

## *The Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict*

THROUGHOUT THIS BOOK, THE CONTEMPORARY BRITISH interpretation of the battles and campaigns of the New Zealand Wars has been investigated in as much detail as the events themselves. The purpose of this has been to go beyond the mere detection of 'bias' in the British writings which dominate the historical record, and seek to understand how that bias worked. This concluding chapter summarizes the results of the investigation, and offers an explanation for the pattern of interpretation which emerges. It then suggests that these findings have a wider application: that they can be used, at least in cases of racial warfare, to alleviate the problem of one-sided evidence.

### I THE DOMINANT INTERPRETATION

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH OPINIONS ABOUT THE NEW Zealand Wars can be discussed as a single 'dominant interpretation' in two senses. Firstly, the British interpretation dominated the Maori as far as the written record was concerned. Whatever their historical success, historically the British won the New Zealand Wars hands down. The second sense is perhaps less obvious. Throughout the Wars, there were some British commentators who doubted their compatriots' victory claims, and even gave the Maoris some of the credit due to them. Their opinions help make revision possible. But, normally, these commentators did not put their pieces of information together to form an idea of the Maori military system. Those few who did were overwhelmed, ignored, set aside, or forgotten. The more objective or generous British interpreters form an important minority in recognizing the existence and impact of specific Maori victories, but they tended to rejoin the mainstream of interpretation in incorrectly explaining them, in ascribing them to particular rather than general causes. Moreover, it was the mainstream of interpretation which was the more widely received and accepted. It was endorsed, repeated, and amplified until it became the dominant interpretation; the general rule which absorbed, replaced, or *dominated* the exceptions.

The dominant interpretation rarely involved overt hypocrisy or conscious

distortion—indeed, it was compatible with real respect for some Maori qualities, and with a humanitarian ‘philo-Maori’ position. It was not a culpable act of deception for which its authors should be chastised, but it did produce a fundamentally and systematically false picture of the New Zealand Wars.

In different respects, the dominant interpretation can be understood as a system and as a framework. It was not systematic in the sense of an artifice or conspiracy; there was no collective and methodical censorship, no conscious plot to deceive. But it was systematic in the sense that it operated according to a discernible pattern which, broadly speaking, remained constant from case to case. It was also systematic in that its component parts formed an integrated whole. The components were numerous, diverse, and sometimes logically contradictory, but they addressed connected problems, maximized each other’s strengths, and compensated for each other’s weaknesses. Their relationship can be understood as that of a succession of safety nets, each filtering out a further share of the unacceptable facts and implications which had escaped those above it.

In other respects, the dominant interpretation had the character of a framework: a collection of limits containing within it considerable room for variation. Interpreters of the New Zealand Wars shared a British heritage, but otherwise they were a diverse lot, ranging from privates to generals, missionaries to settler politicians, Wanganui newspaper correspondents to London newspaper editors. Their accounts naturally varied substantially; there were great differences in emphasis, and sometimes intense conflicts between opposing schools of thought. But, in the final analysis, the British interpretation was more remarkable for its consistency than its diversity. The set of options was large, but it was limited by pressures to which virtually all interpreters were subject. They could select varying combinations of options, but they could not extend the set. Occurrences such as defeat evoked responses drawn from the same restricted range. Diversity and internecine debate was contained within a greater unity, a framework flexible but strong.

The functioning of the dominant interpretation can be summarized as follows. The dynamic force behind it was the expectation of victory. This sometimes led to the exaggeration of real British victories and the creation of fictional ones. Where defeat was recognized, the jarring disjuncture between event and expectation created a traumatic shock, which then had to be alleviated, mainly through the development of acceptable explanations for the disaster. British stereotypes of their own and of Maori military abilities determined what was acceptable and what was not. Unacceptable implications which survived this part of the process were subsequently downplayed, obscured, or forgotten.

The enormously powerful British expectation of victory pervades the interpretation of the Wars. Sometimes, it proved so strong that it simply overshoot the evidence—given one element of an equation, commentators would deduce the second from the principle that the British always won battles

against savages. In 1864, one writer referred to the Maori victory of Puketutu during the Northern War as follows: 'Engaged on both sides here, the rear rank of the soldiers faced round and charged with the bayonet. Further description is superfluous.'<sup>1</sup> At Cracroft's *pa* at Waireka in 1860, the presence of the enemy was also superfluous, and the expectation of victory created a fictional triumph.

This tendency often acted in concert with a reluctance to credit the Maoris with strategic finesse and the ability to co-ordinate the movements of two or more groups, and with the propensity to exaggerate Maori numbers and casualties. As we have seen, the combined effect was the frequent creation of fictional victories, and the still more frequent exaggeration of real ones. The expectation of victory also meant that when defeats were recognized, they created a massive shock. British responses to defeat basically consisted in an effort to absorb this shock; through some kind of palliative, which counter-balanced the disaster; through a satisfying explanation which softened the blow by providing acceptable reasons for it; or through a suppressive reflex, whereby the defeat was played down, ignored, or forgotten.

One kind of palliative involved taking that aspect of a lost battle in which the British had been least unsuccessful, and treating it as an autonomous operation. This ameliorated or even nullified the disastrous aspects. Another common palliative was the exaggeration of Maori casualties. The thin red line may have been worsted, but not before it had piled the ground high with Maori corpses. High Maori casualties might be deduced from 'bloodstained trenches' observed after a battle or from the number 'seen to fall'. British accounts were liberally peppered with both phrases. The former made a corpse from a cut finger, while the latter ignored Maori combat practice: when you were fired at, or about to be fired at, you instantly dropped to the ground. The British knew of this practice—some colonial units adopted it—but its implication for estimates of Maori losses were rarely acknowledged.<sup>2</sup>

Hard evidence of Maori casualties was often manipulated. When Maori estimates of their own casualties were received, the British dismissed or discounted them, or assumed that they referred only to chiefs. When Maori bodies were counted after a battle, it was assumed that many more had been carried off. This assumption was sometimes true, but more often it was both gratuitous and false. On one occasion, it was too much even for the colonial press. 'It is generally supposed that the Hau Haus have been exterminated to the extent of something under 10,000, but with the usual tact and consideration that distinguishes these playful creatures, they have done their own undertaking and removed the entire lot.'<sup>3</sup> British exaggeration of Maori casualties was also important in the manipulation of victory, but it had its greatest impact as a palliative for defeat. The more damaging or embarrassing the defeat, the greater the tendency to inflate Maori losses. On some occasions high estimates of Maori casualties lacked even a frail basis in fact, and were created purely by the need for them. 'Their wounded are not more than 8', wrote one British commentator, 'our wounded come to near

100. From this it will be seen that a large number of them must have been lost in the lagoon.’<sup>4</sup>

Palliatives were important, but the main way of ameliorating the shock of defeat was to offer acceptable explanations for it. The first and most simple acceptable explanation was overwhelming Maori numbers. There was a tendency to exaggerate Maori numbers at all times, but immediately after British defeats it suddenly became acute. The interpretation of the Battle of Puketakauere provides a good example of this. As with the exaggeration of Maori casualties, slender favourable evidence was accepted, strong contrary evidence was rejected and, on occasion, no evidence at all was required. The British were outnumbered because they were beaten, and they were beaten because they were outnumbered. The exaggeration of enemy strength is very common in war, and emphasis on it may seem to belabour the obvious. But the tendency was pervasive, influential, and persistent. The Maori achieved what they did with a quarter as many fighting men as most contemporary British believed, and half as many as most historians believe.

A still more important acceptable explanation was to attribute defeat to the deficiencies of the military forces. Englishmen were not unaccustomed to criticizing their generals. The emphasis on the responsibility of the leader, as with the hero-worship of Nelson and Wellington, could apply to defeat as well as victory, as the Crimean War showed. But it seems fair to suggest that the New Zealand scapegoat hunt was unusual in degree if not in kind. Of the thirteen Imperial and colonial officers who held independent commands of any importance during the Wars, not one escaped severe criticism. Other theatres of war have been the graveyard of reputations, but the death rate was rarely quite this high.

