

Malcolm Ross, journalist and photographer. The perfect war correspondent?

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Abstract

Malcolm Ross was New Zealand's first official war correspondent and from 1915 until the end of the First World War he provided copy to the New Zealand press. His journalism has been the subject of recent academic investigation but Ross had another string to his bow, he was an enthusiastic photographer with the skill to develop his own film 'in the field'. It might therefore be expected that Ross was the ideal war correspondent, an individual who could not only write the stories but also potentially illustrate them with photography from the battlefields. Yet by the end of the conflict his body of photographs was largely unpublished and unrecognised. This paper looks at Ross's photography and, in an era when media organisations increasingly require journalists to be multi-media skilled, asks whether the role of the writer and image-taker are still two different and not necessarily complementary skills.

Malcolm Ross, New Zealand's first official war correspondent was a multi-talented individual – journalist, photographer, mountaineer and sportsman. He seemingly embodied the attributes now viewed as essential for journalism. The ability to provide both words and visuals. As a writer in the *Guardian* recently argued: "Gone are the days of specialism in print....Today's journalists must be multi-platform wonders and those who fail to adapt to these new expectations will find it increasingly difficult to compete".¹ One hundred years ago Malcolm Ross headed for the WW1 battlefields as a correspondent capable of complementing his copy with photographs.

However, those who have surveyed his contribution as a journalist during the war do not rate him highly. In his 2007 Master's thesis on Ross, Ron Palenski compared him to Australia's official war correspondent Charles Bean. Palenski states that Bean is "an honoured and revered figure in Australia"² yet Ross is barely known in his own country and "where Bean succeeded in the tasks set him, Ross failed".³ Allison Oosterman writing about the Gallipoli campaign remarks that "all journalists at Gallipoli suffered from the vagaries of a badly directed and often capricious censorship but ways round this could be achieved through diligence, imagination and excellent writing, as

¹ Whelan, Natalie. 'Will specialist journalism survive in our multiskilling age?' <http://www.theguardian.com/media/organgrinder/2008/jun/16/post68/print>. Accessed 14/07/2014.

² Palenski, Ron (2007) 'Malcolm Ross: A forgotten casualty of the Great War', M.A. Thesis: University of Otago. P.1.

³ Ibid, p.1.

demonstrated by (British correspondent) Ashmead-Bartlett and Bean. It seems this was beyond Ross's capabilities".⁴

Ross certainly had the experience and at 52 years of age had reached "what appeared to be the pinnacle of his career".⁵ Aside from his record in print he was also recognised for his photographic skills. Before the war Ross had supplied illustrated stories for special weekly and Christmas editions of New Zealand publications. Below is an example from the *Otago Witness*' Christmas Annual in 1905.



⁴ Oosterman, Allison (2008). 'Malcolm Ross: From the peaks to the trenches', Unpublished PhD thesis: Auckland University of Technology. P.19.

⁵ Ibid, p.xii.

There is evidence that Ross took his camera with him on all his significant trips as a journalist after he returned to journalism after a period as private secretary to the managing director of the Union Steam Ship Company from 1889 to 1897. By the early 1900s he was “well established as one of the leading journalists in New Zealand”⁶ and was also a correspondent for *The Times* in London.

Although the daily papers he worked for did not feature photography their weekly and special editions, such as the Christmas Annuals, certainly did. Ross was also to use his own photographs in his tourism and mountaineering books.

Ross Palenski states that perhaps no series of stories established Ross in the national consciousness more than his despatches from Samoa during the period when that country became the subject of a tug of war between the imperial powers Germany, the United States and Great Britain. The three powers had agreed to a treaty in 1889 providing for the neutrality and autonomous government of the Samoan Islands however this broke down when the death of the Samoan king in 1898 and the three imperial states backed rival claimants.

Ross arrived in February 1899 and from his first dispatch quickly supported the British imperial view blaming German agents for fomenting the rising and arming ‘rebel’ Samoans. An example from one of his dispatches to the *Otago Witness* where he invokes the memory of the most notable European to settle in Samoa, Robert Louis Stevenson, shows a writer of some descriptive power before he ends with regrettable cliché.

