

Even More Loyalist than Most: The Round Table Movement in New Zealand, 1910–1923

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Abstract

This article illustrates the extent of the Round Table movement's influence in New Zealand from 1910 until its decline in the early 1920s. There have been several in-depth analyses of this political movement in Australia, Britain, Canada, and South Africa. In contrast, the Round Table movement in New Zealand has received startlingly little attention. The article highlights that the New Zealand movement became a noteworthy lobby group and recruited some prominent members. However, it also highlights that the movement's social elitism and internal tensions marred the effectiveness of its outreach.

Historiographical Overview

I argue in this article that the Round Table movement played a noteworthy role in New Zealand public life from 1910 to 1923, and that until now no historian has sufficiently elucidated this fact. It should be noted at the outset that this early twentieth-century political movement is unrelated to the Round Table International, a men's society, and to the modern New Zealand Business Round Table. I contend that although the Round Table movement in New Zealand was quite small, consisting of approximately 600 subscribers (many probably unsolicited) and perhaps thirty active members at its height before the First World War,¹ it was a noteworthy lobby group that influenced some prominent figures.

At least four politicians were members during this period: Sir Arthur Myers, Sir James Allen, Sir Heaton Rhodes, and William Downie Stewart Jr. All became cabinet ministers at some point in their careers. The first three became Minister of Defence, serving one after another from 1912 to 1926; the last became a notable imperial statesman in the 1920s and early 1930s. Other members included prominent military officers, university professors, lawyers, and businessmen. Before the war, New Zealand Round Tablers (as they were known) helped prepare the country for the First World War. During the conflict, they were among the most fervent supporters of the war effort, including the controversial policy of conscription.

This focus on defence was a natural consequence of the movement. The Round Table had been founded in 1909 to help the British Empire meet the challenges of an increasingly inhospitable world.² It was the brainchild of Alfred, Lord Milner, who held several government posts in southern Africa from 1897 to 1905, a region troubled by conflicts between Britons, Boers, and Indigenous Africans. Milner concluded that British interests would best be served by uniting southern Africa's fractured territories into a single dominion, which would secure British hegemony while allowing for a plurality of languages and cultures. He and several well-placed acolytes, dubbed the "Kindergarten" because of their youth and loyalty to Milner, played a crucial role in realising the Union of South Africa in 1910.³ They believed that this emphasis on unity could, on a larger scale, help the British Empire defend its far-flung possessions from burgeoning rival powers such as Imperial Germany. In particular, they wanted common defence and economic policies that would encourage coherency throughout the Empire and overcome a parochial tendency detectable in some British and colonial politicians.

The Round Table movement sought to achieve these objectives by establishing an Empire-wide network of patriots to co-ordinate policy.⁴ Members would meet in small local groups and keep abreast of broader political affairs by reading the movement's journal, *The Round Table*.⁵ Local groups would organise nationally under the leadership of a dominion secretary and a dominion treasurer.⁶ Both co-ordinated local activities. In addition, the treasurer handled funds and the secretary liaised with the Round Table's global headquarters, the London Moot. The latter was needed to produce *The Round Table* effectively and to keep secretaries and treasurers aware of noteworthy developments. The authority of the Moot and the dominion leaders to enforce discipline and mandate policy was ill defined. Round Table activities were to be carried out collaboratively and altruistically by like-minded imperial patriots. Little attention appears to have been given to the prospect of overbearing members using leadership positions to stifle, rather than facilitate, free discussion.

The organisation was elitist. Only men were eligible for membership, and only those who possessed significant influence or seemed likely to do so were actually recruited.⁷ For this reason, its members tended to be upper- or middle-class and prominent in public life. Many had political and military connections. Furthermore, because of the organisation's attachment to empire, its members tended to be politically conservative.⁸

The Round Table was also secretive. To be sure, members often made themselves known, even to the general public. Yet, the Round Table sought to avoid unnecessary publicity and its journal long insisted upon authorial anonymity. This secretiveness in part stemmed from a desire to transcend party politics and thus construct an imperial policy favourable to all patriots. For this reason, especially at first, the movement was circumspect about recruiting active politicians, inviting only those who eschewed party politics on imperial issues.⁹ For this same reason, *The Round Table* was a collaborative effort. An individual would write an article, then submit it to one or more groups, whose members would suggest ways to make it less partisan.¹⁰ The members never did settle on a common imperial policy. In the early years, imperial federation was popular.¹¹ However, especially after the First World War, which substantially weakened the Empire and made federation seem somewhat improbable, the advocacy of closer co-operation between its self-governing territories became more widespread.¹²

Several studies have charted the movement's influence in Australia, Canada, and Britain.¹³ Leonie Foster's 1986 history of the Australian Round Table is particularly detailed. Another study, Walter Nimock's *Milner's Young Men*, explores how Milner and his Kindergarten were instrumental in the unification of South Africa.¹⁴ In contrast, the historiography of the New Zealand Round Table is slim. Round Table historians have provided only limited discussion. General studies, such as those by John Kendle in 1975 and Andrea Bosco in 2017, provide only a broad overview of the New Zealand organisation.¹⁵ Carroll Quigley's *The Anglo-American Establishment*, published in the 1980s but written much earlier, mentions New Zealand.¹⁶ However, it is notoriously unreliable owing to its conspiratorial thesis that the Round Table was a vehicle for the global domination of an Anglo-American elite. Finally, studies focusing on the Round Table movement in other countries occasionally mention New Zealand.¹⁷

Martin George Holmes published a short article in the *New Zealand International Review* in 2022 that discusses the Round Table movement.¹⁸ However, the article is very brief, looks at only two members' involvement, and focuses on the period after the 1920s. In the 1960s, Kendle published two robust journal articles on the New Zealand Round Table. The first explores its founding in 1910;¹⁹ the second, its influence on the New Zealand Prime Minister Sir Joseph Ward's endorsement of imperial federation at the 1911 Imperial Conference.²⁰

However, the limited scope of these articles means that the history of the movement after 1911 remains largely uncharted. Furthermore, these articles were written when many archival materials relating to the New Zealand organisation were unavailable or difficult to consult. Consequently, his articles leave several key aspects of the movement unexplored. To rectify this oversight, I have ventured beyond the sources upon which Kendle relies, namely published materials and Curtis's 1910 travel diary. In addition to these sources, I draw on the papers of three prominent Round Tablers – William Downie Stewart, Heinrich Ferdinand von Haast, and James Hight – and the correspondence of a fourth, Samuel Arthur (S. A.) Atkinson, with the London Moot.

