Commemorating the First World War



AN ENDURING TRADITION of Anzac Day services throughout New Zealand has been the recitation of Laurence Binyon's *Ode of Remembrance*, which ends with the exhortation 'We will remember them'. Often the response given to Binyon's words is the phrase 'Lest we forget', taken from Rudyard Kipling's *Recessional*. The centennial of World War I has now provided New Zealanders with an opportunity to reconsider why and how they continue to commemorate this tumultuous conflict, and to reflect upon exactly what is now remembered

The essential events of the war provided the key dates of commemoration, neatly book-ended between the centennial of New Zealand's declaration of war on 4 August 1914 and the conclusion of the fighting on the Western Front on 11 November 1918. Remarkably, much of the commemorative activity mirrored New Zealand's collective response to the original events, which occurred half a world away. The initial euphoria surrounding the outbreak of war was soon followed by the shock and tragedy of Gallipoli, which itself was then eclipsed by the greater horrors of the Western Front and the grim reality of New Zealand's sustained war effort, resulting in a domestic preoccupation with commemoration of the nation's war dead, at the expense of the memory and welfare of those who survived the conflict.¹

New Zealand-based events proved the easiest to commemorate. Significant milestones were marked by re-enactments of the original events — for instance, a Dawn to Dusk return train trip from Invercargill to Dunedin to mark the embarkation of Otago and Southland troops in 1914, a route march over the Rimutaka Hills in 2015 to remember the troops who trained at Trentham and Featherston, or the nation-wide 'Roaring Chorus' to mark the end of the war in 1918.² Individual stories of triumph and tragedy were also remembered in print and in exhibitions, such as the legacy of Gallipoli war artist Horace Moore-Jones who was memorialized with both a published tribute and a bronze statue in Hamilton's main street, or personal accounts of the campaign by Spencer Westmacott and Onesimus Howe.³

The commemoration of the battles themselves proved somewhat more problematic. The centennial of the landing of New Zealand troops on 25 April 1915 was, of course, well marked both in New Zealand and at the battle site itself. The domestic commemorations ranged from the traditional Dawn Parades at war memorials across the country to the landmark *Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War* exhibition which opened at Te Papa, while politicians,

diplomats, military personnel and onlookers packed Anzac Cove. As in 1915, the Turkish memorialization of the campaign dominates the battlefield, where impressive flags, memorials and cemeteries surmount the more discrete Commonwealth war cemeteries and memorials.⁴ It has taken a century for New Zealand's depiction of the campaign to match the heroic scale of the Turkish statuary on the Gallipoli Peninsula, with the two-and-a-half-times life-sized figures of New Zealand men and women created by Weta Workshops for the *Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War* exhibition.⁵

Anzac Day 2015 marked a high point in New Zealand's World War 100 (WW100) commemorations, backed by government funding which helped support a variety of activities and exhibitions. Some commemorations focused solely on the Gallipoli campaign, including productions from Auckland to Invercargill of Maurice Shadbolt's play *Once on Chunuk Bair*, or Leanne Pooley's animated documentary 25 April.⁶ Others sought to present the entire war experience, with the Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War exhibition concluding with the figure of Cecil Malthus looking upon the maelstrom of the Somme in 1916, the Toitū Otago Settlers Museum exhibition of Dunedin's Great War 1914–1918 and the associated documentary series Journey of the Otagos, or the television series When We Go To War and Great War Stories.

Ceremonies in foreign fields to mark New Zealand's role in later battles were smaller and more formal affairs, led (as during the war itself) by politicians and military commanders. Commemorations in New Zealand were more muted; the scale and cost of the Western Front battles, or the uncharacteristic panache of the mounted campaign in the Middle East, proved too challenging for communities to mark over three consecutive years. The effect could be described as 'commemoration fatigue' (a modern incarnation of 'battle fatigue') once the enthusiasm and funding for the initial commemorations of 2014–2015 were exhausted. Beyond 2015, remembering the war changed subtly from a national experience to more intimate commemorations of the stories of individual family members or of those listed on local war memorials.

