

Melody slithering through the misery

Martin Lodge



Good-bye Maoriland: The Songs and Sounds of New Zealand's Great War

Chris Bourke

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For both civilians and the soldiers alike on active service during WWI, music proved a significant and enduring element of New Zealand's war effort and war experience. This was recognised at the time: a contributor to the onboard magazine of the *Opawa*, a ship carrying troops to Europe, wrote in 1917 that "A ship without a musical programme is like a dog without a tail."

Chris Bourke's excellent book focusses on the composition, performance, reception and function of music; so the subtitle is slightly misnomeric, as the wider question of the sounds of war is not systemically treated. That would have required a consideration of the whole soundscape and a different methodology. Instead, Bourke wisely concentrates on the songs, revues and marches written, performed and heard by New Zealanders of the time, and the breadth of musical creativity and ingenuity during the war is striking. The material is presented in a chronological arc, including an interesting section on the character and richness of New Zealand's musical life in the decades prior to 1914. Our most famous march, "Invercargill", popularised so widely during WWI and in the decades after

it, was, it turns out, written as early as 1908 – and by an Australian who happened to spend a few years in Southland. Originally it was a civilian piece, a tribute to the city, and existed both in solo piano and band arrangements. After the 1918 armistice, the Second Otago Infantry Battalion band played "Invercargill" as they marched across the Rhine into Germany as part of the allied occupation force.

The intersection of civilian and military life, including musical elements, is a fascinating thread that runs through the book. Alexander Lithgow, the composer of "Invercargill", was not at all a bellicose type, for example, and his granddaughter and biographer Pat Ward thought it was curious that such a quiet man should be noted primarily for his martial music. Lithgow himself is reputed to have been proudest, not of his marches, but of a suite he wrote to accompany silent films called simply *At the Movies*. How fascinating it would be to hear this today, played live with an appropriate film!

The detailed section on Lithgow is one of a series of vignettes throughout the book that provide specifics to illustrate broader currents and larger events generated by the war. This approach aerates the flow of chronological narrative, and the effect of each is heightened visually by having it set on the page on a differently coloured background. Several of these inserted vignettes are on themes rather than people, and serve to summarise the surrounding material, such as "Soldiers' Songs" and "Haere Mai Ki Au: Come Where Duty Calls".

Throughout his narrative, Bourke judiciously selects examples from around the country to illustrate historical points and themes. It is, for instance, rewarding to be able to read so much material referring to Taranaki, and not be confined exclusively to the cities of the day – the so-called "four main centres" of early 20th-century New Zealand. By painting such a rich and diverse picture, an insight is conveyed into the values and traditions of New Zealand society at the time, offering a welcome breadth that extends beyond the purely military aspects of WWI. This successfully builds on the approach of music historian John Mansfield Thomson in his *Oxford History of New Zealand Music*, his biography of

composer Alfred Hill, and other books, and it's a little surprising that Bourke doesn't acknowledge him. Bourke's inclusive approach covers the contributions of dissenters and pacifists, as well as combatants, and strikes a good balance between Māori and Pākehā musical stories.

One of the pleasures of *Good-bye Maoriland* is the number and quality of beautiful photographs and pictures. The visual research is as impressive as the musical and historical digging that obviously underpins the book. One of the most striking images is a photo of a military bugle ripped apart by a bullet. The instrument was played by 20-year-old George Bissett, who was killed two days after landing at Gallipoli in 1915. Bissett's body lay rotting in no-man's land for a week, until a temporary ceasefire allowed the dead of both Turkish and Allied sides to be buried. By this time, Bissett's corpse was in such a state that Lieutenant-Colonel Malone was moved to write: "It is a desecration of the human body to leave it shot up and unburied." This detail, and others similarly explicit, are a strength of the book, as Bourke doesn't shy away from the gross, the violent, or the crude, when covering the diverse roles and places in which music and musicians featured during the war. He notes, for instance, how one of the war's most popular songs, "Mademoiselle from Armentières", spawned many alternative versions of its lyrics, but that some of these crossed the line from cynicism about the war and satire of the military administration over into violent pornographic fantasies. Bourke cites a number of superbly insightful observations by Les Cleveland on this inevitably brutal, dark side of warfare, and how it permeated some music of the time.

It is clear that New Zealanders' music of WWI was not confined to imperialistic marches and patriotic songs, despite an understandable push by the Establishment to promote those genres. But sadness, bereavement, despair and nostalgia all feature strongly in songs as well, and were heard not just in military camps, or far away by those left at home. Sometimes, performances at the front had to go ahead in the cold and dark, and sotto voce, to avoid being targeted by enemy snipers or patrols,

but, even under such dire conditions, music would continue.

Of New Zealand's most famous case in point, Bourke observes: "Gallipoli and music seem an unlikely combination, yet – as with every other location during the war – melody managed to slither through the misery." And even though instruments were not permitted in a soldier's kit at the front, some were smuggled through, so that at Gallipoli Alexander Aitken, later to become a renowned mathematician, was able to play Christmas carols on his violin in a dugout beneath Chunuk Bair in November 1915. Another violinist, gunner Lew Jones, was not so lucky. While playing to comfort wounded and dying comrades at Gallipoli, he was seriously injured by an exploding shell, and his violin destroyed.

A significant musical development to come out of WWI was the use of recorded music, as both entertainment and belligerence. The famous scene in the 1979 movie *Apocalypse Now* in which the ruthless Sergeant Kilgore blasts out a recording of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" from helicopters

heading into battle in Vietnam, we can now see, has an ancestry traceable back to the trenches of the Western Front, where portable gramophones were a desirable item. During the war, the Decca company changed its marketing from the exclusive end of the market to become more populist, and advertised its smaller models as ideal gifts for active troops serving in France. One soldier wrote:

[our gramophone] has actually been played within 15 yards of the Germans at a spot called Bomb Alley, where the lines practically touch and where such a song as "Let's go and find some Germans" is immediately greeted by a shower of grenades.

