

INGLORIOUS DASTARDS

A George Grey-inspired attack that killed up to 100 Maori men, women and children to crush a non-existent uprising signalled “a great war for New Zealand” was being waged. **by VINCENT O'MALLEY**



Today, the only visible remnant is St Paul's Anglican Church. Further up the road is an old Catholic cemetery where a mission station once stood. The two churches marked the outer limits of Rangiaowhia, a bustling Maori settlement 5km east of Te Awamutu. In the 1850s, it was one of New Zealand's most important agricultural hubs. But all that changed with a devastating and controversial raid early in

1864. It is a story few New Zealanders know anything about.

Throughout the 1850s, the Waikato tribes were among the most prosperous, not only

In the 1850s, Rangiaowhia was one of New Zealand's most important agricultural hubs.

The attack on unfortified Rangiaowhia. After the cavalry went in, foot soldiers fired into whare sheltering villagers.

feeding the settlers of Auckland but also contributing a significant chunk of the country's export earnings through wheat sold to the gold miners of Victoria and California. The area around Rangiaowhia was the country's granary, and in 1849, two young chiefs from the settlement proudly sent a bag of flour ground at their own mill all the way to

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Queen Victoria. Crowds of Waikato Maori flocked to view the two lithographs of the royal family the Queen sent them in return.

Early European visitors to Rangiaowhia were amazed by the “European” appearance of the settlement. Wheat fields stretched as far as the eye could see. Peach groves and all kinds of orchards added to the scene. Horses and carts carried produce to market. Lady Mary Martin observed that “the women sat under trees sewing flour bags” and “fat, healthy children and babies swarmed around”. Governor George Grey, following a visit to the district in 1849, informed the Colonial Office that he had “never seen a more thriving or contented population in any part of the world”.

GREY AREA

The ever-wily Grey departed the country in December 1853, ignoring instructions to remain and implement a new constitution that established New Zealand’s Parliament. Because the right to vote was based on European forms of land ownership, the still numerically dominant Maori population was effectively denied representation.

Parliament became a vocal and aggressive mouthpiece for Pakeha interests.

Maori leaders called in vain for the rights of British subjects promised them in the Treaty of Waitangi to be delivered. When that failed, some turned their minds to new institutions of their own. But despite

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repeated assurances to the contrary, the Maori King movement (Kingitanga) that saw Potatau Te Wherowhero raised up as King in 1858 was soon dubbed a challenge to British sovereignty over New Zealand.

By 1861, Grey had returned to the colony. Nearly two years later, after much careful planning and preparation, he invaded the Waikato heartland of the Kingitanga in July 1863, determined to destroy the movement.

1. Queen Victoria, to whom Rangiaowhia chiefs sent flour; 2. Sir George Grey; 3. Bishop George Selwyn; 4. Potatau Te Wherowhero, the first Maori King; 5. Wiremu Tamihana; 6. Kereopa Te Rau, whose wife and two daughters were said to have been killed at Rangiaowhia; 7. Opotiki missionary Carl Sylvius Volkner, reportedly killed by Kereopa Te Rau; 8. Gustavus Ferdinand von Tempsky, who took part in the raid.

It was a deliberate war of conquest, reliant on a dodgy dossier of evidence signalling a supposed Maori threat to the settlers. And so the British imperial military machine was unleashed against a heavily outnumbered civilian population with deadly and devastating effect.

Spurning Waikato Maori pleas for peace, the governor pushed on after capturing Rangiriri under dubious circumstances in November 1863 (the pa taken after the defenders had raised a white flag to talk terms, not surrender). The following month, the Kingitanga headquarters at Ngaruawahia were voluntarily surrendered to the Crown in compliance with preconditions laid down by the Government before it would negotiate terms. But still Grey would not come and talk peace.



Ahead lay the fertile fields around Rangiaowhia. But the British path forward was blocked by a chain of defensive pa at Paterangi so formidable and daunting that Lieutenant-General Duncan Cameron concluded he could not take it by main force. Cameron's eventual solution was not to even attempt to take the pa.

