

Half a World Away: New Zealanders in the Middle East during the
Second World War

By

Josh King

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Contents

List of Abbreviations	iii
Abstract	iv
Introduction	1
Historiography and Sources	6
The Middle East	14
Chapter 1: Place	19
The Desert	20
The City	31
The Holy Land	41
The Ancient World	48
Conclusion	55
Chapter 2: Materiality	57
Shopping and Souveniring	59
Romance and Reality: An Interesting Contradiction	67
Conclusion	74
Chapter 3: People	75
Racial Attitudes and Racism	76
A Hierarchy of Races	86
Photographs: Visual Representations of Middle Eastern People	93
Good Relations with Middle Eastern People	101
Conclusion	107
Conclusion	108
Appendix A: Maps	112
Bibliography	117

List of Abbreviations used in this Thesis

2(NZ) Div.	2 New Zealand Division
2NZEF	2 nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force
AA	Anti Aircraft
Div. Cav.	Divisional Cavalry
NZA	New Zealand Artillery
NZMC	New Zealand Medical Corps
NZASC	New Zealand Army Service Corps
NZDF	New Zealand Defence Force
NZE	New Zealand Engineers
NZGH	New Zealand General Hospital
RAF	Royal Air Force

Repository Abbreviations

ANZ	Archives New Zealand
ATL	Alexander Turnbull Library
AWMM	Auckland War Memorial Museum
KMARL	Kippenberger Military Archive and Research Library
NLNZ	National Library of New Zealand

A Note on Nomenclature

Units within 2NZEF appear in this thesis both with and without the ‘th’ or ‘nd’ after the unit number; e.g. 4th Field Artillery and 14 Light Anti Aircraft Regiment. There is no uniformity in the sources as to how units were supposed to be designated, so I have included the unit designations as they appear in the sources.

Abstract

New Zealand's longest and most important campaign of the Second World War was in the Middle East. When New Zealand's Middle Eastern war is discussed, the focus is usually on combat and the lives of New Zealanders on the battlefield. The limited discussion of life behind the lines is dominated by a picture of racism, drunkenness and debauchery with its focal point in Cairo. This thesis uses primary sources, including letters, diaries, photographs and soldier publications, and focusses on how New Zealanders saw the Middle East through the lenses of place, materiality and people. It assesses how New Zealanders experienced the Middle East as a series of geographic and imagined places, the material things they chose to acquire in those places, and the relationships they formed with the diverse range of people they encountered. An examination of these three topics reveals a complex and rich picture of respect and loathing, delight and disgust, wonder and disillusionment. Such a picture shows that the one-dimensional understanding of racism and poor behaviour is an entirely inadequate representation of New Zealanders' Middle Eastern war, a war that would take them to Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Iran and Iraq. In moving beyond this conventional understanding, this thesis hopes to expand the picture of New Zealand's long relationship with the Middle East – a relationship that stretches from the beaches of Gallipoli in 1915 to the mountains of Afghanistan in the present day.

Introduction

On 14 March 1942 Stephanie Lee sat on her bed in a hut in the Egyptian desert and wrote a letter to her parents. Lee was a nurse with 3 New Zealand General Hospital at Helmieh, 12 miles outside of Cairo, and the hut she was writing in was her quarters, shared with another nurse named Jean.¹ Sitting on her iron framed bed, Lee's surroundings were spartan – “concrete walls and floor with two iron beds...a little table and a huge cupboard of a wardrobe.”² As she wrote to Frederick and Kate Lee of Palmerston North, Lee might have looked out the window (covered only when necessary with waxed canvas – there was no glass at the hospital) and seen the barbed wire that “goes right round the place”, and the seemingly unending desert that “stretches away beyond it”. Perhaps she compared this vast sandy waste in her mind with the green farmland of the Manawatu plains back home.³ By the time she wrote her letter on 14 March, Lee had been in Egypt a month. Since she had arrived in the Middle East she had sailed up the Suez Canal, travelled through the desert, seen her first camel, been shopping in Cairo's bazaars and visited the pyramids.⁴ She described her experiences of Egypt to her parents as “extreme”. There were “extremes of everything here. Large shops and small ones. Wealthy people and beggars rubbing next to each other in the streets. The same with the traffic and clothes and customs and the odours and just everything in this country. Extreme. Nothing mediocre at all.”⁵ What Stephanie Lee had experienced was an intense culture shock, one she shared with thousands of other New Zealanders who came to the Middle East during the Second World War. During the war, New Zealand men and women, many of whom had never been overseas before, encountered places and people completely alien from their lives back home in New Zealand.

This thesis is a cultural history of New Zealanders' engagement with the Middle East during the Second World War, and the way they wrote about their experiences in letters, diaries and other correspondence. It argues that the generally accepted picture of New Zealanders in

¹ Stephanie Vanoosten, Letters 1941-1944 Vol. 1, in Papers Relating to War Service, Auckland War Memorial Museum, MS-2002-186, 19 February 1942, p. 79. Stephanie Lee's collection at AWMM is under her married name, Vanoosten.

² Ibid. During the war there were four NZGH's in the Middle East, though 4 NZGH was short-lived. For information on the hospitals at which New Zealand nurses served in the Middle East, see Chapt. 12 of Anna Rogers, *While You're Away: New Zealand Nurses at War 1899-1948*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2002.

³ Vanoosten, 23 February 1942, p. 83.

⁴ Ibid, 19 February 1942, pp. 28-29; 23 February 1942, p. 83; 25 February 1942, p. 87; 1 March 1942, p. 91.

⁵ Ibid, 14 March 1942, p. 108.

the Middle East during the war, characterised by drunkenness, debauchery and racism, is far too simplistic and does not do justice to the diversity of experience New Zealanders had while serving in the region. While the subjects of the thesis are soldiers, airmen and nurses, this is not strictly a military history. It does not deal with weapons and tactics, campaigns and battles, or sweeping narratives of victory and defeat, as have been the focus of previous histories of the Middle Eastern campaign. In many respects, this thesis looks at the men and women of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF) in their role as tourists. In describing his war service, Airman Gerald Craddock (a New Zealander serving with the Royal Air Force) labelled it “enforced touristdom”, hinting both at the military reason for his presence in the Middle East, but also at the role New Zealanders assumed to, in Craddock’s words, “get something out of the life.”⁶ While they were in the Middle East to fight a war, New Zealanders managed to do much more besides. They spent their leave in Cairo, Damascus and Jerusalem. They visited the pyramids and the Sphinx, saw Roman ruins, shopped for souvenirs in centuries-old bazaars and took photographs to document it all. It is with these sorts of experiences that this thesis is primarily concerned.

Though very few of the New Zealanders who served in the Middle East during the Second World War had visited the region before, many of them were nevertheless familiar with it. Through religious teachings, classical literature and the desert romances of the inter-war period, many New Zealanders had some notion of what the Middle East was – or at least thought they did. They might have seen the names of First World War battles like Gaza and Beersheba on war memorials in New Zealand, or even have had family members who fought in those battles. Those relatives brought back stories of the desert, and photos of men and women in uniform posing astride camels in front of the pyramids. Such pre-war experiences created preconceptions, which New Zealanders took with them when they went away to war in 1940. Many New Zealanders went to the Middle East with romantic notions of what they would find. This thesis will, at several points, discuss the preconceptions New Zealanders took to the Middle East, how these helped to shape the way they defined their experiences, and whether their preconceptions were borne out or subverted by reality.

⁶ Gerald Rainsborough Craddock, *Drink of Nile Water, in 1910-1990: Essays and Papers*, Alexander Turnbull Library, MSX-2282, p. 71.

New Zealanders began arriving in the Middle East in February 1940 when the First Echelon, 2NZEF sailed up the Suez Canal and began to populate the camp set up for them in the desert at Maadi, 12 miles outside of Cairo.⁷ They were joined by the Third Echelon in October, and the Second Echelon, which had been diverted to England, in early 1941.⁸ Maadi Camp became a slice of New Zealand in the Middle East, complete with bars, rugby pitches, a bakery, an ice cream factory and a movie theatre. For many New Zealanders Maadi would be their home for several years, and by the end of the war 76,000 of the 140,000 New Zealanders who served overseas had passed through the camp.⁹ From their base in Egypt, the men and women of 2NZEF ranged far and wide across the Middle East, seeing active service in Syria, Libya and Tunisia, and visiting Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq and Iran on leave.¹⁰



Fig. 1: Soldiers of the First Echelon digging-in their tents in the early days of Maadi Camp c. June 1940. From these humble beginnings, the camp would soon grow to enormous size.¹¹

⁷ Robin Kay, *Chronology: New Zealand in the War 1939-1946*, Historical Publications Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1968, p.6.

⁸ Ian McGibbon, 'New Zealand Expeditionary Force', in Ian McGibbon (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 2000, p. 367.

⁹ Alex Hedley and Megan Hutching, *Fernleaf Cairo: New Zealanders at Maadi Camp*, Harper Collins, Auckland, 2009, p. 17.

¹⁰ For more detail on the geography of New Zealand's war in the Middle East, see the maps in Appendix A.

¹¹ 'Digging in Tents at Maadi Camp, Egypt', c. June 1940, National Library of New Zealand, DA-00579-F.



Fig. 2: Maadi in 1941. The camp has grown to include more permanent structures, paved roads and power lines. The Cairo skyline is just visible in the background.¹²

Brendon Judd argues that the exploits of New Zealanders in the Middle East “have become indelibly etched into the consciousness of people throughout the Commonwealth”, and that New Zealanders “come from a country where the legendary can-do attitude was immortalised by men in the desert”.¹³ Similarly, Peter Bates claims that “the Desert has had a special place in the war history of Britain and the Commonwealth.”¹⁴ I would argue quite the opposite. Despite being, in the words of Ian McGibbon “the longest and most important land campaign fought by New Zealanders in the Second World War”, there seems to be little place for the Middle East in New Zealand’s national narrative of the war.¹⁵ This narrative is dominated by the battles of Crete and Monte Casino. Like Gallipoli in the First World War, Crete and Cassino have achieved a near monopoly on New Zealand knowledge of the Second. Popular New Zealand historian Michael King notes that Gallipoli, Crete and Cassino are “the actions on which [New Zealanders] have dwelt most considerably in retrospect”.¹⁶ Of Crete

¹² Jim Vernon, ‘Maadi Base Camp, Egypt’, 1941, NLNZ, PA1-o-1522-21.

¹³ Brendon Judd, *The Desert Railway*, Penguin, Auckland, 2004, p. 17.

¹⁴ Peter Bates, *Dance of War: The Story of the Battle of Egypt*, Leo Cooper, London, 1992, p. 12.

¹⁵ Ian McGibbon, ‘Up the Blue: New Zealanders in the North African Campaign, 1940-43’, in Megan Hutching (ed.), *The Desert Road: New Zealanders Remember the North African Campaign*, Harper Collins, Auckland, 2005, p. 20.

¹⁶ Michael King, *New Zealanders at War*, Penguin, Auckland, 2003, p. 14.

more specifically, King writes that no Second World War battle “engraved itself more deeply on the national consciousness.... It was the Gallipoli of its era.”¹⁷ Glyn Harper makes similar assertions, writing that Crete, Cassino and Gallipoli are all often touted as the most important events in New Zealand military history, with Crete holding “a special place in the public imagination of New Zealanders.”¹⁸ He notes a tendency in New Zealand to “focus on heroic failures, when success came so tantalisingly close but never materialised.”¹⁹ Crete and Cassino fall into this category, the Middle Eastern campaign does not.

The discussion of the Middle Eastern campaign in New Zealand rarely gets beyond the battlefield. When it does, New Zealand’s involvement there is usually reduced to a story of racism, drunkenness and debauchery. This is the case for both the First and Second World Wars. The majority of this discussion is centred around Egypt, and more particularly Cairo, where Ian McGibbon describes the experience as one “usually restricted to ‘booze and bints’.”²⁰ In this ‘booze and bints’ narrative the same tales of drinking, fighting and venereal disease are brought up again and again.²¹ While I am not trying to argue that alcohol, sex and violence were not features of New Zealand’s Middle Eastern experience (for all my protestations they appear in this thesis too), to focus solely on them as the *defining* features of that experience is to paint far too narrow a picture. The reality of New Zealand’s Middle Eastern war was far more complex and multifaceted.

The aim of this thesis is to expand the picture of what New Zealand service in the Middle East during the Second World War meant. It will attempt to do justice to the breadth of New Zealanders’ experience during their service in the region, and argues that we need to move beyond the negative stereotypes that have come to define that experience in order to more fully understand it. To broaden the discussion, this thesis will consider New Zealand’s Middle Eastern war from several different angles. Chapter 1 will discuss New Zealanders’ experience of the Middle East as a place. It is easy to talk of the Middle East as a single homogenous region, but New Zealanders encountered a great variety of geographic and imagined places

¹⁷ Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, Penguin, Auckland, 2003, p. 398.

¹⁸ Glyn Harper, *Dark Journey: Three Key New Zealand Battles on the Western Front*, Harper Collins, Auckland, 2007, p. 17; Glyn Harper, ‘Crete’, in McGibbon (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, p. 128.

¹⁹ Harper, *Dark Journey*, p. 133.

²⁰ Ian McGibbon, ‘Egypt’, in McGibbon (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, p. 153.

²¹ Jock Phillips, *A Man’s Country: The Image of the Pakeha Male – A History*, Revised Edition, Penguin Books Auckland, 1996, pp. 210-211.

during the war. This chapter will analyse how New Zealanders wrote about the desert, the city, the Holy Land and the ancient world – all physical places, but all layered with added meaning and significance. Chapter 2 examines the materiality of the Middle East – what New Zealanders bought, souvenired or stole – and what this can tell us about how they viewed the region. Finally, Chapter 3 will investigate New Zealanders’ relationships with the people of the Middle East. It will look at the racial prejudice that was undoubtedly present, but it will also go further, illuminating greater complexity in these relationships, as well as instances where New Zealanders were able to build more meaningful relationships with local people. With this three-pronged approach, this thesis will explore key aspects of New Zealand’s experience of the Middle East during the Second World War, and show that there was far more to that experience than simply ‘booze and bints’.

Historiography and Sources

The historiography of the Second World War in New Zealand is dominated by the *Official History*, published by the Department of Internal Affairs over nearly four decades between 1948 and 1986. With 45 volumes of unit histories, campaign histories and histories of the New Zealand people at war, as well as 27 subsidiary volumes of official documents and ‘Episodes and Studies’, the *Official History* is the single largest publishing effort ever undertaken in New Zealand. As such, it is unavoidable to any historian studying New Zealand’s place in the Second World War, and this thesis is no exception. However, the *Official History* does not provide a complete picture. Second World War serviceman Captain Noel ‘Wig’ Gardiner notes in his memoir that “whereas the official histories are strictly accurate as to dates, and although many of them are admirably written, they do not tell all, or nearly all, that happened – much less why it happened.”²² Former New Zealand Army Museum Curator John McLeod goes even further and writes that while the *Official History* “did attempt to portray accurately the battles fought by 2(NZ) Division”, it nevertheless presents “a sanitised version of New Zealand’s participation in World War II.”²³ The *Official History*’s strong suit is ‘old’ military history and its primary focus is on units in 2NZEF and the battles they fought.²⁴ While, as Ian McGibbon

²² Noel ‘Wig’ Gardiner, *Freyberg’s Circus: Reminiscences of a Kiwi Soldier in the North African Campaign of World War II*, Ray Richards Publisher, Auckland, 1981, p. 12.

²³ John McLeod, *Myth and Reality: The New Zealand Soldier in World War II*, Reed Methuen, Auckland, 1986, p. 14.

²⁴ ‘Old’ military history as opposed to the new military history that developed in the later decades of the twentieth century. ‘Old’ military history focusses on actual warfighting – battles, strategy and tactics. New military history seeks to draw links between armies and the societies from which they come. Most recently

notes, the *Official History* does not necessarily just present “the government’s view of the war”, its strong military focus makes it only partially useful for a thesis largely concerned with the lives of New Zealanders outside combat.²⁵ While the *Official History* contains some anecdotal material from servicemen and women, this thesis looks beyond it to more fully examine the New Zealand experience in the Middle East.

Other scholarly secondary material on New Zealand in the Second World War is relatively limited. New Zealand Defence Force Historian John Crawford writes that:

Apart from the official history series, New Zealand’s historiography of the Second World War is notable for the comparative dearth of scholarly articles and books on the subject.... The great bulk of books published in New Zealand about the war have been personal memoirs or popular histories that make little or no use of archival sources.²⁶

While the situation has improved somewhat since Crawford made this assertion in 2000, New Zealand scholarship on the Second World War is still not nearly as comprehensive as that on the First World War (especially in light of the current centenary). Deborah Montgomerie attributes this dearth to military history’s “mid-twentieth century centrality to the New Zealand historical enterprise.”²⁷ She suggests that “the very success of military history, particularly the massive output of official history following World War II, encouraged a belief that the war had ‘been done’.”²⁸ What scholarly secondary material does exist is primarily from a military, rather than a social or cultural history perspective. Some of New Zealand’s preeminent military historians, such as John Crawford, Ian McGibbon, Glyn Harper and Christopher Pugsley, have all written about the Second World War, and though they provide comprehensive studies of New Zealand’s war, their work still largely takes a ‘soldiers and campaigns’ approach, while perhaps also considering political or strategic issues.²⁹ Work specific to New Zealand’s war in

military history has begun to draw on cultural history and the history of memory to further expand its range. For a good overview of the schools of military history, see Robert M. Citino, ‘Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 112, No. 4, October 2007, pp. 1070-1090.

²⁵ Ian McGibbon, ‘Official War Histories’, in McGibbon (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, p. 399.

²⁶ John Crawford, ‘Introduction’, in John Crawford (ed.), *Kia Kaha: New Zealand in the Second World War*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 2000, p. 7.

²⁷ Deborah Montgomerie, ‘Reconnaissance: Twentieth-Century New Zealand War History at Century’s Turn’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2003, p. 66.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See for example John Crawford, ‘A Campaign on Two Fronts; Barrowclough in the Pacific’, in Crawford (ed.), *Kia Kaha: New Zealand in the Second World War*, pp. 140-162; Ian McGibbon, *New Zealand and the Second World War: The People, the Battles and the Legacy*, Hodder Moa Beckett, Auckland, 2003; Glyn

the Middle East is even more scarce and where it does exist it generally falls into the same military history category as the general works.³⁰ The dearth is, I think, in part due to the general scarcity of Second World War scholarship in New Zealand, but also due to the prevailing national narrative that chooses to focus on Crete and Cassino, rather than the Middle Eastern campaign.

This is not to say that all New Zealand Second World War writing is strictly military in focus. There are a small number of notable exceptions. John McLeod's book *Myth and Reality* deals with the life and mythology of the 2NZEF soldier, and while it devotes almost half the book to the combat experience, it also contains chapters on soldiers' lives out of the line, including material about soldiers' behaviour on leave in the Middle East. Alex Hedley and Megan Hutching's book *Fernleaf Cairo* is a study of Maadi Camp and New Zealanders in Egypt more generally. While it relies heavily on the *Official History*, it still provides valuable material to the socially-minded military historian, interested in the New Zealand experience of Egypt. What these few exceptions show however, is that there is a relative gap in our scholarship of the Second World War, and a real need for more historians to grapple with the non-combat experiences of New Zealanders during the war. John McLeod wrote in 1986 that historians needed to engage with Second World War New Zealanders, "for soon they will be lost to history without any serious attempt being made to understand their experience".³¹ While in the intervening decades several historians have attempted to understand the New Zealand combat experience, McLeod's statement arguably still rings true for the social and cultural history of New Zealanders in the Second World War. It has been over four decades since John Keegan, in his seminal work *The Face of Battle*, pointed out "The Deficiencies of Military History".³² While New Zealand historians have followed Keegan's exhortations to move beyond "the win/lose approach of the Decisive Battlers, or the narrative focus on the doings of generals", it is arguably time to take military history a step further and leave the battlefield altogether.³³ This thesis will hopefully play some small part in expanding the picture of New

Harper, *The Battle for North Africa: El Alamein and the Turning Point for World War II*, Massey University Press, Auckland, 2017; Christopher Pugsley, 'The Second New Zealand Division of 1945: A Comparison with its 1918 Predecessor', in Crawford (ed.), *Kia Kaha: New Zealand in the Second World War*, pp. 94-106.

³⁰ See for example Harper, *The Battle for North Africa*; Bates, *Dance of War*; Matthew Wright, *Desert Duel: New Zealand's North African War 1940-1943*, Reed Books, Auckland, 2002.

³¹ McLeod, p. 6.

³² John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme*, Pimlico, London, 1991 (first published 1976), p. 27.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 74.

Zealand's Second World War experience, and, in Keegan's words, attempt "to propagate understanding of, not merely knowledge about, the past".³⁴

In attempting to achieve this aim, this thesis draws on scholarship from a number of different areas. Mark Johnston's excellent *Anzacs in the Middle East*, in its discussion of Australians in the Middle East during the Second World War, is the closest work in spirit and intention to this thesis, however there are still some notable differences.³⁵ Johnston's work is chiefly concerned with "the way Australian soldiers, and particularly members of combat units, interacted with...the local people they met in the Middle East...[and] the allies alongside whom they fought in the Middle East."³⁶ This thesis similarly considers interactions with local people, however it expands on Johnston by looking beyond combat units, and also considers other 'off-battlefield' topics such as interaction with place and material culture.

Spatially, what has been encompassed by the term 'Middle East' has never been static. Numerous historians, including M. E. Yapp, Bernard Lewis, Peter Beaumont, Gerald H. Blake and J. Malcolm Wagstaff, have traced the historical and geographical contours of this ever-changing region.³⁷ This thesis draws on these works, and others, to define geographically what New Zealanders understood to be the Middle East during the Second World War. Sitting alongside these studies are those by Hsu Ming Teo, Katheryn Tidrick, Brian Yothers and others that deal with the romance often surrounding the Middle East.³⁸ Much of this romance grew up in the nineteenth century as European imperial expansion facilitated greater access to parts of the deteriorating Ottoman Empire. However, little of this work (with a few notable exceptions) considers how the romance of the Middle East affected travellers to the region later in the twentieth century.³⁹ There is almost no scholarship that considers how romantic ideals about the Middle East influenced those who served there in the Second World War. This thesis

³⁴ Keegan, p. 35.

³⁵ Mark Johnston, *Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, Their Allies and the Local People in World War II*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2013.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. xi.

³⁷ M. E. Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East 1792-1923*, Longman, London, 1987; M. E. Yapp, *The Near East Since the First World War*, Longman, London, 1991; Bernard Lewis, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle East*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994; Peter Beaumont, Gerald H. Blake and J. Malcolm Wagstaff, *The Middle East: A Geographical Study*, John Wiley and Sons, London, 1976.

³⁸ Hsu-Ming Teo, *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels*, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX, 2012; Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart-Beguiling Araby*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981; Brian Yothers, *The Romance of the Holy Land in American Travel Writing, 1790-1876*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2007.

³⁹ Those few exceptions include James Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travellers in Arabia*, I.B. Tauris, New York, 2011; Ali Behdad, *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1994.

contends that the romance born in the nineteenth century was an important lens through which many New Zealanders viewed the Middle East during the Second World War, and thus is an important consideration when assessing New Zealanders' experience of the Middle East as a place.

In assessing New Zealanders' interaction with the materiality of the Middle East, this thesis looks to the ever-growing literature on material culture. Numerous authors, including Karen Harvey, Janet Hoskins and Richard Grassby, have emphasised the use of material culture as a framework for historical enquiry, and John Schofield *et al* specifically highlight the importance of reflecting “on...the materiality of events which have shaped the modern world.”⁴⁰ Frank Trentmann notes that materiality and consumption have “been shaped by states and empires, through war and taxes and the often violent transplantations of people and goods from one part of the world to another.”⁴¹ Given that this thesis is concerned both with war and the transplantations of people that war involves, Trentmann's observations show that considering materiality is especially pertinent.

There is also considerable literature specifically dealing with materiality during wartime. Historians such as Tim Cook, Krista Cowman, Kate Hunter and Kirstie Ross have all shown how physical objects and material culture were key elements of war experience – just as much as combat or camp life.⁴² However, much of this literature is centred on the First World War while the materiality of the Second World War has not been given the same attention. This is not because the Second World War was any less a material event than the First. Indeed, for many combatants (including New Zealanders), the Second World War was a far more mobile and wide-ranging conflict than the First, thus exposing them to a far greater diversity of

⁴⁰ Karen Harvey (ed.), *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2009; Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives*, Routledge, New York, 1998; Richard Grassby, 'Material Culture and Cultural History', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 35, No. 4, Spring 2005, pp. 591-603; John Schofield, William Gray Johnson and Colleen M. Beck, 'Introduction: Matériel Culture in the Modern World', in John Schofield, William Gray Johnson and Colleen M. Beck (eds.), *Matériel Culture: The Archaeology of Twentieth Century Conflict*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 2.

⁴¹ Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How we Became a World of Consumers from the 15th Century to the 21st*, Penguin, London, 2017, p. 12.

⁴² Tim Cook, 'Tokens of Fritz': Canadian Soldiers and the Art of Souvenearing in the Great War', *War & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2012, pp. 211-226; Krista Cowman, 'Touring behind the Lines: British Soldiers in French Towns and Cities during the Great War', *Urban History*, Vol. 41, No. 1, February 2014, pp. 105-123; Kate Hunter and Kirstie Ross, *Holding On to Home: New Zealand Stories and Objects of the First World War*, Te Papa Press, Wellington, 2014.

material culture. As such, this thesis will take cues from the First World War literature and attempt to expand the picture by applying it to The Second.

As this thesis is specifically about the *New Zealand* experience of the Middle East it necessarily draws on scholarship about New Zealand. If we are to consider the way that Second World War New Zealanders interacted with the Middle East, and how their preconceptions shaped their experiences, it is important to look at literature that helps contextualise the environment these New Zealanders came from. The work of historians such as James Belich, Keith Sinclair and Manying Ip illuminates New Zealand attitudes to race in the decades leading up to the Second World War.⁴³ Meanwhile, Pamela Wood, Geoffrey W. Rice, Margaret Tennant and others chart ideas around health and sanitation in New Zealand that directly influenced the Second World War generation in their attitudes to physical space and personal hygiene.⁴⁴ These works prove especially useful in Chapter 3, when considering New Zealanders' relationships with local people in the Middle East, which were partly shaped by ideas brought out from New Zealand.

Nevertheless, despite this weight of literature, and due to the nature of the thesis itself, it largely relies on primary archival material. The principal focus is on diaries and letters produced by New Zealand servicemen and women while in the Middle East. First World War historian Kate Hunter writes of such sources that “the rise of social history brought soldiers’ letters into the frame as evidence, and the shift to cultural history made letters important for what they revealed of ‘representations, feelings, emotions of men and women.’”⁴⁵ It is through these writings that this thesis explores New Zealand views on the Middle East, and the way that New Zealanders framed their experiences in the region. However, Hunter and other epistolary historians warn that “in using letters and diaries as sources we must tread

⁴³ James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Allen Lane, Auckland, 2001; Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity*, Allen & Unwin, Wellington, 1986; Manying Ip (ed.), *The Dragon and the Taniwha: Maori and Chinese in New Zealand*, Auckland University Press, 2009; Manying Ip and Nigel Murphy, *Aliens at My Table: Asians as New Zealanders See Them*, Penguin, Auckland, 2005.

