

Remembering our past, warts and all, is not about making New Zealanders feel guilty

Confronting our history is not about creating discord, but rather about binding us together as a nation



Anzac Day has long been used to commemorate New Zealand's involvement in overseas wars.

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Anzac Day, marking the anniversary of the landing of Australian and New Zealand troops on the Gallipoli peninsula on 25 April 1915, has long been a day for many New Zealanders to reflect on their country's involvement in wars. But until recently the wars commemorated were exclusively foreign ones, not those fought closer to home, on Aotearoa's own shores.

In recent years that has begun to change, as many non-Māori also come to learn about and acknowledge the 19th-century New Zealand wars fought between the crown and various Māori communities between 1843 and 1872 – defining conflicts for land and sovereignty whose consequences continue to be felt today in multiple ways.

How Pākehā (European) New Zealanders have engaged with this “difficult” history has undergone radical transformation since the last shots were fired. In the early 20th century a burst of nostalgia for the pioneering period saw the New Zealand wars reframed as chivalrous and heroic conflicts between two worthy foes. In this mythologised version of the wars, mutual respect forged on the battlefield sowed the seeds for future harmony. New Zealand had the “best race relations in the world”

because of these wars, so the story went. Many of the 50th-anniversary events held during this period were even described as “celebrations”. That imagined narrative, reflected in films, books and elsewhere, endured for much of the 20th century.

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A similar approach was still evident in the 1960s, when the centenary of many of the major conflicts were commemorated. But the dominant Pākehā version of this history had never been widely shared by Māori. It was hard to feel nostalgic about events from the past where your own ancestors had been killed, your lands taken, your economy destroyed and future generations condemned to lives of poverty as a result. While Pākehā publicly celebrated, many Māori continued to privately grieve.

By the 1970s more forceful Māori voices, combined with powerful revisionist accounts of this history, had all but discredited the dominant Pākehā interpretation of the past. It was no longer acceptable to celebrate the New Zealand wars. The problem was that no new narrative of the wars emerged, or at least none that gained widespread Pākehā acceptance, and so we were left with a kind of uncomfortable silence. When that was challenged in various ways, such as in *The Governor*, a highly ambitious and ultra-expensive six-part drama series about the life and career of Sir George Grey that screened on TV One in 1977, significant controversy arose. From the perspective of many Pākehā, it was easier just to forget the New Zealand wars had ever happened.

The paltry crown funding and support for many of the 150th-anniversary commemorations of the battles of the New Zealand wars over the past decade stood in marked contrast with the lavish ceremonies and events staged to mark the centenary of Gallipoli in 2015 and various other first world war conflicts. That left some observers to wonder why Pākehā New Zealanders could not get enough of foreign wars but seemingly went out of their way to deliberately forget those fought closer to home. What would it take to remember these wars?

Gallipoli and other overseas conflicts provide a ready opportunity to rally around the flag, instilling warm and fuzzy feelings of patriotism. So much so that occasionally there are calls for Waitangi Day to be replaced by Anzac Day as New Zealand's national day. Whereas Anzac Day is perceived as a straightforward celebration of heroic sacrifice and other desirable national traits, the Waitangi anniversary is seen by many Pākehā as divisive, complicating efforts to celebrate the nation through awkward reminders of a more troubled past.

But the purpose of remembering our past, warts and all, in an honest and upfront manner has never been about making anyone feel guilty or ashamed about the actions of their ancestors. It has not been about creating discord or division but rather binding us together as a nation that can honestly confront its own past. That is not and has never been about assigning blame. It is just about taking ownership of our history.

Fortunately, there has been progress on this front in recent years. Thanks to the efforts of rangatahi (young people) especially, a national day of commemoration for

the New Zealand wars is now held each year on 28 October; a new history curriculum to be introduced in 2023 will for the first time ensure all students leave school with some basic awareness of the history of their own country; and even Anzac Day has become more inclusive of these internal conflicts. These are all positive steps on the path towards a more historically aware, engaged and mature Aotearoa.

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