A significant problem in sustaining the spirit of commemoration for the full four years of the centennial are the popular clichés associated with World War I — particularly the slaughter of innocent youth in uniform, controlled by a brutal and incompetent British high command. It is a cliché which neatly absolves the New Zealand troops and their own commanders of the time of any fault — as with the Charge of the Light Brigade half a century earlier, someone else had blundered. The succession of exhibitions and publications has done little to counter this myth, concentrating instead on the experiences of individual soldiers and nurses at the expense of a wider reconsideration of

New Zealand's role in the war. The popular story of betrayal and butchery was reinforced by the reappearance in print, in exhibitions and on the screen of many of the same individuals, including Gallipoli veterans Ormond Burton, Alexander Aitken, Hāmi Grace and William Malone, and conscientious objector Archibald Baxter. It is not a story which bore much repetition over a four-year period.

The preoccupation with individual experience, rather than the collective experience of New Zealanders at war, obscured the fact that by 1918 the New Zealand Division was a highly effective fighting unit on the Western Front — aggressive, resourceful and thorough. A recent investigation into the New Zealand Special Air Service and civilian Afghan casualties in 2010 naively contrasted counter-insurgent operations in Afghanistan with an empathy which supposedly developed during World War I between New Zealand soldiers and their Turkish or German foes. 12 A similar legend is commemorated at Gallipoli where the 'Monument of Deep Respect for Mehmetçik (Turkish Soldier)' depicts an apocryphal tale of a Turkish soldier carrying a wounded Australian soldier back to his trench.¹³ In reality, only 25 New Zealanders were taken prisoner during the Gallipoli campaign, while 2779 died. 14 A German appreciation of the New Zealand Division in July 1918 noted it was 'A particularly good assault Division', with troops who displayed 'a very strongly developed individual self-confidence or enterprise, characteristic of the colonial British, and a specially pronounced hatred of the Germans', and who therefore took pride in taking few prisoners. 15 The truth is that no New Zealand war could ever be considered honourable if subjected to close scrutiny, whether in the context of colonial conquest, imperial endeavour or international Special Forces' operations in Afghanistan in 2010.16

The nature of New Zealand's World War I experience — ideas which, in the words of American military historian S.L.A. Marshall, 'may be shocking to civilian sensibilities' — was largely suppressed. Thistopher Pugsley, Charles Ferrall and Jane Tolerton ensured that key testimony from World War I veterans was revived for the centennial, while Ian McGibbon and Matthew Wright separately offered fresh descriptions of the battles in which New Zealanders fought in France and Belgium. However, the essential role of New Zealand infantry — what Marshall bluntly described as 'the business of killing' — was neatly avoided. For example, a full-sized cross-section of a New Zealand private in the *Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War* exhibition depicted in minute detail the military and personal clothing and equipment of an infantryman in 1915, but perversely omitted his most essential item of equipment, the .303 calibre Lee Enfield rifle. An account of Hāmi Grace at Gallipoli mentions in passing his role as a sniper before dwelling on the

casualties and suffering during the campaign.²⁰ Amongst the popular accounts of New Zealand which were reprinted for the centenary, such as Ormond Burton's *The Silent Division* or C.B. Brereton's *Tales of Three Campaigns*, John A. Lee's graphic description of the Battle of Messines in June 1917 was a notable omission.²¹

The full body of work undertaken under the aegis of the First World War Centenary Print Series cannot yet be fully assessed — as with the original four volumes of popular campaign histories and associated unit histories which were produced after World War I, many of the centennial print histories will appear beyond the centenary of the 1918 Armistice. The volumes published to date offer new insights into aspects of New Zealand in the First World War — military heritage sites in New Zealand, the truly extraordinary story of New Zealand airmen, or the role of the New Zealand Medical Services — while others provide essential overviews of New Zealand and the war: Damien Fenton's New Zealand and the First World War, and Glyn Harper's Johnny Enzed. The New Zealand Soldier in the First World War 1914–1918.

