

From Picardy to Picton

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When New Zealand bound itself militarily to Britain at the outbreak of war with Germany in August 1914, discussion arose over how the news of the conflict was to be conveyed to readers back home. The families in Picton, a tiny settlement nestled in the Marlborough Sounds at the top of the South Island, like all other families around the country, were keen to read about how their men folk were faring in the various theatres of war. The tiny Dominion of New Zealand was well supplied with newspapers and any sort of news, whether it was of racing and rugby, politics or just plain gossip, was avidly devoured. The first daily paper, the *Otago Daily Times*, was established in 1861. From that time and up to the 1920s newspapers were in their heyday, feeding an almost insatiable desire by New Zealanders for news. Before the outbreak of war establishing newspapers was a popular activity in New Zealand. In 1900 few settled districts did not have their own newspaper. By 1911 the number of registered publications reached 237, including 64 dailies, for a population of just over a million.¹

How to disseminate news around the country was a crucial issue considering its geography. In 1862 the telegraph was established in the South Island and slowly moved north. In August 1865 the two islands were finally linked by a cable across the Cook Strait, and a telegraph office was established at Picton. All parts of the country were covered with a network of wires within a decade. Until the arrival of the telegraph, many newspapers had to rely on mail and news arriving by ship. New Zealand was connected by submarine cable to Australia in 1876² and two years later the New Zealand Press Association was established “for the mutual exchange among its members of telegraphic intelligence and for the procuring of cable news from overseas”.³ The inaugural membership of the association was 26 papers and in co-operation with the Government the association secured a special wire for members’ telegrams. However, the papers that had not been included set up a rival body and after some considerable protest eventually won the same rights to the wire service. This state of affairs could not continue and in 1879 it was decided that all members of the New Zealand press should belong to one organisation and it would be open to all newspapers with a scale of entrance fees for each class of newspaper. A new name was chosen for the organisation – the United Press Association – and one of its main rules was that no member could join

another agency for the procuring of news that might compete with the new association.⁴ The UPA made arrangements with a number of agencies to supply news to New Zealand from round the world. From Reuters, to Australian, Canadian, British and other agencies, the overseas news flowed in. In 1902 the Pacific cable from Vancouver, Canada, to Fiji, Norfolk Island, Queensland, and finally Doubtless Bay, New Zealand began operation thus assisting an even better flow of news. By the time war was declared in August 1914 a reasonably satisfactory system of receiving and then transmitting news around the country had been established.

At the outbreak of war New Zealand's help was accepted by Britain for the capture of the German radio station at Samoa and the Expeditionary Force set sail in late August. One New Zealand journalist saw an opportunity and with the compliance of the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the New Zealand forces, Major-General Sir Alexander Godley, travelled with the troops to record the operation. This journalist was Malcolm Ross, a freelance who was contracted by some of the leading newspapers of the day to act as parliamentary reporter in Wellington. This was not Ross's first foray as a war correspondent. He had covered the disturbances in Samoa in 1899 when the Samoan head of state, Laupepa, died and fighting began between rival claimants to his position. Ross had spent about three months covering this conflict. In fact, he seemed able to turn his hand to many different kinds of journalistic ventures. As a younger man he had been a noted mountaineer having conquered and written about many of New Zealand's highest mountains. He had published a book of his exploits.⁵ He had been a noted sportsman in rugby, golf and tennis and was a personal friend of many leading parliamentarians, including the Prime Minister, William Massey. Ross was a skilled photographer. His wife, Forrest, a well-connected and artistic woman, and their son, Noel, were also accomplished journalists. Although from a humble, Scottish, working-class family, Ross had worked his way to a position of importance in New Zealand society, although this was not always appreciated by some of his fellow journalists. Nevertheless, he had the support of the newspapers that hired him, leading papers such as the *Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin), the *Press* (Christchurch) and sometimes the *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland) and *Evening Post* (Wellington). They had sanctioned many of his journalistic ventures from trips to the Pacific Islands with the Governor to covering the visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall in 1901. As a freelance he was free to pick up other jobs when Parliament was in recess and he made the most of his time, sometimes acting as agent for visiting artists, such as Ignace Paderewski, the Polish pianist and other times

accepting Government jobs, such as secretary for a visiting trade commission. For many years he was the London *Times* correspondent and he wrote for the *New York Times* and some of the Australian papers.

When war was declared in 1914 Ross appeared to some to be the logical person to accompany the New Zealand troops to Samoa. Many others did not see it that way. Opposition parliamentarians saw him as the representative of conservative, Government-aligned newspapers and were incensed he had stolen a march on other journalists by going to Samoa. Questions were asked in Parliament. The tenor of the outcry was that if someone was to go as a journalist to the war he should be someone who would write for all the newspapers in the country. The Government then revealed that the British War Office had approved one journalist to act as the official war correspondent for each of the British Dominions. Opposition MPs did not want Ross. But they did not want another possible candidate, Guy Scholefield, either. He was the London correspondent for the same group of newspapers that employed Ross, and so was considered tainted with the same political bias. For seven months the country was treated to a protracted wrangle over who would be the journalist picked to cover the war for New Zealand. There was no question there could be more than one journalist sent, as Australia was doing. There, Charles Bean was selected by his journalist colleagues to be the official Australian correspondent, but at least two other journalists were also despatched by their newspapers to cover the war – Peter Schuler and Charlie Smith, and later Harry Gullet, Keith Murdoch and Gordon Gilmour. While Scholefield did go to France from London on several occasions, only one New Zealand journalist was ever permitted to follow the New Zealand forces, even though the forces were divided and often in different countries. No journalist ever covered the actions of the New Zealand troops in Palestine, for example, although it was mooted at one point.

