

'He died for us': The Challenge of Applying Critical Thinking at Pukeahu National War Memorial Park, 2015–17

Steve Watters Manatū Taonga, Ministry for Culture and Heritage

Abstract

On Anzac Day 2015, the Pukeahu National War Memorial Park in Wellington, officially opened to the public. With the National War Memorial, dedicated in 1932, at its heart, the development of the park was the government's key project to acknowledge the centenary of the First World War. The park shared its opening with another First World War commemorative initiative, *The Great War Exhibition* at the nearby former National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum building.

In my role as Senior Historian–Educator I sought to establish an education programme at Pukeahu that would use an inquiry-based approach to encourage students to think critically about the National War Memorial and the wider themes of commemoration and remembrance.

Students as young as eight years old would gather round the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior and when asked 'who is buried inside?' would reply that the soldier interred within was someone who had 'died for us', 'a hero'. These answers highlighted the need for our teaching to strike a balance that allowed space for empathy and emotion—valid responses in the context of a war memorial—while encouraging a more critical acknowledgement as to why the tomb exists in the first place (see Baird, this volume).

Remembering 'the fallen' is steeped in traditions that can be difficult to challenge or question. They reflect practices in which those participating have rarely had a say in creating yet are required to dutifully observe. Young New Zealanders visiting Pukeahu need to be supported in thinking critically about such practices to enable informed reflection.

This is an autoethnographic article in which I share my observations of teaching at Pukeahu between its opening in April 2015 and the Passchendaele centenary in October 2017. It examines the impact of the wider First World War centenary commemorations on the education programme and the pedagogy adopted to help students gain a deeper understanding of the impact of war on the nation.

Keywords

autoethnographic; commemoration and remembrance; empathy; education; memorialisation; national identity; Pukeahu National War Memorial Park; sacrifice and honour; war and conflict

This is an autoethnographic account of what I observed to be some of the challenges encountered when employing critical thinking skills with school groups visiting Pukeahu National War Memorial Park (Pukeahu) in Wellington between its opening on Anzac Day 2015 and the Passchendaele commemorations of October 2017. How could we encourage school visitors to Pukeahu to critically analyse what they experienced there objectively and to make reasoned judgments and

conclusions as to its significance and meaning? Hew Strachan, noted British war historian and member of the United Kingdom government's First World War Centenary Advisory Board, had warned that if the commemoration simply reworked these 'familiar themes of remembrance, it will be repetitive, sterile and possibly even boring.'¹ He continued, '[i]f we do not emerge at the end of the process in 2018 with fresh perspectives, we shall have failed'.²

1 Hew Strachan, 'First World War Anniversary: We Must Do More Than Remember', *The Telegraph*, 11 January 2013, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/9795881/First-World-War-anniversary-we-must-do-more-than-remember.html>.

2 *Ibid.*

New Zealand's official First World War commemoration programme (WW100) marked the centenary of the war through a range of events, activities, and projects in all parts of the country.³ Manatū Taonga, the Ministry for Culture and Heritage was a key contributor to WW100. Manatū Taonga historians produced a range of new content for our NZHistory website and contributed to the official Centenary History Programme of print publications. In the education space, our 'Walking with an Anzac' project was a place-based initiative that encouraged schools to explore the war's impact on their own community and then locate this experience within the broader, national narrative. In 2018 the culmination of 'Walking with an Anzac' saw more than 60,000 New Zealand schoolchildren aged 9–15 years old use a discovery box containing a range of reproduced primary sources to gain a more intimate view of the war and its impact on real people in relatable settings and contexts.⁴

Manatū Taonga's other key education project was the development of a programme to support schools visiting the redeveloped Pukeahu National War Memorial Park in Wellington. Pukeahu was the government's key legacy project to commemorate the centenary and was built to create a space where New Zealanders could gather to remember and reflect on their country's experience of war and peacekeeping.

The themes of death, sacrifice, patriotism, and remembrance that dominated life at school a century before seemed just as familiar and powerful in the present. In 1914, many New Zealanders responded with great excitement and enthusiasm to the declaration of war. In the years prior to the outbreak of war the education system had helped prepare children for what would be expected of them. Children learned not only to read, write, and do their sums, but also received instruction in moral virtues and imperial ideals. Physical education and training in schools reflected the commonly held belief that a healthy body ensured a healthy mind. In the school cadets boys were taught to march, shoot straight and follow orders. Compulsory military training

prepared a body of young men ready and willing to fight for 'King, Country, and Empire' when the call went out in August 1914. Young men, fearful the 'great adventure' would be over before they could take part, rushed to enlist. Britain accepted New Zealand's offer of an 8,000-strong expeditionary force on 6 August. Recruitment for the New Zealand Expeditionary Force's 'Main Body' began on 8 August and within four days 14,000 men had volunteered. Spoilt for choice the army could afford to be selective and for the remainder of 1914 the medical rejection rate averaged 25 per cent.