“Would that the thin, wasted figure of the Scottish scholar had been spared for a few years to finish his footnote to history. In what burning words he would have sent it forth to all the world. But the red-roofed house that just peeps through the palms of Vailima is tenantless. The weeds are running wild in the tropic garden, and we can only make pilgrimage to the

⁶ Palenski, Ron (2007) ‘Malcolm Ross: A forgotten casualty of the Great War’, M.A. Thesis: University of Otago. P.15.

tomb on the mountain that overlooks the harbour where, under the wide and starry sky, the sailor is home from the sea, and the hunter home from the hill".⁷

Ross could enrich his descriptions visually. He took his camera with him and took images of Samoan life and the combatants, apparently ready for action.



This shot is, however, the closest Malcolm Ross ever get to capturing actual combat in all of his war reporting. Many of his photographs in the collection of 261 photographic negatives held by the National Library are distant from their subject and even when Ross gets closer who appears to have no rapport with his subjects. A year after his reportage of the events in Samoa, Ross was back in the South Pacific accompanying the Governor General, Lord Ranfurly, on a voyage which saw the Cook Islands and Niue assimilated into the British Empire. Ross took photographs throughout the voyage and developed the glass plates on board the ship. He outlined the difficulties in a despatch back to

⁷ *Otago Witness*, 16 February 1899, p.20.

the *Otago Witness*: “At night-time I would turn the engineer’s cabin into a photographic darkroom. With every crevice shut, and the lights still burning under a red cloth, it would immediately become a Turkish bath and the perspiration would trickle down and try to spoil my plates”.⁸ The result of all this effort was often disappointing.



The above photograph shows the arrival of Lord Ranfurly’s party in Rarotonga for the ceremony marking the annexation of the Cook Islands. Ross takes the image from a respectful distance and it appears he has made little effort to seek a more visually arresting record. The result and the positioning is very similar to a photograph taken a few months before in Samoa. Again Ross the photographer is distant from the action, seemingly more concerned not to upset the dignitaries rather than getting the shot.

⁸ *Otago Witness*, 21 November 1900, p.11.



This distance from the action and apparent deference to authority marked Ross's photography during World War 1. Certainly Ross was noted for the care with which he fostered his relationships with senior New Zealand politicians, military leaders and the Governor-General. As a parliamentary reporter Ross had formed close links with a number of senior politicians with his home, across the road from Parliament, known as a "frequent rendezvous for keen Parliamentary debates and intelligent discussions".⁹ Ross was particularly friendly with William Massey, the Leader of the Reform Party and New Zealand Prime Minister from 1912 to 1925. This involvement with Reform Party politicians also included James Allen, who would be the minister of Defence in WW1. When Ross was appointed New Zealand's official war correspondent in 1915, the *New Zealand Truth* printed a poem by an anonymous fellow journalist:

⁹ McCallum, Janet (1993). *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Malcolm Ross, p.400a. Cited by Palenski, Ron (2007) 'Malcolm Ross: A forgotten casualty of the Great War', M.A. Thesis: University of Otago. P.15.

Another little tit-bit for Malcolm;
 Another little lucky bag for Ross;
 He's Jamsie's little jewel and joy,
 He's Willie's white-haired boy.
 And he's always so obsequious to the Boss!
 Though other day-lie pen pushers are cross,
 With "Maykum", sure they aren't worth a toss,
 Oh, his pen just shouts aloud,
 And he does his sponsors proud,
 As they turn to gold his literary dross!¹⁰

In this ditty Jamsie is presumed to be James Allen and Willie, William Massey. The poem shows that among fellow correspondents there was the view that Malcolm Ross was not an independent journalist and was far too deferential to the country's political leadership. Certainly Lord Ranfurly was obviously sufficiently comfortable with Ross to invite him to join his party when he visited the Tuhoe people in the Ureweras in 1904. This was another arduous trip but Ross again took his camera and had a very comprehensive photographic record of the trip. It should have been an opportunity to capture the character of the country and its people but again Ross's photography seems distant, disassociated and detached.