One of the reasons why the New Zealand newspapers were reluctant to send their own journalists to cover the war, besides the wish not to defy the War Office, was that earlier they had found the exercise far too expensive. There had been a tradition of individual papers sending journalists overseas as war correspondents before the First World War. For example, Ross was at Samoa in 1899 with reporters from the *Auckland Star* and the *New Zealand Herald*, and then a syndicate of papers sent correspondents to the Transvaal during the war there of 1899-1902. Arthur Adams was despatched to China during the Boxer rebellion of 1900. In every case, the journalists were withdrawn after a few months because of the cost to the papers of maintaining them abroad. This was the most likely reason why in 1914 none of

the papers offered to send a correspondent independent of the official nominee and why they turned to the Government to make the final choice and to fund the winning candidate. Unlike the Australians, New Zealand journalists did not get to choose the official correspondent. A quartet of newspaper editors picked four candidates from a list of about 47 applicants, narrowed these down to two, and then Cabinet decided on the winner. The UPA undertook to impartially distribute the “letters” (i.e. despatches) to all papers that applied for them, for a distribution fee of 1/-. The man chosen to be the country’s first official war correspondent was 52-year-old Malcolm Ross, which surprised few. Many believed he was selected because of his close connection to the Prime Minister and to other members of his Cabinet and because he was a representative of the conservative press that supported the Government. His salary was £450 per annum until the date of his return to New Zealand with a daily allowance of 15/- except when he was with the forces in Europe, when his daily allowance was £2.10 or in Egypt, £1.

Few seemed to believe he had been appointed because of his excellent journalism skills. While he was well recognised as an excellent photographer, his writing ability as he got older was not held in such high esteem. He had spent eight years in the newsroom of the *Otago Daily Times* as a young man and made a name for himself as the reporter covering the search for a missing Otago professor. His reports riveted the nation for several weeks in December 1888. Unusually for the time, he had a byline for many of his stories. He was an early exponent of the art of the interview, and some of his subjects were world famous, such as novelist Samuel Clemens, (alias Mark Twain), and Paderewski. His writing style was typical of the time – lengthy narratives often littered with florid poetic expressions and detailed facts. He was a liberal user of the first person pronoun. After his eight years on the *Otago Daily Times* he became the personal secretary to the manager of the Union Steam Ship Company and was then headhunted by his old paper, and *The Press*, to be their parliamentary reporter in the Wellington Press Gallery. While he was “Our own correspondent” for this position, in the recess he was able to write with a byline about whatever he chose. Very rarely did his writing include straight news reporting. Many believed that as the official war correspondent he would struggle to write despatches that would meet the needs of his readers back home.

The main body of the New Zealand forces sailed for Egypt in October, 1914. It became part of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force which saw action on the Gallipoli

peninsula, fighting against the Ottoman Turks only to be pulled out after seven months when they proved too difficult to overcome. Ross's coverage of the Gallipoli campaign was widely criticised. In his defence, there were many obstacles to his performance that were out of his hands. For example, Ross did not reach the peninsula until June 1915, well after the legendary landing of April 25. This was not his fault – the lengthy debate over his appointment saw to that. He was held up in Egypt by the military authorities for nearly four weeks. This did give him time, however, to search for his son, Noel, now a Lance Corporal, who had been severely injured at Gallipoli in April. However, the delay meant the New Zealand readers had to rely on other journalists stationed in the Mediterranean to supply news. And when Ross finally arrived at Gallipoli in June 1915 he was competing with a dozen other established journalists not the least being Charles Bean who had sailed with the Australian Imperial Force in November 1914. In a survey of despatches from 40 different journalists over the final six months of the campaign, nearly 50% of the coverage in four major New Zealand papers was supplied by the three Australian correspondents, but in particular Bean. Individually, Malcolm Ross's despatches were second in the number of column centimetres published to Bean's, closely followed by those from Englishman, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett.