Everyone else was expected to show their support for the war through displays of patriotism, fundraising, or by making sacrifices in their daily lives. Schools and children raised funds for the war effort, knitted socks and scarves, and wrote letters to the 'boys' at the front. Children were encouraged to be 'cheerful' and 'helpful', to ease the worry and sorrow suffered by soldiers' mothers and wives.

But as the war dragged on into 1917 what could be described as a sense of 'war-weariness' had set in. Conscription had to be introduced in August 1916 to provide the necessary reinforcements, with the first monthly ballot held in November. In 1917 the call went out for renewed effort in support of the war and greater public displays of patriotism. In July of that year 14 conscientious objectors were sent from Trentham Camp to the western front.⁵ Their victimisation by the military authorities was designed to break their resolve and force them into uniform. Soldiers who had returned home ill or injured, and parents of those who had lost a son, wrote to local newspapers demanding that children be taught to sing patriotic songs and demonstrate their loyalty through flag ceremonies.⁶ Many schools made their students gather around the flagpole to remember the fallen, mark significant battles and salute or cheer the flag. This sense of loyalty was reinforced by singing the 'Flag Song', which first appeared in the *School Journal* in June 1914. It urged those gathered to 'hail the flag, the bonny flag, of red, white and blue'.⁷

3 WW100 – New Zealand's First World War Centenary Programme, accessed 20 December 2019 (now archived), <https://ww100.govt.nz/>.

4 *Walking with an Anzac*, School Kit, Manatū Taonga, Ministry for Culture and Heritage, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://www.walkingwithananzac.co.nz/>.

5 'Untitled', *Manawatu Standard*, 20 July 1917, 4.

6 'Saluting the flag', Ministry for Culture and Heritage, updated 28-Aug-2014, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/saluting-flag>.

7 *Ibid.*:

Flag Song

Some flags are red or white or green,
And some are yellow too.
But the dear, dear flag that we love best,
Is the red and white and blue.
Then hail the flag, the bonny flag,
Of red and white and blue.

We love our native country's flag,
To it our hearts are true.
Above we wave in splendid folds,
The red and white and blue.
Then hail the flag, the bonny flag,
Of red and white and blue.

School Journal, June 1914, 80.

The New Zealand *School Journal* was initiated by Education Department head George Hogben in 1907 to provide schoolchildren with a free magazine containing information on history, geography, and civics.

The *School Journal* increasingly found subject material in the war, mixing moral fables, stories of heroism and battles, and poems and songs to promote patriotism in the schoolyard. Teachers pinned maps onto the walls of their classrooms and tracked progress at the 'Front'. Children were constantly reminded in class or at special assemblies of the sacrifices that 'old boys' and brothers and fathers were making in their name. They were also reminded that when they were old enough, they could be expected to be called upon to make the same sacrifices.

In 1917 the newly created National Efficiency Board recommended that schools require *all* children to salute the New Zealand flag at the start of each school day. District education boards ordered all schools to follow this recommendation.⁸ Some teachers had preferred the less militaristic 'cheering of the flag' as a display of support.⁹ This was not always understood or appreciated, and some teachers found themselves accused of 'seditious' or 'traitorous behaviour'. The *Hawera & Normanby Star* of 18 October 1918 reported on a 'curious matter' involving Hugh Goldsbury, a Quaker who was teaching at Umumuri School. Goldsbury was willing to cheer the flag but if forced to salute it, he would resign his position. The Wanganui Education Board initially accepted his resignation but rescinded this decision at a later meeting.¹⁰ Earlier in 1918 the *Otago Witness* reported on the case of Henry Mayo, a teacher at Auckland Technical School who had been convicted and fined £25 for describing the British flag as 'a dirty rag not worth fighting for'. He was later deemed to be a 'fit and proper person to be teaching young Britons' having previously 'acted in a patriotic way' and the Board accepted his defence that on the day in question he was 'not feeling well'.¹¹

A century later schools and their students were once more being called upon to do their 'bit', not by supporting an actual war but by actively participating in the commemoration of the war's centenary. Through a range of local and national initiatives, schools were encouraged to explore the impact of the war on our history and people. In addition to the range of curriculum-based experiences presented, including in the *School Journal*, all schools were provided with opportunities to participate in acts of remembrance.

