

# From Empire's Servant to Global Citizen — — A History of Massey University



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INTRODUCTION

— Writing  
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Histories of universities are often partly autobiographical, written by historians whose memories are both longstanding and affectionate, as much rooted in personal experience as in the universities' archives. Although they are now increasingly farmed out to professionals as exercises in public relations, they were once the preserve of historians with many decades of institutional memories. Length of service was not necessarily a mark of seniority, but it was acknowledged that young historians had things that interested them more. They had not spent long enough in academic corridors to be puzzled by their present direction and to wonder whether the university of the present was still the same place that had once inspired in them such excitement and enthusiasm.

TODAY'S UNIVERSITY HISTORIES VARY in purpose and style. Some are puff pieces, designed to open the pockets of alumni. Others are sentimental journeys, reunions with dead colleagues, adversaries and allies alike, glorying in the hearsay of even earlier times. Still more are compendiums of the driest details of buildings, disciplines and departments, faculties and fundraising: litanies to bearded founders and bluestocking achievers. This history is an historian's history; it tries to explain the present from the experience of the past.

Most of the histories that have been written for New Zealand universities were published at a time when the nature and value of university life were uncontested — if we discount the deep-seated anti-intellectualism long rooted in New Zealand's cultural landscape. None of the early histories questioned their writers' faith in the value of university education and the continuing importance and increasing relevance of the universities, which many of them had entered as young students decades before.

Since the late twentieth century, however, universities have faced significant challenges from global competition and technological change. Internal revolutions have replaced academic management and governance with regimes more corporate than collegial, and with much higher levels of external and internal competition. Writing a history of a university in 2016 is to confront an uncertain future. Like every other university, Massey as we know it may be threatened by massive changes that will transform the very nature of university teaching and research. In this history the Massey of today can be clearly seen in its past, but for the writer of a later history this may be much more difficult.

Universities remain one of the triumphs of the modern era, and while their independence had been hard-fought, until the end of the 1980s their futures appeared secure. The campaign for recognition from often sceptical politicians and taxpayers seemed the battle of semesters past. Earlier histories did not deny or ignore the existence of fractious parochialism, as the provincial colleges competed for resources and status, but they were cast in an era when the University of New Zealand and then the University Grants Committee managed these disputes, often to the annoyance of university councils and their staff. Above all, competition was dampened, and limited largely to the acquisition of 'special schools', the specialist agricultural, veterinary, medical, forestry, engineering and even extramural schools that had a national catchment.

Universities were attached to place. Massey shared the history of Palmerston North, onto which it had been grafted, and the urban and rural élite who

populated its councils. This has all changed. University education is now increasingly detached from location. Massey exists in a global marketplace, competing at all levels for undergraduate and graduate students alike, and with private and non-university providers of tertiary education.

In past decades the writing of a university history could be an intimate retrospective, as much reminiscence as history. Keith Sinclair's history of the University of Auckland was published in 1983 to mark the university's centenary. This was the year before the dramatic state sector reforms that heralded a new period of government relationships with what became known as the post-compulsory sector.<sup>1</sup> Unbeknown to Sinclair, universities were set to lose their privileged ascendancy. Their exclusive rights to grant degrees were stripped from them in a fee-for-all competitive market where, for better or worse, the universities' pretensions to exclusivity and élite status were every day challenged.

The mantra was lower cost, increasing the participation rates of New Zealanders in tertiary education, and transforming universities into competitive marketing machines. These dramatic structural transformations have undermined the value of intimacy as a tool of historical writing. Much of Keith Sinclair's history of Auckland feels like a common-room peroration at the end of a day's teaching or writing — or, even more likely, following a conference dinner — a glass in one hand while reminiscences and anecdotes flowed freely, later to emerge polished by footnotes, good rewriting and editing. This intimacy was the history's charm and its strength.

WRITING A HISTORY of a university in 2016 means focusing on bigger and novel questions, which undermine the ability to build a university history like a Christmas stocking, stuffed with small delights and the occasional dull pair of socks. But this does not mean the history cannot be personal. This history is both individual exploration and explanation.

In 1973 I entered the University of Waikato, a parallel universe to Massey, established at the same time. I was part of the baby-boom generation flooding into New Zealand's rapidly expanding universities. The Gothic imitations of nineteenth-century New Zealand campuses had given way to the New Brutalism of Massey and Waikato, and many of the buildings were interchangeable.<sup>2</sup>

There is much that would make Massey distinct, not just from establishments founded in the nineteenth century but also from Waikato, and this book explores



many of these differences. But as a history student at Waikato in 1973, what was important was not the distinctive nature of a campus or an independent university; it was the fact that it was a university, that it shared a universal heritage and gave access to international debates about the past and about the nature of society. These debates were occurring as much in the tutorial rooms of Palmerston North and Hamilton as in myriad other similar universities mushrooming worldwide.

Universities were about enquiry, they were about independent research, and in the 1970s they were about critically challenging orthodoxy. Old ideas were to be tossed out; their age and their universality alone qualified them for the scrapheap. The environment that fostered the dramatic growth of university education in the 1960s rejected reverence for the past and often even denied its relevance. I remained uneasy about such political and intellectual radicalism. Worshipping the future seemed as worthy of the critical knife as venerating the past. However, the idea of the university as a place of debate, intellectual exploration and personal transformation has remained with me.

In writing a history of Massey University, I hoped to test deeply held personal assumptions about the nature of the university itself. I wanted to consider whether the university that my generation encountered in the early 1970s was but a transitory and probably imagined community built by and for the baby-boom generation. Or was my idea of a university not too distant from that of Cardinal John Henry Newman's own ideal university, one open to pluralist and tolerant enquiry among colleagues, and one still relevant today?<sup>3</sup> If we do share common values with those academics and other staff who have taught and written at Massey since the 1920s, then is longevity resilience or simply habit?