⁴⁴ Pamela Wood, *Dirt: Filth and Decay in a New World Arcadia*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2005; Geoffrey W. Rice, ‘Public Health in Christchurch, 1875-1910: Mortality and Sanitation’, in Linda Bryder (ed.), *A Healthy Country: Essays on the Social History of Medicine in New Zealand*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 1991, pp. 85-108; Margaret Tennant, ‘Missionaries of Health’: The School Medical Service During the Inter-War Period’, in Bryder (ed.), *A Healthy Country*, pp. 123-148.

⁴⁵ Kate Hunter, ‘Diaries and Letters as Testimonies of War’, *First World War Personal Experiences*; available at <http://www.firstworldwar.amdigital.co.uk/FurtherResources/Essays/DiariesAndLetters?search=true&q=kate+hunter>; accessed 5 November 2018.

cautiously.”⁴⁶ There is a tendency to view letters and diaries as truthful, open and personal accounts that provide an unvarnished snapshot of an individual, in contrast to more circumscribed official sources. But several historians have urged us to look more critically at these primary sources, and grapple with the fact that they are products of societal rules and expectations, as well as formalised patterns of correspondence.⁴⁷ We need to be alive to the fact that, in the words of Miriam Dobson, correspondence does not necessarily tell us what “letter-writer[s] pursued inside their heads when entirely alone, for the way they articulated their thoughts on paper was shaped by what they thought the reader expected and the conventions of letter-writing.”⁴⁸ None of this is to discount the usefulness of primary correspondence as a source for historians, and I agree with epistolary historian Martha Hanna that “combatants wrote more frankly about the experience of war than skeptics have suggested.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, this thesis is alive to the cautionary voices of the historians above, and while, as Christa Hämmerle notes, correspondence “can and must be interpreted”, the thesis is also aware of “the genre’s strong dependency on context.”⁵⁰ Aside from letters and diaries, other textual sources used in this thesis include accounts of servicemen published during the war, unit magazines and tourist guide-books and pamphlets.

Alongside these textual sources, this thesis also heavily relies on visual sources – especially photographs, but also physical objects. Photographs appear throughout the thesis as illustrative sources and are discussed more closely in Chapter 3. Physical objects are discussed primarily in Chapter 2. There is some debate in academic literature on the nature of photographs and their use as sources by historians.⁵¹ Without wishing to become too deeply mired in this

⁴⁶ Hunter, ‘Diaries and Letters’.

⁴⁷ Kate Hunter, ‘More than an Archive of War: Intimacy and Manliness in the Letters of a Great War Soldier to the Woman He Loved, 1915-1919’, *Gender & History*, Vol. 25, No. 2, August 2013, p. 343; Martyn Lyons, ‘French Soldiers and their Correspondence: Towards a History of Writing Practices in the First World War’, *French History*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2003, pp. 80-82; Martha Hanna, ‘A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition of France During World War I’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 108, No. 5, December 2003, p. 1338; Miriam Dobson, ‘Letters’, in Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of texts from Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century History*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2009, p. 64.

⁴⁸ Dobson, p. 64.

⁴⁹ Hanna, p. 1360.

⁵⁰ Christa Hämmerle, ‘Diaries’, trans. Andrew Evans, in Dobson and Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources*, pp. 150, 151.

⁵¹ Derek Sayer, ‘The Photograph: The Still Image’, in Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird (eds.), *History Beyond the Text: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2009, pp. 49-71; Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird, ‘Introduction’, in Barber and Peniston-Bird (eds.), *History Beyond the Text*, pp. 1-14; Julia Thomas, *Reading Images*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2000; Wenhsin Yeh, ‘Introductory Remarks ‘Reading Photographs: Visual Culture and Everyday Life in Republican China’’, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2007, pp. 1-3; Robin Lenman (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005. An introduction to the debates and

scholarly debate, this thesis agrees with Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird who stress the value of “increasingly turning to visual...sources”, rather than solely relying on “well-worn notions of empirical evidence, the primacy of the document, and the reification of prose.”⁵² This is especially so in the context of New Zealand Second World War history where, due to the growth of photographic technology in the interwar period, an enormous body of thousands of wartime photographs now sits in the nation’s archives – much of it underused or unused by historians. Physical or visual sources add another dimension to the textual sources, allowing us to vividly glimpse some of what New Zealanders saw, and chose to capture during the Second World War. For these visual sources, and for textual sources as well, I have been especially reliant on the excellent collections at archives such as the Alexander Turnbull Library, Auckland War Memorial Museum and the Kippenberger Military Archive and Research Library in Waiouru.

It should be noted that, as with the secondary material, primary Second World War material in New Zealand does tend towards specific mediums and subjects. There is a preponderance of oral histories and memoirs, usually recorded and published some decades after the war. This thesis does not completely avoid such sources. Works such as Megan Hutching’s *The Desert Road*, an oral history collection of New Zealand Middle Eastern reminiscences, and Noel Gardiner’s *Freyberg’s Circus*, a war memoir published in the 1980s, can still provide valuable insight.⁵³ However, the focus of the thesis remains on primary material produced during the war. There is also a preponderance, in New Zealand and other Second World War combatant nations, of prisoner-of-war memoirs. Titles like *Diary of Life in a Stalag: a New Zealand Soldier’s Wartime Story*; and *From Timaru to Stalag VIII B*, are not uncommon among New Zealand Second World War testimony.⁵⁴ Though the POW experience was a peculiarly Second World War phenomenon (far more so than in the static First World War), these works have tended to overshadow personal testimony of other wartime experiences. This thesis attempts to expand the focus of personal narrative beyond that of the POW, and on to more diverse experiences.

contours of photographic theory can be found in Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1981; Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1977.

⁵² Barber and Peniston-Bird, p. 1.

⁵³ Hutching (ed.), *The Desert Road*; Gardiner, *Freyberg’s Circus*.

⁵⁴ Alf Rawlings, *Diary of Life in a Stalag: a New Zealand Soldier’s Wartime Story*, A. Rawlings, Timaru, 1991; Jack Hardie, *From Timaru to Stalag VIII B: a New Zealand Pilot’s Wartime Story*, J. D. Hardie, Motueka, 1991.

The Middle East

Before going further, it is necessary to define what this thesis means when it uses the term ‘Middle East’. It is a difficult term, for while it has only been in common usage for a little over a century, the region encompassed by it has taken several different forms over that time. Certainly the region that we would define as the Middle East today is very different from the Middle East of the Second World War. Middle Eastern historian M. E. Yapp notes the problems associated with using the term ‘Middle East’, writing that “to an historian who wishes to write about Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Israel and the Arab world of Asia in the twentieth century this terminological mess is distressing for he can find no completely satisfactory term to describe an area which warrants being treated as a region.”⁵⁵ Nevertheless this thesis does have a specific set of places in mind when using the term ‘Middle East’. What this region is we will come to shortly, but first we will discuss the origins of the term itself.

At the time of the Second World War, the term ‘Middle East’ was still relatively new. While it had been used infrequently in the nineteenth century, historians generally agree that it only came into common usage after 1902, when an American naval Captain, Alfred Thayer Mahan, used it in an article on naval power in the Persian Gulf.⁵⁶ That Mahan’s usage popularised ‘Middle East’ at all is surprising, as the term only appears once in his article, in an almost throwaway sentence. Mahan simply wrote “the middle East, if I may adopt a term which I have not seen”.⁵⁷ What Mahan meant by the Middle East is not particularly well defined. While it is clear that his Middle East was centred on the Persian Gulf, as befitted a naval man concerned with the power struggle in the area between Britain and Russia, his descriptions of the region are loose and amorphous. He framed the Middle East as the region “between the two continents, Asia and Europe”, and stated that the region included “the Suez route”, the Gulf, the Euphrates Valley and the Levant.⁵⁸ He also distinguished it from the area beyond Persia, calling this “the farther East”.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Yapp, *The Near East Since the First World War*, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2008, p. 17; Beaumont, Blake and Wagstaff, p. 1; Lewis, p. 3; Clayton R. Koppes, ‘Captain Mahan, General Gordon, and the Origins of the Term ‘Middle East’’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, January 1976, p. 95; Roger Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East: Money, Power, and War, 1902-1922*, Yale University Press, London, 1995, p. 1.

⁵⁷ A. T. Mahan, ‘The Persian Gulf and International Relations’, in *Retrospect and Prospect: Studies in International Relations Naval and Political*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1902, p. 237.

⁵⁸ Mahan, p. 219; p. 236.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 231.

Mahan's usage of 'Middle East' was picked up by Valentine Chirol, a foreign correspondent for *The Times*, himself a frequent traveller in the region. In 1902-1903 Chirol published a series of articles in *The Times* entitled 'The Middle Eastern Question', which were consolidated into a book in 1903. This work was crucial in spreading the use of the term, especially in Britain. Chirol wrote approvingly of the region that "Captain Mahan has aptly christened 'The Middle East'", and himself defined it as "those regions of Asia which extend to the borders of India or command the approaches to India."⁶⁰ Like Mahan, Chirol also distinguished the Middle East from "the Far East", however he went further and also distinguished it from "the Near East".⁶¹ Similar distinctions were made by English author B. L. Putnam Weale (a nom de plume for Bertram Lennox Simpson – a prolific author, mainly about China) in 1910. He wrote of "the Middle East and the Near East" together, defining them as "the immense region stretching from the Hindu Kush to Palestine and the Mediterranean shores", including such places as "India, Afghanistan, Persia, Arabistan, Asia Minor, and last, but not least, Egypt."⁶² Like Chirol, Weale also distinguished this region from the Far East, which he defined as the area "from Singapore to Kamchatka".⁶³

In the lead up to the First World War, both 'Middle East' and 'Near East' were used to describe distinct, but nevertheless overlapping, regions. The Near East, a term that had existed since the late nineteenth century, was used, according to Yapp, "as a convenient expression to describe the Ottoman empire and the territories which had until recently formed part of it."⁶⁴ Yapp writes that "the companion term 'Middle East' appeared a few years later and was used to indicate the territories which extended from Iran to Tibet. These two terms were used in those senses down to the end of the First World War."⁶⁵ Bernard Lewis notes a similar origin for the Near East, writing that:

The term 'Near East' was originally applied in the late nineteenth century to that part of southeastern Europe that was then still under Turkish rule.... For a while, the Near

⁶⁰ Valentine Chirol, *The Middle Eastern Question or Some Political Problems of Indian Defence*, John Murray, London, 1903, p. 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² B. L. Putnam Weale, *The Conflict of Colour: The Threatened Upheaval throughout the World*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1910, p. 184.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East*, p. 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

East was, so to speak, extended eastward and, especially in American usage, came to embrace the greater part of the territories of the Ottoman Empire, in Asia and Africa as well as in Europe.⁶⁶

With the Near East inherently linked to the Ottoman Empire, it is logical that the term began to fall out of favour after the First World War and the Empire's dissolution. In this context, Yapp notes that "the Near East became gradually engulfed in the Middle East as the latter term began to be used to include the Arab states which emerged from the Ottoman Empire."⁶⁷ By the time of the Second World War, the Near East had faded from use, its territories subsumed by the Middle East, which was then only defined against the Far East – usually meaning such places as China and Japan.

It is important to note that all of these terms – Near East, Middle East and Far East – are European constructs. For there to be a Middle or Near East, they had to be east of somewhere, and that meant east of Europe. Beaumont, Blake and Wagstaff note that "the term 'Middle East' was one of strategic reference, developed in a Eurocentric world, just as the older terms 'The East', 'Far East' and 'Near East' had been."⁶⁸ Bernard Lewis writes that the "names...are relics of a world with Western Europe in the centre and other regions grouped around it."⁶⁹ For centuries the region had simply been 'the East', but as Lewis notes "it was only when Europe became involved in the problems of a vaster and more remote Orient that a closer definition became necessary."⁷⁰ The results of this closer involvement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the Eurocentric neologisms Near East, Middle East and Far East.

For the purposes of this thesis, the important events in defining the Middle East during the Second World War came in the 1930s. In 1932, the RAF amalgamated its commands in Egypt and Iraq under the title Middle East Command.⁷¹ In 1939, the British Army did the same, creating their own Middle East Command with its headquarters at Cairo titled GHQ Middle East.⁷² Middle East Command's mandate was vast. It had centralised authority over what had

⁶⁶ Lewis, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Yapp, *The Near East Since the First World War*, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Beaumont, Blake and Wagstaff, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Lewis, p. 3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷¹ Beaumont, Blake and Wagstaff, p. 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*

been three separate army commands in Egypt, Sudan and Palestine.⁷³ At its inception, this meant command over units in Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan, the Sudan and Cyprus.⁷⁴ However, as the war escalated, Middle East Command quickly gained authority over troops in Aden, Iraq, Libya, the Persian Gulf (on land), Eritrea, Ethiopia, British Somaliland and Greece.⁷⁵

Thus, the British Army command structure (under the authority of which 2 New Zealand Division found itself) took an extremely wide view of what came under the term ‘Middle East’ during the Second World War. Several historians note this wide definition. Yapp writes that “during the Second World War the triumphant Middle East marched yet further westward into North Africa and subsequently began to send feelers into Pakistan.”⁷⁶ Beaumont, Blake and Wagstaff make a similar point, writing that:

‘North Africa’ itself was used during the Second World War to designate the subregion of the ‘Middle East’ where fighting between Allied and Axis troops was actually taking place, particularly the Western Desert of Egypt and Libya. Later the term was extended to the whole of Africa between the Mediterranean Sea and the steppe lands of the Sudan.⁷⁷

Unsurprisingly therefore, it was a wide definition of the Middle East that New Zealanders adopted when they were stationed in the region. Lieutenant Ian Johnston made two references to the scope of ‘Middle East’ in his letters to his family. In December 1940 he wrote to tell them that “if we go to Turkey, Greece or Albania we are still Middle East Forces.”⁷⁸ Then in September 1941, at the close of a course at Middle East Training School, he wrote that “folk have gone back to all parts of Middle East – to Tobruk, Western Desert, Syria, Palestine, Eritrea, Cyprus and Malta”.⁷⁹ This thesis will therefore take a similarly wide definition of the Middle East. During the desert war, New Zealanders found themselves in Egypt, Libya,

⁷³ I. S. O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East Volume I: The Early Successes against Italy*, Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, London, 1954, p. 31.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 457.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 459; Pinar Bilgin, *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 74.

⁷⁶ Yapp, *The Near East Since the First World War*, p. 1.

⁷⁷ Beaumont, Blake and Wagstaff, p. 3.

⁷⁸ Ian Thomas Young Johnston, Letter to Family 15 December 1940, in Letters to Family Aug-Dec 1940, Papers Relating to Service in World War II, Alexander Turnbull Library, MS-Papers-7852-01, p. 2.

⁷⁹ Ian Thomas Young Johnston, Letter to Family 28 September 1941, in Letters to Family Jun-Dec 1941, Papers Relating to Service in World War II, ATL, MS-Papers-7852-03, p. 1.

Tunisia, Palestine, Transjordan, Syria, Iran and Iraq.⁸⁰ These places all fell under the contemporary broad definition of the Middle East, and thus they will all within the scope of this thesis.

⁸⁰ Note that during WWII Jordan was known as Transjordan. The names Iran and Persia were both used during the Second World War to refer to Iran, and both names will appear in quotations in this thesis. In my own writing, I will use Iran rather than Persia, as this was the name by which the country was officially known at this point.

Chapter 1: Place

“I am certainly getting about the world, having in the past week, been in three different countries, namely Egypt, Palestine and Syria. I have also stayed or passed through Ismailia, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Tiberias and Damascus.”

- Lieutenant Ian Johnston, 1942.¹

The mobile and inclusive definition of the Middle East described in the Introduction defies seeing the region that New Zealanders encountered as homogenous. To talk of the Middle East risks glossing over an enormous diversity of places. To this day we are often guilty of speaking of the Middle East as some kind of contiguous region – a single entity that can be encompassed with a single name. However, this hardly reflects reality, and certainly did not reflect the diversity encountered by New Zealanders during the Second World War. When experiencing the Middle East as a place, they really experienced a number of different places, all spatially and geographically different from one another. They encountered barren deserts and fertile farmland; low-lying plains and lofty mountains; massive cosmopolitan cities and tiny villages. They travelled through Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Transjordan, Iraq and Iran, and while these countries shared some commonality of language, religion and custom, each presented New Zealanders with a different experience.

Historian Justin Fantauzzo, discussing soldiers in the First World War, writes that:

In Egypt, they were surrounded by the wonders of Pharaonic civilization and architecture built under the Mamelukes and Muhammad Ali Pasha. In Palestine, places known to them from church hymns and Sunday school lessons appeared before their eyes. And all throughout the region...the geography looked so rugged, so foreign, and occasionally so beautiful.²

Fantauzzo’s statement is equally true of soldiers experiencing the Middle East in the Second World War. Indeed, as seen from the list of countries above, soldiers in the Second World War encountered an even greater range of places, each imbued with its own history and meaning.

¹ Ian Thomas Young Johnston, Letter to Family 8 March 1942, in Letters to Family Jan-Jun 1942, Papers Relating to Service in World War II, ATL, MS-Papers-7852-06, p. 1.

² Justin Fantauzzo, ‘Picturing War: Soldier Photography, Private Remembrance, and the First World War in Egypt, Sinai, and Palestine’, *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, August 2017, p. 224.

To attempt to do justice to this diversity, this chapter will address the New Zealand experience of the Middle East as a place by breaking it down into a number of smaller places: the desert, the city, the Holy Land and the ancient world. In making these choices I have largely taken my cue from the sources themselves, where places defined by borders and nationalities are less important to New Zealanders than the more loosely defined places above. While all of these sub-topics discuss geographical regions, they are not exclusively geographic, and also discuss place thematically. In this way, the chapter will address how New Zealanders wrote about different places in the Middle East, what they experienced in those places, and how they contextualised those experiences.

The Desert

By the Second World War, the desert had long been imbued with special significance in western eyes. With the exception perhaps of the ocean, no other geographical setting was surrounded with such romance. This had not always been the case. Hsu-Ming Teo notes that the desert was “once considered a wasteland populated by wild and savage tribes to be avoided at all costs”.³ However, as growing European imperial power in the Middle East during the nineteenth century facilitated greater access to the region’s ‘uncharted wastes’, a series of romantic tropes began to grow up around the desert.

Many of these tropes centred around the vastness and emptiness of the desert. As romanticism around the desert grew in the nineteenth century, the emptiness that had once rendered it a ‘wasteland’ instead became a positive quality. It provided, in the words of English explorer and orientalist Sir Richard Burton, qualities of “the Indefinite and the Solitude”.⁴ The vast tracts of uncharted sand became the perfect forum for introspection and self-discovery, free from the clutter and distraction of a rapidly modernising western world. Kathryn Tidrick asserts that, from the nineteenth century onwards, the desert provided the traveller with an “ecstatically heightened sense of self.”⁵ The journey across the desert was, in the words of Ellen Turner, “a journey inwards with a focus on the self”.⁶

³ Teo, p. 67.

⁴ Richard Burton, quoted Tidrick, p. 35.

⁵ Tidrick, p. 34.

⁶ Ellen Turner, ‘E. M. Hull’s *Camping in the Sahara*: Desert Romance Meets Desert Reality’, *Studies in Travel Writing*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2015, p. 131.

Soul-searching in the desert was also intimately tied with religion. Tidrick notes that “in the nineteenth century, an era of swooning religiosity as well as scientific doubt, the convention arose among the mystically inclined that desert travel was conducive to religious belief.”⁷ To many, it was no coincidence that Moses, Jesus and Mohammed had all received religious enlightenment in a desert environment. Not only in the Christian tradition, but also in those of Islam and Judaism, the desert was a place where “spiritual revelation was received.”⁸

But the emptiness of the desert not only lent itself to introspection. It also provided a blank canvas for self-projection. The desert became, as Teo notes, “an empty stage for the Romantic ego writ large.”⁹ A beautiful, yet harsh environment, where European travellers could test themselves and project personal mastery over the elements. Desert travel required a toughness and self-sufficiency that became, in itself, something to be glorified by romantics.¹⁰ This opportunity for self-projection created such totemic figures as Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Gertrude Bell, Lawrence of Arabia and Glubb Pasha, and their exploits only heightened romantic sentiment around the desert.

Bound up with self-projection (and underpinning much of the romance around the desert) was an amorphous notion of freedom. In the desert, the individual was free to forge their own destiny away from the constraints of modern technology or society. James Canton writes that the desert tantalisingly promised “an emancipation born of the open space which Arabia offers”.¹¹ This notion was well expressed by 1930s explorer Douglas Carruthers who exclaimed of his travel in the Nafud (in modern Saudi Arabia) that “We were free! A boundless beautiful country lay ahead of us, a rolling desert, with lovely soft contours.... We acknowledged no master, we obeyed no rules – except those most intricate ones of the desert.”¹²

New Zealanders serving in the Middle East during the Second World War were not immune to the romance of the desert. Many came out from New Zealand in possession of such romantic ideals as described above. Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Varnham, commander of 19 Battalion, wrote in his diary in November 1940 that he was “pleased to get back to the desert

⁷ Tidrick, p. 44.

⁸ Teo, p. 67.

⁹ Ibid, p. 66.

¹⁰ Tidrick, p. 48.

¹¹ Canton, p. 69.

¹² Douglas Carruthers, *Arabian Adventure: To the Great Nafud in Quest of the Oryx*, Witherby, London, 1935, p. 32.

again.”¹³ He had been in Cairo before returning to Bagush in Egypt’s Western Desert, and had “had enough of City life”.¹⁴ For Varnham, the desert had “a fascination about it and it is somehow clean and fresh.”¹⁵ Varnham favourably compared the desert to the metropolis, echoing the ideal of the desert as an escape from the constraints of modernity. He praised the cleanliness and freshness of Bagush, no doubt in direct contrast to the sensory overload of Cairo.

Varnham was not alone in his ‘fascination’ with the desert. Captain Joseph Molloy of 7th Anti-Tank Regiment wrote to his mother in October 1941, that the desert “is an amazing place and undoubtedly has a fascination of its own.”¹⁶ Gunner Thomas Birks (known as ‘Laurie’) of 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment echoed Molloy and went further. Writing to his mother, Mrs R. L. Birks of Auckland, in January 1942, Laurie stated that “the desert itself has a certain fascination about it I think, very forbidding in some ways, its stark immensity is rather overpowering, and when out in a perfectly flat area without a sign of a break as far as the eye can see, one feels very small and insignificant.”¹⁷ For Birks it seems, the desert’s fascination lay in the vast emptiness that so attracted nineteenth and early twentieth century travellers, and like them, he was spurred to self-examination by the scale of the landscape.

However, soldiers like Varnham, Birks and Molloy were in a distinct minority. If New Zealanders had romantic ideals about the desert, most were quickly disabused of them. Many expressed disappointment that the desert did not live up to their fantasies or imaginations. Nurse Stephanie Lee wrote to her parents that:

The golden desert people think of at home is all wrong. There is very little of that. The real desert is just bare rocky earth. A dirty grey brown colour, sand and rocky rubble. Then frequently out of this wilderness there would be a native village hardly visible as it is made out of the very rock around it. Hovels the same as their surroundings. Not a

¹³ Frederick Stuart Varnham, *Typed Transcript of Diaries Located at MSX 3306 and MSX 3307/Transcribed by Nancy Croad*, in *Varnham, Frederick Stuart, 1889-1963: War Diaries*, ATL, MS-Papers-4380-1, pp. 54-55.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 55.

¹⁶ Joseph Thomas Molloy, Letter to Mother 4 October 1941, in *Letters 1940-1941 62 letters plus typescript*, AWMM, MS-743, pp. 1-2. Page numbers for Molloy’s letters relate to the typescript, not the original letters.

¹⁷ Thomas Lawrence Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 16 January 1942, in *Papers: Letters Jan – June 1942 Letters 39-65*, AWMM, MS-1413, pp. 6-7.

bit of colour and not even any sign of life except perhaps some scraggy goats, a couple of dirty hens or a scavenging dog.¹⁸

Bombardier Martyn Uren of 4th Field Artillery wrote of the Egyptian desert that “there is not much sandy desert as seen in the films, but one finds mostly the hard-packed earth and rock type of country. Sometimes the land is scrub-covered, but more often desolate of any growth at all.”¹⁹ He was even more scathing of Libya. Far from being romantic, their drive to Tripoli was through “flat featureless desert, dotted everywhere with camel thorn bushes. A more dreary desolate waste would indeed be hard to imagine.”²⁰



Fig. 1: A photo taken by Captain C Garnett Rands of 25 Battalion, showing what he calls ‘Typical Desert’. He labels it ‘The Abomination of Desolation’.²¹

¹⁸ Vanoosten, 11 April 1942, p. 136.

¹⁹ Martyn Uren, *Kiwi Saga: Memoirs of a New Zealand Artilleryman*, Collins, Auckland, 1943, p. 37.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 293-294.

²¹ C Garnett Rands, ‘The Abomination of Desolation’, in Photograph Album: Egypt – WWII, Kippenberger Military Archive and Research Library, 1993.1313.2.

As these quotes suggest, New Zealanders encountered a reality that was far more prosaic than the romantic visions of the nineteenth century. They faced extremes of heat and cold, dirt, sandstorms, flies, lack of water and living quarters that were often little more than holes in the ground. Added to these discomforts was the fact that the desert was where New Zealanders saw most of their combat, and the fighting and dying brought only further negative associations.

The weather in the desert was something that New Zealanders quickly had to adapt to, and it was almost uniformly unpleasant. Moaning about the weather is an age-old soldiers' pastime and discussions of temperature figure prominently in New Zealanders' diaries and letters. An obvious corollary of service in the desert was extreme heat. Private Sydney Hadley wrote in his diary on 24 May 1942 that:

The day was a terror temperature up to 115° at least and not a breath of wind or a bit of shade. Even the lizards would follow us to keep in the shade. Stones too hot to sit on. Only allowed one bottle of water which damn near boiled not much use for quenching a thirst. Just had to sit there with a towel over our face and bake.²²

Even when there was some shade afforded by a vehicle or tent, it made little difference to the stifling heat. Gunner Frederick Mosely wrote to his former comrades at North Head Battery Auckland, stating that “the past month or so has been pretty hot – once or twice over 120° in the shade. On the hot days we just lay down on our bunks after lunch and have a siesta and sweat and sweat more.”²³ Private Bassett Carter of 27 Machine Gun Battalion put the soldiers' hatred of the desert heat succinctly in a brief diary entry for 12 May 1940. He simply wrote – “Awful day – heat 112° shade, hot winds and dust storm. Worst day since our arrival.”²⁴ Mosely and Carter, both writing from Egypt, would undoubtedly have laughed at a contemporary Egyptian Tourism Department guidebook which stated that “to many the gentle warmth and incomparable sunshine are the inducement that causes them to come [to Egypt] from afar.”²⁵

²² Sydney Osborn Hadley, Dairy No 2, ATL, MS-Papers-11780-2, 24 May 1942.

²³ Frederick Gordon Mosely, Letter to ‘The Boys of the Right Watch’ 7 June 1941, in Frederick Gordon Mosely, Papers, AWMM, MS-1692.

²⁴ Bassett Haig Carter, Diary: Bassett H Carter – North Africa & Italy – WWII, KMARL, 1989.410, 12 May 1940.