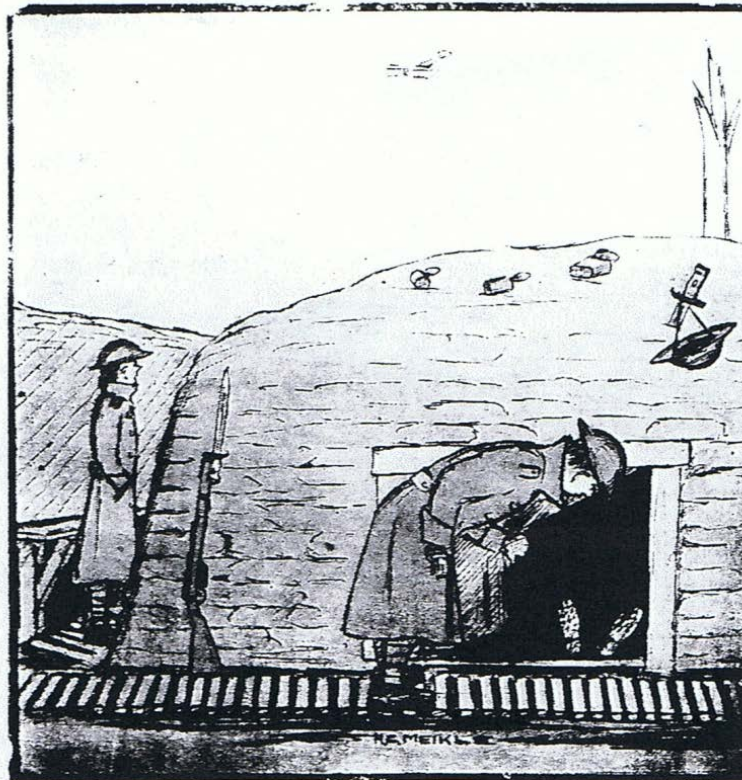
The biggest cross that Ross had to bear at Gallipoli, however, was the condition of his employment which denied him the ability to cable his despatches to New Zealand. He had to send them by sea, which meant that by the time they were published they were often six to eight weeks old. (This was exacerbated by further delays at home while the Department of Internal Affairs sent them off to the Government censor to be censored again, printed and then finally handed over to the UPA to distribute.) Despite the outcry at the staleness of his reports, the Government refused to change this condition until the end of the campaign when it finally allowed Ross to send short cables of newsworthy action. This was all too little too late, however. Trying to adapt his lengthy, narrative style to the requirements of cable news was also a struggle for Ross and he never really captured the art of short, snappy writing that this method of transmission demanded. Ross's reputation had been damaged by these many setbacks and he battled to recover from them. His standing was further impaired when he missed, through illness, the other extraordinary action of the campaign, the evacuation of the peninsula in December, 1915. A despatch about the evacuation purported to be by Ross was in fact written by the Australian, Bean, on his behalf. Even with the criticism he faced at home, Ross maintained the support of the Government and the military authorities. And he

firmly supported the military's demand that war correspondents not "give the show away", as did most of the journalists covering the war. This may have been why his request for an honorary captaincy, similar to Bean's, was granted in May 1916.

Ross and Bean sailed for France in April 1916 and journeyed to the front "for the 54th day of the Battle of Verdun".⁶ As at Gallipoli, Ross and Bean were permitted to accompany their own forces rather than being sequestered in crumbling chateaux well behind the lines as their British counterparts were. One of Ross's earliest despatches from France concerned the beginning of the Somme offensive when on the first day the British army suffered more than 60,000 casualties. He wrote:

...we are now the masters of the vaunted German legions. On this day our brave soldiers feared neither man nor machine. They went into action with a glorious courage unexcelled in any war. As on the earth and on the sea, so in the air did we obtain mastery and the initiative.⁷

There was no recognition of the horrors of that first day and the impact it would have on those at home in Britain waiting to hear news of their menfolk or the implications for the New Zealand troops once they entered this battle later in September. This over-cheerful tone was to become commonplace, and was one much favoured by journalists covering the war. The realities of the battles in the mud of France and Belgium were glossed over not just by Ross, but by most of the war correspondents. New Zealand parliamentarians, for example, had plenty to say about the number and quality of the war reports being published in New Zealand newspapers calling much of it "nauseating 'piffle'" that "was not the kind of stuff that New Zealand wanted".⁸ This view of overseas despatches was corroborated by the manager of the UPA's Sydney office, Jos Bradley. He said much of the material "extensively duplicated" the work of other correspondents and was of "varying merit", and others were "often merely wordy reproductions of official reports". "Some of the correspondents clearly show their want of military judgment and though their matter may supply good enough reading it is palpably worse than valueless".⁹ New Zealand's weekly satirical journal, *The Observer*, often criticised Ross and his efforts at the front. The paper ran a cartoon in June 1917 pillorying Ross for not getting near the firing line.¹⁰



A NATURAL MISTAKE.

Rifleman Jones (on seeing the New Zealand war correspondent in the trenches—to his mate within the dugout: Come on, Bill: get yer gear—the war's over.

Figure 1: Cartoon from *The Observer*

Ross's reaction to the criticism of his war coverage was hurt indignation. As he commented to the New Zealand Minister of Defence, James Allen in a letter of April 28, 1916: "The criticism about myself does not worry me much, but it has been beastly mean and unfair, not to say untrue".¹¹ However, in Parliament some MPs were aghast at what appeared to be Ross's expanded salary, which had reached £1,600 in total by November 1918,¹² and demanded he be sent home because his despatches had little value. Newspapers which had agreed to take his reports were cancelling in increasing numbers and the Government was having a hard time justifying his position.

