

‘The Great Wave of Enthusiasm’

NEW ZEALAND REACTIONS TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN AUGUST 1914 — A REASSESSMENT



CYRIL FALLS wrote of the Great War in the late 1950s that ‘little room can be found for the life of the nations at war. It seems opportune, however, to open a few loopholes bearing on it and to risk the reproach that the glimpses are so slight as to be hardly worthwhile.’¹ Ever since Falls took those first tentative steps towards examining life on the home front historians have been curious about, and written much on, how people reacted to the outbreak of war in 1914. ‘With enthusiasm’ is considered to be the most common reaction, which is generally characterized by a ‘chorus of patriotic outbursts, people yelling hurrah and singing patriotic songs’.² This was evident in Nelson, New Zealand, where ‘enthusiasm for the war was high in the first fortnight of August 1914’, as it was across the Tasman Sea.³ In the rural Victorian shire of Yackandandah ‘patriotic enthusiasm’ marked the inhabitants’ reaction.⁴ Throughout the rest of the British Empire, in countries like South Africa, ‘a floodtide of enthusiasm’ was observed, and ‘unprecedented excitement and demonstrations of war enthusiasm’ were expressed in Canada.⁵ A.J.P. Taylor wrote that ‘[t]he peoples of Europe leapt eagerly into war’; William Carr that ‘[t]he outbreak of war was greeted with enthusiasm in all belligerent countries’.⁶ These examples are typical of the traditional, yet popular, view of how people reacted to news of war, a view which has existed for decades, even though Arthur Marwick signaled the possibility of diverse reactions as early as 1965: ‘By and large the country [Britain], on the surface at least was united and enthusiastic’.⁷ Following Marwick, the popular view has been questioned, reassessed and modified by historians.

In the late 1970s, Jean-Jacques Becker pioneered research into how people reacted to the Great War by examining the French home front in 1914. ‘Becker undertook a national enquiry based on accounts written by primary school teachers from six French departments, the reports of Prefects, and the daily press of thirty-six provincial towns’.⁸ From that enquiry Becker concluded, ‘[i]t is no longer possible to claim that France was swept by a wave of enthusiasm for the war as troops mobilized. Some outward signs of this have been unduly emphasized, leading people to draw false conclusions. A certain portion of the French population did respond enthusiastically, but this portion was a small minority.’⁹ As a consequence of Becker’s work some historians believe that ‘[t]he history of mobilization was thus entirely revised’.¹⁰ Some, notably Niall Ferguson, Jeffrey Verhey and Hew Strachan, followed Becker’s lead. They conducted their own studies of war enthusiasm in Britain, Germany and throughout Europe and concluded that there is more to know about people’s reactions in August 1914 than patriotic flag waving.¹¹ This conclusion is best

summed up by Strachan: 'enthusiasm was the conspicuous froth, the surface element only'.¹² As a consequence of their rethinking more historians are looking afresh at the extent to which people reacted with enthusiasm to the Great War. In his reassessment of war enthusiasm in London and Wales, Adrian Gregory concluded that 'a society as complex, subtle and nuanced as Edwardian Britain would seem unlikely to have had a single, uniform reaction to such a major event as the outbreak of a European war'.¹³ Such reassessments are not confined to Europe. Grant Mansfield's enquiry into Australian war enthusiasm found variations in the primary evidence and historiography, leading him to conclude that '[i]t is perhaps time that Australian scholars reassess the local evidence supporting Australian war enthusiasm'.¹⁴

Can the same be said of New Zealand? How have historians viewed war enthusiasm here and is there a need for reassessment? If so, what approach should be adopted? Deborah Montgomerie's view that '[t]he nation is not the only point of reference for studies of the links between war and society' encourages a new way forward in reassessing war enthusiasm in New Zealand. A focus on regions, localities and individuals reveals diversity, not homogeneity, in characterizing the ways people greeted the Great War in 1914.¹⁵

'With enthusiasm' is an accepted understanding of how people in New Zealand reacted to the war. Newspaper reports first used the word 'enthusiasm' to describe the reactions within days of the war starting, and throughout August and September 1914 they reported news of excitement generated by the war, and of people eager to give their assistance.¹⁶ The authors of the four-volume *Official History of New Zealand's Effort in the Great War* and the various unit and regimental histories published between 1919 and 1928 provide accounts of these reactions. Major Fred Waite recalled in 1919:

