Living Halls: The War Memorial Community Centres

Bill McKay

How do we go from grief to community centre? Why are there all these war memorial halls throughout New Zealand? We are all familiar with the rituals of ANZAC Day, the dawn ceremony and the cenotaph, most of which date from the Great War. Was the Second World War any different from the First? Had times changed? Was there a newly developed sense of community or a pragmatic streak that saw New Zealanders reject the cenotaph and statue in favour of the hall?

There are so many of them throughout the country. Some are a wee bit forlorn now, like the well-worn jackets of the old soldiers you see on parade at ANZAC Day. And the words ‘war memorial’ can seem a bit tacked on, like a medal on a jacket. But those halls are everywhere when you start to notice them. Many are called community centres, not so much to distinguish them from country or school halls it seems, but to reiterate that they do indeed mark the heart of nearly every little township or rural community in the land.

Most of us can now only imagine what it must have been like to live through the war, with the anxiety of a son, husband or brother away fighting. And when the telegram arrived or the visit from the authorities occurred with the notification of death, words must have been inadequate to deal with this most severe of losses. Without even a funeral or a grave to visit, the urge to commemorate the loss of loved ones in some other kind of way seems natural. And through the shared national experience of war, many suffered these losses; losses that impacted on communities throughout New Zealand as many of their young men never returned. But how did this impact culminate in the wave of community centre construction throughout the country?

The War to End All Wars

The Great War, 1914-18, was marked by waves of patriotism on the home front that were starkly at odds with the reality of trench warfare. New Zealand’s war record was marked by the defeat at Gallipoli. And then, on the Western Front, under the care of mostly inept British commanders, the experience of industrialised methods of mass killing, which wasted troops on a vast scale, would have made the individual heroism of the lone soldier seem pointless. I think many a returned soldier, knowing the futility of war, would have found the stone monuments memorialising that conflict hollow indeed. And for the families severed by loss, those who had their hopes and aspirations for the future amputated, there would have been little compensation in a visit to a statue once a year. Their men had not died for a particularly noble cause.

Other countries around the world had also grappled with these issues, of course. In fact the notion of the war memorial that salutes the common soldier, that commemorates the masses of men who served or died, only dates from the first ‘modern war’, the Crimean War of the mid-nineteenth century. Before then, war memorials celebrated victories and

glorified the conqueror or the commander-in-chief. Perhaps it's something to do with the mechanisation of war, the explosion of death to slaughterhouse scale and the increasing toll on local communities, that more local memorials were produced than single national triumphal symbols. Certainly the increase in war memorials have paralleled the enfranchisement of humankind; with the vote it seems the common man (and woman) counted in more ways than one, even when dead. The typical Great War memorial did remember the dead, "lest we forget"[i], most of whom were interred in foreign soil. The name "fallen soldiers memorial", rather than "war memorial", became popular at the time. While emphasising the sacrifice of the individual, it did tend to sanitise the situation – modern warfare was much more of a slaughterhouse. Soldiers did not fall, they were blown apart or died of disease seeping up from their miserable conditions.

After the Great War, there was public debate over the nature of memorials that would commemorate that conflict. Would they be symbolic in the form of sculptural monuments or would they be more utilitarian such as appropriate public facilities or even scholarships for returned servicemen? In New Zealand, due probably to the disillusionment with war of those who had actually been there, some veterans seemed to prefer utilitarian memorials rather than ones expressing lofty ideals. Chris Maclean and Jock Phillips mention a couple of examples of this in their book on New Zealand war memorials, *The Sorrow and the Pride*[ii]. However, despite a number of proposals from towns and communities for "useful" memorials such as libraries, halls, clubrooms, hospitals, sports parks and other facilities, the Government came down firmly against them, supported by numerous newspaper editorials and the Returned Services Association.

