

The Great Adventure. New Zealand Soldiers Describe the First World War. Edited by Jock Phillips, Nicholas Boyack and E.P. Malone. Allen & Unwin, Wellington, 1989. 280pp. NZ price: \$24.95.

THE FIRST World War has suddenly achieved a new importance, not only in New Zealand but in other countries. In the past 15 years war itself, it might be said, has attracted a new interest. Courses in military history recruit a large and enthusiastic following. Lecturers who once skipped from the origins of a war to the peace settlement now often give at least one lecture on the war itself. The reasons for this are not easily defined. In part, no doubt, it reflects the interest of the lucky generations born since 1930 in an experience which dominated the lives of every generation born between 1860 and 1930, including our parents' and grandparents'. The fact that the last survivors of the First World War are now so few and old further whets our interest. Indeed, for those whose grandfathers fought, survived, and can be remembered — usually taciturn about their 'Great Adventure' — the interest is often intense. Perhaps, too, in this nuclear age, these 'conventional wars' attract a certain nostalgia, innocent curiosity, or simply astonished disbelief that slaughter on such a scale could have occurred. Yet, ironically, men rushed to enlist for fear that they would miss the 'great adventure' and were farewelled by enormous crowds in a mood of festive enthusiasm. The past is indeed like a foreign land.

Ormond Burton and W.P. Morrell claimed in the 1930s that the New Zealand nation was born on the slopes of Gallipoli and forged in the experience of the campaign there and on the Western Front. The claim has been repeated but never thoroughly investigated. Of course, the records of the first New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) were not kept until the New Zealand War Records Section was finally established in November 1917. Many of the Gallipoli records had by then been lost. Four popular histories were written in 1919–20 but they were not official. Some survivors sponsored histories of particular units, but they were a commercial flop and are not easily obtained. The war years themselves, not to mention the Reform Party and the wartime Prime Ministers, have also long been studiously ignored.

This curious lack of interest at the time is not easily explained, for New Zealanders erected memorials and urgently sought souvenirs and trophies (as had the soldiers on the battlefield). Yet in the past few years historians have recognized the importance of war in the construction of a male New Zealand identity, if not a New Zealand nation. The experience of the men, however, has been of less importance than the mythology of military prowess. Some have questioned that mythology. There has been less interest in the idea that an army is in some respects a mirror to the society from which it has been recruited. Nor has there been much attention given to the possibility that the experience of an army may shape the nation. Bill Gammage's *Broken Years* proved both possibilities. The popularity of Christopher Pugsley's *Gallipoli*, although it is not an analytical work, also demonstrates the existence of great interest in these questions. In some respects, however, Pugsley's volume failed to supersede C.E.W. Bean's account of the New Zealanders in his official history of the Australian Imperial Force. Perhaps Maurice Shadbolt's *Once On Chunak Bair* did more than any history book to awaken in New Zealanders a new interest in the First World War and its significance.

The First World War has also attracted the attention of scholars who would scarcely know of New Zealand's existence, notably Paul Fussell. Fussell's remarkable book, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, used literary memoirs to portray the First World War as the crucible of a distinctly twentieth-century consciousness. A historian might complain that Fussell raised more questions than he answered, yet he portrayed a range of cultural consequences worthy of the scale of that grim slaughter, a slaughter that bled

not only Europe but countries such as New Zealand.

The Great Adventure — based on the letters and diaries of eight soldiers — is a modest contribution to this literature. The introduction is slight and at times rather too self-righteously revisionist. There is no index. Some might complain that the editors should have provided more in the way of context and annotations. The subtitle implies that these eight have captured the views and experiences of the 117,000 men who served in the 1st NZEF. Time and further research will tell. The editors acknowledge, however, that the eight men whose letters and diaries form this book are not representative and that they chose 'the most evocative writers' (p.8). The book resounds with the din of battle as seen from the front line. No nurses or staff officers are heard. The editors also explain why they have included no Maori voice (and seem to have ignored Te Rangi Hiroa's diary). The omission is a pity, because the Division was conscious and proud of its Maori soldiers.

These criticisms should not be given too much weight. The editors have successfully chosen and skilfully edited these eight collections. The selections nicely balance each other. One leads on to the next. The reader is quickly absorbed into the 'Great Adventure'. My only regret was that no collection had been found which covers the period between 'peaceful penetration' and the still astonishing end of the war. Not that it matters much. These eight voices are superb and speak with a freshness and force that the years have not dimmed. One quickly feels that one knows many of these men; sees through their eyes; knows about death and injury; and, as affection grows, one turns to the end to find out what happened to them. In most cases they were killed.

