

Myth New Zealand

JUSTIN BROWN



WHATEVER HAPPENED TO NUMBER 8 WIRE,
EIGHTY MILLION SHEEP, A GOOD KEEN MAN,
THE PAVLOVA AND THE GREATEST PLACE
IN THE WORLD TO BRING UP KIDS?

with CD of original
Kiwi songs

Hey, and thanks for stopping by to check out the first chapter of my latest book, Myth New Zealand. It was something I felt needed to be written for confused Kiwis, myself included. I had a stack of fun researching the project and met some brilliant New Zealanders. Time is precious. I'm not going to rabbit on. Enjoy the chapter, buy the book (!) and I'll see you on the beach. In bare feet. With fish and chips and lime milkshake.

Choice.

One day in my not-too-distant past, I realised by chance I had turned 36 and a half.

Initially I thought those first grey hairs were from painting the house that morning. But no, there they were, in full view, having a party on the side of my head. By sheer coincidence, I also learned that same week that the average age of a New Zealander was 36 and a half. My first reaction was to leap about and theatrically celebrate the fact I'd officially become 'the average New Zealander.'

Sometimes you shouldn't joke about such things. It didn't take long for me to run a stocktake on the rest of my life - married, two kids, a car that looked like ten thousand others, unpaid bills on the kitchen bench, an un-mown lawn and three loads of unfolded washing. If I were any good with a hammer I'd even have the picket fence. Bloody hell, I thought, drinking an average cup of coffee in an average cafe, how average can you get?

At school, being normal means you avoid getting a hiding. Once you reach the outside world, the opposite is encouraged. Ordinary is fine as long as an 'extra' prefaces it. But I promise you, when I went to Kapiti College in the 1980s, my aim wasn't to grow up to become normal. Far from it. In my quest to dodge mediocrity, I used to harass my teacher, Mrs Noble-Campbell, with constant questions. 'The problem with you, Justin Brown, is that you ask too many questions,' she'd say. 'How can you ask too many questions?' I would ask.

I haven't changed. Whenever something flummoxes me, my natural instinct is to question it until it holds mysteries no more. But had I really turned into Mr Average New Zealand? If not, who has? When I think 'average', I think corned beef, the \$2 Shop and Telecom. Is that the sort of life I and other Kiwis aspire to? Is there even such a thing as the 'average' New Zealander? I tried to answer my own questions, feeding myself the scraps of information I'd grown up with. The stuff that has been drummed into us from birth. We Kiwis love rugby, racing and beer. We love blokey things like inventing stuff with bits of Number 8 fencing wire. We're surrounded by sheep and we live in the greenest, cleanest, safest place in the world. It's the best country to bring up the kids. Everyone's equal and though we don't agree on everything, we all want to stuff the Aussies.

I put down my trim double-shot cappuccino and looked out of the window of the chic inner-city Auckland cafe where I was trying to get a WIFI connection. Outside, parking wardens marked tyres, ensuring their quota was reached. I saw a Hello Kitty shop across the road and watched as men wearing women's sunglasses drove past in shiny imported cars. Trendy soccer mums pulled up at the lights in 4x4 beasts fit for scaling mountains and traversing rocky streams.

Not a sheep in sight, not a black singlet nor a pair of gumboots. Where were the kids on bikes? Where were the people stopping to say giddyay and ask about last night's game? When my limp panini arrived, I sighed. I scoured the blackboard for a pie, Lamington, egg sandwich or pot of tea. No such luck. Everything was written in Italian or French and, unbelievably, cost less than an hour's parking.

My God, where was I?

I felt I was in a country I couldn't name. Somehow I'd been spirited from the Land Called New Zild and taken to a place that was . . . well, I was no longer sure. I'm not good at sitting still. Every man needs a cause. Nelson Mandela fought apartheid. Martin Luther King fought civil injustice. Mother Teresa fought poverty. My mission would not help mankind but it would mean a lot to me. I would try to find this place called New Zealand, the place I called home, and find out whether it was still the place of legends – or myths. It was the perfect chance to pack my notebook and a guitar to set out on a journey of discovery. As Mrs Noble-Campbell could attest, I was tops at asking questions. Just not so good at understanding the answers.