Although Ross could cable stories back to New Zealand, his longer despatches were still going by steamer from England. Originally Ross was to send them to the High Commissioner in London. The cables were not to exceed 500 words on "matters of direct interest to New Zealand" referring to the country's troops and not dealing with matters of general interest "certain to reach the Dominion through ordinary channels". Duplicates of articles could be sent for publication in England at the High Commissioner's discretion".¹³

There were still some problems with delays in getting stories published, to the extent that often a paper sent out from England with one of Ross's stories published in it, arrived before his official despatch. For example on June 20, 1916 Ross's report "*The raiders*" appeared in the *New Zealand Times*. It had been copied from a London periodical, which had reached New Zealand before the original despatch. The High Commissioner was ordered to send out the Ross articles one week after the steamers conveying the despatch to New Zealand had left.¹⁴ One would have supposed that the criticism from home of the delay in publishing Ross's despatches that arose during the Dardanelles campaign would have had some effect. While the despatches were no longer weeks late as in 1915, even the cabled messages were still being published up to a week later in some cases. One consolation for Ross was that his accounts could now be published in Britain, something he was obviously delighted about. They had been "most favourably commented upon, both by press and public".¹⁵ The English readers of Ross's despatches were in a much more favourable position than their New Zealand counterparts.

Ross covered all the major battles the New Zealand forces were engaged in on the Western Front, but notably the third Somme offensive (Battle of Flers-Courcelette) and Third Ypres (Battle of Passchendaele) and the taking of the walled town of Le Quesnoy. When on September 15, 1916 the New Zealand Division went into battle in the third Somme offensive, by midnight, of the 6000 New Zealanders who took part, just over a third were dead, wounded or missing.¹⁶ By the unofficial end of the battle the Allied forces had not succeeded in breaking through German lines. After a period of static trench warfare the New Zealanders took part in the Battle of Morval and by September 28 the objectives of capturing the towns of Gueudecourt, Lesboeufs, Morval, Thiepval and Combles had been achieved but with more casualties for the New Zealanders. After 23 days of constant fighting, and with casualties of about 7,000 men, 1,560 of them killed, the New Zealanders were withdrawn from the line.¹⁷ The first the New Zealand reading public knew of this new offensive in which their soldiers were involved was five days after it began on September 20 when on page six of the *New Zealand Herald*, an editorial told of the New Zealanders going into action.¹⁸ This was followed on the next page with a communiqué from Douglas Haig, commander in chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), mentioning the part New Zealand had paid in the battle of Flers-Courcelette.¹⁹ Ross's first cable appeared on September 22 and was published in at least *The Press*²⁰ and *Evening Post*²¹ and the *New Zealand Herald*.²² As well, on that date in *The Press* was an item by Philip Gibbs, gleaned from the *Daily Chronicle*, which told how

Gibbs had spent four days among the men who had broken the Flers line and praised the Londoners, the Canadians and the New Zealanders.²³ Ross had actually sent two cables; the first was dated September 15 the day of the beginning of the offensive and covered the initial bombardment and the use of tanks for the first time. Both *The Press* and *Evening Post* had used this cable, together with the second cable dated the following day. The latter cable gave little indication of what it was like for the men fighting in this battle and what the cost was to them – in men killed, wounded or missing in those first three days of the offensive. In a neighbouring column in the *Evening Post* Gibbs also wrote about the tanks.²⁴ Neither journalists' account conveyed the fact that on the whole the tanks were not terribly successful, especially the four which were allotted to the New Zealand Division. Three of them got stuck and never saw any action²⁵. Ross was surely in a position to have learned this as he was mainly stationed at NZHQ and he certainly would have heard it anecdotally from any soldiers who he interviewed.

On September 23, the *Evening Post* ran a short cable from Ross dated September 18 describing the actions of the New Zealand artillery in the battle.

This for them was the supreme moment. For the first time in the war they experienced the glorious sensation of fulfilling the true functions of field artillery. Their shooting had been splendid. The switch trench, which the infantry had captured so brilliantly, was in many places obliterated.²⁶

On September 25, the three papers ran several more of Ross's cables with the *Evening Post* running a column-long account on the New Zealanders by Gibbs which covered the first week of the fighting.²⁷ The *New Zealand Herald* ran this same lengthy despatch on September 26.

In the fighting since the 1st July there has been nothing fiercer or bloodier than the hand-to-hand struggles on the left of Flers, where the New Zealanders increased their fame gained on Gallipoli as soldiers who had to give up what they gained, and who could hold on to their ground with grim obstinacy against the heaviest odds.²⁸

Ross's account dated September 22 was a round-up of the work of all sections of the force, including infantry, artillery, medical services, transport, engineers and Pioneers and was used by *The Press* and the *New Zealand Herald*. But as well these two papers used the September 18 despatch from Ross, already published by the *Evening Post* on September 23. Highlighted by a large headline, the *New Zealand Herald* story trumpeted Ross's statement that New

Zealand losses, though severe, were not as heavy as expected.²⁹ These losses started appearing in the Rolls of Honour in the various newspapers that day and continued appearing in increasing numbers well into October. According to Andrew Macdonald³⁰ by September 17 the New Zealand Division had suffered 3,000 casualties since arriving at the Somme, and this included 992 men killed since August 31. Ross, in looking back on the Somme battle from November 10, but only published in the *Grey River Argus* in January 1917, had this to say about the casualties:

New Zealanders will now know that the casualties in this fighting were considerable. They might, however, very well have been heavier than they were. As a matter of fact, our men had been sparingly used. The great test of a successful operation is the number of troops left at the end of the day. We had no fewer than five fresh battalions ready to go on.³¹

From a September 26 cable from Ross, the *New Zealand Herald* published another short piece on September 28 about an advance made by the Rifle Brigade describing it as a “splendid effort”, where a Rifle Brigade captain, “who was afterwards killed, greatly distinguished himself” and the Canterburys fought “with dash and great gallantry”.³² The three papers all published on Friday September 29, a September 25 despatch from Ross about the renewal of the offensive on September 15, the so-called battle of Morval, after a period of consolidation and the part played by the “veteran brigade”.^{33 34 35} Macdonald³⁶ called Ross’s coverage of this battle “minimalist, non-critical and misleading”.

