising given Sinclair himself had always been highly critical of the humanitarian vision on which he was now placing so much historical importance.

Erik Olssen once said that 'paradox' defined Sinclair the person.[17] Perhaps history reflects its author, for while Sinclair now attributed New Zealand's exceptionalism to the humanitarian influence, he had previously derided humanitarians for being sentimental, emotive, intellectually shallow and politically conservative. As he stated in 1957, they were 'united in little but the belief that in the past colonisation had been a calamity for the native races and that it was Britain's especial mission to evangelise the backward peoples of the world, and to lead them to the blessings of Protestantism and western civilisation.'[18] But beyond this vague goal of protection, they could offer 'little else'. They had no plan of action, nor the understanding or indeed cultural appreciation required to properly protect and assist Māori. Any 'serious endeavor to benefit or protect primitive peoples, except in the case of converting them, required a more intellectual base',[19] he concluded. 'Official and missionary alike' also 'looked at primitive people through Christian eyes, and the measures which seemed most essential to them were terribly destructive of the heathen societies they meant to protect'.[20] What attempts were made by humanitarians to improve race relations were therefore inadequate and unsuccessful,[21] and 'left them working among ruins, trying to revive instead of to reform'[22] Māori society. Though laudable, their aim of combining imperialism with humanitarianism was therefore little more than an unachievable 'Utopian' experiment;[23] the 'failure of humanitarianism' being an ongoing theme in Sinclair's work and what he regarded as a key cause of the wars that followed in the 1860s.[24]

This highly critical view of humanitarianism sat uneasily with Sinclair's later claims as to its importance in New Zealand history. More significantly, it also sat uneasily with the evidence. While Sinclair stated humanitarian aims to be vague and limited to 'protection' – an 'implicitly negative'[25] goal – and focused largely on 'amalgamation', he had cited humanitarians at the time

as saying something quite different: that their aim was to secure 'for men of every race an equality of natural rights',[26] and that what they sought to create in New Zealand was no less than a 'biracial nation' based on a 'new, non-racial concept of empire'.[27] 'For the first time', observed Sinclair, '…Englishmen were looking at natives as an integral part of the imperial community'.[28] This was clearly something quite different from the goal of 'protection'. Nor did it equate to 'amalgamation' as he understood it. And while Sinclair criticized humanitarians for their political conservatism and asserted their talk of rights to be nothing more than a 'convenient weapon, divested of any radical implications',[29] he cited their opponents at the time deriding them for their 'radicalism' in seeking 'to covertly introduce democracy and some wild idea of universal equality'.[30] Indeed such was the radicalism of their views that humanitarians like Selwyn, Martin and Octavius Hadfield became embroiled in what Sinclair described as a 'war of ideas' over the future of the colony: whether New Zealand was to be a 'white man's colony', or whether it was to be a bi-racial community in which Māori were afforded equal rights and opportunities with Pākehā. The intellectual conflict this created split the European community in New Zealand and created what Sinclair described as a 'polemical, bitter and highly personal conflict' that was to continue in press, pamphlet and debate throughout the nineteenth century.[31] Yet Sinclair nonetheless concluded that the difference between these Europeans was less ideological and more 'between a longer and shorter view of the future of the colony'[32] given all sought the same thing: the 'amalgamation' of Māori into British society.

According to Stenhouse, this confusing portrayal of humanitarianism was a result of the 'ambivalence' Sinclair felt 'about the Christian tradition' and because the Christianity, Britishness and elitism that characterized many humanitarians 'symbolized much of what Sinclair, as a secular, left-liberal, egalitarian nationalist sought to liberate New Zealanders from'.[33] But while this might explain Sinclair's earlier criticism of humanitarians, it cannot explain his later regard. It also attributes much to Sinclair's personal views and agenda when what is perhaps more evident is the influence of the present on Sinclair's early writing, and particularly the research then emerging regarding humanitarianism and the impact of colonization on indigenous peoples.

It was the anthropologists who had led the way. From the 1930s Ivan Sutherland had become an outspoken critic of the policy of assimilation that had been pursued unofficially in New Zealand since the nineteenth century (and officially from 1952 to 1961). In 1940 he presented what was the first assessment of the 'Maori situation', relying on the latest developments in

'contemporary scientific opinion regarding the contacts of native peoples with civilization'.[34] The experience of the American Indians in particular was seen as 'strangely familiar' to other colonial arenas, the parallels 'numerous and striking'.[35] Such research helped to provide a new and 'general consensus of opinion' that stood 'in marked contrast to that existing in the last century': that the previous assumption of 'the intrinsic value of European civilization' to native peoples was erroneous.[36] The result had in fact been disastrous for native peoples everywhere – 'save to civilize some peoples into their graveyards, to leave others broken and diseased remnants'[37] – and Sutherland used those insights and their 'relevance to local questions'[38] to advocate on behalf of Māori. He especially sought to challenge what he described as the 'persistent tendency to idealize' race relations – the 'widespread belief, and it is one certainly cherished by the average white New Zealander, that no native people has ever been so fairly treated by Europeans as has the Maori people'.[39]

