KIWI KEITH – PORTRAIT OF A PM

Continued from page 11

precise elocution and "plummy" voice Keith Holyoake was often ridiculed for later in life. He always denied it was put on – it was simply something he and his siblings learned at their mother's knee.

Entering politics had never crossed his mind. The Motueka electorate had been a Reform Party stronghold for 14 years but in the 1928 general election it was unexpectedly won by George Black, a 24-year-old supporter of Sir Joseph Ward's newly formed United Party.

The Reform Party immediately began looking for someone to stand against him and Keith Holyoake, not even a party member, was suggested. When he was asked to put his name forward he was saving money to go overseas to see the world. If he stood, the money would be required for his election campaign.

Older brother Conrad encouraged him, saying he could go overseas any time but would remain a back-country fruit farmer all his life if he didn't give it a go.

Holyoake put his name in the ring and was selected ahead of four older, more experienced men.

The Motueka electorate was large with a mixed constituency. The Depression and resulting unemployment, business failures and reduced farm incomes, had forced the United and Reform Parties to form a coalition Government. One of its retrenchments was to stop work on Nelson's railway, resulting in 300 workers losing their jobs.

Holyoake's task to win votes for the Government in this environment was never going to be easy. He struggled with public speaking but, following a crash course, was sent on the road to address a series of public meetings.

One of his first was in Reefton, a Labour stronghold.The meeting was in Holyoake's hotel room with his small audience arriving and departing via the fire escape.

Another time, a unanimous vote of no-confidence in the candidate was passed and a threat made to throw him and his car off a cliff. Unsurprisingly, Holyoake failed to lift the seat from Black and put all thoughts of politics out of his mind.

But his bid for the Motueka seat brought him to the attention of the powerful farming lobby. The newly formed Farmers Union came to him in 1932 and before he knew it, he was not only a member but also union chairman. In time, Keith Holyoake became known as one of New Zealand's great farmer politicians.

He would probably have stayed a farmer if it were not for the suicide in October 1932 of George Black. A coroner found the Motueka MP had taken cyanide and it was revealed he "was worried financially" and had been a voluntary patient in a psychiatric hospital.

Such tragic deaths were not uncommon during the Depression and Black left a widow and young child. However, his death opened an opportunity for Holyoake to make a second bid for a Parliamentary seat.

He won the Motueka seat in the 1932 by-election and became Parliament's youngest MP by 13 years. Being the youngest did not mean he was a push-over. In his maiden speech he stood up against his own Government's bill, which if passed, would have severely increased taxes on tobacco and seriously damaged Motueka's burgeoning tobacco industry.

Holyoake's impassioned speech against the proposed legislation earned him the prime minister's congratulations and rewording of the bill in the tobacco growers' favour.

In 1934 Keith Holyoake married Norma Ingram, who was born in Motueka in 1909. They met at the local tennis club and were engaged for five years before eloping to Wellington and marrying at the registry office on September 24, 1934. It is believed Esther's resistance to Norma as her son's bride was behind the elopement, but once they had tied the knot, Esther insisted the newlyweds return home and have a proper church wedding, which they did on January 11, 1935.

Keith and Norma Holyoake had five children. The first four, Roger, Peter, Diane and Lynley, were all born in Motueka and the fifth, Keitha, in Dannevirke. This is where the family moved in 1942 so Holyoake could contest the safe National seat of Pahiatua following his defeat in the 1938 general election.

For some years he retained the Palmdale farm, while also running Kia Ora, a farm near Dannevirke. He won the seat in the 1943 general election. Holyoake held Pahiatua until his retirement from politics in 1977.

In 1946, he became deputy leader of the National Party and when it ended 14 years of Labour Government in the 1949 election, he was appointed deputy prime minister and minister of agriculture.

"He was renowned for having his name, home address and phone number in the Wellington telephone directory.

In 1957, Holyoake became party leader and prime minister when Sid Holland retired due to ill-health, 10 weeks out from the general election. Although National lost to Labour, it was back in power in 1960 and Holyoake remained prime minister until he stood aside in 1972.

Knighted in 1970, he didn't retire from politics until 1977 when he was made a Knight of the Garter by the Queen and controversially appointed governor-general. He held the vice-regal role for three years and retired from public life in 1980. He died in Wellington in December 1983.

