

## WAR AND THE ANTIPODEAN GAZE

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**Project:** I am currently writing a book on New Zealand's World War One photography. A survey of the visual culture of New Zealand in wartime allows us to examine the multi-layered complexity and richness of the wartime gaze. The imaginative geography of New Zealanders in wartime is revealed to be fragmentary and partial; eloquent evidence to this war's destructive impact but also testimony to the efforts and creativity of human beings who sought to understand, to affirm and to survive.

**Title:** *War and the Antipodean gaze*

### **Synopsis:**

During World War 1, 100,000 New Zealand men, some 9% of the population, travelled from the 'uttermost ends of the earth' to fight in the Middle East and on the Western Front. This war exodus was a historic first, a vast outflow of New Zealanders to the other side of the world over a concentrated period and for a purpose explicitly understood to have imperial and national significance. An unknown but significant number of men and women took cameras with them. Thus, for the first time, large numbers of New Zealanders could see, know and have the technological means to possess the world visually, and bring those views back home. The medium of photography was implicated from the outset in allowing New Zealanders to situate themselves both visually and conceptually within a British/colonial world at war, but it did something else as well. It

helped New Zealanders manage the terrible anxiety of the war years, during which a small population struggled to deal with mounting losses and the need to supply evermore manpower to a distant war. The democratization of the newer forms of camera technology made it possible for ordinary men and women to create a whole new chapter in the language of photography, and a whole new visual vocabulary in war and family history. Photography became a site of remembrance and forgetting; of nation and sacrifice; mourning and mythology; subjectivity and identity.

I seek to provide a new and distinctive approach to studies of war and culture. My approach to examining the material and theoretical issues of visual culture, memory and history is exemplified in one example.

On August 29, 1917 the *Otago Witness* re-produced two lantern slide images for its readers. Both images had been taken on a cold winter's day in Dunedin outside the First Church of Otago (Fig. 1). The two groups of women, young children and babies were suitably clad to ward off the chill, but more important, they had dressed with a certain audience in mind. The caption published below the images reads:

Groups of Mothers and Relatives of Otago Boys on Active Service  
Reproduced from photographs taken by the Dunedin Photographic Society, with the object of providing Mr. Hughes, of the Y.M.C.A. with lantern slides for exhibition in the Y.M.C.A. hutments behind the firing line on the Western Front.s



**Figure 1:** 'Groups of Mothers and Relatives of Otago Boys on Active Service'

Photograph courtesy Hocken Library, Uare Taoka o Hakana, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

These photographs were published as the last of a series of twenty-six group photographs of women and children appearing in the paper in May and June of that year. They belong to an even larger body of images, some two hundred lantern slides of approximately three hundred soldiers' mothers and other near relatives, destined to be viewed by a very different audience: Otago soldiers serving on the Western Front. The New Zealand death toll at the end of this war was 18,166, three times those of World War Two. With a population of one million virtually every person in New Zealand had a close relative or friend killed and wounded. Yet on August 29, 1917, these photographs were published as part of an ambitious attempt to serve the living, not the soon-to-mourn. Photographic enterprises like the lantern slide project testify to the emotional power and the perceived 'truth-value' attributed to both photography as technology and photographs as artefacts. These images tell us that wartime looking was multi-directional and that photographic practices were used to reinforce the links, maternal and material, between the home front and the frontline as families endured a war of an unprecedented length. Yet the vernacular photographs of the war years have been ignored by visual historians.

Many Antipodean soldiers took with them their Kodak box cameras intent on producing a visual record of the Great War. Documenting their experience of war necessitated the convergence of a unique set of variables. The timing was propitious: the Kodak box camera had democratized and commodified camera technology. The technology was non-exclusive: if we are looking for proof of the egalitarian nature of life in the colonies, one could make an argument for the camera since it was not confined to officers and the elite. Cameras required no special skill: it is a truism that anyone can point a camera, and ordinary soldiers avidly photographed and communicated their experiences; indeed, the first New Zealand newspaper photograph depicting the Gallipoli campaign was supplied by Private R. B. Steele. Photography empowered observers: ordinary soldiers could now visually locate themselves in a field of vision previously reserved for generals, war heroes, officers and the grand historical moments of battle, thus legitimizing a different way of seeing war; one from the bottom up. Further, the opportunity was there: soldiers' photographs have shaped the vision of war from the outset because in the New Zealand case, 'official' photographers and artists were not appointed until late in the war. Memories have been constructed from the visual testimony supplied by ordinary soldiers. This has had immense consequences for New Zealanders' way of visualizing and remembering the war.

### **Outline:**

Chapter 1, 'Picturing War', sets the context for why the medium of photography was so very critical in allowing New Zealanders to picture the war. Chapter 2, 'Photographing History' considers a number of over-lapping war-time photographic practises including: the studio portraiture of soldiers, lantern slides, snapshot photography and military-medical photography. Each emerged within a different context and circulated within a particular cultural form. Moreover, they represent different but overlapping historic phases both in the evolution of photographic practises and of the observer. The 'spectacle of war' is the subject of Chapter 3 and 4. Over the last 150 years photography has developed to become the pre-eminent cultural representation of war in Western culture.

We seek to understand the nature of war through recourse to the visual evidence. New Zealanders used photography to envision the battlefield in a number of ways, which collectively produced the look of the war – from the soldiers’ albums, through the first official history of the Gallipoli campaign, the Western Front official photographers, and military photographs taken for tactical purposes – and helped construct an ‘imaginative geography’ of New Zealanders at war.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 3 offers a rereading of the Gallipoli photographs; Chapter 4 extends the theme of battlefield photography to the Western Front, together suggesting that photography was enlisted in creating and disseminating complex and often contradictory representations of war *from the outset*. Chapter 5, ‘*Stabat Mater Dolorosa*: death, photography and collective mourning’, seeks to explore the function of vision on the Great War’s ‘home front’ in the face of an escalating death toll. I argue that photography became a pivotal medium in the representation of communal loss and bereavement. The examples which are examined allow us to see how death, mourning and grief were negotiated by a particular cultural group in a historical moment. Chapter 6, ‘Broken Gargoyles’ examines a disturbing rediscovered medical archive documenting New Zealand’s facially wounded. These images graphically counter the romanticised view of wartime heroism, opening up questions about national identity and repressed memories of war. Chapter 7, ‘Forbear to Cry’, seeks to illuminate the ways in which visual material intersects with the everyday, the personal and the historical to construct a complex array of photographic memorialising practises within the family.

### **The Significance**

In many ways, the persisting representations of World War One have been powerfully defined by a Eurocentric perspective, which dominates the history books and critical commentary, and has effectively marginalized alternative ways of seeing this war. It is the first time that someone has examined a number of Antipodean photographic practices during the war and argued for their significance as 'history'.

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