

The Invasion of the Waikato: Te Riri Ki Tainui.

By Vincent O'Malley.

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In his introduction, Vincent O'Malley, calls *The Invasion of the Waikato: Te Riri Ki Tainui*, a companion piece to his magnum opus, *The Great War for New Zealand: Waikato 1800-2000*, published in 2016. It is one of an impressive series of books that establish him as the recognised authority on the New Zealand Wars and the Waikato War in particular.

The aim of *Te Riri Ki Tainui* is, in O'Malley's words, 'to provide a more accessible introduction to the history of the Waikato War than that big book, it is not a condensed version, but offers new insights of its own', some drawn from the Marsden Fund project O'Malley co-led between 2019 and 2022 on 'remembering and forgetting the New Zealand Wars' (p. 5). This ongoing research reinforced to the author, 'the importance of place and landscape in this history.' In his words, 'It is at sites like Ōrākau, Rangiaowhia and Rangiriri that we begin to get a sense of the stories embedded in the land. These are places that speak to us. As the following chapters reveal, the tale they tell is tragic, but one that goes to the very core of who we are as a nation' (p. 5).

When I read this, I shared his response. My background as a historian is shaped by my military experience. In every military situation we were taught that 'the ground dictates', and though situations and opposing forces may seem the same as what had happened previously, the 'place and the landscape' as O'Malley proclaims makes each event different. In this sense to quote Split Enz, 'History never repeats'. Because of this the wars in New Zealand are unique, we can draw parallels with campaigns and battles overseas, but our land shaped both those who fought them, how they were fought and the impact they had.

The invasion of the Waikato was a deliberately manufactured war devised by Governor Sir George Grey and his military commander, Lieutenant-General Duncan Cameron with the objectives of breaking the power of the Kīngitanga and confiscating the Waikato for European settlement. It was a land grab to 'confiscate the lands of the hostile Natives, part of which lands would be given away and settled on military tenure to provide for the future security of the districts near Auckland and the remainder sold to defray the expenses of the War' (p. 62).

Its impact on both Māori and Pākehā resonates down to this day. The book is in six parts: The slide to war; The Waikato War; Raupatu; Legacies; Towards a settlement and Landscapes of Memory. The nine-month Waikato campaign with its First Taranaki War prequel takes ninety-seven pages in the 281 pages of text. It is a beautifully produced book on quality paper with brilliant illustrations and maps relating to all aspects of the campaign and the confiscations that followed.

I am always interested in reading how an author condenses a study of a military campaign, it is so easy to generalise into error. It also highlights how much the author understands about the tactics, strategy and generalship employed by both sides: all this of course being in relationship to the ground. This is where O'Malley stumbles and reveals his weakness. I listened to him at the Featherston Book Town Festival in 2025 where he and his colleagues spoke of the need to unlearn our history and see the ground not as somewhere distant such as Gallipoli or the Somme,

but somewhere to visit and study here in New Zealand. I agree with this entirely but to me his book's excellent illustrations and maps tell a different story to the ones he writes of in the text. O'Malley may have visited and walked the ground, but his words show that he does not understand what he was looking at. He is not alone, many campaign histories are written by historians who never visit the ground they are writing about or if when they do, have not taken the opportunity to examine or discuss with experts what the ground is telling them. I have stood on battlefields with noted historians and realised that while they are steeped in the archival material, they are lost on the ground. Judged by this book, O'Malley is one of them.

The book follows the chronology of the war and then traces its impact. Its strength and primary focus are on the latter. O'Malley's understanding of the strategy and tactics of the Waikato Campaign is questionable, that also applies to the Taranaki Wars which preceded the invasion and was used as an excuse by Grey to invade. O'Malley is a disciple of James Belich, but he lacks the nuances and understanding of Belich. He accepts Belich's conclusions without relating them to the ground. Time and again O'Malley fails to connect the dots that the ground suggests. Let me demonstrate this by walking through aspects of the campaign. There are three universal connected issues when one examines the ground where a campaign has been fought. The first is enemy. For Grey and Cameron this was the Kīngitanga Forces. O'Malley states: That 'the Kīngitanga forces were essentially civilian and untrained (though some of the older fighters had taken part in the Musket Wars)' (p. 77). He expands on this by explaining that 'none of those who fought on the Kīngitanga side were professional soldiers. The Kīngitanga force lacked any centralised command structure. It had no officers or formal disciplinary codes. No one gave orders. Decisions were often made communally through rūnanga or councils, which might be convened even in the midst of battle to consider next steps. Yet somehow it all worked' (pp. 76-77).

This does the Rangatira and the tauā they led a great disservice. In O'Malley's eyes the Musket Wars and their importance barely feature. He ignores or does not understand that the iwi of New Zealand had lived and fought through thirty to forty years of warfare where the tactics of fighting with muskets and the evolution of defences against firearms and artillery had been developed to a fine art. Ron Crosby's *The Forgotten Wars: Why the Musket Wars Matter Today*, gives the lie to O'Malley's description. In the 1860s the Musket Wars were far from ancient history, being 'the most tumultuous period of warfare in our nation's history' with casualties that far exceeded those of the New Zealand Wars.¹ The resulting issue of customary land rights and iwi/hapu relationships from these decades of fighting had a major impact during the New Zealand Wars. It also continued a level of Māori military leadership and tactical knowledge that was again demonstrated in the Waikato campaign.

