

Look back and learn, says

Wellington: Most New Zealanders are ignorant about their own history but it's not really their fault, Christchurch historian Edmund Bohan says.

Rather he blames an education system – particularly the universities – which has not made New Zealand history compulsory.

“Most New Zealanders get degrees in history without having to do any New Zealand history at all.”

Most other countries, such as Scotland, Ireland, Australia, Canada and the United States, make a big thing of teaching their own history, he says.

The average New Zealander has ideas about the past but they're not necessarily correct. But interest is now growing and is bigger than ever before.

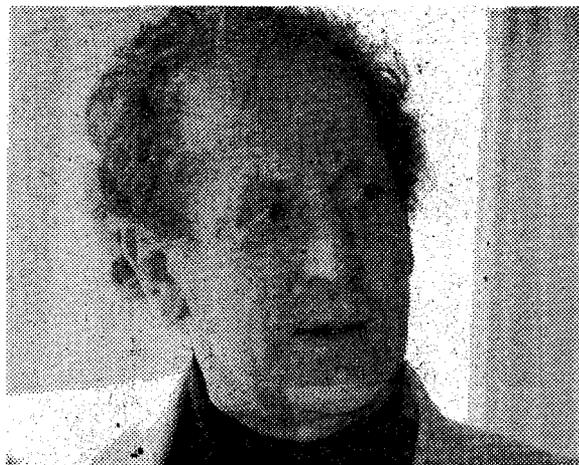
“That's because we're getting further away. When I was a child, my Irish and Scottish grandparents were still alive. There were old people still alive – the 19th century was their century. So it wasn't terribly interesting to us.”

He maintains a passionate interest in this country's colonial past, despite having spent three decades of his life pursuing a career as a classical singer on the other side of the world.

The “singing historian” – as he was known as an undergraduate in Christchurch – has made a success of two careers.

During his long stint in Britain, Mr Bohan sang 60 operatic roles and performed in Britain, Europe and South America. And now he is a successful

Neither European nor Maori New Zealanders know enough about their country's past, says Christchurch historian Edmund Bohan. He has a particular passion for some of the tough, brilliant politicians of last century who are often unjustly blackened as wicked colonials. He spoke to KATHY STODART, of NZPA.



Historian Edmund Bohan

New Zealand historian with an acclaimed biography of 19th century politician Edward Stafford under his belt, along with children's historical novels and historical detective fiction.

He has strong opinions about history and is not worried about rewriting of the past: “There can't be too much revisionism – every generation will look at the past in its own terms.”

But some people go too far, such as those who tar all colonials as dreadful and make generalisations about the New Zealand wars of last century.

“We can blacken a whole generation without knowing enough about them.

“Parliament debated those wars violently in the 1860s. It was not a universally accepted policy. When Governor George Grey invaded the Waikato, there was a storm of protest in newspapers and Parliament.”

And confiscation of Maori tribal lands was bitterly opposed by Stafford and another prominent politician of the time, James Edward FitzGerald.

Mr Bohan says many MPs of that time were Irish or Scottish who knew about the land clearances in their home countries and deplored what the English land laws had done in Ireland.

Many of the colonial politicians were young, well educated, and impres-

passionate singer-historian

sive orators, bringing with them to New Zealand new ideas about political freedom that were causing ferment all through the western world.

For example, Stafford, who was prime minister three times, and FitzGerald were humanitarians with radical ideas about equality and Stafford had modern ideas on conservation of forests.

"Stafford is the great underrated colonial figure," Mr Bohan says. For 25 years his coalition governments were the only ones that held together for more than a year. He was a "moderate, an advanced thinker and a superb politician" who had a vision of a multi-racial New Zealand.

Both Maori and European New Zealanders need to know what happened last century, Mr Bohan says, and he believes Maori have just as many misconceptions about the past as do non-Maori.

"Both must look to the facts rather than imposing current political philosophies on the past.

"You can't ignore something in history just because you don't agree with it. Historians must be strictly honest."

The racial situation was a complex one in the 1860s and '70s, made more difficult by Maori tribal rivalry. Stafford had tried to return confiscated Maori lands but was blocked by other Maori who objected to land being returned to enemy tribes.

Grey had also mistakenly confiscated land from friendly Maori tribes

who were on the side of the government out of tribal antipathies.

Tribal rivalries were of crucial importance, he says. They parallel the earlier clan disunity in both Scotland and Ireland, which meant that the Elizabethan English armies never faced a united Irish or Scottish army.

Tribal societies damage themselves in this way and this is still evident today in the fight over the Maori fisheries settlement, Mr Bohan says.

Maori people today must get past the grievance mindset if they are to go forward – injustices should be recognised but ultimately an attitude of grievance can hold a people back.

"There has to be a time when people say, 'that's the past, we've got to deal with the future and the present'."

In the 1950s, Mr Bohan was expected to pursue an academic career after completing an MA Hons in history and English at Canterbury University, with a special interest in colonial politics.

But he did not relish the infighting and politics of university life. He had also got into a fight with eminent historian Dr J. C. Beaglehole over "tactless" remarks the young Bohan had made about the older generation of historians and what he regarded as their outdated ideas about colonial politics.

He trained as a history and English teacher and got a job as a part-time assistant to parliamentary historian, Dr A. H. McClintock, who was immersed in his great 1950s project of producing a parliamentary history of New Zealand.

"But I was getting so much work as a singer. I wanted to go to Australia. McClintock said go, and gave me a list of subjects I could write historical novels on."

While in Britain, Mr Bohan did not give up writing. He had two children's historical novels published, *The Writ of Green Wax* in 1970, a medieval story set in Kent; and in 1972 a Scottish border story called *The Buckler*.

In 1987 he came back to live in New Zealand and to devote his time to the other career: "I was doing 100 concerts a year for more than 20 years and wanted more time to write."

He was asked to write a few thousand words about Stafford for the *New Zealand Dictionary of Biography*, which led to a fully fledged book.

He has also written two Victorian detective novels – "operatic melodrama" he calls them – set in Christchurch in the 1870s and 1880s. *The Opawa Affair* and *The Dancing Man* both feature Detective Patrick O'Rorke. A third is in the pipeline.

He is now writing a new biography of Governor Grey, whom he describes as "an enigma" and "an extraordinary character", a flawed human being who was "slightly unhinged" by the breakup of his marriage.

Mr Bohan is concerned that historians today may neglect our politicians of the past because of a general dislike of the breed.

"We need to know what they did then, because we're still dealing with their mistakes."