Beyond these personal aspirations lies a strong belief that the university of today and the challenges it faces can only be understood in the university of the past. The values we have cherished need to be tested before they are defended in the future. A tradition of open and independent (of government, special interests or business) enquiry and debate, applied research and problem-solving supported by a strong foundation of pure, theoretical and serendipitous research has been crucial to our past and should continue to be valued in the future. The same is true of the principles of open and equal access, even if these aspirations have never been fully realised. Ironically, only through these values can Massey be fully responsive to the needs of its students and to local, national and global communities. In the disruptive challenges that face tomorrow's university, we disregard these liberal values at our peril.

IN AN ERA OF CHANGE, it is important to distinguish between the truly novel and the old dressed in new livery. This history argues that for all the increasing complexity and specialisation experienced by Massey University since 1964, our current commitment to the future, in documents that express both the strategic and the marketing faces of the university, should not disguise the extent to which so many of the problems we confront today were also the everyday challenges of earlier times. Today we just label them differently. We talk about the challenge of internationalisation, forgetting, or unaware, that in 1961 one in six of Massey's students came from outside New Zealand. We fret about the threats to university autonomy from political interference. So, too, did the university's founders in the 1920s, George Fowlds, Geoffrey Peren and William Riddet.

After a quarter of a century of being a multi-campus university, we still struggle with the consequential problems, puzzling over whether Massey is an empire or a federation. As restructurings have been layered over restructurings, the extent to which this has been a long-term problem has often been forgotten. Sometimes the same issues have emerged in different guises. In 2013, Massey, in concert with the other universities, opposed attempts to increase government influence on their governing councils, fearing them as an attack on the hallowed principles of the Education Act 1989. In 1989, Massey's Vice-Chancellor, Neil Waters, regarded the same piece of legislation as a dangerous attack on the university's autonomy.

Yet this story is not just one of continuity. Much has changed and is changing, but even here this change can have a longer trajectory. In recent decades, Massey, like almost all similar institutions, has faced competition on a global scale. Universities once were 'the University of': of Edinburgh, of Auckland, or even Victoria University of Wellington. From the very beginning, Massey was different. Yes, there was local patronage: Palmerston North was proud of, and owned, its agricultural college. But it was not a college for Palmerston North: it was a special school serving the whole of the country (or, if Lincoln had had its way, the North Island).

Other university colleges began with a truly local constituency then campaigned to have the national status of special schools, but Massey went beyond Palmerston North and the Manawātū from the very beginning. This continued after the metamorphosis of the agricultural college into a university in 1964.

For a brief period the university became Massey University of the Manawatu.

This name reflected a local campaign to have a university that was focused on a particular place. But the name was soon shortened to Massey University, recognising its broader relationship not only with the country's agricultural sector but also with its extramural student body and even with a developing world. Massey's sense of being part of the global scientific community goes back to the 1930s, and was dramatically expanded through its involvement in the Colombo Plan during the 1950s. Attempts to create partnerships within and beyond New Zealand were a defining feature of Massey in the 1980s, when government still regarded international students as a threat rather than as New Zealand universities' economic salvation.

SOME RECENT DEVELOPMENTS in Massey's history have fewer precedents. One of the most significant of these has been the decline of the university run by academics for academics, often despite the best intentions of university councils. Increasing size and complexity, reflecting the very large budgets and assets managed by universities, has led to a greater level of managerialism. Professional managers rather than part-time academics play a much greater role in the university's management and its governance than they ever did in the past. Although some of this change has been gradual, the dramatic restructuring of Massey University that occurred just prior to the turn of the millennium significantly changed the relationships between the professorial staff and line management. The role of academic governance was weakened, leaving Massey not only more businesslike but also more like a business. This transformation and the challenges associated with it have become the universal experiences of universities.

Precedents in the past may inform present discussions, but they often disguise the extent of change. An academic-led university was not egalitarian, and especially not at Massey. For much of Massey's history, principals and vice-chancellors have been far more hands-on than was usually the case in New Zealand universities. Geoffrey Peren and Alan Stewart, who steered Massey through its first half-century, had little doubt about their responsibility to make decisions, small and large. Tensions between Massey's council and the principals and vice-chancellors, academic staff and students even carried with them the ambiguity inherited from a distant monastic past.

Some cherished values of academic life are more recent than often thought,

however. The idea of academic freedom, now so closely attached to the rights of individuals to act as the critic and conscience of society, is relatively new. Until the 1960s, academic freedom was almost exclusively found in the freedom of the institution from political interference — not freedom of an individual academic to be ‘critic and conscience of society’, as it would be enshrined in the Education Act 1989.

Academic freedom rested in the university council’s prerogative to determine the institution’s path. Hierarchy and collegiality have always been uneasily intertwined. At Massey, where they were divided, principal and vice-chancellor ruled. Collegiality implied the acceptance of their decisions, with a belief that academic leadership was rooted in academic experience, based on scholarship in a discipline. As university management has become more professional and less academic, new tensions have arisen between management and collegiality.

This history explores these questions and in doing so is very different from the recent histories of Waikato and Victoria, and also of the yet to be published, new history of Otago. This is not a comprehensive, bottom-up or inclusive history. The university’s myriad departments, faculties, research centres and support services do not have their histories told here. It is also, largely for archival reasons, limited to the period prior to 2002. This history is deliberately top-down and big-picture, focusing on the institution as a whole; it is my hope that this history’s absences, which many will see as its failings, will inspire future micro-histories. And although this history was commissioned to celebrate its half-century as a university, Massey’s centenary is little more than a decade away.

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