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## BOOKS

# Twelve New Zealand Statesmen

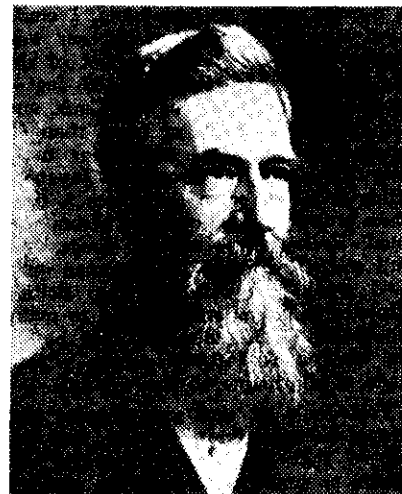
NOTABLE NEW ZEALAND STATESMEN:  
TWELVE PRIME MINISTERS. By Dr.  
G. H. Scholefield. Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd.

(Reviewed by W. Downie Stewart)

WILLIAM GISBORNE, who has left us a fine series of pen portraits of New Zealand statesmen, has truly remarked that their fame, unlike that of great men at the centres of civilisation, has not been spread far and wide. His explanation is that they have been able to prove their worth only in a small and remote country instead of on a large scale before many witnesses. For this reason they are often merely vague and shadowy figures in the public mind and memory. The rising generation seems to

know little beyond the names of those of even a comparatively recent era, such as Seddon and Massey.

Yet to students of history there is a peculiar fascination in the lives and careers of our public men of earlier days. Most of them were highly educated and cultured men of many-sided interests and strong individuality. In many instances they began as pioneers and explorers as a prelude to their tasks as legislators. They had to solve provincial legislations as well as a central Parliament. They had to solve intricate problems of our relations with the Maori race. When these problems could be settled only by armed force some of these statesmen proved themselves brave and brilliant soldiers. Most of them had a dignity and simplicity that makes us anxious to know more of them. For my part I am something of a hero-worshipper and regard these men as political giants of whom I wish I knew as much as does Dr. Scholefield.



SIR HARRY ATKINSON  
"Born out of time"

them in detail, but they are all interesting, informative, and impartial. The author has given us the light and shade of each personality and added quite a few items that are new. For example, I had always assumed that Sewell, who was often a Cabinet Minister, had also practised his legal profession in our law courts, and there is a well-known story of his habit of appearing in wig and gown in Lambton Quay. However, the author, who mentions this practice, is quite clear that Sewell never appeared in Court so one is left to wonder why he appeared in wig and gown. He was a useful man, but by no means an impressive figure. The samples of his wit quoted by the author make us wish he had given us some more.

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THE character that has always attracted me most is that of Sir Harry Atkinson, who bore an immense burden and owing to hard times never had a chance to try out his real views. He earned great distinction in the Maori Wars and was five times Prime Minister and six times Treasurer in other Cabinets. When Vogel left for England in 1875 he left the whole burden of the final abolition of the Provinces, and the intricate questions of readjusting the finances arising therefrom, to Atkinson, who completed the task in masterly fashion. Had his contributory pension scheme met with success it would in a great measure have anticipated much of our social security legislation by more than 60 years. In the midst of his heart-breaking efforts to cope with a prolonged depression he over-taxed his failing strength by spending long night hours in nursing his wife, who was an invalid. He is usually described as a Tory, but he was at heart a Socialist born out of time whose dreams of Utopia were frustrated by fate. The author's portrait of Atkinson is clear and convincing and indeed the same applies to the whole gallery of portraits—Stafford, Fox, Grey, Vogel, Ballance, Seddon and others less well known.

I read with special pleasure his study of G. M. Waterhouse, of whom I knew little except that he had been Premier of South Australia before he became Premier of New Zealand—surely a

IN his preface to his great *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, published in 1940, Dr. Scholefield has told us how he began to collect biographical material over 40 years ago. It was fortunate that he began when he did, for he was in time to talk to public men still on the political stage or living in retirement. Thus he secured first-hand recollections of many political events that might otherwise have passed into oblivion. Moreover, as comptroller of archives, he has collected patiently, from far and wide, diaries, letters, and family records. One of his finest traits is the generous way in which he allows all this material both official and private to be made available to other students instead of hoarding his treasures jealously as do some librarians, as if they were their own private property.

In the volume now under review Dr. Scholefield has presented us with brief sketches of twelve Prime Ministers, beginning with James Edward Fitzgerald and ending with Richard John Seddon. How difficult his task was can be seen from the fact that he could allot only one chapter to each character. I wish he had been commissioned to devote a whole volume to each of them, because he cannot otherwise display adequately his rich stores of knowledge or do full justice to their many-sided activities. For example, Fitzgerald had an interesting and varied career before he came to New Zealand, and he was not only our first Prime Minister, but first Superintendent of Canterbury. Add to this that he was our greatest orator (unless Sir George Grey was his equal), an artist, a poet, a journalist, a runholder, and a financier. Any one of these features of his life requires at least a chapter, unless like Carlyle you can sum up a man in one blinding phrase which is often illuminating but not always fair or adequate.

My impression—which may be quite wrong—is that the author, after dealing with Fitzgerald, realised that he must pass over the political background more lightly and draw his characters in firmer outline. At least it seems to me that each succeeding study is in more high relief and gains in clearness and solidity. It would be impossible to comment on



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