As the reality of colonialism for indigenous peoples became increasingly clear, so too did attention turn to its historical origins. By the time Sinclair began his research in 1946, humanitarianism was already under attack internationally for its use in justifying the colonial enterprise. Up until the 1930s there had been 'little doubt about the humanitarian aims of British imperial policy'.[40] That interpretation was challenged in 1945 – the year before Sinclair completed his research – with the publication of Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery*. Williams's work was a damning indictment on the good intentions of British abolitionists and the notion of British imperialism as a humanitarian and benevolent enterprise. An economic historian, Williams argued that slavery was abolished because it stood in the way of greater profits – that self-interest was the driver not Christian morality or any notion of justice. He based his assessment on what he stated to be rigorous empirical research – previous scholars having 'sacrificed scholarship to sentimentality'[41] – and went on to castigate humanitarians for their piety and hypocrisy, rejecting the idea that they were in any way 'radical' in their views or the 'valiant heroes' battling imperial racism that they were said to have been. According to Williams, that narrative of benevolence had merely served to justify ongoing oppression.[42]

Such arguments undoubtedly held much appeal to Sinclair as a young historian writing his first work. For academics of his generation, decolonization 'took the form of a deep dislike of the British Empire, its self-image and its propaganda, particularly as it related to the attitude towards "primitive" people as subjects of the Imperial Crown',[43] and Sinclair's writing certainly reflected that view. The argument also made sense because it provided a means of resolving what was a critical issue: how to explain the difference between the stated intentions of nineteenth-century humanitarians and the given outcomes

for aboriginal peoples. For Williams, the answer lay in economic self-interest and British hypocrisy. While Sinclair went on to liberally repeat his many criticisms, the issue for him always lay more with the humanitarians' colonial agents, the missionaries, and in their unthinking ethnocentrism and piety. As contemporary critic Charles Dickens had put it in 1865, missionaries were 'perfect nuisances who leave every place worse than they find it'.[44]

It was Sinclair who had, of course, inspired Judith Binney's critique of Kendall. As one of Sinclair's students, Binney took the title and broader inspiration for her book from a poem written by Sinclair about Kendall and published in 1952 under the title, 'Memorial to a Missionary'. According to Allen Curnow, it 'matched a historian's understanding with a poet's insight':[45]

> Father he left us a legacy of guilt
> Half that time owed us, who came from the north, was given:
> We know St Paul, but what in that dreaming hour,
> In that night when the ends of time were tied – and severed
> Again and so ever – did he learn from the south?
> He could not turn to teach his countrymen,
> And lost, (our sorrow), lost our birthright forever.[46]

At the heart of Sinclair's criticism was the missionary's inability to understand or see any value in Māori society and culture. Kendall could not understand 'That to reach for truth was to reach for God', and that God was '…immanent in the cannibals' beliefs'.[47] Like humanitarians generally, his piety and ethnocentrism created 'intellectual barriers'[48] that meant he could not learn 'from the south' nor 'turn to teach his countrymen'. He thereby lost New Zealand's bicultural 'birthright' and bequeathed instead a 'legacy of guilt'. It was a poetic rendition of the prevailing critiques advanced by Sutherland and other anthropologists, and Sinclair went on to repeat the argument in his published histories. As its basis was the essential conflict that recent research had revealed: while humanitarians had believed 'that to europeanise the Maoris would be a great blessing',[49] it had in fact proved deeply destructive, the evidence for which was then becoming everywhere apparent.

Like all great revisionists, Sinclair thus took the measure of society's interests at the time and combined it with the latest in academic research to produce what was a very modern exposition of New Zealand's history. He, in turn, became renowned for having 'transformed the [New Zealand] wars and freed the *tangata whenua* from an oppressive Pakeha stereotype',[50] but it came, in part, at the cost of employing what was an equally oppressive stereotype of British humanitarians. In using that stereotype, Sinclair also

created a number of contradictions with the evidence that, far from being intrinsic to humanitarianism itself, were the result of his own attempt to apply an argument that did not fit. It eventually also raised both for him and the anthropologists[51] what was a critical question: if this international critique of colonialism and humanitarianism was correct and had universal application, why did Māori receive treatment different from other indigenous peoples?[52] Why were race relations in New Zealand better than elsewhere? That was the question Sinclair was seeking to answer in 1968.

