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# Historiography 1918-Today (New Zealand)

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**This article surveys New Zealand historiography of the First World War since 1918. It outlines the key frameworks studies have been pursued within, how these have developed over time and notes major titles.**

## Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 The First Generation](#)
- [3 1980s Resurgence](#)
- [4 Beyond the Battlefield](#)
- [5 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

## 1. Introduction

Since 1918 [New Zealand](#) historiography of the First World War has produced a respectable record of historical writing, though through rather irregular efforts.<sup>[1]</sup> A burst of publications in the 1920s and 1930s was followed by a decline, then, in a development consistent with international trends, renewed attention from the mid/late 1980s. The burst of production accompanying the war's centenary would seem to confirm the subject as one accumulating consideration in inverse relation to the passage of time.

Much of this work has been directed towards military subjects – notably campaigns, studies of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) and battlefield experiences – and commentators have

noted conspicuous gaps in the historiography.<sup>[2]</sup> However, changes within historical methodologies and interests from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have seen trends towards the exploration of wider dimensions of the war and academic theses and articles, entries within anthology works and a growing range of publications attest to a broadening consideration of the subject.

## 2. The First Generation

The earliest writings appeared around the early 1920s. Most salient are four official history volumes commissioned by the government – covering campaigns in [Gallipoli](#),<sup>[3]</sup> [France](#),<sup>[4]</sup> [Palestine](#)<sup>[5]</sup> and minor campaigns and services<sup>[6]</sup> – supplemented by various unit-produced histories. These works revolved around contemporary impulses to chronicle a collective effort within a conflict whose broad shape was part of general public consciousness.

Later assessments of these works have often been critical. Comments have been made on their "inadequacy" and their "turgid prose", and revisionist histories have argued that they present an officer's outlook.<sup>[7]</sup> Tacit acknowledgement of the project's shortcomings might be glimpsed in the far more extensive nature of the forty-eight volumes of the *Official Histories of the Second World War*. Conversely, some of these volumes served as standard works on their subjects until relatively recently and are still referenced in contemporary works as serious investigations. Furthermore, their reflections on the war's meanings, costs and place in posterity have seen them cited as useful indicators of contemporary attitudes and sentiments.<sup>[8]</sup>

A second component of post-war writing emerged in memoirs. These include command perspectives such as General Sir [Alexander Godley's \(1867-1957\) \*Life of an Irish Soldier\*](#) (1939). However, the men formerly under Godley's command also produced their own, often highly personal, testimonies. Some examples include [C.A.L. Treadwell's \(1889-1966\) \*Recollections of an Amateur Soldier\*](#) (1936) which asserts a relatively positive sense of the war's rationale and his endurance of his experiences. A more complex view is available in [Ormond Burton's \(1893-1974\) \*The Silent Division\*](#) (1935). An interwar convert to Christian [Pacifism](#), Burton would become a renowned [conscientious objector](#) during 1939-1945: his writing frequently focuses on the common "digger" as embodying distinctions and ideals which he argued would form the basis of a national character. Conversely, the journalist [Robin Hyde \(1906-1939\)](#) conveyed the exploits of the veteran Douglas Stark, aka "Starkie", in *Passport to Hell* (1937). Indicative of international trends towards more graphic and cynical representations of the war, the text dwells on the violent and ignoble aspects of Starkie's war experiences.<sup>[9]</sup>

The four decades after 1945 saw a decline in writing on the war, arguably reflecting a broader waning in public consideration of 1914-1918.<sup>[10]</sup> Unit-produced histories and memoirs tailed off with Major John Robertson's *With the Cameliers in Palestine* (1938) and [Cecil Malthus's \(1890-1976\) \*ANZAC: A Retrospective\*](#) (1965) forming some of the last examples of veteran self-publishing. Some

exceptions to this trend can be found in academic work, notably within theses and articles devoted to the developing interests of social history (discussed below).