In the town enthusiasm was infectious: newspaper offices were besieged, and eager volunteers thronged the headquarters of each territorial unit; every shop, office and factory sent its representatives, and before the services of the Expeditionary Force were accepted by the Imperial Government the lists were full to overflowing. From the country men crowded in. The musterer and the station owner alike forsook their flocks; the bushman put aside his crosscut and axe; the flaxmill hand left swamp and mill and hurried to the nearest railway station. Quiet men up on the hillside watched the train coming across country with the eagerly awaited newspapers. The strain of waiting was unendurable. With the call of Old England throbbing in their ears, they left their stock unattended in the paddocks and swelled the procession to the railway station. Here eager crowds discussed the situation. It was instinctively recognized that Britain must stand by France and Belgium, and when the news of that momentous decision did come the great wave of enthusiasm swept anew over the country side.¹⁷

Waite's description of a 'great wave of enthusiasm' sweeping over the land resonates with how most other writers in the 1920s recalled the reactions and the alleged unanimity with which New Zealand greeted the war.¹⁸ Some writers recalled what they considered to be 'stirring days at the beginning of August, 1914'.¹⁹ Others remembered men who 'rushed' and 'poured' into recruiting offices 'at the first asking'.²⁰ In a chapter on 'New Zealand in the War' in the 1924 edition of William Pember Reeves's *The Long White Cloud*, C.J.

Wray recalled the reactions as being unanimous: 'In New Zealand not a mere outburst, but a blaze of intensest loyalty and devotion to the cause which every heart believed to be a just one spread through the land from end to end'.²¹ These recollections helped form the basis upon which the popular view of New Zealand's war enthusiasm was established.

Since the 1920s, New Zealand historians have shown an interest in discussing the reactions and mood of society in the opening months of the Great War. In a manner reminiscent of the *Official War Histories*, Ormond Burton noted in *The Silent Division* (1935) that '[t]here was enthusiasm and a haze of rather splendid feeling', as men from all walks of life 'came pouring in' to volunteer their services.²² Burton's recollection was echoed by many writers from the 1930s to the 1960s who wrote about how New Zealand 'hastened' and 'sprang to support the mother country'.²³ W.P. Morrell and D.O.W. Hall, in *A History of New Zealand Life* (1957), felt that the nation had 'with impulsive patriotism, almost eagerly committed itself to the war'.²⁴ Cecil Malthus wrote in *Anzac: A Retrospect* (1965) that 'the feeling throughout New Zealand was mainly one of pleasurable excitement' in 1914.²⁵

Publications on New Zealand during the Great War entered a period of hiatus during the 1970s. In 1984, though, in *Gallipoli The New Zealand Story*, Christopher Pugsley repeated the popular view of war enthusiasm.²⁶ Pugsley wrote that the war 'evoked scenes of widespread public enthusiasm. Everywhere there appeared a national confidence in New Zealand's preparedness for war and willingness to fight'.²⁷ Following Pugsley's book, other writers sustained the popular view.²⁸ In *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (2003), Michael King cited John A. Lee's view as typical of the mood in 1914. '[Everybody] rushed of course to enlist', recalled Lee, 'That was the spirit ... [Folks] sang patriotic songs and they cheered'.²⁹ More recently, though, there has also been a sign that this view is being reconsidered and modified. Ian McGibbon acknowledged in *New Zealand's Great War* (2007) that while enthusiasm was evident, 'such displays may not have reflected the feelings of the general population'.³⁰

McGibbon's revisionist view picks up on the sentiments in Ormond Burton's 1922 study, *The Auckland Regiment*. As Ormond recalled, '[i]n the first three days of August, 1914, there were hopes, fears, doubtings, but an ever-increasing undercurrent of certainty that war would come'.³¹ When war did come there were mixed reactions. An often cited example of war enthusiasm in New Zealand are the reactions to Lord Liverpool's announcement from the steps of Parliament to a crowd of about 15,000 people on 5 August 1914 that a state of war existed with Germany.³² The announcement generated excitement according to newspaper reports, but there is evidence to suggest that not everyone was enthusiastic about the news. Writing in 1924, Stephen Smith noted:

The blow had fallen and the worst fears were realized! What one short month before was undreamed of and unthinkable in our happy and prosperous country had actually come to pass and we were at death's grip with Germany, with her enormous resources, her mighty army and vaunted navy. Some who heard the announcement cheered, but many

of the assemblage of Wellington's citizens who heard those ominous words, spoken by the Earl of Liverpool, on that eventful 5th August, 1914, had a very real premonition of the tortures of mind to be endured and the terrible losses to be sustained during the struggle that had been forced upon us.³³

Smith's dour recollection, along with Burton's comment, stand in marked contrast to those of Waite and other writers in the 1920s. Collectively their recollections reveal an absence of agreement about how people greeted the war in August 1914.