It was not until October 4 that Ross allowed himself any emotion when describing what he had seen over the last 23 days when the New Zealand troops were finally withdrawn from the Somme.

The slopes leading down from the crest of the ridge between Delville and High Wood into and beyond Flers are strewn with the graves of heroes. These hillsides will forever be sacred to the memory of the great and successful advance. It is a bit of France to which present and future generations may make a pilgrimage to pay homage at the shrine of New Zealand’s honoured dead.³⁷

There were many graves to be wept over. Nevertheless, Ross did acknowledge and was proved correct, that in the future many would make the pilgrimage to the battlefields to remember the dead. He reviewed the battle after the New Zealanders were withdrawn from the trenches but this 2500-word despatch written on October 8 was not published until mid-December, for

example, in the *Grey River Argus*.³⁸ A further 2000-word summary of the Flers action appeared in the *Grey River Argus* on January 16, 1917.³⁹

After the battle of the Somme the New Zealand troops were withdrawn to Fleurbaix, near Armentières and this is where they spent the winter “coldly but quietly” before heading for Messines.⁴⁰ On June 7 1917 the New Zealand troops were involved in an attack to capture this Flanders town and then they were involved in a skirmish at La Basseville before being relieved to take part in Third Ypres, or what is more generally known as the battle of Passchendaele.^{41 42} The New Zealand Division arrived at its battle position facing two spurs of the main Passchendaele Ridge – Gravenstafel and Bellevue. The former was the initial objective for the New Zealanders. The offensive opened on October 4. The first New Zealand knew about a renewed offensive was on October 5 in the afternoon papers and on October 6 in the morning papers when it was announced that on Thursday morning an attack had been launched in Flanders in the Zonnerbeke region east of Ypres. Haig said troops were making “satisfactory progress” in one of the “greatest battle of the war” and were “quickly overcoming all difficulties” with a “smashing blow” being dealt to the Germans.⁴³

