Defining conflict

A landmark study of the New Zealand Wars is an important contribution to change.

by NIGEL PRICKETT

he title *The Great War for New Zealand* is from Wiremu Tamihana Tarapipipi, the “Kīngitanga”-making, referring to the Waikato War as decisive in the 19th-century struggle between Pakeha and Maori. In the first of 600 pages, author Vincent O’Malley goes further – that this was the “defining conflict in New Zealand history”.

There was, of course, another “Great War”, of 1914-18, now World War I, for 100 years central to our nation-building, with the Government committing leadership and $25 million to the centenary commemorations.

Only months before the World War I centenary was the 150th anniversary of the 1863-64 Waikato War, with remembrance co-ordinated by Nga Pae o Maumahara, described as a collective of iwi and community representatives, to which the Government contributed $250,000.

O’Malley’s book has four main parts. The first describes Waikato before the war, including the crucial establishment of the Kīngitanga under Te Wherowhero. On the Pakeha side are the preparation for war and the politics required to bring it about, from fear of an independent Maori power in Auckland’s hinterland and a desire for land.

“The Pakanga ki Waikato – War in Waikato” tells of the war itself, referring throughout to the politics and objectives of the two sides, effectively tying the fighting to the all-important before and after – how it came to this and the results that are still with us. Among stories is the peace that might have been after Rangitiriri.

“The Aftermath” covers especially the confiscation/raupatu of 486,000ha of Waikato land. O’Malley notes that despite this, the people and Kīngitanga were not defeated, although they were driven south of Fumi River to Ngati Maniapoto territory, now the King Country. The last section, “The Long Search for Justice”, takes the struggle for recognition and recompense to the 1995 Raupatu Settlement.

The author estimates Maori killed at nearly 4% of the pre-war Waikato population – which is more than twice the death rate of Kīwi troops to population in WWI. The latter is awful enough, although it included the servicemen and women who died from illness, accident and wounds, which are mostly unrecorded among Maori casualties of the New Zealand Wars.

The book is introduced by two short sections, “Owning Our History” and “Remembering (and Forgetting) the Waikato War”, to tell of changing Pakeha recognition of the conflict to the present “historical amnesia”.

In his essay “What is a Nation?”, 19th-century French historian Ernest Renan wrote that: “Where national memories are concerned, grids are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort.” Also: “Forgetfulness, and I would even say historical error, are essential in the creation of a nation.”

Here we have the reason for Government spending on remembrance of “The Great War for New Zealand” being 1% of that spent on WWI commemorations.

O’Malley urges knowledge and understanding as a way forward. “None of this requires feelings of guilt or shame, but simply a willingness to hear, read and embrace the difficult aspects of our past.” His book is a landmark study of the New Zealand Wars and an important contribution to change.