New Zealand historians, for their part, have devoted little attention to the New Zealand Round Table. Sir Keith Sinclair, the country's most influential twentieth-century historian, barely mentions it in his premier study of support for imperial federation in New Zealand.²¹ Furthermore, Sinclair's nationalist convictions ensure that what little he does say is somewhat uncharitable: his treatment of Ward's 1911 conference speech is a case in point.²² Michael Bassett provides a more nuanced interpretation of Ward's behaviour at the 1911 conference.²³ However, he does so without explaining in detail what the Round Table movement was and how much influence it had on New Zealand.

Some historians have ignored the movement entirely or almost entirely. For example, L. C. Voller's biography of Allen notes in passing that he believed in "a Parliament of Empire possessing real power",²⁴ but does not elaborate. Furthermore, to my knowledge, none of the recent studies of New Zealand's war effort and pre-war preparations adequately explore Allen's affiliation with the Round Table movement.²⁵ Even Stevan Eldred-Grigg's *The Great Wrong War*, which relentlessly criticises New Zealand militarism, does not take the opportunity to lambast this organisation of die-hard imperial patriots.²⁶ Stephanie M. Dale's biography of William Downie Stewart vaguely notes that he wrote for *The Round Table*, but does not really explain what the Round Table was or that Stewart was a leading member of it.²⁷ Nor does Geoffrey W. Rice's biography of Rhodes discuss his association with the movement.²⁸

Because of the historiographical neglect of the New Zealand Round Table, those few scholars who do refer to it sometimes utter misleading statements. Quigley is a classic example. At one point, he incorrectly asserts that Allen was the original leader of the New Zealand Round Table.²⁹ Another example is Bassett. He claims, without evidence or explanation, that most Round Tablers supported Liberalism.³⁰ Certainly, some Liberal politicians in New Zealand and elsewhere affiliated with the Round Table. However, without qualification Bassett's statement is extremely misleading because, as noted below, Round Tablers in New Zealand tended to support the Reform Party, founded in 1909 by politicians formerly known as the Opposition, which was the conservative response to the New Zealand Liberals.³¹

The Founding of the New Zealand Round Table, 1910

Milner and his associates were initially based in Britain and South Africa. Eager to help the movement spread, Lionel Curtis, one of Milner's greatest aides, toured Canada, New Zealand, and Australia to establish new Round Table groups. He reached New Zealand in June 1910 and travelled the country for several months. Kendle has already provided a narrative of Curtis's activities, which draws heavily on Curtis's detailed travel diary.³² Even with extra source material at my disposal, there is little that I can add to this narrative.

However, certain aspects of the New Zealand movement's foundation merit discussion, since they help explain the trajectory of the movement from 1910 to 1923. Demographics are key. In Britain, the Round Table targeted the landed gentry (including titled aristocrats) who, because of hereditary privileges and a strong sense of duty, powerfully influenced public life in this period. By targeting this group, the Round Table could recruit – for example – prominent politicians, businessmen, university professors, and military men. Jim McAloon has recently dispelled the notion that New Zealand had a colonial equivalent to Britain's landed gentry.³³ He stresses that even the wealthiest landed families should be considered colonial capitalists, since they became rich through hard work and never lost their bourgeois work ethic. Nevertheless, New Zealand had a social elite, which included many of these colonial capitalists, whose wealth and connections made them influential in public life. Some privileged families were even forming political dynasties. For example, William Downie Stewart Jr. was the son of a Member of the House of Representatives (MHR), William Downie Stewart Sr., and the grandson of a noteworthy provincial politician, George Hepburn.³⁴ In line with the Round Table's elitist outlook, Curtis engaged almost exclusively with this demographic, and especially with those liable to influence defence matters. Consequently, the New Zealand Round Table was extremely well connected.

The Wellington group, the foremost New Zealand group, is a case in point. Hector Rolleston, a Boer War veteran and the incumbent British Board of Trade Commissioner, became the dominion treasurer.³⁵ He was the son of William Rolleston, one of the country's leading conservative politicians. The lawyer S. A. Atkinson, a son of the former conservative premier Sir Harry Atkinson, became the dominion secretary.³⁶ Another prominent member of the Wellington group, the lawyer Heinrich Ferdinand von Haast, was the son of Sir Julius von Haast, the esteemed German-New Zealand scientist.³⁷

The Christchurch group embodied this same trend. Its leading member, James Hight, was an erudite historian at Canterbury University College.³⁸ Another key member, Heaton Rhodes, was the scion of a wealthy landed family. He was prominent in the Volunteer Movement, a part-time militia force, and had served as the conservative MHR – a title changed to Member of Parliament (MP) after 1907 – for Ellesmere since 1899.³⁹ A third key member, Sir George Clifford, was a wealthy estate holder who had inherited a baronetcy – a rare honour in the Antipodes – from his father, the first speaker of the New Zealand House of Representatives.⁴⁰ Groups were formed in four other locations: Auckland, Dunedin, Timaru, and Wanganui.⁴¹ None were as active as those of Christchurch and Wellington. I have found little archival evidence to explain this phenomenon. The Timaru and Wanganui groups faded away quite quickly, probably because they lacked committed members. The Dunedin group always suffered from a dispiriting dearth of members,⁴² though it produced one leading figure, William Downie Stewart Jr., who in 1910 was a prosperous lawyer. In 1914, he would himself enter parliament on the Reform Party ticket. The Auckland group also seems to have lacked members and played only a peripheral role in the movement, though it too produced a noteworthy leader: Arthur Myers, a Liberal parliamentarian and veteran Volunteer officer.⁴³

Internal Tensions

Curtis left New Zealand in September 1910. After this point, as was the case with the Australian groups, the New Zealand Round Table was largely left to its own devices. The distance of the Antipodes from Britain, where Milner and his associates increasingly congregated, ensured that they rarely visited New Zealand after 1910. For its part, the New Zealand Round Table seems not to have sent delegates to Britain on Round Table business in the period under study.