### 3. 1980s Resurgence

Many elements of the first generation remain core features in the resurgence of interest in the war from the 1980s. The rationale of highlighting specific service or unit efforts has produced new works on, for example, [nursing](#),<sup>[11]</sup> the Maori Pioneer Battalion,<sup>[12]</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Canterbury Battalion<sup>[13]</sup> and the New Zealand Division.<sup>[14]</sup> Furthermore, various publications have sought to update and revise campaign histories through the lens of new military history. Christopher Pugsley's *Gallipoli: The New Zealand Story* (1984) was an early indication of a fresh interest in New Zealand's part in that operation. Terry Kinloch's *Devils on Horses* (2007) examines the New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade's involvement in the Palestine Campaign and Matthew Wright's *New Zealand on the Western Front* (2005) and *Shattered Glory* (2010) investigate involvement in the [Middle East](#) and Europe. Others have contemplated specific battles. Glyn Harper's *Dark Journey* (2007) considers New Zealanders' experiences of key battles on the [Western Front](#) and Andrew Macdonald has investigated New Zealand's experience of the [Somme Offensive](#) in *On My Way to the Somme* (2005) and [Passchendaele](#) in *Passchendaele: The Anatomy of a Tragedy* (2013).

The publication of soldiers' accounts also remains a point of interest. As veterans became scarce towards the end of the century descendants took up the task of publishing [diaries](#) and [letters](#), an act indicative of how kinship links remain a point of access to the war.<sup>[15]</sup> In the cases of particular soldiers, professional historians also fulfilled this labour; consider [William G. Malone's \(1859-1915\)](#) and [Herbert Hart's \(1882-1968\)](#) writings, published respectively as *No Better Death* (2005) and *The Devil's Own War* (2008). Broader studies of soldiers' writings are available in *Letters from the Battlefield* (2001) and *Letters from Gallipoli* (2011), both edited by Glyn Harper. Written accounts from New Zealand soldiers are also collected in *The Penguin Book of New Zealanders at War* (2009), edited by Gavin McLean and Ian McGibbon.

Drawing lines of continuity between the first generation and works produced since the 1980s should not suggest a static approach. Indicating that a strong consciousness of the war's history can no longer be taken for granted, many of the aforementioned works used the conflict's historical distance to question the war's larger impacts; looking back in lieu of the first generations' tendency to look forward. Additionally, much of this work reflects the trends of new military history. Christopher Pugsley's *On the Fringe of Hell* (1991) and *The ANZAC Experience* (2004) offer key examples. Both pursue subjects grounded in the fundamentals of conventional military history – respectively troop discipline and the ANZAC Corps "learning curve" into a professional fighting force – but make extensive use of diaries, letters, photography, sketches and oral records.

This shifting approach to battlefield experience is most evident in several pioneering works of social history in the late 1980s. *The Great Adventure* (1988), edited by [Jock Phillips](#), Nicholas Boyack, and

E.P. Malone, for example, presented the writings of eight New Zealand soldiers along with background information. Boyack's *Behind the Lines* (1989) also surveyed soldiers' diaries and letters and claimed to capture the authentic experiences and attitudes of the common soldier against the faux tenets of the Official Histories and popular mythology. Interest in individual accounts is also evident in oral history work. *In the Shadow of War* (1990), edited by Boyack and Jane Tolerton, showcases the findings of a project to interview veterans on various aspects of their experiences. This work has since been followed up by Tolerton's *An Awfully Big Adventure* (2013).

These works also indicate new interests in aspects of the war experience and pursue, for example, [remembrance](#), troop (ill)discipline and [venereal disease](#). More recent articles and entries in anthology works such as *New Zealand's Great War* (2007), edited by John Crawford and Ian McGibbon, and *The Great Adventure Ends*, edited by Nathalie Philippe (2013), also showcase this trend and have seen consideration of varied aspects of experiences: repatriation,<sup>[16]</sup> troop entertainment,<sup>[17]</sup> soldier tourism,<sup>[18]</sup> and [shell shock](#).<sup>[19]</sup>

## 4. Beyond the Battlefield

Though there are some precursors from earlier decades, the post-1980s' revival has also seen increased interest in the social interaction and cultural representation of the war beyond the battlefield. The often eclectic nature of cultural history has sometimes seen precise subjects selected to investigate this. Examples include [religion](#),<sup>[20]</sup> [photography](#),<sup>[21]</sup> [cartooning](#),<sup>[22]</sup> death and [bereavement](#),<sup>[23]</sup> war memorials,<sup>[24]</sup> regional studies<sup>[25]</sup> and material culture.<sup>[26]</sup>