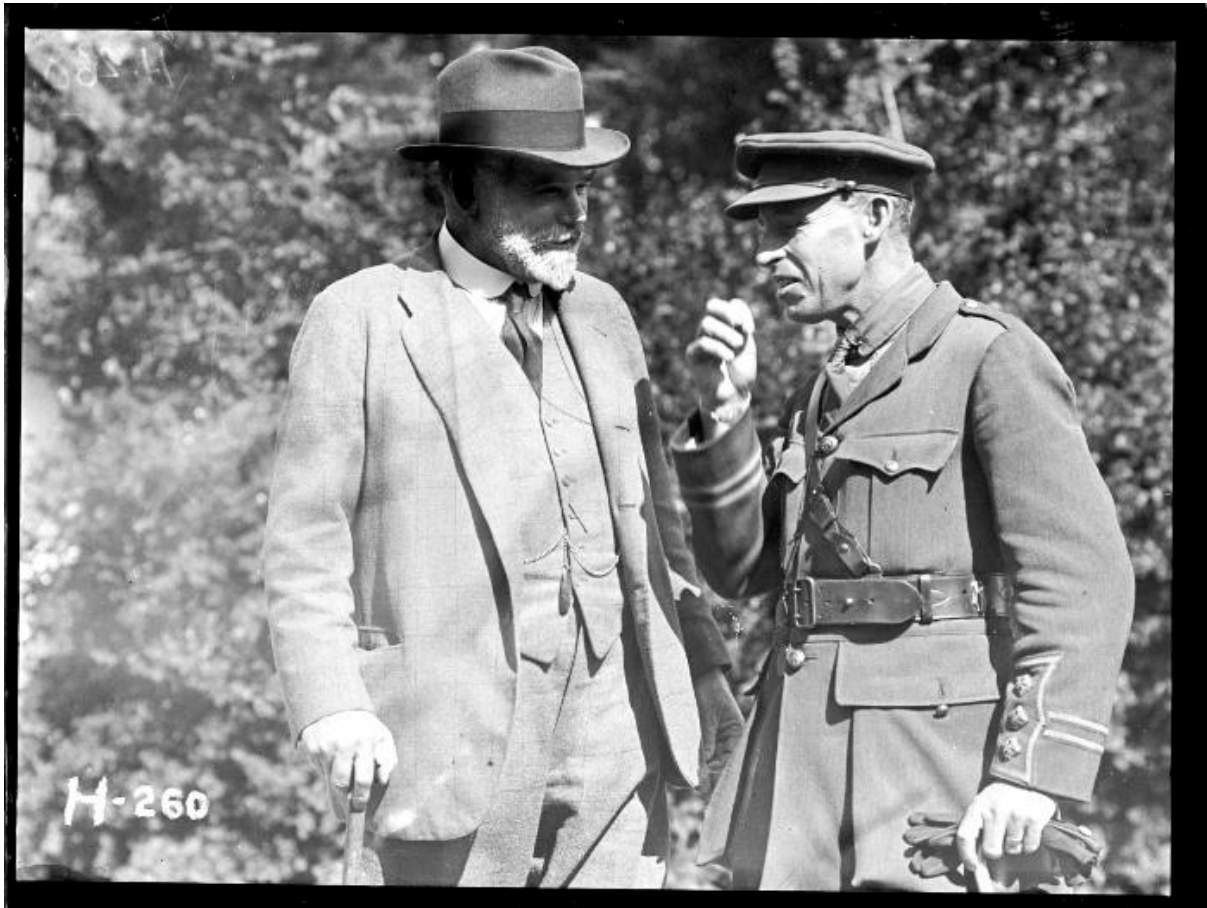


Figure 2: Sir Thomas MacKenzie talks with the New Zealand War Correspondent in France, First World War, September, 1917. Photograph taken by Henry Armytage Sanders. (Permission to publish granted from National Library of New Zealand.)

It was not until October 8 that it became clear that New Zealand troops had taken part in the action and that they had been successful. *The Auckland Star* in the next few days ran glowing commentaries from nearly every war correspondent except Ross. The paper used the British journalists Gibbs, Beach Thomas, Philips and Robinson and the Australian correspondents Gilmour and Murdoch. *The Evening Post* and the *New Zealand Herald* also made use of these journalists' despatches at this time. The New Zealand troops had been relieved on October 6 but the fulsome headlines continued for another week. The New Zealanders had been involved in a "smashing victory", "a success to be proud of" on a "great and glorious day". Glyn Harper⁴⁴ said the New Zealand attack had been highly successful but not without cost – 1,853 casualties, among them 530 killed or missing. What of Ross's accounts? On October 8 portions of Ross's three-day account ran in the *Evening Post* and in the *New Zealand Herald* the following day. Ross took an upbeat view of the action. "This morning I saw the men who attacked on the left. All were tired and sleepy after their

strenuous exertions, but cheerful and elated at their success".⁴⁵ It was a "thrilling spectacle", officers and other ranks fought with "the greatest gallantry" or with "dash and gallantry".

The New Zealand troops had a week's respite before they were marched back to the front line for the next push against the Germans, which for them was to take place on October 12. This was to be a much more difficult battle and one that Harper⁴⁶ has called the country's "worst ever military disaster". It had been raining steadily and the front lines were a quagmire over which the troops had to struggle to attain their objective of Bellevue Spur and then the village of Passchendaele itself. The signs were ominous before the attack even began. While New Zealanders back home were reading about the success of Gravenstafel, their men were about to die in their hundreds at Bellevue. "Lull on all fronts" pronounced the *New Zealand Herald* on October 10 together with a lengthy despatch from Gibbs extolling the "brilliant work" of the New Zealanders in the previous advance on Abraham Heights.⁴⁷ On Monday October 15, on pages five and six, the *New Zealand Herald* notified readers that another attack had been launched on the previous Friday – the fifth attack in Flanders since the offensive resumed on September 20.⁴⁸ General Haig was quoted as saying the fighting had been especially severe on the slopes of the main ridge itself. Percival Philips said there had been a "great amount of bayonet work". Keith Murdoch wrote that the rain had reduced the land to a "perfect quagmire" "but the British and Anzacs "navigated the mud seas and mud mountains like miracle men". Perry Robinson, writing for Reuters, said the army was "in the best of spirits and enormously contented with the results of the fighting". It wasn't until the next few days that New Zealand learned that the picture was not quite as rosy as some of the correspondents made it appear. Now the Anzac troops were "labouring" through difficulties (Gibbs) and fighting "under appalling difficulties" (Murdoch). Malcolm Ross's cable dated October 12 was published on October 16 in the *New Zealand Herald*. It read:

The New Zealand Division with other units took part in the renewed attack on Passchendaele Ridge at dawn. After a day of sunshine, the weather again changed in the night, and the attack started under difficulties in rain and deep, sticky mud. Under the circumstances progress was necessarily slow especially as the position attacked was strongly defended with machine gunners in the "pill boxes" behind uncut wire.⁴⁹

Ross elaborated further in a message the next day which was published by the *New Zealand Herald*, *Auckland Star* and *Evening Post* but saying largely the same thing.

The weather has been simply appalling. The battlefield has been such a sea of mud and of water-logged shell holes that the continued success of our last attack was an utter impossibility. In addition, our men found themselves confronted with machine guns in strong concrete positions, fronted with barbed wire uncut by the artillery.^{50 51 52}

Later reports of all the correspondents praised the work of the medical services in particular the stretcher bearers in getting wounded men off the battlefield. Harper⁵³ called October 12 an “unmitigated disaster” which was never accurately reported in New Zealand newspapers. “The attack was portrayed as a limited success rather than the absolute disaster it really was”. The toll was frightful. More than 2,700 New Zealanders were casualties, of whom nearly 850 men were either dead or missing. “In terms of lives lost in a single day, this remains the blackest day in New Zealand’s post-1840 existence”.⁵⁴ The New Zealanders were eventually relieved by the Canadians on October 18. It was not until October 20 that the columns and columns of casualty lists started appearing in the New Zealand newspapers. On that day all three papers ran more stories on the battle for Bellevue Spur. Among them was a report from Ross lauding the “superb heroism” of the New Zealanders but again largely repeating previous reports.

