

The Great War for New Zealand, Waikato 1800-2000

Vincent O'Malley

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Reviewed by Basil Keane

The main focus of Vincent O'Malley's book is the Waikato War, 1863 to 1864. However, the coverage of the book runs from 1800 to 2000.

O'Malley notes that this is the first book-length treatment of the Waikato War since 1879. The in-depth coverage the book provides is both timely and illuminating, and adds significantly to our knowledge of the Waikato Wars. It seems appropriate that the first copy of the book was presented to Kiingi Tuheitia by O'Malley at the launch of the book at the Poukai at Waahi Paa, in October 2016. O'Malley's words at that launch are salient: 'But it is time as a nation that we remember. Me maumahara tātou – we must remember.'¹

The title of the book is drawn from a quote by Wiremu Tamihana in a petition to parliament in 1865: 'No te taenga ki te kohuru i Rangiaohia, katahi au ka mohio he tino pakanga nui tenei, no Niu Tireni.... When it came to the (time of the) murder at Rangiaohia, then I knew, for the first time, that this was a great war for New Zealand.'² At the beginning of the book O'Malley has a short chapter entitled 'Owning our history'. It starts with a bold claim which reflects the title of the book:

The Great War for New Zealand tells the story of what is, in my view, the defining conflict in New Zealand history. It did not take place on the Western Front, or at Gallipoli, or in North Africa. Instead, it happened right here, in Aotearoa New Zealand. On 12 July 1863 the biggest and most significant war ever fought on New Zealand shores commenced less than 40 miles from central Auckland, as British imperial troops crossed the Mangatāwhiri River and invaded Waikato (1).

I'm cautious about this claim. It is logical to ask about the importance of the New Zealand Wars generally, and the Waikato War specifically, given the significant contrast in the investment of time and resources by the Crown into First World War commemorations compared to 150th anniversaries of key New Zealand Wars battles. But when discussing wars that have a significant impact on the nation, it raises the question of whether we can truly rank the inevitable misery and suffering that has followed the internal and external wars that have played out for peoples of this nation since the signing of the Treaty. To do so risks taking a similar path to that taken by the Crown for the centenary of the Great War, when it gave that commemoration top tier status while initially ignoring key New Zealand War anniversaries such as Rangiriri, Ōrākau, Pukehinahina/Gate Pā and Te Ranga.³ Additionally, it is hard to separate out a number of the other New Zealand wars that preceded and followed the Waikato War, with Taranaki being the most obvious example. For other iwi, their wars are likely to be the defining conflict of their history. As Belich has noted in his New Zealand Wars series, a commemorative plaque dedicated to Te Kooti at Te Wainui Marae, Ōhiwa describes the New Zealand Wars as Ngā Pakanga nunui o Aotearoa, meaning The great Wars of New Zealand.⁴ The Māori title and its translation, I think, better reflects the nature of these conflicts. All parts are important and together make up one of our most significant conflicts, the New Zealand Wars.

In the next chapter, 'Remembering (and Forgetting) the Waikato War', O'Malley implicitly softens the impact of his earlier claim around the importance of the Waikato War:

My point is not that we shouldn't be marking the First World War. Of course we should. Remembering the Great War does not, in itself, make us forget the New Zealand Wars. Neither is it a question of creating some kind of equivalence between the two wars. The Waikato conflict was important for its own reasons and in its own ways (26).

Also in this chapter, O'Malley talks in greater detail about how the wars have been commemorated up to the present, from the fiftieth anniversary through to the 150th. O'Malley notes that Te Ururoa Flavell, co-leader of the Māori party, was the sole parliamentarian to attend the 150th of the battle of Rangiriri in 2013. Flavell was quoted at the time as saying, 'I'm a little bit embarrassed that I'm the only MP here today because people from Parliament should understand about days like this' (9). It is likely that the coverage of this was enough to embarrass the Crown into action with then prime minister John Key and governor-general Jerry Mateparae attending the Ōrakau commemorations in 2014.

Part I of the book is 'Before the war' and begins with 'Early Waikato, 1800-1852'. This chapter is particularly interesting as it really sets out who the people were who had the conflict brought to their front door. I'm impressed with the detail of who the hapū and their leaders were and what their rohe was. It counters the tendency in some works on the New Zealand wars to emphasize the names and ranks of settlers, soldiers and sailors, and not return the favour to Māori combatants by naming them, their hapū or iwi. It is not a fault of O'Malley's work; he lets us know the details of the actors on both sides.