Instead, at 11pm on February 20, 1864, a column of 1230 British troops and their colonial allies marched silently around the perimeter of the Paterangi defences. Shortly before daylight, the troops reached the near deserted settlement of Te Awamutu. Cameron decided to immediately push on to Rangiaowhia.

IN GO THE CAVALRY

So it was that at dawn on February 21, 1864, armed cavalry, followed by foot troops, charged into the settlement of Rangiaowhia, whose terrified, startled and screaming residents ran for their lives in every direction. The troops encountered little organised resistance, but official returns listed 12 Maori killed and a similar number wounded. Casualty rates elsewhere were much higher

during the New Zealand Wars, so why is it the attack on this village in particular that was remembered with great bitterness long after the event?

Rangiaowhia was a place of refuge for women, children and the elderly. It was an open village, lacking fortifications or

Oral histories from the time of the raid onwards consistently refer to women and children being killed.

defences of its own. The men of fighting age were amassed at Paterangi waiting for a British attack that never came. Kingitanga commanders had been given to understand that women and children would not be killed. Following the Rangiriri battle, the presence of both inside the pa was condemned by Europeans (including Grey) and the Maori defenders were urged to remove them to a place of safety. Bishop

George Selwyn, accompanying the Crown forces as official chaplain, was told nine days before the February attack that Rangiaowhia had been designated such a place and was asked to consult Cameron and ensure that the people there would not be harmed.

Kingitanga leaders understood that some kind of agreement had been entered into, making the early-morning attack on the settlement – on a Sunday – all the more treacherous. It was after the assault on Rangiaowhia, Wiremu Tamihana later wrote, that he knew, for the first time, that this was a great war for New Zealand. Whitiara Te Kumete was even blunter, condemning the “foul murder” in which the troops “did not go to fight the men” but “left them and went away to fight with the women and children”. It was a matter Waikato Maori would return to repeatedly over the years.

For obvious reasons, official British reports did not dwell on this aspect of the attack. There was little glory to be gained under the circumstances. But most of the prisoners captured at Rangiaowhia were women and children. And Maori oral histories from the time of the raid onwards consistently

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Otorohanga College students deliver their 12,000-signature petition to Parliament. Top right, a haka on Parliament's lawn. Right, students (from left) Rhiannon Magee, Leah Bell, Waimarama Anderson and Tai Te Ariki Jones.

Pupil power inspires commemoration

October 28 has been declared the national day of remembrance of the New Zealand Wars after a petition launched by Otorohanga College students. **by SALLY BLUNDELL**

A school trip on a blazingly hot day in 2014 to Orakau and Rangiaowhia, the sites of two particularly brutal clashes during the 1863-64 Waikato War, has paved the way for a nationwide day of recognition of the New Zealand Wars.

Accompanied by local kaumatua, community members and historians, the five busloads of students from nearby Otorohanga College learnt about the military invasions of Maori settlements in the area by Imperial and colonial troops. They saw the trenches that surrounded the pa where the British raids took place and the location of a village where unarmed Maori had been killed.

Leah Bell was 14.

"It was extremely heart-breaking. Seeing the absolute grief of the descendants – I had no idea, and it is only half an hour from our school. But that grief can be helped by addressing the fact we have this

history. It can no longer be the burden of our elderly people – it is up to us as young people to take action and use the powers we have to create change. To create an awareness."

Bell walked up to the principal and said, "What can we do?"

"We had to fight for each signature. People wanted reassurance, they wanted to look into our eyes and see where we were coming from."

At the same time, fellow student Waimarama Anderson approached a teacher and also asked the question.

"They didn't know what they wanted to do," recalls Otorohanga College teacher

Linda Campbell, who, with English head Mariana Papa, organised the visit. "The kids were awash with emotion but not with information. They didn't know the history."

By the time they returned to Orakau two weeks later for the 150th commemoration of the battle at the site, the school had launched a nationwide petition asking for a statutory day of recognition to memorialise the estimated 2750 Maori and Pakeha who had lost their lives in the New Zealand Wars, and for the inclusion of this troubled period of our history in the secondary school curriculum.