His answer lay in the very ideology he had long critiqued. It lay in the humanitarian vision of key British officials in 1840 and particularly those few 'educated men who held power and influence' in the colony, including Selwyn and Martin. As dissenters from the mainstream, not only were they different from the Europeans around them – 'from the "uneducated", and some of the educated, [who] spoke carelessly of "niggers"' and had little thought for Māori welfare. They were also the exceptions to the very stereotype Sinclair had previously drawn on and endorsed. While Sinclair still believed that their broader aim was to 'amalgamate' Māori with Pākehā, he now also believed that, in doing so, they sought something more than this – something that was unique at the time: a bicultural society in which the Christian principles of harmony and equality 'would prevail'.[53] To that end, they attempted what he described as a number of 'experiments in trying to improve racial relations in a colony': from 'the Treaty of Waitangi itself, to the Protectorate Department to Governor Grey's hospitals and subsidies to Maori schools'. While Sinclair understood such measures were 'inadequate and usually unsuccessful', it was what they represented that was important – what he described as 'a new and better attitude to aborigines'. 'Nor was their aim ever quite forgotten,' he stated, or those Christian ideals ever wholly ignored; the best evidence for which was, he believed, the later establishment of four Māori seats in Parliament 'and the granting of "one man one vote" to Maori some twenty years before the English'.[54] New Zealand's exceptionalism in race relations was thus attributable to the humanitarian ideology that informed the vision of these early leading men, and to its subsequent (albeit partial) acceptance by society.

While Sinclair had previously referred to some of the positive legacies of New Zealand's humanitarian origins, he had never before spoken of the 'experiments' that had actually been attempted by humanitarians to achieve their goal. Nor had he ever before expressed their goal and broader Christian vision with such sensitivity or indeed understanding. Like others, what he had consistently focused on and referred to was the 'failure of humanitarianism' and especially the 'destructive' consequences of the 'Christian eyes' through

which they viewed Māori.[55] He was now stressing the importance of those ‘evangelical attitudes’ in creating a vision of a truly bicultural society, and regarded those Christian ideals as being responsible for no less than the comparatively better treatment Māori had been afforded up to his present. What was once a legacy of guilt had become, for Sinclair, a legacy of exceptionalism.

That change in thinking was evident some few years earlier when Sinclair gave the 1963 Winter Lecture in which he examined contemporary New Zealand society and spoke of his concerns and hopes for its future. He spoke in that lecture of ‘visions’ – ‘our fathers’ visions, and my own’[56] – and of the importance of such ‘visions’ in shaping society. He referred, by way of example, to the legacy bequeathed by the Liberals and their vision of ‘greatness in a moral sense’ and of ‘a society which cared for all of its members’ and sought educational and social equality, and he spoke of how that vision or ‘moral ideal’ had made a small nation world renowned by 1900.[57] But he spoke also of the humanitarian vision of New Zealand’s early leaders and the ‘desire, which led the British Government to annex these islands, to achieve better racial relations here than had hitherto existed in the non-European world’,[58] and stated his belief that this ‘ideal of racial harmony’ had exerted an ‘immense and benevolent influence’ on the country: ‘before any other people we widened the concept of democracy to include non-Europeans’, he stated, referring to the granting of manhood suffrage to Māori in 1867. Though he believed ‘the ideal is, as yet, imperfectly achieved, it is achieved sufficiently to form our chief distinction’ and was still evident, he believed, in the policies then being implemented in the 1960s to improve the situation of Māori.[59]

But what Sinclair also illustrated in that lecture was something new: a greater respect for the Christian beliefs that had inspired that humanitarian ‘vision’. He now described Christianity as having been New Zealand’s ‘active philosophy’ and lamented the ‘simple materialism’ that he believed had ‘superseded’ it, declaring such materialism to be, most emphatically, ‘not enough’. New Zealand’s ‘concern for human welfare, once our glory, has gone soft,’ he lamented, ‘and become, only too often, a matter of comfort and not much more’.[60] It was as if the potentially beneficial influence of Christian ideals had – perhaps in their growing absence from society and Sinclair’s concerns for its future – finally revealed itself to him. He cited A.J.P. Taylor, ‘Men see the past when they peer into the future’, and perhaps in looking ‘backwards as well as forwards’[61] in that lecture he had seen what had previously been unseen: the bicultural legacy that New Zealand’s Christian origins had bequeathed. The greater social concern he exhibited in the 1960s

– his increasing role as a 'participant historian' like J.C. Beaglehole before him[62] – may well have encouraged that view or perhaps given him a new appreciation of what humanitarians had sought to achieve. He certainly now espoused a morality and ideology that was remarkably similar to that of the Christian humanitarians he had so consistently derided, both in the concern he showed for righting the past and preventing injustice in his present, and especially in his 'dream of a civilization based on equality, in the respects in which equality is valid, in educational, social, and economic opportunity; in legal and political rights'.[63] Perhaps, too, 'at the half century' of his life, with 'some belief ... perhaps self knowledge',[64] had come new insight, or at least an appreciation of what belief could offer: 'At times I'd like to say in my distress of spirit, "I who do not believe Lord, I believe".'[65] Whatever its cause, by 1968 Sinclair had also come to understand the importance of those Christian ideals to New Zealand's history, and perhaps not least because it was the only answer he could arrive at: the Christian vision of the early leading men was the only factor that could account for New Zealand's subsequent and exceptional history of race relations.