This absence of agreement is not surprising given the research by Jock Phillips on the cultural diversity of groups in New Zealand and their differing attitudes to the Great War.³⁴ Women's organizations, pacifists and conscientious objectors are examples of some of the groups Phillips refers to, who by their very nature and beliefs indicate that society had divergent views about the war. The views of these groups suggest that New Zealand society could not have been unanimous in greeting the war with enthusiasm in 1914. The longevity of these groups' opposition, their geographical spread and the numbers of people involved are supportive of this idea. Megan Hutching informs us that for nearly 20 years before the outbreak of the Great War, 'a small minority of women in New Zealand agitated for international arbitration and an end to war'.³⁵ By means of conferences, speeches and pamphlets the National Council of Women (NCW), the Canterbury Women's Institute (CWI) and the Women's International League conducted their agitation publicly. At their 1897 conference members of the NCW passed a resolution to the effect that war was a 'savage, costly and futile method of solving disputes'.³⁶ There is also evidence of women privately expressing their concerns about military matters. In 1900, during the Anglo-Boer War, Jane Atkinson in New Plymouth wrote to Emily Richmond in Nelson protesting: 'I am sick of war and rumors of war and feel as tho' [sic] they would never cease the world seems so steeped in militarism'.³⁷ These views and actions represent the advance guard of an anti-militarist movement that gathered momentum in the years immediately preceding the Great War.

From June 1910, with the formation of the Anti-Militarist League (AML) in Christchurch, opposition to compulsory military training quickened. Branches of the AML were formed in Runanga, Blackball, Huntly and Waihi. The National Peace Council (NPC) formed in Christchurch in May 1911 and spread 'rapidly' throughout New Zealand. By December the NPC consisted of 16 branches and had attracted 30,000 members.³⁸ In November 1911 an 'anti-militarist conference was held in Wellington attended by twenty-five delegates representing the various anti-militarist leagues, the Wellington branch of the Federation of Labour, the Auckland Peace Society, the Society of Friends, the Women's Christian Temperance Union and individual delegates from Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Huntly, Runanga, Waihi and Hastings'.³⁹ In February 1912 the Passive Resisters Union (PRU) was formed in Christchurch, with branches in Wellington, Auckland, Millerton and Runanga.⁴⁰ Other organizations opposed to compulsion in Christchurch included the CWI, the New Zealand Housewives' Union and the Children's

Peace Society, and in Auckland, the Liberty League, later known as the New Zealand Freedom League.

In addition to these organizations and their memberships, the numerical evidence of breaches of the 1909 Defence Act shows a lack of compliance with its requirements for compulsory military training. R.L. Weitzel's research indicates that throughout New Zealand in the year ending April 1914, 2779 territorials and 1367 senior cadets had been convicted, and 234 objectors were sentenced to military detention for breaches of the Act.⁴¹ Furthermore, up to 31 May 1914, 78 applications had been received by the defence authorities for exemption from military training based on religious grounds, of which 72 were granted.⁴² A lengthy period of opposition to militarism, the geographical spread of organizations and the numbers of people opposed to, and resisting, compulsory military training suggests that unanimity of reactions in August 1914 was unlikely.

How the anti-militarists reacted once the Great War began reveals much about the diverse ways people greeted the war. The anti-militarists certainly did not react with enthusiasm. If anything, ambivalence characterized their reactions. Some 'initially at least shared the considerable public enthusiasm with which the war against Germany was greeted'; others 'resolutely opposed the war from the first'.⁴³ The NPC 'suspended all its public work', preferring instead to hold 'private study circles'.⁴⁴ The AML reacted by drawing its activities to a close, and the PRU 'dissolved in disarray', with some of its members emigrating to Australia.⁴⁵ Archibald Baxter, a conscientious objector during the Great War, recalled in 1939: 'I met in the most unexpected places people who were definitely opposed to the war, and people who had doubts, but fear usually prevented that opposition from being at all effective'.⁴⁶ Baxter, by his own admission, reacted in a way that could be considered ebullient. He recalled that his opposition to war 'was strengthened rather than diminished during the next two years', claiming that, 'I did not hesitate to give expression to it'.⁴⁷

That some of the anti-militarists reacted to the outbreak of war with caution, even fear, suggests that a potential for hostility existed in 1914. An indication of that type of anti-social behaviour is revealed in the letters James Allen, Minister of Defence, received in response to a circular he sent to local authorities in March 1914 concerning the introduction of conscience as a reason for exemption from military service. The government was considering this matter and Allen wanted to ascertain from councillors the availability of local work for objectors in lieu of military training. He also sought their opinion on the issue of conscience. Some of the councils responded by informing Allen that they had 'little sympathy with objectors', while others were more strident, even hostile. Councils in Eltham and Mosgiel felt that objectors should be 'disenfranchised'. The Westland County Council went so far as to suggest that 'objectors should be deported, or lose their civil rights, or be put in gaol'.⁴⁸ Hostile expressions like these could have found outlets in the excitement and tension generated by war in 1914 — as they did in Australia — and perhaps that is what anti-militarists feared, hence their reactions.⁴⁹

Recollections of 1914, and in particular to the month of August, often make

references to 'war fever', 'stirring days' and, of course, 'enthusiasm', but Paul Baker's research on conscription in New Zealand during the Great War found that 'most of the noises and impetus came from "boys and youths"'.⁵⁰ Adults reacted differently. Baker discovered that the 'response of most adults was more sober than is usually assumed', and that '[m]ost adults who congregated in the streets did so less for celebration than for reassurance in the face of frightening uncertainty'.⁵¹ Nicholas Boyack, whose research focused on soldiers during the Great War, concluded that, '[a]lthough most published accounts indicate that New Zealand men enthusiastically supported the war and rushed off to do their duty for King and country, the facts indicate otherwise'.⁵² The statistical record shows that 8454 males were mobilized throughout New Zealand by the end of August 1914, rising to 15,854 by December, which is only about 4% and 8% respectively of the male population of military age in the pre-war period.⁵³ Jock Phillips believes that about one-third of all volunteers who registered in New Zealand did not get to the training camps; Christopher Pugsley says about one-quarter.⁵⁴ Given the actual numbers of men mobilized and the proportion of volunteers likely to have been rejected, the 'rush to enlist' appears to have been undertaken by a small proportion of the 193,254 males of military age who resided in New Zealand in the immediate pre-war period.⁵⁵

In view of the historiographical and statistical record an obvious conundrum exists. Did people in New Zealand react with enthusiasm to the war, or not? A way forward in exploring this conundrum is to focus on local and regional studies, and the experiences of individuals rather than persisting with general accounts that purport to be the national view. Adrian Gregory adopted this approach recently in a reassessment of war enthusiasm in local communities in Britain. Gregory's approach would no doubt find support from other historians, namely Keith Grieves in Britain and John McQuilton in Australia. Grieves argues that, '[i]n the history of British society in the Great War locality matters alongside the dimensions of nation, class and gender'.⁵⁶ He adds that, '[t]he micro-histories of individuals and communities challenge long held preconceptions' about the war.⁵⁷ Furthermore, 'confident generalizations in national narratives', like that of war enthusiasm, are being reassessed through studies of local communities where experiences of the war 'varied so greatly'.⁵⁸ McQuilton echoes this view. His research discovered that, '[m]ost of the literature [on the Great War] relies heavily on metropolitan sources, and implicit in much of it is an assumption that the war in rural Australia simply reflected the war in metropolitan Australia'.⁵⁹ There is a strong resonance here with First World War studies in New Zealand. McQuilton advocates the use of regional case studies because 'it allows the researcher to test arguments presented in the general literature and through the prism of place to suggest a different picture', while also providing 'some of the building blocks for the historians interested in the general picture'.⁶⁰

Some New Zealand historians would no doubt favour Gregory's approach. Peter Gibbons, in thinking about New Zealand's history, has written favourably about micro-histories that focus on communities and individuals.⁶¹ Citing Caroline Daley's research on Taradale, Gibbons wrote: 'I feel much more comfortable about the characterizations of life in Taradale than I do about

generalizations which purport to represent New Zealand as a whole'.⁶² Could this mean that Gibbons would be more comfortable with knowing how people reacted to the Great War in Taradale and Hawke's Bay than with generalizations about war reactions at the national level? If so, then micro-histories can perform an invaluable role as 'building blocks'. Montgomerie, like Gibbons, also looks favourably on micro-histories. In considering New Zealand's military historiography Montgomerie stated that 'unless we take the work of analysis more seriously we will never bridge the gap between the generalizations about the macro-level impact of war on New Zealand society and culture and the treasure trove of micro-level material generated by individuals caught up in war'.⁶³ With an emphasis on the local and the particular, rather than the national and the general, the Taranaki region is suitably placed to begin a reassessment of war enthusiasm. It is an area where some of the 'building blocks' already exist in establishing a national 'picture' about people's initial reactions to the Great War.⁶⁴

Studies of war enthusiasm in the context of the Great War usually focus on August 1914 because that is the month in which people's reactions to the war typified what Hew Strachan has referred to as the 'conspicuous froth'. August 1914 was a volatile month in Europe owing to the diplomatic crisis that the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo had set in motion. The *Stratford Evening Post* printed editorials on 63 war-related topics that month, compared with 35 in October 1914. Newspapers in Taranaki reported the death of the Archduke in late June, but little if any reportage of the event followed, or of the fall-out it created until late July when news of the diplomatic crisis came 'suddenly like an eclipse of the sun' according to the *Hawera and Normanby Star*.⁶⁵ Ominously, the *Patea and Waverley Press* reported the news from Europe as being 'the gravest that has been received in years'.⁶⁶ Not since the Bosnian Crisis of 1908 had newspapers in Taranaki printed such worrisome news about the possibility of a major war in Europe. This raised concerns about what course of action Britain would take should a major war arise and how the local dairy industry would be affected, given Taranaki's strong economic links with Britain.