After the Great War

In retrospect, we now call the period after the "war to end all wars"[iii] the mid-war period, but that was not how it was seen then. But even during the Roaring Twenties the Great War cast a shadow: "all wars fought, all gods dead, all faith in men shaken" as F. Scott Fitzgerald put it.[iv] The 1930s saw the Depression, localised conflicts and unsettled international relations, but this period is important to the way New Zealanders (and Australians) began to commemorate war. The development of ANZAC Day as one of the most significant anniversaries in the national calendar is bound up with our sense of emerging national identity. ANZAC Day is marked by solemn commemoration at dawn but quiet conviviality afterwards as old mates share a drink at the RSA or local hall. ANZAC Day, even though it is still our most solemn national occasion in the morning, is marked by a swift return to normality in the afternoon as shops reopen and others enjoy a day off work. This duality strikes me as significant in the population's later enthusiasm for the utilitarian war memorial hall.

The inter-war period was also the time when those countries that had formerly been part of the British Empire became the Commonwealth of Nations. The 1926 Imperial Conference established that the dominions were equal in status, not subordinate to the United Kingdom. These countries would start to follow their own paths more as they discovered their own national character. Not just yet though, because when Britain

declared war on Germany in 1939, the Prime Minister, Michael Joseph Savage, announced that where Britain went, we would go, “where she stands, we stand”[v].

A Second World War

We should not forget that in New Zealand 1940 was also the nation’s centenary, the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, and this had resulted in a spate of memorial building that included the Centennial Exhibition. Maori took a bit of a back seat in this exhibition though; it tended to celebrate 100 years of progress through Pakeha effort. As planning for the exhibition coincided with the outbreak of war, there was a deal of public debate over the merits of continuing with the Exhibition, but it was felt that not only would the Centennial raise morale and national spirit, but that continuation would reflect the can-do pioneering spirit of New Zealanders. But that pioneering spirit was also generally practical too: it was emphasised that as far as possible the buildings and materials of the Exhibition would be reused. The Centennial saw other notable buildings erected too, such as the Waitangi meeting house and more prosaic buildings throughout the land: Plunket rooms, rest rooms, and halls. Maclean and Phillips have called this spate of construction “a dress rehearsal for the memorials of the Second World War”[vi].

The Great War was marked by monuments in many communities and we are all familiar with these prominent obelisks, cenotaphs and statues of solitary soldiers. Many take the form of elaborate gateways to fields, reserves or cemeteries as well. But what do you do when the war to end all wars turns out not to be the last; how do you mark a second global conflict? Do you add an S to Great War? A couple of towns did: Cheviot and Mosgiel. Or do you add on another set of dates and another list of names? Do you construct a second monument next to the first or at the other end of town?

The Great War was renamed the First World War, as Janet Frame put it, “its greatness being finally in doubt”[vii]. The mid-war years strike us now as a quick breather between two halves of the 20th Century’s great game: global national conflict. But the Second World War must have seemed to people then as another great pit that civilisation had tripped into. The realisation that world war was upon them again within a generation must have made people reflect on the cyclic, repetitive, seemingly unavoidable nature of war, and this must have surely affected the nature of their later commemoration of it.

Living Memorials

Internationally, following the American lead, utilitarian war memorials to the Second World War (1939-1945) were favoured by many including governments and the public. These “useful” memorials, such as community centres, parks and other public facilities, were called by proponents in one debate “living memorials” and “agencies for future peace, not war”[viii]. There was a great deal of debate about this; as Andrew Shanken has said, “choosing a form of memorial was tantamount to choosing a form of society”[ix]. After two global conflicts in a generation, people were ready to try a new approach, in the democratic countries anyway.

Perhaps this is also due to the impact of the modernism in design and thought that changed the way we saw the world, from the 1920s onwards especially – the pervasive notion of efficiency, progress and functionalism in all things and all aspects of life was also bound to affect our commemoration of death.

From another aspect, in modern 'total warfare', it is not only soldiers who serve; those who work in factories or on farms also serve to sustain the war effort. Of course the dead have made the ultimate sacrifice, but each nation's whole population was affected by the Second World War, especially those close to the front who experienced civilian bombing for the first time and the destruction of homes and cities. Even citizens of remote New Zealand felt the impact of war through rationing, shortages, workplace and manpower restrictions, war-time regulations, limitations on activity and the austerity afterwards. Auckland prepared for Japanese invasion, constructing an elaborate network of air raid tunnels under Albert Park, for example. Then later, of course, New Zealand was invaded: by American troops. In the Second World War whole populations experienced war differently, but perhaps this impelled communities to commemorate that same experience in a more communal and modern way.