Despite being a long quote, the following illustrates O'Malley's approach:

The confederation of iwi and hapū living [in the Waikato region], collectively known as Waikato, traced their ancestry to the *Tainui* waka, as did some other iwi outside the region. Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Hikairo, Ngāti Apakura and other groups predominated in the Waipā (King Country) district, with other Waikato tribes (including Ngāti Māhanga and Tainui Awhiro) also present in coastal locations such as Whāingaroa (later Raglan) and Kāwhia. Eastern Waikato was occupied by tribes that included Ngāti Hauā, Ngāti Raukawa and Ngāti Korokī Kahukura. Lower Waikato (the northernmost area) was home to various groups, including Ngāti Tipa, Ngāti Tāhinga and Ngāti Naho. Further south along the river, around Taupiri, Ngāruawāhia and beyond into upper Waikato, was the domain of Ngāti Mahuta (paramount chief and later King Potatau Te Wherowhero's own tribe) and other hapū. But tribes strongly associated with Waikato, including Ngāti Te Ata, Ngāti Tamaoho, Ngāti Koheriki and others also had a presence north of the Waikato River, giving rise to the famous pepeha (saying): 'Ko Mōkau ki runga, ko Tāmaki ki raro' (Mōkau is above, Tāmaki is below) - the north-south axis frequently being inversed in customary Māori imaginings of their world (31-2).

The next chapters (chapters four-ten) outline the lead up to the beginning of the Waikato war, including the development of the Kiingitanga and the war in Taranaki.

Part II covers the 'War in Waikato'. The chapter on Rangiaowhia and Hairini (chapter 16) is particularly illuminating, considering some of the more recent controversy over the events at Rangiaowhia.⁵ In Ōrakau and beyond (chapter 17) O'Malley debunks some of the myths around the chivalry of Ōrakau and details some of the contentious issues there, in particular the killing of women and children.

Part III looks at the aftermath in the following decades. It begins with ‘An uneasy peace’ (chapter 18) and concludes with ‘Lands for ‘landless rebels’’ (chapter 25).

Part IV covers ‘The long search for justice’. ‘Protests, petitions and appeals’ (chapter 26) illustrates that protests have been going since 1864. O’Malley notes the case of a Māori woman objecting to the auction of township sections at Ngāruawāhia, claiming that she and her family retained rights to the land under the Treaty of Waitangi as they had remained peaceful during the wars. The chapter takes us through various legal challenges, deputations to England, the Sim commission, the Waikato-Maniapoto Maori Claims Settlement Act 1946, and then finally the Raupatu settlement in 1995.

It is often said that you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover, but in this case the stunning design of the cover is a good indication of the production value of the book. The resources used through the book are well-researched and visually stunning, as is the design. It is a joy to read a book where the publisher clearly feels as much passion for the book as the writer does.

This book is a must have for anyone interested in New Zealand history. It illuminates a number of significant aspects of the Waikato Wars. It tells us the stories of all those involved in the wars – Crown, Māori and Pākehā – with an emphasis on bringing to light a more detailed picture of the impact on Waikato Māori. The discussion of Rangiaowhia and Ōrākau, in particular, provides a thoughtful and nuanced picture of significant episodes from the Waikato wars that deserve reflection. The book also gives us a fuller picture of Waikato Māori and their communities before the Waikato Wars and follows the lengthy aftermath of the wars that they had to endure. It is part of a continuing search for recognition of the importance of the New Zealand Wars for New Zealanders. As O’Malley states, ‘Me maumahara tātou – we must remember.’

¹ <http://bwb.co.nz/news/king-tuheitia>.

² *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, <https://atojs.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/atojs?a=d&cl=search&d=AJHR1865-I.2.1.8.5&srpos=3&e=-----10--1-----0kohuru+tireni-->.

³ For 2014, top-tier commemorations were the 100th anniversary of the First World War and occupation of Samoa, while second-tier events were listed as the 200th anniversary of the first mission station and 75th anniversary of the Battle of the River Plate. See <http://www.mch.govt.nz/commemorations-2014-2020>.

⁴ *The New Zealand Wars, Ngā Pakanga Nunui o Aotearoa*, written and presented by James Belich, directed by Tainui Stephens, screened on June-July 1998.

⁵ In particular, where historian Jock Phillips described the battle for Rangiaowhia as an ‘appalling act of genocide’. See <http://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/tv-radio/85506738/jock-phillips-comments-condemning-rangiaowhia-battle-not-unfair-bsa-finds>.