What he missed was the Māori perspective – perhaps the humanitarians' greatest legacy. While Sinclair realized that the Māori contribution to harmonious race relations was of 'major importance', he referred only to the later emergence of an educated leadership as a factor. The possibility that many Māori had early embraced the ideology brought by British humanitarians and indeed shared that bicultural vision – that commitment to it was what originally bound and continued to hold both peoples together in peace – did not occur to him, but nor should it have. This was not his purpose. His purpose was to counter the increasingly loud denials of any good intent on the part of the British. To that end, his answer came with something of a warning.

Sinclair is often described – like Beaglehole before him – as an empiricist, but as Olssen once commented, Sinclair was never 'the prisoner of a style, even a style which he had helped to create'.[66] For both him and Beaglehole, empiricism was always a 'servant but never allowed to be master'.[67] Both understood something which some of the emerging generation of historians would not: that ideals – 'visions of the future' – were also 'important facts, which exert immense influence on social development'.[68] Sinclair understood the power of ideas. As he observed in 1963 by way of example, what 'moulded' South Africa was at its basis a 'passionate vision of white mastery and black slavery'.[69] For Freddy Wood, strict empiricism could only 'smother thought' and result in 'spiritual emasculation', while positivism had an 'aridity which could never read the riddle of humanity'.[70] For Peter Munz, the very idea that

'history is to be contrasted with poetry' – 'that to write history is simply to record' rather than to 'make something', excluding 'both imagination and speculation' – was absurd. History was not an 'empirical science' involving 'a rigorous confinement' of interpretation 'to the evidence contained in the sources'.[71] For Munz, the historian's most important task was 'a search for the thoughts behind the facts'[72] – for the 'words that nourish and keep warm the minds and souls of men'[73] – because 'it is only when he lays hold of them that he strikes the hard rock bottom of what actually happened.' For all of them, history was the 'history of the spirit, and spirit is value.'[74]

In 1968 Sinclair warned against ignoring 'spirit' and the ideas that influenced and inspired men. He warned against ignoring 'the influence of ideology' and the 'power of hope', and insisted that the 'thought side of the events of New Zealand history, the motivation of governments and individuals, cannot be dismissed'.[75] Here was the historian as 'prophet', and as one writer has commented,[76] 'prophets issue warnings, clarion and brassy, stark as desert bones. *Heed*.'

In 1968 J.M.R. Owens sounded a similar warning with regard to missionaries and religion. He complained about the 'gap in our knowledge of the ideas of the missionaries' and that there was little appreciation of the fact that 'there was great variation' among them. He bemoaned that it was 'becoming common for New Zealand histories, following the pattern of reacting against earlier histories, to stress the negative social consequences of missionary activity' and he criticized the way in which 'contemporary historians judge missionary activity'. It was worth remembering, he warned, that 'a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious'.[77]

Sinclair's claims to the 'thought side' of New Zealand's history and the importance of Britain's humanitarian intentions were ignored. So too was Owens's caution to appreciate the complexity of and diversity in the missionary enterprise and seek to understand religion on its own terms. On the cusp of what was to be a lengthy period of racial conflict, Sinclair's argument appeared out of touch – 'controversial'[78] and 'notorious'[79] was how his article came to be described. According to O'Malley, it made clear that Sinclair was 'out of step with the new histories emerging from a younger generation of historians'.[80] Like Beaglehole before him, Sinclair 'was a scholar of international standing, but when revisionism is in the air, the former greats are at risk of being denigrated as yesterday's men'.[81]

By the time the article was published in 1971 – the same year in which Nga Tāmatoa held their first protests at Waitangi – anything that appeared to assert what was increasingly described as the 'myth' of good race relations

was disregarded. Internationally, too, few historians by the 1970s 'cared to write about "selfless men" engaged in a "virtuous crusade." In the aftermath of decolonization, as the morality of empire became discredited, not many wished to revive an interpretive tradition associated with and implicated in colonial rule.'[82] What historians did accept without question was the stereotypical critique of humanitarians that Sinclair had once drawn on and endorsed, without acknowledging either his later argument or further considering the 'thought side' of the history he had presented. And as conflict between the races escalated, and Māori and Pākehā sought to find the reasons for that conflict, New Zealand history entered a highly critical phase of revision that served only to reinforce that stereotyping.