¹⁰ *New Zealand Truth* (1915) 'Our war correspondent', September 25, p.7. Cited by Oosterman, Allison (2008). 'Malcolm Ross: From the peaks to the trenches', Unpublished PhD thesis: Auckland University of Technology, p.150.



Photograph courtesy of the National Library of New Zealand, Ref. No.

Even when Ross gets closer to his subjects there is the absence of any rapport with his subjects or the sense of what differentiates a record of an event from a memorable image. Malcolm's wife, Forrestina Ross, was viewed by fellow journalist and editor of the *Fielding Star* Thomas Mills as having a keener news sense than her husband.¹¹ She was also a keen photographer and painter and although few of her photographs survive they also appear to show more flair than those taken by her husband. The following image is credited to her and portrays the Clerk of the course at a Maori race meeting in the Waikato.

¹¹ Mills, T.L. papers, 7291-03 Tapuhi IRN: 693168, Alexander Turnbull library, Wellington. Cited by Oosterman, Allison Oosterman (2005) 'Covering Gallipoli: A New Zealand war correspondent in the age of empires', unpublished conference paper, Australian Media Traditions Conference, University of Canberra, 24/25 November, 2005, p.3.



Photograph courtesy of the National Library of New Zealand, Ref. No. PUBL-0170-002

When the First World War was declared in August 1914, Ross's connections gave him an advantage over his journalist rivals. He persuaded the commander of the New Zealand forces, General Alexander Godley, to allow him to join the advance party to Samoa to wrest control of the German transmission station. Ross had come to know Godley when he was appointed from the British army on the recommendation of Lord Kitchener to head and train New Zealand's military forces in 1910.

Malcolm Ross boarded ship with his camera equipment as the solitary newspaper reporter with the force. However, his approach to the task was signaled when he passed up the opportunity to file a story in New Caledonia when the New Zealand forces met up with Australian naval vessels on the way to Samoa. His reasoning he outlined in a later dispatch:

"One might have posted news of our expedition here, but so far as I was concerned, I decided to play the game and say nothing. Letters sent from here might fall into the hands of the enemy, and, so as far as our expedition was concerned, might give away the whole show."¹²

It may be viewed as an act of patriotic self-censorship or of Ross being unwilling to risk his relationship with General Godley. The *New Zealand Herald* correspondent in New Caledonia had no

¹² Ross, Malcolm (1914) 'The capture of Samoa – the official report', *Otago Daily Times*, p.7.

such qualms and sent off a report about the stopover which was published in the paper on the 3rd of September. The incident appears to show that Ross's instinct as a journalist was secondary to his desire to support the Imperial cause and maintain his position with politicians and army leaders.

Of the photographs Ross took in Samoa none appear to have been used to accompany his dispatches. The *New Zealand Herald* used two pictures of the New Zealand force occupying Samoa on the 16th of September 1914, but neither was by Malcolm Ross. A photograph of the hoisting of the Union Jack in the capital Apia on the 29 August was by Alfred James Tattersall, a New Zealand photographer resident in Samoa at the time.



National Library, Ref: PA1-q-107-32-1

The image taken from an elevated position is far superior to anything taken by Ross where he pictured the New Zealand administrator Colonel Robert Logan reading a proclamation and this shot taken in the road outside the Courthouse pictured above. It might be fairly judged that where Ross positioned himself at this event and the photographs he took indicated that he viewed the pictorial

record as absolutely subsidiary to his primary role as a journalist. There is no indication that despite his interest in photography he sought publication of his World War 1 photographs.



