New Zealand historian discusses government's book glorifying World War I

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7 June 2014

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to historian Stevan Eldred-Grigg about the government-produced book, *New Zealand and the First World War 1914–1919*, published last November. The Ministry of Culture collaborated with the Defence Force and hired the ardent militarist Damien Fenton to write the book, which is one of about a dozen being produced as part of the country's centenary commemorations of WWI.

The WSWS review characterised the book as pro-war propaganda, based on falsifications, omissions and distortions, designed to numb the consciousness of workers and youth in order to prepare them for future wars. WWI was an imperialist war, caused by the breakdown of the capitalist system, expressed in the struggle between the major powers in Europe, Asia and America for domination of colonies, markets and profits. More than 10 million people were killed, including 18,500 New Zealanders, and millions more were maimed. New Zealand's ruling elite joined the war, as a junior partner in the British Empire, in order to expand its wealth and colonies in the South Pacific.

Fenton falsely presents the war against Germany and its allies as an altruistic endeavour. He celebrates New Zealand's involvement, including its seizure of German-held Samoa, and its share in the plunder from Nauru. He concludes that WWI was "largely successful and profitable" for the country.

Eldred-Grigg is the author of *The Great Wrong War: New Zealand Society in WWI* (Random House, 2010), which examines the disastrous impact of the war on the country. He has written several other works of history and novels, including *The Rich: A New Zealand History*, *New Zealand Working People*, and *Oracles and Miracles*.

Tom Peters: As a historian, what do you make of Fenton's book as a whole?

Stevan Eldred-Grigg: The fact that such an uncritical text is one that gets the official imprimatur is, of course, depressing—deeply depressing. It's not surprising that it's got the government, or the prime minister's backing. But they [the researchers at the Ministry of Culture] should know better than that. They're proper historians. Basically, he's not a historian. He's an antiquarian. Antiquarians are those who gather all the information they can about a subject and don't know what to do with it, don't know how to argue, how to critically appraise or analyse.

TP: There's virtually no discussion of New Zealand's invasion of Samoa at the start of the war.

EG: It gets one little box, and the carve-up of Nauru gets half a line—where it's described as beneficial, as you pointed out in your review. No mention of the gross exploitation that was going on in Nauru. By the end of the war, one Samoan historian argues, Samoa had just become one big prison camp. There were curfews and very strict racial segregation of four groups: the whites, the Cantonese coolies (who were the bottom of the heap), the Samoans and the *afekasi* (part Samoan, part white).

Until *The Great Wrong War*, no New Zealand historian had discussed—in any mainstream history of New Zealand or about the war—our seizure of Samoa. Fenton should have integrated what I said about it. He hasn't taken any account of my book. It's not in the bibliography.

TP: You point out that there were long-standing designs on Samoa, Nauru and other places throughout the Pacific, even Hawaii at one stage.

EG: The New Zealand governing groups, the Liberals and Reform, both seem to have been equally strong on the idea of a New Zealand colonial empire in the Pacific. That actually seems to have been quite an important strand in the political elite's thinking when we decided not to join the Federation of Australia—the sense that New Zealand should look towards the Pacific, that we had our own "manifest destiny."

TP: Fenton claims New Zealand went to war partly because it faced a naval threat from Germany and relied on Britain for protection.

EG: That's of course nonsense. Historians of the right have argued that our trade depended on Britain. Fenton accepts that. I went to a great deal of trouble to show that the largest market for our wool exports may well have been Germany, and they were also an important market for frozen meat. The German shipping line Norddeutscher Lloyd, one of the largest in the world, was also going to break the British shipping monopoly between Europe and New Zealand.

Then there's the military defence argument: that we depended on the British navy to keep the seas clear of other navies, because if they didn't do that, all those other predatory powers that wanted us would take us. Who exactly were those predatory powers? The only ones that had the capacity were the US and Japan. Japan was an ally, the US was neutral and became an ally. France, Britain and Germany were of no account in the Pacific by 1914.

Then they always add: the great majority of New Zealanders emotionally identified as British.

TP: Which is what he says.

EG: First of all, you have to take out the 10 to 12 percent Catholic Irish, who certainly did not see themselves as British, and saw the British Empire as a very dodgy enterprise. You have to take out most Maori, who—unlike what he says—did not flock to the colours, but stayed away in droves. You have to take out German and Scandinavian New Zealanders, for the most part, and a large number of Croat New Zealanders, and you have to take out Chinese New Zealanders.

Then there's our colonial peoples, who had to be shovelled in to fill the recruitment quotas. Kalaisi Folau and Margaret Pointer have written a really moving work about the poor Niueans. Some of them volunteered, some got brow-beaten. They had terrible experiences. Most of them just got sick. In return, the whole community of Niue got a type-written letter with a mimeographed signature from the war minister, and some portraits of the king and queen to hang in a village hall.

You've still got an overwhelming majority of Anglo-Scots, something like 75 percent. But then of course you can start doing your class analysis.

TP: Fenton doesn't discuss class at all.

EG: No, of course, class doesn't exist, we're all one united people. He talks about "New Zealand" as though it's an organic unity.

It was really polarised. If you read the private papers of wealthy, conservative people before the war, there was a widespread anxiety about revolution—as there was everywhere in the capitalist world. There was also the very strong idea that "the people"—the working class—had become too prosperous, too demanding, and had lost touch with reality, and that war would restore true values. That was very widespread in New Zealand among conservatives, just as much as it was in Prussia, England, France and St Petersburg.

TP: And it was a very militarised society, as you explain.

EG: It was. One of the things I was struck by, when I first began looking at newspapers before the war, was the salience of military and naval images. The governors wore military uniforms. Children, boys and girls, wore naval uniforms. There was a lot of anger about compulsory military training among working class people and among Methodists and Baptists from the middle class. Those were the stalwarts of the peace movement.

In fact, in the years before the war, pamphlets were being published back in Britain, by New Zealanders, warning British working class people not to accept the blandishments of the New Zealand government giving them assisted migration, because their sons would end up being turned into cannon fodder.

TP: One of the shocking aspects of the book is that he completely endorses all the repressive measures taken by the government.

EG: Yes. Ostensibly, of course, a war fought for democracy and freedom, that's what they kept banging on about. And the first thing you do, as soon as war breaks out, you bring in a whole lot of regulations to suppress democracy and freedom. As the war went on, the measures got sterner, and sterner, and sterner. They were continuing to strengthen them towards the end of the war.

TP: Anti-war meetings were prohibited.

EG: Anti-conscription meetings were prohibited as well, once it was introduced. And you couldn't even speak in private against the war, so people were self-censoring.

Amelia Turnbull, an ordinary citizen, while seated at the family breakfast table, heard her son-in-law say something about not caring if Germany won the war. She dobbed him in, and he was sent to prison for twelve months. A bewildered old Norwegian woman, on the railway station at Palmerston North, who was having trouble with her baggage, began to abuse "you Britishers", and she was sent to prison for six months.

So you couldn't speak out, even in your own home. Of course, people did anyway, not everyone had that sort of mother-in-law.

The tradition which I grew up in, in my mum's family, the unskilled working class, was that the whole thing was stupid: a stupid war. Mum had about eight uncles and of them one got into uniform. The others wagged, they ran away, they messed up the medicals. These were not idealistic conscientious objectors. These were just men who felt: this is stupid, it's a fat man's war, nothing to do with me.

A lot of people ran away to Australia or the US, especially the Irish. That's another thing Fenton doesn't touch on, the Catholic Irish opposition.

TP: He says there was a tiny proportion of people who resisted conscription.

EG: He doesn't make any reference to the women's riot in Christchurch that I looked at [1]. The government was very careful to phase in conscription: first of all targeting the single, then later on the young married with no children. By the time the married with children were being conscripted in 1917, the anger was widespread, and you got those huge crowds protesting about conscription and wartime inflation.

I was born in Blackball, a working class mining town, and in Blackball there's a well-known story. There were a lot of men running away from conscription, or who'd deserted from the army. Some cops arrived in town to try and track some of them down, and some people from the miners' union led the cops to the top of a big limestone bluff over what's called Coal Creek. And they said, "See down there? It's a long way, isn't it? If you come back here doing this again, you'll find yourself at the bottom." That was the feeling in places like that.

There were quite a lot of strikes, because there was this increasing sense as the war went on that the working class were being shafted to pay for it. So they began to try to claw back some of their losses.

TP: Fenton claims that this cartoon from the *Observer* [see left] in December 1916 "illustrates the public anger at the prospect of coal miners and workers in other essential industries using wartime conditions to win higher pay and better conditions."

