

If there are small quibbles, one might wish the authors did not repeat the myth that ‘historically speaking, New Zealand is a young country’ (p.3) when their own first chapter would suggest otherwise; that the gender discussion probed more of how sport shaped a changing New Zealand masculinity; and that Raewyn Dalziel’s ‘Colonial Helpmeet’ was the beginning, rather than the end, of formulations of gender relations in the colonial period. And if there is a bit more Canterbury in these pages than a Wellingtonian can easily stomach, that just proves the authors’ argument that provincialism is alive and well!

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Fearless: The Extraordinary Untold Story of New Zealand’s Great War Airmen. By Adam Claasen. Massey University Press, Auckland, 2017. 495pp. NZ price: \$59.99. ISBN: 9780994140784.

BLOOD, MUD AND SHRAPNEL are the enduring images of World War One. Its imprint is strong on the public consciousness of New Zealanders, especially around Anzac Day. In particular, the Gallipoli campaign has long dominated New Zealand’s public memory and, therefore, been the focus for historical research. Over the years, the shift from Gallipoli-based research to the battles on the Western Front has slowly addressed this historiographical imbalance. However, the focus on land-based warfare has also meant the war in the air has been generally neglected. A small body of literature by historians such as Errol Martyn and Ian McGibbon has laid much of the groundwork regarding New Zealand’s involvement in the war in the air.

The impetus for *Fearless* comes from the Centenary History Programme, funded by the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Massey University and the New Zealand Defence Force. Its brief is to produce authoritative and accessible print histories on New Zealand and World War One. About a dozen publications were planned for, and just over half have already been published.

Adam Claasen draws the reader in by opening with the improbable near-death experience of ace pilot Keith Caldwell. Standing with one foot on the rudder, Caldwell waved to a fellow airman, who mistakenly thought it was a heroic gesture, before he plunged to his death. In fact, like something out of a movie, Caldwell jumped at the last minute, rolled and stood upright. The laconic entry in his logbook ‘Very lucky’ (p.16) epitomises the forthright character of one of New Zealand’s outstanding wartime pilots. Claasen recounts numerous instances of bravery and recklessness from the New Zealand airmen.

The text follows a chronological structure that serves the reader well. The pithy chapter titles, like ‘Dust and Dysentery’, ‘Bashed into Shape’ and ‘Bloody April’, set the tone for each section. The early chapters provide an overview of the pre-war efforts to introduce aviation into New Zealand. The New Zealand government

believed funding an air corps was too costly and so the impetus came from private entrepreneurs. This meant with the outbreak of war, individuals had to join the various precursors to the British RAF, as New Zealand lacked its own air force.

Once the chapters on the war effort begin, Claasen manages to balance the various theatres of war and the New Zealand efforts. In documenting the various pilots, like air aces Keith Park, Clive Collett and Arthur Coningham, to name but a few, it would have been easy just to glorify their wartime exploits. Instead, Claasen recounts the roles of mechanics and lesser-known pilots whose families had to deal with their losses. Of particular note was Major Rainsford Balcombe-Brown, who had the unenviable task of writing letters to the families of his squadron when their sons died. Using archival and sometimes private family collections, Claasen demonstrates the human cost of war in often heartfelt letters.

Obviously the biggest challenge for a text about airmen is dealing with the aircraft and their various iterations. World War One saw a lot of experimentation in aircraft, so the names throughout the text can be a challenge. A useful feature of the book is the illustrations of the various aircraft on the inside of the front and back covers. All the famous aircraft like the Sopwiths, Fokkers and bombers such as the Handley Page, are there.

One misstep in this otherwise thoroughly researched book involves airmen who were not New Zealanders. Claasen recounts the story of Thomas White and Francis Yeats-Brown who were despatched by their New Zealand commander, Hugh Reilly, to blow up some Ottoman communications close to Baghdad in 1915. Everything went wrong and both airmen were captured by local Arabs who then turned them over to the Ottoman Turks. Both men were imprisoned, in harsh conditions, for about two years. On more than one occasion, Claasen refers to both airmen as Australians (pp.110–11, 120) when in fact White was the only Australian. Yeats-Brown, though born in Italy, was English. He was a member of the Royal Flying Corps and joined White as part of a multinational force. To reinforce the point, Yeats-Brown called his pilot ‘Australia’ White in the book *Caught by the Turks* (1919). As this information is readily available, it is a surprising error.

The breadth and depth of research in this single volume provides the reader with an overview of individual New Zealanders who joined the war effort in the air. A lavish array of illustrations from the public domain and private collections supplement the lively text. Claasen ably demonstrates the wide-ranging efforts of a small but determined group of New Zealanders. Whether battling German pilots, gathering reconnaissance or defending Britain against the dreaded Zeppelins, New Zealand pilots and support crew played a prominent role. They were, as the title says, ‘fearless’.

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