

The Great War for New Zealand Waikato 1800-2000

VINCENT O'MALLEY

Bridget Williams Books (2016)

The last few years have witnessed an upturn in discussion and *kōrero* on the acknowledgement and commemoration of many of the battles and events surrounding the New Zealand Wars. The conflict at Ōrākau, Ranginui and other parts of the Waikato between 1863-1864 have been central to this. Vincent O'Malley's publication in 2016, *The Great War for New Zealand*, has contributed significantly to this resurgence of interest. Spiralling out from the Waikato wars of 1863-1864 O'Malley puts these wars into context by covering two centuries of colonisation, conflict and the New Zealand Wars, in its broadest sense.

O'Malley's thesis is set out over four sections encapsulating the time period 1800-2000: 'Before the war'; 'Te Pakanga ki Waikato'; 'The aftermath'; and 'The long search for justice'. Such a format follows the traditional chronological pattern of a historical overview. What is unique and exciting in this work is the manner in which O'Malley weaves reflections on historical points of view into the narrative, which makes the work read as always contemporary.

Partly this contemporaneous analysis is achieved by the choice of images used to illustrate the text. For example, when highlighting the Battle of Ōrākau in 1864, a 1940 poster of Rudall Hayward's 1925 silent movie, 'Rewi's Last Stand', is depicted. The visual imagery here gives an indication of how this battle, the Waikato Wars, and the relationship between Pākehā and Māori could be represented and "sold" to the public. Of further interest here is that this version of the poster featured in the School Film Library catalogue for New Zealand school children. So besides the perceived entertainment value of this film, the movie was also being seen as educational, an early example of New Zealand history being taught in schools perhaps? And through whose lens is this history of Ōrākau being portrayed?

Underpinning this O'Malley notes:

Many of those who appeared in the talkie version were descendants of Māori and Pākehā veterans of the Ōrākau conflict.

This relationship, where descendants' whakapapa back to the Battle of Ōrākau and are then present, and part of, a representation of their own culture, and a recreation of an historical event through a Pākehā world

view, adds layers of complexities upon the existing colonial discourse. O'Malley's skill lies in teasing such complexities apart. One of the tools he uses in unravelling historical perspectives is the acknowledgement and celebrations (or not) of historical events.

How events are historically marked, celebrated or completely ignored is one of his central tenets in looking at this history of the New Zealand Wars in the Waikato. Juxtaposing historical images and maps with contemporary commemoration photographs and recent landscape images of traditional battle grounds gives this debate a real immediacy. History is the past, but it is also the present, and the future. By wrapping the Wars in this context O'Malley is able to trace the significance, or lack of significance, in both the Māori and Pākehā communities. This also allows for an analysis of the Government's response to these wars and Māori over time and for an enquiry into the role historians play in the creation and dissemination of historical knowledge.

O'Malley argues that by acknowledging this history, and particularly the effects on Māori by such events, a dialogue can be created acknowledging Māori, Pākehā and the Government's role in these wars. This dialogue may lead to reconciliation, understanding and acceptance of historical grievances. He advocates that this balanced view of history (Māori and Pākehā) be taught in our schools, that sites of historical significance be protected and promoted, and that the battles of the Waikato and New Zealand Wars be commemorated like other commemorations involving New Zealand servicemen and women who fought overseas.

As O'Malley drills down into the historical details of the effects of the Waikato war on Māori, he sheds new light on some of the practices around land sales, leases and speculation. In regard to the confiscation of land in the Waikato O'Malley notes:

"Thomas Russell, the former Minister of Colonial Defence in the Whitaker-Fox ministry, held a 40 per cent stake in the 90,000-acre Piako Swamp; Whitaker was himself another member of the syndicate of owners. Their purchase of the area from the government proceeded on such favourable terms that it provoked something of a colonial scandal. But by the late 1870s it was said that the steady rise in Waikato land values following the construction of a railway made it far more profitable to speculate in land than to farm it ... Thus vast areas of Waikato north of the Pūniu River remained virtually empty for years, while the former owners lived in crowded conditions in the King Country and refused to accept the confiscation of their lands."

This leads into the last section of the book which looks at Māori protests and petitions over land, then negotiations and finally compensation. Beyond that is the plea from O'Malley for the public acknowledgement and respect of this history. This book is part of a momentum over the last eight years to commemorate the New Zealand Wars, and recently there has been regional commemoration at local sites across the country, including Ōrākau. In turn this has led to a national day of commemoration for the New Zealand Wars – He Rā Maumahara. The first He Rā Maumahara commemoration was held in 2018 in Kororāreka. In 2019 the commemoration will take place on 28 October in Taranaki.

The publication is beautifully produced by Bridget Williams Books with superb illustrations, maps and photographs. The book has comprehensive endnotes, sources list, index and bibliography, and is well served with a glossary of Māori words. It is an important historical work in a research area that has not received much critical appraisal in recent years. The time is right for such a book to be used as a guide and research source for schools, universities, iwi and those with an interest in the history of Aotearoa New Zealand.

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