“Fairness and Freedom: A History of Two Open Societies, New Zealand and the United States,” by David Hackett Fischer

By Colin Woodard, February 17, 2012 – The Washington Post

It’s said you cannot truly understand where you’re from until you’ve spent time elsewhere, and that’s perhaps especially true of a place as expansive and unwieldy as the United States, a continent-spanning federation riven by regional fissures and philosophical contradictions. Only by taking a step back — preferably way back — can one see it from the outside in its august complexity, compare and contrast it with other variations of the human experiment, and tease out the ideas and ideals that hold it together and those that distinguish it from anywhere else.

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David Hackett Fischer offers such an opportunity in his latest work, “Fairness and Freedom,” itself the outgrowth of a New Zealand sabbatical. The parallels between the island nation and our own were obvious: Both are open and democratic societies with British colonial origins, a frontier legacy, a history of mass immigration and widely remarked-upon senses of optimism.

But what really intrigued Fischer was a striking difference he recognized in their core values. Americans cherish freedom and liberty above all else, and much of our political history and public discourse has been about the meaning of these ideas. New Zealanders, by contrast, have organized their society around fairness, a principle that divides Americans. This book is the result of Fischer’s quest to understand how and why these two open societies came to take such different paths, and it provides valuable insight into the American identity.

Fischer is perhaps best known for “Albion’s Seed” (1989), which posited the existence of four competing “British folkways” in colonial America — each distinct in its founding values, ethnography, spirituality and societal structure — and showed how their respective influences have been felt thereafter. His “Liberty and Freedom” (2004) revealed how these regional cultures came to define the two guiding ideals of the American experiment in different and sometimes contradictory ways.

Given his past work, one might expect Fischer to have found an ethnographic basis for the differences between the two countries’ guiding principles, some revealing set of cultural distinctions between the peoples who initially colonized each place that set them on their distinctive paths. But the key difference, he argues, was a matter of timing. The American colonies were part of the “First British Empire,” which died when they became independent; their experience with London was largely confrontational, and the colonists were continually challenged to fight for their rights as Englishmen against imperial officials who denied that they possessed them. New Zealand was founded during the “Second British Empire,” which reached its apogee in the period from 1890 to 1945; during this era, London granted Britons abroad the same rights as those at home, and colonial ventures had an idealistic bent, an outgrowth of a civilizing mission in which fairness, decency and social justice received plenty of lip service. The Kiwis’ central concern wasn’t that the empire was tyrannical, but that it was hypocritical. “The irony of British imperial rule,” Fischer observes of this later era, “was that it inculcated its ethical ideals by failing to live up to them.”

Fairness is a concept that was unique to English, Norse and Scandinavian languages, Fischer reveals, and is properly understood as “not taking undue advantage of other people.” His exhaustive historical survey shows that Kiwis of all political persuasions have embraced fairness, even if they disagree on how it is achieved. Their heroes of sport, war and mountaineering are conspicuously celebrated for their decency toward others. Their parliamentary commissions sponsor programs to “promote fair play and good sporting behavior while discouraging a win-at-all-costs attitude among children.” It’s a country where everyone is insured against accidents — regardless of fault or cause — and is taxed to pay for it based on the danger of their profession; it’s more equitable than our system of tort litigation, which “brings large settlements to a few people . . . [while] most victims of accidents . . . get nothing.”

By comparison, Fischer’s survey of our history shows that Americans are often ambivalent about fairness. When veterans of earlier wars complained of being called up to fight in Vietnam as well while others had not served at all, President John F. Kennedy famously responded, “Life is unfair,” a notion that crops up regularly in our political discourse. Many American conservatives argue that fairness is “hostile to capitalism, destructive of national security, and dangerous to liberty,” and that unfairness is virtuous and inseparable from freedom.