In his half century in politics, Holyoake oversaw a tumultuous time in New Zealand politics, including New Zealand's decreasing agricultural dependence on the United Kingdom, involvement in the Vietnam War and the development of an anti-nuclear policy. But throughout, he remained a man of the people, as demonstrated in many delightful stories told about him.

As prime minister, Holyoake made himself available to anyone who wanted to talk to him. At Parliament "the door of Room 1", the office of the prime minister, "is open to anybody – diplomat or dustman – who has legitimate business with the Prime Minister", wrote a journalist in 1961.

He was renowned for having his name, home address and phone number in the Wellington telephone directory. People rang him day and night. When asked why he put up with it his curt reply was: "I am a public servant and if people want to phone me they're entitled to do so".

One day a stranger rang from the Wellington Train Station to say they had lost their luggage. He walked down to help look for it.

As a farmer, it was second nature for Holyoake to grow as much of his own food as possible and during food shortages and high prices in 1952, he suggested more people should have vegetable gardens. Reporters, sceptical at his claim to be almost self-sufficient, found he was growing 30 different vegetables when they visited him at home.

In the family: Keith Holyoake's seven-a-side rugby team which won the 1930 Motueka tournament. Back row from left: Nelson (cousin) and Oscar (brother); middle row from left: Lake (cousin), Keith (captain), Jack (cousin); Front row from left: Harold (brother), Claude (brother). Source: IAN HOLYOAKE

He was also well-known for towing loads of sheep manure from his farm to Wellington. One story recalls a Wairarapa traffic officer stopping a car travelling at night with an uncovered trailer load of sheep manure. To his surprise and consternation the driver was the prime minister.

On another occasion, Holyoake's driver told him about the clay soil at his new home. The Prime Minister demanded to see it and, after telling the man's wife to "put the jug on", inspected the garden. Advising his driver to get some seaweed, Holyoake promised to bring a trailer of old hay from his farm and gave instructions on how to layer it all. The result apparently was a wonderful garden.

Often he would spend the weekend working on his holiday property at Kinloch, on the shores of Lake Taupo, where he could shrug off the mantle of prime minister and simply be Keith.

One day, visitors were cheerfully greeted by a man planting trees. He was dressed in a straw hat, singlet and baggy pants – rotten at the cuffs and held up by binder twine, worn and muddy boots and with three days' growth of beard.

Asking for the person in charge, they were sent down to the station manager. Mentioning to him they had been given directions by the old farm worker they were astonished to hear he was also the prime minister. You couldn't take the farmer out of the politician.

What, his son-in-law Ken Comber mused, must the porter at the Savoy Hotel in London have thought on one occasion when unpacking the prime minister of New Zealand's suitcase. "He hung up the suits, put away the ties, socks etc – the nuts, bolts, paperclips, washers and, inevitable binder twine, he arrayed on top of the dresser!"

Kiwi Keith, Portrait of a PM runs at the Nelson Provincial Museum until November 3, 2013.

Acknowledgements: Kiwi Keith, A Biography of Keith Holyoake, Barry Gustafson, 2007, Sir Keith Holyoake; Towards a Political Biography, edited by Margaret Clark, 1997; The Holyoake Years, Ross Doughty, 1977.

BOOK REVIEW

World of tiny things

Collins Pocket Guide to New Zealand Minibeasts, by Terence Lindsey and Rod Morris
HarperCollins Publishers
$24.99. 144 pages
Reviewed by Sarah Dunn

There was only one reason I initially wanted to review this book, and I'll come right out with it – "minibeasts" is one of the most appealing terms I've ever heard. It conjures up images of tiny buffalo or cattle, roaming through a miniature landscape in ant-like herds. It's adorable.

As it turns out, the term "minibeasts" refers to a subset of rather less charming small creatures. This category includes earthworms, molluscs, spiders, crustaceans, velvet-worms and other insects of the kind that might typically be found in a drop of water or a shovelful of dirt from your garden.

The miracle of this book is that it succeeds in presenting actual minibeasts as interesting little beings in their own right. I've found children's books tend to go for the gross-out factor when presenting animals such as leeches and fleas for inspection, but the *Collins Pocket Guide* goes to great lengths to explain that these creatures are simply doing their best to exist as part of the natural world. Each beast gets a colour photograph and information explaining what it looks like, where it lives, what it is called and what it does. There is also a good index which includes Latin, Maori and colloquial names.

