

# Weekend

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# KIWI KEITH

## PORTRAIT OF A PM

Farmer. MP. Prime minister. Governor-general. Sir Keith Holyoake was all of these, and more. But, explains **Karen Stade**, it is his back story as the kid from Riwaka and personal quirky stories that most fascinated her as she curated an exhibition about "Kiwi Keith", opened at the Nelson Provincial Museum last night by Prime Minister John Key.

**K**eith Holyoake, the kid from Riwaka who became prime minister, was first dubbed "Kiwi Keith" by his teacher at Brooklyn School to differentiate him from an Australian-born Holyoake cousin, also called Keith, who sat beside him in the classroom.

The name stuck – and, given the way he would eventually conduct himself in the corridors of power, it could hardly have been more appropriate.

Like his father Vic, Keith Holyoake was raised on the land. The outbreak of World War I a year after the family arrived back in Riwaka made finding farm labour tough and finances were tight. In fact, he missed out on a secondary school education because his parents could not afford to send him to college, unlike his older and younger brothers. Instead, he left school at the age of 12 and worked on the farm, where he became indispensable.

Although her second son's formal education was cut early, Esther Holyoake was determined he would continue learning at home. A teacher before she married, Esther had been educated at Nelson College for Girls when Kate Edgar, New Zealand's first female university graduate, was headmistress.

Esther insisted her son continue lessons at home after he finished work on the farm for the day. Each night he read in bed with a dictionary by his pillow so he could check the meaning of words.

Years later, he said: "I doubt whether I'd have been a better prime minister had I been a better, formally educated man".

Esther was punctilious in ensuring her children spoke well. Holyoake's eldest brother Conrad once remarked that "you daren't use bad grammar. Even at the table you had to be correct".

This early speech training was responsible, in part, for the very

### IN THE BEGINNING



**Family snap:** Vic and Esther Holyoake with baby Keith, Conrad and Muriel.  
Source: DIANE COMBER

The Holyokes were among the earliest settlers in Nelson's rural hinterlands. Richard Holyoake was a whaler when he first reached New Zealand shores in the early 1830s. He returned to England in 1833 and married. He later remarried after his first wife died.

Richard, 16-year old Eliza (nee Kimble) and their infant son, also Richard, arrived in Nelson in 1842 and went straight to Riwaka where they squatted on untitled land on Pah Rd, close to Cook's Corner. Eventually they became landowners and expanded their property with 10 hectares purchased from Thomas Rowling on Old Mill Rd at Brooklyn. In time, the Holyokes owned around 25ha bounded by Old Mill, Andersons and Umukuri Rds.

The Holyoke and Rowling families were neighbours for more than 100 years and coincidentally produced two New Zealand prime ministers – Sir Keith Holyoake and Sir Wallace

(Bill) Rowling, although from opposite sides of the political spectrum.

Richard and Eliza's son, Thomas Holyoake, married Laura Jacka, the daughter of Thomas Jacka, a teacher at Brooklyn and later a Motueka member of the Nelson Provincial Council.

Thomas and Laura's son Victor Holyoake married Esther Eves, the granddaughter of two pioneering families, the Eves and the Gibbs, who both arrived in Nelson in 1842.

Vic and Esther lived and worked on the Holyoake farm and their firstborn, Conrad, was delivered there by their neighbour, Mrs Rowling.

Keith Jacka Holyoake, the third of their seven children, was born in 1904 in Mangamutu, near Pahiatua in the North Island, where Vic and Esther had moved earlier. The family returned to Nelson in 1913 when Thomas Holyoake died and Vic took over the family farm.



**Apple picking on the Holyoake farm:** Keith Holyoake, sitting front left with the dog and his brother Harold.  
Source: IAN HOLYOAKE.

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**Well-spoken:** Keith Holyoake gives a rousing speech as prime minister in Nelson in 1963.  
Photo: NELSON PROVINCIAL MUSEUM, GEOFFREY C WOOD COLLECTION: 2413 FR3

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