²⁵ R. Schindler, *Egypt throughout the Ages*, Cairo, 1939, in Alan Hardie Napier, Collection: Alan Hardie Napier – WWII, KMARL, 2013.14.1, p. 159.

When the seasons turned in the Middle East late in the year, the searing heat was replaced with freezing cold, often accompanied by heavy rain. Some New Zealanders were surprised to encounter such weather in what they had imagined would be a balmy paradise. Gunner Ralph Nicholson wrote in his diary in January 1942 that “the bad weather is making things very unpleasant. It is hard to believe that it can be so cold and wet in the Egyptian desert. Our tents leak like the devil. It has the nasty habit of never leaking in the same spot two nights running.”²⁶ It often took some time for troops to be issued with winter uniforms. Private Walter Young of 5th Field Ambulance wrote in November 1942 that it was “bitterly cold again. We are still in summer shorts and shirts. Have one singlet, a shirt, two pullovers and a greatcoat but still cold. We stayed here all day in rain and mud.”²⁷ He concluded by expressing his frustration with “this bloody desert – you are cooked in the summer and frozen in the winter.”²⁸



Fig 2: New Zealand troops in the desert, December 1941. Note the wool battledress uniforms, greatcoats and rain-capes that replaced shorts and shirts once the temperature dropped.²⁹

²⁶ Ralph Haig Nicholson, *Army Adventures of Gnr R H Nicholson*, in *Papers Relating to Service in World War Two*, ATL, MS-Papers-11256-1, 1 January 1942, p. 46.

²⁷ Walter Young, *Wal's Memories of the Western Desert*/Transcribed by Elizabeth Young, ATL, MS-Papers-8825, 7 November 1942, p. 26. This source is a combination of diary entries (as seen here) and later reminiscences.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ George Silk, 'Commonwealth Forces in North Africa 1941', 3 December 1941, Imperial War Museums, E 3745E.

Coupled with the temperature, hot or cold, was the ever-present sand and dust. Soldiers slept in it, worked in it, fought in it and it filled their clothes, blankets and food. Private Arthur Helm wrote of the morning after his first sandstorm, when stationed at Mersah Matruh in the Western Desert: “Inside the tent sand was everywhere, and it was days later before we were able to get rid of it all. Breakfast was a sorry meal, consisting of porridge and sand, bacon, eggs and sand, tea and sand, and bread and butter and sand.”³⁰ Lieutenant Ian Johnston made similar complaints to Helm, noting how personally invasive the sand could be. He wrote to his parents in December 1940 that the sand “gets into your mouth, ears, hair and at meal times you can feel [it] in your food. It would be OK if during the evening it would stop but it goes on all night and on waking in the morning it just looks like a snow fall.”³¹



Fig. 3: A typical desert ‘bivvy’. Note the blankets completely full of sand.³²

³⁰ A. S. Helm, *Fights & Furloughs in the Middle East: A Story of Soldiering and Travel in Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Greece, Crete, Trans-Jordan, Syria, Irak and Iran*, Whitcombe & Tombs, Christchurch, 1944, p. 16.

³¹ Johnston, Letter to Family 19 December 1940, p. 5.

³² ‘New Zealand World War 2 Soldier in Typical Sleeping conditions in the Western Desert, North Africa’, 30 October 1941, National Library of New Zealand, DA-02128-F.

However, there was one desert hardship before which all others paled. Flies were a constant blight and many soldiers viewed them as their true foe in desert warfare. Private Rex Griffith, writing to relatives back home in Nelson on his arrival in the desert in August 1942, complained that “the first thing that greeted us on arrival was a swarm of flies. The place is lousy with them. They are our worst enemy. Jerry annoys us some of the time but the flies are here all the time.”³³ There was no escaping the flies and their sheer numbers were often beyond comprehension. Laurie Birks wrote of flies on the Alamein line in June 1943, stating that there were “countless millions of them, a curse worse than all the rest put together.”³⁴ Walter Young remembered later the flies’ “oneness”. He wrote that “none was separate from its fellow any more than the wave is separate from the ocean or the tentacle from the octopus. As one fly, one dark and horrible force, guided by one mind, ubiquitous and immensely powerful, it addresses itself to the one task – which was to destroy us body and soul.”³⁵

In the dry desert environment flies sought moisture. They swarmed around eyes, noses and mouths and covered sweating bodies in a thick black mass. Their propensity for flinging themselves headlong into food, water or tea earned them the nickname ‘dive-bombers’. Gerald Craddock, a New Zealand bomber crewman with the RAF wrote that “half a dozen flies zoom through following the mug, as soon as the airman replaces it on the ground it is half filled with a seething swarm of insects.”³⁶ Laurie Birks continued his letter above, saying that “one of the chaps on the other gun said he turned away from his cup of tea to say something to someone, and when looked at it again there were 35 flies in the tea.”³⁷ Men had to get creative when eating in order to avoid swallowing insects with their bully beef. Martyn Uren often “had to laugh at the sight of Dunc, or some of the boys, running out into the desert against the breeze and cramming food into their mouths as they ran. It was the only way to eat during the day”.³⁸ Men made traps out of empty beer bottles or tea mugs covered with handkerchiefs, killing thousands, but their efforts were futile against the flies’ sheer numbers.

³³ Rex Dennis Griffith, Letter to Gordon and Vera Wadsworth 30 August 1942, ATL, MS- Papers-2252, pp. 13-14.

³⁴ Thomas Lawrence Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 13 June 1943, in Papers: Letters Jan – June 1943 Letters 93-119, AWMM, MS-1413, p. 3.

³⁵ Young, p. 18.

³⁶ Craddock, pp. 37-38.

³⁷ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 13 June 1943, p. 4.

³⁸ Uren, p. 251.



Fig. 4: Fly-spray ad in the back of a New Zealand Field Ambulance unit magazine. Fly-spray and home-made traps were used, but provided little real relief from flies.³⁹

³⁹ FANZ: *Compiled and Published by a NZ Field Ambulance, Cairo, 1941, KMARL, 1999.2198.*

Nevertheless, despite the discomfort and deprivations there were some instances where the desert could move even its most ardent critics. Though most of the terrain New Zealanders encountered was barren and ugly, in the Sinai many finally found their fairy tale desert. Arthur Helm wrote that the Sinai:

Looked more like a story-book desert than any of the others I had seen. We were travelling through rolling white sandhills, and soon I caught a glimpse of the Mediterranean on the right. A large caravan of camels passed nearby, making their way south, laden with merchandise.... It looked like a scene from a ‘Sheikh story’ of the films.⁴⁰

Martyn Uren made similar filmic comparisons, stating that the Sinai “seemed to me to be exactly what I had always imagined a real desert would look like. It is the desert of the motion-picture world – the desert of *Beau Geste*.”⁴¹ Laurie Birks called it “the desert of picture-postcards”.⁴²

Similarly, sunrises and sunsets were often remarked upon with wonderment, even in environments otherwise considered bereft of beauty. Laurie Birks told his mother that “on the subject of sunsets, there have been some magnificent ones here lately.... They may be partly due to the dust in the air, but anyhow the effects are marvellous, more often than not. Sunrises are the same”.⁴³ Sergeant Harry Dansey of 28 (Maori) Battalion wrote in a May 1944 letter that “sunset is a wonderful time here.... The blinding noon day glare fades, the wind drops and the ridges of the escarpment are pale gold and each...valley fills with purple shadow”.⁴⁴ The purples and golds described by Dansey are well illustrated by New Zealand War artist Captain John Pine Snadden, in two works entitled ‘Desert Sunrise’.

⁴⁰ Helm, p. 86.

⁴¹ Uren, p. 188.

⁴² Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 13 April 1942, p. 4.

⁴³ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 16 January 1942, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Harry D. B. Dansey, Letter to Mrs W. P. Dansey 12 May 1944, in Harry D. B. Dansey, Papers, AWMM, MS-873, p. 8. The first part of this letter is undated. The 12 May date comes from a later continuation of the letter.



Fig. 5: John Pine Snadden's 'Desert Sunrise', c. 1941.⁴⁵



Fig 6: Snadden's 'Desert Sunrise', c. 1942.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ John Pine Snadden, 'Desert Sunrise', c. 1941, Archives New Zealand, R22498332.

⁴⁶ John Pine Snadden, 'Desert Sunrise', c. 1942, ANZ, R22498352.

However, the Sinai and the sunrises were small exceptions to an otherwise overwhelmingly negative view of the desert during the war. Though there was significant romance and mystique surrounding the desert, even in the early twentieth century, the vast majority of New Zealand troops quickly realised the romance little matched the reality. As James Canton states, “the sense of romance which had accompanied many of the adventures of British officers in the earlier Arabian campaign [of WWI] was replaced by a gritty reality in the experiences of thousands of troops sent to the western desert of Egypt.”⁴⁷

The City

The New Zealand experience of Middle Eastern cities was more complex than their experience of the desert. There was greater variety in reaction to cities, largely because while there was a lot to loathe, there was also a lot to like about city life. Middle Eastern cities could certainly be overwhelming for New Zealanders, with their size, smells, crowding and dirtiness. However, they were also the place where New Zealanders spent their leave, providing good food, plentiful drink, shopping, entertainment and the simple pleasure of a mattress and clean sheets.

For all New Zealanders in the Second World War, exposure to Middle Eastern cities started rather inauspiciously with Suez. Port Tewfik was the disembarkation point for military transports coming up the Red Sea, and many New Zealanders had high hopes for this famous port and its equally famous canal. However, what they saw upon arrival was an anti-climax. Bombardier Martyn Uren and his comrades, lying out in the harbour, had “ample opportunity to gain our first impressions of Egypt, and I can say that they were not very favourable ones at first.”⁴⁸ He wrote that “for a place so geographically important, Suez is a singularly filthy and unattractive cess-pool. It has absolutely no redeeming feature at all.”⁴⁹ Private John Hood was similarly unimpressed. Travelling “over what seemed to be an extra large irrigation canal”, he “suddenly realised that this was the famous Suez Canal. In the half light it just looked like a big ditch with the sand piled up on either side of it and it was difficult to realise just how important that same ditch had been to the Empire.”⁵⁰ Upon disembarkation Nurse Stephanie

⁴⁷ Canton, p. 71.

⁴⁸ Uren, p. 35.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 186.

⁵⁰ John Brown Hood, Palestine Leave January 1944, in Accounts and Papers Relating to Leave in Palestine and Syria, ATL, MS-Papers-2159, p. 1.

Lee “passed through the dirty native town and have since discovered that that is all there is of Suez. Just a native town and I had thought it would be a large European one.”⁵¹

Perhaps fortunately, New Zealanders did not have to spend much time in Suez. Instead, the Middle Eastern city they became most familiar with was Cairo. With Maadi Camp located in the desert just outside Cairo, this city was the most common leave site for New Zealanders. While they would travel to a myriad of other cities over the course of the war, Cairo dominated New Zealanders’ urban experience of the region. Upon first arrival, Cairo certainly presented a culture shock. Its sheer size was hard for New Zealanders to comprehend, and Private Bassett Carter noted with awe upon his arrival that the “Cairo population equals that of the whole of NZ.”⁵² To many, it seemed that the whole population was there to greet them when they alighted at Cairo’s train station. Official historian J. B. McKinney writes that “outside Bab-el-Louk station [New Zealanders] were besieged by bootblack boys trying to earn a few piastres by applying doubtful boot-polish, by unprepossessing pedlars in nightgown-like *galabiehs*, by gharry drivers seeking a fare in their cabs drawn by feeble-looking horses.”⁵³ Private Desmond (‘Des’) Davis summed it all up by noting that “Cairo just swarms.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Vanoosten, 19 February 1942, pp. 78-79.

⁵² Carter, 14 February 1940.

⁵³ J. B. McKinney, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War: Medical Units of the 2NZEF in Middle East and Italy*, Historical Publications Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1952, p. 31.

⁵⁴ Desmond Hartley Davis, Letter to Mum, Dad and Hazela 12 January 1943, in Letters 1943, AWMM, MS-2002-75, p. 8.

Image redacted in digital copy

Fig. 7: A 1944 Neville Colvin cartoon commenting on the crowding, but also the diversity of the population in Cairo.⁵⁵

The city has commonly been understood in New Zealand as a backdrop for soldiers' behaviour. As such, it is the behaviour of soldiers while in Cairo that has come to dominate our understanding of the city, both in the First and Second World Wars. The city is usually seen as a passive environment that soldiers acted in, rather than a place that acted on soldiers as well.⁵⁶ Soldiers' behaviour is an important part of the picture but we must remember that there was also something about the urban environment, and Cairo in particular, that engendered particular types of behaviour that rarely happened elsewhere. Cairo was primarily a site of leave and as such transition from camp life to city life represented a release from military constraint and discipline. There was a certain permissiveness inherent in the urban landscape of Cairo where, away from active duty, soldiers felt they could 'let their hair down'. The stereotypical image

⁵⁵ Neville Colvin, 'What It Feels Like to Be a Private in Cairo', in E.G. Webber and Neville Colvin, *Johnny Enzed in the Middle East*, Rotorua and Bay Of Plenty Publishing Co., Rotorua, 1944, p. 18.

⁵⁶ For an example of this kind of analysis in another context see Roberto Mazza, 'Transforming the Holy City: From Communal Clashes to Urban Violence, the Nebi Musa Riots in 1920', in Ulrike Freitag, Nelida Fuccaro, Nora Lafi and Claudia Ghrawi (eds.), *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation State*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2015, pp. 179-194. Mazza shows how the urban environment of Jerusalem, particularly under British occupation after WWI, acted to create particular kinds of behaviour – in this case urban violence.

of the New Zealander on leave in Cairo is one of debauchery and larrikinism, and there were certainly many New Zealanders that conformed to this stereotype. Violence, thieving and property destruction were recurring problems. Gunner Ralph Nicholson's diary features several colourful stories of leave in Cairo. One night in October 1941 he and his comrades "went on the spree", and he wrote that "Bones, Eric and I went round the streets lassoing wogs. Also swiped a couple of chairs and several trees. It sure was a wild night."⁵⁷ On another leave in January 1942, Nicholson's comrade "Alf Hey put on a good show in the bar, running up and down the counter and along the shelves at the back. He tore a lamp off the wall and amused himself cranking up the cash register. The barman gave him a free beer to leave it alone."⁵⁸ Property destruction was not limited to bars. An anonymous New Zealand soldier wrote in 1940 of destroying a cinema in Cairo when the projector broke: "To put it mildly, the boys, like Queen Victoria, 'were not amused,' and proceeded to do a job that would put any demolition company to shame. Army boots make a fearful mess of trumpery furniture!"⁵⁹ Men would also frequently get into fights – with each other, with the local population and with other nations' troops. Lieutenant James Barclay remembered that "it didn't take much to ignite a situation in Cairo."⁶⁰ According to Barclay, "it was easier to get into a fight than to avoid one.... It only took one cross word and you could be in a fight that involved fifty people in no time at all."⁶¹

The city also meant easy access to prostitution, and New Zealanders often visited Cairo's brothel district, the Wagh El Birket, or 'Berka'. Reactions to the Berka differed. New Zealand writings show a mix of moral opprobrium and fascination with the open and licensed prostitution they found there. Sapper William Pearson, on his first Cairo leave in March 1941, noted that "all hands proceed to Berka area. A wow of a place. Saw the famous Tiger Lil. Also one of the girls having a bath.... A real eye opener this place to civilised people. No shame among these girls of all kinds and nationalities. Some great sights around here."⁶² While Pearson stressed that he did not partake in the pleasures on offer, the fascination in his description of the Berka is plain to see. At the other end of the spectrum, Private Francis

⁵⁷ Nicholson, 23 October 1941, p. 35.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 16 January 1942, p. 47.

⁵⁹ 'One of the Boys', *A Digger's Diary: Ramblings in Egypt with the First Echelon*, Organ Bros. Ltd., Wellington, 1940, p. 11.

⁶⁰ James Barclay, quoted in Hutching (ed.), *The Desert Road*, p. 196.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² William John Pearson, *Diary: William J Pearson – North Africa & Italy – WWII*, KMARL, 1989.129, 22 March 1941.

Jackson wrote that “every soldier in Egypt has heard of the Berker [*sic*]. The street, and the filthy houses in it, has a revolting, unclean atmosphere, the sort of thing that goes against the grain for the boys who are used to the clean surroundings of homes in New Zealand.”⁶³ Despite Sapper Reginald De Grave’s statement that “any soldier who served in Egypt and claims – hand on heart – he never patronised a brothel is a liar”, it seems that many New Zealanders, like Francis Jackson, found the Berka distasteful.⁶⁴



Fig. 8: A New Zealand soldier with one of the women of the Berka, c. 1940.⁶⁵

⁶³ Francis Jackson, *Passage to Tobruk: The Diary of a Kiwi in the Middle East*, A. H. and A. W. Reed, Wellington, 1943, p. 97.

⁶⁴ Reginald Arthur De Grave, *The Yellow Rose*, in *War Reminiscences: Tales of Long Ago*, AWMM, MS-99-67, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Graham Walter Dudding, ‘New Zealand Soldier and a Woman at the Wagh El Birket, Cairo, during World War 2’, c. 1940, National Library of New Zealand, DA-14051. Though the pictured soldier is wearing an

The Berka became a locus for much of the poor behaviour exhibited by New Zealanders in Cairo. As soldiers frequently drank there, and as it was constantly patrolled by British Military Police ('red caps'), fighting was rife. Perpetual trouble maker Ralph Nicholson wrote in February 1942 that "there was a bit of a brawl up the Birkett [*sic*] last night. The red caps tried to break up a two up school [a form of gambling]. That started it. The crowd, mostly NZ'ers got stuck into the MP's. They called out re-inforcements and there were about a hundred all told but they got chopped up."⁶⁶ More worryingly for army command, the Berka also put many soldiers out of action with VD. Many New Zealand troops had lax attitudes towards prophylactic use, as men falsely assumed the licensed prostitutes in the Berka would be 'clean'.⁶⁷ This led to VD rates that, while not astronomical, were more than double the civilian rate back in New Zealand.⁶⁸ By February 1945, 2NZEAF had suffered 4000 VD casualties which, as John McLeod notes, "constituted a loss as heavy as the battle casualties of a campaign."⁶⁹ Ultimately the Berka proved too much of a headache for military authorities, and was placed out of bounds in August 1942.⁷⁰ Not that this stopped soldiers going there. For many New Zealanders, the Berka provided exactly what they wanted on leave – in the coarse but succinct words of Driver Anthony Madden, "a feed, a fuck, and a fight. But not necessarily in that order."⁷¹

As can be deduced from several of the examples above, alcohol was a key contributor to New Zealand misbehaviour in Cairo (and in other Middle Eastern cities). While men had limited access to beer in camp or in the field, when in Cairo Stella (the "local onion water" according to Reginald De Grave) was available cheaply and in large quantities.⁷² Captain Bruce Robertson wrote in 1942 that "our fellows consumed [beer] by the gallon with of course the usual result, noise and fights and general upheavals. They were a constant nuisance to us, which was always the case when there was drink about."⁷³ Robertson wrote this of the men of 25 Battalion at Aleppo in Syria, but it applies equally well to Cairo or any other Middle Eastern

Australian slouch hat, he is stated to be a New Zealander. The photographer is definitely a New Zealander – Private Graham Dudding of 18 Battalion.

⁶⁶ Nicholson, 8 February 1942, pp. 49-50.

⁶⁷ McLeod, p. 132.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* The rate was 47 per 1000 among soldiers compared to 23 per 1000 among civilians.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Anthony Madden, quoted in Hedley and Hutching, p. 87.

⁷² Reginald Arthur De Grave, Cleopatra, in *War Reminiscences: Tales of Long Ago*, AWMM, MS-99-67, p. 2.

⁷³ Rosanne Robertson (ed.), *For the Duration: 2NZEAF Officer Bruce Robertson on Active Duty and 'In the Bag'*, Ngaio Press, Wellington, 2010, p. 26.

city. Private Laurie Birks told his mother that the men were drinking so much beer in Egypt that “the local breweries are working continuously at high pressure, and we’re told can’t fully supply civilian demands”.⁷⁴ Birks was a vocal critic of his comrades’ drinking, and was disgusted by his officers’ tacit acceptance of it. Birks wrote, of a speech given by his commanding officer, that:

he didn’t say a word in condemnation of drinking, for one reason I guess because most of the officers do a fair bit of it themselves, not exactly moderately either.... In any case it would have been a waste of breath to say anything about it, the chaps won’t be denied it when it’s to be had, and even appeals to restrain their drinking don’t seem to have much effect.⁷⁵

Many officers were willing to overlook heavy drinking among their men, provided they performed well when on duty or in combat. Mark Johnston notes this phenomenon among Australian officers, who were sympathetic to their men letting off steam, given the possibility of death or wounding in combat.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, regardless of the accepting attitude of officers, alcohol was the root cause of much of the violence and debauchery associated with the New Zealand experience of Cairo in the Second World War.

⁷⁴ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 20 March 1942, p. 5.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Johnston, *Anzacs in the Middle East*, p. 48.



Fig. 9: New Zealand soldiers drinking in Helwan, Egypt. Note the bottles of Stella on the table and the large Stella sign in the background.⁷⁷

Despite the prevalence of debauchery and violence in the story of New Zealanders in Cairo, it seems that this behaviour was confined to a small, though still very apparent, minority.⁷⁸ Most New Zealanders were able to enjoy their leave in the city in a more restrained manner. Cairo had much to offer the open-minded soldier beyond drink, sex and brawling. Accounts of days spent seeing the sights, enjoying a few refreshments and then returning to camp are far more common than accounts of drunken revels. Private Hugh Mackenzie wrote of a typical leave day in January 1942. He “went to the Zoo in Cairo and got some excellent snapshots with Arthur Hunt and his companion. We had a few drinks at the Pole Nord bar just to cool off and we caught a taxi back to Camp at about 9.30pm.”⁷⁹ A few months later, he had an equally sedate experience, writing that he “went alone to Cairo and out to Giza and Mena to see the Pyramids and Sphinx. I came back to the Club then to the Metropole Theatre seeing

⁷⁷ A. W. Froggatt, ‘Helwan’, in Collection: A W Froggatt – WWII, KMARL, 2014.15.3.

⁷⁸ McLeod, p. 126. Johnston also argues this in relation to Australian misbehaviour during war time at various points throughout *Anzacs in the Middle East*.

⁷⁹ Hugh Robin Mackenzie, From 1941, in Mackenzie family: Papers, ATL, MS-Papers-11985-03, 31 January 1942.

‘Tobacco Road’. A snack at the Club and back to Maadi Camp 10.15pm.”⁸⁰ Bombardier Martyn Uren perhaps summed up the typical Cairo leave best in a passage that is worth quoting in full:

Leave, then, for myself and whoever happened to accompany me, usually took something like the following form:- a hot bath, shave, haircut and shampoo to start the day with, a good meal of several courses, innumerable cups of coffee or iced drinks according to the season of the year, a look round perhaps to the Zoo, the Citadel, a mosque or the Pyramids for a couple of hours, another large meal, some shopping, a cinema, supper, and home in a *gharri* to the station. This entire procedure was a ritual with me, and now, three years later, I still do the same things.⁸¹

Unsurprisingly, given its opportunities for rest and relaxation, many New Zealanders grew fond of Cairo. Uren noted, after returning from Greece, that “gradually, almost imperceptibly, I began to acquire a liking for Cairo.... Perhaps it is because one feels like enjoying comfort, quiet and rest after an action – for I began to know Cairo pretty well about this time, and knew just where these essential conditions could be found.”⁸² Private Walter Young appreciated “all the goodies this Cosmopolitan city has to offer”, and the 24 Battalion magazine *Bab el Look* labelled Cairo “polyglot, expensive but intensely interesting and very, very educational”.⁸³ Nevertheless, this attitude was not universal, and many New Zealanders described Cairo in similarly condescending terms as Suez. Private Des Davis called Cairo “a city of the lowest and degenerate type.”⁸⁴ Gunner Thomas Toll wrote that he had “been in Cairo on leave a couple of times but I don’t think much of the place it’s not what it’s cracked up to be.... It’s a pretty dirty sort of a town and about ¾ of it is out of bounds to troops”.⁸⁵ For Private Arthur Moore, what stood out about the city was the “filth, stink and squalor”.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Mackenzie, 27 June 1942.

⁸¹ Uren, pp. 42-43.

⁸² *Ibid*, pp. 145-146.

⁸³ Young, p. 17; B.T.J.J., ‘The New Zealander on Leave’, in Lt. E. H. Halstead (ed.), *Bab el Look*, Societe Orientale de Publicite, Cairo, 1941. There are no page numbers in this magazine.

⁸⁴ Davis, Letter to Mum, Dad and Hazela 12 January 1943, p. 4.

⁸⁵ Thomas James Toll, Letter: Thomas J Toll – Middle East WWII 9 October 1943, KMARL, 2007.542, p. 4.

⁸⁶ Arthur Sutherland Moore, Diary: North Africa & Italy WWII, KMARL, 2005.736, 22 March 1941, p. 7.



Fig. 10: An image from Gunner Leslie Coleman's photo album. Many soldiers formed unfavourable opinions of Cairo and other cities based on their poverty and dirtiness.⁸⁷

This dichotomy became the pattern for New Zealand reactions to most cities throughout the Middle East. No matter the city, some soldiers would look favourably on the history and shopping available, others would dwell negatively on the dirt and smell. One soldier would speak reverently of Damascus as “the oldest city in the world”, while another would describe it as “very dirty and wholly native”.⁸⁸ In Baghdad, one man would “catch a glimpse of the Arabian Nights”, another would see only “a collection of hovels” in “just another Wog town”.⁸⁹ Thus, we can see that the New Zealand experience of Middle Eastern cities was far more varied than that of the desert. Reactions sat on a spectrum from scathing to favourable, and while a

⁸⁷ Leslie Trevor Coleman, ‘Cairo, Typical of the Tumble Down Homes of the Poor’, in Photograph Album: North Africa – WWII, KMARL, 1987.1930.1.

⁸⁸ Hood, p. 6; Robertson (ed.), p. 11.

⁸⁹ Helm, p. 217; George Newton, Account of Journey from Cairo to Tehran, ATL, MS-Papers-8745, 12 April 1942; 9 April 1942.

significant minority were more interested in causing a scene, most were willing to enjoy the city's attractions quietly and open-mindedly.

The Holy Land

The Middle East was the birthplace of Christianity. Even by the Second World War, Palestine and Syria (which then included Lebanon) were still referred to as the Holy Land. New Zealanders experienced the Holy Land during the war on two levels. Firstly, they experienced it as a geographical place – another of the many environments they found themselves in over the course of the war. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, they experienced it as an idea – one that was intimately tied to religion. Whether religious or not, New Zealanders could not avoid engaging with religiosity and religious history. Religion featured, to a greater or lesser extent, in all accounts of service or leave in the Holy Land.