More systematic studies have emerged around the context of New Zealand's war. While the forces which took societies to war are a universal issue, factors of distance, isolation and a junior position within a larger coalition have raised questions around New Zealand's relation with the conflict, often accented with concerns around identity and interests. One response has seen studies of the geopolitical context of commitment. Ian McGibbon's *The Path to Gallipoli* (1991), for example, studies the evolution of New Zealand's defence policies, circa 1840-1915, and argues the rationale of involvement in the Dardanelles campaign.<sup>[27]</sup> In 2000, Pugsley produced a comparable study of the links between [pre-war defence planning](#) and the dispatch of the NZEF.<sup>[28]</sup> The political/diplomatic<sup>[29]</sup> and economic<sup>[30]</sup> idiosyncrasies of New Zealand's position within the imperial partnership have likewise formed a point of interest in several works and form issues within biographical studies of political and military leadership.<sup>[31]</sup>

Studies of military, political and economic commitment often touch upon the broader social/cultural contours of wartime New Zealand, though this has also been pursued in its own right. An early example was produced by Sir [James Allen \(1855-1942\)](#) in an entry for *The Cambridge History of the British Empire* which described New Zealand's war effort as "the outcome of the spirit of its people."<sup>[32]</sup> In 1988 Paul Baker analysed the relationship between society and war effort in a study of

the introduction, application and enforcement of conscription: *King and Country Call*. Drawing on newspapers, interviews, cartoons, political papers, letters and photographs, the text provides insights on various social aspects and remains among the most valuable works on wartime New Zealand society. More recently, [Steven Loveridge's \*Calls to Arms\* \(2014\)](#) examines wartime society and the cultural context in which commitment to the war effort was mobilised. A radically contrasting view to works emphasising the political, economic, defence and cultural rationales for commitment is available in Stevan Eldred-Grigg's *The Great Wrong War* (2010). Eldred-Grigg's account shifts culpability onto the [New Zealand government](#) whose decision to go to war is described as "wholly avoidable, wholly unnecessary and almost wholly disastrous."<sup>[33]</sup>

Other studies have elected to investigate specific social groups, often those that experienced social conflict or change. These include those affected by wartime sectarian discord,<sup>[34]</sup> anti-Germanism<sup>[35]</sup> and impacts on [labour](#) relations and specific occupations.<sup>[36]</sup> Interest in [social tensions](#) and commitments to rediscover "history's losers" has also seen a spotlighting of misfit figures; [Ettie Rout \(1877-1936\)](#), who was instrumental in developing prophylactic kits, and inspected brothels to check VD rates in the New Zealand Army, and who went unmentioned in the official history of the medical services, has since been the subject of specialist and general attention.<sup>[37]</sup> Interest has likewise grown around pacifists, anti-militarists and conscientious objectors.<sup>[38]</sup> In 1919 Harry Holland made an early effort to collect and report on the treatment of objectors in *Armageddon or Calvary*. Later work by P.S. O'Connor,<sup>[39]</sup> Paul Baker<sup>[40]</sup> and David Grant<sup>[41]</sup> revisited government policies and the treatment of objectors. However, this interest is most encapsulated in the success of [Archibald Baxter's \(1881-1970\) \*We Will Not Cease\*](#), republished numerous times since its initial 1939 run and described as "a classic of anti-war literature."<sup>[42]</sup> The text details Baxter's recollections of the imprisonment, starvation, beatings and field punishments he endured during an effort to coerce fourteen objectors into service.<sup>[43]</sup> Further insights into dissent, resistance and state reaction are evident within writings on figures connected with the labour movement,<sup>[44]</sup> Maori resistance<sup>[45]</sup> and anarchism.<sup>[46]</sup>