Independent historians contributed a wide variety of significant publications, ranging from a study of life in Nelson in 1914, and the songs and sounds of the war, through to Jane Tolerton's 'hidden history' of New Zealand women who served overseas in roles other than nursing, and Stevan Eldred-Grigg's revisionist condemnation of the 'Great Wrong War'. 23 Some military units have merited centennial histories, such as the New Zealand Army Nursing Service, the Otago and Waikato Mounted Rifles Regiments and the 1st New Zealand Light Trench Mortar Battery, while the Featherston Military Camp has been the subject of a book, exhibition and memorial.²⁴ The experiences of Pacific Island soldiers who served with the New Zealand Expeditionary Force have been recounted in two new studies as well as in a re-issue of James Cowan's classic history of Māori in the Great War.²⁵ Two of New Zealand's leading military personalities — General Sir Alexander Godley and Lieutenant-Colonel William Malone — were each the subject of a new biography.²⁶ Aside from Peter Cooke's forthcoming history of the Royal New Zealand Engineers, however, the combat units of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force — particularly the infantry and artillery units — have not received any special attention.

The non-combat approach to the centenary also helped to define the commemoration timetable. While the official New Zealand First World War Centenary Programme specified 13 key events and related themes between 1914 and 1919 worthy of commemoration, much of the local activity appears to have tailed off after October 2017 and the centennial of the disastrous assault on Bellevue Spur, echoing Captain Darling's desperate

hope in the final episode of *Blackadder Goes Forth* that he had survived 'The Great War, 1914–1917'.²⁷ Indeed, productions of a stage play based on the wartime adventures of Captain Edmund Blackadder proved a popular means of marking the final year of the centennial commemorations, rather than marking the signal triumphs of the New Zealand Division in France in first helping to halt the massed German Spring Offensive in March and April 1918, and then in assisting with the defeat the German Army in the field. Thus the centennial of the 11 November 1918 Armistice commemorated an end to the fighting — or even a 'calamity' and a 'failure to prevent war' — rather than a conclusive victory.²⁸ Likewise, the final New Zealand feat of arms was remembered at Le Quesnoy, a French village liberated without loss of civilian life on 4 November 1918, rather than the New Zealand Division's key role in the wider second offensive on the Sambre.²⁹

In the final year of the World War I centennial, other anniversaries competed for public recognition. Some milestones arguably held a greater significance for New Zealand than the final battles of 1918, such as the 125th anniversary of women's suffrage — a more inclusive and attractive commemoration than the relentless casualty figures from a succession of battles. Equally, the repatriation in 2018 of 36 New Zealand military personnel and dependants who died overseas after 1 January 1955 offered a more satisfactory resolution for the families of the deceased than the repatriation in 2004 of An Unknown New Zealand Warrior representative of the New Zealand war dead who remain buried overseas in Commonwealth war cemeteries.³⁰ Even the question of national memorials, once confined to the commemoration of war dead, was expanded in 2018 to include plans for a national memorial for the 257 victims of the 1979 Air New Zealand crash on Mt Erebus, Antarctica, to mark the 40th anniversary of that disaster.³¹

Amongst the most significant milestones which fell during the period 2013–2014 were the 150th anniversaries of the battles of the New Zealand Wars. The war in the Waikato was remembered 150 years later with a mixture of ceremony and re-enactment, commencing with Rangiriri in November 2013 and concluding in 2014 at Orakau in March and April, and at Gate Pā in April and May, while the start of the South Taranaki campaign was marked on 7 September 2018.³² These anniversaries prompted a debate about instituting a national day of commemoration of the New Zealand Wars, and the establishment of the Te Pūtake o Te Riri — Wars and Conflicts in Aotearoa New Zealand Fund. In September 2018 the government allocated \$4 million to this fund, which since 2017 has supported whānau, hapū and iwi to promote and deliver events commemorating the New Zealand Wars.³³ A century earlier, memorials had been erected to chivalry and heroism of

the fighting, whereas in 2014 a memorial was unveiled by the Māori King Tūheitia Paki to commemorate the deaths of unarmed women and children when the village of Rangiaowhia was attacked on 21 February 1864 by British troops. As Jock Phillips noted, the use here of the word 'atrocities' on a war memorial is unusual, if not unique, in the world.³⁴