EG: "The public anger"! Rather than capitalist anger... It's worrying. The first task of a historian is to look at a piece of evidence and ask: who wrote it? Why did they write it? Who were they trying to persuade, of what, for what purpose? And he just doesn't do that. He just accepts the newspapers!

TP: What do you think of how Fenton writes about the fighting itself? He praises the British general Douglas Haig and French general Henri-Philippe Petain, among others.

EG: I just find it so distasteful. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the world of historiography was largely liberal and left, we were being told that these people were wholesale slaughterers of the working class. But then there was a reaction against this. The New Right came in and stripped off, quite quickly, the thin skin of leftish liberalism on a lot of people.

So by the 1990s there were some historians in the old British Empire who were beginning to argue that the 60s and 70s response was just a sentimental, wet response, and a dry way of looking at it was: Britain won the war. That's good, because Britain is good, it stands for justice. So, how did it do it? By killing millions of its soldiers, but by killing *even more* millions of the other people's soldiers. Ipso facto, it was worth doing.

Some historians also began to stress what had previously just been regarded by the liberal left as the British rationale for intervention, which was the invasion of Belgium and the violation of an international treaty. So I went to some pains to point out how Britain violated two international treaties as soon as the war broke out.

TP: By attacking German colonies in Africa...

EG: Also, the British illegally and unilaterally, within a few months of the outbreak of war, defined contraband to mean anything going to the enemy, even to feed the civilians. But that's not discussed by Fenton.

TP: He generally sanitises the fighting and New Zealand's role.

EG: He doesn't talk about the violence and exploitative behaviour of the New Zealand soldiers towards the Egyptians, which was all through the war. It was sustained and systematic.

He talks briefly about what has become glamorised as a romantic interlude: the riot in the Cairo brothel district. This is "our boys" attacking a lot of sex workers, who are making a really crap living. There's no suggestion that the men, by buying these sexual services, are exploiting them. Then they get beaten up for their pains and have their houses burnt down.

TP: He says there was "mutual hostility" between the Egyptians and the Allied soldiers.

EG: Yes, as though it equals out. Rather than the New Zealanders being in an occupation force, with the population naturally enough not wanting to be occupied. The accounts of people who were there, written subsequently, talk about a lot of nasty stuff: New Zealand soldiers taking pot shots at Egyptians from the trains—things like that.

TP: What do you think of the images in the book, which are a large part of it?

EG: The pictures are easy to look at and hardly any of them show the cost. Look at this painting of Gallipoli [see above]. Where's the blood? Where are the body parts? That was a really disgusting battle. Within an

hour or so, there were all these body parts everywhere. This is just total propaganda: good-looking young men, well dressed, not an intestine to be seen, not an eyeball hanging out.

It doesn't show what it's like to be killed or maimed in a pointless, bloody war. And what's it like for the people left behind, who've got to carry the can. It's just so heartless, it's emotionless, its passionless, it has no real love of people.

TP: Why hasn't it been criticised by anyone? The reviews all praise it.

EG: *The Great Wrong War* was my most unpopular book ever. All the reviews were very, very hostile. Because what you're implying is that "our boys" suffered needlessly.

People haven't really been encouraged to think critically about the two world wars. In the 1990s there was a lot of anxiety about how boys were not succeeding in the education system. So the content of New Zealand history was looked at, and it was decided to try to hook in boys by putting war in there. One unfortunate consequence has been that all these kids are now being taught war history in a quite an uncritical way.

A unit called "The Origins of the First World War" was taught at School Certificate level in the 1960s. It was great! It looked at imperialism, capitalism and all states aggressively manoeuvring, and all equally culpable.

The way it's taught in schools now is that the war was like a tsunami, a natural force that came to New Zealand. Sort of dark, sad, but at the same time there were elements of heroism, and it drew us together and we did well and were brave. I think that's a big part of why young people turn up in growing numbers for Anzac Day. It's social engineering.

Note:

[1] See *The Great Wrong War*, pp. 373–374. Thousands of women rioted one afternoon in May, 1918, outside the King Edward Barracks in Christchurch. They shouted down officers who were attempting to take a roll call of conscripts, and called on the men not to go to camp.

[2] "The battle of Chunuk Bair, 8 August 1915." The sesquicentennial gift to the nation from the New Zealand Defence Force. By Ion G. Brown, Major, Army artist. [Wellington, New Zealand Defence Force, 1990] http://mp.natlib.govt.nz/detail/?id=40955