Such was the scale of the Second World War that both victors and defeated were involved in post-war reconstruction, reorganisation and rehabilitation. Perhaps it helped that this period of austerity meant efforts were directed towards memorials that had a more practical function. The new discipline of urban planning was also having an impact with its focus on scientific re-organisation of communities and infrastructure. There was a wide-spread sense after the Second World War that things would not return to the way they had been. New ways of doing things would be found, and there was a new and better world to build.

In other countries such as the United States, construction of the utilitarian memorial, the 'living memorial', dominated that of the 'traditional' monument. In Australia memorials were of both types, but in both countries, sculptural monuments tended to be additions or adjacent to previous First World War memorials. New Zealand's memorialising was to be quite different.

The Government

The First Labour Government (1935-1949) is famous for its reforms and new ways of doing things. It was an administration that acted rather than indulged in rhetoric. It was a government that built many buildings, notably a great number of state houses, the tracts of which also established new suburbs, new communities and new town centres. This government embraced the international idea of the 'living memorial' as a war memorial. To ministers, administrators and planners, this could be seen as simply a good opportunity to improve infrastructure, but the story is more complex than that.

It's also worth noting that some members of this government, including Peter Fraser, Prime Minister after Savage's death in 1940, had resisted conscription during the First World War and been imprisoned for that. Plainly, the inclination of these men would be

to convert swords to ploughshares, to bring into being new ideas, such as the 'living hall', that could be seen as making a contribution to the community rather than glorifying war. And, after all, the old way of doing things, those massive stone piles, the mute and tomblike memorials of the past, hadn't done much to steer us away from a second twentieth century conflict. In contrast, Australia saw a mix of the two types of memorial[x], but perhaps the pertinent difference seems to have been New Zealand's Government subsidy for war memorial construction that determined just the one type of memorial. Australia also has distinct states under a federal system whereas New Zealand is a younger, smaller country administered by one government.

The post-war period internationally saw a sense of building a new world. Part of that way of thinking was the Labour Government's focus on the everyman; improving the lot of the man in the street not just through improving his house and his health, his workplace and his wages, but through education. As we look through the archives and follow the memos, we can see the Government fine-tuning its policy, discouraging sports pavilions for instance, and encouraging community centres that would engage more in cultural pursuits and provide opportunities for everyman's – and everywoman's – education and enlightenment.

Utilitarian Memorials

The population had also been prepared for this. An article in *Harpers Magazine* was reprinted in *Korero*, an Army Education Welfare Service publication[xi], arguing that monuments glorified war and perpetuated the cycle. Prime Minister Peter Fraser was able to comment in 1946 on "the very clear evidence that our people generally [the populace] are thinking in terms of living memorials"[xii], and later that year said "Thought throughout the Allied world today is in the direction of memorials that will not only perpetuate our hallowed memories but will also serve a real community interest."[xiii] A circular was issued to local authorities (councils) outlining policy and stating that the choice of memorial was of course up to communities, but the only ones that would be subsidised by the Government had to be the following:

"something vitally living, something that from the very nature of its use and enjoyment will ever keep before us and the generations that follow us that freedom of life and personal expression for which our men and women fought and fell… the type of memorial which best embodies this ideal is the community centre where the people can gather for social, educational, cultural and recreational purposes."[xiv]

The Government subsidy would be a pound grant for every pound raised by the community. What was the public reaction? Great enthusiasm. There doesn't seem to have been the same level of dispute as there was in the US and Australia, or indeed here after the Great War, between proponents of the symbolic monument and the utilitarian building. Undoubtedly the subsidy appealed to the pragmatic streak of Kiwis who would not look a gift horse in the mouth. Others of a different political streak could argue that this was also due to the welfare state that the Government had established; instilling in

New Zealanders a desire to follow the Government hand-out. There are other factors we could consider as well.

Perhaps it wasn't simply a choice between one type of memorial or another. The country already had a large number of monumental memorials from the last war and the new ones would not replace them; they would be in addition. And they would fit in well with the commemorative ritual we had established with ANZAC Day. On that day, once a year, New Zealanders gather at dawn for the commemorative ceremony, then the old soldiers parade through the streets to the nearest hall or RSA for a day's camaraderie and recollections over a drink or several. It was clear this ritual did not need a larger or an additional monument, although in many cases the dates of the Second World War and more Rolls of Honour were added to plinths and cenotaphs. The community halls would not supplant this commemoration, they could add to it because ANZAC Day is about us coming together in our communities; although, as is often the case, the pub is frequently the final destination, but generally with more teary eyes than usual. And on other days of the year of course, the halls would be of continuing use to the community – especially those communities that did not already have them.

The People

This acceptance of the utilitarian memorial could be seen to reflect the practical nature of the New Zealander in a young country not yet flush with the public infrastructure of older cultures. This was an opportunity for many communities to obtain new facilities and it reflected the tradition of the country hall as the centerpiece of social life. We forget how the New Zealand of the 1940s was made up of little communities, more self-contained and isolated than they are now. This was a time of provinces, made up of junctions, settlements, pas and townships. And even the big cities were a mass of individual boroughs and town centres with their own identity and governance – and funding issues.

It's well known the shortages of manpower in the Second World War propelled women into all sorts of positions previously occupied by men: landgirl, factory worker, office manager, head of household and probably a more significant voice in the community. Man Alone is a national myth, but at least rurally, Woman Alone is probably more accurate in the 1930s. It was a hard life for both in the backblocks, but men did get out more. They frequently worked together, met at the various intersections between the farm and commerce, and drank together. It was usually the missus or mum tied to the house, so the appeal of a social, community or cultural function becoming a special occasion beyond the prosaic everyday intercourse men enjoyed was great.

The embrace of the new hall or community centre also reflects the rather prosaic attitude to this second war as opposed to the first one. This war came after the depression. It was another world war. It was a fact of life. The whole country just had to get on with it. It was treated as 'a job to be done'. It wasn't an adventure turned sour like the first war. It was a serious business and fascism needed to be stopped but by and large this had been done in a workman-like manner, not that much different from the attitude you would bring to the farm or the factory or even the footy field. The soldiers did their duty and

achieved a result. But they were keen for this work to finish and see a return to normality. This attitude of New Zealand troops has been noted in the field, but the so-called 'furlough mutiny' of 1943-44 is also notable as an example of this attitude at home. Men who had returned to New Zealand for a few months leave between transfer to another theatre declined to return to service when recalled. With a lot of public support, these men resisted returning to the war: why should they serve twice when others had yet to serve at all? Much of this episode was censored, but it is more reminiscent of a strike rather than a mutiny.

New Zealand soldiers in our national mythology are also often seen as innocents abroad led into folly by inept (generally British) command. But our soldiers have had considerable experience at slaughter. Farmers, freezing workers, factory men, labourers. The ranks knew the facts of life, they knew where the meat on the table came from and how it got there. But it would be wrong to construe skill at butchery as a propensity for violence. It's a job. And those at home, many of them veterans of the first war, knew that too.

Modern War

Total war, of which the Second World War was the first, involves marshalling the effort of the entire population and industry. An Allied victory was ultimately made possible by the resources of manpower and raw materials provided by the mobilisation of United States industry in particular; and was achieved without too much in the way of martial flourishes, rhetoric or glorious gestures. The end of the war in Europe was certainly achieved by men on the ground, but the way was prepared by the effectiveness of a naval noose that restricted Germany's access to raw materials and a continuous conveyor belt-like series of bombs hitting cities. This was a war won by utilitarian means and it is apt that the memorials to this war are utilitarian as well.

The war in the Pacific was brutal, but the end that came with the nuclear bombing of Japan came about through the same concerted scientific and industrial process that culminated in the pushing of a button in a single aircraft. But that button push was the result of the contributions of the entire working population of the Allied nations. Populations were not just affected by the deaths of their soldiers, populations were all, one way or another, involved in the war effort. Again, it may have been appropriate that the general population reaped the reward in the form of new public facilities. These factors can all be seen as a very pragmatic view of the new utilitarian war memorial, but careful reading of documents reveals a more idealistic view.