It was in part made possible by the turn inward and away from British imperial history that accompanied the process of decolonization occurring in the 1970s and which effectively removed the primary context of early New Zealand history from much of its British (and humanitarian) origins. The idea that New Zealand history could be understood largely in terms of what happened here quickly gained influence, and few historians thereafter sought to investigate the intentions of British leaders beyond the immediate files and minutes associated with the decision to annex, most on the assumption that it was now known. The empirical approach increasingly adopted by many historians provided a similar tightening in focus. It led to new analyses focused on the wording of the Treaty in which the text itself was now viewed as a self-sufficient object of inquiry. Assessing that text without its context effectively provided a pretext to argue for British deception, and the Treaty was deemed a fraud;[83] the uniqueness and exceptionalism 'portrayed in much of the earlier literature' having finally been 'supplanted by more sober analyses'.[84] The empirical approach increasingly adopted by many historians further encouraged the emerging dominance of notions of historical materialism over such things as ideas, values and the power of imagination, and a clear preference for utilitarian explanations that placed land and authority at the forefront of race relations was the result.[85]

The broader marginalization of religion in history and its separation from the study of race relations had a similarly narrowing effect. In what was perhaps a reaction to both contemporary secular attitudes and revisionist attacks on the missionary enterprise and its agents, religion became separated from the study of race relations. And though many would bemoan the limited significance given to religion by mainstream historians, few works actually attempted to bridge that divide. That separation further deprived the history of early race relations of what was its primary intellectual framework and obscured both the humanitarian perspective derived from that religion and

the people who adhered to it. If religious figures were referred to at all they were 'ineffectual humanitarians, sectarian bigots, pleasure-hating puritans, domineering patriarchs and uptight moral evangelists'.[86] But in stereotyping and dismissing the religious, historians not only failed to see the leading role played by those Christian humanitarians in New Zealand's early history. They also failed to see the political vision derived from that religion, and the radical implications that a belief in racial equality and harmony could have in re-visioning colonial relations.

The growing militancy of postcolonial thinking created a further tightening in focus. The postcolonialism of Sinclair's generation was neither theoretical nor rigidly defined. It questioned while allowing for complexity – for paradox, contradictions and exceptions. For a country with New Zealand's exceptional history, that was important. The postcolonial discourse that emerged from the later 1960s and 1970s was highly theoretical and above all based upon binaries and a monolithic view of colonialism that rendered conflict between the races both endemic and inevitable, and that binary view quickly became the dominant lens through which New Zealand history was viewed. It not only obscured the role of humanitarians – the exceptions or dissenters from the Pākehā mainstream – but also what Sinclair rightly understood to be the key 'intellectual matrix of colonial society'[87] at the time. This was not the struggle of Māori against Pākehā. This was the ideological struggle that occurred between Pākehā – Sinclair's 'war of ideas' – and what was the essential context to understanding the period. Obscuring the view of humanitarians also obscured the Māori perspective they were seeking to defend. While many historians would later refer to Māori leaders having had a vision of biculturalism, few thought to consider where that vision had originated.[88]

By the time Claudia Orange began what was to be her now famous work, *The Treaty of Waitangi* (1987), the humanitarian intentions of New Zealand's early leaders could be dismissed by reference to arguments that had become both pervasive and entrenched. When Orange started her thesis in 1977 race relations — past and present — dominated national news. Television images and reports of Ngāti Whātua's highly publicized occupation of Bastion Point coincided with the airing of Keith Aberdein's highly acclaimed historical drama, *The Governor*, the very purpose of which was to demonstrate the 'flaw in the national mythology of racial harmony' by showing that equality was 'proclaimed but never practiced'.[89] While Joe Hawke stood with his supporters at Bastion Point and declared Ngāti Whātua 'landless in our own land,'[90] Governor Grey thus spoke from the past of his hopes for a 'future where for the first time in the history of the world, two

peoples of different skins, of conflicting cultures, can live together in perfect harmony, perfect equality.... And in all the world this land shall be unique'.[91] The conflict between past statements and present reality was palpable, and with that conflict before her, Orange set out to 'establish a basis for understanding the divergence of Maori and Pakeha attitudes'.[92] Reiterating Wards's analysis, she concluded that, whatever assurances of humanitarian intent were given by the British, they were little more than window-dressing and simply an expedient way of obtaining Māori consent.[93] The primary goal was the acquisition of sovereignty, and though the British did intend to protect Māori 'from the worst effects of uncontrolled European contact', their aim was not 'to preserve traditional Maori society but ultimately to destroy it and to amalgamate Maori with the settler community.'[94] According to Orange, New Zealand – despite the Treaty – was 'merely a variation in the pattern of colonial domination of indigenous races'.[95]