Captioned: 'Street scene showing New Zealand troops and a Samoan group, photographed by Malcolm Ross during the annexation ceremony in Apia, Western Samoa, 29 August 1914.' *Alexander Turnbull Library Ref: 1/4-017527-F.*

Further, there is no evidence that Ross's ability to take and develop photographs was a factor in his appointment as New Zealand's official war correspondent in April 1915. Yet as Caitlin Patrick argues: "There is little doubt that photography was a part of warfare at all levels for the first time during the Great War".¹³ When Ross finally set foot on the Gallipoli peninsula on June 26 1915, some two months after the Anzac landings on April 25, he joined two fellow correspondents who were very active in taking a visual record of what was happening. Ashmead Ellis-Bartlett working for the London Press took still photographs, lantern slides and even films, one of which has been restored by Peter Jackson. The official Australian war correspondent Charles Bean was also a keen photographer and drew pencil sketches whilst based on the peninsula. Examples of his work appear in the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18, Vol.12*. This volume which he co-edited,

¹³ Patrick, Caitlin (2014) 'The Great War: Photography on the Western Front', <http://www.ucd.ie/photoconflic/histories/wwiphotography/> accessed on 30/07/2014. P.1.

was sub-titled 'Photographic Record of the War' and he wrote in the preface that it was intended to "contain in itself, as far as possible, a complete authentic pictorial narrative of the effort of Australia in the war".¹⁴ He further adds that photographs of the Gallipoli campaign are "dependent upon those taken by the Official War Correspondent (that is himself) and by officers and men, who, in consequence of the non-enforcement on the Peninsula of the order against photographers, were enabled to carry their cameras".¹⁵ A photograph by Bean in this history with annotations explaining the action illustrates what was achieved by Bean, Ashmead-Bartlett and other amateur photographers with cameras at Gallipoli. Yet, if as Jane Carmichael writes "during the First World War there was a growing recognition for the status of the topical photograph as a news medium"¹⁶ this does not appear to have influenced Malcolm Ross's approach.



76. SUPPORTS AT "QUINN'S POST" DURING ATTACK OF 29TH MAY, 1915

A company of the 15th Battalion in readiness to counter-attack, about the time of Major Quinn's death. The Turks had exploded a mine and seized a section of trench. Vol. II (ch. vii).
Aust. War Museum Official Photos, Nos. G1006 and 1011.