Other branches of activity have emerged with the rise of [women's](#) and [indigenous](#) history. Both have contemplated the war as a site in which the state of race relations and the female condition were reflected. Work by Monty Soutar<sup>[47]</sup> and Franchesca Walker<sup>[48]</sup> consider the complexities and meanings apparent in Maori involvement in the conflict, though precursors of this interest can be seen in James Cowan's *The Maoris in the Great War* (1926) and O'Connor's 1967 article.<sup>[49]</sup> Women's history has produced comparable questioning of female roles within the conflict. Female labours have been explored in Margaret Tennant's work on patriotic fundraising<sup>[50]</sup> as well as in Melanie Nolan's work on welfare and the wartime labour force.<sup>[51]</sup> Some of the ideological aspects of female activism have been touched on in Graham Hucker's study of the Women's Anti-German League<sup>[52]</sup> and Megan Hutching's study of women who opposed the war.<sup>[53]</sup> Broad insights are

available in Lauris Edmond's and Carolyn Milward's edited collection *Women in Wartime* (1995) and Val Wood's *War Brides* (1991) and unpublished academic research contains rich details and data.<sup>[54]</sup> Consideration of gender has also seen investigation of wartime masculinity. Phillips' larger analysis of New Zealand masculinity, *A Man's Country?* (1987), cuts through 1914-1918 and subsequent works have built on this investigation of wartime representations of [manliness](#).<sup>[55]</sup>

Lastly, historians of [children](#) have displayed a comparable aspiration to explore how the young experienced and were affected by the war. An emerging area of study, with work taking the form of articles and unpublished theses, a central interest has been how children were integrated into the physical and ideological panorama of the war.<sup>[56]</sup> However, oral history interviews of childhood memories<sup>[57]</sup> and examination of children's writings<sup>[58]</sup> have also explored how children experienced and mediated the war's impacts.

## 5. Conclusion

Historical investigation of New Zealand's war experiences have been driven by both bursts of attention and by the pursuit of various subjects since 1918. Investigation of battlefield events has formed, and remains, a core feature of the historiographical record. However, recent decades illustrate both a more varied contemplation of battlefield history and a deeper consideration of broader aspects of New Zealand's war.

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### Notes

1. ↑ For an extensive list of works see *New Zealand and the First World War: a bibliography of non-fiction sources*, online: <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/files/documents/new-zealand-first-world-war-bibliography.pdf> (retrieved: 9 April 2014).
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4. ↑ Stewart, H.: *The New Zealand Division, 1916-1919. A Popular History Based on Official Records*, Auckland 1921.



5. ↑ Powles, C. Guy: *The New Zealanders in Sinai and Palestine*, Auckland 1922, online: <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH1-Sina.html> (retrieved: 29 January 2015).
6. ↑ Drew, H.T.B. (ed.): *The War Effort of New Zealand*, Auckland 1923, online: <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH1-Effo.html> (retrieved: 29 January 2015).
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11. ↑ Rogers, Anna: *While You're Away. New Zealand Nurses at War 1899-1948*, Auckland 2003.
12. ↑ Pugsley, Christopher: *Hokowhita a Tu. The Maori Pioneer Battalion in the First World War*, Auckland 1995.
13. ↑ Latter, Edward: *Marching Onwards. A History of the 2nd Battalion*, Christchurch 1992.
14. ↑ Stack, Wayne: *The New Zealand Expeditionary Force in World War I*, Oxford 2011. The effort to connect locals with foreign locales might also be glimpsed in battlefield tourism literature. For example see Gray, John H.: *From the Uttermost Ends of the Earth. The New Zealand Division on the Western Front 1916-1918: A History and Guide To Its Battlefields*, Christchurch 2010.
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16. ↑ Clarke, Stephen: *Return, Repatriation, Remembrance and the Returned Soldiers' Association 1916-22*, in: Crawford / McGibbon, *New Zealand's Great War 2007*, pp. 157-181; Walker, Elizabeth: 'The Living Death'. *The Repatriation Experience of New Zealand's Disabled Great War Servicemen*, MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington 2013, online: <http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/handle/10063/2641> (retrieved: 29 January 2015); Clarkson, Coralie: *The Reality of Return. Exploring the Experiences of World War One Soldiers after their Return to New Zealand*, MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington 2012, online: <http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/handle/10063/2072> (retrieved: 29 January 2015); Parsons, Gwen: 'The Many Derelicts of the War'. *Great War Veterans and Repatriation in Dunedin and Ashburton, 1918 to 1928*, PhD thesis, University of Otago 2008.
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