The Kīngitanga may have been a civilian force but certainly not 'untrained' the warrior culture and spirit continued. The war party or tauā and the role of the rangatira was inherent to Māori culture and continued in every tribe. Many of the rangatira whose mana had been achieved in these terrible years of fighting were still active.

Looking at the invading forces of the Crown O'Malley dismisses Cameron's tactical ability in this campaign. 'British officers rarely learnt from the mistakes of their predecessors' (p. 88). He differs from Belich who believed that Cameron was not only the best European commander to serve in New Zealand but 'among the best of Victorian generals' judging him to be a good tactician and strategist, and a 'superb organiser'.² The New Zealand of the 1860s was difficult country in which to make war, particularly one that involved securing the Waikato and then

defending it against a possible counter invasion, so one must ask why attack in mid-winter, the worst possible time to mount a campaign in New Zealand. It is a question that O'Malley does not answer. O'Malley suggests impatience and political pressure and while he notes that Grey does not mobilise the citizens of Auckland under the Militia Act until 1 July 1863. Neither he nor Belich understands that the beginning of war in July that the crossing of the Mangatāwhiri declared, was a necessary step to fit into place the last pieces of the logistic jigsaw. By first accepting that the disruption to the Auckland economy citizen mobilisation would entail was best carried out during the winter months before the advance proper started in the spring. War also guaranteed the retention of British regular regiments already in New Zealand and allowed Grey to gain three more regiments from garrisons in India. Cameron's seizing of the Koheroa heights gave him the necessary bridgehead that protected Queen's Redoubt and its embarkation points on the Waikato.

It also gave him the winter to recruit militia regiments from the Australian colonies and bring them to New Zealand to garrison redoubts and outposts and secure his lines of supply against the inevitable guerrilla raids that he expected. This would free up his Regular regiments to carry out the summer invasion. Both Belich and O'Malley want to believe that the two-month delay imposed on Cameron was due to Māori success. This was not the case. Cameron's winter campaign with its inevitable Māori guerilla response consolidated South Auckland up to the Koheroa heights overlooking the Whangamarino River and the swampland looking south to Meremere, the next logical defensive position covering the Waikato.

Most critical of all was arrival in October of the armoured stern paddle-steamer *Pioneer* and the construction of armoured barges for troop carriage were the essential elements in Cameron's plan. Cliff Simons succinctly sums it up in *Soldiers, Scouts & Spies*. 'Each side knew the Waikato River was the key to the campaign: the Government built ships so they could use it and the Kingites built fortifications to bar their way. Ultimately by being unable to keep control of the river, Māori lost control of their land.'³ The armoured steamers and barges allowed Cameron to bypass the impressive Meremere defences. The one disappointment was his inability to secure a landing point close enough to attack the defences from the rear. Cameron always sought to encircle and destroy his opponent. Rangiriri provided that opportunity.

At Rangiriri O'Malley states that, 'Cameron was convinced that a frontal assault could succeed'. However, his description of Cameron's plan contradicts this. 'A group of 860 men would storm the front of the pā, while another 300 men would be landed at its rear, with a further 200 sailors on stand-by if necessary' (p. 87). Cameron's plan was always to simultaneously attack from both front and rear. Problems with the Waikato current delayed the rear landings and account for the heavy losses suffered by the frontal forces, but despite this, the frontal assault broke through on the right flank on the lower ground nearest the river. The delayed attack from the rear saw many defenders rushing forward to meet the frontal assault. This led to the rear defences being rapidly overrun when the river-borne troops landed and attacked from the rear. It was now that the mass exodus occurred with defenders including women and children fleeing to canoes positioned on Lake Waikare, now the much-reduced Lake Kōpūera. By evening it was the central redoubt alone that still held, crammed with its Māori defenders, surrounded on all sides.

O'Malley disagrees with this and argues that Cameron's official report that the pā was 'completely surrounded and cut off', and that its occupants 'surrendered unconditionally' is

totally false (p. 88). He shows how little he understands about the course of the battle by saying that most of the defenders escaped during the night, certainly some key rangatira including Wiremu Tāmihana and possibly the Māori King were smuggled out through the surrounding ring of soldiers. There was no mass exodus during the night, this had already occurred at the time that troops landed from the river.

