

Soldiers, Scouts and Spies: A Military History of the New Zealand Wars 1845–1864

By Cliff Simons. Massey University Press, Auckland, 2019.

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Reviewed by Vincent O'Malley

Military historian Cliff Simons says one of the inspirations for *Soldiers, Scouts and Spies* was “hearing a well-known Pākehā host on national radio vehemently declare that ‘Māori never lost a battle’” during the New Zealand Wars (21). At its launch, fellow military historian Richard Taylor described the new book as a “watershed publication” that marked a new era in research on the New Zealand Wars, supplanting the allegedly flawed work of James Belich.¹ It is a bold claim to make for a history of the role of military intelligence in some (but not all) of the conflicts fought between 1845 and 1864, especially given the omission of all of the wars fought after that date through until 1872. Simons himself makes some further claims for the work, suggesting that his own background as an officer in the New Zealand Army gives him special insights into the wars not available to other historians and writers from a non-military background.

Another way of situating the work might be to see it as part of an already fairly substantial body of literature on the wars seeking to challenge or dismantle various aspects of Belich's findings. Nothing gets a New Zealand military historian more worked up than talk of trench warfare, and Simons rehearses the usual arguments against Belich's claims that Māori had invented the modern version of this later seen on the Western Front during World War One. He goes further than that, suggesting that Pākehā may have aided Māori in the design of their fortifications—in this way repeating a familiar allegation levelled by nineteenth-century British military officers based in New Zealand, who often refused to believe that Māori could have constructed their various intricate pā without secret assistance from European military engineering experts.

In this way, Simons' work is not so much a portent of the future of New Zealand Wars research as a return to some older Pākehā tropes and interpretations. And that is reflected in other ways as well. Simons even claims that “Māori Wars” or “Maori Land Wars” are the most commonly used terms for these conflicts today (17). That might have been the case half a century ago but hardly withstands serious scrutiny any more. And Simons' description of the mid-nineteenth century Māori world as “a still largely subsistence society” could not be further from the truth (12). A failure to understand the scale of Māori economic activity and achievement in the two decades after 1840 can easily lead one to underplay the extent of the losses endured as a result of war and confiscation in the 1860s. Entire communities had their economic infrastructure stripped away or destroyed. That left a lasting and deeply negative legacy for the whānau and hapū concerned.

There are other ways in which Simons' failure to engage more deeply with the existing historiography manifests itself. He argues (against Belich) that Crown forces secured a decisive victory at Ruapekapeka in January 1846. It was no coincidence, he suggests, that when military settlements known as the Fencibles were established after 1847 they all faced south towards Waikato since it was “not considered necessary to protect the nation's capital from Ngāpuhi in the north because they were thought to have been pacified and no longer constituted a military threat” (162). He appears unaware of the fact that a settlement of Fencibles was initially planned for Kerikeri, in the Bay of Islands. That location was abandoned after Hone Heke effectively vetoed the idea, leaving the Crown to focus on areas closer to Auckland. One

newspaper wag had suggested that any such settlement further north would more appropriately be called the “Defencelessibles.”² The absence of military settlements in the north was, in other words, not a reflection of Grey’s magnanimity to his defeated foes but further evidence of the Crown’s failure to impose its authority over the north in the wake of Ruapekapeka.

The John Gorst-generated myth of a Kīngitanga (Māori King movement) deeply divided between a “moderate” faction led by Wiremu Tamihana and an “extremist” one under Rewi Maniapoto is repeated for the umpteenth time, despite lacking any real credibility when subjected to serious examination. That feeds into another retro element of his analysis. Historians, Simons says, “have never felt particularly comfortable about gauging how close Auckland came to being attacked by the Kingites in July 1863” (269). That the “extremist” faction of the Kīngitanga was about to attack Auckland under Rewi Maniapoto’s leadership and massacre its residents was the justification employed by Governor Grey in July 1863 for launching a preemptive Crown attack on Waikato. Rewi Maniapoto was returning from a tangi in Taupō when British troops crossed the Mangatāwhiri River and commenced their invasion—surely the wrong place to be if he was intent on destroying Auckland. Grey’s supposed evidence of an imminent Kīngitanga assault on the township was exposed more than fifty years ago by historian Brian Dalton as little more than feeble justifications for a predetermined war of conquest.³ More recently, it has been shown that an ultimatum to Waikato demanding they comply with Crown demands or suffer the consequences was still being drafted after the invasion had already commenced.⁴

What followed was devastating for those on the receiving end of British bullets. The suggestion (quoting Taylor) that Rangiaowhia, attacked early on a Sunday morning on 21 February 1864, was a “legitimate target” entirely ignores the fact that it was not a fighting pā but an open, undefended village whose residents—mostly women, children and elderly men—had been led to believe that it was a place of sanctuary (316). As military historian Chris Pugsley notes, what happened at Rangiaowhia was “the inevitable consequence of soldiers attacking an unarmed settlement and finding nothing to fight but families.”⁵

The failure to engage with Māori responses to the attack on Rangiaowhia is symptomatic of an overall approach that tends to privilege Pākehā perspectives. Simons does offer some useful insights on matters of military intelligence, highlighting, for example, that “colonial warfare was not taught in the war colleges,” so that officers arriving in New Zealand were forced to confront an unfamiliar enemy and environment (51). Overall, however, the book fails to live up to the grand predictions made for it at launch. There remain many dimensions of the New Zealand Wars that require further investigation, and while *Soldiers, Scouts and Spies* highlights the importance of military intelligence in these conflicts, it is not likely to replace Belich’s *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* as the preeminent work on them anytime soon.

¹ Launch speech for *Soldiers, Scouts & Spies*, by Lieutenant Colonel Richard Taylor, 15 October 2019, <https://www.masseypress.ac.nz/news/2019/october/launch-speech-for-soldiers-scouts-and-spies/>

² *Southern Cross*, 25 September 1847, quoted in Vincent O’Malley, “‘The Natives Here Rule’: Northland after 1846,” in *After the Treaty: The Settler State, Race Relations and the Exercise*

of Power in Colonial New Zealand, ed. Brad Patterson, Richard S. Hill and Kathryn Patterson (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2016), 214.

³ B. J. Dalton, *War and Politics in New Zealand, 1855–1870* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1967).

⁴ Vincent O'Malley, "Choosing Peace or War: The 1863 Invasion of Waikato," *New Zealand Journal of History* 41, no. 1 (2013): 39–58.

⁵ Chris Pugsley, "Walking the Waikato Wars: Farce and Tragedy at Rangiaowhia, 21–22 February 1864," *New Zealand Defence Quarterly* 17 (1997): 32–36.