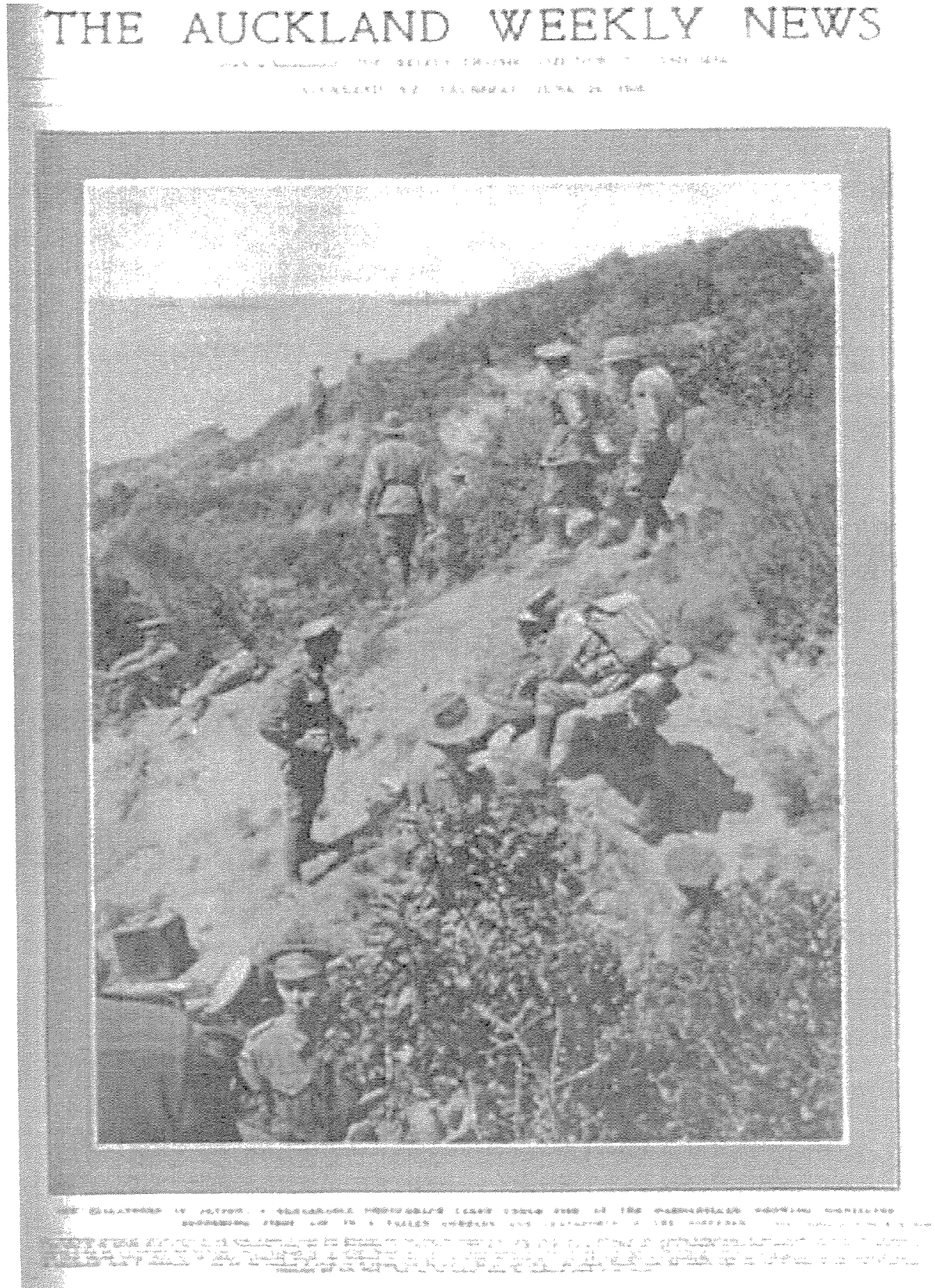
Ross took photographs in Egypt, on the Gallipoli peninsula and on the Western Front but none appear to have accompanied his despatches from the war zone even though his written accounts were being sent by steamer to New Zealand for cost reasons whereas those of Bean and other correspondents were normally sent by telegraph. Although the daily press in New Zealand rarely had photo illustrations, weekly titles such as the *Auckland Weekly News* could be described as 'illustration-driven'. The first photograph of Gallipoli seen by the New Zealand public was printed on the cover of the *Auckland Weekly News* on the 24th of June 1915. Reflecting the desire of the home

¹⁴ Bean, C.E.W. and H.S.Gullett (1939, 12th Ed.) *Official history of Australia in the War of 1914-18. Vol.xii. Photographic Record of the War.* Sydney: Angus & Robertson. P.v.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.vi.

¹⁶ Carmichael, Jane (1989) *First World War Photographers.* London: Routledge. P.146.