Although there was significant correspondence between British and New Zealand members, both official and unofficial (many became friends), the New Zealanders were rather isolated. In theory, Rolleston and Atkinson should have worked together to co-ordinate New Zealand activities. However, from the start, Rolleston's work commitments ensured that Atkinson assumed de facto leadership of the New Zealand Round Table. His leadership was formalised when, in January 1911, Rolleston died unexpectedly.⁴⁴ Whether another treasurer was appointed is unknown; in any case, the dominion secretaryship became the key position in the New Zealand Round Table. The results were catastrophic. During his 1910 trip, Curtis had described Atkinson as "tremendously keen" but "not brainy".⁴⁵ Upon assuming leadership, Atkinson revealed himself to be tactless, autocratic, and dogmatic. He had a rigid interpretation of Round Table policy and believed that the dominion secretaryship gave him the authority to impose his perspective on others. The Wellington group tended to support him, whether out of conviction or intimidation. However, the other groups were more ambivalent. A crisis swiftly ensued that, as far as I know, has never been explored in previous research.

The chief point of contention was the recruitment of active politicians. As previously noted, the movement was circumspect about recruiting such persons. Retired politicians were welcome, as were Round Table members who became politicians after joining.⁴⁶ However, the movement did not want to drag the Round Table into party politics by letting in opportunistic and loud-mouthed career politicians. Exceptions could be made, however, for non-partisan politicians. During his New Zealand trip, Curtis had recruited Myers and Rhodes.

However, Atkinson interpreted this guideline as a strict rule. In late 1910 or early 1911 (the exact dates of many incidents in the conflict remain uncertain), the Christchurch group recruited James Allen, a leading member of the Reform Party, which was then the Opposition. They did so because Allen, a veteran Volunteer, was passionate about defence issues. Atkinson was irate because of Allen's prominence and demanded in mid-1911 that the Christchurch group solicit his resignation. The Christchurch group, led by Hight, refused on the grounds that Allen had always kept imperial issues above party politics.⁴⁷ At one meeting, they read a letter from Curtis emphasising that exceptions were legitimate. However, seeking to avoid conflict, the Christchurch group suggested that from this point, no group should admit a member – politician or otherwise – before he had been vetted by all other groups.⁴⁸

Atkinson refused to compromise. On 23 August he wrote directly to Allen, claiming to speak for the whole Wellington group but "find[ing] it difficult to avoid emphasising my own point of view".⁴⁹ Atkinson claimed that Allen's prominence in parliament would jeopardise the ecumenical nature of the Round Table. Atkinson stated that if Allen were truly non-partisan, he should "wish to resign" to prevent a schism.⁵⁰ He then had the gall to deny the authenticity of the letter read at the meeting in Christchurch: "Loyalty to Curtis demands this [your resignation]. You may take it from me that no such letter as that you read to-day has come from him."⁵¹

Atkinson's denial was brazen, for while I am unsure of the letter in question here, the Stewart papers contain a letter from Curtis to Atkinson, dated 28 July, that highlights Curtis's non-dogmatic approach: "[W]e must take certain principles for our general guidance, rather than act on any fixed and absolute rules."⁵² Curtis avowed that exceptions can be made for non-partisan active politicians and that Hight is "the very type of man" to make them.⁵³ Even if Atkinson never received this letter or another like it, his position was illogical because when Curtis recruited Rhodes, the latter had been the Opposition Whip – hardly an inconspicuous post.⁵⁴ Secondly, because Round Table groups throughout the world were recruiting active

politicians, Atkinson's claim to represent the authentic Round Table viewpoint was dubious. When the Christchurch group held its ground, the Wellington group passed a motion declaring Allen to be an imposter.⁵⁵

At this point, Myers of Auckland suggested a solution: the exclusion of all active politicians – Allen, Rhodes, himself, and any potential recruits – from the Round Table.⁵⁶ The conciliatory Stewart, representing a group not involved in the conflict, mediated a settlement on these grounds. It was not easy; the Christchurch group initially refused to meet with him.⁵⁷ However, he eventually persuaded all parties to agree. Myers resigned voluntarily, and Allen (and presumably Rhodes) involuntarily. In late 1911, Stewart chaired a conference in Wellington that formalised a set of rules for all New Zealand groups.⁵⁸ The fourth barred, without exception, all MPs from the New Zealand Round Table.⁵⁹

The Round Table's desire for influence, however, meant that the organisation violated the rule rather quickly. In 1914, Stewart became the Reform MP for Dunedin West. From 1921 to 1928 and 1931 to early 1933, he served as a cabinet minister; in 1926, he was briefly Acting Prime Minister. Curtis approved of Stewart's prominence in New Zealand political life,⁶⁰ as did other overseas Round Table members and supporters.⁶¹ New Zealand Round Tablers also came to accept Stewart's membership. For example, von Haast, one of the signatories of the 1911 rule barring politicians, worked closely with Stewart to strengthen imperial ties at the 1933 British Commonwealth Relations Conference,⁶² and did not criticise Stewart's political career in his unpublished autobiography. This suggests to me that it was Atkinson alone who animated the 1911 anti-politician controversy.