At the end of 2014 I visited the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra to observe its long-established education programme in action. This is

on a scale we in Wellington could only dream of. The Australian federal government's significant financial investment in the memorial includes the development and implementation of an education programme. A full-time staff of around a dozen is responsible for the development of online teaching resources. During my visit the teaching of the school groups I observed was the responsibility of community volunteers. Through the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) scheme, schools are given financial assistance to visit Canberra to support on-site learning about national democratic, historical, and cultural institutions. This funding in 2014 helped 160,000 Australian schoolchildren visit the AWM.¹²

The AWM includes permanent gallery spaces covering Australia's involvement in each major external conflict, as well as temporary exhibitions exploring other aspects of Australia's military history. These exhibitions are extensive and a significant attraction in themselves. The Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier and the Roll of Honour is another key feature of a visit to the memorial. Large, bronze panels in the Memorial's Commemorative Area, list the names of over 100,000 Australians who have died serving in overseas wars. The plaques are typically a sea of red as visitors attach poppies alongside the names of loved ones.

Many schools visiting the AWM participate in a Last Post Ceremony which is held shortly before the memorial closes each night. Visitors are invited to lay wreaths and floral tributes as a story of an individual serviceperson is told.¹³ Members of participating schools with whom I spoke, described the ceremony as a moving and appropriate way of remembering those who are memorialised here.

I had witnessed similar displays in a private capacity when visiting the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing in Ieper (Ypres), Belgium, and the Arlington National Cemetery near Washington DC, where schools were also significant participants in ceremonies. There was a strong sense that these visits were part of a pilgrimage. Ypres, Canberra, and Arlington all stressed the importance of the act of remembrance. There was consistency in terms of the form this remembrance would take. Canberra and Arlington highlighted the significance of recognising and valuing service to the nation. The relief commander who supervised the school groups laying wreaths at Arlington shook each child by the hand and thanked them for 'honouring' America's

8 'Displaying patriotism', Ministry for Culture and Heritage, updated 28-Aug-2014, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/children-and-first-world-war/patriotism-in-schools>.

9 *Ibid.*

10 'The Goldsbury Case', *Hawera & Normanby Star*, 18 October 1918, 3.

11 'A Teachers Loyalty', *Otago Witness*, 1 May 1918, 42. Note the average annual salary for a male teacher in a public school was recorded as £272 in the Appendix to the Journal of the House of Representatives (AJHR) for 1918. 'Education: Primary Education', *AJHR*, 1919 Session I, E-02,17, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://atojs.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/atojs?a=d&d=AJHR1919-I.2.1.6.3&e=-----10--1-----0-->.

12 Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER), accessed 20 December 2019, <https://www.pacer.org.au/>.

13 'Last Post Ceremony', Australian National War Memorial, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/last-post-ceremony>.

fallen. The students participating were told that they had performed a 'great service to their nation'.

What was less obvious was the extent to which students had been encouraged to discuss what they had just witnessed. It was hard to know what work was going on behind the scenes to help students process the experience and embed any learnings from it. These observations were useful for us to reflect on as we developed the content and pedagogy for the education programme at Pukeahu. We wanted to ensure that our programme was not built on the notion of remembrance for remembrance's sake but presented opportunities for reflection where the purpose of such remembrance could be considered.

In 1917 we could speak of New Zealand as experiencing a sense of 'war-weariness'. In 2017 those of us working with the wider WW100 programme were experiencing something not dissimilar in the form of 'commemoration fatigue'. After two years of ceremonies and acknowledgement of certain milestones from the war how could we prevent things becoming 'boring and repetitive'. How could we maintain public interest *and* participation in a national commemoration that still had two years to run? We were acutely aware of the 'long shadow' cast by Gallipoli and its ability to dominate the entire centenary period.