Geographically, the Holy Land came in for comment almost as soon as troops crossed the border into Palestine. This comment was overwhelmingly positive, as New Zealanders contrasted the fertile land they encountered with the barren deserts of Egypt. Private Sydney Hadley wrote on 1 March 1942 that he “crossed the Egypt-Palestine border at 11 am and from then on the country became greener and more inviting. It was a great change from the desert which is practically all we had seen for 4 ½ months. Green low hills very much like N[orth] C[anterbury].”⁹⁰ Sergeant George Newton made a similar comparison to home, writing a month after Hadley that “on Monday we went across Palestine and Trans Jordan and being spring it looked just like home, barley and wheat seemed to be the main crops and it is strange to come out of the desert into the green countryside again.”⁹¹ Travelling by train or truck, New Zealanders passed miles of irrigated farmland and colourful citrus orchards. Bomber crewman Gerald Craddock wrote that his “new camp is pitched among orange trees in an atmosphere strong with the scent of oranges, new-mown hay and green grass, a relief to the eyes.”⁹² Many found it so beautiful in comparison to Egypt that they were reluctant to return to Maadi. Private John Hood wrote on return to Egypt that he “came out to camp in the afternoon and I must say

⁹⁰ Hadley, 1 March 1942.

⁹¹ Newton, 9 April 1942.

⁹² Craddock, p. 40.

it did not look a very pleasant prospect after the pleasant green fields, orchards and hills of...Palestine.”⁹³



Fig. 11: New Zealanders at the source of the River Jordan, looking out over the fields and hills of Palestine.⁹⁴

⁹³ Hood, p. 13.

⁹⁴ Harold Gear Paton, 'New Zealanders from New Zealand Convalescent Depot View the Source of the River Jordan, Palestine, World War II', 5 October 1942, NLNZ, DA-06807-F.



Fig. 12: A painting by Gunner Jack Crippen, showing Palestine's gently rolling greenery.⁹⁵

Syria was viewed equally favourably. 2 New Zealand Division was stationed in Syria for several months in early 1942, encamped mainly in the Lebanon Mountains. Again the striking natural beauty contrasted favourably with Egypt. Nurse Stephanie Lee, in Beirut with 3NZGH, wrote “we just cannot get over the lovely views up here. After the flatness of Egypt I suppose we notice it more, but really it is such a beautiful country and we all adore it.”⁹⁶ Private Arthur Helm painted a particularly picturesque image of the mountains, writing that:

After coming from the heat of Egypt we found the air of the mountains was delightful, and we drew it into our lungs in great deep breaths. When we reached the summit we asked the driver to stop at the first café, and soon we were sitting in a cool arbour of grapevines, with a fountain playing in the middle, drinking a bottle of wine and eating grapes which had been picked from the vines growing overhead.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Jack Crippen, ‘Village Palestine’, 1942, ANZ, R22498207.

⁹⁶ Vanoosten, 2 July 1942, p. 201.

⁹⁷ Helm, p. 183.

Gunner Frederick Robbie also contrasted Syria with Egypt writing that “we are all enjoying the change immensely”, and noted that they had even been on “a skiing trip into the hills.”⁹⁸ The fact that New Zealanders did not have to fight in Syria, and instead were able to ski or drink wine, certainly furthered their liking for the country. Part of the reason they were stationed there at all was to rest and relax after the Division’s mauling in Greece, Crete, and the early Egyptian battles of 1941.



Fig. 13: New Zealand sentry at the 9th Army Ski School in Lebanon. Note the skiers descending the slope in the background.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Frederick Keith Robbie, Letter to Doris Robbin 7 June 1942, in Letters; Middle East – WWII, KMARL, 2004.209, p. 1.

⁹⁹ Mervyn Daniel Elias, ‘Sentry Deep in the Snow at the Ninth Army Ski School, Lebanon’, 19 April 1942, NLNZ, DA-02451-F.

However, though geography figured prominently, it was religion that dominated New Zealand accounts of Palestine. Many earnestly and unironically used the terms Holy Land or Promised Land to refer to Palestine.¹⁰⁰ Still more characterised travel there as a pilgrimage, reflecting the growing acceptance of pilgrimage among Protestants that began in the nineteenth century.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the journeys New Zealanders made, and the places they visited did resemble the medieval Christian pilgrimage. Crusades historian Steven Runciman writes of those who “went on to Palestine, to Nazareth and Mount Tabor, to the Jordan and to Bethlehem, and to all the shrines of Jerusalem. They gazed at them all and prayed at them all; then they made the long journey homeward”.¹⁰² This quote describes Christian pilgrims in the eleventh century, but it could equally describe New Zealanders on leave in 1942.

We must remember that New Zealanders, even during the Second World War, still came from a society in which Christianity played an important role. Though actual church attendance had been gradually dropping in the early decades of the twentieth century, the percentage of the population who identified as having no religion in the 1936 census was only 0.3 percent.¹⁰³ Sunday school attendance also remained high, and historian Christine Weir states that “from the perspective of the early 21st century, it is easy to underestimate the scale of the interwar Sunday school movement”.¹⁰⁴ In the first decades of the twentieth century, as many as 75 percent of New Zealand children aged five to fifteen were enrolled in Sunday school, and these numbers “remained high until World War II, declining only in the 1950s and 1960s.”¹⁰⁵ This meant that a large proportion of the Second World War generation of New Zealanders had some formal exposure to Christianity, and even when they did not, most still considered themselves to belong to the Christian faith. Service in the military furthered exposure to Christianity through compulsory church parades and the fact that, unlike during the First World War, chaplains were actually attached to 2NZE units.¹⁰⁶ Chaplains, embedded

¹⁰⁰ Johnston, Letter to Family 8 March 1942, p. 4; Helm, p. 46; Harold Loftus, Diary: Greece, Crete & North Africa – WWII, KMARL, 1996.1220, 5 March 1942; F. R. L. P., ‘Impressions’, *Kiwit: Unit Magazine of 2 NZ General Hospital*, Vol. 1, No. 2, May 1942, p. 42; Craddock, p. 40.

¹⁰¹ Stephanie Stidham Rogers, *Inventing the Holy Land: American Protestant Pilgrimage to Palestine, 1865-1941*, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD, 2011, p. 2; Yothers, p. 5.

¹⁰² Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades I: The First Crusade and the Foundation of the Kingdom of Jerusalem*, Penguin, London, 2016 (first published 1951), p. 41.

¹⁰³ Allen Davidson, *Christianity in Aotearoa: A History of Church and Society in New Zealand*, 2nd ed., New Zealand Education for Ministry, Wellington, 1997, p. 106.

¹⁰⁴ Christine Weir, ‘Deeply Interested in These Children Whom You Have Not Seen: The Protestant Sunday School View of the Pacific, 1900-1940’, *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2013, p. 44.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁶ Geoffrey M. R. Harworth, *Marching as to War? The Anglican Church in New Zealand during World War II*, Wily Publications, Christchurch, 2008, p. 51.

with the troops, conducted ecumenical services “where barriers of denomination or race were temporarily removed”.¹⁰⁷ Many soldiers who were not otherwise church goers found these non-denominational services appealing, and as a result received their first formal exposure to Christianity in the very lands that were being discussed in their chaplains’ sermons.

Many New Zealanders were filled with awe and reverence for the religious sites they encountered in the Holy Land. They visited Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem and gazed upon the Mount of Olives, the Sea of Galilee and the Plain of Esdraelon – all places with evocative Biblical associations. Many felt they were walking in Jesus’ footsteps, as Private Francis Jackson noted on visiting the Mount of Olives, writing that “it’s a rather frightening feeling to think you may now be treading on the same ground as did Christ, or perhaps one of His disciples.”¹⁰⁸ Lieutenant Ian Smith was equally aware of Christ’s presence at the Sea of Galilee, which “transported me...back two thousand years to the fishermen of the lake and their Master.”¹⁰⁹ These associations reached their apogee at the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem – the route Jesus took to his crucifixion – of which Private Arthur Helm eloquently wrote that “a vivid picture of the scene rose before me. I could hear the roar that greeted Jesus as He left the Praetorium. I could see the narrow way thronged with fanatical Jews looking on the simple Galilean who had presumed to say that if their beautiful temple was destroyed He could rebuild it in three days.”¹¹⁰ All of these observations reflect a phenomenon noted by religious historian Kerrie Handasyde, that “accounts of travel to the Holy Land are interrupted again and again with the arresting thought that ‘here’ the sacred may be glimpsed, ‘here’ proof may be had, and ‘here’ (rather than elsewhere) Jesus’ ‘reality’ may be more personally felt.”¹¹¹ For many New Zealanders, travel in Palestine provided a physical manifestation of places or concepts that had previously been only imagined.

But not all New Zealanders were quite so overawed. Many felt disappointed or disillusioned by what they saw in the Holy Land, especially when it did not meet their preconceived expectations. As Brian Yothers states, travel to the Holy Land represented “an ineluctable tension between what is expected and what is found”, and this was certainly the

¹⁰⁷ Harworth, p. 67.

¹⁰⁸ Jackson, p. 82.

¹⁰⁹ Ian Denis Smith, Letter: Egypt – WWII 7 June 1942, KMARL, 2005.806, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ Helm, p. 59.

¹¹¹ Kerrie Handasyde, ‘Holy Land Tourism: A Horseback Ride from Public Theology to Private Faith’, *Melbourne Historical Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 1, January 2015, p. 101.

case for New Zealanders.¹¹² Often, not coming from a Catholic or Orthodox background, New Zealanders were bewildered by the elaborate shrines and churches they found at important Biblical sites. Private Roger Smith wrote that “in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre...I felt at a disadvantage to my Catholic companions.”¹¹³ The Church, “all gleaming in a semi-barbaric display, bore extravagant testimony to the bounty of their faith. I was left in utter bewilderment. Where was the stark hill of the Story? Where was the cave with the rock rolled across the entrance? Behind that towering alter? Beneath those aspiring candles?”¹¹⁴ Private Francis Jackson had similar feelings to Smith when visiting the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. He wrote that “this Church, with its smoke-stained tapestries and walls, hardly conveyed to the visitor a tumbled-down manger and the crib bed. So we left the Church a little disappointed, as I had expected to see something quite different, and this grandeur I could not associate with the humbleness of the life of Jesus Christ.”¹¹⁵

Still more New Zealanders were disgusted at how commercialised the holy sites were. Many churches and shrines asked visitors for donations, and, understandably, local vendors used popular religious sites as locations to sell their wares. Private Arthur Helm wrote that “everywhere one goes in Jerusalem the holy places are commercialised. To my way of thinking the various creeds and religions would do well to make an effort to set these places above such needs.... It was noticeable that some of the soldiers were openly scornful when asked for donations.”¹¹⁶ Private John Hood wrote of the Holy Sepulchre that he was “somewhat jarred by the presence of a gowned Greek Priest in the Chapel of the Tomb of Christ who asked for a donation”.¹¹⁷ Gunner Laurie Birks put it even more forcefully, writing that he “was getting a bit fed up with churches and what they’ve come to stand for, and didn’t bother much about another church or two there, and a few crypts with the usual priest or such-like scrounger soliciting alms ‘for the church’.”¹¹⁸ As for vendors outside the churches, Private Roger Smith wrote that “the atmosphere of the precincts was anything but reverent: gangs of hawkers, with crosses, rosaries and testaments, were as insistent and clamorous as any Cairo bootblack.”¹¹⁹

¹¹² Yothers, p. 1.

¹¹³ Roger Smith, *Up the Blue: A Kiwi Private’s View of the Second World War*, Ngaio Press, Wellington, 2000, p. 23.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Jackson, p. 84.

¹¹⁶ Helm, p. 56.

¹¹⁷ Hood, pp. 9-10.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Lawrence Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 11 July 1943, in Papers: Letters July – Dec 1943 Letters 120-153, AWMM, MS-1413, pp. 7-8.

¹¹⁹ Smith, *Up the Blue*, p. 22.

Some New Zealanders went beyond disillusionment, and were openly sceptical about the authenticity of religious sites, or the underpinnings of religion itself, but these were in a distinct minority. Most at least accepted the religious history these sites represented, even if the sites did not meet their prior expectations. Moreover, those who were openly sceptical still visited all the holy sites alongside their more devout comrades, and still contextualised such places in light of religious history. In this way, religion was unavoidable in the New Zealand experience of Palestine. Though some admired the Holy Land's natural beauty, almost all visited and commented on the famous places of Christianity. All New Zealanders went on a pilgrimage of sorts in the Holy Land, whether they believed in it or not.

The Ancient World

When New Zealanders went to the Middle East during the war, they went to a place with a long history. Remnants of ancient civilisations were everywhere. The ancient Egyptians and Romans were not just storybook figures in the Middle East, they took on a physical presence through the buildings and artwork they had left behind. As official historian Frazer Norton notes, these were things previously only on “the picture postcards...seen in bookshops in New Zealand.”¹²⁰ Now New Zealanders were seeing the real thing.

Roman and ancient Egyptian sites, and other ancient ruins and monuments were extremely popular leave destinations for New Zealanders, and accounts of trips to Giza, Baalbek and Luxor pepper wartime correspondence. It should be remembered, as noted by historian Ian McGibbon, that “for most of the troops it was their first overseas experience, and sightseeing was an early preoccupation for many”.¹²¹ Maadi Camp's proximity to Cairo meant that the pyramids and the Sphinx were the two most ubiquitous tourist experiences for New Zealand troops. Like the generation before them in the First World War, New Zealanders had their photo taken astride camels in front of these famous monuments, and such pictures are present in almost every Second World War photo collection.

¹²⁰ Frazer D. Norton, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War: 26 Battalion*, Historical Publications Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1952, p. 9.

¹²¹ McGibbon, 'Egypt', in McGibbon (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, p. 153.

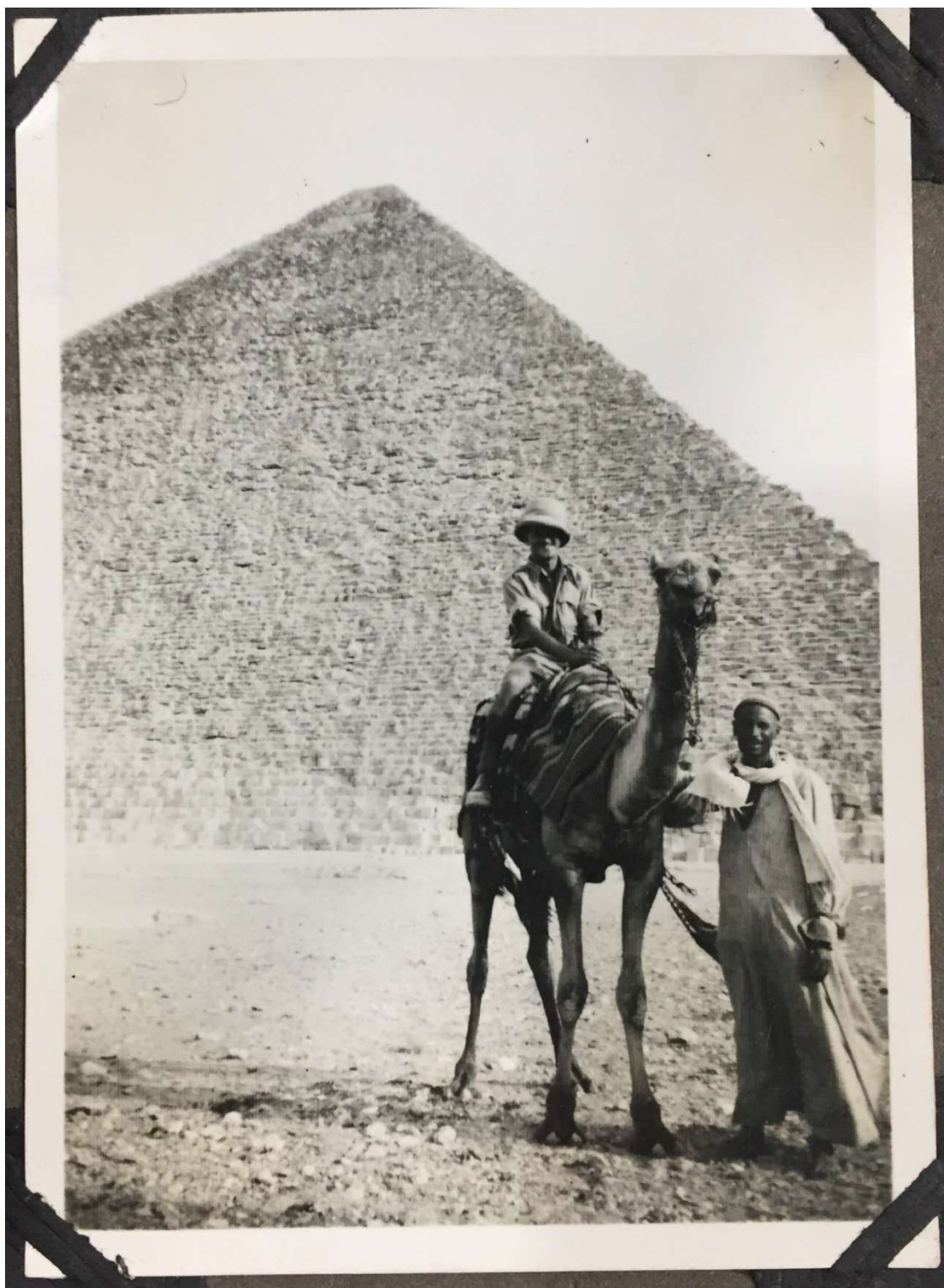


Fig. 14: The ubiquitous camel-pyramid photograph, this one from the photo album of Private Roy Dalbeth, New Zealand Ordnance Corps.¹²²

Many New Zealanders obviously relished the chance to see the pyramids. Private Arthur Helm found his “preconceived idea of the Pyramids was fully borne out when I stood

¹²² Roy Leonard Dalbeth, ‘Don at Big Pyramid’, in Photograph Album: England, Egypt, Greece & Italy – WWII, KMARL, 2004.420.

in their gigantic shadow. They are awe inspiring, and one cannot but wonder at the immensity of the project of building them”.¹²³ For Nurse Stephanie Lee, they were “the one place that I have always wanted to see and now I have.... They are the most interesting and marvellous structures ever built by man.”¹²⁴ For Laurie Birks the pyramids “haven’t lost the romance and the fascination they had for me when I saw them first...though I see them a dozen times a day”, and Sergeant Harry Dansey noted that he had “been to see the Pyramid area three times during the last six weeks”.¹²⁵ Not all New Zealanders were so effusive with their praise. Sapper William Pearson described them as “nothing but heaps of rock surrounded by dust and dirt”, and Gunner Thomas Toll thought that “they are well worth seeing once but otherwise they don’t interest me much.”¹²⁶ Nevertheless, as with the holy sites in Palestine, more cynical views did not actually stop these soldiers from visiting the pyramids anyway. New Zealanders would climb to the top of the pyramids and admire the view over Cairo and the Nile. Arthur Helm managed to climb ten pyramids during his time in Egypt – a feat not possible for the modern tourist.¹²⁷

¹²³ Helm, pp. 24-25.

¹²⁴ Vanoosten, 1 March 1942, p. 90.

¹²⁵ Thomas Lawrence Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 4 October 1942, in Papers: Letters July – Dec 1942 Letters 66-92, AWMM, MS-1413, p. 10; Dansey, Letter to Mrs W. P. Dansey 10 July 1944, pp. 6-7.

¹²⁶ Pearson, 6 May 1941; Toll, p. 4.

¹²⁷ Helm, p. 28.



Fig. 15: Sister Violet Wallace and another New Zealand nurse sit atop the Cheops pyramid.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Violet E. Wallace, 'On Top of Pyramid', 1941, in Photograph Album: NZ Army Nursing Service – WWII, KMARL, 1993.2420.1.

Roman ruins were also remarked on with interest. When stationed in Syria, the Division was encamped near the ancient town of Baalbek, with its well-preserved Roman temples. Private Sydney Hadley wrote in March 1942 that the Baalbek temples were “magnificent”, and he was “astounded by the size of pillars and blocks of rock making the huge buildings.”¹²⁹ Captain Bruce Robertson was equally “thrilled, and tried to visualise the ancient Romans in their togas wandering among these impressive piles and the still magnificent gardens nearby.”¹³⁰ Soldiers encountered other ruins at Palmyra, also in Syria, and El Djem in Tunisia. The theatre at Maadi camp was even named El Djem in honour of that ancient Roman amphitheatre.



Fig. 16: New Zealand trucks passing the Roman ruins at Palmyra in May 1942.¹³¹

Some Roman remains were more humble, and could even serve a practical function. Private Roger Smith and his comrades, camped near Bardia in Libya, drew their water “from

¹²⁹ Hadley, 6 March 1942.

¹³⁰ Robertson (ed.), p. 33.

¹³¹ Harold Gear Paton, ‘A Convoy of New Zealand Army Trucks Pass by the Ruins of Palmyra, Syria’, 5 May 1942, NLNZ, DA-06814.

an old Roman cistern, through a small hole in the desert ringed with crumbling masonry.”¹³² That it was still usable was, according to Smith, “a great tribute to the engineers who had designed and built it.”¹³³ It was at these wells and other small sites that some New Zealanders began to engage in amateur archaeology and artefact collecting. Airman Gerald Craddock noted that it was Roman wells in “our patch of Libyan sand” that spurred his enthusiasm for archaeology.¹³⁴ As he and his bomber crew criss-crossed the Middle East, they attempted to spot ancient sites of interest from the air.¹³⁵ Private Arthur Helm wrote of a comrade called Tuck who “had been bitten rather badly by the archaeology ‘bug’”, who he accompanied on several archaeological trips around Mersah Matruh.¹³⁶ On these trips New Zealanders would collect pieces of tile, pottery or Roman coins as mementoes of the ancient sites they had visited, bringing a piece of the ancient world with them when they returned home.

New Zealanders were also conscious of the long military lineage in the Middle East. They wrote of the armies that had ranged over the region for thousands of years, and placed their experience on a continuum stretching back to the Alexandrian hoplite or Roman legionary. A popular guide book on Palestine reminded New Zealanders that “they come at the end of a long line of soldiers who have spent years of their service in this country. We today are the military successors of Egyptians, Hittites, Syrians, Israelites, Midianites, Philistines, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, Saracens and Turks; who, one after the other, found cause to bring their forces here”.¹³⁷ Lieutenant Ian Johnston echoed this idea when travelling along the Mediterranean coast in Libya. He wrote of “that historic sea over which the Greeks, the Romans and the Carthaginians had sailed right to the land on which I was standing.”¹³⁸ These forbears were given tangible presence when “alongside the [railway] line we passed the ruins of old Roman baths and occasionally the remains of an old Roman road.”¹³⁹ In Libya, Private Laurie Birks found it “strange to think that Roman soldiers once trod the same ground as we did”, and wondered “if they had to put up with the same as we do, the dust, and the heat in summer and the cold in winter and everything that makes this country so darned

¹³² Smith, *Up the Blue*, p. 28.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Craddock, p. 40

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 43.

¹³⁶ Helm, p. 15.

¹³⁷ H. G. Williamson, *Palestine Past and Present*, 2nd ed., 1938, in Collection: Alan Hardie Napier – WWII, KMARL, 2013.14.1.

¹³⁸ Johnston, Letter to Family 6 December 1940, p. 3.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

inhospitable.”¹⁴⁰ Bombardier Martyn Uren colourfully sketched this military lineage in a passage on a sixteenth century Spanish castle in Tripoli:

I could not refrain from thinking that this very spot must have seen many guards of varied nationalities. Here,...long before the Spaniards built the castle, the Carthaginians mounted guard seven centuries before Caesar conquered Britain. Here, again, the Roman centurions must have inspected their men while trumpets blared and banners waved in the fresh sea breeze. This square undoubtedly saw the colourful pomp of Spain, the Eastern splendour of Turkey and the pirates of Barbary. Now a Union Jack flutters from its lofty castle walls.¹⁴¹

Thus, engagement with the ancient world went beyond physical ruins and artefacts. New Zealanders actually imagined their experiences in the context of those who had experienced them in the past. Much in the way that they felt themselves walking in Christ’s footsteps in Palestine, they saw themselves marching in the footsteps of the Roman legions throughout the Middle East.

Nevertheless, despite New Zealanders’ enthusiasm for history, the ancient world could also form a negative lens through which they viewed the Middle East as a place. Apparent in some New Zealand writing about the ancient world is an undercurrent of regression – an idea that the modern Middle East somehow failed to live up to the standards set by ancient civilisation. This rhetoric is apparent in Private Arthur Helm’s account of his travels in Iran and Iraq. Helm’s story is truly incredible. A simple private soldier, he chose to travel alone to countries few New Zealanders bothered to visit, rather than spend his leave in Cairo with his comrades. He stayed in local homes and showed a keen interest in indigenous culture and Islamic religion. His reasonable and open-minded attitude to the Middle East stood in stark contrast to the bigoted and parochial views held by many of his compatriots. Nevertheless, his writing on Iran and Iraq still evidences the idea that these countries had fallen from the pinnacle of civilisation they represented in ancient times. When travelling through Iraq, he wrote that due to “years of mismanagement under the Turks, and the varied problems that face the country today... little has been done to return the land to the fertile and prosperous condition that it enjoyed in ages past.”¹⁴² Of Baghdad, he wrote that “it contains little of its former splendour

¹⁴⁰ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 16 January 1942.

¹⁴¹ Uren, p. 317.

¹⁴² Helm, p. 211.

and no monuments of its departed glories.”¹⁴³ And of Iran he wrote that “the vandalism of the Moslems and the Mongols has reduced a once prosperous and flourishing country to a state of poverty.”¹⁴⁴ All this should not detract from the fact that Helm was genuinely fascinated by the Middle East, loved travelling in the region, and even planned to go home after the war via Marco Polo’s route through to China.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, his writing still reflects a notion that, while the Middle East had a glorious past, its present represented a step backwards. This notion is perhaps summed up best by the caption to a series of photos of the pyramids in Lance Corporal Thomas Goodall’s photo album. It simply reads in Latin “gloria transit sic mundi” – “thus passes the glory of the world”.¹⁴⁶

The New Zealand engagement with the ancient world was not one dimensional. Much like the Holy Land, the ancient world represented both a physical place and an idea of place. It was certainly somewhere that could be visited in the form of ancient ruins and monuments. However it also informed notions of history and regression that shaped how New Zealanders viewed the contemporary Middle East. In this way, ancient monuments and civilisations had a currency that belied their millennia-old age.

Conclusion

For New Zealanders in the Second World War the Middle East was never a single place. Diversity was the hallmark of their experience in the region. What a focus on the desert, the city, the Holy Land and the ancient world shows, is that each location presented New Zealanders with something unique. They all represented geographical locations, but they also came with associated ideas of place that were often just as important in framing how New Zealanders viewed the region. Importantly, all four of these place-lenses already existed, in some form, in New Zealanders’ imagined Middle East. This meant that when New Zealanders encountered the *real* place their reactions could be violent and evocative, as their preconceptions were reinforced or subverted. For some, the reality stripped them of all romantic sentiment they held. For others, Like Arthur Helm and Stephanie Lee, Middle Eastern places surpassed expectations and fulfilled life-long ambitions.

¹⁴³ Helm, p. 215.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 280.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 275.

¹⁴⁶ Thomas Arnold Goodall, Photograph Album: Egypt, Greece & Crete – WWII, KMARL, 2000.723.

While many certainly had negative impressions of various places, as with much of the discussion of New Zealanders in the Middle East during the World Wars, the negative tends to overshadow the positive, thus oversimplifying the picture. Historiographically New Zealanders' reactions to the Middle Eastern landscape have been scant and reductive, emphasising dislike and violent reaction. However, many soldiers found much to appreciate in the history, natural landscapes and polyglot cities of the Middle East. These positive reactions were just as much, if not more, a part of New Zealand wartime correspondence than their negative counterpoints. They show that the New Zealand experience of the Middle East as a place was complex and varied from location to location.