Curiously, I have found no indication that Atkinson criticised Stewart's election to Parliament. However, it is likely that the outbreak of the First World War, which Atkinson saw as an apocalyptic struggle of good against evil (see below), distracted his attention from internal matters. I have found little evidence to suggest that Allen, Rhodes, or Myers ever rejoined the Round Table. Nevertheless, Allen's eldest son, John Hugh, became a very active member, both in New Zealand and Britain, despite aspirations to enter politics.⁶³ James Allen, for his part, kept abreast of Round Table affairs long after his departure.⁶⁴ Finally, I think it significant that Rhodes and Myers maintained their interest in imperial defence: the former served as Minister of Defence from 1920 to 1926 and the latter during a short stint in 1912.

Edwardian Defence Preparations

Like their counterparts overseas, New Zealand members fervently supported military preparedness against rival great powers. There was a strong anti-German element in the New Zealand movement. For example, Stewart reported becoming concerned about German expansionism as early as the 1890s.⁶⁵ Moreover, upon meeting Curtis, von Haast seems to have portrayed himself as a Dutch New Zealander rather than a German New Zealander.⁶⁶ In reality, as Heinrich later stated in his 1948 biography of Julius, the latter was indeed German.⁶⁷ This suggests to me that von Haast was trying to obscure his German ancestry at this point to avoid prejudice within New Zealand's burgeoning militarised society.

In itself, these militaristic and patriotic views are not surprising. In the early 1900s, many New Zealanders were concerned about such threats, including Ward, the Liberal prime minister. This attitude explains the country's military build-up shortly before the First World War, first under the Liberals (1891–1912) and then Reform (from 1912). In 1909, the government replaced the Volunteer Movement with a more efficient and modern Territorial Force and

instituted compulsory military training. It also funded a new battlecruiser, HMS *New Zealand*, for the Royal Navy.

What is remarkable was not that the Round Table energetically supported these initiatives, but that it constantly agitated for greater contributions. The New Zealand members were conscious that Britain, not the dominions, paid for the Royal Navy, the principal shield of the Empire.⁶⁸ As rival great powers augmented their forces, New Zealand Round Tablers worried that Britain might buckle under the weight of its defence responsibilities and urged the dominions to help bear the burden. For them, a battlecruiser and a territorial army represented a belated and modest beginning, not an end. The New Zealand articles in *The Round Table*, which were a collaborative affair, demonstrate that most members avowed that much more could and should be done.⁶⁹

The members also thought that the Liberal government's views on defence were poorly articulated and poorly applied. The members were horrified by Ward's proclamation of imperial federation, complete with a common defence policy, at the 1911 Imperial Conference.⁷⁰ Sometime before the conference, Ward had become aware of the Round Table's aspirations for imperial unity – a clear example of its influence on a politician outside its membership.⁷¹ Overzealously and seemingly without forethought, Ward uttered a contradictory and poorly expressed appeal for a common imperial defence policy. The New Zealand members were distressed by Ward's conduct, especially since they believed that the citizens of Britain and the dominions were not yet ready to accept federation.

In September 1912, they again criticised Ward, this time for letting his desire to win electoral support from anti-militarist labourites prevent him from punishing opponents of compulsory military service.⁷² They noted that his successor in 1912, Thomas Mackenzie, was likewise unreliable, but that Arthur Myers – the former Round Tabler now in charge of defence – had saved the system by enforcing the law.⁷³ That same year, a motion of no confidence was passed against the Liberals, and the Reform party formed a government. Allen became Minister of Defence. The New Zealand Round Table praised him when, like Myers, he enforced compulsory military service.⁷⁴ Myers's and Allen's concordance with Round Table policy suggests that they remained influenced by the movement after their departure. At the very least, the Round Table's praise of them demonstrates that the movement regarded them as kindred spirits, as proof that some politicians were doing what was necessary to safeguard the Empire.

Placating Labour

Round Tablers across the world were aware that opposition towards the Empire was widespread in the labour movement.⁷⁵ As part of their defence preparations, they sought to persuade labourites of the virtues of the Empire. The movement's elitist membership made this strategy difficult to implement. One tactic, typical of Round Table elitism, was to appeal to select labour leaders thought to be more moderate and sophisticated than their peers. This tactic met with little success.

Kendle notes that the New Zealand members managed to recruit Edward Tregear, the Secretary of Labour from 1891 to 1910, because the latter was concerned about German militarism.⁷⁶ Kendle portrays Tregear's recruitment as a boon for the New Zealand Round Table. It is certainly commendable that Kendle mentions this fact; the latter's biographer, K. R. Howe, does not.⁷⁷ However, Kendle does not explain that Tregear, who became increasingly radical in this period, speedily distanced himself from this self-consciously imperial organisation. Atkinson soon declared him "Curiously undependable".⁷⁸

The only other prominent labourite the Round Table tried to recruit using this tactic seems to have been Alfred Hindmarsh. Atkinson led this initiative in late 1914. He did so because Hindmarsh was a cultured lawyer – the grandson of the first governor of South Australia, in fact – who was less extreme than many labour leaders. Hindmarsh seemed interested in Atkinson’s ideas but never joined the organisation.⁷⁹ One could argue that his refusal to adopt a pacifist position during the First World War, which put him at odds with most labour leaders, was influenced by the Round Table. However, not least because Hindmarsh left virtually no papers for posterity, this must remain conjecture.

Another member of the Wellington group, the university professor David Picken, also reached out to labour. He often moderated the tone of draft articles for *The Round Table* that struck him as too uncharitable towards working-class concerns (a few examples of New Zealand Round Table drafts have been preserved in Atkinson’s correspondence with the London Moot).⁸⁰ I emphasise this point because Picken emigrated to Australia during the war, whereupon he became hostile to the labour movement because of its lack of patriotism (see below for the situation in New Zealand). Although Foster highlights Picken’s conservatism in her book on the Australian Round Table,⁸¹ she does not mention that in his New Zealand days, he was rather pro-labour.

One more noteworthy labour sympathiser was William Downie Stewart. Although he was never an egalitarian, he sought to alleviate the sufferings of the poor and associated with radical trade unionists as a young man.⁸² He criticised both the Liberal and Labour Parties for being too authoritarian and dogmatic, and claimed that these vices were undermining free speech and association in the country.⁸³ He hoped that the Reform Party, as befitting its name, would offer a more restrained and constructive social programme. Stewart never lost his interest in working-class concerns and befriended Labour politicians such as John A. Lee while in Parliament.⁸⁴

The Round Table groups also reached out to friendly Liberals. Around this time, Atkinson sent a forthright letter to the London Moot complaining that the Round Table’s conservative reputation was hampering recruitment.⁸⁵ He stated that he would permit visits from British politician members or sympathisers only if they were Liberal, since visits by Tories might damage the New Zealand organisation’s capacity to engage with labour leaders. Atkinson was also concerned that the New Zealand Round Table had become too closely aligned with the Reform Party. Thus, he emphasised that he was – ultimately unsuccessfully – trying to recruit Robert McNab, a left-wing Liberal who had served with the Volunteers.⁸⁶

Despite these efforts, the Round Table remained thoroughly conservative. It never boasted long-term, dependable, prominent left-wing members. Nor did its wealthy conservative members, except for Stewart, make extensive contacts in the labour movement. Atkinson exemplifies this shortcoming. Although he claimed always to have had labour sympathies,⁸⁷ he admitted to the London Moot his ignorance of how *The Maoriland Worker*, New Zealand’s pre-eminent socialist newspaper, really perceived the Round Table, since he did not know anyone associated with it personally.⁸⁸

The First World War

Kendle notes that the First World War broke the back of the Round Table as an international movement.⁸⁹ The chaos of the war killed many members, interrupted the organisation’s routine work, and severely weakened the Empire’s long-term integrity. Attempts to maintain bonds,

let alone strengthen them, were hampered because many surviving Round Table members were elevated to positions of authority that left them little time for the movement. For example, the London Moot felt obliged to cancel a proposed meeting of all Round Table groups in December 1919.⁹⁰ The Round Table suffered a steep decline in membership and activity, and by the 1920s and 1930s resembled less a coherent movement than an increasingly nebulous collection of aging idealists.

This scenario certainly applies to the New Zealand Round Table. As in other countries, the membership responded to the war with unequivocal patriotism. Members young enough to fight often did so, including those with substantial responsibilities in New Zealand. For example, Stewart entered Parliament shortly after the war began but soon decided that the army needed him more. He left after making his maiden speech, an eloquent plea for post-war imperial federation.⁹¹ His war service was short-lived: in 1915, an attack of rheumatoid arthritis disabled him while in France, and he returned to New Zealand an invalid in 1916.

Atkinson also volunteered. Kendle errs in saying that he remained a major member in New Zealand only until 1914;⁹² his responsibilities as dominion secretary kept him active on the Home Front until 1916. Soon after he reached France, he became famous for sending a staunch justification of the Allied cause to the *Dominion* newspaper, portraying the war as an apocalyptic conflict between good and evil, and then almost immediately dying in battle trying to rescue a fellow officer.⁹³ His story earned him recognition in an eminent 2019 history of New Zealand's war effort,⁹⁴ though, typically, the authors do not reference how Atkinson's Round Table beliefs shaped his conduct. This is despite the fact that General Alexander Godley himself, the commander of the II Anzac Corps, stated publicly that Atkinson's death "is a great loss not only to the 'Round Table,' but also to this force".⁹⁵

Another prominent casualty of the New Zealand organisation was John Hugh Allen.⁹⁶ He died at Gallipoli in 1915 leading a charge against the Ottoman trenches. Because he had been very active in the Anglican Church, the Diocese of Dunedin solemnly memorialised his passing. Once again, Allen's Round Table convictions were emphasised.⁹⁷

Many Round Tablers were too old to fight but were very active on the Home Front. All three politician former members found themselves in positions of authority in the National Government, a wartime coalition of the Reform and Liberal Parties formed in 1915. Allen was Minister of Defence; Rhodes was a wartime commissioner; and Myers was Acting Minister of Finance when the incumbent minister, Ward, was overseas. Another current member, Hight, would serve on the Board of Trade to investigate living standards near the end of hostilities.⁹⁸ Others distinguished themselves as propagandists for the war effort. For example, in late 1914, the groups published a justification of the Allied cause and a plea for post-war imperial unity.⁹⁹ Another example was von Haast's series of public lectures and debates held in 1917 and 1918, which avowed the necessity of post-war imperial unity.¹⁰⁰

Only one active member appears to have engaged in ambiguous conduct: George Clifford, as chairman of the New Zealand Racing Conference, provoked public controversy by holding wartime racing competitions. Nevertheless, in a patriotic manner befitting a Round Table member, Clifford argued that horse racing was a martial sport that trained horses and riders for war.¹⁰¹ He seems to have persuaded enough New Zealanders of his point of view to remain president, and in any case, his conduct appears not to have negatively impacted the Round Table. Once again, it is noteworthy that historical treatment of the Clifford controversy does not mention his association with the Round Table.¹⁰²

It is impossible to quantify the influence of Round Table wartime initiatives. However, the Round Tablers evidently thought that they were helpful, and they probably resonated with a significant number of New Zealanders. To maintain a steady supply of reinforcements, they passionately advocated conscription, which the government introduced in 1916.¹⁰³ Caught up in war fervour, they became extremely hostile to anti-conscriptionists in the labour movement, though they consoled themselves by suggesting that the agitators were a small minority.¹⁰⁴

These actions identified the Round Table with the patriotic majority of New Zealand society. However, the Round Tablers also manifested an extremism that distinguished them sharply from many other patriots. Constantly, they worried that New Zealand's contribution to the war effort was inadequate.¹⁰⁵ Secluded in the South Seas, and protected by the naval might of the Allies, the movement had known even before the war that New Zealand was relatively safe from German attack.¹⁰⁶ During the conflict, New Zealand did not suffer economically as much as the Mother Country.¹⁰⁷ For the Round Table, this security was tragic, even repulsive, since members believed that it fostered a sense of complacency. One article wondered only half-jokingly whether bombs needed to be dropped on New Zealand for the population to take their wartime responsibilities seriously.¹⁰⁸ They proclaimed the need to put every available man in uniform,¹⁰⁹ and were only slightly placated when the casualty lists began to mount from 1915, and they could report to their compatriots overseas that New Zealand really was doing its bit. Such thinking placed the Round Table on the extreme fringe of New Zealand patriotism.

Post-war Decline

In the post-war world, the New Zealand Round Table began to fall apart. I have found it difficult to chart this decline, since most correspondence peters out after 1915 and only one thin minute book from the Christchurch group is extant. Undoubtedly, Atkinson's death was a serious blow to the New Zealand movement. Although he was overbearing, he was also proactive, and nobody stepped in to assume his mantle. The Round Table suffered without clear leadership. According to Stewart, the unity that the Empire had shown during the war persuaded many members that the Round Table was now obsolete, since closer co-operation within the Empire was treated as a given.¹¹⁰ When dominion nationalism and the Empire's weakness belied this hope, members could become rather dispirited.

The Auckland group dissipated, not even leaving a decent paper trail for posterity. The Dunedin group also collapsed, almost certainly because its old leader, Stewart, was now a disabled MP based in Wellington who, after 1921, had significant ministerial responsibilities. From 1918 to 1920, the Christchurch group appears to have stopped meeting. The reasons for this are obscure, though two factors probably influenced its inactivity. In early 1918, a long-standing member of the Christchurch group, the university professor Thomas Blunt, resigned without giving a reason,¹¹¹ and in 1918 and 1919 Hight – the group's prime mover – became heavily involved with the Board of Trade and presumably had less time for the movement. Von Haast, with Stewart's help, managed to keep the Wellington group active. However, the members did little more than meet to plan articles for *The Round Table*.¹¹² From 1920 to 1923, the Christchurch group began to meet again, albeit infrequently and with little to say apart from complaints about funds.¹¹³ Then, in 1923, the minute book ends, which suggests that the group became permanently defunct.

I consider this juncture symbolic of the Round Table's demise as a coherent movement in New Zealand. The organisation – or, more aptly, the Wellington group – survived in name until the 1960s.¹¹⁴ However, it was no longer a collection of groups seeking closer imperial unity, but a

tiny number of individuals – of whom the most active were Stewart and von Haast – trying desperately to keep the weakened, fragmented British Empire from completely breaking apart. Their tenacious struggle has been partially explored by Holmes, who notes that both ended their lives disillusioned with the future of the Empire.¹¹⁵ Perhaps this helps explain why, despite the large number of papers they left behind, the New Zealand Round Table has remained a neglected area of New Zealand and imperial history.

Conclusion

In this article, I have provided the first detailed historical study of the Round Table movement in New Zealand from 1910 to 1923. In doing so, I have helped to fill a glaring gap in international Round Table historiography and corrected the neglect of the Round Table in New Zealand academic circles. I highlighted that the development of the Round Table in New Zealand was broadly similar to that of Britain and other dominions. Their recruits tended to be wealthy, prominent citizens of conservative persuasion. They usually had a pre-existing interest in defence matters and imperial politics.

Before the war, they were fervent supporters of the new military reforms, which they saw as an integral part of imperial defence. As part of their campaign for better defence, they sought to placate the labour movement, but they met with little success because of their elitist bias. During the war, they stood on the extreme fringe of patriotic opinion, virulently advocating conscription and lamenting New Zealand's relative insulation from the conflict. After the war, the movement fell apart because of Atkinson's death, the work responsibilities of other members, and the widespread belief that the Round Table was now obsolete. One noteworthy feature of the New Zealand movement was its 1911 ban on active politicians becoming members, which stemmed from Atkinson's strict interpretation of Curtis's programme.

I hope that this article will spark further academic study of the New Zealand Round Table. The papers of von Haast, Stewart, and Hight, as well as Atkinson's correspondence with the Moot, contain a wealth of information about Round Table activities from the 1910s until the 1950s. What I have cited in this article represents only the tip of the iceberg. For example, more detailed research into contacts between New Zealand members and their compatriots overseas, whom they often befriended, would help contextualise the movement internationally. In addition, owing to the omissions and bias of Sinclair's work on support for imperial federation in New Zealand, a scholarly reanalysis of this subject might be beneficial.

¹ For the list of subscribers, see "For Dispatch of No. 10 at the 1st December 1912," 1912, MS 66391, MB 1973, James Hight Papers, Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand. Membership figures are elusive, but thirty seems like a reasonable number based on my research.

² John E. Kendle, *The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 62, 107.

³ *Ibid.*, 46. Note that one key figure, Leo Amery, operated independently of the Kindergarten. For a detailed study, see Walter Nimocks, *Milner's Young Men: The "Kindergarten" in Edwardian Imperial Affairs* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970).

⁴ Kendle, *Round Table*, 74–75.

⁵ All copies of *The Round Table*, which was later revamped as an academic publication, are available at Taylor and Francis Online.

⁶ Alexander May, "The Round Table: 1910–66" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1995), 40–41; John E. Kendle, "The Round Table Movement: Lionel Curtis and the Formation of the New Zealand Groups in 1910," *New Zealand Journal of History* 1, no. 1 (1967): 47.

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- ⁷ Kendle, *Round Table*, 16–17.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*; May, “The Round Table,” 49.
- ⁹ Kendle, *Round Table*, 102. Leonie Foster, *High Hopes: The Men and Motives of the Australian Round Table* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press / The Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1986), 29.
- ¹⁰ Heinrich von Haast, unpublished manuscript “Further Typescript copy of reminiscences,” 1949, MS–Papers–0037–349H, Haast Family Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, 39.
- ¹¹ Kendle, *Round Table*, 70–71.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 274.
- ¹³ Foster, *High Hopes*; May, “The Round Table”; James Eayrs, “The Round Table Movement in Canada,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 38, no. 1 (1957): 1–20; Carroll Quigley, “The Round Table Groups in Canada,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 43, no. 3 (1962): 204–224.
- ¹⁴ Nimocks, *Milner’s Young Men*.
- ¹⁵ Kendle, *Round Table*, 80–85, 262, 272, 89–94, 198–201, 234; Andrea Bosco, *Round Table Movement and the Fall of the ‘Second’ British Empire (1909–1919)* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 188–189, 192–193.
- ¹⁶ Carroll Quigley, *The Anglo-American Establishment: From Rhodes to Cliveden* (Dauphin Publications, 2013), 155, 192, 326.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, May, “The Round Table,” 106, 122–123, 166, 168, 215, 221, 243, 319.
- ¹⁸ Martin George Holmes, “A Commonwealth Relations Duo,” *New Zealand International Review* 47, no. 4 (2022): 22–24.
- ¹⁹ Kendle, “The Round Table Movement.”
- ²⁰ John E. Kendle, “The Round Table Movement, New Zealand, and the Conference of 1911,” *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies* 3, no. 2 (1965): 104–117.
- ²¹ Keith Sinclair, *Imperial Federation: A Study of New Zealand Policy and Opinion, 1880–1914* (London: University of London / The Athlone Press, 1955), 14, 41–43.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 41–43.
- ²³ Michael Bassett, *Sir Joseph Ward: A Political Biography* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993), 189–193.
- ²⁴ L. C. Voller, “Colonel the Honourable Sir James Allen G.C.M.G., K.C.B., T.D., M.A. Cantab” (MA diss., University of Otago, 1943), 46.
- ²⁵ Noteworthy examples include Steven Loveridge, *Calls to Arms: New Zealand Society and Commitment to the Great War* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014); Steven Loveridge and James Watson, *The Home Front: New Zealand Society and the War Effort, 1914–1919* (Auckland: Massey University Press, 2019).
- ²⁶ Stevan Eldred-Grigg, *The Great Wrong War: New Zealand Society in WWI* (Auckland: Random House, 2010).
- ²⁷ Stephanie M. Dale, “Gentleman of Politics: A Life of William Downie Stewart, 1878–1919” (MA diss., University of Otago, 1981), 192.
- ²⁸ Geoffrey W. Rice, *Heaton Rhodes of Otago: The Illustrated Biography*, 2nd ed. (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2008).
- ²⁹ Quigley, *Anglo-American Establishment*, 326.
- ³⁰ Bassett, *Sir Joseph Ward*, 197.
- ³¹ Note that “conservatism” in this article refers to opposition to the left-wing New Zealand Liberal and Labour Parties. New Zealand conservatives, Rolleston included, have often embraced certain radical policies. However, people such as Rolleston are best described as conservatives because they demurred from what they considered the untrammelled and reckless reformism of the Liberal and Labour Parties. For further information, consult Martin George Holmes, “Radicalism and Patrician Conservatism in Aotearoa New Zealand: The Case of William Downie Stewart Jr.,” *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 2 (2022): 6–39.

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- ³² Lionel Curtis, "Diary," Correspondence and papers concerning the distribution of the 'Original Egg' and Lionel Curtis' early writings, including (fol. 3) a copy of his diary of his travels in New Zealand, 1910, MS. Eng. hist. c. 833, Archive of the Round Table, Bodleian Library, Oxford, England.
- ³³ Jim McAloon, *No Idle Rich: The Wealthy in Canterbury and Otago, 1840–1914* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2002).
- ³⁴ William Downie Stewart, unpublished manuscript "Typescript of 'Three Generations in New Zealand Politics,' 1941," MS–0985–030/013, William Downie Stewart: Personal, Political and Family Papers (1670s–1957), ARC–0164, Hocken Library, Dunedin, New Zealand.
- ³⁵ Kendle, "Formation of the New Zealand Groups," 42.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 46–47.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ⁴¹ Von Haast, "Further Typescript," 37–38.
- ⁴² "Agenda," 1911, Round Table letters, circulars and pamphlets including correspondence with Lionel Curtis and others, MS–0985–019/008, Stewart papers, 1.
- ⁴³ Kendle, "Formation of the New Zealand Groups," 47.
- ⁴⁴ "Death of Mr Rolleston," *New Zealand Times*, 20 January 1911, 4. Note that all newspapers were accessed via the National Library of New Zealand's Papers Past.
- ⁴⁵ Kendle, "Formation of the New Zealand Groups," 47.
- ⁴⁶ Foster, *High Hopes*, 29.
- ⁴⁷ Letter from Hight to Atkinson, 26 July 1911, Round Table letters, Stewart papers.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ Letter from Atkinson to Allen, 23 August 1911, Round Table letters, Stewart papers.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² Letter from Curtis to Atkinson, 28 July 1911, Round Table letters, Stewart papers.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ Kendle, "Formation of the New Zealand Groups," 46.
- ⁵⁵ Letter from Atkinson to Allen, 2 September 1911, Round Table letters, Stewart papers.
- ⁵⁶ Letter from Stewart to Atkinson, 11 October 1911, Round Table letters, Stewart papers.
- ⁵⁷ Letter from Stewart to Atkinson, 21 September 1911, Round Table letters, Stewart papers.
- ⁵⁸ "Agenda," Round Table letters, Stewart papers.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ⁶⁰ Letter from Curtis to Stewart, 30 November 1937, "Letters from Lionel George Curtis (1910, 1913, 1932–1948)," MS–0985–002/054, Stewart papers.
- ⁶¹ Letter from Thomas Bavin to Stewart, 24 November 1925, "Letters from Sir Thomas Rainsford Bavin (c.1925–1936)," MS–0985–002/014, Stewart papers; Letter from Amery to Stewart, 28 May 1925, "Correspondence with and relating to Leopold Stennett Amery (1913–1949)," MS–0985–002/006, Stewart papers.
- ⁶² Von Haast, "Further Typescript," 56–64.
- ⁶³ "John Hugh Allen," *Press*, 26 December 1919, 4.
- ⁶⁴ For details, see Holmes, "A Commonwealth Relations Duo," 22–23.
- ⁶⁵ William Downie Stewart, unpublished manuscript "Typescript of 'Three Generations in New Zealand Politics,' 1941," MS–0985–030/013, Stewart papers, 42.
- ⁶⁶ Kendle, "Formation of the New Zealand Groups," 44.
- ⁶⁷ H. F. von Haast, *The Life and Times of Sir Julius von Haast, K.C.M.G., Ph.D., D. Sc., F.R.S.: Explorer, Geologist, Museum Builder* (Wellington: H. F. von Haast, 1948), 1.
- ⁶⁸ Von Haast, "Further Typescript," 51–52.
- ⁶⁹ See, for example, "New Zealand," *The Round Table*, September 1913, 760.
- ⁷⁰ "New Zealand," *The Round Table*, March 1912, 379.
- ⁷¹ For details, see Kendle, "Conference of 1911."