The region's newspapers followed the events that unfolded in Europe with interest and printed many news items about the geo-political and military situations on the Continent.⁶⁷ News headlines like the 'BATTLE OF ARMAGEDDON' signalled the gravity of the situation.⁶⁸ Whether a calamitous war would result remained unanswered during the first weekend of August, but that changed when an 'extraordinary' cablegram on Sunday 2 August brought 'startling' news of Germany's declaration of war on Russia. The *Stratford Evening Post* reacted by printing an 'extra' edition for posting throughout the borough and for distribution to the congregations attending the evening church services.⁶⁹ Similarly, in New Plymouth, runners distributed a thousand *Taranaki Herald* 'extras'.⁷⁰ At Whiteley Memorial Church in New Plymouth, a *Herald* correspondent reported that 'the whole service was characterized by the influence of the serious news just received from Europe. At the commencement of the service the Rev. A.B. Chappell announced the cabled particulars, and emphasised the gravity of the turn European affairs

had taken. It was, he said, not a time for panic, but a time for prayer.⁷¹ The war news moved William Skinner, a prominent land surveyor from New Plymouth, to record in his diary, ‘Now we are in for a most awful [sic] war, as France must go to Russia’s assistance, & England can scarcely hope to keep out of it this will be one of the most dreadful wars of all time.’⁷² The next day the *Herald*’s correspondent in Inglewood reported, ‘of course, as elsewhere, the war [between Germany and Russia] is the talk of the town at present’, and ‘every available copy of the *Herald* [is] being demanded immediately upon its arrival’.⁷³ Newton King — Taranaki’s most prominent businessman — on holiday with his family in America, considered the news so serious that he ‘immediately’ began the return journey home.⁷⁴ With German and Russian armies on the move a key question arose, ‘What Will Britain Do?’⁷⁵ Scenes of war enthusiasm there may have been in Europe at this juncture, but they were absent from a regional outpost of Britain’s empire in late July and very early August.

On Wednesday 5 August, when news reached Taranaki that Britain had taken action and declared war on Germany, local newspaper reports displayed mixed reactions. The *Taranaki Herald*’s correspondent in Stratford wrote: ‘From the manner in which the folks about the street this afternoon received the news that we were at war with Germany, they might have been born and bred in war’s alarms. A shrug of the shoulders, and a remark that if it had to come then the sooner the better was the average attitude. I have seen more excitement over a mayoral election.’⁷⁶ In New Plymouth, the *Herald* reported that the news had caused ‘little or no surprise, for it has been accepted as a foregone conclusion during the last two or three days’.⁷⁷ The *Herald* also reported a ‘sense of relief from the suspense and anxiety which [had] oppressed the nation’.⁷⁸ In central Taranaki, an *Eltham Argus* editorial expressed forebodings about the war: ‘Whatever the outcome may be there must be widespread misery and disaster, and the luckiest of the surviving nations can scarcely hope to emerge from the struggle other than sorely crippled Though war may bring misery, desolation and the direst of distress and indescribable suffering to hundreds of thousands of widows and orphans, yet there is always a section of people who can fatten and batten upon the death and desolation of thousands of their fellow creatures.’⁷⁹ And yet some people did receive the news with excitement. A Stratford resident, Syd Bernard, reacted by playing *God Save The King*, *Rule Britannia* and *The Marseillaise* on his cornet to a ‘good crowd’ outside the post office.⁸⁰ Stratford’s piano tuner and musical instrument retailer, Thomas Grubb, decorated the entire space of his shop window with a ‘representation of mimic military operations’.⁸¹ On the first evening of the war at His Majesty’s Theatre in Stratford, the audience, after hearing the latest war news read to them by the theatre manager, reacted by singing *God Save the King* ‘enthusiastically’.⁸² Similarly in New Plymouth’s Empire Picture Palace the audience stood and sang the national anthem ‘with enthusiasm’.⁸³ Some people gathered at post offices and newspaper offices to learn more about the war. In New Plymouth, ‘crowds’ did not disperse from outside the *Taranaki Herald*’s office until 11.00pm.⁸⁴ People gathered there again ‘at an early hour’ on Sunday morning, and in the evening ‘a still larger crowd assembled’.⁸⁵ Early the following week,

the *Herald's* correspondent in Inglewood reported that 'excitement over the war is growing more intense than ever and all hours of the day see small knots of men talking over the situation and waiting eagerly for extras'.⁸⁶ Railway stations also presented 'a lively scene on the arrival of the various trains; crowds [made] their way to the platform in expectancy of hearing fresh news from other towns'.⁸⁷ It is clear that the war generated public interest, but it is less clear whether people gathered and reacted in an enthusiastic and excited way, or with concern and anxiety.