I wanted to find out what was true and not true about the stuff we constantly peddle as 'the truth' about New Zealand. I would challenge a few of our sacred cows and ask the questions we store in our heads but don't say out loud. I was aware it would lead me into the murky area of statistics, all of which can be twisted and made to support any argument. I knew any three politicians could give me three different versions of their truths. And I knew some stuff would just completely bamboozle me because I'm not an expert in any of it.

But surely I could tackle the basic questions. Where is the good keen bloke? Where are the new Burt Munroes? Does anyone still eat pavlova? As a father of two young girls I needed to ask: is New Zealand a great

place to bring up the kids? If the 'average' Kiwi loves rugby, racing and beer, when's the last time you nipped down to the TAB to make a lazy bet? Who these days can afford to rent, let alone own, a quarter acre paradise?

Part of me hoped I was just out of touch, a townie in a bubble that insulates me from the Real World. But the more mates I talked to, the more I found they wanted to know the same things: Who are we? What are we? I reckon I join countless confused Kiwis in asking those questions. What was bothering me was a problem for many of us. So few of us are experts in anything. I would do my best to figure things out and if it left me more confused, then so be it. If I've mangled some important bits of data, then so be it. I make no apologies, because a lost man should never say sorry for yelling out for help. I'm not promising all the answers in this book, but I've got a hell of a lot of the questions.

In this country, everyone seems to want things to be like they used to be, when we used to walk to the dairy in bare feet and play Go Home Stay Home till dark. It was a time when no one we knew had car crashes and there weren't any murders. Summers went on for ever. You didn't need a helmet for your bike and every second family seemed to be making go-karts. The trampoline had a sprinkler beneath it, going into 'town' was a mission and you weren't anyone until you had a key to the school swimming pool. These images still exist, but usually in clever television ads that aim to remind us of a bygone era.

I was born the year after Austin Mitchell wrote his much heralded book *Half Gallon Quarter Acre Pavlova Paradise*, a book that helped perpetuate the image of the greatest little country in the world. So much has changed since. If Mitchell was writing his book for the 21st century, the title would need to be something like *1.9 Litre, 0.2 Hectare Sugar-Free Low Fat Dairy-Free Dessert Paradise* (may contain nuts). A year after Mitchell's book hit the shelves, Fred Dagg made his first appearance on New Zealand television. It was 1973, Norman Kirk was in charge, Shona Laing had just won best new artist at the New Zealand music awards and the nation's number one single was *Damn the Dam* by John Hanlon. Future sporting heroes Ruben Wiki, Stephen

Fleming and Tana Umaga popped out the same year, as did colour on our television screens.

And it was here that Fred Dagg's long affair with the Kiwi public began. The bloke from Taihape, wearing only a floppy hat, black singlet, tattered shorts and gumboots, was set to become one of our most celebrated icons. But why exactly? Clearly a good deal had to do with the fact that Kiwis could see themselves in Fred. He did things 'on the quiet.' He was a joker. He didn't suffer fools. He knew he lived in paradise. And he wore gumboots. As I watch the *The Fred Dagg Anthology* on DVD, I ask myself, if Fred was a mirror of ourselves all those moons ago, where do we stand as a nation today? Clearly Fred lived in a fictional world, but the stuff he talked about was all a part of Kiwis' everyday lives. Which begs the question – is New Zealand still like that? Was New Zealand ever really like that? Or is this romantic view of Godzone something we conveniently cling to for nostalgia's sake? (I told you I was big on questions).

I figured the best place to start was to read the newspaper from the week I was born. That way I could at least, albeit with hindsight, understand more about the country I was brought into. As I trudged to the third floor of the Auckland City Library, I joined other Kiwis perched over microfiche machines keen to gather turgid details on family history, or gather nostalgic headlines for a friend's 50th. I was a novice at collecting information in this way. In fact, it was my first time. I had to ask the elderly lady to my left how to work the machine. She suggested I grab a higher seat, so I wouldn't crane my neck every time I needed to read information on the screen. I thanked her and she resumed the argument with her husband.

The New Zealand Herald — December 6, 1973

The first headline may as well have been from last week: FUEL TROUBLES COULD BRING ATOM POWER. New Zealand's Minister of Electricity, Mr McGuigan, explained that 'the uncertainty over the future of oil supplies could mean a nuclear power station will be built in New Zealand earlier than originally planned.' Four decades later and we still squabble over lake levels and nuclear power. As I scrolled down the page another article grabbed my eye: HOUSEWIVES HIT NEXT? Mouth agasp, I read that 'New Zealand housewives are being

told they may have to reduce their detergents and go back to old fashioned soaps if the oil crisis continued.' I was grateful Kim Hill, Helen Clark and a revived and angry Kate Sheppard were nowhere in the vicinity.