Orange's work became what is known as a 'foundational' text – one which sets the parameters of future research and analysis.[96] It attained the 'kind of popularity usually reserved for books by television chefs and sporting heroes'[97] and came to encapsulate what had by then become the 'dominant interpretation' – what James Belich once defined as 'an acceptable compromise between fact and preconception'.[98] Over 20 years later, *The New Oxford History of New Zealand* – originally established by Sinclair as a means of informing the broader public of 'advances in research'[99] – was still reiterating that interpretation. It opened its 2009 edition by reference to what its editor described as the 'myth-model of biculturalism'.[100] Contrary to the view of an older generation of 'wishful thinking' historians, the Treaty was not a new beginning in British imperial practice nor an experiment in 'humanitarian exceptionalism':

> The purpose of colonizing New Zealand was to procure Maori land and other resources, for the benefit of settler capital, with indigenous minds and bodies subjugated in the process. Maori wishes and desires were not unimportant, but were secondary and needed to fit within the settler colony paradigm…. A peaceful pact of cession, achievable through verbal and written promises disguising the full realities of imperial intentions, was the easiest and cheapest way of gaining a new colony…. The apparently generous terms of the Treaty towards Maori were not as uncommon in imperial settings as scholars and mythmakers have frequently believed. The rights and privileges such treaties conceded were essentially a matter of expediency…. The use of coercion was always implicit – and became explicit, and overwhelming, when needed. The annexation of New Zealand was an 'act of state' to seize a new territory, rather than a consensual acquisition….[101]

With the exceptionalism of the Treaty denied, and Māori experience and outcome increasingly equated with the fate of indigenous peoples everywhere, the very idea of New Zealand ever having had harmonious race relations was called into question and deemed little more than a self-serving Pākehā myth. The view that conflict was in fact the normative state of race relations emerged in its stead. New Zealand's history of race relations in turn became one of 'conflict and dispossession, of alienation of land and other resources from a declining Maori population and their opposition to such loss'.[102] Such is the importance now given to the New Zealand Wars in particular that, in what is the ultimate rebuttal to Sinclair's exceptionalism, it is the wars that are now said to have profoundly shaped the nation.[103] But as Sinclair understood,[104] those wars did not define us. They just made us the same.

Sinclair himself remained unconvinced by such arguments. As he observed in 1979, 'Attempts to suggest that the Treaty of Waitangi did not derive mainly from a humanitarian concern for Maori welfare have been unconvincing', and he continued to insist that what the British intended in 1840 was to establish a 'biracial society in New Zealand with equality of rights for both races'.[105] In stating as much, he had himself become a dissenter from the mainstream – a dissident or non-conformist from what had become the 'dominant interpretation'. There were other dissenters, too, but as Belich understood, it is always the 'mainstream of interpretation' that is 'endorsed, repeated, and amplified' and precisely because it can 'accommodate the cherished preconceptions of the day'.[106] Within such a context, an important insight from an important historian was missed.

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NOTES

* This article is based on a paper presented to the New Zealand Historical Association in Wellington in November 2019.

1 Sinclair had been awarded a Smuts Fellowship at the University of Cambridge where he was a Fellow of St John's College for nine months. He left New Zealand in August 1968. See K. Sinclair, *Halfway Round the Harbour*, Penguin, Auckland, 1993, p.194.

2 Keith Sinclair, 'Why are Race Relations in New Zealand better than in South Africa, South Australia or South Dakota?', *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH), 5, 2 (1971), pp.121–7.

3 Sinclair, 'Race Relations', p.121.

4 Sinclair, 'Race Relations', pp.125–6.

5 As he later stated, he had 'carried out more research into British humanitarianism... than most, perhaps any, of the New Zealand historians'. Sinclair, *Halfway*, p.112.

6 Judith Binney, '[Review]: I. Wards, *The Shadow of the Land, A Study of British Policy and Racial Conflict in New Zealand 1832-1852*', NZJH, 3, 2 (1969), p.200.

7 I. Wards, *The Shadow of the Land, A Study of British Policy and Racial Conflict in New Zealand 1832–1852*, Government Printer, Wellington, 1968, p.23.

8 Judith Binney, 'Review', p.199.

9 Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Apollos, Leicester, 1990, p.19.

10 Michael Belgrave, 'The Politics of Maori History in an Age of Protest', *Journal of New Zealand and Pacific Studies*, (1 April 2014), p.147.

11 Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, p.12.

12 Judith Binney, *The Legacy of Guilt: life of Thomas Kendall*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1968, p.13.

13 B. Porter, *Critics of Empire: British Radicals and the Imperial Challenge* (first published 1968), revised ed. 2007, Bloomsbury Academic, 2007, p.xv.

14 R. Winks, ed., *The Historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth: Trends, Interpretations and Resources*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1966, p.3.

15 Sinclair, 'Race Relations', p.127.

16 See, for example, John Stenhouse, 'God's Own Silence: Secular Nationalism, Christianity and the Writing of New Zealand History', NZJH, 38, 1 (2004), pp.58ff.