The attack was launched at formidable positions, and wave after wave of infantry went forward in an attempt to storm dominating concrete machine-gun positions, the only shelter from which was in waterlogged shell holes.^{55 56}

As Harper said in *Massacre at Passchendaele* the newspaper reports did not mention the death toll of those trying to reach their objective, the weather was seen as the main cause of the problems, and it was seen as a limited success rather than a complete failure. “The New Zealand attack of 12 October, 1917 was an intensely emotional and bitter experience for those who survived.”^{57 58}

Withdrawn from the offensive at Passchendaele, the New Zealand troops wintered over in the Polygon Wood sector of the Ypres salient, then in March were sent to Amiens. In July they took part in a steady advance which began to force the Germans back towards the Hindenburg Line, taking Bapaume on August 29. The Germans were slowly pushed back until the New Zealanders found themselves at Beaudignies and approaching the town of Le Quesnoy captured by the Germans early in the war.⁵⁹

The *New Zealand Herald* and *The Press* on November 7 alerted readers in New Zealand that something unusual had taken place at this little fortified French town three days

earlier. The *New Zealand Herald* ran two stories, one reporting that the New Zealand troops were near Le Quesnoy⁶⁰ and then another brief that the town had been taken by New Zealand forces.⁶¹ *The Press* ran a November 5 cable from the Australian and New Zealand Cable Association saying fighting was continuing at Le Quesnoy “where the position is obscure”.⁶² As well *The Press* ran an official German message saying the town had been evacuated⁶³ along with a Reuters cable describing the taking of the village by the New Zealanders. “The skill and valour with which the stronghold was carried are beyond praise,” said the correspondent.⁶⁴ This story was repeated in the *Grey River Argus* on the same day.⁶⁵ Another story said the New Zealanders’ capture of Le Quesnoy was “a most dramatic feature of Monday's battle”.⁶⁶ (This story was also run in the *Grey River Argus* a day later.⁶⁷) On page seven of the *Evening Post* of November 7 there were three stories about Le Quesnoy. Gibbs proclaimed the storming of Le Quesnoy in a double column tribute to the New Zealanders ranking their action in the taking of the village as “one of their most heroic”.⁶⁸ The Reuters correspondent’s comment were repeated and on the same page was a report from Ross, dated October 29, citing the possibility of New Zealanders playing “a conspicuous part in the fall of Le Quesnoy” when it was quite clear by now to readers that the action was over.⁶⁹

On that same day *The Press* and *Evening Post* published a November 6 despatch where Ross described the actions of the Otago and Canterbury battalions as they pushed forward towards the Sambre. It did not really address the capture of Le Quesnoy at all except to refute suggestions by the British press that the New Zealanders had been compelled to draw back from the first attempt to storm Le Quesnoy frontally. Once again Ross had been scooped with important news by the British journalists. The next day more news was published, and saw the papers full of correspondents’ praise for “one of the most outstanding single feats of the whole war”⁷⁰ and leading articles also proclaiming the momentous feat. Journalists Beach Thomas, Phillips and Gibbs were all quoted. The only stories on that day from Ross in any of the papers mentioned were obituaries for Sgt H J Nicholas, VC and Major J M Richmond, DSO, MC. Ross had another story published in the *Weekly Press*, but dated October 23-24, about the advances of the New Zealanders towards Le Quesnoy.

It was not until November 20 that Ross’s despatches about the taking of the walled town began to be published at any length. It is clear from his writing that Ross viewed much of the action at Le Quesnoy and this gives his reports a much greater sense of immediacy and conviction. (Earlier he had been kept well behind the lines at NZHQ and it is clear from his

reports of battle that he was never present in frontline trenches –none of the correspondents were permitted to be there.) These accounts described in detail the actions at Le Quesnoy Ross wrote of the New Zealand soldiers scaling the ramparts and entering the town to the cheers of the French population. He also wrote about one of the last scenes of the war enacted in the town square when the president of the French Republic attended the celebration of the town's liberation from the Germans.^{71 72 73 74} It is hard to understand why Ross's despatches were published so late after the actions at Le Quesnoy. By November 11 the war was over and New Zealand had turned from the sufferings of war to the sufferings caused by the deadly influenza epidemic which was raging through the country and which had already claimed many lives. But there was one last operation of the war that the New Zealand forces were involved in. On December 20, 1918, the 2nd Brigade crossed the Rhine River into Cologne as part of the Allied Army of Occupation. Malcolm Ross, however, was not there to see it. He had been admitted to a French hospital on December 9 after falling ill on November 11. The journalist was then sent back to the New Zealand General Hospital at Brockenhurst in the UK on December 14. As with Gallipoli, Ross missed the final stages of the military operations on account of sickness.