Chapter 2: Materiality

“The hand work here is marvellous. If only I could send lots home. I have bought you a blouse which I will send off. Do hope you like it. It is typical of this place.... If only you could come shopping with me. I’m going to bring home just as much as I can.”

- Nurse Stephanie Lee, Beirut, 1942.¹

Historian Tim Cook states that “the history of souvenirs is the history of soldiers.”² Since time immemorial, soldiers have sought items – bought, souvenired, picked up or stolen – to serve as compensation for the hardships of war, or as mementoes of their war experiences. Nevertheless, Krista Cowman notes that shopping and souveniring, as part of leisure and recreation, “are rarely considered part of ‘war experience’ despite their recurrence in both contemporary and later war writings.”³ Shopping and souveniring were certainly part of ‘war experience’ for New Zealanders in the Middle East. The generation of New Zealand men and women that went overseas during WWII were the beneficiaries of a more than century-long growth in consumerism. Frank Trentmann notes that “the century after the 1820s witnessed a revolution in shopping.... Shopping became a popular leisure activity – an end in itself as well as a means to acquire goods – and people talked of ‘shoppers’.”⁴ Shopping, though traditionally a feminine pastime, also became something that men embraced more and more into the twentieth century.⁵ New Zealanders had acquired a reputation as avid shoppers when serving overseas in the First World War, and they engaged in the pastime just as enthusiastically during the Second.⁶

In many ways, materiality complements the New Zealand experience of the Middle East as a place. Physical objects provided tangible and individual mementoes of places or experiences. Soldiers and nurses could buy things for themselves, or for friends and family, either at their request or as gifts to give relatives a snapshot of their lives in a faraway land. Thus, materiality can provide an important insight into the way New Zealanders experienced

¹ Vanoosten, 30 July 1942, p. 211.

² Cook, p. 212.

³ Cowman, p. 122.

⁴ Trentmann, p. 191.

⁵ Cowman, p. 122; Trentmann, p. 200.

⁶ Hunter and Ross, p. 64.

the Middle East. As John Schofield *et al* note, “the material record...has historical and interpretive significance; it tells us about the past, about historic events and people.”⁷ Margaret Higonnet perhaps put it more succinctly, writing that “the souvenir is a nexus of narrative.”⁸ In this way, material objects can tell us what New Zealanders thought about the region and how they chose to frame their experiences there.

This chapter discusses New Zealanders’ engagement with the materiality of the Middle East. It examines what New Zealanders chose to acquire, and what this can tell us about the way that they viewed the Middle East. In doing so an interesting contradiction emerges – that while many New Zealanders were quickly disabused of any romance associated with the Middle East, they still bought or acquired things that seemed to play into, or cement, romantic stereotypes.

It should be noted that this chapter is not strictly an object history – it does not focus on material objects and analyse their physical nature, using them as the jumping off point for an argument. Rather it attempts to paint a picture of New Zealanders and their relationship with the Middle East’s material culture, and what this can tell us about the way they experienced the Middle East. I agree with those authors who have written on the need for historians to better incorporate material sources into their analysis, though I have not perhaps foregrounded physical objects as much as some of them would like.⁹ Nevertheless, Janet Hoskins discovery in her research that “people and the things they valued were so complexly intertwined they could not be disentangled”, certainly rings true for this chapter.¹⁰ To separate the *things* from New Zealand’s Middle Eastern war is to avoid a key part of the experience. To a greater or lesser extent then, this chapter takes a cue from Richard Grassby’s suggestion that “the most effective method of reconstructing material culture is to combine written evidence – didactic and informational literature and archival documents – with the physical evidence of buildings, artifacts and images.”¹¹ It examines what New Zealanders wrote about the materiality of the Middle East, and then moves to look at some of the specific objects themselves.

⁷ Schofield, Johnson and Beck, p. 6.

⁸ Margaret R. Higonnet, ‘Souvenirs of Death’, *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2007, p. 73.

⁹ Karen Harvey, ‘Introduction: Practical Matters’, in Harvey (ed.), *History and Material Culture*, p. 1; Giorgio Riello, ‘Things That Shape History: Material Culture and Historical Narratives’, in Harvey (ed.), *History and Material Culture*, pp. 42-43; Henry Glassie, *Material Culture*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1999, p. 44; Grassby, p. 602.

¹⁰ Hoskins, p. 2.

¹¹ Grassby, p. 602.

Shopping and Souveniring

When they arrived in the Middle East, New Zealanders encountered places where the buying and selling of goods was an integral part of everyday life. Markets, bazaars, shops and street vendors filled Middle Eastern cities, and some of these shopping districts were centuries old. Gunner Ralph Nicholson wrote in March 1942 that the bazaars in Aleppo “were very interesting...and are reported to be the oldest in the world.”¹² Bombardier Martyn Uren recounted with a certain amount of reverence that one of the bazaars in Damascus was where Saul was cured of blindness in the Bible.¹³ Thus, not only were these markets places of business but they were also historical sites.



Fig. 1: Corporal Laurence Retter poses with tapestry workers in Cairo's Muski Bazaar.¹⁴

¹² Nicholson, 24 March 1942, p. 54.

¹³ Uren, p. 207.

¹⁴ Laurence Chapman Retter, 'Tapestry Workers in the Mousky', Photograph Album: Egypt – WWII, KMARL, 2001.667.7.

However, despite their ancient pedigree, it was not history that dominated accounts of shopping districts, but rather the overwhelming array of exotic goods that could be bought there. Private John Hood wrote of Jerusalem's Old Town that "it is impossible to relate the various things that can be bought there and the numberless types to be seen in those ancient streets. The variety of colours in dress and the many different types of dress are also beyond description by me and in any case would fill a volume on their own."¹⁵ Shopping lists in New Zealand diaries and letters reflect the variety described by Hood. In February 1941, Lieutenant Ian Johnston sent home from Cairo "some more tapestry, two of which are cushion covers, which I think will look quite nice on the sun porch. Also included in the parcel is a small alabaster sphinx."¹⁶ In Syria, in March 1942, Private Sydney Hadley wrote that "Art, Jim Faass and I walked 2½ or 3 miles to a village where Art bought an inlaid Damascus box for £4."¹⁷ Also available were "very good hand worked cushion covers £6 ½ per pair", and "hand worked table cloths and serviettes 14/-".¹⁸ In the same month, Private Hugh Mackenzie bought in Aleppo "a pouffée and a cushion to match also 2 souvenir purses, one for Dad's birthday and one for myself."¹⁹ When in Damascus, Nurse Stephanie Lee "bought a very small piece of [brocade]...just enough to make an evening purse.... I then bought four small pieces of Damascus enamel ware. It is bronze silvered over and roughly enamelled in colours. Have got pinky bluey pieces that would do in a bedroom."²⁰ Other popular purchases were lace, scarab rings, embossed wallets, mother of pearl jewellery and traditional Arab daggers and headdresses.²¹

¹⁵ Hood, p. 31.

¹⁶ Ian Thomas Young Johnston, Letter to Family 16 February 1941, in Letters to Family 5 Jan-5 May 1941, Papers Relating to Service in World War II, ATL, MS-Papers-7852-02, p. 3.

¹⁷ Hadley, 15 March 1942.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Mackenzie, 22 March 1942.

²⁰ Vanoosten, 7 July 1942, p. 203.

²¹ Hood, p. 16; Mackenzie, 12 July 1942; B.T.J.J., 'The New Zealander on Leave'; Nicholson, 12 June 1941, p. 25; Young, 8 April 1942, p. 8; Helm, p. 59.



Fig. 2: Ad for The Sphinx Oriental Store in Jerusalem, showing the dizzying range of goods available to New Zealanders in the Middle East.²²

New Zealanders frequently bought presents for friends and relatives back home. Kate Hunter and Kirstie Ross, writing of New Zealanders in the First World War, note that shopping was a “pleasurable aspect of their overseas service” that they wanted to share with their loved ones.²³ This was certainly still the case in the Second World War, and Stephanie Lee wrote to her mother “if only you could come shopping with me.”²⁴ Sending packages back to New Zealand was far easier in the Second World War than the First, with the advent of a relatively regular and reliable airmail system. Sometimes gifts were of the exotic kinds described above – a wallet embossed with a sphinx for dad, some silver jewellery for mum and a carved alabaster pyramid for a younger sibling. But more often than not they were everyday luxury commodities that were prohibitively expensive or entirely unavailable in New Zealand. Two of the most common gifts to send home were silk stockings and perfume for female relatives. Ian Johnston sent stockings home to his mother and to his two sisters, Kathleen and Margaret, on multiple occasions.²⁵ Bombardier Robert Finlay did the same for his mother and sisters Merle and Edna.²⁶ And Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Varnham sent four pairs to his wife Dorothy in July 1941.²⁷

²² James Nazil, *Pathfinder Guide to Palestine, Transjordan, & Syria*, The Commercial Press, Jerusalem, 1941, in George ‘Scotty’ Rogers, *World War II Ephemera*, ATL, MS-11808-14.

²³ Hunter and Ross, p. 64.

²⁴ Vanoosten, 30 July 1942, p. 211.

²⁵ Johnston, Letter to Family 25 October 1940, p. 2; 2 February 1941, p. 4; 9 February 1941, p. 4.

²⁶ Robert Finlay, Letter to Mrs James Finlay 11 August 1943, in *Letters: Robert Finlay – Egypt WWII*, KMARL, 2012.21.8.

²⁷ Varnham, 8 July 1941, p. 100.

Stockings perhaps seem a mundane present when compared to a scarab ring or mother of pearl brooch, but soldiers went to great pains to ascertain female relatives' foot size, as well as thickness and colour preference, so they were obviously a popular choice back home. This is unsurprising when their scarcity in New Zealand is taken into account. Deborah Montgomerie, writing on women's clothing in New Zealand during the Second World War, notes that silk stockings (all imported) started to become scarce in the late 1930s after import restrictions were introduced.²⁸ During the war itself, stockings "became famously hard to procure", being the first rationed clothing item in New Zealand when rationing was introduced in April 1942.²⁹ Thus, having a relative overseas, especially in a silk-producing hub like Egypt, was an easy way to get around the four pairs per year allowance that women had to contend with in New Zealand.³⁰



Fig. 3: An Egyptian ad for silk stockings and women's underwear from a 34th Battery, NZA unit magazine, 1941. Both were difficult to acquire in New Zealand, making them popular gifts for soldiers to send home.³¹

²⁸ Deborah Montgomerie, 'Dressing for War: Glamour and Duty in Women's Lives during the Second World War', in Bronwyn Labrum, Fiona McKergow and Stephanie Gibson (eds.), *Looking Flash: Clothing in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2007, p. 170.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *The Thirty Fourth: Magazine of the 34th Battery, NZA*, No. 3, 1941, KMARL, 1999.2034.

Perfume too was popular, and men sent home brochures from Middle Eastern perfumiers to allow mothers, sisters or sweethearts to select their scent of choice. Sergeant Noel Chapman sent one such brochure home from Sayed Perfumery of Cairo, asking the unknown recipient “which would you like”?³² The brochure promised cigarettes that were “the finest and most nourishing”, an “Ambar Paste...which is actually The Elixir of Youth”, and advertised such exotic scents as “Secret of the Desert”, “Xmas” and “Tutankhamon [*sic*]”.³³ What scent Chapman’s recipient chose (and what a perfume flavoured after a long-dead Pharaoh smelt like) are unknown, but the brochure demonstrates the lengths that New Zealanders would go to, to acquire suitable gifts for family and friends.

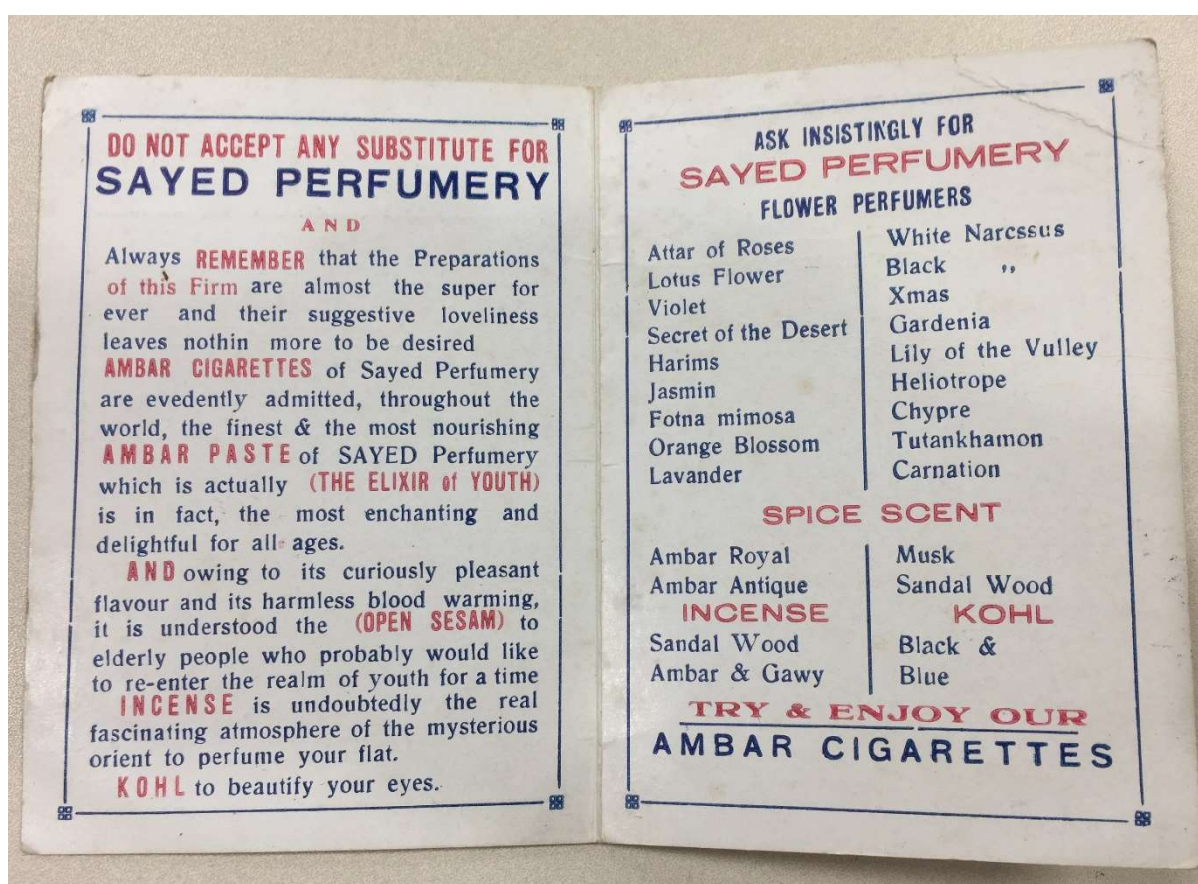


Fig. 4: The Sayed Perfumery brochure sent home by Sergeant Noel Chapman in December 1942.³⁴

Of course, not every item or object acquired by New Zealanders during the war was bought. Soldiers picked up souvenirs from various towns and tourist sites they visited as well, and we have already noted in the previous chapter the trend for amateur archaeology and collecting ancient coins or pottery. However, not all souvenirs were acquired so innocently.

³² N. K. Chapman, Papers N K Chapman – WWII, KMARL, 1988.1342.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Some New Zealanders stole things from shops and other locations. Stealing was not overly widespread, but it was common enough for Sapper Reginald De Grave to remember that New Zealanders acquired a reputation as “The Forty-Thousand Thieves” (a tongue-in-cheek reference to the famous Arabian Nights tale).³⁵ One of the ‘Forty-Thousand’ was Gunner Ralph Nicholson, who along with some of his comrades, engaged in a pastime they called “collecting”. He wrote in his diary in January 1942 that:

We went collecting late last night and collected all the rubbish you could imagine. This is what we had. A bucket with a brick in it, four pot plants, a big iron grating, three stuffed birds, a cane chair and table and a big picture frame. We tried to get a garrie [*sic*] by telling the driver we would pay but none of them would have it on. A couple of MP’s tried to stop me from taking the bucket and brick into a cabaret. Hey Bag and I had a lot of fun getting the chair and table.³⁶

Earlier in 1941, Nicholson noted that his comrade ‘Bones’ was “slipping” as “he only swiped a post card today.”³⁷ Though when out “on the spree” later in the year, Nicholson, along with Bones, managed to “[swipe] a couple of chairs and several trees.”³⁸ Whether Nicholson and his comrades stole to actually acquire items, or simply for the sport (a mixture of both seems likely), ‘collecting’ was certainly another way they engaged with the materiality of the Middle East. It is interesting to note that one of the Arabic words that entered common usage among 2NZEF was ‘kleftie’, meaning ‘steal’. Indeed, Private Arthur Helm had a friend whose nickname was Kleftie, presumably for his prowess in thievery.³⁹ It is also worth noting that though ‘scrounging’ was an ordinary part of the soldier’s life in the field, outright thievery from businesses or homes was something usually confined to cities. Thus, it can be seen as another form of behaviour encouraged by the permissiveness inherent in Middle Eastern cities.

However New Zealanders chose to acquire material objects, there was a desire to get something that was an ‘authentic’ piece of the Middle East. Tim Cook notes that “souvenirs are defined as remembrance objects, even mnemonics of events and things”, and that soldiers sought “singular objects that best represented experiences.”⁴⁰ Many soldiers felt that their

³⁵ De Grave, Cleopatra, p. 1.

³⁶ Nicholson, 18 January 1942, p. 48.

³⁷ Ibid, 22 February 1941, p. 14.

³⁸ Ibid, 23 October 1941, p. 35.

³⁹ Helm, p. 197.

⁴⁰ Cook, p. 212.

souvenirs needed provenance true to the place of acquisition to best represent their experience as Cook describes. Gunner Laurie Birks wrote to his mother when in Alexandria that he was keen “to look into the chances of getting some definitely genuine locally-made stuff.”⁴¹ Gunner Ralph Nicholson visited the markets of Aleppo in March 1942, and “was going to buy some hankies as souvenirs until I saw they were made in Japan.”⁴² The fact that the hankies were not made in Aleppo, and thus not authentic objects of that place made them inappropriate souvenirs in Nicholson’s eyes – they did not properly represent his experience there. Stephanie Lee felt similarly about the souvenirs on offer from local hawkers in Luxor. She wrote in April 1942 that “the wogs were a real nuisance with their hawking. One even tried to sell me what he called a sacred cat. Certainly it was ancient, though not 4000 years as he told me. A filthy shrivelled carcass of some animal and he kept holding it up in front of me. They had lots of small trinkets and ornaments but none of them would be real.”⁴³ What she means by ‘real’ is difficult to tell, but it seems that Lee was only interested in souvenirs authentic to their place of purchase.

The desire for authenticity was very important for New Zealanders, and certain towns or cities became known as the proper place to get specific types of souvenirs. Places came to be defined to a certain extent by the material items available there. This had happened in the First World War as well, when a town like Arras in France was known as the best place to buy silk.⁴⁴ In the Middle East during the Second World War, a number of towns achieved such an association with particular material goods. Damascus was known for wooden items, inlaid with silver or brass, and the process of making these objects took its name from the city. Damascus boxes were very popular souvenirs with soldiers, but they could also buy inlaid furniture and tableware.⁴⁵ Nazareth, as well as being the childhood home of Jesus, was known for lacework, especially lace table centres, made in the numerous convents in the town.⁴⁶ Bethlehem, also important in the life of Christ, nevertheless became a popular leave site for its mother of pearl souvenirs as much as for its biblical associations. In an incredible twist of fate, New Zealanders found when visiting Bethlehem that many of the mother of pearl ornaments available were

⁴¹ Thomas Lawrence Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 23 September 1941, in Papers: Letters April – Dec. 1941 Letters 1-38, AWMM, MS-1413, p. 1.

⁴² Nicholson, 24 March 1942, p. 54.

⁴³ Vanoosten, 11 April 1942, p. 139.

⁴⁴ Cowman, p. 112.

⁴⁵ Hood, p. 7; Uren p. 207; Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 4 April 1942, p. 1 – in a nice conflation of Syrian and Egyptian objects, Birks sent home the inlaid box he described in this letter with a piece of a statue of Rameses II, picked up in Thebes, inside.

⁴⁶ Hood, p. 16; Johnston, Letter to Family 21 June 1942, p. 3.

actually made using imported New Zealand pāua shell.⁴⁷ There is a bewildering, yet at the same time wonderful circularity about pāua being shipped from New Zealand to Palestine, made into jewellery and then brought back to New Zealand again as a souvenir of the Middle East.

It is through these regionalised souvenirs that the materiality of the Middle East is most closely linked with New Zealanders' experience of the Middle East as a place. Soldiers sought objects to remind themselves of countries like Egypt and Syria. But further than this, the way they actually experienced and wrote about a specific town or city was shaped by the material goods available there. Rather than souvenirs simply providing a memento of a particular leave trip, they could actively make soldiers think a certain way about a place, and seek that place out for the material goods it had to offer.



Fig. 5: A mother of pearl brooch bearing the 2NZEF insignia, made between 1940-1945. Though its specific place of origin is unknown, it is believed to come from the Middle East, and was likely made in Bethlehem.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Nicholson, 12 June 1941, p. 25.

⁴⁸ 'Sweetheart Brooch', Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, c. 1940-1945, GH021692.

Romance and Reality: An Interesting Contradiction

Examining New Zealanders' shopping lists and souvenirs during the war, an interesting contradiction arises. Though many New Zealanders went off to war in possession of romantic ideals about the Middle East, many (if not most) were very quickly disabused of those ideals. The heat, the smell, the crowding and the inevitable 'gyppo guts' (diarrhoea) soon had many New Zealanders doubting that there was any romance to be found in the region. Nevertheless, despite this disillusionment many of the souvenirs they acquired when serving in the region still seemed to play into romantic stereotypes or ideals. Handcrafted goods using precious or exotic materials abounded. A wallet or photo album embossed with ancient Egyptian imagery; hand-wrought jewellery in brass, silver or gold; perfumes scented with exotic florals and spices; or silken tapestry, embroidered with colourful thread and shining sequins. Items like these were universally popular souvenirs and gifts, and all seem, by their very nature, to perpetuate an image of the Middle East as a romantic place. John Benson and Laura Ugolini argue that "consumers' and observers' attitudes towards sellers and towards the places where commercial transactions take place are inseparable from their attitudes towards the goods that are for sale."⁴⁹ However, I would argue the opposite for New Zealanders in the Middle East. Many were seemingly able to separate their often negative attitudes towards the places they shopped, from the romantic and idealised goods they bought.

Many New Zealanders believed in, or at least hoped for romance when they left for the Middle East. Peter Beaumont *et al* note that "the West often sees the Middle East in terms of romantic, slightly unfocussed stereotypes which have been fostered by childhood familiarity with some of the tales from the *Arabian Nights* and novels like John Buchan's *Greenmantle*."⁵⁰ This statement is certainly true when applied to 2NZEF, and added to the *Nights* and *Greenmantle* as influences could be *Beau Geste*, T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and a slew of 'sheik romance' films and novels that were popular in the inter-war period.⁵¹ Statements made before arriving in the Middle East, or before visiting a particular place, give voice to New Zealanders' hoped-for romance. When he learnt that the final destination of their voyage from New Zealand was Egypt, Bombardier Martyn Uren wrote that he "had always

⁴⁹ John Benson and Laura Ugolini, 'Introduction', in John Benson and Laura Ugolini (eds.), *Cultures of Selling: Perspectives on Consumption and Society since 1700*, Routledge, Aldershot, 2006, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Beaumont, Blake and Wagstaff, pp. 12-13.

⁵¹ Teo, pp. 2-3.

been quite keen to see this country”, and evocatively called it “the land of the Pharaohs.”⁵² On his outbound voyage, Private Arthur Moore described their destination as the “mysterious East”.⁵³ Airman Gerald Craddock sailed up the Suez Canal on first arrival in Egypt and wrote that “a stirring gateway this introduction of the Old World proves to us. Egypt we are coming!”⁵⁴ He waxed lyrical that the “names of heroes, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon identified with Egypt come down to our own day all imbued by the mystery of enchantment, magic, and the attempt to read the enigma of life”.⁵⁵ He felt this romance and mystery to be “like an intoxication”, and titled this section of his wartime writing as ‘Egypt Casts a Spell’.⁵⁶

However, it did not take long for high hopes to be dashed by reality. Captain Noel Gardiner remembered the glamour hoped for by “many readers of *Beau Geste* and *The Sheik of Araby*”, but noted that “raw reinforcements were soon disillusioned of these romantic ideas by a few hours in the very limited shelter of a non-upholstered gun-truck...with the blown sand searing the paint off the mudguards.”⁵⁷ Historian Brendan Judd, writes that New Zealanders’ “romantic notions” were soon shattered when they found that “the local inhabitants existed in a shanty town of homes made from flattened petrol tins, which also housed their sheep, goats, fowls and beasts of burden.”⁵⁸ Gunner Laurie Birks wrote of his comrades that “the majority had all sorts of vague ideas about the mysterious and glamorous East, and were promptly disillusioned”, and that “most of them loathe the place, have ever since they came here”.⁵⁹ Martyn Uren, who arrived in the Middle East on such a hopeful note, soon described Libya as “a hell” (especially compared to “romantic Greece”), and wrote that Damascus will “disappoint many travellers” who “visit Damascus with a picture or conception in their mind of the Arabian Nights, and expect a city of Eastern splendour and romance.”⁶⁰ Lieutenant Ian Johnston perhaps put it best when he wrote of “Egypt – or as some misguided folk love to call it ‘the Glamorous East.’ Glamour! – believe you me if this is glamour, then I’ve seen all I ever want to see and the day I shake the sand of Egypt off my boots can’t come quick enough.”⁶¹

⁵² Uren, p. 34.

⁵³ Moore, 22 February 1941, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Craddock, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 10.

⁵⁶ Ibid; Ibid, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Gardiner, *Freyberg's Circus*, p. 63.

⁵⁸ Judd, pp. 69-70.

⁵⁹ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 4 April 1942, p. 5.

⁶⁰ Uren, p. 161; p. 208.

⁶¹ Johnston, Letter to Family 21 September 1941, p. 1.

And yet, despite all his derision, the same Lieutenant Johnston wrote home to his family about the Muski, noting that “there is a whole street of...perfume shops and they have all the perfumes imaginable – you know ones that allure you with the glamour of the East”.⁶² Stephanie Lee similarly described a Cairo perfume shop as “what you would imagine to be the ‘Glamorous East’.”⁶³ Indeed, though many New Zealanders found little romance in the Middle East, almost all the souvenirs and gifts they acquired seemed to reinforce a romantic ideal.

This paradox is especially apparent in the case of Egypt. Egypt was the country in the Middle East that attracted the most criticism from New Zealanders, perhaps as it was the country in which they had to spend the most time. Distaste for the country, and an expressed desire to leave it as soon as possible, were common in New Zealand writing about Egypt.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, souvenirs and gifts bought in Egypt seemed to present a romantic, rose-tinted vision of the place that did not reflect many soldiers’ views of the country at all. Egyptian souvenir photos albums are a perfect illustration of this phenomenon. Bought to house the photos taken by soldiers during wartime, these albums served more than simply a functional purpose. They were also souvenirs in and of themselves, often colourfully decorated with ancient Egyptian imagery (see Figs. 6 and 7), or idealised scenes of the Nile or Pyramids (see Fig. 8). Inside the albums there are photos of the urban and rural poverty so prevalent in Egypt at the time – a picture of the hard-scrabble dirt farm of a *fellah*, an old man sleeping on the side of the road in Cairo or a child dressed in rags with a distended belly.⁶⁵ Yet the covers of the albums chosen to house these photos still reflect an ideal of Egypt as ‘the land of the Pharaohs’, possessed of a mystical natural beauty, completely at odds with many of the pictures inside and with much of the New Zealand writing about Egypt.

⁶² Johnston, Letter to Family 17 October 1940, p. 3.

⁶³ Vanoosten, 25 February 1942, p. 87.

⁶⁴ L. D., ‘Insane’, *Kiwit: Unit Magazine of 2 NZ General Hospital*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1941, p. 26; Nicholson, 19 June 1942, p. 63; Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks, 4 April 1942, p. 4; Johnston, Letter to Family 20 July 1941, p. 3; Johnston, Letter to Family 29 December 1940, p. 2. Some of these opinions are more violent than others. Johnston was particularly adamant in his distaste for Egypt, but even someone like Birks, who admitted there were things he liked about the country, still expressed a desire to leave.

⁶⁵ Goodall, KMARL, 2000.723; Cyril Earnest Hawkins, Photo Album: C.E. Hawkins – WWII, KMARL, 2015.95.1; Leslie Trevor Coleman, Photograph Album: North Africa – WWII, KMARL, 1987.1930.1.



Fig. 6: Photo album belonging to Lance Corporal Thomas Goodall, decorated with ancient Egyptian motifs.⁶⁶



Fig. 7: Photo album belonging to Private Cyril Hawkins. This example features embossed rather than painted ancient Egyptian imagery.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Goodall. Another example of the same album can be seen at Violet E Wallace, Photograph Album: NZ Army Nursing Service – WWII, KMARL, 1993.2420.1.

⁶⁷ Cyril Earnest Hawkins, Photo Album: C.E. Hawkins – WWII, KMARL, 2015.95.2.



Fig. 8: Photo album belonging to Gunner Leslie Coleman. The cover features stereotypical Egyptian imagery – the Nile, palm trees, a camel, a veiled woman and the Pyramids.⁶⁸

Other Egyptian souvenirs struck similar notes to the photo albums. Scarab rings, carved alabaster pyramids and reproductions of relics from Tutankhamun's tomb evoked the legacy of ancient Egypt.⁶⁹ Souvenir brochures and hotel flyers played up images of the natural beauty of the Nile and desert.⁷⁰ No soldiers' souvenirs reflected the dirtiness, poverty and racialised depictions of Egyptian people that were so common to New Zealand writing about the country. In short, there was a disconnect between their attitudes towards the country, and the souvenirs and gifts they sent home supposedly reflecting those attitudes.

A possible explanation for this disconnect is that shopping and souveniring in Egypt (and indeed in the Middle East more broadly) were formulaic activities. Items acquired by New

⁶⁸ Coleman. Another example of the same album can be seen at Hawkins, KMARL, 2015.95.1.

⁶⁹ E. Hatoun's, 'What Every Tourist Wishes to Know', in N. K. Chapman, Papers: N K Chapman – WWII. This brochure for Hatoun's shop in Cairo promises "Tut Ankh Amon's reproductions", and various other ancient Egyptian gifts including "Ancient Manuscripts" and "Eastern Antiquities".

⁷⁰ For examples of these brochures and flyers, see Newton Ernest Wikham, Ephemera: Middle East – WWII, KMARL, 2011.1087.1; Ian Thomas Young Johnston, Scrapbook of Wartime Ephemera, in Papers Relating to Service in World War Two, ATL, fMS-Papers-7852.

Zealanders reflected a romance they did not believe in simply because, in the ritual of Egyptian shopping shared by all soldiers, those were the things you bought. This might seem an overly simplistic explanation, but it must be remembered that soldiers did develop patterns of purchasing certain things in certain places. Just as it was the done thing to buy mother of pearl in Bethlehem, so it could have been part of the expected pattern of behaviour to buy a souvenir photo album in Egypt. It should also be remembered that in Egypt, perhaps more than any other place in the Middle East, leave itself was a highly formulaic exercise for New Zealanders. Regardless of their opinion of the place, there were certain things that soldiers did when on leave in Egypt that became a quasi-ritual – in many respects a ritual handed down to them by their First World War forbears. An author, going by the initials B.T.J.J., alluded to the formulaic nature of Egyptian leave in the 24 Battalion magazine *Bab el Look*. In 1941, he wrote that:

Having assisted the cause of humanity by parting with several piastres the soldier visitor is shown around and into the pyramids, treated to a ride on a camel, introduced to the Sphinx and packed off home in possession of a couple of fly-swats, a camel-hide wallet or what-you will. That's roughly the newcomer's first day of delving into the scenic wonders of Egypt. Next he'll probably do a few mosques, take a trip down the Muski Bazaars and complete the experience a much wariar and wiser man.⁷¹

We have already seen how a trip to the pyramids and Sphinx were a ubiquitous and expected part of leave for New Zealanders, and that just as important was the equally ubiquitous camel-pyramid photograph. To these formalised activities, B.T.J.J. added the acquisition of material things – in this case a fly-swat or a camel-hide wallet – and a trip through Cairo's Muski bazaar, the place where all the romanticised souvenirs of Egypt could be acquired.

Broadening our approach to material culture, we can find an area in which New Zealanders' attitudes to Egypt more closely aligned with their material interaction. Alongside New Zealanders' material experience was, I suggest, an 'anti-material' experience that found its greatest expression in Egypt's cities. We have already noted several instances of soldiers engaging in material destruction when on leave in Cairo – vandalising bars or cinemas in expressions of drunkenness, frustration and anger. These places were common targets for destruction, but there were others. Private George Mackay remembered attempting to force

⁷¹ B.T.J.J., 'The New Zealander on Leave'.

gharries to crash on the streets of Cairo, noting that “the idea was to get them going and then bring them in so the wheels clashed and then try to get them interlocked, so that the pair of them do their bun. Then we’d duck off and forget about paying them.”⁷² A correspondent in a 2NZGH magazine characterised this destructive behaviour as “the boys trying to break away from [the stresses of army life]...by slipping into Cairo, breaking bounds and anything else that annoys them”.⁷³ The stealing discussed earlier could also be seen as an extension of this anti-material behaviour. This was especially so when the thieving could be characterised less as a means to acquire goods, and more as a negative reaction against a particular place. The common thread between these instances of anti-materiality, was that they were largely perpetrated against modern Egypt. Bars, theatres or taxis on modern city streets had no associations with ancient Egypt, with exotic culture, or with any natural beauty that Egypt might have possessed. They were also perpetrated largely against urban Egypt, which we have already seen, implied a degree of permissiveness to soldiers. Thus, soldiers caused material destruction in these modern environments, expressing their disillusionment with Egypt as a place, while still being able to follow the formula of acquiring romantic souvenirs expressive of ancient culture and exotic handcraft.

In short, New Zealanders’ dislike of Egypt did not transfer over to the way they interacted with Egypt materially. There was a disconnect between their attitudes towards, and experience of the country, and the souvenirs and gifts they sent home supposedly reflecting those attitudes and experiences. Nevertheless, their distaste for the country did transfer to their anti-material interaction with Egypt. Destruction was carried out in places shorn of any association with ancient Egypt or exoticism – largely meaning the modern urban environment of Cairo. The existence of this anti-material behaviour does not detract from the disjuncture between New Zealand attitudes to Egypt, and the material objects they acquired. Those objects still reflected a romance that most New Zealand servicemen did not feel, and were bought as part of the formulaic pattern of leave in Egypt. What anti-material behaviour demonstrates, is that if we broaden our scope from acquisition to material destruction, there was some correlation between negative New Zealand attitudes to Egypt, and their material experience of the country. If soldiers were able to vent their dislike of Egypt through material destruction, it might further explain why they were happy to acquire souvenirs that did not reflect this dislike.

⁷² George Mackay, quoted in Hutching (ed.), *The Desert Road*, p. 255.

⁷³ H.G.O’N., ‘This B.... Army’, *Kiwit: Unit Magazine of 2 NZ General Hospital*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1941, p. 42.

Conclusion

The materiality of the Middle East was a key part of the New Zealand experience during the Second World War. Though often neglected as part of war experience, considering 2NZEF in their role as travellers, or even tourists, the material world becomes central to our Second World War history. Just like civilian tourists, soldiers sought souvenirs of their journeys, and presents to give those back home a glimpse of their overseas experiences. These gifts and souvenirs needed to be authentic, and when particular places became known for particular material goods, the way New Zealanders engaged with those places changed.

However, it also seems that attitudes to a place and the nature of the souvenirs acquired from that place did not always align. In Egypt, the souvenirs soldiers acquired often seemed at odds with their dislike, even outright loathing, of the country. The romantic picture of Egypt that these objects painted is interesting when you consider the lack of romance felt by most soldiers. That New Zealanders felt these romanticised items were appropriate souvenirs of their time in Egypt, shows that their disillusionment with the country did not extend to its materiality, and that in this instance, they were happy to separate their attitudes to a place from their attitudes to the things they acquired there. Potential explanations for this separation can be found in the formulaic nature of leave in Egypt, which extended to a formula of souvenir acquisition that became almost ritualistic, and the fact that soldiers were instead able to vent their dislike of Egypt through anti-material behaviour – theft and destruction – rather than material acquisition.

Chapter 3: People

Land of sheiks and tailored clothes
Egyptian bints in silken dress
Girls dark, and without a care.
Who will entice you if you dare
Dhobies, hawker, tailor blokes
All come around to scrounge our smokes
Canteen Wogs who squeeze you dry
You'd love to poke them in the eye
The hawker with the dirty photo
Who's waiting to catch you – when you're Blotto
So ancient Egypt – new as well
Land of Bastards, Fare thee well.
 - Anonymous, 'A Soldier's Farewell to Egypt'.¹

New Zealand encounters with the people of the Middle East were defined by difference. Different customs, clothing, language, appearance and lifestyle all combined to make Middle Eastern people completely alien from anyone most New Zealanders had encountered before. Limited overseas travel and restrictive immigration policies meant that most New Zealanders serving in the Second World War had known only a largely homogenous white population before travelling overseas for war service. While they had heard tales of foreign people and cultures from relatives who had been overseas – especially fathers or uncles that had served in the First World War – their own personal experience of racial others was limited.

One corollary of this difference was racism. It is the racist attitudes of New Zealanders that usually dominate understanding of wartime relations with Middle Eastern people, both in the First and Second World Wars.² Certainly, many New Zealanders brought racial prejudices with them to the Middle East, and these prejudices could (and did) result in stark expressions of racism, through both words and actions. However, once again the tendency to overemphasise

¹ 'A Soldier's Farewell to Egypt', quoted in McLeod, p. 117.

² McGibbon, 'Egypt', p. 153; McGibbon, 'Up the Blue', p. 25; Gardiner, *Freyberg's Circus*, p. 146; Hedley and Hutching, pp. 20-21; McLeod, p. 131; King, *New Zealanders at War*, p. 164; W. G. Stevens, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War: Problems of 2NZEAF*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1958, p. 217.

the negative paints far too simplistic a picture. Just as New Zealanders encountered a vast array of different places in the Middle East, they also encountered a plethora of different people: men and women; city-dwellers and peasant farmers; Muslims, Christians and Jews. One reaction to these encounters was what we would label racism, but there were other reactions as well. Race relations between New Zealanders and Middle Eastern peoples went beyond simple prejudice and denigration, and the picture only became more complex the more peoples that New Zealanders encountered. Moreover, moving beyond the negative stereotypes, some New Zealanders were able to put aside prejudice and engage in meaningful relationships with people in the Middle East.

Thus, this chapter attempts to paint a fuller picture of New Zealand interactions with Middle Eastern people during the Second World War. It considers racism, but it also considers the growing complexity of New Zealanders' attitudes as they encountered different peoples in the Middle East, and began to compare them with one another. It assesses how New Zealanders captured their encounters visually through photographs, and it looks at those New Zealanders that were able to build meaningful relationships with the people of the Middle East.

Racial Attitudes and Racism

There is no denying that one of the key ways that New Zealanders contextualised their encounters with people in the Middle East was through the lens of race. Ian McGibbon notes that the attitudes of wartime New Zealanders reflected “the aggressively self-confident and racist culture from which they hailed”, and it is true that race was never far from the surface when New Zealanders wrote and spoke about Middle Eastern people.³ It was through discussion of race that many New Zealanders attempted to understand the massive gulf of difference that separated them and their lives back in New Zealand, from the people and their lives in the Middle East.

One of the chief ways that racial difference was expressed by New Zealanders was through the use of racist names or labels for local people. The general term ‘natives’, inherited from the language of the British Empire, was used to describe non-white people in the Middle East, but a series of more specific terms also emerged. These ranged on a spectrum from

³ McGibbon, ‘Egypt’, p. 153.

relatively harmless joke-names to more malicious racial slurs. At the more innocent end of the spectrum was the common practice of calling all Egyptian men ‘George’. Private Francis Jackson wrote of the phenomenon of “all natives being Georges”, and indeed, examining New Zealanders’ wartime writing, it seems to have been a near universal epithet.⁴ Captain Noel Gardiner recalled that Egyptian men (in the city at least) “all answered to the name of George”, and Private Francis St. Bruno (who went by Frank Bruno) wrote that “every gharry and taxi driver is George, and waiter and bootblack and guide and tout.”⁵ The origins of the name are unknown, and in a bizarre twist it seems that Egyptians also began calling New Zealanders (and other Commonwealth soldiers) George as well. Sapper Reginald De Grave remembered that “for some unknown reason all soldiers were addressed as ‘George’ and quite irrespective of nationality or rank.”⁶ Though ‘George’ seems a relatively harmless label, it still nevertheless connoted difference – it was after all Egyptians and no one else that New Zealanders called George. There was therefore, something inherent in them being Egyptian that made them Georges. Though the name itself was not particularly offensive it almost came to stand for a caricature of the Egyptian male that could be lampooned and made fun of. George was the so-called “Father of Many and Son of None”, or “sleepy son of a cockroach” – a source of humour for New Zealanders, but also of contempt.⁷

⁴ Jackson, p. 21.

⁵ Noel ‘Wig’ Gardiner, *Bringing up the Rear: Further Reminiscences of a Kiwi Soldier*, Ray Richards Publisher, Auckland, 1983, p. 85; Frank Bruno, *Saeeda Wog! A Dubious History of Campaigning in Libya, Greece and Crete*, KMARL, 1991.1331, p. 23.

⁶ De Grave, *The Yellow Rose*, p. 4.

⁷ Bruno, p. 23; Jackson, p. 97.



Fig. 1: A picture of Egyptian 'George' from the photo album of Sister Violet Wallace.⁸

At the other end of the spectrum from George, were names that were more openly denigrating. The term 'gyppo' had been common in the First World War to refer to Egyptians, and was still used during the Second. Upon his arrival in Egypt in early 1943, having served in the Pacific, Private Des Davis wrote to his family that "we had been well warned against the 'Gyppos' I thought the Suva natives were bad enough at arguing but the 'gyppos' have them absolutely licked. And cunning! It's an eye-opener. I just can't describe it."⁹ However, though gyppo was still used, it was the term 'wog' that was the most common racial epithet in the Middle East during the Second World War. While gyppo only applied to Egyptians, wog was used to refer to any Arab or North African, regardless of their country of origin. Such a broad ranging term perhaps reflects the fact that New Zealanders covered far more ground in the Middle East during the Second World War as opposed to the First. As a result, encountering such a diverse range of peoples called for a more all-encompassing term than gyppo could provide.

⁸ Violet E. Wallace, 'George', 1940, in Photograph Album: NZ Army Nursing Service – WWII.

⁹ Davis, Letter to Mum, Dad & Hazela 12 January 1943, pp. 4-5.

The common belief was that wog stood for ‘Wily Oriental Gentleman’, though Alex Hedley and Megan Hutching claim that it likely originated as a British term that “referred to members of the clerical *effendi* class, those who were ‘Working on Government Service’.”¹⁰ The British, from whom New Zealanders adopted the term, had used it “as both a reference to anything Egyptian and as a means of insult”, thus, though it came to refer to any Arab indiscriminately, it too had Egyptian origins like gypso.¹¹ New Zealanders apparently did not always use wog with the purpose of denigration. Hedley and Hutching posit that New Zealanders used wog “with a mixture of affection and contempt”.¹² Captain Noel Gardiner claimed that:

Kiwis and Aussies of both World Wars generally referred to the Egyptians as Wogs. It would be true to say that many thought of them as Wogs, but not with the derogatory overtones and undertones now associated with the word. ‘Wog’ was not meant to be contemptuous, as ‘Nigger’ was when used by American whites in the Deep South.¹³

Gardiner’s statement is an interesting one. While he claims that the word lacked “derogatory overtones and undertones”, he qualifies this by saying that New Zealanders “thought of them as Wogs”. What is involved in thinking of someone as a wog is unclear, but it seems almost implicit that to think of someone as a wog is to think poorly of them. The word was so widely used by New Zealanders that it has found its way into the *Reed Dictionary of New Zealand English*. There at least the definition states that wog refers to “a dark skinned person, especially an Arab”, and that its “*use is racist, offensive*”.¹⁴ Gardiner’s reference to American racial terminology is also interesting. Though the racial picture in the Middle East was not quite as rosy as Gardiner would lead us to believe, New Zealanders, unlike Australians, almost never referred to locals as niggers.¹⁵ I have only found one example of a New Zealander using this term, and in his diary it only appears once.¹⁶ Nevertheless, though they did not resort to such extremes of racial language, racial prejudice undoubtedly still existed, and a series of

¹⁰ Hedley and Hutching, p. 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Gardiner, *Freyberg’s Circus*, p. 146.

¹⁴ H. W. Orsman (ed.), *The Reed Dictionary of New Zealand English*, 3rd ed., Reed Books, Auckland, 2001, p. 1329. Italics in original.

¹⁵ For examples of Australians using this term, see Johnston, *Anzacs in the Middle East*, pp. 6-7, 10, 68.

¹⁶ Carter, 18 February 1940.

stereotypes grew up around the term wog. Wogs were lazy, dirty and thieving, caring little for personal space, personal hygiene or personal morality. These were all stereotypes that had been applied to 'Eastern' people for centuries, and they continued to appear frequently in New Zealand Second World War writing.

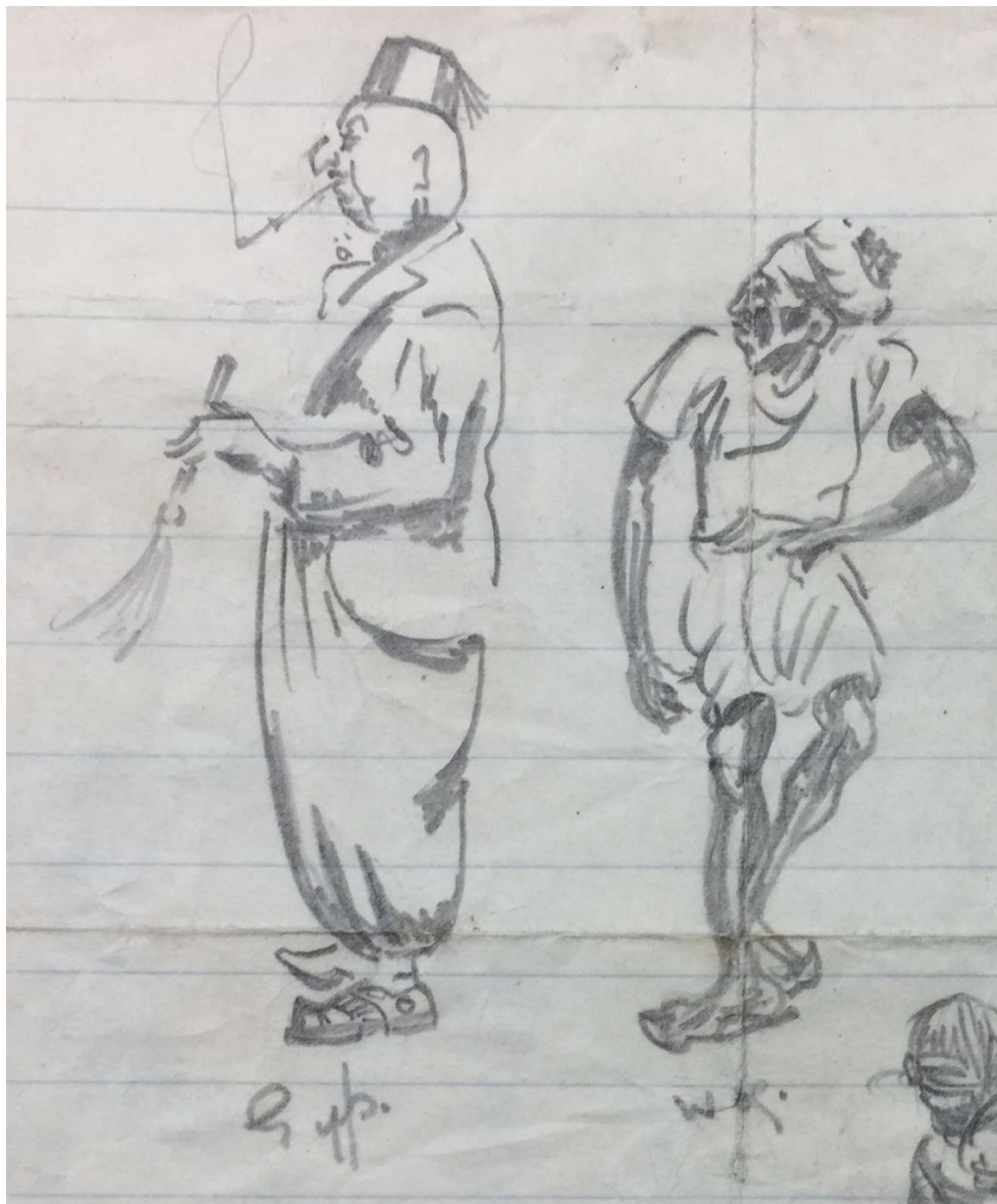


Fig. 2: Sergeant Alexander Cameron sent many illustrated letters home to his young son Duncan. In this sketch, he depicts two people labelled 'Gyp' and 'Wog'. While his drawings are wonderfully detailed, they often descend into caricature, accentuating features like hooked noses and large lips.¹⁷

¹⁷ Alexander Duncan Dick Cameron, Letters: Alexander D D Cameron – Fiji & Middle East – WWII, KMARL, 1998.2813.

Much like New Zealanders' criticisms of place in the Middle East, many of the racialised critiques of Middle Eastern people centred on their supposed dirtiness. Mark Johnston writes that "the issue of cleanliness was a major obstacle to cordial relations between Australians and Arabs", and the same could be said for New Zealanders.¹⁸ When Private Des Davis first arrived in Egypt, he wrote in his diary that he and his comrades "saw our first wogs today. Talk about filthy."¹⁹ Sergeant Harry Dansey had a similarly poor impression on his "first introduction to that noble specimen of manhood – the Egyptian 'Wog'. He was dressed in what might be described as an extremely filthy nightgown, had an extremely filthy face with a scarf of a nondescript colour knotted round it and was engaged in picking up scraps and eating them. He was a good example of a particularly loathsome species."²⁰ Dirtiness was not limited to Egyptians either. Private Francis Jackson wrote while in Palestine that "the market-place in Jaffa is like the wogg [*sic*] bazaars in Cairo or any town in the east. Dirty natives caress their barrow-loads of oranges, melons, limes and assorted lines of green vegetables."²¹ Captain Bruce Robertson called the inhabitants around the Sea of Galilee "some of the dirtiest and crudest natives we were to meet. They were very poor and looked a villainous type."²²

It was not just their persons that made them dirty, but also their habits – especially around drinking and washing. New Zealanders were shocked to discover that many in the Middle East bathed or washed their clothes in rivers and canals. Gunner Ralph Nicholson wrote when travelling along the Nile that "the canal which runs alongside the road seems to be the bathing place of all the animals and natives in the district. They all pile in together. The water is filthy but that does not stop them from using it for washing their clothes in."²³ Captain Bruce Robertson was more explicit. In the Abbasiya canal he saw "natives diligently washing themselves, water buffalo submerged up to the very nostrils, dead donkeys, women washing clothes and drawing water, children paddling and fishing – a veritable cesspool which would kill the white man, but in which the native thrives."²⁴ Private Arthur Helm recounted another particularly extreme example, writing that he "glanced in the canal which flowed alongside the road. In it was a dead sheep – a very dead sheep – and a dog was having the feed of his life. Downstream people were bathing – in the nude – and still further down they were drawing

¹⁸ Johnston, *Anzacs in the Middle East*, p. 39.

¹⁹ Desmond Hartley Davis, 1943 Diary, in *Diaries 1938-1945*, AWMM, MS-2002-75, 6 January 1943.

²⁰ Dansey, Letter 12 May 1944, p. 4.

²¹ Jackson, p. 86.

²² Robertson (ed.), p. 38.

²³ Nicholson, 1 September 1941, p. 29.

²⁴ Robertson (ed.), pp. 41-42.

water for drinking.”²⁵ Soldiers were told in lectures of “all the horrible diseases one can catch here if precautions are not taken”, and that “apparently you have merely to fall into the Nile and die of typhus or something.”²⁶ With this kind of scaremongering, it is hardly surprising they found it repulsive that the locals bathed in these supposedly disease-ridden waters.

New Zealanders’ visceral reactions to locals’ supposed dirtiness comes in part from their upbringing in New Zealand. The Second World War generation was the product of half a century of sanitary reform in which a crusade was waged against dirt and disease throughout Europe, America and the white settler colonies of the British Empire. Beginning in the last decades of the nineteenth century, this so-called “Progressive Era”, “classic period” of sanitary reform, or “age of light, water and soap”, shaped western attitudes to dirt and dirtiness, where it was appropriate and where it was not.²⁷ In a New Zealand context, historian Pamela Wood notes that in the colonial period “filth threatened the integrity of the settlers’ vision of an ordered and healthy community”, and that “controlling dirt also had symbolic significance as a measure of progress in turning a rough new settlement into a civilised and healthy place to live.”²⁸ Alongside physical dirt was the ‘moral dirt’ that came with it, and as a result, the sanitary crusade was also a war against laziness, slovenliness and sexual impropriety.²⁹ In the words of Mariana Valverde, for reformers “physical and sexual hygiene...were the microcosmic foundation of the larger project of building a ‘clean’ nation.”³⁰

The young New Zealanders who went on to serve in the Second World War had these values drummed into them from a young age. The early twentieth century saw the birth of Plunket and the School Medical Service in New Zealand, which had as their goal the health and hygiene of infants and children respectively.³¹ At school, the Second World War generation were taught the “elementary laws of hygiene”, and their school doctors and nurses (some with backgrounds in the New Zealand Medical Corps in the First World War) were strong proponents of “the adage that cleanliness is next to godliness, and constantly impressed it on children and teachers.”³² Upon entering the military, an even higher premium was placed on

²⁵ Helm, p. 29.

²⁶ Dansey, 12 May 1944, p. 6.

²⁷ Wood, *Dirt*; Rice, p. 87; Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1991, p. 17.

²⁸ Wood, pp. 2-3.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 9; Valverde, p. 116.

³⁰ Valverde, p. 28.

³¹ Tennant, p. 129.

³² *Ibid*, p. 135-136.

personal hygiene and eradicating dirt which were seen as threats to troop strength. Official historians T. Duncan and M. Stout write that “a high standard of cleanliness” was required of men when in training camps throughout New Zealand.³³ This high standard was enforced in camp by field hygiene sections, trained at the School of Hygiene at Trentham, and when 2NZEF shipped overseas, by Medical Officers equipped with Army hygiene and sanitation manuals.³⁴ With such importance placed on cleanliness throughout almost the entirety of their lives to that point, it is no surprise that Second World War New Zealanders found the lack of hygiene and sanitation in the Middle East shocking and repulsive.

New Zealanders also viewed Middle Eastern people as cunning and actively trying to cheat visitors out of their money. The haggling and bartering inherent in Middle Eastern trade, and the constant presence of beggars asking for ‘baksheesh’ (alms or a tip) were evidence to New Zealanders that Arabs were trying to swindle them for everything they had. Soldiers sometimes gave a religious reasoning for this supposed desire to cheat. Private Laurie Birks wrote that “most of them [would] take us down to our boots, given half a chance. Have heard that’s part of their religion though... that they feel disgraced if they can’t get the better of a mere infidel.”³⁵ Private Ernest Clarke wrote of the Egyptians’ love of haggling, saying that “as for the infidel, well, he’s a choice victim, especially the NZ ‘millionaire’ soldier, (George, they call him), who has plenty of money, and they know he wants to get something Egyptian, so they keep the prices up and make a fortune.”³⁶ It is highly unlikely that any of these small street vendors and hawkers made a fortune – in fact the very opposite is more likely – but New Zealanders could not get past the feeling they were being cheated. They were unable to realise that haggling was simply the method of conducting business in the Middle East going back centuries, and that any inflated prices or street begging were merely attempts by many people to alleviate the crushing poverty in which they lived. In fact, a fundamental misunderstanding of, or lack of sympathy for poverty in the Middle East seemed to be at the root of many of New Zealanders’ prejudices against its people. They either did not understand, or chose not to care, that many of the things they criticised – the personal dirtiness, lack of sanitation and alien attitudes to money – were simply results of a poverty few of them were ever likely to

³³ T. Duncan and M. Stout, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945: Medical Services in New Zealand and the Pacific*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1958, p. 250.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 251, 253.

³⁵ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 10 September 1941, p. 2.

³⁶ Pte. E. C. Clarke, ‘Kiwi in Egypt: A Traveleave’, in Lt. E. H. Halstead (ed.), *Bab el Look*, Societe Orientale de Publicite, Cairo, 1941.

experience. Some New Zealanders acknowledged that poverty and inequality existed in the Middle East. Laurie Birks, an avowed socialist, was appalled that “93 per cent of the children attending public schools in Cairo were under-nourished”, and that “the whole country is owned by 300 people.”³⁷ Nevertheless, it did not stop him, or others, being disgusted at the dirtiness and begging that were results of that poverty.

The weight of stereotypes about dirtiness, greed and immorality led to some particularly unflattering general remarks about Middle Eastern people. Private Fred Such wrote to his nephew Kevin in January 1942, telling him that “there are hundreds of little black boys over here Kev and they are as dirty and cheeky as the devil and nobody likes them”.³⁸ Nurse Stephanie Lee had a particularly scathing opinion of the local hospital orderlies she worked with. Though calling the use of the term wog “very terrible”, she went on to describe the orderlies as “very dark and repulsive looking”, and wrote that “I am rather inclined to doubt if they have any brains at all and certainly since I came over here my ideas on all these subjects have changed. They are such a different kind of people from the whites and even the Maoris. They are just like animals and there are a lot of animals that I have known who would be very insulted at that.”³⁹ The contempt that many New Zealanders felt for Arabs also found its expression in physical acts – often acts of violence. The anonymous soldier-author ‘One of the Boys’ related a story of a Cairo tram ride with a comrade ‘Buggles’:

We pushed our way into a crowded carriage, ‘Buggles’ drawing down all the curses of Allan [*sic*] by stepping on the tender corn of a wizened ‘gypo’ who crouched on the floor, an evil smelling bundle by his side. ‘Yallah bina,’ muttered the New Zealander, adding a few nasty remarks in English about natives who wore sandals and expected such flimsy covering to guard wicked corns and bunions! The Egyptian...shrieked and waved a pair of dirty hands. He refused to be pacified.... Up came [Buggles’] fist and down went the native. And he howled for mercy before ‘Buggles’ lifted his fifteen stone from its seat on the ‘gypo’s’ face!⁴⁰

Frank Bruno related another story of violence against an Arab. After a night out drinking, their gharry driver queried the amount the New Zealanders offered to pay. Bruno wrote that “as I

³⁷ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 20 March 1942, pp. 7-9.

³⁸ Fred A. Such, Letter: Middle East – WWII 8 January 1942, KMARL, 1999.3189.

³⁹ Vanoosten, 3 March 1942, p. 95.

⁴⁰ ‘One of the Boys’, p. 1.

picked up Wee Davy and carried him away, the voice of George the arbagi rose querulously. It stopped significantly short with a startled howl...and a bump. There came a scatter of hurried hoofbeats, and Red Mac came in licking his lips.”⁴¹ It is hard to believe that most New Zealanders would have committed such casual acts of violence or disrespect back in New Zealand. NZEF Times correspondent E. G. Webber jokingly acknowledged this in an article contemplating his return to New Zealand after the war. He wrote that a “chap’d have to be careful. Couldn’t start pushing the little woman out of the bus queue and then trying to borrow an acker from her.”⁴² The corollary of Webber’s quote is that it *was* alright to behave in such a manner in the Middle East, where disrespect for the people made such behaviour acceptable.

Such overtly racist language and behaviour, and the near unquestioning manner with which it was accepted, can seem shocking to a contemporary New Zealand audience. However, the racial climate in the society from which these New Zealanders came must be remembered. Most New Zealanders who served in the Second World War came of age at a time when New Zealand adopted what historians have characterised as a ‘White New Zealand’ immigration policy.⁴³ The instrument of this policy was the Immigration Amendment Act 1920, which allowed free access for British or Irish immigrants, while access to anyone else was granted at the discretion of the Minister of Customs.⁴⁴ This legislation, motivated according to P. S. O’Connor by “racial prejudice”, was effectively designed to prevent any further growth to the tiny Chinese, Indian and Lebanese communities in New Zealand, who, from the late nineteenth century, had been subject to intense racial discrimination.⁴⁵ The result of the White New Zealand policy was that the Second World War generation grew up in a society possessed of strong racial prejudices against non-whites, while paradoxically having almost no exposure to the tiny non-white population. In 1926, Indians and Chinese constituted 5000 out of a

⁴¹ Bruno, p. 24.

⁴² E. G. Webber, ‘What a Life’, in *Johnny Enzed in the Middle East*, p. 44.

⁴³ P. S. O’Connor, ‘Keeping New Zealand White, 1908-1920’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1968, p. 41; Erich Kolig, *New Zealand’s Muslims and Multiculturalism*, Brill, Leiden, 2010, p. 20; David Pearson, ‘The ‘Majority Factor’: Shaping Chinese and Māori Minorities’, in Ip (ed.), *The Dragon and the Taniwha*, p. 45; Nigel Murphy, ‘Māoriland’ and ‘Yellow Peril’: Discourses of Māori and Chinese in the Formation of New Zealand’s National Identity 1890-1914’, in Ip (ed.), *The Dragon and the Taniwha*, p. 78; Ip and Murphy, p. 16.

⁴⁴ O’Connor, p. 59.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 41. For discussions of discrimination against Chinese, Indian and Lebanese settlers in New Zealand see Ip (ed.), *The Dragon and the Taniwha*; Ip and Murphy, *Aliens at My Table*; Jacqueline Leckie, ‘In Defence of Race and Empire: The White New Zealand League at Pukekohe’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1985, pp. 103-129; Dorothy Page and John Farry, *The Hawkers: A Family Story*, 2nd ed., Shinbone Alley Press, Dunedin, 2010.

population of around 1.4 million – less than 0.5 percent.⁴⁶ As a result, most New Zealanders had little opportunity of having their racism tempered by first hand encounters. The same stereotypes of laziness, greed, dirtiness, and immorality that were applied to Egyptians or Syrians in the Second World War were applied to ‘Asiatics’ in pre-war New Zealand. Thus, there was continuity between racially motivated attitudes held by New Zealanders during the Second World War, and the tone of race relations in New Zealand in the decades leading up to it.⁴⁷

A Hierarchy of Races

New Zealanders’ racial attitudes to the different people they encountered in the Middle East were more complex than simple racism. As they travelled through different countries in the Middle East, New Zealanders began to compare and contrast the different peoples they encountered. Comparisons were made between the peoples of different countries, but also within individual countries based on where people lived or how they traced their line of descent. In making these comparisons, favourable and unfavourable, New Zealanders began to develop a sort of loose racial hierarchy of Middle Eastern people with some groups viewed far more favourably than others

In many respects, Second World War New Zealanders were the inheritors of a complex web of ideas about race from the British Empire, that interacted with ideas of regression discussed in Chapter 1. With the expansion of the empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came encounters with a greater and greater range of peoples. These peoples had a myriad of different appearances, languages and social customs, and the British set about ranking them in a hierarchy of civilisation in an attempt to understand their own position as colonisers. Early proponents of such a hierarchy were found among Scottish Enlightenment thinkers in the late eighteenth century, who proposed a “ladder of civilizations” or a stadial theory of race representing “a gradual process from rudeness to refinement”.⁴⁸ Similar theories

⁴⁶ Leckie, p. 104.

⁴⁷ There was obviously also the influence of the long-running tension in race relations between Māori and Pākehā New Zealanders, which this thesis unfortunately has not time to discuss. For discussions of this see M. P. K. Sorrenson, ‘Māori and Pākehā’, in Geoffrey W. Rice (ed.), *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1992, pp. 141-166; Michael King, ‘Between Two Worlds’, in Rice (ed.), *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, pp. 285-307; Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*; Belich, *Paradise Reforged*.

⁴⁸ Jane Rendall, ‘Scottish Orientalism: From Robertson to James Mill’, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1, March 1982, p. 43; Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress*, Jeremy Carden (trans.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013, p. 48.

continued to develop over the coming decades, and ideas of racial hierarchy held sway in the British Empire even into the early twentieth century.⁴⁹

While often given different names and operating under different influences – from Aryanism to Darwinism – these hierarchies all did basically the same thing.⁵⁰ They placed white Europeans (and specifically Anglo-Saxons) at the top of the hierarchy with all other non-white races at various levels below them.⁵¹ The fact that white people were at the top of the hierarchy is less important for this thesis than the degrees of separation between different non-white peoples. Pākehā New Zealanders were not new to this kind of comparison of supposedly inferior races. Māori position on the hierarchy of civilisation had been widely discussed in nineteenth and early-twentieth century New Zealand. While they still did not reach the top of the hierarchy, the purview of the white races, the general consensus was that Māori were a “superior kind of savage” or “the finest coloured race in the world”, and definitely compared favourably to Aboriginal Australians.⁵² The White New Zealand immigration policy discussed above also reflected a racial hierarchy, with British and northern Europeans (the Saxon, Germanic or ‘Aryan’ races) being the most desirable immigrants, followed by southern Europeans, with Chinese and Indians definitively the least desirable.⁵³

If any group in the Middle East could be placed at the top of the hierarchy created by New Zealanders it was probably Palestinian Jews. This might be partly due to the fact that many of them were European in origin (and therefore ‘white’), but whatever the reasoning New Zealanders held a largely favourable opinion of them. Jews’ work ethic – especially on their communal farm settlements – was regularly praised by New Zealanders, and Captain Noel Gardiner noted that “their industry and ingenuity impressed us all”, and that “their talent was evident everywhere.”⁵⁴ Visits to Jewish communal farms became a popular leave activity for New Zealanders, and most were very impressed by what they saw. Private Roger Smith wrote

⁴⁹ Henrika Kuklick, *The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 78.

⁵⁰ Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2002, pp. 3-4, 47.

⁵¹ Debbie Challis, ‘The Ablest Race’: The Ancient Greeks in Victorian Racial Theory’, in Mark Bradley (ed.), *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, p. 96; M. D. Biddiss, ‘The Politics of Anatomy: Dr Robert Knox and Victorian Racism’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Vol. 69, No. 4, April 1976, p. 249.

⁵² Sinclair, p. 197; Belich, p. 190.

⁵³ Belich, p. 224.

⁵⁴ Gardiner, *Bringing up the Rear*, pp. 67, 69.

while in Palestine that “we spent a couple of days inspecting the Jewish community settlements, which were very efficient and very attractive.”⁵⁵ Private Laurie Birks wrote of the settlements that “the land is the mainstay of the place, of course, most of the work is agricultural, but everything is absolutely up-to-date in methods and equipment, and the whole place spotlessly clean”.⁵⁶ The Jewish farming methods were often compared more favourably with those of their Arab neighbours. Sergeant George Newton, when travelling through Palestine on the way to Tehran, noted that “the Jews seem to be right up to date with the farm-machinery, and it is a contrast to see in one paddock a header and a bit further along old Pa Arab and his many offspring and spouses using a sickle in the old Biblical style.”⁵⁷ Laurie Birks was even stronger in his comparison, writing that “I don’t doubt [the Jews] make more out of the land than the Arabs would ever do, one has only to see the obvious poverty of the Arabs and their slovenly living-places and general haphazardness, as compared with the comparatively prosperous Jews, and their clean and well-clothed children and neat fields and gardens.”⁵⁸ Private John Hood wrote that “there is not the slightest doubt in my opinion that the Jews are making Palestine into a real country in a way that the Arab would not be likely to do in centuries.... That is after seeing the way they have turned desert country into flourishing farm lands.”⁵⁹ In these comparisons you catch glimpses of the simmering conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, and Hood also noted that “it seemed to be the general opinion that in the country be the person Jew, Arab, Army or whatnot that there will again be trouble between the Jews and Arabs in Palestine when the war is over.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Smith, *Up the Blue*, p. 22.

⁵⁶ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 13 April 1942, p. 12.

⁵⁷ Newton, 31/4/42.

⁵⁸ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 13 April 1942, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Hood, p. 27.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 26.



Fig. 3: Photo taken by an unknown New Zealand soldier of the young inhabitants of a Jewish communal farm in Palestine.⁶¹

Of course, not all New Zealanders held favourable opinions of Jews, and anti-Semitism did occasionally rear its head. Laurie Birks told his mother that some of his comrades “seemed to dislike them intensely, thought Hitler had the right idea regarding them, and frequently referred to them as ‘Jewish bastards’ and suchlike uncomplimentary names.”⁶² The reference to Nazi anti-Semitism seems shocking, and indeed it is highly prejudiced, but it must be remembered that the full extent of Nazi atrocities against Jews was not yet known. New Zealanders were not alone in such attitudes either, and Mark Johnston notes that Australians made similar references to Hitler’s policies when discussing Jews.⁶³ Birks himself stated that

⁶¹ ‘Jewish Community Farm Palestine’, Photograph Album: Egypt, Palestine & Western Desert – WWII, KMARL, 1988.2090.

⁶² Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 1 August 1943, p. 5.

⁶³ Johnston, *Anzacs in the Middle East*, p. 33.

he had a “rather low opinion of Jews as a race” and that his mother “may be surprised that I’d ever go near them”.⁶⁴ However, in a bit of internal comparison he admitted he had a much more favourable opinion of the Jews on collective farms, whose communal living appealed to him as a socialist, than the urban Jews.⁶⁵ For Birks, the city dwellers “seemed altogether too much concerned in getting all they could out of everyone”, but he and his comrades “all agreed... about the people in the settlements being a much better type.”⁶⁶ It should also be noted that despite his anti-Semitism, Birks still compared Jews far more favourably to the Arabs in Palestine.

If Palestinian Jews were at the top of New Zealanders’ racial hierarchy in the Middle East, then Egyptians were undoubtedly at the bottom. As with almost any aspect of their wartime service in the region, New Zealanders’ most negative impressions were reserved for Egypt. Much like New Zealand attitudes towards Egypt as a place, the fact that most of their time in the Middle East was spent in Egypt probably contributed to their unfavourable opinions of the people – they simply had more time to become familiar with the things they disliked about Egyptians. It was the perceived characteristics already described – of laziness, dirtiness, cunning and desire to cheat westerners of money – that largely contributed to New Zealanders’ poor opinion of Egyptians. These were attributes that, to a greater or lesser extent, were ascribed to all Arabs in the Middle East, but New Zealanders seemed to find them particularly objectionable in Egyptians. There were some exceptions. Captain Noel Gardiner recalled that “in Egypt there were some fine people, particularly the fellahin [peasant farmers]”, and Private Des Davis was of the opinion that “the higher class Egyptians are gentlemen and ready to lend a hand if you’re in trouble.”⁶⁷ But these were merely exceptions that proved the rule, and served more to provide internal points of contrast than anything else. Indeed, both Gardiner and Davis qualified their statements with comparisons: Gardiner compared the rural *fellaheen* to “the Cairenes, who seemed to us and to our fathers before us to be a race of thieves, rogues and gulli-gulli men”, and Davis compared the higher-class Egyptians to almost all other inhabitants of the country who he labelled “wogs” and “a real bad lot” who “would cut your throat for your wallet.”⁶⁸ Egyptians even compared unfavourably as a race to their ancient forbears, with Private Laurie Birks describing the modern inhabitants as “not real [Egyptians] having been

⁶⁴ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 19 April 1942, p. 9.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 1 August 1943, pp. 2, 5.

⁶⁷ Gardiner, *Freyberg’s Circus*, p. 146; Davis, Letter to Mum, Dad & Hazela 12 February 1943, pp. 5-6.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

here I think only about 200 or 300 years. The descendants of the Pharoahs [*sic*] are now only a small proportion of the population”.⁶⁹ The irony in labelling people who had lived in Egypt for three centuries as ‘not real Egyptians’, when his family had likely only lived in New Zealand for a century at most, was seemingly lost on Birks, but it well illustrates the fairly low regard in which modern Egyptians (especially modern *urban* Egyptians) were held.

The space between the Jews and Egyptians at the top and bottom of the hierarchy was less well defined. The other peoples encountered in the Middle East tended not to be systematically ranked against each other, but rather all ranked against Egyptians at the bottom of the hierarchy. It was here that New Zealanders most explicitly engaged in the kind of ranking among supposedly ‘lower’ races so common in the British Empire. The comparisons began almost as soon as New Zealanders crossed over into Palestine, the second country after Egypt that most visited in the Middle East. Private Sydney Hadley crossed the border on 1 March 1942 and wrote that the villages, while similar to those in Egypt, were “noticeably cleaner.”⁷⁰ More importantly, he noted that the “natives are more savoury”, and that he “saw a genuine Arab for the first time”, implying that those he had encountered in Egypt were not the real thing.⁷¹ Hadley went on to make the comparison even more explicit, writing that the Palestinians were “clean, not beggars and thieves like the Egyptian wog.”⁷² Private Laurie Birks made a number of comparisons between Syrians and Egyptians when stationed there in 1942. He wrote that “generally speaking, I’d say those [Syrians] I’ve seen were superior to the average Egyptian, more independent, and friendly, and not so everlastingly ready to get anything they can out of the foreigner.”⁷³ A month later he wrote in another letter that though the Syrians near his camp were “usually pretty ragged”, they were nevertheless “a good deal more friendly than the natives in Egypt.”⁷⁴ In both Hadley and Birks’ writing are several of the common stereotypes about Egyptians – their dirtiness, penchant for begging and thievery, and desire to cheat foreigners. Because the Palestinians and the Syrians did not fit these stereotypes to the same extent, they were therefore considered better than the Egyptians.

⁶⁹ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 19 June 1941, p. 6.

⁷⁰ Hadley, 1 March 1942.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 19 April 1942, p. 10.

⁷⁴ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 24 May 1942, pp. 5-6.

New Zealanders also made the same kinds of internal comparisons of other Middle Eastern peoples as they did for Egyptians. Once again, rural people were usually considered superior to urban people, but contrasts were also drawn between hill tribes (especially in the Lebanon mountains) and lowland dwellers. Captain Bruce Robertson described a “Syrian goat herder” he met in the Lebanon mountains as “a fine looking chap with a clean skin and finely chiselled features”, and he felt that in that area generally “the natives appeared of a healthy type and their women folk lissom and attractive.”⁷⁵ These kind of attractive physical characteristics led Airman Gerald Craddock to declare “the hill Arabs as being superior to those we had seen on the plains”, and even when he travelled further afield to Iraq, he still believed that “youth of splendid physique also from the hills leave the town folk far behind in appearance and bearing.”⁷⁶ Private Rex Griffith felt similarly to Craddock. He wrote of the Syrian hills that “it was a good life up there. No stink of wog towns. The only natives we saw were the shepherds. They are a much cleaner living people than the city dwelling Arab.”⁷⁷ This favourable comparison of rural people with urban people perhaps stemmed from the fact that the characteristics New Zealanders found most repugnant in the local people had their greatest concentration in towns and cities. It was in urban centres that New Zealanders’ found the most supporting evidence for their prejudices around the morally dissipated Easterner. People sleeping in the street, ready access to alcohol and prostitution and a concentration of beggars, hawkers and street vendors were all features more of city life than country life. New Zealanders were able to look far more favourably on people inhabiting areas where these features were not so apparent. The fact that rural people also tended to live a life completely separate from modernity allowed New Zealanders to hold a far more romantic view of their lives, away from the corrupting influence of the modern world.

New Zealanders were far from having a monolithic racist attitude towards people in the Middle East. While it is easy to look at the very evident racial prejudice that many New Zealanders expressed, and paint a simple picture of ‘us vs them’ racism, we can see that the reality was not so simple. New Zealanders did not see all people in the Middle East as the same, and while they might have labelled many of them ‘wogs’, their attitudes differed from country to country and people to people. These attitudes were not simple dislike or distaste. Instead,

⁷⁵ Robertson (ed.), pp. 23, 25.

⁷⁶ Craddock, pp. 77, 49. Note that the page numbered 77 appears out of sequence in *A Drink of Nile Water*, and is located between pp. 41 and 42.

⁷⁷ Griffith, pp. 5-6.

they encompassed a complex mixture of views on cleanliness, hygiene and appearance, commercial behaviour, and urban and rural life.

Photographs: Visual Representations of Middle Eastern People

It was not just through writing that New Zealanders documented and commented on the people of the Middle East. They also took thousands of photographs documenting their service in the region, including of the people that they encountered. Photography was part of soldiers' and nurses' touristic experience of war, where, just like civilian travellers, they took pictures to capture and communicate their experiences, and to provide mementoes for themselves.⁷⁸ Justin Fantauzzo, writing of First World War Middle Eastern photography, notes that:

For men so far from home, photography was the most powerful way to connect the colonial spaces of Egypt, Sinai, and Palestine to the domestic spaces of Britain, Australia, and New Zealand.... With little hope of seeing home before the war's end, soldiers wanted to bridge the continent-sized gap between them and their loved ones. Photography was a direct, visual space where that could happen.⁷⁹

Fantauzzo's statement is just as applicable to the Second World War, where airmail made photographs an even more viable way to communicate with family back home. New Zealanders collected their photographs in albums (sometimes also purchased in the Middle East, as seen in Chapter 2), which have survived to provide rich snapshots of an individual's visual experience of war in the Middle East, and more specifically rich snapshots of the people met there.⁸⁰ It is from these albums that the photographs discussed in this section are drawn.

New Zealanders in the Second World War benefitted from half a century of technological development since the invention of the personal Kodak camera in 1888. By the time they went off to war most servicemen and women had ready and affordable access to cameras and photographic equipment, and no longer had to rely on professional studios to

⁷⁸ The link between photography and soldier tourism is discussed in Paul T. Nicholson and Steve Mills, 'Soldier Tourism in First World War Egypt and Palestine: The Evidence of Photography', *Journal of Tourism History*, Vol. 9, Nos. 2-3, 2017, pp. 205-222. Note especially pp. 206, 213 and 221.

⁷⁹ Fantauzzo, p. 225.

⁸⁰ Justin Court notes the importance of soldiers' photo albums as sources, "in contrast to other photographic representations of the war, which threaten to reduce a rich visual archive of the war to the illustration of a few expected motifs". Justin Court, 'Picturing History, Remembering Soldiers: World War I Photography between the Public and the Private', *History & Memory*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Spring-Summer 2017, p. 76.

provide photographic souvenirs of their time in the Middle East.⁸¹ The nature of their photographs of people had also changed with the technology. Ali Behdad notes that in the nineteenth century, photographs of the Middle East were largely of depopulated monuments, “unobstructed by the presence of indigenous peoples.”⁸² When photographers did capture people, it was largely in staged images that showed “a projected fantasy of the Middle East and its people.”⁸³ No longer encumbered by bulky cameras with long exposure times, New Zealanders in the Second World War were able to take more candid pictures of people actually going about their day to day lives.

New Zealanders took photographs of people to show their physical appearance and what they wore, but their photographs do more than this. They also capture what people did – be it work, leisure activities or cultural practice. There is an amateur ethnographic character to some New Zealand photographs of Middle Eastern people, in which New Zealanders documented the exotic peoples they met and also attempted to record how they lived their lives. Ken Jacobson states that “in Middle Eastern photography, studies of ‘street characters’ have been dismissed on one hand by postcolonialists as negative stereotypes and on the other hand by curators as cheap commercialism.”⁸⁴ Similarly Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan note that such photography could be classed as “‘photo-exoticism’...that reduced people of the lower classes to (ethnographic) types.”⁸⁵ However, all of these historians warn against a blanket dismissal of these kinds of photographs. Jacobson argues that ignoring street photography means ignoring images that genuinely show “everyday people and contemporary life”, and Behdad and Gartlan write that “such images cannot be viewed merely as a reflection of Europeans’ racial prejudice against ‘Orientals’, nor should we assume that the photographs of the Middle East by European artists simply validate Euro-imperial dominance over the region.”⁸⁶ Simply put, these are

⁸¹ Ken Jacobson, *Odaliques and Arabesques: Orientalist Photography 1839-1925*, Quatritch, London, 2007, p. 57.

⁸² Ali Behdad, ‘The Orientalist Photograph’, in Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan (eds.), *Photography’s Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2013, p. 24.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 25.

⁸⁴ Jacobson, p. 77.

⁸⁵ Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan, ‘Introduction’, in Behdad and Gartlan (eds.), p. 2.

⁸⁶ Jacobson, p. 77; Behdad and Gartlan, p. 4. Such assumptions are frequently expressed in discourses on Middle Eastern photography. See, for example, Jülide Aker, *Sight-Seeing: Photography of the Middle East and its Audiences, 1840-1940*, Publications Department, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, MA, 2010, where, at pp. 2-5, the author argues that all European photos of the Middle East participate in Orientalism, that “no photographic image of the Middle East escapes the net of Western ideas about the region”, and that “almost without exception, these staged images reinforced Western prejudices by providing examples of the backward people viewers expected to find.”

photographs of real people – perhaps the only extant photographs of them – and as such they have real significance as sources.