The stories of entertainment troupes formed by New Zealanders in WWI, and the way soldiers could turn from active service, often in the dangerous role of stretcher bearers, into very popular revue performers, make remarkable reading. Bourke treats the cross-dressing and drag elements of these shows with judicious care and avoids the temptation to over-interpret

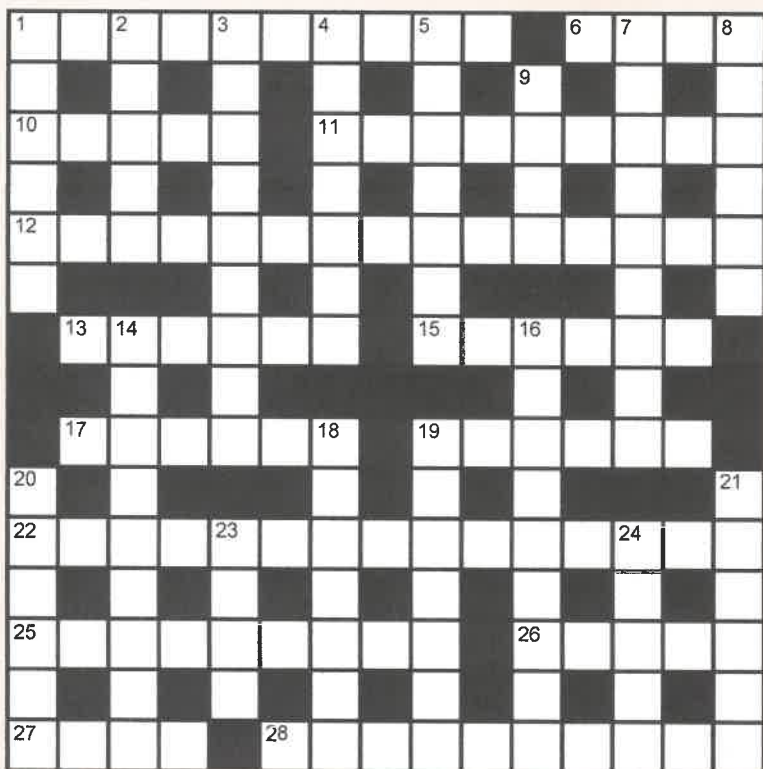
them. The appearance of what appeared to be attractive young women so close to the Front seems to have been a major drawcard of the revues. In some cases, these shows launched professional careers. Stan Lawson had been a menswear salesman for Hallenstein Brothers in Dunedin before the war, but his drag act as a flapper was so successful in the New Zealand Pierrots concert party that subsequently he went on to a professional stage career. His impersonation of a young woman in front of a large audience in France, including the visiting politicians William Massey and Joseph Ward, prompted one reviewer to write: "It makes you homesick to see him."

This kind of interweaving of grand narrative with memorable detail, supported by superb research and striking illustrations, makes *Good-bye Maoriland* not just a significant contribution to the writing of New Zealand's music history, but a highly engaging read as well.

Martin Lodge is a composer and professor in the University of Waikato Conservatorium of Music.

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Prize cryptic crossword – Puzzle 52 by Brent Southgate



Clues across

- 1 A novel amenity for the bathroom blonde (6,4)
- 6 Device employed by TripAdvisor (4)
- 10 Compare approval on Facebook to "neutral" indication (5)
- 11 Underlying structure of *Faces in the Water*, for example (9)
- 12 Novelist with curiously ribald moustache (7,8)

- 13 NZ writer the reverse of down-cast at article (6)
- 15 Big departure for second book (6)
- 17 Means "in company with this writer" (6)
- 19 Say no to rubbish (6)
- 22 A workroom painted red is surely no mystery? Yes it is (1,5,2,7)
- 25 Tea Party member in shock,

- they say, following demonstration (5,4)
- 26 University situated on wettish block (3,2)
- 27 Death-bell sounds for Dickens heroine (4)
- 28 Author on the subject of non-performing asset returns (5,5)

Clues down

- 1 Capacity shown in book (6)
- 2 Relations going up to Auckland University get the palm (5)
- 3 Inclining towards detonating explosive, although leader of assault missing (7,2)
- 4 Union team not exactly fine about free trade with Europe initially (7)
- 5 Throne at regular intervals subjected to terrible tsar in historical novel (7)
- 7 Preambles favouring outcomes from timber milling, say (9)
- 8 Which subtribe of the Sioux? (State north or south) (6)
- 9 Type of guitar for heavy metal (4)
- 14 Annual rut, stupid and artificial (9)
- 16 Casual worker retained by absent editor (9)
- 18 Arab state upholding old-style verse at start of education (7)
- 19 Secret sharer: how Shakespeare began with bits from Bacon (7)

- 20 Fish for diamonds dropped by Dame Anne (6)
- 21 Condition of Proust when drunk? (6)
- 23 Indian recipe supplied by children's writer (4)
- 24 In the morning get paraded around, deprived of free limb movement (5)

Send completed crosswords (photocopies are acceptable) to **New Zealand Books, PO Box 28-084, Kelburn, Wellington. The first correct entry opened after 5pm Friday 18 January 2019 wins a \$50 book token. Solution in our next issue.**



Winner of a \$50 book token for puzzle 51 is Ali Carew from Eastbourne.