As the introduction explains, minibeasts are often overlooked but well worth an investigation.

"They may be small, they may be obscure – but they are New Zealand treasures just the same. They're fascinating, and some need help just as badly as some of the bigger, flashier extroverts of the endangered animal set."

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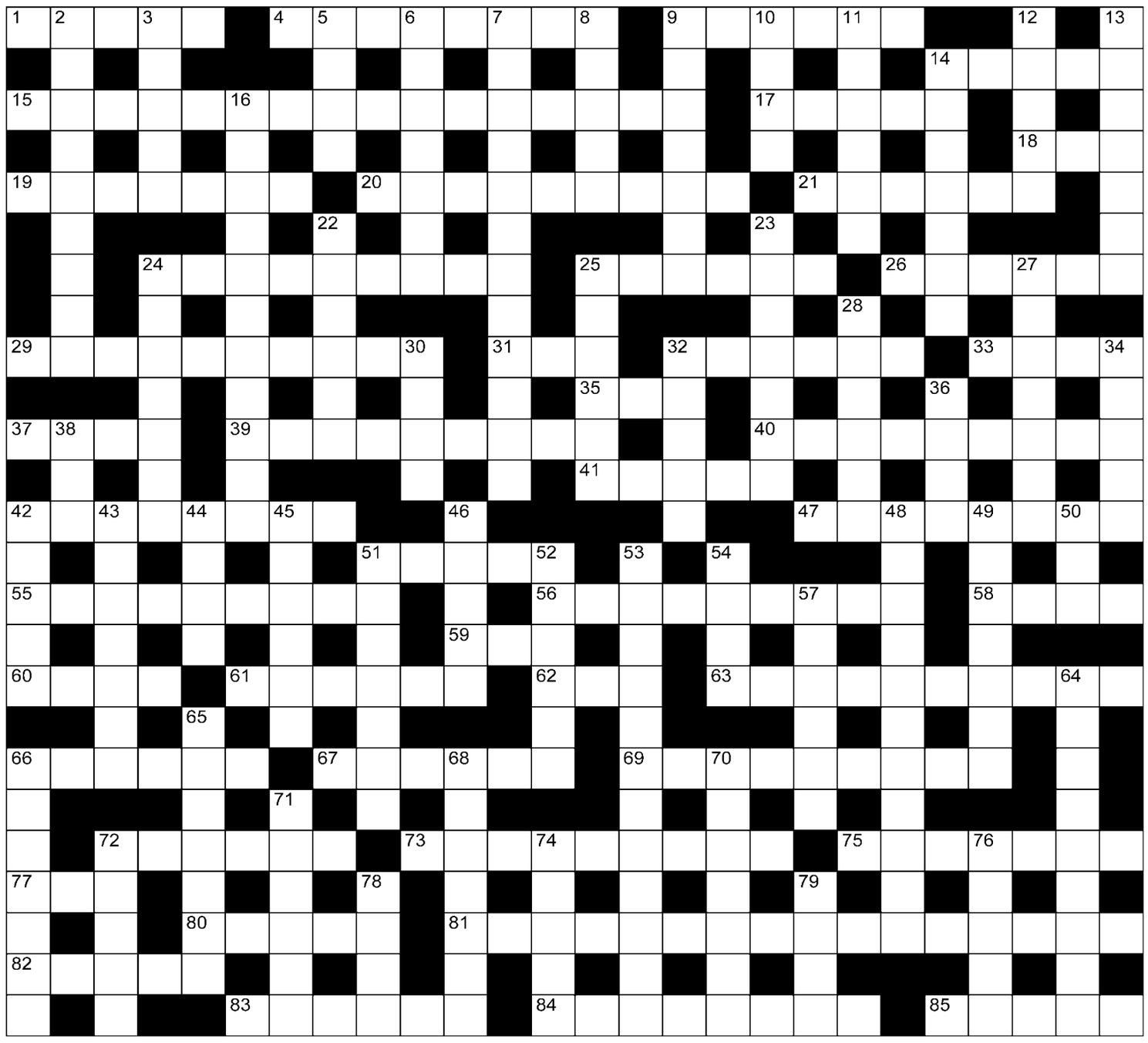

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