

James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1986; distributed outside N.Z. by Oxford University Press. Pp. 396, maps, glossary, bibliography, index. US\$29.95.

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James Belich's book tells a remarkable story. During the Anglo-Maori wars of the mid-1840s and the years 1860-1872, the Maoris won a string of victories against the British army, and sometimes naval detachments, scarcely paralleled in any other war between European and so-called primitive peoples. In some of the battles crack regiments suffered heavy casualties. The Maoris were heavily outnumbered and outgunned. They were only part-time soldiers, for periodically they had to return to their villages and cultivations. Yet they fought off and often defeated large British army of about twelve thousand men, with a total mobilization of eighteen thousand men. These were professional, full-time soldiers. There was only one settler commando in New Zealand, at Wairau in 1843, when a posse tried to punish a Maori general and chief, Te Rauparaha. So many of them were killed that they never tried again.

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Nor did many New Zealand-born Europeans fight against the Maoris--very few of them were of military age--though there were probably some in the Armed Constabulary in the late 1860s. This was a war between the imperial forces and some, but not all, Maori tribes. Some tribes, notably the Arawa, helped the British or remained neutral.

Belich's explanation for the Maoris' successes is partly that their military engineering was in advance of anything known to the British. They built what Belich calls "modern *pa*" (forts), which featured systems of trenches and antiartillery bunkers (*rua*) very like those used during World War I. In several battles the Maoris endured and survived artillery barrages of a weight and intensity comparable to those during that modern war. Secondly, the Maoris proved to be expert guerrilla fighters and they produced several brilliant guerrilla leaders, such as Te Kooti and Titokowaru.

Belich rightly calls his book "a revisionist study." He reassesses or reinterprets the significance of numerous people and events. Hone Heke, in the northern war of the 1840s, was not, we learn, trying to overturn the Treaty of Waitangi or to expel the settlers, but to regulate European contact and to preserve Maori local independence. The much-ridiculed General Duncan Cameron turns out to have been an excellent and perceptive commander. Titokowaru, a warrior scarcely mentioned in recent histories, was, we are told, a much more formidable enemy than Te Kooti. At the battle of Te Ngutu o te Manu, he virtually destroyed the government's sole remaining fighting force. Those units who were not defeated either mutinied or went home. Titokowaru had conquered southern Taranaki, but his victory evaporated when his men deserted him, apparently because of his liaison with the wife of another chief.

Dr. Belich takes much pleasure in being revisionist, but it must be said that his remarks are not always quite original. For instance, the importance of Maori *rua* and other earthworks was emphasized in James Cowan's two-volume *The New Zealand Wars and the Pioneering Period* in 1922-1923. Belich stresses the one-sidedness of the evidence available to us, but Cowan knew many of the Maoris who had fought against the British and had heard the Maori oral evidence too.

Sometimes Belich seems to me to set up those he criticizes. For instance, he quotes me as writing that "throughout the wars the Maoris adopted no comprehensive or co-ordinated strategy" (p. 17; from Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand* [Harmondsworth, Eng., 1980], 133)--which still seems to me to be true in the sense that I intended. They did not, for instance, coordinate attacks on the settlements. And Belich mentions that Te Kooti and Titokowaru did not coordinate their simul-

taneous campaigns. He similarly criticizes Anne Parsonson for writing, "To the grenade, the rifle, and the Armstrong gun, the sap and the redoubt, they had no ultimate answer" (p. 17; from *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. W. H. Oliver and B. R. Williams [Wellington, 1981, 158]). Surely she was correct.

On occasion Belich concedes that he goes beyond the evidence. For instance, he confesses that, at one crucial point, no one was privy to Titokowaru's thoughts, but claims that "circumstantial evidence indicates overwhelmingly" what his strategic objective was.

In a section on the Victorian interpretation of racial conflict Belich shows that the British consistently exaggerated the numbers of the Maori enemy and of their losses in battle. British victories were exaggerated or even invented. For instance, one Maori *pa* taken by storm with "heavy" Maori casualties was, in fact, almost unoccupied. The British simply could not believe that they could be beaten by a non-European enemy. They believed that the Maoris lacked the higher mental faculties. One writer, an army doctor, wrote that they could produce "not one good example of invention"! Consequently the British simply refused to see or believe that the Maoris had strategic skill and field-engineering innovation. Thus the "dominant interpretation" of the wars had racist overtones.

*The New Zealand Wars* is one of the most impressive books on New Zealand history to appear in thirty years. It is very well written, witty, lucid. It includes excellent pen-portraits of the principal characters, Maori and European. It is an absorbing story and analysis that will have a wide appeal among people who do not habitually read military history.