

The New Zealander who fought in South Africa

JOHN CRAWFORD (with ELLEN ELLIS), *To fight for the Empire: an illustrated history of New Zealand and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Reed Books in association with the Historical Branch, Department of Internal Affairs) Auckland (New Zealand), 1999.

ISBN 0 7900 0703 7

Paperback, pp. 128

Monochrome photographs, Appendices, Endnotes, Select bibliography and Index.

Price: NZ dollars 32.95

The Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902 has over the years generated an enormous amount of interest, and up to the end of 1998 at least 2 486 books, 2 002 journal articles and 889 pamphlets were published that dealt with the war as a whole, or with some aspect of the conflict, including the causes, the military course of events, the prisoners of war, the concentration camps, medical aspects, the role played by foreigners, and the peace negotiations.

Books have been published on the role played by Canadians and Australians during the war, but the role of New Zealanders is less well-known, at least in South Africa. This gap has, to a large extent, been filled by the book by John Crawford (assisted by Ellen Ellis), *To fight for the Empire: an illustrated history of New Zealand and the South African War, 1899-1902*.

The first New Zealand contingent of 215 mounted riflemen left Wellington on board the SS *Waiwera* on 21 October 1899, i.e. ten days after hostilities began – the first ever combat troops to leave New Zealand's shores. Many New Zealanders were prepared to serve voluntarily in South Africa, but not all of them were allowed to take up arms against the Boers; for example, the "non-white" Maoris were barred on racial grounds. (The war was supposed to be a white man's war, albeit that right from the start both sides employed blacks and coloureds in a non-combatant capacity, and in due course the British also armed many thousands of them.)

After arriving in Cape Town on 23 November 1899, the first New Zealand contingent joined Lt-Gen. John French's 1st Cavalry Division on the Colesberg front, and first saw action on 18 December. As part of Lord Roberts' reorganisation scheme, the New Zealanders (still under French's command) were in due course moved to the Kimberley front. They took part in Roberts' elaborate flank march;

the relief of Kimberley; the pursuit, siege and surrender of Gen. Piet Cronjé's army; the capture of Bloemfontein; operations against Gen. Christiaan de Wet, and Roberts' advance to Johannesburg and Pretoria.

In the meantime, four additional New Zealand contingents were raised and sent to South Africa, and by the middle of 1900 some 1800 New Zealanders were in the field against the Boers. Most of them were organised into the 1st Battalion, New Zealand Mounted Rifles. Others served in the Rhodesian Field Force. From December 1900 to June 1901 all five the original contingents returned home, but in the light of the escalating guerrilla campaign waged by the Boers, two additional contingents (each comprising approximately 600 men) were sent to South Africa – in January and April 1901 respectively. They took part in search-and-destroy operations against the elusive Boer commandos, and also destroyed Boer farms.

The Sixth and Seventh Contingents returned home at the beginning of 1902, and were replaced by a 1011-strong Eighth Contingent that arrived in Durban in mid-March 1902. Shortly afterwards sixteen of its members died in a train crash. A Ninth and Tenth Contingent was also despatched to South Africa, but arrived too late to take part in operations.

A total of 6507 New Zealanders embarked for service in South Africa as part of the official contingents, of whom 230 died – mostly (133) from disease. Other New Zealanders joined volunteer units as individuals in South Africa, at least 30 New Zealand nurses served in the war zone, and 20 teachers worked in concentration camps.

The New Zealand mounted riflemen served with distinction in South Africa: they were able to adapt quickly to the harsh conditions in the war zone, and their marksmanship and horsemanship added value to the British war effort. At the home front in New Zealand, their participation in the conflict on the one hand boosted nationalism, but (paradoxically) it also boosted imperial patriotism.

In his *To fight for the Empire*, John Crawford sketches the background to the war; the huge popular support in New Zealand for the British war effort; the raising, departure and role of the First Contingent and subsequent contingents in South Africa; the Maori and the war (for example their role in fund-raising activities); medical services, and the legacy of the war for New Zealand. A Roll of Honour (pp. 99-107), statistical summary of the men who died (p. 108), statistics with regard to the strength of the ten contingents (p. 109), notes (pp. 110-121), a select bibliography (pp. 122-124), acknowledgements (p. 125) and an index (pp. 126-128) round off this excellent publication.

As can be expected from an illustrated history, much of the value of the publication lies in the photos that have been reproduced – in this case 130 apt photographs and other illustrations have been included, most of them not well-known. The illustrations contribute towards the success of the book, and make it a joy to consult – again and again.

To fight for the Empire: an illustrated history of New Zealand and the South African War, 1899-1902 is a welcome addition to the historiography of the Anglo-Boer War. It is an excellent reference work for serious scholars, as well as for all people interested in the history of the most devastating conflict in the history of South Africa, and it deserves to be consulted by a wide audience.

André Wessels

University of the Free State, Bloemfontein