This is not the place for an extended analysis, but some points are worth making. Most of these men migrated psychologically from being colonists to being ANZACs or New Zealanders. One smiles to read their reactions to England. Peter Howden remarked that 'the general opinion is that we should hand it [England] over to the Germans and apologise to them' (p.169). Their reactions to Egypt, 'Niggers', the French, the Belgians, and their enemies are equally interesting. All quickly developed what John dos Passos later claimed that everybody needed, 'shit detectors'. They also disliked 'strict discipline and red-tape'. They thought poorly of the Tommies and detested English hierarchies and snobbery. Howden complained about 'the saluting nuisance' (and he was an officer). They all respond in interesting and usually positive ways to the Maori and feel dreadfully homesick for 'God's Own'. They anxiously awaited letters.

The more loquacious of the eight took great pride in being New Zealanders — even the English-born. As Cecil Malthus said in *ANZAC*, 'We hoped for success and we hoped we would not disgrace ourselves'. Within days of the Gallipoli landing they knew that they had not disgraced themselves. Colonel Malone took enormous pride in his New Zealanders and in the fact that they had been described as 'white Gurkhas'. It was not just that to his generation war was the testing of character and nationhood. Englishmen, Scots, and Australians all recognized the outstanding capacity of the NZEF in combat. The men took pride not only in their quality as soldiers but in the fact that they always took their objectives and held them. Gallipoli, of course, was a defeat, but it was seen as a British bungle that no amount of ANZAC courage and skill could avoid. And Passchendaele was a failure which the troops felt deeply, although, as Massey angrily told the Imperial War Cabinet, they had been wasted and shot down like rabbits. With that one awful exception, the experience of battle contributed, both within the NZEF and at home, to an exultant sense that we were as good as any and better than most. In several of the extracts one can almost watch the cultural cringe peeling off.

The volume is organized to highlight the confusion and brutality of the battlefield and the incompetence of the British. It climaxes (but does not end) with two powerful accounts of the slaughter at Passchendaele. It would be a pity, however, if this remarkable collection were condemned to such a limited purpose. The letters and diaries teach us much about

the New Zealanders at that time. The preoccupation with equality, the commitment to promotion through seniority, and the concern with fairness are all evident on most of the pages. Wilfred Smith's extraordinary account of crossing the equator is almost worth an article in its own right. In many of these extracts even the language deserves analysis. The word 'stunt', for instance, seems to have been a uniquely New Zealand expression for describing attacks. Eric Partridge, seemingly unaware of the use made of the word by the 'diggers' (the New Zealanders' name for themselves until it was appropriated by the Australians), defined it as 'an item and an entertainment'; 'an athletic performance, any (daring) feat Hence, an enterprise undertaken to gain an advantage or a reputation. . . . ' In the context of the First World War 'stunt' suggests ironic understatement, 'taking the mickey' out of the war and the New Zealanders' own pretensions, even frivolity. At Le Quesnoy, on 4 November 1918, the Division engaged in its most spectacular stunt, scaling the walls of the historic fortress in order to save civilian lives and 'historic monuments'. It was like an episode from a war in another century, almost a gesture of contempt for the industrialized slaughter of the 'Great Adventure'.

The letters and diaries provide a remarkable series of insights into New Zealand men of that generation. They also provide a compelling and moving account of an experience which seems quite extraordinary. In their different voices these eight recognized the extraordinary nature of that experience, and this skilful selection allows the reader to rediscover what they learned. The editors suggest that most of what the men learnt was not understood at home; in some respects this was obviously true. What surprised me, however, was the frankness and fullness of many of the letters that travelled back to New Zealand. It may have taken the population that stayed at home the best part of a decade to absorb the full cynicism of the troops, but letters such as these must have helped considerably in creating the foundation for that twentieth-century consciousness which scholars like Fussell have begun to analyse.

ERIK OLSEN

University of Otago

King and Country Call. New Zealanders, Conscription and the Great War. By Paul Baker. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1988. 274pp. NZ price: \$30.70.

THE SOCIAL history of the two world wars has recently come under close scrutiny by New Zealand historians, as revealed by a number of recent publications. Attention has been focused on the experiences of the New Zealand troops overseas, conscientious objectors, and women, and wider questions about the effect of war on New Zealand nationalism have been addressed. While Paul Baker claims, in his preface, to have been 'inspired by the heroic approach of Sir Keith Sinclair . . . complet[ing] the map, in broad strokes', *King and Country Call* is not a general social history of New Zealand in the First World War, but about a very specific aspect of that war—conscriptions. Baker seeks to explain why conscription was introduced in 1916 and how New Zealanders responded. Through his discussion of conscription he does, however, expose some of the characteristics of New Zealand society of the early twentieth century, in particular the conservative nature of that society. The response to the war showed New Zealand to be unequivocally loyal to Britain, and the attitudes to 'shirkers' revealed some deep concerns in New Zealand society about non-conformity to the dominant ideology of the Protestant work ethic. 'Army discipline [it was hoped] would finally reform the drunkards, thieves, layabouts, radicals, and general purpose ratbags who had proved beyond their control' (p.49).