How were Ross's Western Front despatches being received back in New Zealand? As mentioned earlier, Ross had experienced continued criticism back in New Zealand, lead largely by opposition parliamentarians and some members of the press. The criticism had started with Ross's appointment as official correspondent and continued throughout the Gallipoli and Western Front campaigns. *The Observer's* main critique appeared to be that Ross was a vainglorious, publicity-seeking man too ready to trumpet his and his family's successes. The paper pilloried Ross's writing style and its lack of vivid description calling it "guff", "tripe" and "flam".⁷⁵ The paper had called for Ross's withdrawal on many occasions. The Government stood firm and only recalled Ross in 1919 in spite of the cost to it of not only Ross's salary and expenses but also the cost of the cables. As papers grew increasingly disenchanted with Ross's work they withdrew from the arrangement to take the cables until by the end of 1918 the shortfall in income for the Government for 85 cables of 36,824 words was £869.7.6.⁷⁶ The Government had to weather sustained attacks in Parliament about the war correspondent every time the issue of approving his salary came up.

The major issues surrounding Ross and his correspondence were aired in Parliament and then publicised around the country in the newspapers. The complaints largely fell into five categories. The first, as noted by *The Observer*, was Ross's prosaic writing style and the dull,

and sometimes incorrect, content of his despatches. For example, Ross infuriated the New Zealand Artillery when he criticised one of their operations in 1918. He was roundly censured when he claimed the failure of the infantry was because of the inefficiency of the artillery.⁷⁷ This also touched on the second complaint against Ross that he rarely went near the firing line to observe what he was writing about. For example, Dr H.T.J. Thacker, had this to say:

What the soldiers thought of him was shown in a paper which depicted some New Zealand soldiers coming out of the trenches and being greeted by their mates with the news the war was over. "How do you know? they asked. "Because Mr Malcolm Ross has arrived at the front."⁷⁸

The third issue was the continuing claim that he was a Government journalist, too close to the generals and therefore not independent. The Prime Minister had to repeatedly refute claims, that as Ross's friend, he had had a hand in Ross's appointment. It sometimes appeared as if Massey was Ross's only backer in the House and he had to resort to reading out letters of support for Ross from the generals at the front. But as one MP noted: "It was easily understood that the Generals were bound to back up the man who had been appointed by the Government which had appointed them and to which they were indebted for promotion."⁷⁹ The fourth complaint was that Ross did not give value for money – that his large salary was not warranted. Liberal MP for Riccarton George Witty, for example, said he thought Ross was "a useless expense as far as the country is concerned, considering what we get from him by way of news."⁸⁰ The final, and probably most important issue, was the lateness of his despatches, and this was something Ross had no control over. While things did improve somewhat after Gallipoli, Ross's reports were continually being scooped by other correspondents, especially the British and Australian ones. The Government never understood how important the topicality of news was to readers. Solutions to all the complaints ranged from recalling Ross, dropping his salary, to sending someone to assist him. By 1917, even the UPA, which circulated the despatches around New Zealand, wanted Ross recalled. A deputation from the Press Association visited the Minister of Defence, James Allen on February 26, 1917 and told him Ross's despatches were unsatisfactory and asked that they be discontinued. Ross, however, continued as official war correspondent until his recall in 1919.

There were two reasons why the delivery of the news from Picardy to Picton by the New Zealand official correspondent was largely unsuccessful from the readers' point of view. The first is because the man chosen for that position, whoever that was, would have laboured under the same difficulties of being a Government employee working under Government and

military imposed restrictions. These included, of course, the military censorship, but for the New Zealand correspondent, the Government-imposed condition about the transmission of his despatches. Initially this had meant that all despatches were posted and travelled by ship. They often took weeks, even months, to reach their destination and so were well out of date by the time they arrived for publication. Picton readers would have already read accounts by other war correspondents. Even when cables were permitted, for some reason, even these were often held back to be scooped by official communiqués or other correspondents' reports. This was the one area where no blame could rest with the journalist. After Ross had filed his despatches they were in the hands of the relevant authorities, many of whom would have had little conception of the urgency required to transmit the news back to New Zealand readers.

This leads on to the second reason why the delivery of news from Picardy to Picton by the official correspondent was never wholly successful. It rests with the person chosen to fulfil the role. Malcolm Ross just did not have the skills required for the task. He had not been a reporter in a newsroom covering daily news for nearly 25 years when he was appointed as official correspondent. His style of writing such as it was – lengthy narratives, often florid and wordy – was not suited to a war journalism that had to abide by the censorship, but nevertheless deliver something readable and accurate about the war. When it came to being able to send cables home, Ross, even more, needed the skills of daily journalism to compact information into few words in a concise, accurate but interesting way. He seemed unable to adapt his style. He relied too much on official reports which compounded the difficulty. These were often a dry narrative of events which did not translate well into reader-friendly prose. As well, Ross's accounts were overly cheerful and eulogistic when the facts obviously said otherwise. This infuriated both the soldier at the front and the reader back home in Picton, especially when huge columns of casualties were being published daily. So a man who had created a highly successful niche for himself as a journalist, mountaineer, author and sportsman in New Zealand society – a member of the elite establishment – saw his reputation slowly diminish in his role as the country's first official war correspondent. The relentless criticism had its effect because on his return to New Zealand he faded into obscurity and died largely unacknowledged in 1930.

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