If attacks on the leadership in New Zealand were unusual in degree, the other aspect of the criticism of the military was extremely unusual in kind. This was the series of aspersions cast on the quality of the rank and file. The 96th, 40th, and 43rd regiments were heavily criticized for their performances at Kororareka, Orakau, and the Gate Pa respectively. The 43rd, which had one of the highest reputations of any active regiment, and their naval partners at the Gate Pa, Britain’s favourite fighting men, appeared as ‘arrant cowards’. Even the frontiersmen-soldiers of the colonial forces, so highly praised for their prospective deeds before they took the field, found themselves subjected to terrible abuse after their defeats in 1868.

Both failed leaders and failed troops could be seen as exceptions to the rule of British military excellence, rather than evidence that the rule itself was questionable. In 1860, the *New-Zealander* was ‘driven to a very painful contrast between our commanders who imperil New Zealand, and those who saved our Indian Empire two years ago’. Similarly, failures by the troops cast doubt, not on the over-all reputation of British soldiers, but on the failure of particular units to live up to it. ‘If the 96th is a specimen of the [new] army, the sooner the Horse Guards incorporates the pensioners, the Old Peninsula and Waterloo men, the better.’ Colonial soldiers, as ‘troops of British lineage’, were victims of the same high expectations.<sup>5</sup>

When British commentators acknowledged the failure of their officers and men, but could not bring themselves to ascribe it to cowardice or incompetence, they did not shrink from offering mysterious or even ridiculous explanations. In 1868, a colonial writer regretted that 'some fatality appears to hang over our colonial forces, for, let them be commanded and officered in as seemingly efficient a manner as possible, still they are doomed to discomfiture.' In 1860, the *Times* of London offered the following explanation for British failures in the Taranaki War: 'Can it be that the very insignificance coupled with the boastful insolence of the enemy unsteadies our men and puzzles our commanders, just as at chess a bad and reckless player is sometimes more formidable than a master of the game?' There was something strangely desperate about the great New Zealand scapegoat hunt.<sup>6</sup>

A third favoured explanation for British difficulties was sometimes used in concert with assertions of military incompetence, but it appeared most often as the counter to such allegations. This was the argument that British problems were primarily the result of the New Zealand terrain, in combination with various Maori 'natural advantages'. We have seen that problems of terrain were sometimes exaggerated. Rough country was common, but the Maoris often selected fairly accessible positions and waited to be attacked in them. Still more questionable was the concept of special abilities: advantages which were very useful, but of a distinctly 'lower' type. The capacity to 'burrow like rabbits through the high fern' was one. 'Anyone who knows what it is to shoot a snipe or a rat when running, can form some idea of the motion of a native in the bush.' The Maoris were also blessed with inborn aquatic skills. 'Amphibious in their habits, they are as much at home in the water as on land.' Innate Maori bushcraft, whereby they 'appeared and disappeared in the most marvellous way', was stressed time and time again by British writers. These abilities made possible the characteristically evasive Maori tactics.<sup>7</sup>

The kernel of truth was deceptive. The Maoris were skilled in bushcraft, and some were good swimmers and boat-handlers, but these talents were of limited use in constructing and utilizing the modern *pā* that were the main British problem and the major cause of their defeats. The emphasis on 'natural advantages' not only provided false but acceptable explanations of defeat, but also helped to create a false picture of the wars as guerilla conflicts where the problem was not beating the enemy but finding him.

The fourth common explanation was to attribute Maori success to imitation. After inspecting some Maori entrenchments, one British officer suggested that perhaps 'the most studious of them have been reading our works published on fortification.'<sup>8</sup> Few commentators were happy to attribute successful imitation to Maori scholarship, however, and allusions to European renegades acting as the medium of information were more common. After inspecting the scene of his defeat at Ohaeawai *pā* in 1845, Colonel Despard wrote: 'The strength of the place has struck me with surprise, and I cannot help feeling convinced that the Natives could not have constructed

it without some European assistance.<sup>9</sup> Six months later, white men were rumoured to have shown the Maoris how to make breastworks at Ruapekapeka, and allusions to renegades imparting European knowledge were to recur throughout the wars.<sup>10</sup>

The Europeans supposedly responsible for Maori military education were usually British army deserters, but the range included Australian convicts, American traders, Irish Fenians, and French missionaries. Colonel H. J. Warre breathlessly informed his superiors that there could be 'very little doubt that the Maori insurrection has been encouraged and fostered by Foreign Priests'.<sup>11</sup> There are indications that a few Europeans did help the Maoris, and this may be worth further study, but their aid usually took the form of arms and ammunition.<sup>12</sup> A few British deserters actually lived and fought with the Maoris, but their status was low. Moreover, the private soldiers involved were hardly in a position to give instruction on a system of fortification which was a mystery to their generals—'our works published on fortification' would have been of little help to the Maoris even if they had access to them. Normally, however, these questions did not arise, because there were no deserters with the particular Maori groups referred to. Their presence was simply deduced from the quality of the Maori entrenchments.

These explanations had two things in common: they were acceptable to the British, and they were inaccurate. What defined acceptability and precluded accuracy was a British stereotype of Maori military abilities. British commentators were quite capable of recognizing some Maori qualities: courage, chivalry, dexterity at guerilla methods, and intuitive or traditional fort-building skill. But there were others that they were reluctant to acknowledge. For some commentators, these included good marksmanship, discipline, and the capacity for sustained and well-organized physical labour. We have seen that these features of the dominant interpretation properly belong in the dustbin of historical apocrypha. Collectively, they could result in quite serious distortion: some Maori victories could not be explained without reference to good shooting, battle discipline, and high work-rates. But a still more important aspect of the stereotype was the reluctance to credit the Maori with the higher military talents: the capacity to co-ordinate, to think strategically, and to innovate tactically and technically.

Occasionally, the British belief that the Maori lacked these talents was explicit, though it was usually coupled with a reference to their possession of other qualities. The Maori were 'clever at building stockades and fighting in the bush', according to the *Nelson Examiner*, but 'incapable of combination'. Colonel Carey freely acknowledged Maori bush-fighting ability, but stated categorically that 'no strategical knowledge was shewn by the Maori in his plans'. 'With all their cleverness', wrote Von Tempsky, the Maoris 'have not the true military sagacity'.<sup>13</sup> But the decisive evidence for the existence of this belief is implicit, though clear and overwhelming. The British consistently sought to avoid the conclusion that the Maori possessed the higher military talents, despite the fact that a major manifestation of these talents,

the modern *pa*, was constantly before them. Instead, they searched widely and desperately for alternative explanations for their defeats and difficulties.

This tendency was more complicated than simply not seeing what one did not wish to see. For some British interpreters, it was less a failure to perceive than a reluctance to recognize. In 1869, Colonel Whitmore, in commenting on a minor ambush set by Titokowaru, noted that individual scouts had been permitted to pass unmolested. He suspected that the chief had done this intentionally, to avoid springing the trap prematurely, but he expressed this conclusion very tentatively: 'If this surmise is too civilised a motive for his [Titokowaru's] movements, it is very difficult to understand why he permitted so many individuals travelling almost alone to pass . . . and reserved his attack for the strongest party likely to pass.'<sup>14</sup> Whitmore was no fool; he had recent hard experience of Titokowaru's abilities, yet he still hesitated to credit him with so simple a trick.

Good enemy tactics and strategy were relatively easy to overlook or avoid, but sophisticated Maori field engineering was more tangible and, consequently, less easily ignored. The British often occupied abandoned modern *pa*, and the facts of construction stared them in the face. The more able and open-minded of them were not always content to attribute the quality of these fortifications to Maori tradition, instinct, or mimicry. But their recognition of Maori ability was incomplete or short-lived. In early 1846, the newly-arrived Governor Grey—a trained army officer—produced a relatively enlightened memorandum on war against the Maori. Like most other analysts, he unduly emphasized Maori guerilla skills, but he acknowledged that their *pa* were formidable, impregnable to light artillery. But he concluded: 'there is, however, no doubt that a battery of 18-pounders, of 24-pounders, or of 32-pounders, would in hours knock these stockades to pieces.'<sup>15</sup> Grey's insight was real but partial. He recognized that Maori anti-artillery defences created a problem, but assumed that it was amenable to a simple quantitative solution.

A few British officers, including General Cameron, had a more comprehensive understanding of the modern *pa* than Grey. After leaving New Zealand, Cameron became Governor of Sandhurst, the institution in which British army officers were trained. He was succeeded by General Frederick Middleton who, as an Ensign in the 58th regiment, had seen service in New Zealand.<sup>16</sup> From 1866 to 1884, the military education of British officers was controlled by men who had first-hand knowledge of the effectiveness of sophisticated earthworks. Cameron in particular knew as much about modern *pa* as any European and the Waikato War was the major active command of his career. Cameron took his training job seriously, and his tenure was marked by persistent attempts at reform in the face of great difficulties, but neither he nor Middleton, as the British performance in later wars made clear, passed on any of their knowledge of trench and bunker systems.

Another officer, George Greaves, later a full general and prominent member of the 'Wolseley Ring', actually described modern *pa* as 'perfect examples of field-fortification'. In 1920, in the preface to Greaves's *Memoirs*,

Field-Marshal Earl Haig wrote: 'I cannot name any other general from whom I learnt more practical soldiering.'<sup>17</sup> Haig, of course, was the Commander-in-Chief of British armies on the Western Front in 1915-18. We can perhaps gather from this how much the 'perfect examples of field-fortification' taught Greaves about the tactical limitations of offensives against earthworks.

Military thinking is often glacial in its rate of change, and these examples are merely suggestive anecdotes. But the officers concerned came closer than their fellows to understanding the Maori military system, and the fact that they came so far and no further is illuminating. Their knowledge was set aside, or held at arms length. It was not taken on board, not fully incorporated into their understanding of warfare. They failed to grasp that Maori methods formed an original and innovative military system—a system which cast doubt on the conventional axioms of European warfare. Most British interpreters, believing that Maoris could not possess the higher military talents, neither heard nor listened to the lessons of the Maori system. The relatively enlightened minority heard, but they did not listen.

The British stereotype of Maori military abilities created the limits within which their interpretation had to operate. According to the stereotype, certain Maori abilities did not exist, and consequently could not be used to explain British defeats and difficulties. In particular, Maori strategic skill and field-engineering innovation, products of the higher military talents, were the last explanation to occur to the British observer. Since they were also the true explanation, the whole British interpretation was reduced to something like an attempt to explain a football game without reference to the ball.

Acceptable explanations were the most pervasive feature of the dominant interpretation. But, constrained as they were by the British stereotype of Maori abilities, explanations alone were not always found to be sufficient. A residue of unpleasant implications remained, and this was dealt with by what might be described as a suppressive reflex: a tendency to play down, obscure, or forget the unacceptable. Such tendencies existed during the war period, but their main effect was retrospective. As the years passed by, they became the point where the contemporary interpretation of the wars merged imperceptibly into historiography.

Those writers who discussed the wars in the years after 1872 sometimes scoffed at contemporary panic, and implied that the whole struggle was a storm in a tea-cup. We have seen how this tendency worked in the case of Titokowaru and the crisis of 1868. Its persistence is reflected in the statement of the respected historian James Hight, made in 1933 in the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, to introduce the chapter on the wars. 'The wars have no claim to any great importance except for the political and sociological questions involved. They were small in scale, taught few, if any, striking lessons in the art of war, and are scarcely entitled to be classed in the category of "war" as recognised by international law.'<sup>18</sup> This assertion was a legacy of earlier interpretations, rather than a deduction for



which Hight was wholly responsible, but for all that it could hardly be less true.

A more subtle but equally persistent form of suppression was to obscure Maori success, and the problem of how it was achieved; to distract attention from it by emphasizing other aspects of the Maori performance. Praise for Maori courage and chivalry, one of the more attractive elements of the dominant interpretation, was unfortunately a case in point. Contemporary British recognition of Maori courage and chivalry did occur, it was sincere, and soldiers and settlers deserve full credit for it. But it did not reflect a British capacity objectively to assess the Maori military performance as a whole. Indeed, it helped conceal their failure to do so.

Maori heroism at Orakau, in particular, was widely admired. Cameron and Gamble, the Deputy Quartermaster-General, praised the garrison's bravery, and they are much quoted. Similar praise from colonial writers is now less well known, but even authors very hostile to the Maori cause, such as Fox and Featon, commended their courage at Orakau. During the battle, Rewi or one of his subordinates had responded to a British call for surrender with the words: '*kaore e mau te rongoa—ake ake*' ('Peace shall never be made—never, never'). Various versions of this became compulsory quoting in discussions of the wars; perhaps the most famous phrase in New Zealand history, with an entry all of its own in the national *Encyclopaedia* of 1965. As the Orakau legend burgeoned, the reality languished. The tactical brilliance of the counter-attack which led to the Maori escape, their strategic blunder in fighting at Orakau, the British massacre of women and wounded, and the fact that the battle had little over-all effect, were all obscured by the emphasis on romantic heroism, and on the British recognition of it. But British generosity, though real, was deceptive. Gamble wrote lyrically of the garrison's escape from Orakau 'calmly, in the face of death' in a 'silent and compact body', but he also believed Maoris to be 'incapable of prompt and organised action on emergencies'.<sup>19</sup> Admiration for some Maori qualities, such as courage and chivalry, gave British accounts the appearance of objectivity, not the reality.

The emphasis on Maori courage and chivalry began during the wars, but it increased greatly soon after them, growing almost to the point where it subsumed all else. Through histories, novels, poems, school texts, paintings, and film it perpetuated the notion of the wars as a limited fight with gloves on, a breeding-ground of mutual respect. The effects of this largely false picture on the race-relations legend have already been noted, and it also functioned to conceal the need for revision and obscure other aspects of the Maori performance—aspects ultimately more important than courage and chivalry. For to describe the Maori war effort primarily as brave and chivalrous is to offer a deceptive fraction of the truth, rather like describing Napoleon Bonaparte simply as a good brother. Yet it is this aspect of the Maori performance on which most attention has been focused. Pitifully enough, the closest thing to a historical debate on the wars is over precisely which member of the Orakau garrison said '*ake ake*'.

The stress on courage and chivalry was the most important way in which British defeats and their cause were obscured by an alternative emphasis, but it was not the only one. Colonial writers emphasized Maori 'atrocities' as much as their courage and this performed a similar function. The cannibalism of Titokowaru's followers received more attention than his brilliance as a general. The tendency to portray Te Kooti as the most able and formidable of Maori military leaders had the same effect. The least successful of the Maori generals, in the strictly military sense, Te Kooti became the best known.

The suppressive reflex had a direct effect on particularly embarrassing events which were difficult to accommodate in other ways, and perhaps it also exerted a less tangible influence. The half century after 1872 was in some respects an assertive phase of white New Zealand culture, though it remained Anglocentric. Proud references were made to the progress of the country, and to the peacetime achievements of the colonial pioneers. The colony—a titular 'Dominion' from 1908—happily shouldered more than its share of the South African and First World Wars. This was a time when one might have expected more use to be made of the budding nation's warlike past. After all, the colony had been at war for more than half of its first thirty years and, in proportion to the population, the conflict was large in scale. Instead of contenting themselves with imported military glory, patriotic writers could have dwelt upon the deeds of their own expeditions, colourful units, and heroes. Suitably interpreted, the wars could provide a rich harvest in these respects; stories of Ngatapa and the Urewera Campaign, 'Buck's Bravos' and 'The Young Brigade', 'Fighting Mac' and the Mair brothers, were not inherently inferior to imported martial legends.

A few writers did attempt to do the wars in this way, including T. W. Gudgeon in *Reminiscences of the Maori Wars and Defenders of New Zealand* and G. Hamilton-Browne in his works on the Armed Constabulary. To some extent, James Cowan belongs in this category. But these writers self-confessedly wrote to fill a gap, to rescue an exciting and instructive past from a present which for some reason neglected it. They sought to lead, not follow, public opinion. Gudgeon wrote to save his comrades in arms from the oblivion which already threatened them by 1879, Hamilton-Browne called his Armed Constabulary 'the Lost Legion', and, in 1922, Cowan wrote that 'in testing the historical knowledge of the average New Zealander the fact is too apparent that the young generation would be better for a more systematic schooling in the facts of national pioneer life and achievements which are a necessary foundation for the larger patriotism'. His books on the wars were designed to help correct 'this deficiency in the popular mentality'.<sup>20</sup> But these writers failed in their efforts. As the basis of 'the larger patriotism', the New Zealand Wars did not capture the people's imagination. The children played old-world soldiers at Waterloo, not Rangiriri, and new-world soldiers at the Wagon Box, not Ngatapa.

Why? A certain lack of cultural independence and of a New Zealand historical sense may have contributed. But one suspects that this was as

much an effect as a cause. Disguising reality is difficult, and the efficiency of the mechanisms outlined above was not absolute. The story of the wars had been rendered more palatable by scapegoat hunting, by neglecting Maori innovation, by emphasizing their chivalry or their barbarism. It had been laundered time and time again, but stubborn stains still remained. There were just too many Little Big Horns in New Zealand's Wild West. So Gudgeon, Hamilton-Browne, and even Cowan, pushed their barrow uphill. The suppressive reflex was the fail-safe device of the dominant interpretation. The final safety-net was to forget.

## II THE BACKGROUND OF IDEAS

SOME ASPECTS OF THE BRITISH INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW Zealand Wars will be very familiar to readers of military history. Contemporary accounts of most wars tend to be biased towards the writer's own party. But the natural predilection for reports favouring one's own side is not enough to explain the interpretative phenomenon outlined above. Unacceptable facts and implications were suppressed almost to the point of overkill, and the real explanation of British defeats was avoided with a desperation that might be described as psychotic in an individual. In the search for alternative explanations, the British did not stop short of verbally crucifying their own generals, nor of stretching credibility to its limits. Why did this dominant interpretation exist, and why did it have these characteristics?

The explanation offered here is that the dominant interpretation was the product of a dialectic between events and preconceptions. Some preconceptions were so widely shared and so highly valued that most British commentators protected them from threatening evidence. Protection took the form of converting the realities into the least unpalatable shape possible, through the various mechanisms outlined above. It was a two-way struggle, and preconceptions did not always win; sometimes the evidence was simply too blatant to be suppressed or acceptably explained. But there was always a pressure to bring events into conformity with expectations.

Most of the relevant preconceptions were related to the body of thought known as Victorian ideas of race. An extensive literature exists on this subject, and no attempt at a full examination is possible here, but it should be noted that Victorian racial thought was older, more complicated, and less intentionally malign than is sometimes implied. The purpose here is not retrospectively to apply current criteria to these ideas, but to assess their effects on an influential historical interpretation. The nineteenth-century British were neither the first nor the last group of people to see their success as evidence of their inherent superiority, and to look to racial and other hypotheses to rationalize this belief. Our society, no doubt, has its own ethnocentric preconceptions, and we should therefore curb our self-righteousness in discussing those of others. But this is no good reason for acquiescing in the addition of their problems to our own.

One effect of British racial attitudes was the totally unselfconscious use of an ethnocentric system of measurement; a culture-specific frame of reference. European styles of military organization and generalship were wrongly assumed to be the only effective forms. Te Kooti was believed to be the most able Maori leader partly because he adopted some of the accoutrements of European generalship. On horseback, 'attired in a red shirt with boots and breeches, a sword suspended from his side', communicating with his subordinates by orderly, Te Kooti seemed to control his forces in a way the British understood.<sup>21</sup> A more traditional Maori command system was not so easily recognizable. Similarly, it was difficult for the British to accept that the King Movement was an effective military organization. Where was the chain of command, the staff, and the commissariat? Equally hard to accept was the way in which sophisticated artifact technology, the European hallmark, was neutralized by superficially less impressive techniques. It was almost impossible for a Victorian to acknowledge that a wonderful scientific achievement such as the Armstrong gun was functionally inferior to an anti-artillery bunker, a mere hole in the ground.

This ethnocentric frame of reference formed a passive backdrop to the interpretation of the Wars, limiting the British ability to recognize Maori military achievements for what they were. But there were three other groups of ideas which played a more active role, joining the events themselves as the positive determinants of interpretation. The first was the conviction of British military superiority *per se*; the second was the notion that British victory over such people as the Maori was, by a law of nature, inevitable; and the third was the belief that most non-European peoples, including the Maori, lacked the intellectual qualities known as 'the higher mental faculties'.

Military achievement was one sphere in which British convictions of superiority were particularly strong. Recent historians stress the undoubted weaknesses of the Victorian army, and it is easy to forget that, on the extant record, this army won four-fifths of its battles before the Second South African War. Given this record, a belief in the superiority of British arms did not have to be based on anything other than empirical observation, and it seems probable that it was both derived from, and reinforced by, actual events. But the line of reasoning normally used went further than this. Military excellence was seen, not as an acquired attribute of the British regular soldier, but as a characteristic innate in all Britons. The typical qualities of the British soldier were also those of Carlyle's John Bull: 'Sheer obstinate toughness of muscle; but much more, what we call toughness of heart, which will mean persistence hopeful and even desperate, unshakable patience, composed candid openness, clearness of mind.'<sup>22</sup> Not only was military excellence a constant; it was also a defining feature of the Briton. Consequently, though the notion of military superiority predated the nineteenth-century upsurge of interest in race, it lent itself easily to fusion with ideas of racial superiority.

The conviction of British military superiority might be quietly stated or

unspoken, but it was very widely shared amongst interpreters of the New Zealand Wars, and it applied whether the troops were Imperial or colonial, regulars or militia. The emphasis was not on one particular military virtue, but on a mixture of them all. 'Heroic courage and hardihood, skilful strategem and brilliant manoeuvring' were among 'the well-known characteristics of the British fighting man', but so was 'moral resolution . . . determination of will', otherwise known as 'ordinary British spirit'.<sup>23</sup> The stress on 'ordinary British spirit' as both the distinguishing attribute of the Briton armed, and a virtue common to all Britons, meant that defeat by a smaller number of natives was fraught with peculiarly unattractive connotations. It could be considered 'un-British' in the sense that it indicated a lack of mental and moral fibre, one of the essential characteristics by which the British defined themselves.

The second group of ideas concerned the inevitability of British victory over the Maori. This belief was closely associated with the idea of Fatal Impact, discussed in a different context in the previous chapter. It was not derived simply from the fact that the British had more men and more guns, or indeed from the conviction that they were superior soldiers, but from what was widely perceived as a law of nature. A basic axiom of nineteenth century racial thought was that Europeans in contact with lesser races would inevitably exterminate, absorb, or, at the very least, subordinate them. As with the conviction of military superiority, this belief arose from an amalgam of experience and theory. By the early part of the century, the decline of aboriginal populations in many areas seemed to indicate that 'uncivilised man melts "as snows in the sunshine" before "superior" capacities'.<sup>24</sup> In an age without knowledge of bacterial and viral infection and immunity, there was a strong tendency to attribute this, not merely to practical factors such as disease and alcohol, but also to more mysterious causes.

Two schools of racial thought, in particular, came to be used as a theoretical justification for this widespread perception. From 1840, racial determinists of a polygenist\* tendency, such as Robert Knox and the American J. C. Nott, argued that race was the key determinant of history, that racial antagonism was inherent, and the inferior state of the dark races was unchangeable. From 1850, the evolutionist theorists Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, A. R. Wallace, and their disciples made possible the assumption that the fittest races, namely the Europeans, survived at the expense of others through the inevitable struggle for existence. The difference between these views were profound, but for our purposes the similarities are more important. Both held that the dark races would inevitably die out, at least in the temperate zone, as a result of contact with whites—though Knox had doubts about the long-term viability of European colonization.<sup>25</sup> Both schools, while acknowledging that armed conflict was not an absolutely

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\* The belief in multiple creation, in several original Adams and Eves, sometimes involving a view of human races as separate species of the *genus homo*.

necessary part of the process of extermination, tended to use warlike imagery, and to see warfare as a common instrument of nature. Both argued that the process would occur whether one liked it or not, but tended to see it as ultimately beneficent and progressive.

The application of this concept of Fatal Impact to New Zealand was widespread,<sup>26</sup> but it was not universal and it was rarely unqualified. Extermination was often watered down to read assimilation or subordination. It was sometimes argued that Europeans had no role at all to play in the fading away of the Maori; that the process was well advanced before Europeans arrived. Many writers hoped that the process was reversible, and deeply regretted perceived indications that it was not. Though many believed this natural law made race conflict inevitable, few—except in newspaper rhetoric—used it to advocate war. But whether or not one believed aboriginal extinction to be absolutely inevitable, or that war was a necessary or desirable part of the process, the slightest degree of commitment to the Fatal Impact concept made one thing perfectly clear. Once war did break out, the Europeans would certainly win.

The assumption that British victory was inevitable naturally reinforced expectations of success in individual engagements, but it also added a certain flexibility to the dominant interpretation. Through the concept of the decisive 'last battle', it could incorporate early defeat. The legendary John Bull had always been terrible when roused, but slow to wrath, and the Prussian Von Tempsky was happy to extend this principle to all 'the Anglo-Saxon races'. Sometimes, observers found the British habit of losing the first engagements in a particular war intensely frustrating. 'How is it that Englishmen will NEVER learn to strike first blows that need no repetition? Why DO they never make their first means equal to the emergency and ensure success without passing through failure?' But it was a habit, an irritating but acceptable inconvenience. 'It seems as if it were passing into something like a law that British fighting men, whether in quarrels great or small, must get a taste of discomfiture at the outset to rouse them thoroughly to vigilance and activity.'<sup>27</sup> Here was a pattern which rendered early defeat more or less acceptable and as such it was regularly applied in New Zealand. Overall, it arguably had a certain validity, but in practice it was applied to each individual war regardless of fact. The greater the initial 'taste of discomfiture', the more decisive the last battle had to be. The Northern War was the extreme example, but there were also clear applications in Taranaki, Waikato, Tauranga, and Titokowaru's War.

These two groups of preconceptions combined to create the enormously powerful expectation of victory—and its inverse, the shocked reaction to defeat—that was the dynamic force behind the British interpretation. But it was the third group of ideas that set the limits within which this force could work. Though they might select the most favourable elements available, interpreters drew their particular stereotype of Maori abilities from a general stereotype of the savage. A dislike of steady labour and the 'excitability' that led to poor marksmanship were aspects of this, as were some 'natural advan-

tages'. But the most important feature of the stereotype was the absence of the intellectual qualities of scientific curiosity, inventiveness, and high reasoning ability. These were collectively known as the 'higher mental faculties', and their warlike manifestation was the higher military talents.

The most obvious proponents of the belief that non-Europeans lacked the higher faculties were polygenists and near-polygenists such as Knox, Nott, and Frederic William Farrar. Farrar wrote that: 'The grand qualities which secure the continuous advance of mankind, the generalising power of pure reason, the love of perfectibility, the desire to know the unknown, and, last and greatest, the ability to observe new phenomena and new relations, —these mental faculties seem to be deficient in all the dark races.'<sup>28</sup> Nott and others promoted this widespread perception into scientific fact, proven by phrenological experiment.

The polygenists were most explicit, but beliefs of this kind were not restricted to their extreme of the range of racial thought. Evolutionists, including Darwin and Spencer themselves, and others such as Wallace and Francis Galton, accepted what, for our purposes, was a milder version of the same concept. Wallace argued that, after a certain point in time, natural selection in humans applied mainly to mental and moral, rather than physical, characteristics; and so 'in conjunction with scarcely perceptible modifications of form, has developed the wonderful intellect of the Germanic races'. It was this that enabled these races, 'when in contact with savage man, to conquer in the struggle for existence'.<sup>29</sup> The Christian degenerationist, Archbishop Richard Whately, who believed that retrogression explained the savage state, wrote that 'savages never seem to discover or invent anything'. Even the early nineteenth-century monogenist writers J. C. Prichard and William Lawrence, founding figures in British anthropology and biology, and strong proponents of the unity of man, shared this belief to some extent. For these writers, black equality was prospective, not actual, and it was a distant prospect. Later anthropologists, notably John Lubbock, Lord Avebury, who saw the savage state as the lowest stage on the progression to civilization, tended to agree. Lubbock wrote that the savage mind was 'easily fatigued', their languages 'very poor in abstract terms', and that indeed some abstract ideas were 'entirely beyond the mental range of the lower savages, whose extreme mental inferiority we have much difficulty in realising'.<sup>30</sup>

The absence, poor development, or disuse of the higher mental faculties was held to explain the stasis, or 'conservatism' of non-European peoples. This was not an eccentric minority position, but a point where several otherwise diverse theories intersected. Victorian anthropologists, wrote Christine Bolt, 'were generally agreed on the conservatism of primitive peoples'.<sup>31</sup>

The soldiers and settlers who left opinions about the New Zealand Wars did not have to be familiar with the theories involved to accept the basic principle, and sometimes they did so explicitly. 'Those best acquainted with the natives', stated the *Otago Witness*, 'confirm that they are deficient in the

higher qualities of the human mind.' Such bluntness was rare; it was widely acknowledged that the Maoris had many good qualities, and comments on their deficiencies were usually coupled with references to these. The Maoris are 'very apt to learn', wrote William Colenso, but 'barren of originality'. 'Naturally a noble race', wrote Richard Taylor, 'bodily and mentally superior to most of the Polynesians, their fine intelligent countenances present the exterior of a fair-built house, which only requires to be suitably furnished.' His son, B. K. Taylor, was firmly of the view that the Maoris could eventually be raised to equality, but in the interim it was 'observable that the Maori cannot entertain two separate subjects at the same time'. The influential ethnographer A. S. Thomson, an army surgeon, felt that the Maoris were advancing up the scale of civilization, but believed that his crude craniometry tests proved them to be 'inferior to the English in mental capacity'. 'The faculty of imagination is not strongly developed among them . . .', wrote Thomson, 'not one good example of invention, the highest function of this faculty, can be quoted from among their works.'<sup>32</sup>

When Europeans, including those in New Zealand, compared themselves to tribal societies they perceived an enormous gulf. One of the ways in which they sought to explain the difference was by reference to the higher mental faculties, the 'grand qualities which secure that continuous advance of mankind'. Thus the higher faculties were not simply a criterion on which to build racial hierarchies, but the very engine of progress and evolution—the processes which gave Europeans their pre-eminence. The conviction did not have to be absolute. As with the Fatal Impact, there were more moderate fall-back positions—the higher faculties had atrophied through disuse, or were simply under-developed. An underlying, unstated belief that the Maori had not invented guns and a written language because they could not was compatible with a great deal of respect for other Maori virtues. The Maoris could be beautiful, strong, heroic, and chivalrous; they could display intelligence of various kinds; but they could not invent or theorize. At the very least, they could not invent or theorize to the same level as Europeans.

The European monopoly of the higher mental faculties was the inner tabernacle of Victorian racial attitudes. To question it was to question a whole world view. When events did indeed cast doubt on it, as with evidence of Maori possession of the higher military talents, Victorian commentators avoided, misinterpreted, or suppressed them. Thus the real explanation for British defeats and difficulties in the New Zealand Wars was banished from the realm of the acceptable.

The groups of ideas outlined above manifested only the simplest and most popular aspects of scientific theories. To accept Spencer's metaphor of the struggle for existence, you did not have to understand his theory of the dynamics of matter, or even know who he was, any more than a small capitalist needs to be familiar with Adam Smith to advocate free enterprise. Moreover, scientific theory was only one of several contributors. Non-scientific schools of racial thought such as Romantic Anglo-Saxonism; con-



cepts such as Progress and philanthropy which were only indirectly connected to racial issues; and the parochial chauvinism sometimes called 'folk racism': all played their part. Above all, experience or perceived experience had its influence, causing and being caused by theory like the proverbial chicken and egg. Victorian attitudes to race were a web spun from many starting points. Literate Victorians were caught at the intersections; the junctions where many otherwise diverse strands overlapped.<sup>33</sup>

That some Victorian racial preconceptions were widely shared does not prove that they were cherished—valued so highly that they had to be protected from adverse reality. Here, one can do little more than refer the reader to the work of J. W. Burrow, Leon Poliakov, and D. A. Lorimer—each of whom, in very different ways, argues that race-related ideas fulfilled an important social or ideological function for the Victorians—and make the following observation.<sup>34</sup> Racial ideas are not just images of others, but of one's self and one's own society. Superiority and inferiority, inevitable victory and inevitable defeat, higher faculties or the lack of them; each are two sides of the same coin. To question the one is to question the other, and thereby cast doubt on an individual and collective self-image. Victorians, like other people, were not eager to ask such questions.

To those familiar with early European literature on New Zealand, the notion that unfavourable racial preconceptions were widely applied to the Maori may seem surprising. Early published references to the Maori, with an Enlightenment objectivity, ensured that their less attractive customs did not obscure their virtues. European writers usually ranked the Maori high on their various racial hierarchies, and remarked favourably on their capacity for improvement. Monogenist, Christian philanthropist, and humanitarian notions of Maori equality influenced colonial legislation. Missionary authors lauded the Maori adoption of Christianity, books on colonization made much of their eagerness for European contact and settlement, and various writers praised their martial qualities of courage and chivalry. But it is all too easy to exaggerate the extent and implications of this favourable publicity.

Much of the early literature on New Zealand was in fact part of two great advertising campaigns: the effort to obtain support for missionary activity and to cast its achievements in the best possible light, and the effort to attract settlers to a young and distant colony in competition with better-known fields of immigration such as North America where land was cheaper and the voyage out shorter. These objectives required an appropriate portrait of the Maori. For the former they should be 'neither too ignorant or too savage to be made the subject of the saving and sanctifying influence of the Gospel'.<sup>35</sup> For the latter, they were best seen as harmless and useful collaborators in the work of colonization, providing a market and labour force and adding 'a freshness and piquancy to the country'—altogether 'a principal inducement which should lead intending emigrants

to make the choice of New Zealand'.<sup>36</sup> Neither portrait necessarily reflected the view of settlers who had actually made 'the choice of New Zealand'.

Furthermore, favourable images of the Maori did not always survive the wars. The case for Maori 'salvageability' was based partly on their readiness selectively to adopt European ways in commerce, agriculture, literacy, and religion. Maori resistance was seen as a reversal of this trend; evidence that the civilizing mission had failed, or even that it had always been doomed to failure. From the first killings of civilians in March 1860, Maori 'atrocities' reinforced this tendency—a tendency which closely parallels the Victorian response to the Jamaica Rebellion of 1865. For those who had always doubted 'bungling and theoretical philanthropy', Maori 'atrocities' and the fact of war itself were proof of their fundamentally unregenerate character.

We have dealt with the natives of this country upon a principle radically wrong. We have conceded them rights and privileges which nature has refused to ratify. . . . We have pampered ignorance and misrule, and we now experience their hatred of intelligence and order. The bubble is burst. The Maori is now known to us as what he is, and not as missionaries and philanthropists were willing to believe him. [In reality, the Maori is] a man ignorant and savage, loving darkness and anarchy, hating light and order; a man of fierce, and ungoverned passions, bloodthirsty, cruel, ungrateful, treacherous.<sup>37</sup>

The 'missionaries and philanthropists' themselves were not immune to this tendency. As the Maoris turned away from conventional Christianity towards overtly syncretic religions, the missionaries became disillusioned. Many who had fearlessly argued the justice of the Maori cause in the Taranaki War of 1860, and consequently looked more sympathetically on Maori military endeavours, felt that the Waikato War of 1863 was the 'sharp lesson' which, sadly, the Maoris both needed and deserved. This group included such notable 'philo-Maoris' as Bishops Selwyn and William Williams, R. Burrows, R. Maunsell, and B. Y. Ashwell. By 1864, the Church Missionary Society in New Zealand was supporting, in principle, the confiscation of Maori land.<sup>38</sup> The civilizing mission was not abandoned, but gentle persuasion based on the conviction that the Maori knew what was good for them gave way to language more like Carlyle's 'beneficent whip' and W. P. Andrews's 'great civiliser, the sword'. Like the liberal parent whose promising adolescent has committed some nasty crime, the Maoris' self-appointed mentors regretted that they had spared the rod and spoiled the child, and they did not intend to make the same mistake again. In many ways, the 1860s—the decade of war—marked the nadir of the Maoris' racial reputation in the eyes of their white neighbours, and the interpretation of the wars could not help but reflect this.

It is equally important to note that favourable images of the Maori were often qualified in various ways. Like Prichard and Lawrence, humanitarian New Zealand writers usually saw Maori equality as prospective rather than actual. The notion of a civilizing mission involved assumptions of cultural

superiority, and the image of the Maori that served the missionary purpose necessarily contained both favourable and unfavourable elements. The savage could not be so degraded as to be beyond redemption, but he had to be degraded enough to urgently require it. The rejection of one group of racial preconceptions was sometimes qualified by the acceptance of another. James Mouat, Cameron's Surgeon-General, believed that 'in point of mental endowment, it is questionable if, with equal cultivation [the Maori] capacity for intellectual achievement would fall short of those of the average European'. But the possibility was unlikely to be tested, since 'it requires no great sagacity to foresee that in a generation or two the race must become extinct'.<sup>39</sup>

British respect for the Maori military virtues of courage and chivalry was also qualified. We have seen that it did not indicate a real objectivity. It did not necessarily imply that the Maoris were the equals of the British—'daring and courageous though they be, they are no match for the British'. 'The New Zealanders', wrote F. E. Maning, 'are not to be despised when they have numbers on their side.' William Swainson chastised his compatriots for believing that no coloured race could stand against them, but 'disproved' this assumption by stating that: 'our troops were driven from the field, to the astonishment of the insurgents themselves, by a Maori force not more than double the number of our own troops.'<sup>40</sup> The Maori might outrank the Hindu and the Hottentot on the scale of martial races, but he was only a non-commissioned officer after all.

Historians still perpetuate the old notion of the wars as a breeding-ground of mutual respect between troops and warriors, leading to 'a warm comradeship between victor and vanquished'. We are even told that this had an effect on operations. The 40th regiment, 'lost in admiration at their heroism', actually allowed the Maoris to escape from Orakau, and Cameron and his men's regard for the Maoris and their cause is sometimes said to have hastened the army's withdrawal from New Zealand.<sup>41</sup> This is a hybrid of fact and fairy-tale, in which the latter predominates. In Cameron's case, doubts about the justice of his cause were a suspiciously late development; his disillusionment with the war predated them, and stemmed instead from the impossibility of decisive victory. As for his subordinates, Von Tempsky justly doubted that the British soldier 'has ever distinguished himself by prying into the causes of the war he was engaged in'. The later Waikato operations were unpopular with the troops, but because of the absence of glory, excitement, loot, and fun—the town of Auckland has no provision for public amusements'. 'Draught colonial beer is so bad it is hardly fit to drink.'<sup>42</sup> A casual kind of contempt for the Maori was more common than respect. 'Nigger', even then a pejorative term, was apparently in general use, and pyrrhic Maori tactics could arouse disgust as easily as esteem—the former could even involve a marginally better appreciation of the Maori military system than the latter. The Maoris, wrote Sergeant William White, 'like other vermin, were partial to underground holes, and once concealed in these could not possibly be ferreted out. Now all this puzzles an English

soldier; he is a match for an army of men, but he feels at a loss with an army of rats.'<sup>43</sup>

This is not to say that positive attitudes to the Maori had no mitigating effect on the British interpretation of the wars. To some extent, they did. Humanitarian, philo-Maori, or unusually objective observers often transcended one set of preconceptions, although they normally fell victim to another. On the other hand, local factors could also exacerbate the situation. Some colonists believed that New Zealand was 'the Britain of the South', a colony with a very great future. Its settler-frontiersmen, who were a cut above their neighbours across the Tasman, were natural Indian fighters. The Colony, an 'infant Hercules' to use a contemporary phrase, would soon strangle the Maori serpents surrounding it—if the hidebound Imperial regulars ever gave the settler volunteers their head. These views did not make Titokowaru's humiliating defeats of the adolescent Hercules any easier to swallow.<sup>44</sup>

To prove empirically that racial preconceptions were in fact a part of the general Victorian consciousness, and that they were not substantially modified in New Zealand, would require a whole series of investigations into the dissemination of ideas among the Victorians in general, and in New Zealand in particular. In the absence of such studies, this argument has dealt in probabilities, in impressionistic evidence, and in 'defences in the alternative', to borrow the legal phrase. But the argument is not totally reliant on such considerations. Hard evidence for it, of both a positive and a negative kind, exists in the preceding chapters. Time and time again, in case after case after case, Victorian interpreters of the wars distorted the facts and their implications, and they did so in an unconscious but systematic way. On the positive side, the links between these distortions and racial preconceptions were often quite obvious. On the negative side, if shared racial preconceptions did not create this collective and systematic distortion, what did?

### III THE PROBLEM OF ONE-SIDED EVIDENCE

NEW ZEALAND INFLUENCES HAD A CONSIDERABLE IMPACT ON the interpretation of the wars. Some exacerbated the tendency to force events into conformity with racial preconceptions, some ameliorated it. Some appeared to ameliorate it, but did not. Yet, in the final analysis, these were local variations upon a more general theme. Interpreters of the wars owed their convictions of superiority, their belief in the inevitability of victory, and their ultimately derogatory stereotype of the native Maori, not to the New Zealand periphery, but to the metropolis: Victorian Britain. It was not a New Zealand colonial interpretation of racial conflict, but a Victorian one.

In New Zealand, this interpretation has endured largely for the simple reason that it monopolized contemporary literature on the wars. No substantial and well-developed competing body of literature, produced by

the Maoris or some third party, existed to provide an alternative interpretation. This situation of one-side evidence is far from unique. The problem of the enduring dominant interpretation may be general, not particular. To a greater or lesser extent, it may occur in most of Victorian Britain's colonial wars. If other European empires had similar racial preconceptions—and recent studies suggest that, for this purpose, French and American attitudes were not decisively dissimilar—then the problem may extend to their colonial wars as well.<sup>45</sup>

To be sure, the Maori military system was probably an unusually effective form of counter-European warfare, and events therefore clashed with cherished preconceptions with uncommon force and frequency. Consequently, misapprehensions on the scale of the British interpretation of the Northern War may be rare. But this was an extreme case. Milder adjustments of reality may be more common, and these may be important only cumulatively. Their influence will not necessarily affect the issue of who won or lost. But one does not have to be entirely convinced by hypotheses like that of T. O. Ranger to accept that the character and intensity of resistance, the ways in which people won or lost, can have a profound effect on a society or a colonial relationship.<sup>46</sup>

The possibility that the enduring dominant interpretation is a widespread problem cannot, of course, be tested here. But it does seem that the few Victorian books which discussed colonial warfare in general exhibited some of the characteristics of the interpretation of the New Zealand Wars. In the most notable of such works, C. E. Calwell stressed exceptional leadership errors and inaccessible terrain as the main causes of occasional disasters and more frequent difficulties. Small wars 'are often campaigns rather against nature than against hostile armies'. 'The enemy', Calwell advised, 'must be made to feel a moral inferiority throughout. The lower races are impressionable. They are greatly influenced by a resolute bearing and a determined course of action.' There is a touch of this legacy in some more recent works. 'Any hint of anxiety', writes Cyril Falls, 'acts as a sort of tonic to primitive peoples.' In colonial warfare, 'a bold confident bearing counted almost as much as straight shooting'. 'The Europeans', writes Lewis H. Gann, 'enjoyed complete moral ascendancy over their opponents, whose resistance was perhaps born of despair more than any belief in ultimate victory.'<sup>47</sup> Successful resistance to Imperial expansion is often explained in terms of exceptional European leadership failures, and of non-European imitation, or 'natural advantages'. Unsuccessful resistance is sometimes attributed to non-European's 'fatalistic acceptance of the inevitable', and to the fact that their military methods were 'usually of the most primitive kind, deficient in leadership, direction and endurance'.<sup>48</sup>

One specific case in which the New Zealand effect may have been duplicated is that of the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879. In a recent analysis of this conflict and its effects, Jeff Guy argues that the decisiveness of the Battle of Ulundi has been over-estimated.

The conventional view, which equates the end of Zulu power and independence with the British military victory at Ulundi in July 1879, is a misleading oversimplification. It . . . ignores the fact that, by the time the battle was fought, the intensity of Zulu resistance had already persuaded London that the cost of ending Zulu independence by force of arms would be too high . . . and that orders had been given that Zululand should not be annexed. Nevertheless, Isandlawhna could not go unavenged . . . the 'stain' on Britain's honour had to be wiped out. To achieve this . . . Ulundi was promoted to the rank of a major military victory. Peace was in fact attained in the weeks that followed Ulundi by promising the Zulu people that they would retain possession of their land if they laid down their arms.<sup>49</sup>

Guy does not attempt a substantive military re-analysis, and his Ulundi case is too perfunctory to be entirely convincing, but he is right to point out that remarkably few rounds were fired by the British in repelling a supposedly fierce and sustained assault on their square.<sup>50</sup> If he is correct, then this is the very kind of interpretative phenomenon that occurred several times in the New Zealand Wars. It is especially similar to the received version of the Tauranga campaign of 1864. A humiliating defeat, followed by a real but exaggerated victory, which is not only made to lay the ghost of the earlier disaster, but which also becomes the necessary 'last battle' when peace is made and falsely presented as complete submission. Once suitably roused, the Anglo-Saxons proceed to the inevitable decisive victory.

The problem may be widespread, but what of the solution? If all or most of the evidence on a conflict comes from one side, and if it is subject to the distorting influence of shared preconceptions, how is revision possible? Must we not register our doubts about the received interpretation and acknowledge that, since it is all we have to work with, we can reject but not replace it? Perhaps the answer is no. Perhaps the problem of systematic bias in cases of one-sided evidence contains the seeds of its own solution. The solution has to do with the way in which a society forms its interpretation of traumatic and complicated events such as battle.

The complexity of battle is a truism of military historiography. 'Write the history of a battle? As well write the history of a ball.' The chaos of action and interaction generates a profusion of evidence on aspects of itself, but little on the whole of itself. Initially, no one, not even the general, has an overview: diaries, letters, unit reports, and recorded comments reflect only the immediate concerns of small groups or individuals.

This evidence preserves only a fraction of the complexity of actual events; but it is still an enormous morass, confused and confusing. People feel the need to render it comprehensible, to impose some structure on it, to make sense of it, to *interpret* it. As the interpretations form, as they become more and more widely accepted as the authorized versions, so it becomes more and more necessary for them to accommodate the cherished preconceptions of the day. Thus the dominant interpretation comes into being, an acceptable compromise between fact and preconception. During the process of formation, non-interpretative evidence, partial interpretations, and minority

interpretations are replaced, absorbed, or demoted to curiosity status by the dominant interpretation. In trying to describe this process, one inevitably gives the impression of separate compartments, and a neat, one-way, chronological sequence. This, of course, is false. The borders of the compartments are jagged, not neat; some may even occur simultaneously; and the whole process can take a day, a year, or a decade—sometimes all three. But the central point is this: the dominant interpretation does not necessarily form instantaneously, and evidence from the time before it forms, is forgotten or set aside, not irretrievably lost.

The stages preceding the full formation of the dominant interpretation offer various possibilities for rescuing the other side of the story. Non-interpretative, or unloaded, evidence, whereby an observer records a fact but does not place it in his perception of its context, can be important. In the absolute sense, this concept may be invalid, since it could be argued that one must interpret a fact to perceive and record it. But this is a matter of degree—some recordings of fact are less interpretative than others—and, in practice, the concept is useful. During the New Zealand Wars, the most clear-cut examples were those where an observer recorded a fact vital to the interpretation of an event prior to the event itself. At the siege of Ruapekapeka in 1846, British officers observed many Maoris leaving the *pa* with packs of goods and supplies, and rightly concluded that they were voluntarily evacuating the place. Later, the British occupied the *pa* and the dominant interpretation asserted that they had stormed it, or seized it by a trick while the garrison was out at prayers. The diaries are forgotten, but they are not lost.

The existence of some specific bias, in competition with the general bias which produced the dominant interpretation, is equally important. Self-aggrandisement, self-defence against criticism, personal or political animosity, danger or a sense of crisis—all could produce tendencies which conflicted with those of the dominant interpretation, and had progressively to be absorbed or suppressed by it. In 1860, Taranaki militiaman A. S. Atkinson felt that the achievements of Cracroft's naval brigade at Waireka were being emphasized to the point where the efforts of his fellow settlers were implicitly belittled. He discovered conclusive evidence that Cracroft had stormed a virtually empty *pa*. He could not bring himself publicly to destroy the legend of Waireka, but the means for its destruction are to be found in his journal. To defend themselves against accusations of procrastination in the early part of the Waikato War, Cameron and his staff pointed out that Maori raiding was tying up the bulk of their army in protecting the line of supply. They did not attribute this to a co-ordinated Maori strategy, but, again, we need not follow suit. The animosity of Haultain and Whitmore to McLean and his clients led them to investigate and disprove claims that Te Kooti had suffered enormous casualties at Makaretu—a 'victory' which the McLean faction attributed to their own efforts. Wanganui settlers whose homes and lives were in danger in 1868 were not inclined to understate the threat presented by Titokowaru. This was played down

retrospectively, not instantaneously, and the original cries of desperation can still be found.

These types of evidence are produced by conflicts between specific biases and the general bias on which the dominant interpretation is based. But contradictions within the general bias can also be useful. In 1870, colonial officers, concerned to show that Te Kooti had been utterly routed at Te Porere, recorded evidence which indicated that his force had been reduced to 71 men by the battle. But this undercut their subsequent claims that they had defeated large *Ringatu* forces at Tapapa three months later. They tended to exaggerate Maori casualties and Maori numbers, but in this case they could not logically do both.

Occasionally, these types of evidence developed into a fully-fledged minority interpretation—an alternative to the dominant interpretation—which eventually suffered historiographical defeat. Though there were few exceptions to all the rules of the dominant interpretation, few commentators who transcended all the cherished preconceptions of their fellows, there were many exceptions to one rule or another. These were gradually suppressed, or subsumed in the mainstream, but they can be rediscovered. A group of British writers believed that their side had lost the Northern War of 1845–6, although they did not understand how. Their last publication was in 1879, and their view was gradually filtered out, but their books and papers still exist.

Another form of evidence contained in, but separate from, the dominant interpretation can be described as ‘embalmed evidence’: non-British information, whether interpretative or not, which the British preserved but did not incorporate. In this sense, the situation of one-sided evidence was not absolute. A considerable amount of Maori evidence was received and recorded by the British. It was not taken on board, but dismissed as a romantic curiosity and used to provide anecdotes rather than alternative interpretations. Thus a short history of the Northern War, written by the early settler F. E. Maning but largely based on Maori accounts, has frequently been reprinted and quite widely read. But it is usually dismissed as a fanciful invention of Maning’s, and not taken very seriously as a document. Yet on several important issues it is more accurate than the received version. Embalmed evidence is like a package, which is preserved, passed on, and perhaps admired by the historiographically-dominant side, but which remains unopened. We can open it when we choose.

None of these forms of evidence are necessarily reliable in themselves, but taken together, analysed critically, and supplemented by the physical parameters of the possible—configurations of terrain, the performance of contemporary weapons, the capacities of the human body—they present an opportunity for revision. But the opportunity cannot be exploited before one great difficulty is overcome. Historians return to the original chaos of evidence and find it as diverse, contradictory, and confusing as did contemporary interpreters. Like it or not, they must have some criteria of selection around which to organize the morass of material. Often, they will turn to



some variant of the received version, the dominant interpretation, and so the problem perpetuates itself. But there is an alternative: to apply knowledge of the way in which contemporary bias worked to the contemporary interpretation, and from this synthesize a model to test against the evidence.

On this basis, perhaps the Victorian interpretation of the New Zealand Wars can form a model for the re-investigation of comparable conflicts, of nineteenth-century British 'small wars' generally. If Americans and European nations interpreted racial conflict in similar ways, then, with appropriate variations, such a model might be of some use in these cases as well. Of course, for some 'small' racial wars, oral evidence or large-scale, un-directed empirical research may already have solved the problem. Nor would it do simply to replace one rigid preconceived paradigm with another. The model should be seen as a set of questions to be applied to evidence pre-dating the full formation of the dominant interpretation, and accepted or rejected as appropriate. The dominant interpretation could be right. Allusions to non-European successes and possession of the higher military talents could be absent from the European interpretation for one of two reasons: first, because they did not exist or, second, because they did.

This study has investigated aspects of the interpretation of nineteenth century racial conflict, and its conclusions and hypotheses are restricted to this subject. But this is not to deny that the problem of one-sided evidence, and the phenomenon of the dominant interpretation, may occur in other fields. We rely largely on men for our evidence about women, on conformists for our evidence about deviants, and on élites for our evidence about non-élites. We must confront this historiographical problem, not sneak past it in the cloak of pragmatic empiricism. Our understanding of the ideology of the historiographically-dominant group need not be sympathetic, but it must go beyond the mere detection of bias. How, why, and in what ways did bias work? Precisely how did it effect interpretation, and how can it be used against itself? The study of group ideology, of *mentalité*, is not the opposite of empirical revision, but its necessary partner. The dominant interpretation both camouflages and preserves, and to utilize the latter we must understand the former.