For the next two years, supported by local iwi, King Tuheitia (he and his family, said Rahui Papa, chair of Te Arataura, Waikato Tainui's executive board, were among the first to sign the petition), MPs and community members, they gathered signatures,



attending festivals and events in Waikato, Auckland and Wellington and writing to schools around the country.

"We had to fight for each signature," says Bell. "People wanted reassurance, they wanted to look into our eyes and see where we were coming from and why it was so important."

Fellow student Zak Henry, now 20, remembers the different responses. "You'd get people that once you mention what the petition was about wouldn't want any knowledge of why – a straight no. Then you would get those people who wanted to know more about the goings-on in their country. They were the ones who asked the most questions. All they needed was a person who had the answers and who was willing to share it with them without shaming them for knowledge they had or didn't have."

On December 8, 2015, students and supporters delivered 12,000 signatures to Parliament. The petition was passed to the Maori affairs committee and a call went out for public submissions. The responses swung a predictable arch across the spectrum of race relations discourse in this country. Some saw it as necessary and timely. As one supporter wrote, "Knowing the history of the struggles over land since colonisation is another means of embracing our history and

working for true reconciliation."

Others saw it ripping open a dark wound.

New Zealand, wrote one opponent, "is being ruined by the deceitful rewriting of history by elite Maori and those who seek to change the facts in exchange for money".

The conservative New Zealand Centre for Political Research think tank launched a petition for those concerned official recognition would trigger "a new round of claims for compensation by their descendants, as well as locking us in the past" (the petition has about 1782 signatures).

By April last year, 189 written submissions had been lodged. According to recent analysis by Joanna Kidman and Vincent O'Malley, 49 supported the petition (some representing organisations as well as individuals), 138 opposed it; two were unclear or ambiguous.

In August last year, before the Maori affairs committee had reported back on the petition, then Deputy Prime Minister Bill English announced a national day of remembrance would be put in place. The date would be set by local iwi, he said, but there would be no public holiday.

Two months later, October 28, the date in 1835 when northern rangatira first signed the Declaration of Independence, was selected as the national day of commemoration. The first will be held this year, hosted by the Te Tai Tokerau tribes in Northland; the commemoration venue will move each year to recognise battle sites around the country.

Surprised? Henry searches for words. "Yes, that was the most ... for such a small idea from a small school like Otorohanga College to fly like it did – it was astounding."

He still hopes the New Zealand Wars will be taught as a core subject in schools: "That was my main focus, for it to be readily available for our young ones to grasp."

And there are still calls to make the day a public holiday.

"A public holiday puts in place great stuff for schools," says Bell. "Like Waitangi Day and Anzac Day, it gives a day for grief, for remembrance, but also for learning and uniting.

refer to women and children being killed (some unofficial estimates suggested more than 100 deaths at Rangiaowhia alone, although it is impossible to confirm the actual numbers). Among those killed were said to be the wife and two daughters of Kereopa Te Rau, who was much later tried and executed for the murder of Opotiki missionary Carl Sylvius Volkner. The priest had previously supplied Grey with detailed plans of Rangiaowhia before the raid.

"INCOMPREHENSIBLE ACT OF SAVAGERY"

As soon as the men heard of the Rangiaowhia raid, they abandoned their position at Paterangi and rushed back to defend their families. Prised out of their formidable fortifications, the Kingitanga force found themselves under attack one day later, suffering heavy losses at nearby Hairini on

Details of the terrifying events included stories of the occupants of at least one whare who were burnt alive.

February 22. Survivors of this latest clash would have heard more details of the terrifying events of the previous day. These included stories of the occupants of at least one whare or hut who were burnt alive.

Some first-hand accounts from those who took part in the assault on Rangiaowhia claimed the hut had caught fire accidentally, as a result of guns fired at close range through the raupo thatching. That would be a natural assumption to make among those who did not witness what really took place (or were trying to conceal it). Others maintained that multiple huts had been deliberately torched. There is no reason for them to have made up such a story. Among their number was the colourful and dashing – but Maori-hating – Gustavus Ferdinand von Tempsky of the Forest Rangers, who also recalled that, as fire engulfed the whare, one elderly man came out with his hands raised in a gesture of surrender. Despite calls to spare him, the man was immediately shot and killed. None of the other occupants of the hut dared come out following this incident. All, including a young boy, were incinerated.

