

Reviews (History in Other Media)

An Impressive Silence: Public Memory and Personal Experience of the Great War.

Archives New Zealand, Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, 10 Mulgrave Street, Thorndon, Wellington. Reviewed on 11 November 2008, 31 January, 14 and 21 February 2009. *An Impressive Silence* [<http://exhibitions.archives.govt.nz/AnImpressiveSilence/>]

Created and maintained by Archives New Zealand, Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga. Reviewed on 11, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22 February 2009.

IN 2001, HISTORIAN ROBERTO RABEL predicted that war history was ‘unlikely to feature as prominently in the future growth of public history’ as it had in the past.¹ When the ninetieth anniversary of the Armistice was commemorated in November last year, it appeared that Rabel’s prediction was erroneous. A number of public heritage organizations used this event to launch war-related exhibitions and web initiatives under the banner of ‘Coming Home/Te Hokinga Mai’. This overarching theme was devised by the Ministry for Culture and Heritage to guide the events and shift the focus from combat to the long-term social impact of the Great War. It was ironic that the anniversary fell just three days after Helen Clark lost the general election, as Clark, in her capacity as Minister for Culture and Heritage, actively promoted greater public recognition and commemoration of New Zealand’s experience of war.

The theme of ‘Coming Home’ has moved the spotlight away from tried and true World War I topics such as battles and nationhood. Some ‘Coming Home’ projects even challenged the idea of authoritative ‘official’ war history. Digital New Zealand’s ‘Memory Maker’, for example, allows users to ‘mash up’ sound bites, photographs and footage to interpret the Great War for themselves.² Archives New Zealand’s exhibition, *An Impressive Silence: Public Memory and Personal Experience of the Great War*, also broadens notions of what constitutes a history of war.

Archives’ staff have realized *An Impressive Silence* in two places: at Archives’ Head Office in Wellington and online. It is the agency’s second consecutive display that deals explicitly with war. In this case, archival collections are displayed to illustrate history, whereas its predecessor simply showcased a selection from the national collection of war art (all of which is now available online). The current exhibition’s title is lifted from a statement made by Marshal Ferdinand Foch, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, who accepted Germany’s surrender in November 1918. The Armistice, observed Foch, established ‘an impressive silence [that] followed upon fifty-three months of battle’. This was a historic moment, one from which ‘nations could now look forward to seeing a world once more restored to peace’. (Foch tempered this optimism after the Treaty of Versailles was signed, saying that it was not a peace that had been brokered, but an ‘armistice of 20 years’.)

The exhibition’s stated aim is to give ‘voice to New Zealand’s Great War experience and memory through the official and unofficial representations of the war and coming home, along with some of the personal realities of the grief and loss faced by individuals, families, and communities across the nation’. Two separate galleries showing archival material, combined with items from the National Army Museum, give substance to these voices, memories and representations. An introduction to the exhibition appears in the main foyer, adjacent to the first gallery. This dimly-lit space is sparsely furnished, dominated by a wall projection of a 12-minute excerpt from a 1973 black and white New Zealand Film Unit documentary, which was ground-breaking at the time. In it, a narrator and World War I veterans describe the story of the overseas experiences of the New Zealand forces. Two suspended model aircraft and a large-scale black and white

photograph of Prime Minister Massey inspecting an aeroplane, complete the installation. The models are impressive but their relationship to the rest of gallery and exhibition is unclear.

A pathway of stylized red poppies fixed to the floor leads visitors from the foyer to the substantive part of the exhibition, which is tucked away opposite the reading room. The idea of a trail is a clever one, but more obvious way-finding would help visitors; perhaps something as simple as a strategically placed text panel instructing them to 'follow the path of poppies to view the rest of our exhibition'.

The entrance to the second gallery features sand bags, a machine gun and a large title graphic on the wall. A surprisingly subtle soundscape evokes a desolate battlefield. This 'main' gallery is compact; exhibits are displayed densely around its perimeter in a frieze-like fashion. This effectively domesticates the space and creates an intimate, almost oppressive, parlour atmosphere. The use of numerous small unframed photographs throughout the exhibition adds to the claustrophobia.

There are seven sections to the exhibition: Off to War; Nurses/Voluntary Aid; Home Front; Ettie Rout and VD; Facing the Cost; Coming Home; and Remembrance. Each section is introduced by a wall panel of informative text. Material related to military manoeuvres has been foregone in favour of objects and documents illustrating other aspects of the Great War, such as conscription, conscientious objection, censorship, desertion, sex, temperance and nursing. This reflects the diversifying historiography of World War I, although it is surprising that Maori responses or home front xenophobia were not explicitly addressed in any of the text panels.

Exhibiting documentary material frequently creates challenges for curators. It is often empirically rich but visually disappointing. However, the exhibition team has overcome this obstacle here, selecting an impressive range of official and personal records, as well as popular print and material culture. One highlight is a card from Ettie Rout endorsing a Parisian brothel run by 'Madame Yvonne'. Another is the 'Dinkum Boy' calendar for 1919, which depicts a kewpie doll wearing a soldier's cap and bandolier. Then there is a letter to Hester Maclean from the department store Kirkcaldie and Stains, with quotes for nurses' uniforms (capes made from scarlet military cloth cost 21 shillings). Nine display cases contain a smattering of three-dimensional exhibits. With film footage of war showing in the middle of the gallery, these add variety to the documentary and photographic material on display. Cased items include a wooden prosthetic hand, worn by 'Cocky' Cains; a nursing sister's tippet (short cape); and a National Recruiting Board 'arm-badge'. The accompanying poster explains that those men who had enlisted or had returned from the Front were encouraged to wear these fabric bands to ensure they were not mistaken for shirkers.

An Impressive Silence is not silent on some of the unsavoury aspects of war. Archives' staff have, for example, selected images of wounded soldiers and amputees (known as 'limbies'); the pay book of court-marshalled Private John Sweeney, which abruptly concludes with the words 'Sentenced to death' in red; and a register of NZEF burials in England, which lists the personal effects of deceased soldiers, including Roland Chadwick who committed suicide, leaving paints, a sketchbook and not much else besides.

Despite its name, *An Impressive Silence* is a clamorous experience. The size of the gallery is too small to do justice to the number of topics covered and amount of material exhibited. The emotional power of objects and stories is muted because of the uniform display of material. The historical significance of many exhibits also remains silent. There are several practical solutions to this overload: facsimiles of duller items, such as newspaper clippings, could have been omitted; image sizes could have been varied to create dramatic impact. The number of topics about the war could also have been pared back to allow those dealing with post-war life to be developed further.

For those who cannot visit in person, most of the material from *An Impressive Silence*

has been reproduced online, although an up-to-date version of Flash is useful for those wishing to view the website. There are three different ways to navigate the digital version of the exhibition. Visitors can select material by format, in three 'galleries' of images, videos and soundclips; they can look at material in five thematic sections; or they can interact with the exhibits chronologically using a timeline running along the bottom of the website. Uncluttered with extraneous data, the 'galleries' are the easiest and most rewarding to use. The five thematic sections recycle text from the physical gallery and are accompanied by images of exhibits. The timeline is an interesting response to chronology. Exhibits appear on it according to their production date but do not refer to any key dates in the conflict or on the home front. Unfortunately, this approach robs the objects of historical significance or meaning, and defeats the purpose of a timeline.

Until recently some voices have not been allowed to speak for themselves in New Zealand's war histories. There has also been an impressive silence in official war histories on matters such as the ongoing emotional and physical impact of war on citizens. Archives New Zealand's contribution to 'Coming Home' has consciously avoided an official voice. In doing so it has inadvertently let too many others speak at once. In spite of this excess *An Impressive Silence* reinforces the diversifying field of war history as public history and suggests voices that historians might listen out for in the future.

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NOTES

1 Roberto Rabel, 'War History as Public History: Past and Future', in Bronwyn Dalley and Jock Phillips, eds, *Going Public: The Changing Face of New Zealand History*, Auckland, 2001, p.66.

2 <http://remix.digitalnz.org/> accessed 23 February 2009.

Te Ara o Nga Tupuna Maori Heritage Trail. Wellington City Council, the Wellington Tenth Trust and Ngati Toa. Visited 7 March 2009. [<http://www.wellington.govt.nz/services/heritage/pdfs/teara.pdf>]

Te Aro Pa, 39 Taranaki St, Wellington. Wellington City Council in partnership with the Wellington Tenth Trust and the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. Visited 22 February and 6 March 2009.

HERITAGE IS HISTORY'S POOR COUSIN. Despite the growth in the professional heritage sector and the attendant university courses in heritage studies, most people still think of heritage as 'Distory' (Disney history), some sort of popular expression of historical nostalgia. But the gap between academic history and public history is closing. The critical view of 'heritage sceptics' like historian David Lowenthal (who claimed heritage is history with the pain edited out) has matured into an understanding of heritage as a contemporary mode of cultural production that draws on the past. A growing corpus of international scholarship and local writing now critically analyses the history, theory and practice of historic heritage in its own right. Taking heritage seriously allows us to critically examine the ubiquitous heritage trail, which, like other forms of public history, looks old but is new, something constructed in the present with recourse to the past.

In the hustle and bustle of downtown Wellington's Courtenay Place, it is very easy to overlook the pou (post) that marks a stop on the Maori heritage trail. The small carved post sits on the traffic island in front of the Embassy Theatre, competing for attention with the plaques, public art and urban design features that clutter this part of the capital.