

PART II.—PUBLIC HYGIENE.

I have the honour to submit my annual report for the year ended 31st March, 1939.

INTRODUCTION.

There are, roughly, four periods in New Zealand's sanitary history. The first period extended from the commencement of organized settlement to the passing of the first Public Health Act in 1872. During this period there was little, if any, sanitary control, and conditions can only be described as primitive.

The Act of 1872 and the second Health Act of 1876 ushered in the second period, during which there was control by a Central Board of Health and Local Boards, the functions of the latter being carried out by the local authorities throughout the colony. It is difficult at this distance of time and in the absence of reports to form an opinion of the work of these Boards, but the remarks of the Colonial Secretary in introducing the second reading of the Public Health Bill in 1900 indicate that conditions were very unsatisfactory. His remarks are quoted in the Acting-Director-General's section of this annual report.

With the passing of the Act of 1900 and the establishment of a Health Department under a Minister of Health the third period commenced. It was a period of great activity, a period during which the small staff of this infant Department fought a long and strenuous fight to improve the very unsatisfactory conditions then prevailing. It was during this period that the Sale of Food and Drugs Act came into force, and this has without doubt had its effect on the health of the community by ensuring that the public obtain wholesome, unadulterated foods. The influenza epidemic of 1918 demonstrated weaknesses in the powers given the Department for the performance of its function of the conservation of the public health, and in 1920 the present Health Act was passed. This comprehensive Act has stood for nineteen years without amendment, a tribute to those who drafted it. With the advance made in aviation and the near approach of the time when the country will be in touch with both eastern and the western hemispheres by air, amendment to enable the Department to exercise sanitary control over air traffic is necessary. Experience has also shown that some portions of the present Act could be improved, and amendments in this connection are at present under consideration.

SECTION I.—VITAL STATISTICS.

(Exclusive of Maoris unless otherwise stated.)

POPULATION.

The mean population of the Dominion for 1938 was estimated to be 1,519,606, an increase of 14,780 over the corresponding figure for the previous year.

BIRTHS.

The births of 27,249 living children were registered during 1938, as against 26,014 in 1937 and 24,837 in 1936. The birth-rate per 1,000 of mean population was 17·93. The general course of the rate during the past five years is shown in the following table:—

Births (Number and Rate) in New Zealand, 1934–38.

Year.	Total Number of Births registered.	Birth-rate per 1,000 of Mean Population.
1934	24,322	16·51
1935	23,965	16·17
1936	24,837	16·64
1937	26,014	17·29
1938	27,249	17·93

During the years 1874 to 1880 the birth-rate per thousand of mean population was over 40. By 1935 it had decreased to 16·17, but since that year it has shown an increase each year, but is still lower than prior to 1932.