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*Kide easy, stranger:  
Surrender to the sky  
Your heart of anger*  
JAMES K BAXTER

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## Sinclair, Keith

### IN BRIEF

Poet and historian Keith Sinclair was born the oldest son of a rambunctious and impoverished family of ten. His reputation as a charismatic history professor and a prolific, accessible scholar of New Zealand history spread far beyond New Zealand's universities. His bestselling *History of New Zealand* demonstrated his commitment to readable yet responsible history and his thirst for archival research made him New Zealand's leading historian, breaking new ground, for example, in his 1957 *Origins of the Maori Wars*. He was among the first to treat New Zealand biography as a serious form and was also a significant poet of the post-war generation.

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### FROM THE OXFORD COMPANION TO NEW ZEALAND LITERATURE

**Sinclair, Keith** (1922–1993), poet and historian, was born in Auckland, and grew up in Point Chevalier beside the Waitemata Harbour, the oldest son of a rambunctious and impoverished family of ten. Their idyllic harbourside adventures in the 1920s and 1930s are recalled in Sinclair's posthumously published autobiography, *Halfway Round the Harbour* (1993). His many adventures on the Meola reef, which juts into the Waitemata, form the basis for one of his most anthologised poems, 'The Ballad of Meola Creek', and were recreated in fictional form in *Reefs of Fire* (1977), a vivid foray into children's literature. Both texts testify to Sinclair's lifelong passion for Auckland's land and seascapes, as well as to his obsession with recording the material facts which make New Zealand distinctive. His enduring legacy is his commitment to being a historian of New Zealand trained in New Zealand.

After Mount Albert Grammar School, Sinclair studied at Auckland Teachers' College and part-time at Auckland University. He completed his BA overseas on military service at the end of World War 2. After the war, he took his MA and PhD in history at Auckland. He joined the Auckland history department in 1947, became a professor in 1963 and, apart from a brief dab into national politics (in 1969 he was member for Eden for three weeks, but lost the seat by sixty-seven postal votes), taught there until retirement. By then his reputation as a charismatic lecturer and a gifted, prolific and accessible scholar of New Zealand history had spread far beyond New Zealand's universities. His best-selling *History of New Zealand* (1957), which went through several editions and still sells well after forty years, demonstrates his commitment to readable yet responsible history. In a series of witty and jargon-free chapters, Sinclair traces New Zealand's history, from Māui's fishing up the North Island (Te Ika a Māui) to the cold war alliance with the USA, focusing especially on issues of national character: bicultural, collectivist, yet ruggedly individual. Subsequent revisions lament the long reign of the National Party in the 1960s–70s and the free-market reforms of the post-1984 period. The *History* set the agenda for much research that followed; Sinclair's old-fashioned romance of national destiny moved generations of readers. He saved scholarly treatment of the 'nature' of the 'nation' for his later cultural history, *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity* (1986), which traced the scars of myths of war and sport on the New Zealand psyche. His other populist endeavours were celebratory: several widely read school text books; the lavish *Looking Back: A Photographic History of New Zealand* (1978); and *The Story of New Zealand* (1985), co-authored with Judith Bassett and Marcia Stenson.

Sinclair's prodigious thirst for archival research made him the first and leading historian in many genres of New Zealand writing. He helped found the New Zealand Journal of History in 1967. The respect granted Māori issues and personalities in his *History of New Zealand* reflected the depth of research for his doctoral dissertation, published as the ground-breaking *Origins of the Maori Wars* (1957), which was not superseded until the late 1980s by James Belich's *New Zealand Wars*. Sinclair sustained his interest in the Māori, becoming fluent enough to read the massive archive of nineteenth-century Māori documents, which lay behind his elegiac social and cultural history, *Kinds of Peace: Maori People After the Wars 1870–85* (1991). His success as a Pākehā historian of the Māori paved the way for later historians, especially his students Judith Binney and Claudia Orange. He never published a novel, though *Reefs of Fire* shows a narrative talent. He developed his interest in prose narrative in his two political biographies, *William Pember Reeves: New Zealand Fabian* (1965) and *Walter Nash* (1976). He was among the first to treat New Zealand biography as a serious form. He relates with gusto the public lives of

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*Kinds of Peace*



Walter Nash



Moontalk



both politicians, surrounding glimpses of their private lives with evocations of New Zealand's political landscape at crucial points in its development as a modern state. His example has been followed, in the works of Raewyn Dalziel (his second wife) and his former colleagues, Barry Gustafson and Michael Bassett. His *Open Account: A History of the Bank of New South Wales in New Zealand* (1961), co-authored with W.F. Mandle, showed the possibilities for engaging and non-sycophantic history of private businesses. Sinclair even managed to make the *History of the University of Auckland 1883-1983* (1983) entertaining and opinionated. Sinclair's colleague, R.C.J. Stone, continues to explore the labyrinthine history of Auckland businesses and businessmen.

Sinclair published five books of poetry: *Songs for a Summer* (1952), *Strangers or Beasts* (1954), *A Time to Embrace* (1963), *The Firewheel Tree* (1974) and *Moontalk* (1993). These were produced perhaps out of his generation's commitment to creating a national poetry, but they have energy, vividness, a witty resourcefulness of language and tone and a metaphysical quality that R.A. Copland called 'direct sensuous thinking'. His strongest poems rework historical themes: 'Memorial to a Missionary' was highly praised by Curnow ('Sinclair has matched a historian's understanding with a poet's insight ... no other poem ... contains, in so many glances of a wary imagination, such a span of our history'). It is frequently anthologised. The love poems are often compellingly sensual. The rollicking castaways 'Ballad of Half-Moon Bay' shows the varied vigour of voice. Despite Sinclair's modest claim in his autobiography that he and Kendrick Smithyman together formed the 'Mudflat School' of New Zealand poetry, he is a significant poet of the post-war generation. His greatest literary achievement, nevertheless, remains in his many histories, which record his passion for New Zealand in his distinctively terse, blunt yet convincing style.

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Author entry from *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, edited by Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie (1998).



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#### MEDIA LINKS AND CLIPS

- There is a bibliography about this author in the Auckland University Library's [New Zealand Literature file](#).

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Phone 0064 4 801 5546  
Level 4, Stephenson & Turner House, 156 Victoria St, Te Aro  
Wellington 6011, New Zealand

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