New Zealand was the last major landmass, other than Antarctica, to be settled by humans. The story of this rugged and dynamic land is beautifully narrated, from its origins in Gondwana some 80 million years ago to the twenty-first century. Philippa Mein Smith highlights the effects of the country’s smallness and isolation, from its late settlement by Polynesian voyagers and colonisation by Europeans – and the exchanges that made these people Maori and Pakeha – to the dramatic struggles over land and more recent efforts to manage global economic forces. In the late twentieth century, new upheavals saw governments demolish institutions that had once defined New Zealand, and economic problems damage a country dependent on exports.

A Concise History of New Zealand places New Zealand in its global and regional context, linked to Britain, immersed in the Pacific and part of Australasia. It unravels the key moments – the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, the Anzac landing at Gallipoli, the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior – showing their role as nation-building myths and connecting them with the less dramatic forces, economic and social, that have also shaped contemporary New Zealand.

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PHILIPPA MEIN SMITH
In memory of my mother Barbara Ann Staff
whose stories and library
contributed to this book
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Philippa Mein Smith
August 2004
It is a pleasure to introduce this history to readers who may know little about New Zealand other than that it is located in the Southern Hemisphere, somewhere near Australia. Often people are surprised to find how far New Zealand is from Australia. They may know the country from film, sometimes from art, music or novels, or sport, or business that takes them there; or travel. Some are familiar with national brands, such as Anchor butter and the All Blacks.

Local readers have their own expectations of how the country’s history is, or ought to be, written. The basic narrative that they require is of equal relevance to the visitor. I wrote this concise history for my students, so that I could comprehend the story of New Zealand, and explain its significance to them; I also kept in mind friends overseas, and people I have met while travelling. Emphases reflect my understanding and interests; but they also indicate where gaps exist in existing histories of New Zealand. Certain themes, such as literature, are already expertly covered elsewhere. This is not an alternative history, but a broadening of the histories that have already been written.

Neither is this an isolated history; the aim is to place New Zealand history in global and Pacific context. This requires a comparative element, especially concerning parallels with Australia. Globalisation is a core theme of this book. One objective is to explore the persistent tension in New Zealand’s short history between domestic politics and global and regional pressures and to examine the importance of the effects of smallness and isolation.
Health and social issues are central to this country’s past (and present) international reputation, and continue to inform beliefs about national identity. Childbirth is one example of how this small country tracks international trends. Demographic contours are too often ignored; here population and defence issues are treated together, alongside economic problems that have consistently beleaguered a country dependent on exports. Maori–European interactions are pivotal in all histories, but their internal dynamics, prominent at home, need to be balanced by an external regard for foreign affairs.

My approach is to highlight themes that explain what has happened. I try to unravel the way in which key moments and episodes in New Zealand history contribute to the country’s national myths. Such events include the Treaty of Waitangi signing, the Anzac landing at Gallipoli, and the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior*. But there is more to history than war – sex (women and children, fertility) and money (economic history) drive societies. There is more to myth-making than war. Migrants know little of Anzac legends, but often come here because of myths about New Zealand as a good place to bring up children, as an Arcadia and a social laboratory. Since these are frequently the stuff of marketing exercises, it is often these myths of New Zealand that people overseas first encounter. They therefore beg to be explained, or at least investigated.