17 Erik Olssen, 'Obituary', NZJH, 27, 2 (1993), p.217.

18 Keith Sinclair, 'The Aborigines Protection Society and New Zealand: A Study in Nineteenth Century Opinion', MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1946, p.3.

19 Keith Sinclair, *The Origins of the Maori Wars*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1957, pp.22–23.

20 Sinclair, *Origins*, p.26.

21 Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, Penguin, Auckland, 1959, p.69.

22 Sinclair, *Origins*, p.26.

23 Sinclair, *History of New Zealand*, p.69.

24 See especially Chapter XIII, 'The Failure of Humanitarianism' in *Origins*, pp.207ff.

25 Sinclair, 'Aborigines Protection Society', p.11.

26 Sinclair, 'Aborigines Protection Society', p.9.

27 Sinclair, 'Aborigines Protection Society', p.11.

28 Sinclair, 'Aborigines Protection Society', p.26.

29 Sinclair, 'Aborigines Protection Society', p.27.

30 Sinclair, 'Aborigines Protection Society', p.12.

31 Sinclair, 'Aborigines Protection Society', p.1.
32 Sinclair, 'Aborigines Protection Society', p.48.
33 See Stenhouse, 'God's Own Silence', pp.59–60.
34 Ivan Sutherland, 'Introduction', *The Maori People Today*, *a General Survey*, New Zealand Institute of International Affairs & the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Canterbury, 1940, p.31.
35 Sutherland, *The Maori People Today*, p.35.
36 Sutherland, *The Maori People Today*, p.32.
37 Sutherland *The Maori People Today*.
38 'I.L.G. Sutherland 1897–1952', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, Vol.61, No.1+2, 1952, p.123.
39 Sutherland, *The Maori People Today*, p.27. Sinclair referenced this new anthropological thinking in his thesis (see p.126).
40 J. Webster, 'Review of The British Anti-Slavery Movement by R. Coupland', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol.4, No.1 (December 1967), p.184.
41 E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, republished as part of The Great Library Collection by R.P. Pryne, Philadelphia, 2015, footnote 949.
42 Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, passim.
43 Peter Laslett referring to J.W. Davidson, 'Becoming an Expatriate: J.W. Davidson and the Brain Drain', *The Journal of New Zealand Studies*, 2/3 (2004), p.24.
44 Charles Dickens, 30 November 1865, cited in Paul Schlicke, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens: Anniversary Edition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p.85.
45 C.K. Stead, 'The New Zealand Poet Laureate blog: The Sinclair cohort', poetlaureate.org.nz, accessed 20 December 2018.
46 Keith Sinclair, 'Memorial to a Missionary', in V. O'Sullivan, ed., *An Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry*, third edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987, p.154.
47 Sinclair, 'Memorial', p.154.
48 Sinclair, 'Aborigines Protection Society', p.126.
49 Sinclair, 'Aborigines Protection Society', p.124.
50 E. Olssen, 'Obituary', p.219.
51 See Sutherland, *The Maori People Today*, pp.27–30.
52 Anthropologists sought to answer this by reference to the strength and resilience of the Māori people themselves. See Ngata and Sutherland in *The Maori People Today*, pp.24–39. It was an argument Sinclair also put forward.
53 Sinclair, 'Race Relations', p.126.
54 Sinclair, 'Race Relations', p.126.
55 Sinclair, *Origins*, p.26.
56 Keith Sinclair, 'The Historian as Prophet: Equality, Inequality and Civilization', University of Auckland Winter Lecture Series 1963, published in Muriel F. Lloyd Prichard, ed., *The Future of New Zealand*, Whitcombe & Tombs, Christchurch, 1964, p.216.
57 Sinclair, 'Historian as Prophet', p.2.
58 Sinclair, 'Historian as Prophet', p.2.
59 Sinclair, 'Historian as Prophet', p.2. Perhaps its most obvious manifestation was to come some ten years later with the institution of the Waitangi Tribunal.
60 Sinclair, 'Historian as Prophet', p.3.
61 Sinclair, 'Historian as Prophet', p.3.
62 In 1968 Sinclair was also involved in the 'Peace Power and Politics Conference' in Wellington opposing the Vietnam War, while in the following year he stood for the Labour Party in his local seat of Eden.

63 Sinclair, 'Historian as Prophet', p.3.

64 Keith Sinclair, 'For Jim Baxter', *The Firewheel Tree*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1973, p.17.

65 Sinclair, 'For Jim Baxter', p.17.

66 Olssen, 'Obituary', p.220.

67 F.L.L. Wood, 'The Historian in the Modern Community', George Arnold Wood Memorial Lecture, Sydney University, 19 September 1949, reproduced in P. Munz, *The Feel of Truth*, A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington, 1969, p.261.