In 2015, the Ministry of Education partnered with the Fields of Remembrance Trust on a project that saw approximately 2,500 commemoration packages delivered to all schools in time for Anzac Day.¹⁴ The aim of the project was to provide an opportunity for those participating to establish their own field of white crosses at their school, resembling the cemeteries overseas where our fallen lay, as a way of honouring those who had served their country in the First World War. Each school was given 30 white crosses to commemorate the men and women who died while serving New Zealand. The list of names placed on these crosses included local soldiers and nurses; four New Zealand Victoria Cross recipients; the youngest New Zealander killed (aged 17); and an All Black captain. One of the crosses was labelled with the words 'known unto God' to commemorate the 'unknown soldier'. This initiative was deemed 'a huge success', with only a few schools choosing to opt out. Many schools commented on how poignant they found the exercise. It had a high visual impact and was able to produce an emotional response that was often interpreted as evidence of empathy and relevance. A smaller number were not so sure, questioning the connection of some of the names supplied with their community, or the choice of VC recipients as reinforcing the notion of heroes. The secular nature of contemporary New Zealand society made the appropriateness of using the

Christian symbol of the cross questionable. It is worth noting that non-religious headstones are employed in Commonwealth War Graves Cemeteries. Some schools balked at the idea of turning part of their school grounds into a 'pop-up cemetery'.

Pukeahu and its new neighbour, *The Great War Exhibition* (GWE) located in the former National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum building, opened to much fanfare on Anzac Day 2015. An estimated 50,000 people attended the Dawn Service at Pukeahu. During the day large queues formed to view the GWE.

This enthusiasm for these new experiences continued throughout 2015. Before the opening of Pukeahu, formal school visits to the National War Memorial (NWM) were infrequent. There was no formal education programme in place. Within the first year of operation over 12,000 students had participated in a formal education visit to the combined sites.¹⁵ But as we moved into 2016 it became apparent that for many, Gallipoli was *the* centenary. After the centenary in 2016 of the first Anzac Day there was a noticeable drop-off in the number of schools visiting. School visitor numbers in 2017 were around 3,500.

Many of the school groups that visited Pukeahu between 2015 and 2017 came with some experience of the commemoration of the war. Schools in existence at the time of the First World War often had an honour board acknowledging the teachers and ex-pupils who served or had been killed, as well as other memorials ranging from memorial gates, arches, plaques, trees, and stained-glass windows to school awards and prizes. These all served as an important connection for successive generations of students with their school's past.

At Pukeahu, we quickly discovered how established traditions of honouring war dead, whether by erecting white crosses as demonstrated by the Fields of Remembrance programme, or constructing monuments and memorials, affected our ability to encourage critical thinking by our visitors. Ours was a space steeped in much emotion around practices we had not created. There is an accepted form for official acts of remembrance that is rarely deviated from. These acts are underpinned by a belief that we, the living, owe so much to those who lost their lives in war. Honouring the fallen is the least we can do.

Despite having never visited Pukeahu before, many students quickly understood that they were visiting a 'special place'. This is often reinforced by the way teachers remind their students of what they believe is the necessary appropriate, respectful behaviour inside the cathedral-like Hall of Memories. This emphasis on 'good behaviour' can inhibit discussion. Once gathered inside the Hall of Memories we educators frequently

14 'Fields of Remembrance: packs to be delivered to schools and kura in March', Education Gazette Tukutuku Kōrero, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://gazette.education.govt.nz/articles/1H9cqW-fields-of-remembrance-packs-to-be-delivered-to-schools-and-kura-in-march/>.

15 'Queen Elizabeth II Pukeahu Education Centre', WW100, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://ww100.govt.nz/queen-elizabeth-ii-pukeahu-education-centre>.

start with the question, ‘If this fell down tomorrow, would we bother to replace it?’ Students can seem unsure as to how to answer, perhaps fearful that their answer may cause offence. Their answers tend to reflect what they think we want to hear. To help reassure students that all answers are acceptable as well as open avenues for broader discussion we ask supplementary questions about whether we would faithfully restore or rebuild and if not, what the alternatives might look like. Inviting students to think critically, creatively, and reflectively, rather than unquestioningly accept what they see before them is the goal.

The Tomb of the Unknown Warrior frequently presents the most challenging space at Pukeahu from the perspective of critical thinking. Not all students are convinced there is actually a body in the tomb, but once this has been confirmed some will announce that ‘he was a hero who died for us’. This casual use of the word ‘hero’ is perhaps not surprising. Despite his anonymity, his presence singles him out as in some way ‘special’. Labelling him as such may well be seen as being suitably respectful. It might also be the result of what they had been taught, heard, or witnessed through experiences like the Fields of Remembrance. We always try to encourage them to explain what makes someone a hero. If we don’t know who he was or anything about him, how can we describe him as a hero? We talk about why it is we feel the need to ascribe such labels and qualities to our war dead. Such conversations allow us to investigate other terms, such as ‘our Glorious Dead’, which we find on the dedication stones at the National War Memorial immediately behind the tomb. We may ask older students whether those who returned, the wounded and the damaged, can also lay claim to being ‘glorious’.

The twin principles of sacrifice and gratitude exemplified by the tomb are complex concepts for a typical 11-year-old visitor to Pukeahu to consider. The notion that we/they are in debt to someone who died on the Somme all those years ago is challenging. It would be wrong to minimise the scale and impact of the loss of life and how it has shaped our practices of remembrance, but

we need to ask whether we have emphasised it in such a way as to make other lines of inquiry harder to pursue.

To enhance Pukeahu’s role as a transformative space in which teachers and educators could explore with their students a range of perspectives on how they think about their society, we developed a framework for our education programme.¹⁶ This framework, consisting of nine principles,¹⁷ provides teachers with ‘design tools’ when contemplating the purpose of a visit to the park to assist in developing powerful learning experiences. The principles are not intended as a checklist and, although written with Pukeahu in mind, could be used to design educational experiences at any site.

The end of the First World War centenary, and the closure of the GWE at the end of 2018, has provided an ideal opportunity to review and evaluate the success of the education programme at Pukeahu. The fact that some schools believed the closure of the GWE meant the end of formal educational visits to Pukeahu has presented a fresh opportunity to reassess the content of this programme. The concept of commemoration remains key, but other layers of Pukeahu’s history such as the mana whenua history of the site are being developed for school audiences in order to broaden Pukeahu’s appeal as an important site for learning outside the classroom. Central to this review and reassessment of the programme will be working with schools which visited during the peak centenary period to determine how helpful they found the framework in terms of both planning their visit and (more importantly) the embedding of key conceptual learning with their students as a result.

Questioning many of our inherited traditions associated with the commemoration of war is difficult. It can be challenging for students today to examine critically the events of the past that saw so many New Zealanders die. The impact of war on this scale is something most students visiting Pukeahu have never experienced. How we commemorate the impact of these events is also something our visitors to Pukeahu have had no say in creating. It is all too easy to accept such traditions and practices without question for fear of being seen as

16 Michael Harcourt, Andrea Milligan, Mark Sheehan, ‘Pedagogical Framework for the Education Programme at Pukeahu National War Memorial Park’, Manatū Taonga – Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2016. This report is found on the education page, Pukeahu National War Memorial Park website. <https://mch.govt.nz/pukeahu/education>.

17 The Nine Principles

- Foreground the purpose of the visit
- Prioritise conceptual approaches to learning
- Embed visits within a pre, during and post framework
- Collaborate with site educators
- Discuss controversial issues
- Balance emotional and critical responses
- Separate memory and history
- Use sites as opportunities to explore Māori history
- Use collective pronouns carefully

Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage, ‘Framework for the Education Programme at Pukeahu National War Memorial Park’, 2016. A detailed discussion of these principles is available from the education page, Pukeahu National War Memorial Park website. For a detailed discussion of these principles, see Harcourt *et al.*, ‘Pedagogical Framework’, accessed 20 January 2020, <https://mch.govt.nz/pukeahu/education>.

disrespectful to the memory of those who served. More than a century after the First World War, if we believe it is important to make remembrance of such events mean something to young New Zealanders today, we must encourage and develop a different approach. We need to consider how we better foster and incorporate the student

voice of today. Supporting students to think critically, creatively, and reflectively about commemoration, can achieve more than the simple replication of past practices and traditions and gain a richer understanding of conflict and its impact on our history.

Steve Watters is the Senior Historian–Educator at Manatū Taonga, the Ministry for Culture and Heritage in New Zealand. After a nearly 20-year career teaching history and social studies in secondary schools, he took up a position at the ministry in 2005. His diverse role includes research and writing for the NZHistory.govt website, including content for ‘The Classroom’ section, as well as contributions to other ministry print publications and projects. In recent years his focus has been on developing educational content and programmes in support of the centenary of the First World War and the WW100 project, including an inquiry-based project for schools, ‘Walking with an Anzac’. In 2015 he was involved in the development and delivery of an education programme at Pukeahu National War Memorial in partnership with the *Great War Exhibition* based in the nearby former National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum building. Steve.Watters@mch.govt.nz