

Book review

MAKE HER PRAISES HEARD AFAR: NEW ZEALAND WOMEN OVERSEAS IN WORLD WAR ONE

Jane Tolerton

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World War One has been explored in depth by many historians. Numerous histories have been written about a range of aspects of the war – from the ANZACs and landings at Gallipoli, to the home front and conscientious objectors. Indeed, such is the depth and breadth of our history at war, some may question if there is any history of World War One left for historians to explore. In *Make her praises heard afar: New Zealand women overseas in World War One*, Jane Tolerton presents an extensive and engaging collection of biographies. She intimately details the experiences of New Zealand women who left the comfort of their homes to take on active roles overseas during World War One. Tolerton argues that despite our large appetite for histories of this period, the history of women with active roles overseas has, until now, been at best ignored, at worst suppressed.

This exclusion fits prevailing gendered narratives that structure the history of women at war in a wider sense. More particular to New Zealand, Tolerton attributes the relative silence regarding this facet of New Zealand's history to a dominant historical narrative that reserves World War One for the men, and presents Suffrage as the key story for women to tell (p. 3). Tolerton convincingly argues that even recently explored histories of New Zealand women active overseas during World War One continue to conform to gendered notions of women at war, by focusing on 'New Zealand women as nurses and VADs, "lady visitors" of soldiers in hospitals and "lady helpers" in soldiers clubs and staying silent about those who worked in "non-traditional areas"' (p. 3).

Tolerton approaches this lost history by telling it through the intensely personal stories of New Zealand women who travelled abroad during a time of great conflict to take on both traditional and non-traditional roles. She uses a wealth of historical evidence to achieve this, including letters home, diary entries, newspaper articles, and oral history. The cover of the book highlights the names of 14 specific women, and as a reader you could be forgiven for thinking that the book might follow these women and their stories predominantly. However, Tolerton draws on the stories of many New Zealand women to illustrate vividly the varied contributions they made to the war effort overseas. The large number of contributions allows for an extensive investigation into these different roles, and is indicative of the rich history that Tolerton has uncovered.

Of particular interest to readers may be the stories of women in occupations not traditionally associated with women and World War One. I found the story of Alice Scott, of Ngā Puhī descent and living in London with her English husband, of particular interest given the circumstances and actions of Alice herself and the ways in which Māori culture was embraced within the English context. Alice had three small children at the time of World War One, but despite this, she opened her home to establish a convalescent home and hostel for Māori soldiers. Drawing on the detailed letters of Sybil Lee, a New Zealand woman who also worked at the convalescent home, Tolerton has pieced together the impact that Alice had on those soldiers in her charge. The care offered by both her and Sybil went beyond traditional western expectations, and included providing the soldiers with traditional New Zealand foods. Sybil describes tracking down some crayfish for a seriously wounded Māori soldier in a bid to raise his spirits and health, which, by all accounts, worked. The retelling of Alice's Christmas party, which included 40 Māori soldiers as guests, complete with a hāngī in the backyard, a haka, and waiata, also makes for fascinating reading. The story of Alice Scott's Māori convalescent home in London also mirrors those established narratives New Zealanders already associate (rightly or wrongly) with the First World War. Sybil Lee, a Pākehā woman herself, writes fondly of the Māori soldiers in London and makes a point of mentioning in her letters that 'it is pretty to see how proud our boys are of them and most indignant if anyone disparages them' (p. 87).

Alongside stories of care for soldiers in London are biographies of New Zealand women who risked, and sometimes lost, their lives in the line of enemy fire. Sister Elsie Kemp nursed the wounded on the Western Front. During the bombing raids that became more frequent, Sister Kemp bravely chose to remain with her patients, rather than seek shelter. It was this decision and her dedication to service that led her to become the only New Zealand born nurse to be killed by enemy fire. Katharine Fulton arrived in France during 1918 to be a 'chauffeur', not realising the extent to which she would become intimately involved in the realities of war. Her role as an ambulance driver meant long hours and working under the constant threat of enemy fire as she drove through the bombing of Soissons. Her heroic acts were later acknowledged by the French and she was 'awarded the Croix de Guerre for bravery and composure under shellfire' (p.307). These three vignettes only scratch the surface of the biographies Tolerton presents in her book – some that are uniquely New Zealand in their description, others that reference familiar themes found among the histories of other nations involved in World War One.

Make her praises heard afar is described on its cover as being 'written for readability', and indeed Tolerton is a consummate storyteller, painting vivid pictures of the lives of the women involved through both her narrative and the extensive visuals woven throughout the book. However, the structure of the book is a little unusual. Following the chronology of the war, it jumps from person and place, making it difficult to follow the story of a particular woman who may have caught your attention. I found myself dipping in and out of the book, reading vignettes of courageous women in far off places, and then leaving the book to come back to it later. While perhaps beyond the scope of this book, it would be interesting to hear Tolerton's views in more depth regarding why she believes New Zealand differs so dramatically from its Commonwealth and American counterparts by leaving such an interesting part of its history in the shadows.

This collection of biographies will appeal not only to those historians with an interest in the history of women at war, but also to those more generally interested in New Zealand's experiences during World War One. Tolerton's extensively researched book succeeds in challenging the notion that the history of New Zealand during World War One has been written in its entirety. Indeed, after reading *Make her praises heard afar* it seems astonishing that the stories of these women and many others have, until now, been largely absent from our history.

Make her praises heard afar makes a substantial contribution to the history of New Zealand and World War One by 'putting women back in the picture' (p.1). Its strength lies in the depth of research undertaken by Tolerton and her ability to ensure that such a wide range of different stories are powerfully communicated.

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