68 Sinclair, 'Historian as Prophet', p.1.

69 Sinclair, 'Historian as Prophet', p.1.

70 Wood, 'The Historian in the Modern Community', pp.256–7.

71 Peter Munz, 'The Skeleton and the Mollusc: Reflections on the Nature of Historical Narratives', NZJH, 1, 2 (1967), pp.102–23.

72 Peter Munz, 'The Purity of Historical Method: Some Sceptical Reflections on the Current Enthusiasm for the History of Non-European Societies, NZJH, 5, 1 (1971), p.15. See also Munz, 'The Skeleton and the Mollusc', p.107.

73 Wood, 'The Historian in the Modern Community', p.260.

74 Wood, 'The Historian in the Modern Community', p.260.

75 Sinclair, 'Race Relations', p.127.

76 Rachel Toliver in reference to that other great social commentator, James Baldwin, whom Sinclair also read. See Toliver, 'On Whiteness, James Baldwin, and Trying to Heed', 9 July 2016, https://medium.com/@racheltoliver/on-whiteness-james-baldwin-and-trying-to-heed-e8a2e16a1700, accessed 3 May 2017.

77 J.M.R. Owens, 'Christianity and the Maoris to 1840', NZJH, 2, 1 (1968), passim.

78 Stenhouse, 'God's Own Silence', p.59.

79 V. O'Malley, 'Unsettling NZ history: The Revisionism of Sinclair and Ward' in Doug Munro and Brij V. Lal, eds, *Texts and Contexts, Reflections on Pacific Islands Historiography*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2006, p.158.

80 V. O'Malley, '"Recording the Incident with a Monument": The Waikato War in Historical Memory', *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, 19 (2015), https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/jnzs/article/view/3767, accessed 30 March 2019, doi: https://doi.org/10.26686/jnzs.v0i19.3767, footnote 88, p.96.

81 Doug Munro, *The Ivory Tower and Beyond: Participant Historians of the Pacific*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, 2009, p.23.

82 Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital, Foundations of British Abolitionism*, University of North Carolina Press, Virginia, 2006, p.16.

83 Most notably by Ruth Ross in her now famous essay, 'Te Tiriti o Waitangi: Texts and Translations', NZJH, 6, 2 (1972).

84 Vincent O'Malley, 'Treaty-Making in Early Colonial New Zealand', NZJH, 33, 2 (1999), p.137.

85 Most notably in the work of Sorrenson whose articles from 1959 to 1972 increasingly focused on the importance of land. His 2014 compilation of essays reflects that ongoing focus. See *Ko te Whenua te Utu? Land is the Price: Essays on Maori History, Land and Politics* Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2014.

86 Stenhouse, 'God's Own Silence', p.52.

87 Sinclair, 'Aborigines Protection Society', pp.1–2.

88 O'Malley has argued that it was in fact Maori who were the 'committed biculturalists some 130 years before the concept was to become fashionable among a minority of liberal, middle-class Pakeha.' See O'Malley, 'Unsettling New Zealand History', p.159.

89 M. Blythe, *Naming the Other: Images of the Maori in New Zealand Film and TV*, Scarecrow Press, New Jersey, 1994, p.189.

90 Rāwiri Taonui, 'Ngāti Whātua - Ngāti Whātua and the Treaty of Waitangi', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/speech/1212/joe-hawke (accessed 29 May 2017).

91 Grey in *The Governor*, cited Blythe, *Naming the Other*, p.191.

92 Claudia Orange, *The Treaty of Waitangi*, Auckland, 1987, p.ix.

93 Orange, *The Treaty of Waitangi*, p.56.

94 Orange, *The Treaty of Waitangi*, p.5.

95 Orange, *The Treaty of Waitangi*, p.5.

96 Munro and Lal, eds, *Texts and Contexts*, p.1.

97 B. Renwick, ed., *Sovereignty and Indigenous Rights: The Treaty of Waitangi in International Contexts*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1991, p.215.

98 James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict*, Penguin, Auckland, 1986, p.332. Belich was referring here to the Victorian interpretation of racial conflict but it is as equally applicable to any 'dominant interpretation'.

99 According to Sinclair as editor in his preface to *The Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand*, 1990, p.viii.

100 G. Byrnes, 'Introduction: Reframing New Zealand History', *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2009, p.15.

101 R. Hill, 'Maori and State Policy', *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, pp.514–6.

102 Hill, 'Maori and State Policy', p.513.

103 See, for example, V. O'Malley, *The New Zealand Wars, Nga Pakanga o Aotearoa*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2019 and 'Leading Historian Vincent O'Malley discusses the New Zealand Wars', RNZ, 'Smart Talk', rnz.co.nz, 27 August 2019.

104 Sinclair, *Origins*, p.19.

105 Sinclair citing C. Hartley Grattan in W.S. Livingston, W.R. Louis, eds, *Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands since the First World War*, University of Texas Press, 1979, p.44.

106 Belich, *The New Zealand Wars*, p.332.