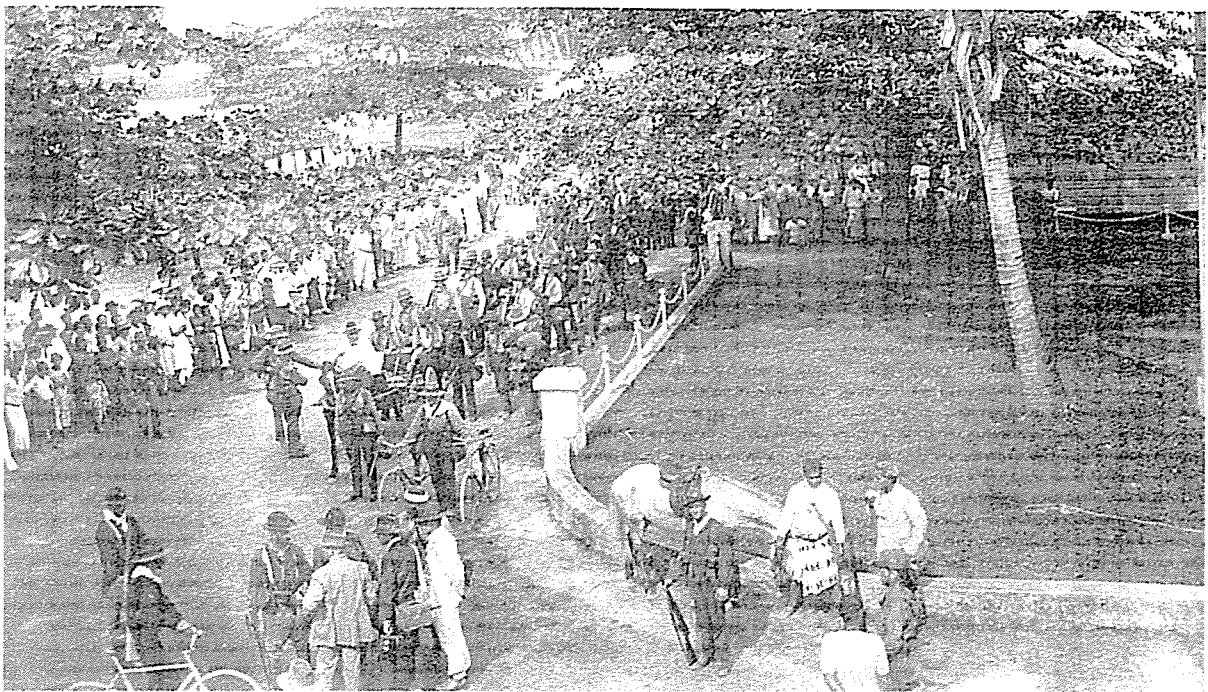
audience to see pictures of where their troops were fighting the publication insisted that it was a remarkable photograph that “should prove of very great interest to every New Zealander”.¹⁷



¹⁷ *The Auckland Weekly News*, 24 June, 1915. P.1.

This photograph was credited to Private R.B.Steele and it is of interest that a soldier was able to take the photograph, send it to Egypt to be developed and then post it to New Zealand whilst the country's official war correspondent, a practised photographer with the ability to develop his own films, did not, as far as we know, seek to accompany his written accounts with photographs from this campaign or the Western Front.

The explanation as to the failure of Ross to add photographs to his dispatches has been explained by the official constraints he worked under. New Zealand military historian Christopher Pugsley says that "censorship regulations prohibited him from having a camera and taking photographs".¹⁸ However, there is evidence that Ross carried his camera openly with him when reporting. For example, in the first action of the war by New Zealand forces in Samoa, a photograph of a crowd lingering after the formal possession of the government buildings in Apia identifies Ross and his camera in the foreground.



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'A crowd lingers after the formal possession of the government buildings in German Samoa has occurred. The man with the camera in the foreground is Malcolm Ross, who later became New Zealand's first official war correspondent.'

National Army Museum 1996-286.¹⁹

¹⁸ Pugsley, Christopher (1995). 'Who is Sanders?' New Zealand's official cameraman on the Western front 1917-1919', Stout Centre Review, Victoria University of Wellington, March 1995, pp.19-22. P.19.

¹⁹ Photo from Harper, Glyn (2008). *Images of War: World War One, a photographic record of New Zealanders at war 1914-1918*. Harper Collins: Auckland. P.33.