What is clear is that during the first week of the Great War people in Taranaki reacted in diverse ways, and enthusiasm was not necessarily their predominant reaction. On the same day that patriotic demonstrations were held in Stratford and New Plymouth, Lewis Coster, a farmer from Onaero near Waitara in north Taranaki, wrote a depressing letter to Lillian Beachamp that indicated acceptance and despondency over what the war would entail: 'This war is going to be very serious dear & we may all be needed yet. I do hope Germany gets quietened down soon as after a war there is always such depression & misery & so many fine chaps loose [sic] their lives & it means so many widows & orphans does it not [?]'⁸⁸ In a not too dissimilar mood to Coster, the Taranaki Employers' Association postponed their annual dinner indefinitely 'on account of the war'.⁸⁹ So did the Stratford Amateur Operatic Society, which postponed rehearsals indefinitely for their production of 'Merrie England'.⁹⁰ In south Taranaki the local newspaper reported panic amongst consumers; there had 'been a great run on necessaries such as flour, sugar etc. Within the last few days one wholesale house having disposed of its entire stock of flour ... while its stocks of sugar, kerosene and benzene are practically exhausted'.⁹¹ Some retailers, however, did not share their customers' anxieties. They reacted in ways that blurred the line between enthusiasm and economic opportunism, using war metaphors in their advertisements. 'War declared! Ladies tweed coats — no German shoddy They'll go like British shells Robinsons are straight shots', claimed one retailer.⁹² Nicholson's pharmacy in Stratford posted war news in its shop window daily, and in the window of the Egmont Clothing Company's shop a map of Europe attracted 'a good deal of attention'.⁹³ In New Plymouth, a shop displayed in its window a model of a Dreadnought 'composed entirely of many of the lines stocked by an ironmonger'.⁹⁴ Over in Inglewood, a bread vendor wanted to give the authorities 'every assistance in his power' because his carts 'were in touch with nearly everybody'.⁹⁵

Patriotic fund-raising activities provided another venue for the manifestation of war enthusiasm. Within one week of the war starting, patriotic demonstrations took place in Stratford, New Plymouth, Hawera and Inglewood to raise money for the Empire Defence Fund. They bore all the hallmarks of what Verhey has characterized as 'war enthusiasm' and the speeches revealed some meanings underlying Strachan's 'conspicuous froth'. In New Plymouth on Saturday evening 8 August, 'great enthusiasm prevailed among' a crowd of 'over two thousand people' — about 25% of the town's population — who paraded in the main street singing the national anthem and waving the Union Jack and the flags of Britain's allies.⁹⁶ A band played patriotic tunes for about an hour before marching to the post office where the mayor, J.E. Wilson, convened an open-

air meeting. 'Here the crowd was considerably augmented.'⁹⁷ In a familial way, Wilson told the crowd, 'I have called you together to-night because a call has come across the seas — a call which we, as part of the British Empire, cannot disregard. (Applause.) Britain is at war.'⁹⁸ Defending 'our honour' and honouring 'our obligations to our friends in France and Russia', stated Wilson, 'impelled us to the steps we have taken'.⁹⁹ He added, 'we must be prepared to take our part in helping the Mother Country Now is the time for us to show that there is more in our pride of Empire than only words. (Cheers).'¹⁰⁰ 'Up to a late hour the streets [in New Plymouth] were thronged, [with] the crowd continuing to sing patriotic songs.'¹⁰¹ This had not been a demonstration about enthusiasm for war, but an opportunity to show devotion to Britain. And this idea underpinned the enthusiasm at patriotic meetings held throughout Taranaki, in the south at Hawera and in the small community of Moumahaki near Patea, to the west in Opunake, and to the north in Inglewood; the imperial sentiment was the same: 'they [Taranaki] must swim or sink with her [Britain]'.¹⁰²

Five days after New Plymouth's patriotic demonstration, when patriotic songs 'in full strength, closed the most enthusiastic and unanimous meeting ever held in Inglewood', the local newspaper printed a decidedly unenthusiastic editorial about the war. In it the editor questioned the desirability of New Zealand men enlisting to fight in a war overseas: 'We cannot see the startling necessity for sending men to die on foreign soil in somebody else's quarrel.'¹⁰³

Is it a fair deal merely on the grounds of sentimentality to take away the very flower of our population to die at the hands of an enemy devoid of honour and whose cause has not a particle of justice in it [?] What is to happen in the future to New Zealand and the Commonwealth devoid of population and with nothing but the medical inspectors' rejects to repopulate our country, occupy and cultivate our idle lands and at the same time defend our dominion from the many nations who look with jealous eyes on our unoccupied country and gloriously fertile lands? Surely a much better method of helping the Old Country could be adopted than the sacrifice of our all that is physically best and the retention of our all that is worst.¹⁰⁴

Owing to those concerns the *Age* felt that 'we cannot enthuse over the departure of our young men'.¹⁰⁵ This was a striking admission at a time when males of military age (20–40 years) willingly joined what historians have referred to as the 'rush to enlist', an action synonymous with war enthusiasm.

