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The First Taranaki War – A Divergent History

**A Thesis presented in Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of**

**Master of Arts in History
at Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand.**

Murray Robert Hill

2013

This work is dedicated to my father
Robin Bernard Hill M.B.E.
For laughing at my 5th Form History teacher
who had said I had no future as an historian.

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Preface

“We believe certain things about the past, not because they are true, but because it suits us to believe them at the moment.”¹

On a crisp May morning in 1978, the day before my 15th birthday, I stood with my brother on the bank of the sport fields at Westlake Boys High School, and watched something we both recognised. We were navy brats recently returned from a two year stay with the Armed Forces in Singapore, so we recognised a military convoy when we saw one. This convoy consisted of Army buses and trucks. The passengers may have been police officers, but the motorcycle outriders were military police and the organisation, bringing those police officers to Auckland via RNZAF aircraft through the base at Whenuapai, was nothing but a military operation.

It was a military operation directed at a group Maori who were in their 507th day of occupation at Bastion Point. This was the first occasion that we had seen such a thing in this country, and even at that young age my brother and I both found it unsettling. In my brother’s words, “the use of the Army by the government in a civil matter - I really felt that was a horrible mistake”.² My brother, a month short of turning 17, raised a bus fare with donations from the staff at our school, and took several buses to Bastion Point, where he employed his age and status as a school-boy to pass through the military cordon and observe the events first hand.

Later that day he talked to several Social Studies classes, including mine, at the request of a number of teachers. Many were not aware of the larger significance of this event, but clearly some of the teachers were. Other staff members were less than supportive and my brothers remaining time at Westlake was coloured more by the headmaster’s politics than any educational efforts. What links this incident to the First Taranaki War, on the face of it, is little or nothing. But when viewed as part of the larger picture, it is inextricably intertwined with a flow of events that has driven the historiography of that war, and all the other wars of the New Zealand’s colonial period. The Bastion Point occupation served to highlight awareness of Maori grievances, it was part of an attitude altering progression of events that would create an environment in which a radical and unique interpretation of the First Taranaki War could find fertile ground and take root. This is so much so that even until quite recently, substantial efforts to revise this new interpretation have meet with near universal failure to gain traction in the public environment.

In the same way that the teachers at my school were divided in their attitudes towards Bastion Point, which coloured their treatment of my brother, attitudes towards the First Taranaki War have coloured treatments of the sources. These differences existed from even before the first shot was fired, yet it is the changing views of those who have presented their respective

¹ Bruce Hill interview 4/6/2012

² *ibid*

interpretations of the events at a later time that has shaped and fixed those divisions. It is obvious to any observer that the wars of this period are of importance to modern New Zealanders. As has been recently observed by Danny Keenan,

New Zealand did not come of age on the beaches of Gallipoli; it came of age on our own battlefields, like Rangiriri. The war that mattered - that forged the nation we are today - was fought on our own soil.³

Yet in spite of this obvious importance, we now have a situation where one radical account has become widely accepted, and even perceived as an “official” interpretation, despite the fact that this account has been repeatedly questioned and demonstrated to be inaccurate on some key issues. This simply hardens the divide that exists between the two narrative lines in what is quite possibly the single most important issue to our nation. Examining how and why this came to be may help us to gain a more thorough, realistic and less divisive, understanding of those events that continue to shape our country today.

³ Keenan, Danny NZ Herald guest column, *We came of age on battlefields of New Zealand*
http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10378631 Accessed 14/08/2012

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements | 3 |
| Preface | 4 |
| Contents | 6 |
| List of Illustrations | 7 |
| I. Introduction | 8 |
| II. The Historiography of the First Taranaki War | 10 |
| III. Bridging the Gap | 37 |
| IV. The First Taranaki War – A Narrative with Case Studies | 43 |
| V. Conclusion | 97 |
| Bibliography | 104 |
| Appendix A | 114 |
| Appendix B | 115 |
| Appendix C | 116 |

List of Illustrations

| | |
|--|----|
| Richard Taylors Historiography periods of the New Zealand Wars | 11 |
| The Historiography of the First Taranaki War | 11 |
| Taranaki Punch cartoon | 13 |
| New Zealand Military History topics | 21 |
| Urban Drift of Maori, graph | 23 |
| “Paper victory” notation | 26 |
| The First Taranaki War – Overview | 46 |
| The Pekapeka Block and Te Kohia Pa | 48 |
| Waireka area | 53 |
| The plan at Waireka | 53 |
| The action at Waireka | 53 |
| Evening action at Waireka | 55 |
| The Battle Waireka timeline comparison | 60 |
| Kaipopo Pa 3D reconstruction | 61 |
| William Odgers medals | 65 |
| The Policy of War, cartoon | 66 |
| Map of New Plymouth | 67 |
| The ground at Puketakauere | 68 |
| The plan at Puketakauere | 70 |
| The action at Puketakauere | 70 |
| The ground at Mahoetahi | 77 |
| The action at Mahoetahi | 79 |
| Taranaki Punch cartoon | 80 |
| Pratt’s final area of operations | 84 |
| Redoubts 1 – 3 | 85 |
| Number 3 Redoubt | 85 |
| The attack on Number 3 Redoubt | 88 |
| Pratt’s Sapping | 91 |

Note. Unless otherwise stated, maps are original.