

Passchendaele: The Anatomy of a Tragedy. By Andrew Macdonald. HarperCollins, Auckland, 2013. 303pp. NZ price: \$45. ISBN 9781775540344.

On 12 October 1917, in the Western Flanders region of Belgium, the New Zealand Division took part in an attack on the German positions around Bellevue Spur on the Passchendaele ridge. A New Zealand sergeant recorded the day's tragic results in his diary:

Black Friday 12[Oct] A day that will be long remembered by New Zealanders. Our boys and the Aussies went over at 5.30 and got practically cut to pieces. ... This is the biggest 'slap up' the NZers have had. Far worse than the Somme I believe.¹

It was the biggest 'slap up' New Zealand soldiers have ever had. In the space of a few short hours 845 New Zealand soldiers were killed and almost 2000 more were wounded. Another 138 soldiers died of their wounds over the next week. What went wrong, why so many New Zealand soldiers had to die and who was responsible is the subject of Andrew Macdonald's second book *Passchendaele: The Anatomy of a Tragedy*.

Andrew Macdonald is a former journalist and Reuters correspondent who now works as a freelance military historian based in London. Macdonald's first book *On My Way to the Somme* examined the performances of the New Zealand Division during its 23-day blooding on the Western Front in September–October 1916. The book was highly acclaimed, as Macdonald's latest effort deserves to be.

There is little doubt that *Passchendaele: The Anatomy of a Tragedy* is the most detailed, analytical study available of New Zealand's worst ever military disaster. Macdonald's research has been meticulous, drawing on archival material from four different countries. German sources in translation have also been well utilized throughout the book. And Macdonald has heeded advice attributed to Lord Macaulay: historians need a good pair of boots. He has trudged over the Flanders battlefields many times, even making sure to be there in the early days of October so he could experience similar climatic conditions to those experienced by New Zealand soldiers in 1917. The end result is a well-researched, readable and complete account of New Zealand's involvement in the Third Battle of Ypres. The experiences of Australian, British and Canadian soldiers feature too, although the book's main focus is on what the New Zealanders encountered at Passchendaele in October 1917. Macdonald's book makes an invaluable contribution not just to New Zealand's involvement in this battle, but to a greater understanding of Third Ypres, of which Passchendaele was a part.

Yet *Passchendaele* has a serious flaw. Throughout the book Macdonald becomes almost obsessed with Lieutenant General Sir Alexander Godley, whom he paints as the chief villain of the Passchendaele debacle. The aloof, ambitious, sycophantic, unpopular and seemingly incompetent Godley makes an easy target: a target Macdonald is keen to hit many times over. Godley, we are informed early in the book, was a 'shameless careerist' who went to extreme lengths to cover up his mistakes and failings (p.59). Godley had a 'hands off' style of command. He was striving to impress his subordinates but was a 'comprehensive failure' as a corps commander (pp.82, 83). Because Godley was unable to grasp the tactical problem facing his corps at Passchendaele, he 'condemned it to failure' (p.207). Godley, Macdonald concludes, was 'an incompetent bungler who willingly drove his II Anzac [Corps] to the cusp of destruction' (p.239). Given that Godley was primarily responsible for the disaster of 12 October, Macdonald argues, the patch of ground where so many New Zealanders perished 'should be known as Godley's Abattoir' (p.213).

There is no doubt that Godley bears a heavy responsibility for what occurred on 12 October, but many others are equally to blame. Macdonald's endless castigation of Godley lacks balance and becomes extreme. Nearly all responsibility for the disaster is laid at Godley's feet;

responsibility for the successes of the New Zealanders, such as the battles of Messines and Broodseinde, are attributed to other commanders, primarily to Major General Andrew Russell. So extreme does this become that Macdonald can give no credit for the successful Gallipoli evacuation at Anzac Cove to Godley. Instead it goes to General Sir Julian Byng, the commander who organized the evacuation from Suvla Bay, not Anzac Cove (p.25). Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the British Expeditionary Force Commander, and General Sir Herbert Plumer, the Army Commander at Passchendaele, escape this condemnation, having only what Macdonald calls 'residual responsibility' for the disasters there (p.215). But it was Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig who made the crucial decisions at Third Ypres, including setting its operational tempo.

The influential military historian and theorist J.F.C. Fuller believed that Third Ypres was 'a tactically impossible battle' and that for Haig to persist after August 1917 'was an inexcusable piece of pig-headedness' on his part.² So ultimate responsibility for 12 October 1917 rests with the British Expeditionary Force commander, not a loyal corps commander trying to implement his impossible orders.

Passchendaele: The Anatomy of a Tragedy is the most complete study to date of New Zealand's worst ever military disaster. It is also a model of how military history research should be done. Some of its judgements, though, lack balance and prevent a very good book from being something exceptional.

NOTES

- 1 Sergeant W.K. Wilson, diary entry 12 October 1917, National Army Museum.
- 2 J.F.C. Fuller, *The Decisive Battles of the Western World and their Influence upon History*, Vol II, London, 1956, p.272.

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The White Ships: New Zealand's First World War Hospital Ships. By Gavin McLean. New Zealand Ship & Marine Society (Inc.), Wellington, 2013. 208pp. NZ Price: \$60. ISBN 9780473249779.

On 5 August 2014, countries around the world will mark 100 years since the beginning of the First World War. The New Zealand government has already allocated more than \$19 million for official centenary projects, with a further \$17 million of lottery grants funding available for community initiatives. A range of exhibitions, online resources, educational material, memorials, publications and other activities is planned as part of the war's commemoration. Gavin McLean's *The White Ships: New Zealand's First World War Hospital Ships* is the first book from a First World War series planned by the Ministry for Culture and Heritage. Along with Damien Fenton's delightfully constructed illustrated history of the First World War (released October 2013), this series will cover New Zealand experiences at the battlefield and at home as well as the enduring legacy of the conflict. If *The White Ships* is a measure of the upcoming works, readers can anticipate well-researched, clearly written and beautifully illustrated accounts of this period in our history.

McLean skillfully weaves a narrative contextualizing New Zealand's two wartime hospital ships, the *Marama* and the *Maheno*. His primarily chronological approach commences before the war, providing information about hospital ships in general and the pre-war life of New Zealand's ships in particular. He traces the development of the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand