The following is a transcript of a talk presented by Nigel Robson and introduced by Manatū Taonga Chief Historian Neill Atkinson at the National Library on 5 May 2021. It has been lightly edited to aid understanding.

The South African War, also known as the Second Anglo-Boer War, and, perhaps more commonly, the Boer War, occurred between October 1899 and May 1902.

The conflict pitted the forces of the British Army and its colonial supporters, against the Boers of the South African Republic and Orange Free State.

For New Zealand, the war was especially significant as it was the first foreign war to which the nation contributed a national military force.

After initially sending the First Contingent in 1899, New Zealand sent a further nine contingents though only the first eight saw active service.

When war broke out in South Africa in 1899, New Zealand's participation in the conflict received huge public support and for the duration of South African War public displays of patriotism remained the most visible elements of New Zealand's response.

Early in the war, Boer forces besieged the three towns of Kimberley, Ladysmith and Mafeking near the borders of the two Boer republics.

Following the Relief of Mafeking by British forces after a 217-day siege, an estimated 30-40,000 people celebrated in Dunedin.

The scale varied, but similar scenes of elation played out across New Zealand from the largest cities to the smallest rural towns.

In this emotionally charged environment, the minority who publicly opposed the war were labelled pro-Boers.

Their reasons varied. There was moral and religious opposition, political opposition, support for pacifism, and opposition to militarism.

Dissenters risked vilification or even violence if their views were made public, and during the Mafeking celebrations in Dunedin people gathered menacingly outside the premises of a tradesman suspected of harbouring 'pro-Boer' views.

In Whanganui a man who agreed with German criticism of the war was reportedly 'hammered', while a passenger aboard a vessel in Lyttleton who made disparaging comments about the British following the relief of Ladysmith was assaulted and unceremoniously hoisted onto the wharf using the ship's crane.

Setting a precedent for First World War concerns about saboteurs infiltrating New Zealand ports, an Auckland resident wrote to the prime minister in 1901 about guarding contingent vessels.

W. Morton claimed that 'well paid spies, agents and traitors' were operating in Australasia and advised the government to prevent 'Pro-Boers' getting aboard troopships and 'firing, scuttling, disabling their engines, or sinking' them.

Among the first to publicly express dissent was the elderly Legislative Council member Henry Scotland.

In early October 1899, 54 parliamentarians in the House of Representatives supported NZ offering the First Contingent with only 5 opposing the resolution.

In the Legislative Council, Scotland alone opposed sending troops.

He was accused of senility after suggesting 'larrikins and loafers' would seek a trip to South Africa at the taxpayers' expense.

When the resolution was passed and members rose to sing the National Anthem, Scotland incensed council members by remaining seated.

In June 1900, Scotland described the South African conflict as a 'wicked, unnecessary and cruel war'.

He claimed the conflict was driven by capitalism and jingoism and expressed concern about the wave of militarism washing over New Zealand.

'It is painful to see people are persecuted, and their loyalty questioned, because they express con-dem-nation of this war'.

Labelled a pro-Boer and a traitor, Scotland continued to oppose the war and New Zealand's involvement in it.

'Imperialism is in the air. Sir, I hate the very word "Imperialism" and the very name of "Empire"'.

Gilbert Carson spoke in opposition to Seddon's resolution during the First Contingent debate but chose to leave the House rather than vote against it.

Concerned by the impact of his actions, Carson attempted to explain his position during a speech shortly before the 1899 general election.

He said that he had initially considered it unnecessary to send a contingent, but once the decision was made, he shared his fellow parliamentarians' desire to dispatch the men.

Many Whanganui voters remained unconvinced and Carson's stance contributed to his single-term parliamentary career ending in 1899.

The *Evening Post* claimed that Carson and fellow politicians James Kelly and Thomas Taylor owed their election defeats to their opposition to Seddon's resolution.

Rutherford Waddell, the editor of *The Outlook* Presbyterian weekly*,* was an equally outspoken critic of the war.

In early October 1899, Waddell asked what was drawing New Zealand into the conflict, and what was to be gained from it.

He claimed Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company was driven by insatiable greed and a thirst for power and accused Joseph Chamberlain - Secretary of State for the Colonies – of 'jockeying the nation into an unnecessary war', 'the flame of patriotism has burst forth and is burning up everything else'.

