

# *Not In Narrow Seas: The Economic History of Aotearoa New Zealand*

## Introduction

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The most important thing I want to say today is to thank the Stout Centre for its contribution to *Not In Narrow Seas*. I had the privilege of a Stout Fellowship for a year which was crucial in the writing of the nineteenth-century chapters of the book. I can also thank the “Stouties” who contributed to the book and are gratefully mentioned individually in the book’s acknowledgments.

Despite my training in science, mathematics and statistics, and in economics and other social sciences, it was perhaps inevitable that, if I were spared, I would write a history of New Zealand. I had read history since childhood and written on various aspects of it—for instance there are over 300 items on my website, which probably amounts to another book of similar size to this one (although there is some overlapping).

But I did not just want to write another history of New Zealand. I was aware of a major gap in almost all our histories, evident to anyone who had been trained in political economy. I put it this way in the book:

Many historians have told the New Zealand story before; but an economist uses a particular lens which, I would argue, helps us to see our nation’s history in a new way. Too often we take the hard economic core of our history for granted, or we give it merely fleeting attention. Sex is notably absent from the Victorian novel; the economy is almost as rare among recent novels and histories. To give an account of a society without paying attention to its economic underpinnings is about as sensible as telling a love story without sex. It can be done, of course, but certain vital facts of life are left out. p.12.

So I wanted to write a history in which the economy was an integral part of the whole story. Indeed, I wanted an even broader perspective—indicated in the title of *Not in Narrow Seas*—for the history strays from geology to poetry even if it is centred on interaction between the economy and society.

You can get a sense of its ambition from the book’s epilogue which sets out sixteen themes which are uncommon in other histories of New Zealand but are central to understanding where we came from, how we got here, and where we are going. I won’t go through them individually—each is elaborated in the epilogue and illustrated throughout the book—but the Stout Centre has kindly produced a handout of the sixteen themes for distribution. [The themes are listed following these remarks.] I am not saying that these themes do not occasionally appear in other histories of New Zealand, but I doubt that any other has been written which is as conscious of them.

As is perhaps appropriate given the title of the book, the epilogue begins with lines from ‘The Unhistoric Story’, another poem by Allen Curnow:<sup>1</sup>

And whatever islands may be  
Under or over the sea,  
It is something different, something  
Nobody counted on.

(Incidentally, I love that reference to ‘under the sea’. Allen could not have known about the eighth continent, Zealandia, which was only identified while I was writing the book. Poets are sometimes far-seeing.)

That poem captures the notion that scholars learn as they write. Setting down what you think does not just codify one’s thinking, but suggests new issues you had not counted on. So I thought I would draw your attention to an issue which is there in the book but is unresolved.

One is struck how the history of New Zealand is what might be called the “continuities of development”. Despite shocks, there is a progression of change in which each generation is different and yet there is continuity from generation to generation.

The exception may be the shock of the Rogernomics revolution. Chapter 59, “The Aftermath of Rogernomics”, asks to what extent Rogernomics was a major disruption to the long term trends in the nation’s economic and social development, putting us on a completely different course. Instead of answering the question definitively, the chapter offers three accounts. Publishers’ readers of the book hated it, because they wanted THE answer. Mine is “I don’t know”.

Perhaps nobody today knows. Perhaps we will only know in decades hence. But the question is worth pondering over. This book should help.

The sixteen themes described in the epilogue (639-45) are:

1. The Economy Really Does Matter
2. The Environment Is Not Passive; Resources Are Limited
3. Aotearoa New Zealand’s History Began Before the Place Was Settled
4. Global Connectedness is Central to Aotearoa New Zealand’s History
5. Aotearoa New Zealand Is a Neocolony with a Challenge of Nation building
6. Technological Change Shapes the Economy and Human Life
7. Changes in Affluence, Choice and Diversity Are as Important as Quantitative Economic Growth
8. The Distribution of Income and Wealth Matters
9. The Nonmarket Economy Is Important Too
10. There Has Been a Constant Tension Between Market Direction and Central Direction
11. New Zealand Governments May Not Reflect the People’s Preferences
12. Aotearoa New Zealand’s Hollow Society Is Only Slowly Filling

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Unhistoric Story’ was first published in *Island and Time* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1941), 9 and is reprinted in *Early Days Yet* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1997), 235. Brian Easton’s book takes its title from Curnow’s first book-length sequence, *Not in Narrow Seas* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1939).

13. A Nation's History is Not Dominated by Great Men and Women
14. Aotearoa New Zealand Is Not Just the Land of the Long Pink Cloud
15. Ideas Matter; How They Are Used and Described Matters Even More
16. Public Intellectuals Play a Vital Role in a Nation's Development – or Not