For Kingitanga supporters urged to fight in a "civilised" manner, just like the British, the assault on Rangiaowhia was an almost



Above, militia following the Rangiaowhia raid. Right, cavalry commander Colonel Marmaduke Nixon, who was killed in the attack.

incomprehensible act of savagery. They had complied with requests to move their families out of harm's way, only for the troops to deliberately target them in the most horrific manner possible.

Selwyn, present for the raid, became a particular target for recriminations. Years later, the missionary Thomas Samuel Grace (ironically, a fierce critic of the war) recalled that he had twice "nearly lost my life on account of the burning of the women" at Rangiaowhia and Selwyn's presumed involvement in the attack. In the late 1870s, Grace came across one elderly man who became "quite furious" as he recalled the killing of the old people and women at Rangiaowhia. The bitter memories ran deep.

The troops had been "blinded by rage" at the loss of their comrades, according to von Tempsky. With Cameron looking on from horseback, Sergeant Edward McHale was shot and killed as he approached the hut subsequently set ablaze. Colonel Marmaduke Nixon, who had led the cavalry charge on Rangiaowhia, was also mortally wounded. His remains are buried at the foot of the Nixon memorial in Otahuhu, Auckland.

Some of the surviving villagers took refuge in the Catholic church. Much to von Tempsky's disgust, Cameron ordered the troops to abandon their pursuit. Cameron had been responsible for launching an all-out assault on an undefended village occupied by non-combatants. As military historian Chris Pugsley notes, what happened at Rangiaowhia was "the inevitable consequence

of soldiers attacking an unarmed settlement and finding nothing to fight but families". Like many of the British troops, Cameron would later become deeply disillusioned with the war, seeing it as little more than a sordid land grab fought for the exclusive benefit of settlers. Perhaps it was at Rangiaowhia that he had begun to feel the first pangs of remorse.

OWNING UP TO THE PAST

Following Rangiaowhia, Kingitanga commanders dared not leave their women and children undefended again. Both were pre-

The invasion had destroyed a flourishing economy, rendering large numbers of Tainui survivors impoverished.

sent inside the partially completed Orakau pa when it was attacked by British troops on March 31, 1864. Lacking food, water or ammunition, the pa's occupants fled on foot on April 2, but were hunted down by cavalry and killed in great numbers. At least 150 of the 300 defenders of Orakau died in the chase. Further atrocities followed. A correspondent for the *New Zealander* newspaper reported: "Women, many women, slaughtered, and many children slain, are amongst the trophies of Orakau, and 'civilisation' in pursuit, or as it returned from the chase, amused itself by shooting the wounded 'barbarians' as they lay upon the ground."

That was not how Pakeha liked to

remember Orakau. They preferred to frame it as "Rewi's Last Stand", a noble and defiant but ultimately doomed rearguard action before both parties settled down to enjoy the best race relations in the world, forged through ordeal by battle. Rangiaowhia was even more difficult to depict in this way and so was largely ignored. Awkward silences ensued on significant anniversary dates. There were no memorials to the victims of Rangiaowhia until recently. But Maori never forgot. The invasion of Waikato had destroyed a flourishing economy, rendering large numbers of Tainui survivors landless and impoverished virtually overnight. The consequences resonated over many generations and continue to be felt today.

Stripped of the romantic sheen that early 20th-century Pakeha tried to impart to it, the invasion of Waikato was a brutal and ruthless conflict. The attack on Rangiaowhia was one of the more shameful episodes in a greater tragedy. Acknowledging this difficult history is not a recipe for endless division and recrimination, as some critics like to allege, but rather a precondition for genuine reconciliation. Owning up to our troubled past requires guts and maturity. No one ever said it would be easy. But it is an essential step in the development of the nation. Remembering what really took place at Rangiaowhia is part of a bigger national conversation that needs to take place about the wars fought within New Zealand. ■

Vincent O'Malley is the author of The Great War for New Zealand: Waikato 1800-2000 (Bridget Williams Books), which has been longlisted for the Royal Society of New Zealand award for general non-fiction in the 2017 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards.