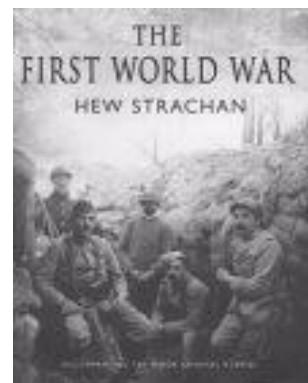


The First World War: A New Illustrated History

Hew Strachan

Reviewed by Neil James



This book is one that any student of strategy or military history will have trouble putting down once taken up. Even most general readers from secondary students up in age and interest will find it absorbing reading.

The author, Hew Strachan, is the Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford University. This one-volume work of summary is based on some twenty years of research for his three-volume history of World War I, the first volume of which, *To Arms*, was published in 2001. The ten chapters of this book provide the narrative framework for an accompanying ten-part television series produced by Channel 4 in Britain but yet to be shown in Australia.

His central theme is that World War I shaped the world for the rest of the 20th century and 'was emphatically not a war without meaning or purpose'. A key supporting theme of the work is that it was truly a world war, both in geographical extent and in why it was fought between global and would-be global powers.

He is particularly impatient with those historians who believe World War I was just a European civil war, and with those who dwell on the extent of death and alleged futility of this and any conflict. Professor Strachan argues that the belief of the time that the war was a struggle for the survival of liberalism has stood the test of time. He argues that the 'Great War', as it was originally called, was 'a great war because it was a war fought over big ideas'.

Much of his view that World War I was truly a world struggle will more readily find resonance with historians and readers from countries of the 'Old Commonwealth' than among his fellow Europeans. It is for this reason that parts of the book, both in research and argument, are so disappointing in their coverage of the contribution by, and strategic views of, the Dominions.

As can be expected in such a wide-ranging work some errors of fact creep in to the narrative. Australian readers will notice some that many overseas readers may miss, and the same will probably occur among Canadian, New Zealand and South African readers. His account of the naval balance of power in the pre-1914 Pacific includes a few faults and some arguable interpretations. He assumes, wrongly, that the battleship HMS *New Zealand* was intended for service in the Pacific whereas although she was built with money provided by New Zealand she was a fully integrated unit of the Royal Navy and always intended for service with the main battle fleet. He also wrongly gives the impression that the RNZN was created before World

War I when this was not the case.

Professor Strachan states that Dominion concerns for strategic buffers were just 'sub-imperialism' and fired by 'territorial ambitions'. He implies that racism alone underpinned Australian concern about Japanese longer-term intentions. Both are highly questionable arguments at best and reflect the over-simplification to be expected in a one-volume summary of this magnitude. He claims that the battlecruiser HMAS *Australia* was intended for the 'close defence of [Australia's] ...own territory'. Her main role was actually to provide general deterrence to Germany's Pacific cruiser squadron, a role she played so successfully that the squadron quickly withdrew from the Pacific in 1914, and consequently Australian troop convoys to Europe and the Middle East required no naval escorts after 1915.

But these are minor quibbles about a major work of scholarship and easily amended for the next edition. Not so easy to reconcile is Professor Strachan's apparent reluctance to acknowledge Dominion contributions to the allied war effort. The 1st AIF is rarely mentioned and heavily patronised when it is, with descriptions such as 'they earned a reputation for mayhem and indiscipline, mingled with combativeness and high morale', and by his allegation that (only) the Australians 'massacred' Turkish prisoners at Gallipoli. The 'mingled' particularly grates and the view of supposed 'indiscipline' is so very English. He even downgrades the importance of the successful withdrawal from Gallipoli by claiming it was '... hardly in the Turk's interests to prolong the allies' departure or to incur further losses needlessly'. This could be easily disputed on both tactical and strategic grounds and was not a view widely held, if held at all, by those involved.

Professor Strachan even tries to paint the incompetent British General, Sir Frederick Stopford, as a scapegoat for inaction at the Suvla landing and not one of its prime causes. His account of Gallipoli and his assessment that the Anzacs 'fought not for Australia or New Zealand but for the "old country", with which they still had strong ties ...' is surely too much of a simplification at best. According to this view Australian losses at Gallipoli (8709) were 'a low number by the horrific standards of the war ... New Zealand's losses were smaller still, 2721'. No account is taken of the proportionality and no mention is made of the disproportionate casualty rates of Australians and New Zealanders, compared with say Britain, in the war overall.

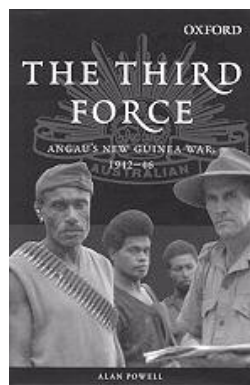
Later he recounts the 'capture of Vimy Ridge [in 1917]

was a national triumph for Canada, a more auspicious coming of age than the mismanaged landings at Gallipoli had been for Australia'. It is almost as if he is implying that the mismanagement was the Australian's fault. Later again, Canadian participation in the '100 days' in 1918 is briefly mentioned but the Australians do not figure at all. In fact from this book you would hardly know that Australians fought on the Western Front. The vital contribution of Anzac troops to the Palestine and Syrian campaigns is also ignored.

The final two chapters covering the situation from the treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 onwards reflect research and thought outside traditional Anglo-centric historical patterns. Professor Strachan's theme of a truly global struggle allows him to give full rein to examining the problems of coalition warfare, especially those faced by the Central Powers, rather than the traditional concentration on Germany's worsening weakness and eventual disintegration. His discussion of the benefits enjoyed by the allies being a coalition of relative equals, at least in contrast to their opponents, is very well done. He notes that the number of allies kept growing throughout the war in both numbers and global spread, but that after Bulgaria, in September 1915, no country sided with the Central Powers.

Although it has faults, Professor Hew Strachan's *The First World War* is a book that will be sought after by generations of history students and general readers seeking a wide-ranging, well-written and generally well-argued summary of the complex international struggle that shaped the modern world. ♦

Hew Strachan, 'The First World War: A New Illustrated History', Simon & Schuster, Sydney, 2003, casebound and jacketed, 360pp, RRP \$49.95.



The Third Force: ANGAU's New Guinea War 1942–46

Alan Powell

Reviewed by Michael O'Connor

Arguably, the most ubiquitous and perhaps the most neglected unit of the Australian Army's World War II New

Guinea campaigns was the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU). The Army History Unit deserves commendation for sponsoring this latest, excellent volume in the Australian Army History Series, especially as at a time when the need for a modern civil affairs capability in the ADF is readily apparent.

Alan Powell is Emeritus Professor of History at the Northern Territory University. His other contributions to Australian military history have included the highly regarded *War by Stealth*, a study of Australians in the Allied Intelligence Bureau.

At the outbreak of the Pacific War, Australia administered two territories in New Guinea quite separately. Papua was an Australian territory, acquired from Britain in 1906 and maintained at absolutely minimal cost to the Australian taxpayer. The Territory of New Guinea had been captured from Germany in 1914 and was administered as a League of Nations Mandate. Thanks to large gold discoveries and an expatriate-controlled plantation industry, New Guinea was wealthier but was administered mainly in the interests of the expatriate community. The Papuan Administration was largely indifferent to the expatriate community and pursued a remarkably benevolent and paternalistic policy towards the Papuan community; in New Guinea, the reverse was generally the case.

History tells us that Australia and the Army in particular were quite unprepared for the Japanese challenge in Papua New Guinea. This was certainly true of the two civil administrations. In New Guinea—as with the small Rabaul garrison—a *saue qui peut* mentality prevailed. An excessively legalistic policy promptly disarmed the civil police and, in many cases, simply abandoned them.

In Papua, a clash between the civil administration and the Army led to the dismissal of the former and the establishment of martial law. Some of the field personnel of the Administration were told that they were out of a job; others were simply ignored.

For its part, the Army with no experience of military government had made no preparations for administering a population assumed to number some hundreds of thousands, many of them in enemy-controlled territory. Its most urgent task was to stem the Japanese advance in country largely beyond vehicular transport. For this, they needed labourers (carriers) to logistically support the trained troops and supplies that were slowly beginning to trickle in to Port Moresby.

The 8th Military District Commander was Major General Basil Morris, a regular gunner not very highly regarded by his peers. Morris did, however, try to make a silk purse from a very tatty sow's ear. Part of the manufacturing process was to establish ANGAU.

ANGAU's priority task was to recruit labourers to carry for the Army. Somewhat to its surprise, the Army found that the transport infrastructure of the New Guinea of 1942 was almost totally unfamiliar with the internal combustion or steam engine. Supply from, and evacuation to, bridgeheads, airheads and roadheads for the forces in contact with the enemy depended upon the