The Central Redoubt is shown in Charles Heaphy's sketch on p. 89 but also look at the oblique aerial photo of the pā prior to the construction of the Waikato Expressway on p. 263. The central redoubt can be seen jutting out to the north at right angles from the main trench line which in 1863 continue both across the former State Highway 1. By nightfall the British forces had consolidated and taken all of the defences except for the central redoubt, which is the size of a two-bedroom state house, or perhaps two present-day tiny homes side by side. You can see the break in the redoubt wall at its junction with the main trench line, this is where the engineers sapped to bring down the wall during the night. Picture 180 or so Māori warriors crammed into this space. There would have been barely room to move, and at dawn, Cameron, despite his worst fears of the defenders escaping overnight, had achieved his aim he had cutoff the cream of the Lower Waikato rangatira. Argue all you like about whether it was a white flag to parlay and discuss terms. What options did the defenders of the central redoubt have at first light that morning but to surrender as they were surrounded on all four sides. Casualties numbered 'at least 48' on the Kīngitanga side compared to 37 dead of Cameron's force, however this does not account for the many Kīngitanga killed in attempting to escape across Lake Waikare as Duncan Henry MacKenzie of the fortieth account in the Turnbull Library records: 'The enemy's dead actually in the works were the same number as our own – these were buried in their own trenches which they had defended so well but for days afterwards the swamps stunk with the dead bodies of those who had fallen to our fire after they were driven from the rifle pits.'⁴



Figure 1: This figure depicts the frontal assault of the British Army units. The naval assault came from the rear, and the central redoubt depicted was completely surrounded by nightfall. ATL, A-145-004, '[Heaphy, Charles] 1820-1881: Naval attack at Rangiriri [1863]'.

As O'Malley records, Grey and his ministers were determined to push on into the Upper Waikato and Waipā, the economic heartland of the Waikato and the breadbasket underpinning the Māori war effort. The principal issues facing Cameron were the logistic difficulties in maintaining supplies to his force. O'Malley states that Rangiaowhia was undefended. I would argue the opposite, if not, what was the purpose of the impressive defences of Paterangi which was one of four equally strong associated pā covering every major road and track access into the area. It was the cultivations and flour mills on his tribal lands surrounding the principal villages that led him to create this New Zealand equivalent of the Maginot Line. Impressive defences sited to protect the flour mills and kāinga that are detailed on the map of the Rangiaowhia area on page 107. Rewi Maniapoto recognised that the villages had no value if the land surrounding them was lost. Cameron recognised the strength of Ngāti Maniapoto's defensive works and sought to draw him out by bypassing his defences. The night advance on Rangiaowhia achieved this. In this it and Kihikihi and the many flour mills were valid military objectives, because their occupants played a critical role in supplying the Māori war effort. The subsequent battle of Hairini achieved Cameron's aim in drawing out the Kīngitanga forces onto open ground where they were defeated.

Resistance at Rangiaowhia was met with fire and rifle. Attempts to surrender were not accepted by soldiers, inflamed by the loss of comrades shot from inside the whare's, ignoring their officers' orders to cease firing. In battle soldiers kill. We would see it in Russell's New Zealand

Division on the Somme in the taking of Crest Trench on 15 September 1916 and again in Freyberg's New Zealand Division in North Africa and Italy. It was a feature in 28 (Maori) Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel P Awatere who expressly ordered that no prisoners be taken by his battalion. In battle the killing stops when officers and non-commissioned officers regain control and, on the Somme, this was at gunpoint. The killing during the attempt to breakout Ōrākau for the Puniu River followed the same pattern, a fighting withdrawal with surrounding troops firing into the mass of warriors protecting rangatira, women and children. It marked the end of the Waikato campaign.

O'Malley is in his comfort zone when he talks about the consequences of the invasion of the Waikato which forms the bulk of this book. He stumbles again when he goes back to the ground in his chapter on 'The Fate of the Battle Sites'. As he says. 'Spotting the remnants of a pa site can be easy – in many cases it has a road running through it' (p. 247). This is meant as a criticism, but it highlights again how little he understands about the nature of the campaign. The roads and tracks were there first. The pā were to stop the British advance, either along the river or the existing tracks and roads. Examine Rangiriri, it was deliberately positioned to block the access track and built months before the invasion and so it made provision for local traffic to pass through. This can be seen on Heaphy's sketch and in his plans of the defences. It is the same for Meremere's river defences, the siting of the pā protecting the Ngāti Maniapoto heartland, the siting of Ōrākau on the bullock track between Rangiaowhia and Kihikihi. War whether in New Zealand or the Ukraine is a battle for communications. O'Malley does not understand this essential fact, and it mars this volume and his magnum opus. He needs to walk the ground and argue it out with someone with a military background. Indeed, it should have been done many years ago and then his valuable work on the impact of the war would be matched by some understanding of the campaign itself.

¹ Ron Crosby, *The Forgotten Wars: Why the Musket Wars Matter Today* (Auckland: Oratia Books, 2020), 14.

² James Belich, "Cameron, Duncan Alexander," *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, last updated November 2010, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/1c2/cameron-duncan-alexander>.

³ Cliff Simons, *Soldiers, Scouts & Spies: A Military History of the New Zealand Wars 1845-1864* (Auckland: Massey University Press, 2019), 294.

⁴ Alexander Turnbull Library, MSY-4571, Duncan Henry Mackenzie, "A Manuscript Account of the Taranaki War; with a Supplementary Account of the Waikato War."