The juxtaposition of the commemorations of the New Zealand Wars and World War I is central to any understanding of New Zealand's tortuous path to nationhood. New Zealand certainly did not come of age on the beaches of Gallipoli — if any nation could lay claim to rebirth at Gallipoli it is modern Turkey, under the leadership of Kemal Ataturk, the implacable Turkish commander at Anzac Cove in 1915.³⁵ Rather, there is a more challenging story to be told, of a nation founded by a treaty which then led to bitter conflict and enduring grievances, and how that nation had the temerity to be a party to the punitive peace treaty which was concluded with Germany at Versailles on 28 June 1919. Vincent O'Malley, with his landmark reappraisal of the Waikato War, has set any future historian of New Zealand and World War I a considerable challenge to 'own' our history and bring together the various strands of diplomatic, political, social and military history so as to understand the causes, course and aftermath of conflict.³⁶

It is the continuity and context of history which was absent from much of the World War I centennial programme, particularly as the last of New Zealand's World War II veterans are passing on. For example, a *Dominion Post* obituary for New Zealander Air Vice-Marshal Charles Gibbs who died in October 2018 mentioned his World War II service with the Royal Air Force and his flights into Yugoslavia in 1943 and 1944.³⁷ A runway had been constructed in a wide valley near Glamoč, to which Gibbs flew British Brigadier Fitzroy McLean and his party in what proved to be the first successful combined Allied and partisan operation in German-occupied Yugoslavia. No reference was made to the fact that just over a quarter of a century earlier, Glamoč had been on the route taken by the young Bosnian Serb student Gavrilo Princip on his journey from Obljaj to Sarajevo, where he assassinated the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife on 28 July 1914.³⁸ Almost half a century later, Glamoč was part of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where between 1992 and 2007 New Zealand peacekeepers assisted in maintaining a fragile peace agreement.³⁹

The problem of comprehending the war in its wider context was due, in part, to the fact that the popular misunderstandings surrounding New Zealand and World War I meant that many of the details have long been forgotten. A case in point was the conclusion by the Gallipoli Numbers Working Group in 2016 that a long-accepted total of 8556 New Zealand troops who served at Gallipoli was incorrect and that the true number was more probably in

excess of 17,000 troops. This research clearly demonstrated that a larger number of reinforcements reached the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1915, thereby reducing New Zealand's overall casualty rate from 87% (of 8556) to 53% (of some 17,000).⁴⁰ What was absent from the discussion, however, was the consideration that, even with reinforcements, the front-line infantry battalions remained seriously under-strength throughout the campaign. By September 1915, the Otago Infantry Battalion, which a year earlier boasted a strength of 34 officers and 1076 other ranks, could muster only 130 men — a wastage due to 'successive months of hard fighting, lack of nourishing food, the trying heat of summer, dysentery, and the constant strain and weariness which existence at Anzac imposed.'⁴¹

Where the centenary worked best of all was in the intersection of commemoration and public memory. 42 Many of the centennial exhibitions and publications were well supported by private family archives or private collections. The Harper family, for instance, shared both the mementos and memories of brothers Gordon and Robin Harper, who served together in the Canterbury Mounted Rifles on Gallipoli and later in Palestine. A New Zealand and Turkish maxim gun, both used at Gallipoli, and which later graced the verandah of the family home, became a central feature in the *Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War* exhibition, while the brothers' letters, detailing Gordon Harper's death in the Sinai Desert in 1916, were published. 43 From private collections across the country came the hardware of war — uniforms, hats, equipment and weaponry, which helped to convey the feel and look of the New Zealand soldier of 1914–1918. 44