Niall Ferguson believes that '[t]he best evidence of war enthusiasm is, of course, the willingness of men to fight'.¹⁰⁶ William George Malone from Stratford volunteered immediately, and he noted in his diary, 'I am glad that three of my boys volunteered without hesitation to serve and fight for their country'.¹⁰⁷ Jack Moller from Opunake recalled volunteering a few days after the declaration of war because 'Britain was involved' and 'we were a part of Britain'.¹⁰⁸ And yet there is evidence that some men did not share their enthusiasm. Duncan Stevens, a sheep farmer near Waitara, kept a diary that recorded his commitment to the farm with only one comment in 1914 about the war: 'all the bushmen called in the morning & R. Fulton, Yarrell & Baldwin left for Waitara to volunteer for the front'.¹⁰⁹ Stevens's apparent indifference to

the war was shared by Lewis Coster. In his letter to Lillian Beachamp, whom he referred to as 'Dolsy', Coster wrote, 'I would like to join in myself only I wouldn't like to now I have you to love I think of Dolsy dear. War; money; farms; everything can go to blazes now as far as I'm concerned as long as I have my little Dolsy to care for.'¹¹⁰ For Stevens, the farm economy, and for Coster, affairs of the heart, proved more attractive considerations than volunteering for military service.

In Taranaki, voluntary enlistment with the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) commenced on the second day of the war. At the Stratford Defence Office 'quite a large crowd' gathered and a 'good number of names were taken'.¹¹¹ Enlistments in New Plymouth were reported to have proceeded 'quietly all day' with 'about sixty men' enlisting.¹¹² A week later enlistments were reported to be 'fairly satisfactory', and in Patea, 'very satisfactory'.¹¹³ The language used by the newspapers does not suggest an enthusiastic 'rush'.

As a potential indicator of enthusiasm, the 'rush to enlist' can be tested by examining the voluntary enlistment dates of all 311 recruits from Taranaki who embarked for overseas service in October 1914 with the Main Body of the NZEF.¹¹⁴ Twenty-four recruits enlisted on 11 August; 76 on 12 August; 18 on 15 August; 43 on 17 August; and 56 on 18 August. Nearly 70% of the region's recruits who served in the Main Body had enlisted within a fortnight of Britain's declaration of war. On each of the other days in August, enlistment numbers ranged from zero to eight with the exception being 25 August when 20 enlistments were registered.¹¹⁵ How many other volunteers enlisted but were rejected on medical grounds in August and throughout the remainder of 1914 is unknown. A local indication is given by Lieutenant Gray's register of all the volunteers who passed through the Stratford Defence Office from August 1914 to August 1916. Gray's register listed about 700 names, of which 160 (23%) had been medically rejected.¹¹⁶ Given the actual numbers of volunteers from Taranaki who embarked with the Main Body and the proportions likely to have been rejected, the 'rush to enlist' appears to have been undertaken by a small proportion of the 9964 males (including Maori) of military age who resided in the region in the immediate pre-war period. Of the 311 soldiers from Taranaki who served with the Main Body, 18 (6%) were married, and 82% were under the age of 30.¹¹⁷ These statistics compare favourably with those provided by Phillips for New Zealand, suggesting that the enthusiastic 'rush to enlist' may have been confined to the region's young, single males.

For Maori in Taranaki indifference to enlistment — even rejection — was both political and historical. Bill Tume, a Maori farmhand from Purangi, recalled over 70 years later why Maori from Taranaki did not voluntarily enlist early in the war. Maori had 'a grudge against the government', claimed Tume, because of the land confiscations during the 1860s.¹¹⁸ Tume served with the sixth reinforcements in 1915, and he recalled Maori saying that 'the Germans had done nothing to us why should we go and kill them'.¹¹⁹ Tume claimed that 'there wouldn't be twenty Taranaki boys [who] went to war[?]'.¹²⁰ He is probably correct. Just how many Maori from Taranaki volunteered in 1914 is unknown, but the historical record shows that only one Maori from Taranaki, from Patea in south Taranaki, embarked with the First Maori Contingent on 14

