

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

Limited, a company whose vessels were chartered for both troop and hospital ships used by the New Zealand government during the conflict. A powerful description of the state of medical care on the Gallipoli peninsula, hamstrung by landscape, location and resources, provides insight into the motivation for New Zealand's first hospital ship. McLean describes the process of arranging and converting the *Maheno* for this purpose, including Governor Liverpool's public appeal to hire and equip the ship. As the war progressed, the need for a second New Zealand hospital ship became clear, and McLean guides the reader through a similar process for the *Marama*. In an engaging and informative way, the author reveals some of the challenges faced, including debate over religious representation, questions about the status of nurses, and problems relating to the command of the ship. Additional information is given in break-out boxes. Detailed explanation of subjects and persons tangential to the main theme of the book provide the reader with a well-rounded introduction not only to life aboard the hospital ships, but also to the wartime milieu in which they operated.

The White Ships provides a balanced account of the daily routines and exceptional circumstances faced by the *Maheno* and *Marama*, their crew and patients. McLean uses a diversity of sources to highlight life aboard the ships, touching on the work involved and the conditions in which this work was undertaken, as well as the range of entertainment options and supplies available. The description of the work of the *Marama* at the Battle of Somme (with ships carrying up to twice as many patients as they were designed for and staff working long periods without stop) furnishes a touching insight into the pressure and trauma of patients and staff. Details of the risk of weather, mines, zeppelin raids, submarine warfare and a range of other threats remind us that the First World War encompassed a range of experiences. Altogether some 25,000 sick and wounded were transported aboard the hospital ships between 1915 and 1919. McLean faced challenges in capturing this story, as few manuscripts of life aboard the ships are extant: perhaps the centenary offers an opportunity to rediscover material from this period held in private collections.

The White Ships is an impressive piece of research and it fills a lacuna in New Zealand's scholarship at a standard of research which is impressive, but there are some minor shortcomings. On the one hand, McLean brings together official records, contemporary reports and personal collections to provide a comprehensive, clear and contextualized history. The reader is presented with a range of excellent supporting material, from W. A. Bowring's watercolour of the *Maheno* to construction plans for the ships from Wellington City Archives. McLean does well to make a maritime story accessible for a general audience, clearly explaining terminology and key players. On the other hand, bountiful images depicting the two ships are included and these quickly become repetitive; after all, to the uninitiated, one ship at sea does begin to appear much like any other ship at sea. His chronological approach does cause thematic aspects to recur in different chapters and occasionally he slips into colloquial language. Some chapters, such as the one on shipboard life from 1915–1919, would have benefitted from greater cohesion. These criticisms, however, do not substantially detract from an important contribution to the literature of New Zealand's experiences in the First World War. *The White Ships* offers a unique understanding of a previously unpublished area of New Zealand history, bringing together a wide range of primary and secondary sources to eloquently illustrate the stories of the *Maheno* and the *Marama* as our hospital ships.

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