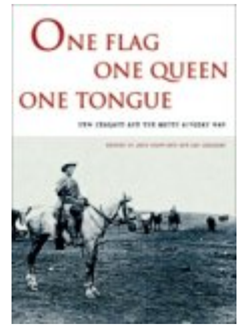
H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Crawford, Ian McGibbon, eds.. *One Flag, One Queen, One Tongue: New Zealand, the British Empire and the South African War, 1899-1902.* Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003. xii + 225 pp. $19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-86940-293-8.



Reviewed by Tom Brooking

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New Zealand's involvement in the South African War (still known more popularly as the Boer War) has received surprisingly little attention from historians apart from one relatively short illustrated history written by John Crawford and Ellen Ellis in 1999 and D.O.W. Hall's slimmer and rather dated essay published in 1949. This rather larger volume of essays edited by Crawford and the remarkably productive Ian McGibbon is, therefore, a welcome addition to both New Zealand historical literature and the broader historiography of the British Empire.

Crawford and McGibbon have deliberately set out to place this story in its broader imperial context by including contributions from Australian, Canadian, South African, and British historians. These essays are based on papers given to the symposium held by the National Library in Wellington in 1999 to mark the centenary of New Zealand's involvement in this conflict. They have been expertly edited and cohere as a set of comprehensive essays that cover a wide range of topics with something of interest for most readers. Unlike much military history, this approach ensures that not only the actual fighting, but the social, cultural, and political aspects of this large colonial war are covered more than adequately. It is also well written, expertly edited, and nicely produced by Auckland University Press. Several interesting photographs are reproduced, but they could have been better integrated into the text, and the book would have benefited from a few more location maps.

Ian McGibbon gets proceedings underway by explaining why New Zealand ended up fighting against a similar farming people. He demonstrates most convincingly that New Zealand's enthusiastic participation involved pursuit of national self interest as much as imperial patriotism. Stephen Clarke follows by showing that New Zealand's and Australia's involvement had little to do with any kind of London-based conspiracy. Seconded British officers known as "commandants" certainly supported the sending of troops, but this was because the trainee soldiers of Australia and New Zealand desperately wanted to prove themselves in action. The support of these commandants who trained the nascent colonial armies in no way detracted from the spontaneous enthusiasm of both countries to support the Empire against the recalcitrant ***Uitlanders***. Malcolm McKinnon then switches attention to those New Zealanders who did not share their contemporaries' enthusiasm for military engagement on the Veldt.

McKinnon breaks opposition to the war into four main groups--pacifists (including women's groups, discussed by Megan Hutching in the following chapter), anti-capitalists, Gladstonian liberals, and Irish nationalists. Although each group was relatively small, they were articulate, vociferous, and well organized. Protestant clergy like the Reverend Rutherford Wardell, the socialist Tommy Taylor, and Patrick O'Regan (Member of the House of Representatives for Buller, land nationaliser and grandfather of Sir Tipene), together with the Catholic newspaper ***The Tablet***, all took courageous stances against the war. None of this able minority had much impact in denting widespread jingoistic support for the war, with over forty thousand New Zealanders involved in bidding farewell to the troops. The opponents of war did, however, later take advantage of a degree of war weariness that had set in by 1902. Hutching goes on to show that the staunchest opposition came from a group within the National Council of Women who spoke out determinedly against militarism in general. Yet even this organization was divided over the issue and could not oppose New Zealand's involvement with anything like the unified support of its members.

British historian Thomas Pakenham, along with New Zealanders John Crawford, Colin McGeorge, and Ashley Gould, next shift attention to the colonial soldiers themselves. Pakenham reminds us that this was a big war involving 440,000 British troops (including 16,632 Australians, 7,368 Canadians, and 6,343 New Zealanders). It witnessed many setbacks, cost the British taxpayer £220 million, and proved to be the bloodiest conflict in which Britain was engaged between Waterloo in 1815 and the first World War. The deaths of some twenty-two thousand Boers held in concentration camps added to the embarrassment caused by the poor performance of the army. The only bright spot--apart from the enthusiastic excesses of the Bushveldt Carbineers like "Breaker" Morant--was the competent performance of the colonial troops.

John Crawford then reviews the popular idea that New Zealanders performed best of all the mounted troops in South Africa. He concludes that despite inadequate training, the New Zealanders played to their strengths as good horsemen and reasonable shots. They were lucky that these skills suited the mobile nature of the war, but on balance, they deserved their glowing reputation. Colin McGeorge's analysis of the social background of these troops debunks the old myth that they were all farm laborers or farmers' sons. In fact they came from all walks of life, from all social ranks, and every part of the country in rough proportion to the broader society as a whole. It seems that many young, town-based New Zealand men shared the skills of horse riding and rifle shooting with their country peers. The preference for horses also did not appear to privilege recruits from farming backgrounds, perhaps because the horse was still ubiquitous throughout the whole of New Zealand. Interestingly, as would be the case with their first World War equivalents, the great majority were single. Ashley Gould rounds out this picture by tracing the stories of the handful of Maori men (usually with European names) who managed to serve despite the official restrictions of this "white man's war."

Before the text shifts its focus to Australia and Canada, Ellen Ellis reminds us that about a dozen New Zealand nurses and twenty teachers served in the South African War. This involvement broke important new ground for women, and they intruded into a predominantly male space and overcame all kinds of prejudice and difficulty. Interestingly, most moved so far outside conventional bounds that they stayed overseas, either as married women or professionals and never returned to "God's Own Country".

Craig Wilcox moves attention from New Zealand to Australia and discerns many parallels between the two trans-Tasman neighbors as well as with Canada. Australia's effort, though, was much more substantial than that of the other white settler colonies and here a powerful mythology developed around the exploits of "Breaker" Morant. Bruce Beresford's 1980 movie lionizing Morant has recast this questionable character as a proto-nationalist hero. Consequently, although the majority of modern Australians have forgotten this obscure war, it still has a higher profile than in New Zealand or Canada and is viewed as sort of prequel to Gallipoli. Carman Miller concurs that support for the war gained less traction in Canada than Australia, but by examining rioting at McGill University, she also shows that the war aggravated ethnic tensions between the Anglo and Francophone populations. Enthusiastic student supporters of the war celebrated victory at Ladysmith by attacking the offices of the French press and then joined forces with their peers at Quebec City University to attack students at the French-speaking Laval University. Only intervention by the mayors of Montreal and Quebec City stopped a counter attack. Thereafter, Canadian politicians toned down their more overt expressions of imperial loyalty and recruitment for the Boer War diminished.

Ian van der Wagg contributes a full and sophisticated chapter on the place of the Boer War within South African historiography. Obviously, this conflict has always meant more to Afrikaner nationalists than to English or Black South Africans, but interpretations of its significance have shifted around considerably. During the 1930s, Afrikaner historians tended to portray the clash with the English as a war of independence. Official histories of the 1950s and 1960s reinforced this view and demonized the British into the bargain. Only since the 1970s has this heroic and mythological interpretation of the war begun to be challenged and its impact upon Blacks assessed. Even so, much work remains to be done in the post-apartheid era as both English and black South African historians have been inclined to ignore the war until very recently. This important point needs to be taken up by whoever undertakes the task of producing a more authoritative volume on New Zealand's experience in this imperial war.

John Crawford concludes the volume with an essay assessing the impact of the South African war upon New Zealand military forces and the broader society. He argues that this involvement helped to both develop a stronger sense of national identity and to militarize New Zealand before the first World War. Certainly, New Zealand gained confidence from the apparent success of its soldiers. The volunteer force was expanded, School Cadets increased in number, and although little came of notions of creating a reserve force, interest in military matters remained at a high level thereafter. Military training also improved. Furthermore, the Boer War seemed to set the pattern repeated in both world wars of dispatching overseas a large, expeditionary force of non-regular soldiers. Intolerance of dissent would also recur each time New Zealand sent its sons and daughters overseas to fight someone else's wars.

These seem sensible conclusions readily supported by the evidence assembled in the rest of this volume. For it to be totally convincing, however, we now need to build on the excellent beginning made by this collection and by Crawford and Ellis's earlier illustrated history, by producing a single author volume which focuses on placing New Zealand's contribution within the wider Imperial context. Essay collections are useful but they tend to be disparate and lack the clarity that comes from an authoritative authorial hand. As one could say in military terms, a "strong individual" needs to provide firmer command of the task of recording and interpreting New Zealand's role in this largely forgotten, but important, imperial war, and such an author is also faced with the challenging task of disentangling New Zealand's emerging self-interested nationalism from a more idealistic enthusiasm for the greater imperial cause.