February 1915, and at least another six Maori from Taranaki embarked with the Second Maori Contingent on 19 September 1915.¹²¹ Historians confirm the likelihood of low numbers of Maori volunteers from Taranaki. P.S. O'Connor believed Maori elders, in particular, were 'unsympathetic' to recruitment in Taranaki and 'only a few men had volunteered'.¹²² James Cowan wrote that 'Maori tribes were denuded of their young men during the war', 'with the exception of the Waikato, Taranaki and Urewera districts'.¹²³

While Maori in Taranaki reacted to the war with indifference, fear rather than enthusiasm was the likely reaction of 337 Germans and 36 Austrians resident in the area.¹²⁴ Even though the *Taranaki Herald's* correspondent in Stratford remarked that 'it cannot be said that Germans are unpopular here, too many are excellent neighbours and fellow settlers', and the *Eltham Argus* reminded readers not to 'forget that we have in the Dominion many Germans who have proved themselves most admirable colonists', and that we should treat them as 'friends', the authorities thought otherwise.¹²⁵ As early as 7 August, New Plymouth police began visiting local Germans and Austrians instructing them 'not to leave the country', and that 'any movements they wish[ed] to make must first be communicated to the Police'.¹²⁶ At Ratapiko, German-Polish residents had to report weekly to the police in Inglewood, but as the war developed some leniency was exercised, although they were not allowed to travel more than 20 miles from home.¹²⁷ Some residents with non-English sounding names had allegations levelled against them and felt the need to declare their 'Britishness' in a bid to preserve their security. Frank Dodunski from Inglewood took exception to an allegation that he had made a statement against the 'British race'. 'This is an absolute untruth', claimed Dodunski in a letter to the editor of the *Inglewood Record and Waitara Age*. 'I am as much British as any other British Colonial.'¹²⁸ In Stratford, Van Heck, a musician at Bernard's Pictures placed a notice in the local newspaper informing readers that while he was 'of German extraction', he was an 'Englishman born in London', and that he 'fought with the British in the Boer War and was seriously wounded'. Furthermore, 'if the authorities would pass him [he] would again offer his services for the front against Germany'.¹²⁹ Nearly a week later, while conducting the orchestra, Van Heck demonstrated his loyalty by reportedly giving a 'vigorous and well deserved tongue-lashing' to some patrons who remained seated during the playing of the national anthem.¹³⁰

The security of resident Germans and Austrians was largely in the hands of the government and the region's police force. While a proclamation of 19 August protected their rights it ambiguously declared that in time of war it was the King's prerogative 'to do with such persons according to his good pleasure'.¹³¹ They had the least cause to be enthusiastic about the war, especially after the Main Body of the NZEF embarked in October, since attention then turned inwards on 'foreign residents amongst us', with newspaper editors and letters to the editors expressing concerns about a potential threat from within.¹³²

The diverse ways in which people in Taranaki reacted to the war in August 1914 were not unique. Indeed, imperial connections can be made between places in this New Zealand region and the reactions in places like Islington in North London; one of the locations examined by Adrian Gregory's reassessment of

English reactions to the outbreak of war. Gregory cites an Islington newspaper from 6 August 1914, 'where the war greets you everywhere' in the form of 'news-vendors' who 'throw out nothing but war' and 'crowds' at the 'Picture Palaces' wanting 'to see the war movements on the screen', and 'uniformed Territorials in the streets', which caused 'excitement', but equally, 'the rise in the price of commodities' caused 'anxiety'.¹³³ This could be New Plymouth, or Inglewood, or Stratford or Hawera in Taranaki let alone a London suburb. It suggests that what people in Taranaki experienced in the opening weeks of the Great War was shared elsewhere in the British Empire.

This article has not denied the existence of war enthusiasm, nor would it be historically prudent to do so. Rather, it has highlighted the existence of a variety of less than enthusiastic reactions from the Taranaki region which represent a more diverse account of how people there reacted to the Great War in August 1914. For historians to continue to accept the popular view of war enthusiasm as the abiding reaction is to labour under a myth at a time when the secondary literature is showing effective and compelling attempts by historians to reassess and modify our understandings about how people greeted the Great War. Historians need to approach New Zealand's reactions during the opening weeks of the Great War differently, using a local and regional lens rather than continuing to rely on generalizations that purport to be the national experience. The Taranaki example has highlighted some of the 'building blocks' in helping to form a national 'picture', but more 'blocks' are needed by comparing this English-minded region in 1914 with, for example, Scottish Otago, or with urban Auckland, or as a predominantly dairy-farming region with that of the extractive primary industrial region of Westland. In moving towards establishing a national 'picture' of New Zealand's experiences at home during the opening weeks of the war in 1914 — and, indeed, the years 1914 to 1918 — much work still needs to be done in the field of First World War studies as the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War approaches.

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