War Memorial Community Centres

The memos in the National Archives, especially those intended for the public, are written in sober but aspirational prose. The government needed to clarify what was meant by 'community centre'. Of course, to a Labour Government, this definition had its Labour movement antecedents in community work and workers' education in impoverished areas. The booklet *What is a Community Centre?*[xv] explained it was not simply a hall,

which many New Zealanders would have been familiar with, the country hall having been a centre of social life for quite sometime. A community centre was more of a complex that could support a variety of events: social, cultural, political, educational and recreational. As to the war memorial aspect, these centres would allow one to partake in "democratic living": a "fuller, richer life," by "participat[ing] in activities in common with our fellows" as well as "developing [one's] abilities and… interests". This was the way of life our soldiers and those at home had fought and worked for: "a way of life in which democratic living can become a reality". This endeavour would be commemorated in a "living memorial that expresses symbolically the sacrifices they made, and actively perpetuates and fosters the ideals for which they died".[xvi]

The Minister of Internal Affairs, Bill Parry, and Joe Heenan, the public servant in charge of that department, were enthusiastic believers in the policy and dedicated to its implementation. Parry had earlier promoted the Physical Welfare and Education Act 1937 that subsidised community facilities such as gymnasiums. As well as state housing and welfare, this first Labour government instituted new educational philosophies, improvements in the health system, health camps for children, even milk in schools. The war memorial community centre policy can be seen as extending some of these things to adults as well; except for the milk.

Ernst Plishcke, the famous emigre architect, was involved in the Housing Department designing state houses and community centres. His contribution to the implementation of this policy should not be underestimated but his sophisticated European background most likely made his modernist community complexes a stretch too far for many smaller communities in both advanced design and cost. Indeed it was frustration over the community centre projects that prompted Plischke's departure as he expressed in his letter of resignation[xvii].

What do the typical War Memorial Community Centres look like then? In many cases, these forms were all that local people in small communities knew and all they were capable of building in terms of both finance and local skills and materials. Many Hall committees would have been driven by knowledgeable locals, well-meaning people who had mates who were builders, rather than led by architects. There was a lot of purchase and adaptation of plans from other projects and localities so as to keep architectural expenses down and aid quantification of costs. Generally applications to the Government first had a sketch done by a local person that had to be approved by the Department. The archives contain a wonderful selection of these. Only later would a professional such as an architect or draughtsman be involved, but they would have been constrained by the initial concept. Many Community Centres involved a gabled hall similar to the typical country hall (or ubiquitous shed) but with a square or stepped façade to modernise its street appearance. The front door faced the street and inside there was often a stage at the rear and a kitchen to one side. One letter to a rural hall committee is interesting:

"It might be better to use a New Zealand architectural style (e.g. a gabled roof). The present style would in Mr Plischke's opinion be quite suitable for a modern urban

community, but in an isolated area would tend to look dwarfed and the residents would soon tire of the design"[xviii].

Of course, the more complex urban community centres were more advanced in their design and generally Modernist in appearance. The Wanganui War Memorial Hall is a significant example of what was at the time a new and radical style of building in New Zealand architecture, but atypical of much of what was actually built.

One of the key criteria for subsidy was that a War Memorial Community Centre had to involve a building. Some sports grounds were eligible if they involved, say, a grandstand with facilities below. Another important aspect was that the building had to be open to everyone. However this did not stop a large number of marae buildings being constructed in certain areas (Northland and the East Coast in particular), especially whare kai or dining halls, along with some meeting houses. These were buildings after all central to their communities. John Scott's Maori Battalion Memorial Hall in Palmerston North is a notable example of a modernist war memorial community centre that is also a very significant example of New Zealand architecture by a very important architect. Interestingly, some applications for RSA clubrooms were declined unless they were part of a larger public complex.

A great number of the War Memorial Community Centres are in small towns and rural communities for obvious reasons. Lacking much in the way of resources, this scheme was a boon to the locals, and frequently involved an upgrade or addition to an existing hall. It's worth noting that the effort going into planning and fundraising would also have acted to galvanise local communities and bring them together although of course the process could be acrimonious as well. There are 720 records of applications for War Memorial Community Centres in the National Archives but that excludes some halls, libraries, pools, parks and so on. In any case the scheme was so popular that Treasury under both the Labour and subsequent National governments attempted to curtail it, but War Memorial Community Centres were still being completed as late as the 1960s. In New Zealand terms, this is a remarkable period of activity focused as it is on one type of building that is so central to the hearts of so many communities.

Living Memorials: Lest We Forget

It's ironic indeed that Michael Joseph Savage's own memorial, also erected in the early 40s after his death during the war, is an obelisk on a headland in Auckland. New Zealanders don't need that tomb-like monument to remember him and the work of that Government: in an antipodean inversion of the Ozymandias story, his works are all still around us, albeit rather worn little state houses and those war memorial halls we swoosh past today. Like a lot left over from that First Labour Government's buildings, the war memorial community centres are so widespread and familiar that they have become unremarkable. Has this familiarity bred forgetfulness of their original purpose, in the last couple of generations anyway?

They have served their communities and fostered cultural and social pursuits, as was the ambition of the government, and have certainly been successful in a utilitarian sense. The halls have also been helpful in creating or bringing communities together: those who planned and built the halls, those who raised money, those who assisted in running events. But does our everyday use prompt thoughts of those who served and died to save our way of life? Have they succeeded as living memorials?

That's not a judgment for me to make, that's for us all to reflect on. It would be a rare user of the halls that hasn't at some stage noticed a plaque or a roll of honour and given a thought to the dead and to those who served in a war that's a long way away now. Increasingly on Anzac Days, generations of New Zealanders who were not even alive in wartime, flock to dawn services at cenotaphs. But on every other day of the year, the war memorial halls still quietly stand and serve the needs of their communities. The halls may be emptier now, most days, but while cenotaph and statue suffer the depredations of the elements and casual vandalism, the halls, though less picturesque than soldier or sentinel, remain living monuments. With their Rolls of Honour kept safe inside, in the words of one old soldier, they still "keep warm the names of the dead"[xix].

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[i] Kipling, Rudyard, "Recessional", 1897.
[ii] Maclean, Chris & Phillips, Jock, *The Sorrow and the Pride: New Zealand War Memorials*, GP Books, Wellington, 1990, p78.
[iii] US President Woodrow Wilson to Congress in his declaration of war, 2 April 1917.
[iv] Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *This Side of Paradise*, 1920.
[v] New Zealand Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage in his declaration of war, 5 September 1939.
[vi] Maclean & Phillips, p139.
[vii] Frame, Janet, *To the Is-land*, Women's Press, London, 1982, p152.
[viii] Lewis, William Mather, "What Kind of War Memorial?" in *The Rotarian*, February 1946, p50.
[ix] Shanken, Andrew M, "Planning Memory: Living Memorials in the United States during World War II" in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 84, No. 1, March 2002, pp. 130-147.
[x] Inglis, K. S., *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998, third edition 2008, p334, 340 and 343.
[xi] Feril, Thomas, "Another Man's Poison" in *Harpers Magazine*, May 1945 reprinted in *Korero*, vol. 3 (14), 13 August 1945.
[xii] Maclean & Phillips, p139.
[xiii] Prime Minister Peter Fraser's announcement on war memorials (nd) Internal Affairs National Archives Series IA 1, 174/1/2.
[xiv] Minister of Internal Affairs official circular on war memorials, 22 October 1946, IA 174/1/2.
[xv] Department of Internal Affairs, Recreational Information Service, "Bulletin Number 4: What is a Community Centre?", 1946, IA1, 174/1/2.
[xvi] Ibid.
[xvii] Plischke, Ernst in a memo regarding resignation (nd), IA1 174/1/7.

[xviii] Maclean & Phillips, p146, quoting extract from a meeting of the Inter-Departmental Committee on War Memorials, 28 February 1948, IA 1 174/151.
[xix] Personal communication to Fiona Jack.