Jane Carmichael states that compared to the official prohibition on soldier photography on the Western Front, the attitudes of the British commanders in the Dardanelles were relatively accommodating to the taking of photographs.²⁰ As for official photography, Sandra Callister²¹ notes that an experiment was undertaken where “war correspondents with cameras were allowed”. She maintains that the “New Zealand coverage of Gallipoli was limited, instead, by this very permissiveness: the lack of designated official photographers or accompanying war photographers meant that places and events could only be haphazardly recorded.”²²

New Zealand did not appoint an official war photographer until March 1917 when Henry Armytage Sanders joined the New Zealand troops on the Western Front. Callister comments that the momentum for his appointment had been building for some time with the New Zealand public demanding to see their troops playing their role in history²³ and Pugsley adds: “Now – for the first time – New Zealand audiences had images to go with the words”.²⁴ Of course this was not strictly the case as photos supplied by soldiers had often filled the gap, but now there were officially authorised visuals to accompany Ross’ despatches.

The issue remains, however, that Ross was capable from Samoa to Gallipoli and on to the Western Front of supplying images to accompany his words. So why did he not do so? The picture we can draw of his actions indicate some possible reasons. First, Ross can be viewed as a closer associate of the other estates of the realm rather than the ‘Fourth Estate’. There was his close association with the New Zealand Prime Minister William Massey and the Minister of Defence James Allen, his friendship with the former British Governor in New Zealand, Lord Ranfurly, and his relationship with the commander of New Zealand forces, General Alexander Godley. He socialised with these members of the political and military elite, he benefited from his connection with them in his journalistic work and he shared their imperial and political outlook²⁵. Ross was not a critical journalist or photojournalist. His personality appears detached and somewhat disassociated with a strong inclination to conform. It would be unsurprising that Ross would follow any rules, strictures or regulations that political or military masters asked of him. If the command said no photographs Ross would obey even though his fellow correspondents and large numbers of New Zealand and Australian soldiers disregarded the order.

²⁰ Carmichael, Jane (1989) *First World War Photographers*. London: Routledge, p.35.

²¹ Callister, Sandra (2005) ‘War, seen through photographs, darkly; the photographic representation of World War One from a New Zealand perspective’, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Auckland, p.95.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, p.107

²⁴ Pugsley, p.19.

²⁵ Oosterman writes “...Ross’s colours were firmly nailed to the political mast....It was well known that the papers Ross wrote for supported a conservative political position. It was not unexpected that Ross had similar leanings.”p.300.

Second, it would appear that Ross lacked confidence in his own abilities and was very deferential, both to those with authority and to those whom he felt were better writers. Allison Oosterman quotes the Australian correspondent on Gallipoli Charles Bean who wrote about Ross that: "He has been an outspoken admirer of Bartlett's (British correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett) from the day B. arrived here, almost to the point of toadyism – but B. is so brilliant that I think it may be just honest admiration."²⁶ However, Bean went on to say that: "At the same time I have heard him give away B. behind his back in a manner which completely staggered me". It was this last comment that leads Oosterman to speculate that it could have been Ross that alerted the British Commander General Hamilton that an Australian journalist, Keith Murdoch, was carrying a damaging letter by Ashmead-Bartlett to the Prime Minister Asquith which led to Bartlett's being banished from Gallipoli. I believe that such an action would fit with the profile of the disassociated conformist.



²⁶ Oosterman, p.172.

However, the story of Malcolm Ross is finally the story of an individual who did not achieve, as New Zealand's first official war correspondent, peer or public expectations in the position for either his written words or his photographs. It also draws attention to the demands that an individual reporter can excel at two skills, the written word and the image. The example shown in this paper is of the coverage of the raising of the British flag in Samoa as New Zealand troops move in as the occupying force. Ross is positioned at ground level to take down the words of the appointed New Zealand administrator Colonel Robert Logan. Tattersall, the photographer who captured the image used in the New Zealand press, sought the best position to cover the event visually and moved up to a first floor balcony to look down on the delivery of a proclamation he probably never heard. Perhaps a clear demonstration of two skills which question the notion of the journalist as scribe and image-maker.

And a final image from Malcolm Ross. One of the last military actions by New Zealand troops in World War 1 was the capture of the walled town of Le Quesnoy on November 4th 1918. They had scaled the walls of the town with ladders and caught the German defenders by surprise. Ross captured the victory parade of the troops through the town – from behind.