The support available to research the histories of New Zealand's military personnel was extensive and exceptional, a tribute to the hard work of Archives New Zealand in digitizing more than 100,000 World War I personnel files, to the Electronic Text Centre at Victoria University of Wellington in making available online the content of New Zealand's published semi-official campaign and unit histories, and to the National Library of New Zealand's Papers Past website, which includes digital copies of wartime newspapers. Government websites such as WW100, Nga Tapuwae New Zealand First World War Trails and New Zealand History all offered a wealth of information on events, battle sites and military units, while the Auckland War Memorial Museum's Cenotaph database is a 'digital social space where enthusiasts, families, and researchers can share and contribute to the records of those who served for Aotearoa New Zealand'.

Perhaps the most dedicated keeper of New Zealand's memory of the war has been the Returned and Services Association (originally the Returned Soldiers' Association when it was formed in 1916), a 'companion sentinel'

to the nation's war memorials, with the mission of welcoming, supporting and remembering New Zealand's returned and serving military personnel.⁴⁷ The memory of the New Zealand soldiers of 1914–1918 is also kept alive on some of their most renowned battlefields, where many of those soldiers still lie buried today, and where the reality of the fighting was immediate, not half a world away. At Gallipoli, the New Zealand soldier remains a worthy opponent in a titanic struggle, while in Messines and Le Quesnoy New Zealand troops are remembered as liberators, an enduring legacy of the character and determination of the New Zealanders of a century ago.⁴⁸

The pageantry and chivalry which supposedly attached to nineteenth-century conflicts favours spectacular yet bloodless battlefield re-enactments — as for the 200th anniversary of Waterloo and the 150th of Gettysburg in 2015. By contrast, the reality of World War I, or even an approximation of it, continues to elude re-enactors or film-makers. The authentic recreation of the scale and carnage of World War I which marked films such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *Hell's Angels* (1930) and *Gallipoli* (1981) was due to the involvement of war veterans as extras or advisors. As the centennial commemorations of the war drew to a close, Sir Peter Jackson expertly matched century-old wartime footage, the oral testimony of veterans recorded half a century ago and the latest digital technology to present a vibrant and immediate experience of the ordinary soldier's war for modern viewers.⁴⁹

The conclusion to the commemorations of 2018 perversely mirrored the events of a century before, with Sir Peter Jackson's Great War Exhibition set to close on 2 December 2018, after which the former Dominion Museum building would be returned to Massey University. This is the same building which, following World War I, was intended to house a national war museum to exhibit war trophies and artefacts either captured or collected by New Zealand soldiers. The intention in 1919 was that the war museum would present the story of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force to the general public, with the proceeds used for the benefit of disabled servicemen. The museum never eventuated, due to a combined lack of official interest and funding, and the collection instead was dispersed to museums and communities throughout the country, since when much of the material — and with it the story of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force — was lost. Only half a century later did the first of the three service museums begin to preserve the nation's military heritage. The service is a century later did the first of the three service museums begin to preserve the nation's military heritage.

The challenge now is to ensure that the information and artefacts of World War I which helped bring the centennial to life are somehow recorded and preserved so that they can be used once again 50 and 100 years from now. Those treasures held by families and private collectors will shortly

disappear from public view, with no guarantee that they will be available for future commemorations. Whether or not they should be actively acquired and curated as military tāonga should be the question of the hour for those entrusted with preserving New Zealand's culture and heritage. The centennial of the November 1918 Armistice is also a timely reminder that New Zealand must look to preserve the memory of post-World War II conflicts, as the ranks of these veterans begin to thin. The lessons of conflict can be remembered only if, as a nation, we understand the significance of what happened, what was won and what was lost. The prescient words of George Santayana are therefore as relevant today as they were in 1922, whether the discussion is about war, peace or the preservation and commemoration of conflicts of a century ago:

Yet the poor fellows think they are safe! They think that the war perhaps the last of all wars is over! Only the dead are safe; only the dead have seen the end of war. Not that non-existence deserves to be called peace; it is only by an illusion of contrast and a pathetic fallacy that we are tempted to call it so.⁵²

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NOTES

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 - 6 25 April, https://www.nzfilm.co.nz/films/25-april
- 7 Alistair Paulin, 'On the brink of WWI overload', *Nelson Mail*, 11 April 2015, https://www.stuff.co.nz/nelson-mail/opinion/67679161/on-the-brink-of-wwi-overload
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- 9 The British high command was memorably and damningly depicted by Alan Clark in 1961 in his study of the Western Front in 1915: A. Clark, *The Donkeys*, Hutchinson and Co. (Publishers) Ltd, London, 1961. A similar theme was present in Peter Weir's seminal 1981 film *Gallipoli*, and Maurice Shadbolt's 1982 play *Once on Chunuk Bair*. See, for instance, J.M. Wilson, "'Colonize. Pioneer. Bash and slash": Once on Chunuk Bair and the Anzac myth', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 34 (1), 2016, pp.27–53.
 - 10 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, The Charge of the Light Brigade, Verse II.
- 11 Ormond Burton's account of New Zealanders at Gallipoli and on the Western Front was republished in 2014, together with his personal memoir of the war, and Burton also featured in the exhibition *Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War* and the animated film 25 April. See O.E. Burton (edited by John J. Gray), *The Silent Division: Zealanders at the Front 1914–1919* and Concerning One Man's War, John Douglas Publishing, Christchurch, 2014 and 25 April, https://www.nzfilm.co.nz/films/25-april. Alexander Aitken's account of his experiences during the latter part of the Gallipoli campaign and during the Somme offensive in 1916 was republished in 2018, and the story of his violin was featured in an illustrated children's book and as part of Series 3 of the TV3 series War Stories, which screened in April 2016. See Alexander Aitken (edited by Alex Calder), Gallipoli to the Somme: Recollections of a New Zealand Infantryman,

Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2018; Jennifer Beck and Robyn Belton, The Anzac Violin, Alexander Aitken's Story, Scholastic New Zealand, Auckland, 2018: 'Alexander Aitken Great War Story, https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/video/alexander-aitken-great-war-story. It is a small irony of history that the illustration on the cover of the Auckland University Press edition of Gallipoli to the Somme is a marvellous character study of a soldier in the 11th (Taranaki) Company of the Wellington Infantry Regiment, Aitken having served with the 10th (North Otago) Company of the Otago Infantry Regiment. Hāmi Grace and William Malone both featured in the Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War exhibition and in Series 2 of the TV3 series War Stories, while Grace also featured in the animated film 25 April. See 'Hāmi Grace Great War Story', https:// nzhistory.govt.nz/media/video/hami-grace-great-war-story; 'William Malone Great War Story', https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/video/william-malone-great-war-story, 25 April, https://www. nzfilm.co.nz/films/25-april. Archibald Baxter's story of the harsh treatment which he received from the New Zealand military authorities as a conscientious objector was recounted in the Television New Zealand documentary No 1 Field Punishment, and in the opera War Hero by John Drummond. See Field Punishment No 1, https://www.tvnz.co.nz/shows/field-punishmentno-1 and 'Punishment appalling, but Baxter's decision wrong', Otago Daily Times, 10 July 2017, https://www.odt.co.nz/opinion/punishment-appalling-baxters-decision-wrong.

- 12 Nicky Hager and John Stephenson, *Hit and Run: The New Zealand SAS in Afghanistan and the meaning of honour*, Potton and Burton, Nelson, 2017, p.86.
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- 15 H. Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916–1919: A Popular History based on Official Records*, Whitcombe and Tombs Limited, Auckland, 1921, pp.402, 616–7.
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 - 20 Tom Hunt, 'The men fell everywhere', *Dominion Post*, 10 November 2018.
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