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- ⁷² “New Zealand,” *The Round Table*, September 1912, 765–766.
- ⁷³ “New Zealand,” *The Round Table*, December 1912, 181.
- ⁷⁴ “New Zealand,” *The Round Table*, March 1913, 384.
- ⁷⁵ See, for example, Foster, *High Hopes*, 66.
- ⁷⁶ Kendle, *Round Table*, 84.
- ⁷⁷ K. R. Howe, *Singer in a Songless Land: A Life of Edward Tregear, 1846–1931* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1991).
- ⁷⁸ Letter from Atkinson to Edward Grigg, 8 August 1913, “Correspondence and papers relating to Round Table groups in New Zealand, 1913–1921,” MS. Eng. hist. c.800, Archive of the Round Table, Bodleian Library, Oxford, England.
- ⁷⁹ Letter from Atkinson to Philip Kerr, 6 November 1914, Correspondence and papers, Archive of the Round Table.
- ⁸⁰ See, for example, Letter from Atkinson to Graeme M. Paterson, 20 June 1913, Correspondence and papers, Archive of the Round Table.
- ⁸¹ Foster, *High Hopes*, 111.
- ⁸² Stewart, “Three Generations,” 43–45.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 51, 47.
- ⁸⁴ John A. Lee, *Rhetoric at the Red Dawn* (Auckland: Collins, 1965), 34, 97.
- ⁸⁵ Letter from Atkinson to Grigg, 31 October 1913, Correspondence and papers, Archive of the Round Table.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁷ Letter from Atkinson to Grigg, 8 August 1913, Correspondence and papers, Archive of the Round Table.
- ⁸⁸ Letter from Atkinson to the London Moot, 5 September 1913, Correspondence and papers, Archive of the Round Table.
- ⁸⁹ Kendle, *Round Table*, 274.
- ⁹⁰ Von Haast, “Further Typescript,” 43.
- ⁹¹ *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 172, 64.
- ⁹² Kendle, *Round Table*, 83.
- ⁹³ “New Zealand and the War,” *Evening Star*, 14 June 1917, 1; “How Captain Atkinson Died,” *Dominion*, 15 June 1917, 5.
- ⁹⁴ Loveridge and Watson, *The Home Front*, 323–324.
- ⁹⁵ “Arnold Atkinson Memorial Fund,” *Dominion*, 27 November 1917, 4.
- ⁹⁶ Voller, “James Allen,” 51.
- ⁹⁷ “Lieutenant J. H. Allen,” *Sun (Christchurch)*, 9 May 1916, 2.
- ⁹⁸ “The Coal Dispute,” *Evening Post*, 9 September 1918, 7.
- ⁹⁹ The Round Table in New Zealand, *Empire Problems: Practical Questions for Each Citizen of New Zealand in regard to Defence, Foreign Policy, and the Dependencies* (Wellington: Wright and Carman, 1914).
- ¹⁰⁰ Von Haast, “Further Typescript,” 42.
- ¹⁰¹ “Continuation of Racing,” *New Zealand Herald*, 24 March 1917, 8.
- ¹⁰² See, for example, Greg Ryan, “‘The whole question bristles with difficulties’: Sport and War,” in *New Zealand Society at War*, ed. Steven Loveridge (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016), 185.
- ¹⁰³ See, for example, “New Zealand,” *The Round Table*, September 1916, 786–787.
- ¹⁰⁴ “New Zealand,” *The Round Table*, June 1917, 628.
- ¹⁰⁵ See, for example, “New Zealand,” *The Round Table*, December 1915, 185; “New Zealand,” *The Round Table*, June 1915, 701–703.
- ¹⁰⁶ “New Zealand,” *The Round Table*, June 1914, 587–588.
- ¹⁰⁷ “New Zealand,” *The Round Table*, March 1916, 377–378.
- ¹⁰⁸ “New Zealand,” *The Round Table*, September 1916, 781.
- ¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, “New Zealand and the War,” *Evening Star*, 14 June 1917, 1.

¹¹⁰ William Downie Stewart, unpublished manuscript “Diary of Conference kept by William Downie Stewart at the British Commonwealth Relations Conference, Sydney,” 1938, MS-0985-023/0093, Stewart papers.

¹¹¹ Notebook “Round Table, Christchurch Group Minutes,” 1915–1923, MS 78610, MB 242, James Hight Papers, 21 March 1918.

¹¹² Von Haast, “Further Typescript,” 38.

¹¹³ See, for instance, “Round Table, Christchurch Group Minutes,” 22 March 1920.

¹¹⁴ In this decade, one of the last veteran members, John Illot, wrote a nine-page history of the movement, which mainly focused on the Wellington group. Although interesting, it contains little of interest about the period pertaining to this article. See John Illot, unpublished manuscript “History of the Round Table Group in New Zealand,” 1960, J. C. Beaglehole Room, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington.

¹¹⁵ Holmes, “A Commonwealth Relations Duo,” 23–24.