Despite his views, Waddell was an objective editor and published letters criticizing his views and accusing him of slandering Rhodes and Chamberlain.

One said it was outrageous for Waddell to suggest Britain was pursuing the war for financial gain, adding that unless Waddell changed his position the veiled threats directed at him would become real.

Commenting on the public's fixation with the conflict, Waddell assured his readership that he was not complaining: 'It is a right and proper thing.'

He also claimed the war roused 'the manhood of the nation', increased patriotism and showcased imperial unity.

Although there was concern within the Presbyterian synod about Waddell's position on the war, he did receive some support from fellow Presbyterians who considered his critics were challenging freedom of speech.

While Reverend Davidson claimed many were outraged by Waddell's stance.

Reverend Hewitson proposed an amendment commending Waddell on his independence of opinion and willingness to publish views that ran counter to his own

Waddell was not the only religious figure to question the reasons for the war.

Reverend Bates, an Anglican, said war would not have broken out had it not been for the Transvaal goldmines, while Reverend James Gibb, the Presbyterian minister of Dunedin's First Church, said that his support for the war was constrained by his uncertainty regarding its causes.

Gibb identified protecting national rights and alleviating the suffering of the downtrodden as legitimate incentives for war but doubted whether either existed in the South African situation.

Though initially critical of the martial fervour engulfing New Zealand, Gibb had an apparent change of heart, later claiming Britain had no choice in 1899 other than 'to draw the sword, and fling the scabbard afar'. Even Waddell acknowledged the need for victory once fighting began.

Few individuals fuelled more controversy during the war than Chief Hansard Reporter, James Grattan Grey.

As well as his role at Hansard, Grey worked as a Foreign correspondent for the *New York Times*

Shortly after war broke out, Grey wrote a *New York Times* article criticizing New Zealand's response to the conflict. Grey claimed NZ had become 'infected with imperialism of the most pronounced type'.

In the article, titled 'Jingoism in Australasia: A Wave of Imperialism Sweeps the Colonies', Grey claimed that other countries would think it odd that self-governing colonies thousands of miles from South Africa would send men to fight people with whom they had no quarrel and assist in their subjugation.

Like Waddell, Grey claimed, 'the jingoistic spirit at the Antipodes is too inflamed just now to care anything about the rights or wrongs of the question'.

After extracts from the *New York Times* article appeared in Dunedin's *Evening Star*, Seddon wrote to Grey asking if he was the author.

Refusing to be intimidated, in February 1900, Grey readily admitted to writing the article.

He told Seddon he had been a lifelong supporter of 'the Party of Peace' and asked,

'Does anyone in his proper senses, anyone with the smallest atom of intelligence or fair-mindedness really believe that but for the gold and diamond discoveries in South Africa the Boers would ever have been disturbed in their isolation?'

Grey also argued that New Zealand's expenditure on sending troops to South Africa would be better spent on improving the nation's defences.

He indicated he had no intention of recanting and regretted the 'wave of jingoistic hysteria' in New Zealand.

Irked by Grey's intransigence, Seddon referred the matter to the Parliamentary Reporting Debates and Printing Committee, which recommended Grey be dismissed for

flouting an earlier committee recommendation that Hansard staff abstain from involvement in politics.

Following one of the longest parliamentary debates of the war, Grey's fate was sealed and he was dismissed from his Hansard position.

The *New York Times* presented Grey as a champion of free thought and speech, and claimed he had been threatened with physical violence.

It claimed New Zealand was the most jingoistic of the Antipodean colonies, possessing a level of intolerance that was inconceivable in a democratic country.

In September 1900, Grey and his wife left New Zealand and sailed for the United States.

But even on the voyage to San Francisco, controversy dogged the couple, with Grey's wife being ostracised by her fellow passengers for refusing to sing God Save the Queen.

In May 1900, during the National Council of Women's Dunedin conference, several politically-active New Zealand women came to the forefront of the public debate surrounding the conflict.

Although the war was a divisive issue within the NCW, the conference provided a forum for the expression of anti-war sentiments.

Delivering a paper on peace and arbitration, Wilhelmina Bain was openly critical of Britain's role in the conflict.

In response, prominent suffragette and NCW president Kate Sheppard expressed disappointment.

Sheppard was not scared of public opinion but had advised delegates to avoid specific reference to the war despite being accused of being a 'pro-Boer' by the *Evening Star.*

Bain remained unapologetic. She said she stood for the interests of humanity and was as much pro-British as pro-Boer.

Bain claimed the rise in militarism was intended to transform men into 'automatic killing machines' and accused New Zealand of sending young men to Africa to kill boys as young as 16 and men as old as 70.

Although its members were dismissed in the press as 'Pro-Boer Cranks', combating militarism was also a key objective of the Auckland Peace Association.

The *Free Lance* newspaper dismissed members of the Wellington Peace and Humanity Society as the 'Wellington peace-and-humanity-stop-the-war sort of patriot', claiming they were characterised by the following rhyme:

We don't want to fight

But by jingo if we do,

We won't go to the front ourselves

But we'll send the mild Hindoo

Bain's motion supporting arbitration and rejecting militarism was seconded by Marianne Tasker, whose son Charles served in the Sixth Contingent.

In an apparent contradiction, Marianne was later involved in organising the Eighth Contingent send-off in Wellington and had reportedly also spoken in support of New Zealand sending troops to South Africa.

Bain also received support from other like-minded New Zealand women.

Temperance worker and suffragette Annie Schnackenberg opposed the involvement of Australasian countries in armed conflicts and accused the British authorities of viewing the colonies as a recruiting ground for 'Imperial militarism'.

Margaret Sievwright, of the Gisborne Women's Political Association, applauded Bain's speech and, like Grey, saw the war as the result of capitalist machinations.

She contrasted the British response in South Africa with the inertia of Christian European nations when Armenians were slaughtered in 1896. The difference, she claimed, was that the South African dispute involved territory, gold and diamonds.

But not everyone in the Gisborne Association supported Bain's stance.

Agnes Scott claimed Sievwright did not speak for the association and stressed it remained loyal to queen, flag and country.

A banner carried in Dunedin during the Mafeking celebrations depicted a member of the National Council of Women embracing a Boer and the following day the Council was accused of being 'Boeresses in disguise'.

In 1901, Marianne Tasker's son was court-martialed for sleeping at his post in South Africa. After being sentenced to five years imprisonment, Tasker was transported to Gosport Prison in the UK.

Clearly angered by the move, Marianne accused the imperial authorities of exceeding their jurisdiction by imprisoning a native-born New Zealander in the United Kingdom.

New Zealand, she noted, was a self-governing colony that had offered troops for a specific purpose in a specific place.

She also criticized the dark ages treatment her son received on the voyage to England where he was confined below the water line in an airless hold during the 15 days it took to pass through the tropics.

The Taskers' plight struck a chord with New Zealand parents concerned about the military's treatment of their own sons serving in South Africa.

A correspondent to Wellington's *Evening Post* spoke for many when she wrote:

'We colonial mothers did not give our sons body and soul to the Imperial Army to do as they like with. Our boys may be brave and fearless as lions, but in the tigerish grip of the Imperial Army it shall avail them nothing in the day of trouble.'

One New Zealand woman who despite her courage and tenacity seems to have been largely overlooked in New Zealand's historical narrative is Takapuna resident, Charlotte Bewicke.

At a time when fund raising within New Zealand was almost entirely focused on supporting the country's war effort, Bewicke instead raised money for sick and wounded Boers.

Refusing to be cowed by public opinion, Bewicke advertised in newspapers seeking contributions.

In a letter published in the press, Bewicke applauded other like-minded individuals who took 'a right view of these much-abused Dutch farmers.'

In an indication of the attitudes Bewicke faced, one of her advertisements appeared in the same column as another advertisement claiming that Britain would 'wipe out' the Boers like Flora Soap wiped out dirt.

Bewicke's activities attracted the interest of Australian newspapers, with the *West Australian Sunday Times* facetiously observing that it was only reasonable to collect money for the Boers as they would be the ones most in need of assistance.

Although it's unclear whether Bewicke obtained the approval of her contributors, she regularly published their names in the press.

Possibly as a sign of German and Irish sympathy for the Boers, contributors' names included Boyle, Geraghty, Turley, McGuire, McGowan, Mosier and Winklemann.

Bewicke collected a total of £21 for the Boers though how she forwarded this to the Boer recipients is unknown.

Shortly before James Grattan Grey and his wife left New Zealand, Bewicke attended a function in their honour and made the purse filled with gold sovereigns that was presented to the couple.

She then appears to have disappeared from the press columns but moved from Takapuna to Russell in the Bay of Islands after the war where she died in 1909.

One of the more amusing examples of dissent occurred in 1901 and involved soldiers of the New Zealand Seventh Contingent and Vilhelm Jensen, a Danish storekeeper in Upper Hutt.

Jensen, a Justice of the Peace, unashamedly described himself as ‘a well-known Boer supporter’.

When he blamed Chamberlain for the war during an Upper Hutt public meeting, the crowd broke into ‘For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow’.

When he claimed the British intended to seize Transvaal, they sang ‘Rule Britannia’.

And when he claimed the war was against fair play, humanity and Christianity, he was finally drowned out by a loud chorus of ‘Soldiers of the Queen’.

On a Sunday in March 1901, members of the Seventh Contingent returning to their Trentham camp gathered at Jensen’s business and tore down the Danish flag he flew over his premises.

The soldiers had been encouraged by local residents who accused Jensen of flying a Boer flag.

After Jensen complained to the Danish Consul, it became an international incident of sorts with the consul requesting that ‘an immediate investigation be made into this affront to the Danish flag’.

The incident was finally resolved when Jensen received an apology from the contingent’s commanding officer and the government formally apologised to the Danish consul.

Seddon dryly observed that similar unpleasant occurrences could be avoided if the men received a lesson on national flags.

While the combined press coverage provided Jensen with a platform for his views, this was not always the case for Boer sympathisers.

In other regions, newspapers were apparently reluctant to publish material seen as supporting the Boer enemy.

Waverley resident D. Fleming asserted that the *Wanganui Chronicle* had refused to publish letters he had written during the war. A self-confessed ‘pro-Boer’ and outspoken critic of British actions in South Africa, Fleming claimed to have spent five years living among the Boers before the war.

He had found them to be reasonable, more trustworthy than Europeans and dedicated to retaining their independence. Within weeks of the war’s outbreak, the Whanganui newspaper dedicated an entire editorial to discrediting Fleming’s views.

In the final months of the war, the Presbyterian *Outlook* was once again in the news.

While acting as the *Outlook*'s temporary editor, Seddon's implacable political foe, William Hutchison expressed regret that the wasteful '*war of extermination*' was still continuing.

Hutchison was especially critical of the deaths of Boer children in the concentration camps, which he described as a dark page in the history of the conflict.

Like Waddell, Hutchison attracted vociferous criticism, with the *Star* calling the *Outlook* a pro-Boer newspaper.

It claimed that following Hutchison's editorial the Mataura Presbytery had passed a resolution drawing the attention of the *Outlook*'s Publishing Committee to Hutchison's disloyal and anti-British sentiments.

In an article titled a 'A Pro-Boer Editor', the *Star* announced Hutchison's resignation, claiming the Publishing Committee believed his opinions were antagonistic to Presbyterians and other churches.

Predating First World War suspicions about unions, the loyalty of some unionists in New Zealand was questioned during the South African War.

In 1900, Wellington resident John Williamson wrote to Lieutenant-Colonel Penton claiming that Danish contingent member Julius Petersen had gone to South Africa 'for the purpose of joining the Boers, or acting as a spy'.

In a confidential response to a query from Penton, Petersen's employer, Harrison Brothers of Kaitoke, accused him of being 'a very deep union fellow' and an 'out & out rank socialist'.

The company warned that if Petersen 'really sympathized with the Boers he would undoubtedly require watching very closely'.

Labour groups certainly had the potential to disrupt troop movements and trade with South Africa, but within the labour movement the war proved divisive.

While some workers questioned the conflict's legitimacy, there was no concerted attempt to disrupt maritime traffic to and from South Africa.

Port workers' employment largely relied on uninterrupted trade with Britain, and to a lesser extent the other territories of the British Empire.

Once hostilities commenced and trade volumes to Natal and Cape Colony soared, there was little evidence of unions favouring disruptive industrial action.

During the first years of the conflict, widespread union support for British actions in South Africa ensured the New Zealand labour movement played a leading role in the country's response.

Even when individual unions became critical of the war, this criticism was undermined by equally strident expressions of union support.

In October 1899, trade unionists took part in patriotic displays at Wellington's Labour Day parade, where Seddon apologised to workers carrying out alterations to the *Waiwera* – the First Contingent's vessel.

The Premier noted that, like contingent members, the tradesmen were doing their duty.

In the south, management and labour divisions were temporarily set aside when the president of the Trades and Labour Council mingled with politicians and the president of the Chamber of Commerce at a Dunedin patriotic fundraiser.

Support for the contingents also came from at least one women's labour organisation, with the Tailoresses' Union making equipment for the Third Contingent, which together with the Fourth Contingent were known as the 'Rough Riders'. The Dunedin branch of the union also contributed £25 to purchase a contingent horse.

Yet although initially unions were largely supportive of British actions in South Africa, as the war progressed some began to question the conflict and New Zealand's involvement in it.

In some cases, workers who voiced opposition to the conflict risked coming into conflict not only with their employers, but also with their workmates. In 1900, a Bluff watersider was reportedly instructed to leave the docks by his co-workers after voicing support for the Boers.

In Napier, the principle of free speech was sidelined altogether by a 1900 Borough Council resolution intended to gag council employees who criticised British actions in South Africa.

Passed unanimously, the resolution appeared in the local newspaper under the ominous title 'A Warning'.

It instructed overseers to inform council workers that making remarks 'derogatory to the British Government in connection with the war in South Africa' would result in instant dismissal.

Similar threats did not pass unchallenged. A Christchurch editorial titled 'Should Englishmen be Muzzled' supported the right of those with pro-Boer sentiments to express their views regardless of whether they ran counter to public opinion.

While stressing that his newspaper was not ‘pro-Boer’, the editor claimed that freedom of speech was under attack. Following claims that several Westport Harbour Board employees had expressed ‘disloyal sentiments’, the board passed its own resolution instructing its engineer to instantly dismiss Boer sympathisers.

The *Manawatu Evening Standard*, a frequent Seddon critic, claimed that the resolution was the worst kind of autocracy and criticised the three ‘Seddonite’ politicians it claimed were on the board and behind the resolution.

Though teachers remained largely supportive of the war, they too could find their jobs in jeopardy if suspected of disloyalty.

In 1901 the New Zealand Ensign Act formalised the use of the Royal Navy Reserve blue ensign with the addition of the Southern Cross as the nation’s official flag.

Under the Act, anyone found to have defaced the flag was liable to a penalty not exceeding £5. However, as Kirikiri School headmaster James Murray discovered, failure to comply with Education Board directives concerning the flag could prove far more costly.

Members of the Kirikiri School Committee accused Murray of refusing to declare a holiday following the occupation of Pretoria by British forces.

While conceding this was true, Murray believed he lacked the authority to send his students home. He stated he had been willing to give them a holiday the following day on receipt of a written instruction from the School Committee but claimed this had not been forthcoming.

While Murray’s initial refusal was anathema to the area’s Loyal and Patriotic Committee, it was his refusal to salute the flag that set the headmaster on a collision course with the Education Board.

Matters came to a head when the board delivered an ultimatum: Murray was to salute the flag and instruct his students to do the same or tender his resignation.

After declining both options, Murray was summarily fired from his £175-per-annum position.

A petition signed by 64 residents of the Kirikiri district (including two school committee members) urged the board to reconsider. They believed Murray’s unwillingness to salute the flag was driven by conscience rather than disloyalty and called for his reinstatement.

One petitioner noted that honouring the flag was neither an obligation under the Education Act nor part of the school curriculum. He believed Murray was fired not for

refusing to salute the flag but because of suspicions he was either a Fenian or a pro-Boer.

Murray's case was also taken up by the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Women's Political League, who considered his punishment unduly harsh.

The headmaster's refusal seems to have stemmed from his personal (and possibly religious) aversion to saluting an object, which he suggested could be considered akin to idolatry.

In a letter to the Education Board, Murray rhetorically asked,

Is it not degrading to the free-born children of this colony to try to compel them to an act of the most servile homage which is never required of the English, Scotch, or Irish children, and such as would scarcely be expected from the pagan, barbarian slaves of a Central African chief? Could anything be devised more utterly foolish than to salute an inanimate, useless piece of drapery in the same manner as an intelligent human being …?

In Waihī, Salvation Army members came under attack during the Mafeking celebrations when their captain, acting under orders, refused to hoist the Union Jack at the local barracks.

When he attempted to address the angry crowd, he was pelted with eggs and drowned out by derisive hoots.

In a letter to the *Auckland Star*, 'Miner' claimed that respectable citizens had reacted to an insult to the flag and it was not the captain's refusal to hoist it that had enraged the Waihī crowd, but the Salvation Army's subsequent lowering of the Union Jack raised by those who had forced their way into its barracks.

'Miner' also referred to traitors in South Africa and claimed there were equally treacherous individuals in New Zealand. Though stopping short of accusing the Salvation Army of treason, the inference was clear.

By late 1901 some unionists had become disgruntled by war-related government spending at a time when government employees reportedly faced redundancies.

The disaffected unions moved a strongly worded resolution opposing the dispatch of the Eighth Contingent 'to assist in waging against the Boers a hideous and unholy war of extermination, which we believe was begun, and now carried on, entirely in the interests of capitalists'.

The Operative Sausage Case and Skin-makers Union expressed its ‘pleasure’ at the resolution, while Wellington unionist T. Lynch claimed that the conflict was not in the interest of workers.

But when the resolution was passed, Trades Council president William Naughton resigned in disgust, claiming it did not reflect Labour Party views or those of most unionists. The plumbers, bookbinders, butchers and saddlers’ unions backed his views.

The Bakers’ Union and the Timber Yards Workers’ Union stated that their continued Trades Council affiliation depended on it rescinding the resolution, while the United Furniture Trades Union described it as ‘ill-timed and viciously worded’.

A delegate accused the Carpenters’ Union of being behind the resolution.

He claimed it had been passed during a poorly attended meeting.

Bowing to pressure, the Trades Council rescinded the resolution shortly after its passage. Instead, the Wellington Typographical Union carried its own resolution: ‘That this union has no sympathy with any disloyal sentiments in connection with the Boer War.’

After Dunedin politician Alfred Barclay condemned the British use of concentration camps to confine women and children, the Workers’ Political Committee rejected press accusations that Barclay was a Boer sympathizer.

The outspoken politician, who in 1899 had published a pamphlet on the theories of Karl Marx, had been repeatedly criticised in the press. After allegedly making ‘pro-Boer’ remarks in a speech, Barclay was advised to resign his parliamentary seat by ‘A Worker’.

Employees at Dunedin’s Hillside Railway Workshops unanimously decided not to invite him to their annual picnic, considering his presence ‘undesirable’ because of his alleged pro-Boer views.

Barclay claimed in Parliament that his four-year-old son had been ostracised by classmates who told the boy his father was a pro-Boer who ought to be shot, and Barclay was later confronted by Union Jack-waving railway employees who passed a resolution denouncing his ‘traitorous utterances’.

When, in 1902, it was suggested that Boer prisoners be interned on the Chatham Islands, the editor of the *Ashburton Guardian* suggested that Barclay and William Hutchison should be placed on the islands as well so ‘pro-Boers and traitors would get their just deserts’.

Despite the strength of their convictions, for the duration of the war individuals like Waddell, Bain, Sievwright and Grey who questioned New Zealand's involvement in the conflict remained an ineffectual minority.

Lacking unity and vastly outnumbered by supporters of British actions in South Africa, dissenters' views were often either openly ridiculed or dismissed.

In this environment, the loyalty of those who publicly opposed the war was questioned and, with few exceptions, they were vilified and risked the threat of physical violence.

Fractured, socially ostracized and with their message often interpreted by a largely hostile press, dissenters never coalesced into a unified, effective anti-war movement, and never presented a serious threat to New Zealand's continued involvement in the distant conflict.

Nonetheless, their bravery and resolve provided a precedent for the anti-war movements that followed in their wake. Although they failed to end New Zealand's participation in the conflict, or even present a real challenge to it, they remained true to their beliefs and generated public debate.

As such, they have earned a well-deserved placed in New Zealand's history.

Transcript provided by Manatū Taonga - Ministry for Culture and Heritage for the NZHistory website.
Original sound file available here: https://nzhistory.govt.nz/handsonhistory/downloads-and-podcasts