Next article: AN APPLE JUICE, COBBER? Following Norman Kirk's recent visit to Australia, MPs had been told they would probably be offered non alcoholic apple juice (definitely not cider) at future parliamentary receptions. This was because Parliament broke into uproar, with two senior opposition members being escorted out of the House of Representatives, immediately after a reception for the New Zealand prime minister. The Australian prime minister accused one member of being drunk. The speaker of the House of Representatives, Mr Cope, told the House that he had conducted an informal poll on whether apple juice should be supplied, instead of only alcoholic drinks, at future receptions for visiting dignitaries. As the members broke into laughter, Mr Cope said: 'Eight were in favour of apple juice, nine were in favour of alcoholic beverages, 16 were undecided and 72 said they had never tasted apple juice.'

I looked in disbelief at the screen. I cast an eye over the elderly couples sitting at other screens, realising they had been in their prime when these stories were news. I took a moment to reflect. The New Zealand I was born into presumed the stove scrubber was a woman (probably true), nuclear power was a dead cert (yawn) and the vast majority of Antipodean MPs hadn't tried anything quite as exotic as apple juice. All the paper needed was a flag debate.

By now I was hooked. Page two: INJURED BURGLAR CAN GET COMPENSATION. A Mr J. Brown (no relation) had the audacity to ask for compensation for an injury suffered while breaking into someone's house. This seemed almost as ridiculous as when I learned on my recent trip to India that beggars had gone on strike. I should have fed the parking meter but couldn't take my eyes from the screen. DOCTOR WOULD LIKE ALL FAMILY AT PUB - Dr F. MacDonald, the medical superintendent of the Kingseat psychiatric hospital, was on a personal crusade to allow families to take kids to the boozier. And he had a point: 'It is essential that young people be taught how to use alcohol.' The young, he said, received a very defective education in regard to alcohol. They were taught it was bad to get drunk but often the only

times children saw their parents laughing and appearing to enjoy themselves was when they saw them intoxicated.

As it was approaching Christmas, the paper's editorial warned of the traditional 'shoplifting season', lamenting that such trends caused the country to lose a million dollars a month with a sharp rise during the school holidays. Is all this starting to sound spookily familiar? A warning was also conveyed that 'those who drink and drive over Christmas will be dealt with firmly.' Such advice was given by Mr H.Y. Gilliland, SM, in the Auckland Magistrate's Court. Mr Gilliland offered more festive words of wisdom. 'People who attend Christmas parties should leave their car at home.'

Meanwhile, D.W of Mt Albert told us in Readers' Views that 'if crash helmets were worn in cars would this not generate a false sense of security and induce speeding - a desire to emulate the greats in motor racing?' In the sports section, a 17-year-old John Reid, the New Zealand secondary schools cricket captain, had scored 302 runs over three successive innings without being dismissed once. Reid, of course, went on to become one of our best players. The paper's classifieds advertised jobs for tea ladies and theatre doormen.

I know we'll laugh at today's headlines in years to come but what I found in the Auckland City Library cracked me up. I felt as if I were reading a comedy script, not the history of my birth place. These seemed like fictional characters in some weird play. With this in mind, there was only one thing to do: look through the New Zealand Women's Weekly for the same week. With a cover proclaiming Birth Control Wing To Sterilization and How To Get Everything Done By December 25, the Weekly was a far less steamy read than it is today. Max Cryer was positively beaming in a photo-story hailing him as New Zealand Entertainer of the Year and a reporter had been sent on a junket to the unveiling of the Sydney Opera House. Why the Solo Parent Forum ever disappeared I'll never know (or the promotion for the Nymph Ladies' Razor, or ads for girdles and corselettes). But some things never change and as reliable as an old pair of slippers, there was the recipe from Alison Holst telling us how to whip up Sherried Apricot Jelly.

These findings only spurred me on and heightened my curiosity. This was going to be fun! All those years of not paying attention in Social Studies was about to pay off.

I already had a stack of questions and didn't know if Mrs Noble Campbell was still around.