A common thread through New Zealand Second World War photo albums are studies or portrait pictures of Middle Eastern people. Such images blur the line between posed, studio-style photographs and more candid ‘street character’ photography, but they still arose organically as New Zealanders travelled through the Middle East and met different people. Private Arthur Helm evidenced New Zealanders’ interest in these kinds of appearance-based photographs when describing a Bedouin in Amman (in Transjordan). He wrote of “one fine strapping warrior who had a dagger and a revolver at his belt, and slung over one shoulder was a rifle and over the other shoulder were draped three full bandoliers of cartridges. He was a fine looking man, and would have made the subject of a good photograph.”⁸⁷ These portrait photographs can be roughly divided into two types – those that place emphasis on the physical features of a person (especially the face), and those that place emphasis on a person’s clothing or costume. The first type were usually taken more close-up and highlight the subject’s facial features, hair, facial hair and what they wore on their head (see Fig. 4). The second type were taken from further away and include the subject’s whole body to show their clothing. Common subjects for this second type of photograph were veiled women, men in full robes and headdresses, and men in police, military or servants’ uniforms (see Figs. 7, 8 and 9).

Beyond pictures of people’s appearances, New Zealanders also took photographs of people going about their day-to-day lives. These images are often less posed than the above portrait shots, and can offer a candid glimpse into the quotidian existence of Middle Eastern people. New Zealanders commonly captured people at work – creating hand-crafted goods in the cities’ bazaars, selling their wares in the streets or working the land in rural areas (see Fig. 8). They also captured people in their leisure hours, praying, sleeping and playing board games (see Figs. 9, 10 and 11). From an amateur ethnographic perspective, these photographs seem to be as much about capturing what it is that people *did* as about capturing what they looked like.

⁸⁷ Helm, p. 103.

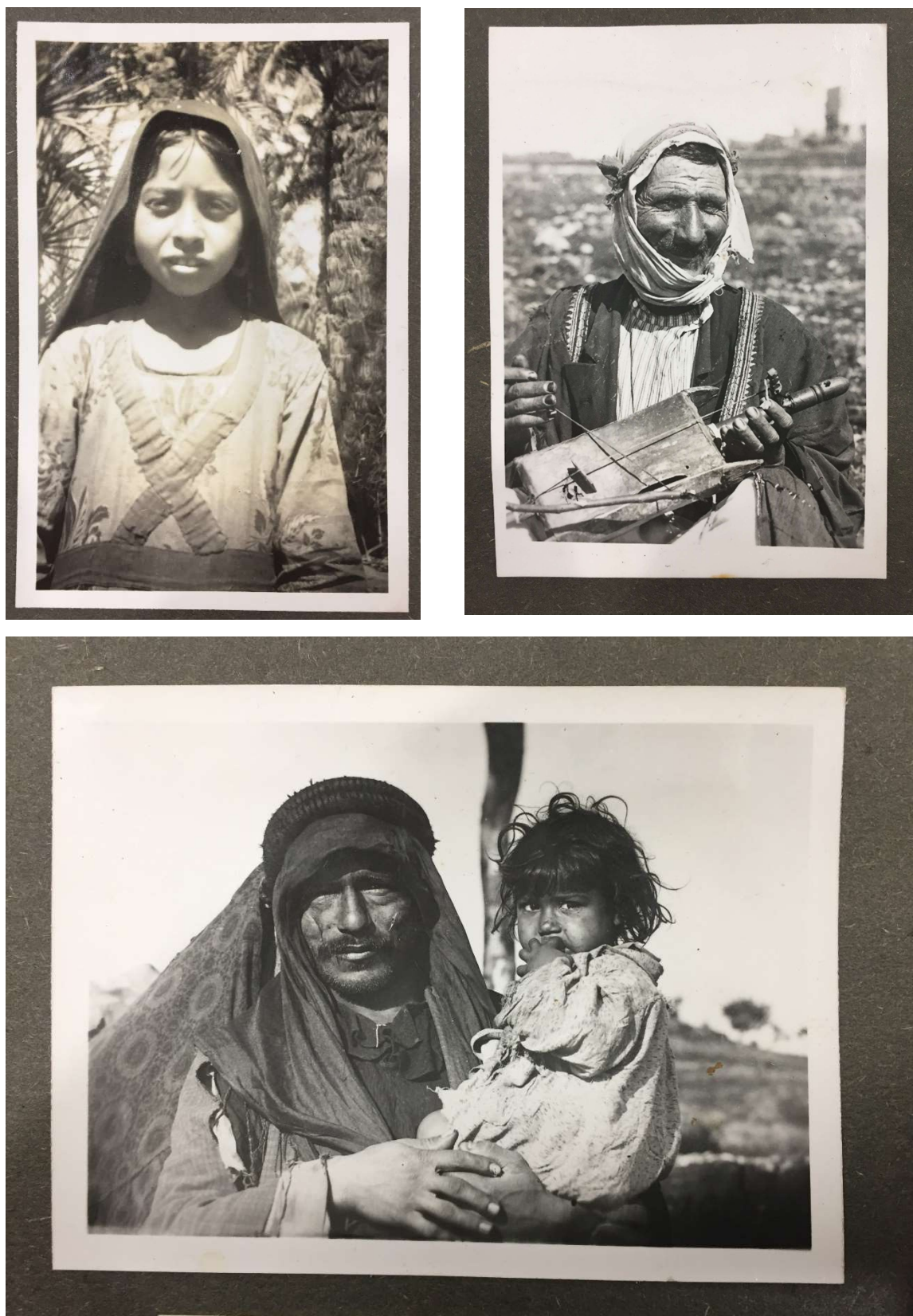


Fig. 4: Three images from the photo album of Sister Grace Piggot, 3NZGH. Piggot's album contains numerous photographs of the people she encountered in Egypt and Syria, and her shots are often wonderfully human and intimate. The first image is of a young Egyptian girl, while the second and third show a musician and a nomadic man and his daughter from the Lebanon region of Syria.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Grace Piggot, Photograph Album: Nurses & Medical Services – WWII, KMARL, 1992.712.



Fig 5 (top left): A photograph of veiled female Egyptian goat herders, from the album of Driver Ron Wulff, NZASC.⁸⁹

Fig.6 (top right): Two Arab men in traditional robes and headdresses, smoking cigarettes potentially given to them by the photographer. Picture taken by Warrant Officer Harold Munro, Div. Cav., in Syria.⁹⁰

Fig. 7 (left): A Cairo mounted policeman, in uniform, sitting astride an Arab horse. From the album of Captain Garnett Rands, 25 Battalion.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ron Wulff, 'Goat Herders', in North Africa & Italy – WWII, KMARL, 1999.693.

⁹⁰ Harold William Munro, 'Syria', in Photograph Album: Middle East – WWII, KMARL, 1991.768.

⁹¹ Rands, 'Policeman on His Arab Horse, Cairo, in Photograph Album: Egypt – WWII.



Fig. 8: Photographs of people at work taken by Captain Garnett Rands. The first picture shows a man making a camel saddle in an Egyptian bazaar; the second shows coffee sellers on the streets of Cairo; and the last shows a *fellah* ploughing his fields near Maadi Camp. Rands seems to have been particularly interested in photographing workers.⁹²

⁹² Rands, Photograph Album: Egypt – WWII.



Fig. 9: Another shot from Garnett Rands' album. This one shows an Egyptian man saying morning prayers next to a river or canal.⁹³



Fig. 10: Private Cyril Hawkins took this photograph of an Egyptian man sleeping against a bale of hay in Cairo. The picture is perhaps partly designed to depict the stereotypical 'lazy Easterner', but it certainly shows what some Egyptians chose to do when not working.⁹⁴

⁹³ Rands, 'His Morning Prayers', in Photograph Album: Egypt – WWII.

⁹⁴ Hawkins, Photo Album C. E. Hawkins – WWII, 2015.95.1.



Fig. 11: A photograph taken by Gunner Leslie Coleman, 14 Light AA Regiment, of several Egyptian men playing backgammon and dominos. Coleman's album is another fantastically rich one, containing numerous portrait study photographs, pictures of urban and rural workers and photographs, like this one, of people during their leisure time.⁹⁵

It is true that these photographs could be accused of depicting Middle Eastern people as certain ethnographic 'types', much in the way that Behdad and Gartlan suggested. There is certainly an element of antiquarianism about New Zealanders' photographs of people in the Middle East. Subjects are mainly depicted dressed in traditional garb, undertaking traditional occupations and pastimes. Study-type photographs of Middle Eastern people wearing, for example, western suits or dresses seem to be almost non-existent, despite the fact that New Zealanders encountered people who dressed this way and lived more modern westernised lives in cities like Cairo, Tel Aviv and Beirut. However, if we consider New Zealanders in their role as tourists, it is perhaps less surprising that the photographs show what they show. New Zealand

⁹⁵ Leslie Trevor Coleman, 'Back-Gammon a Popular Game Through out Egypt', in Photograph Album: North Africa – WWII.

servicemen and women, just like any other tourist, were out to document things that were exotic and different, not things – like men and women dressed in western clothing – that they encountered at home. The documentary nature of the photographs is also important. While not free from orientalist influences, the photographs still depict life occurring naturally around soldiers and nurses, in contrast to the orientalist photography of the nineteenth century, which was largely contrived and staged. In this way, these photo albums serve as an extremely rich visual source that help us understand New Zealanders views of, and relations with people in the Middle East.

Good relations with Middle Eastern People

The inherent cultural difference between New Zealanders and Middle Eastern people did not always result in relationships defined solely by racism. Racism was certainly a feature of New Zealanders' interactions with people in the Middle East, but it was not the only feature. Many New Zealanders were able to move beyond prejudice, engage with the people they met and form meaningful relationships. Even those who might have said disparaging things about 'wogs' in general could treat an individual Syrian or Egyptian with kindness and respect. James Belich, in his history of New Zealanders as a people, notes "the human capacity to stigmatise a group in theory but exempt particular individuals of that group in practice."⁹⁶ New Zealanders demonstrated this capacity throughout their time in the Middle East. It is also important to note that while some New Zealanders held negative views about Middle Eastern people, they never actively tried to distance themselves from the locals. Mark Johnston writes that Australians in the Second World War "never adopted the autocratic and remote manner of Europeans towards native peoples in the East", and claims that they were far less aloof than the British.⁹⁷ The same could be said of New Zealanders, and their sheer willingness to engage with the people they met meant that, though there was prejudice, there were bound to be better relationships as well.

In April 1942 Gunner Laurie Birks went climbing in the hills around his Syrian camp. While he was out he:

Met a shepherd on the way down, tending his flock. Seemed a friendly soul, invited me to spend the night in his house, then offered me a drink of goats' milk, presumably

⁹⁶ Belich, p. 231.

⁹⁷ Johnston, *Anzacs in the Middle East*, p. 8.

direct from the goat, as he didn't seem to have any receptacle with him. By means of his scanty English and my more than scanty Arabic, we managed to exchange a fair amount of information, and he'd have been pleased to have me stay for hours, I think.... Pity I didn't know his language better. I'd have been interested to know how he lived, and his views on things and so on.⁹⁸

New Zealand wartime correspondence is full of these small encounters between New Zealanders and local people. Rather than providing evidence of racism, such encounters, as Birks shows, were often open minded and friendly with each party engaging with the other on a very human level. Captain Bruce Robertson recounted an almost identical story to Birks when he:

climbed the mountain one day behind Harem [a village near his camp] and checked information from my map. It was a stiff climb and it took me all the afternoon to go up. Near the summit I met a Syrian goat herder – a fine looking chap with a clean skin and finely chiselled features. We couldn't talk, but we sat under a rock ledge and smoked my tobacco while he showed me his dagger and I showed him my pistol, which I'm sure he would have been proud to have.⁹⁹

Some encounters could be as brief as a meeting on the side of the road. Lieutenant Colonel Fredrick Varnham was driving along the banks of a canal in Egypt in March 1940, where they encountered “fellaheens working their land & crops.”¹⁰⁰ He noted “many little villages” and stated that the *fellaheen* were “all very friendly calling out saieda (good-day)”.¹⁰¹

Many of these small interactions between New Zealanders and local people were facilitated by smoking. Historian Susie Johnston notes that “smoking was established as an integral part of leisure or time out for New Zealand soldiers”, and that “smoking and cigarettes were also central to notions of ‘mateship’ and military masculinity.”¹⁰² But further than this, smoking became a key part of sociability between New Zealanders and Middle Eastern people, serving as an ice breaker and an easy way to begin a relationship – especially where there was

⁹⁸ Birks, Letter to Mrs R. L. Birks 19 April 1942, pp. 12-13.

⁹⁹ Robertson (ed.), p. 23.

¹⁰⁰ Varnham, 18 March 1940, p. 9.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Susie Johnston, ‘Lighting Up: The Social History of Smoking in New Zealand c. 1920-1962’, MA Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2009, pp. 77, 78.

a language barrier. Bruce Robertson shared his tobacco with the Syrian goat herder, but he also used cigarettes to “fraternise with the Turkish border post close by” his camp.¹⁰³ He wrote that the easiest way to get along with the Turks was by “taking my interpreter and plenty of cigarettes down.”¹⁰⁴ Private Arthur Helm had two drivers from the Arab Legion when travelling through Transjordan, and upon meeting them he “presented them with a tin of Players cigarettes, and we got along famously, with their slight knowledge of English, and my even slighter knowledge of Arabic.”¹⁰⁵ Soldiers also used cigarettes as a bartering tool when trading with Arab hawkers. Gunner Ralph Nicholson wrote when travelling through Palestine in March 1942 that “The natives were very anxious to trade oranges for bully beef or cigarettes but they did not want money. You could get six or more very big oranges for a packet of cigarettes.”¹⁰⁶ Private Walter Young had a similar experience – in Palestine he was able to barter “cigs and bully beef for grapes, watermelons, tomatoes and oranges.”¹⁰⁷ Tobacco and smoking became a sort of universal language that could facilitate trade, and express greetings and friendship when words were unable to do so.

¹⁰³ Robertson (ed.), p. 23.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Helm, p. 100.

¹⁰⁶ Nicholson, 13 March 1942, p. 53.

¹⁰⁷ Young, 18 June 1942, p. 11.



Fig. 12: Sergeant F Williams, 36 NZ Survey Battery, shares a smoke with an Arab in Transjordan. Another Arab in the background has already lit up.¹⁰⁸

Fig. 13: The cigarettes obviously did the trick, as here we see Williams enjoying a friendly conversation with the same Arab seen at back right of Fig. 12.¹⁰⁹



¹⁰⁸ Mervyn Daniel Elias, 'NZ Soldier Enjoys a Smoke with an Arab of Trans Jordania, World War II', 24 May 1942, NLNZ, DA-02496-F.

¹⁰⁹ Mervyn Daniel Elias, 'NZ Soldier Talks with an Arab of Trans Jordania, World War II', 24 May 1942, NLNZ, DA-02495-F.

Beyond brief encounters on their journeys, New Zealanders also formed more lasting and meaningful friendships with Middle Eastern people. These friendships could involve extended periods of time spent together, and even saw New Zealanders invited into local people's homes. Private Sydney Hadley found himself a guest at numerous local homes when in Syria in early 1942. In April, Hadley "went to [a] village 3 miles away Fakia with Jim F and Art. Very interesting afternoon.... Visited a family Jim has become very friendly with sat around on cushions and played with the baby drank coffee and talked as well as we could."¹¹⁰ Later in May, Hadley visited the town of Zahlé, where the "people [were] very friendly and clean."¹¹¹ He "made friends with a family and spent the afternoon with them in the vegetable garden the best place available in the heat."¹¹² In Palestine in 1943, Private Des Davis (himself a practicing Jew) encountered a Jewish man on the streets of Tel Aviv who "came up to me and invited me to his place to lunch. I accepted and had a great time. He had every kind of liquor and also put on a five course meal. His family treated me very well and extended me further invitations."¹¹³ Sapper Breynton Campbell, a train driver with the 16th Railway Company, NZE, worked closely with Egyptian rail crews. He remembered that "we got onto the trains and met the Egyptian crews – we were shadowing them for a while – and made some great friends. We found they had the same sorts of problems as we did."¹¹⁴

But perhaps no New Zealand soldier went further in befriending Middle Eastern people than Private Arthur Helm. Early in the war, Helm was stationed at El Daba in Egypt's Western Desert, and he befriended a group of Sudanese Cameliers who were stationed nearby. Helm wrote that he "soon became a firm favourite of theirs, and spent a good deal of my spare time in their company. Under their tutelage I learned to groom, feed and water the camels."¹¹⁵ With little fighting happening in this early stage of the desert war, Helm had plenty of spare time to spend with the Sudanese, and he would visit their camp, eat meals with them and they would go on camel rides together. Helm wrote that the Sudanese "showed a very keen interest in New Zealand and were surprised to know we had no camels or donkeys. How then, did we get on for milk when we had no camels? I had to explain about the cow – likening it to one of their buffaloes so that they would understand. Our conversations were carried out partly in Arabic

¹¹⁰ Hadley, 19 April 1942.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 9 May 1942.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Davis, Letter to Mum, Dad & Hazela 4 July 1943, pp. 4-5.

¹¹⁴ Breynton Campbell, quoted in Hutching (ed.), p. 217.

¹¹⁵ Helm, p. 41.

and partly in English.”¹¹⁶ When the time came for Helm to leave El Daba he noted that “the Soudanese and I parted with regret, and I shall always look on them as ‘Nature’s gentlemen’.”¹¹⁷

Later, in one of his many intrepid solo journeys to the far-flung corners of the Middle East, Helm travelled on leave to Transjordan.¹¹⁸ Heading to the Greco-Roman ruins at Jerash, Helm stopped at “Karfrenji, a small Arab village”.¹¹⁹ Here, he “was taken to the home of the District Governor of the Jebel Ajlun Province, Rashid Pasha, who was absent, but whose sons entertained me royally. I sat in the open courtyard and was surrounded by a semicircle of sheikhs, and we conversed through an interpreter who was the local schoolmaster.”¹²⁰ Helm’s hosts treated him to “a real Arab meal, and all the time the sons of the Pasha were apologising for the lack of hospitality.”¹²¹

Throughout his time in the Middle East Arthur Helm befriended the Cameliers, Jordanian sheiks, Bedouin on a train journey to Petra (in Transjordan) and an Arab boy with whom he raided an orchard in Syria for figs.¹²² But his closest friendship was reserved for the brothers Jamil and Abdallah Simon in Baghdad. Helm had befriended Jamil and Abdallah’s brother in Cairo, and when he decided to travel to Iraq on leave, he arranged to stay at Jamil and Abdallah’s house where “they made me feel at home”.¹²³ The brothers took Helm to meet their grandmother, “who took a great fancy to me, and wanted me to stay in Baghdad, and even offered to find me a bride.”¹²⁴ Helm declared that Jamil was “one of the best friends I had made in the Middle East. He was just like a brother to me, and I shall always treasure those days that I spent in his company in Baghdad.”¹²⁵ In a tragic end to their friendship, Jamil was murdered not long after Helm left Baghdad, and on a later trip to Iran, Helm went out of his way to travel via Iraq so he could visit Jamil’s grave.¹²⁶

¹¹⁶ Helm, pp. 42-43.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 46.

¹¹⁸ The dates for Helm’s travels are not particularly clear in his book. While it was written during the war, Helm tends to focus on the narrative of his experiences rather than tying things to specific dates.

¹¹⁹ Helm, p. 101.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid, pp. 174, 189.

¹²³ Ibid, p. 209.

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 230.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 237.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 277.

Conclusion

Arthur Helm is at the extreme end of the spectrum, but his experience, and those of other New Zealand soldiers showed that New Zealanders' relationships with Middle Eastern people were not solely characterised by racism, disrespect and violence. There certainly was prejudice, and this did lead to racially charged writing from New Zealanders, and sometimes to more overt acts of disrespect or violence. Moreover, New Zealanders did start to loosely rank the people they encountered on racial lines. However, New Zealanders were also routinely greeted with warmth and hospitality wherever they went in the Middle East, and more often than not they returned this warmth in kind. The accounts of soldiers like Helm and Hadley, and the photographs by people like Sister Grace Piggott, show that there was depth and humanity to New Zealanders' interactions with the people of the Middle East. To limit our discussion of this subject to a story of racism is to do a disservice to open-minded New Zealanders, and to those in the Middle East who welcomed them into their homes and their lives. The last word on this subject should perhaps be left to 'Slaphappy', the fictional soldier-subject of an editorial in a 2NZE demobilisation magazine entitled *You've Had It!*:

Slaphappy says he has enjoyed his time in the army with the other grim digs.... He has made a surprising number of civilian friends, too, who regret his departure sincerely and hope to see him again one day. In fact, when he looks back on it all, those friendships – whether with Syrian sheiks or Italian peasants – are among his most pleasant memories. Out of all the muddle and waste of war, he thinks that such friendships and such understanding between himself and other ordinary people, who differ only by a shade of skin or an inflection of tongue, are things to be put on the credit side.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ 'Editorial', in 'DJB and 'GDF' (eds.), *You've Had It!*, in Collection: Allan Hardie Napier – WWII.

Conclusion

The New Zealand experience of the Middle East in the Second World War was far from one dimensional. The narrative that persists from both World Wars is one of ‘booze and bints’ – a repetitive story of violence, drunkenness and debauchery that has come to monopolise the limited discussion of New Zealand’s Middle Eastern war off the battlefield. While these were all part of the life that New Zealanders led in the Middle East, this thesis has shown that limiting our discussion to New Zealanders’ poor behaviour is to do a great disservice to the breadth of experience they had during the war. The evidence in New Zealanders’ Second World War writings and photographs is rich with people and places, sights and sounds, material objects and intangible romantic ideas – the product of cultural encounters unlike anything the Second World War generation had known before. One gets the impression that service in the Middle East expanded New Zealanders’ world view, both geographically and in a more intangible sense. It made them realise that the world was bigger than just the Empire/New Zealand relationship, and that there was more in terms of place and culture than home and the mother country. When men and women could escape the strictures of army life, they were able to go to places and do things they never would have been able to do if not for the war. In many respects, Airman Gerald Craddock’s characterisation of war service as ‘enforced touristdom’ rings true. New Zealanders travelled, shopped, visited museums and monuments, took photographs and interacted with local people. The experiences that they had in the region were so rich that to ignore the full implications of those experiences represents a significant gap in the historiography of New Zealand in the Second World War.

The topics discussed in Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of this thesis have their own individual contours and complexities, but they are not siloed or shut off from one another. Indeed, there is significant overlap between place, materiality and people that make an understanding of one essential to come to grips with the others. Place, from locations known for particular handcrafts to the romance associated with those locations, informed the purchase of material goods. An inlaid Damascus box or a bottle of perfume from Cairo’s Muski, while holding intrinsic value, were just as important for what they said about *where* they were purchased. Equally, New Zealanders’ desire to acquire souvenirs of the Middle East facilitated interactions with locals that in turn shaped the way that New Zealanders thought about people in the region.

A key thread that runs through all three chapters – one that is inherent in the evidence itself – that is the tension between the imagined and the real; between the preconception and the lived experience. New Zealanders went to the Middle East with ideas about what they would encounter. Sometimes these ideas were borne out by reality, but more often they were tested or subverted. New Zealanders had preconceived, and often highly romantic, notions about Middle Eastern places. Yet they were often quickly disabused of these notions, be it by the blinding sand and searing heat of the desert, or by the commercialisation of sacred sites in the Holy Land that New Zealanders felt should be treated with greater reverence. Their romantic ideals also influenced the material goods that they chose as souvenirs to such an extent that a tension exists between the material record of New Zealanders' Middle Eastern war and their expressed (often extremely negative) views about the places in which they shopped. Preconceptions also influenced the tone of relationships between New Zealanders and the people of the Middle East, where a weight of prejudice brought out from New Zealand led to some highly racially charged language and ideas. But New Zealanders could hold overarching prejudices and nonetheless show warmth and curiosity towards individual Middle Eastern people, and receive friendship and hospitality in return. These sorts of tensions between ideas and reality, and paradoxes of preconception versus actual encounter draw the disparate threads of this thesis together. They unite diverse experiences of a region about which New Zealanders simultaneously knew much and nothing at all.

New Zealand's relationship with the Middle East is not limited to the Second World War. Indeed, New Zealand has been militarily involved in the region for more than a century. The Second World War is simply one point on a long continuum that stretches from Egypt and Palestine in the First World War to Afghanistan where NZDF personnel are still stationed today. As a result, the Middle Eastern experience discussed in this thesis is both a backward and forward looking one. New Zealanders drew on the reminiscences of their older relatives who had served in the Middle East in the First World War, and this in part shaped the preconceptions they held. Second World War servicemen and women became the second generation of New Zealanders to get lost in the hustle and bustle of Cairo and to gaze over the undulating sand dunes of the Sinai desert. But in serving in the Middle East during the Second World War, an entire generation of young New Zealanders also became familiar (sometimes intimately so) with a region that would continue to be at the forefront of world affairs for the rest of their lives. What must the 76,000 New Zealanders who lived at Maadi Camp have thought when, on nationalising the Suez Canal in 1956, President Nasser's Egyptian

government tore down the camp memorial as a legacy of colonialism?¹ How would Private John Hood, so certain that “there will again be trouble between the Jews and Arabs in Palestine when the war is over”, have felt when that trouble flared up into open war and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948?² What would Private Arthur Helm, who travelled thousands of kilometres to visit Iran and the glories of its ancient dynasty, have said when that same dynasty was overthrown after 2500 years in the 1978 revolution? We can only speculate at their reactions to the great events of the twentieth century, but there is no denying that the Second World War generation of New Zealanders had a close personal connection with the Middle East in a way that those who had not served in the war could never have. The countries where these world events happened were not just lines on a map or stories in a newspaper, they were real places filled with real people of which Second World War New Zealanders had first-hand experience.

The scale of New Zealand’s involvement in the Middle East, especially in the two World Wars, means that this thesis represents only part of a wider discussion. What this thesis demonstrates, through its exploration of place, materiality and people, is that it is a discussion worth having. The breadth and complexity of the New Zealand experience in the Middle East during the Second World War, coupled with the notable dearth of scholarship on the war in New Zealand, means that a subject of real importance remains relatively unexplored. A familiarity with the names Crete and Monte Cassino does not constitute an understanding of New Zealand in the Second World War. Even if we extend that roll of battles to include Tobruk and El Alamein, we are still glossing over the extremely important off-battlefield history that is the focus of this thesis. Julia A. Clancy-Smith writes that “population movements constitute the bedrock of world history and assume a wide range of guises”, including “epic wanderings, pilgrimage...[and] transhumance”, but also travel and tourism.³ The ‘enforced touristdom’ of the Second World War was one such population movement – one such ‘bedrock of history’ – where tens of thousands of New Zealanders moved from New Zealand to Egypt, then on to Palestine, Syria, Libya and even further afield. We need to understand that the Second World War does not just mean Crete or Cassino or Alamein. It also means Maadi and Cairo; the Sinai and the Western Desert; Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem; Baalbek, Beirut and Baghdad.

¹ Hedley and Hutching, pp. 223-224.

² Hood, p. 27.

³ Julia A. Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800-1900*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2011, p. 4.



Stephanie Lee left the Middle East on 19 April 1943 “fourteen months to the day” since she had disembarked the *M.S. Oranje* at Suez.⁴ She now found herself serving on board that same hospital ship and, on 24 April, was once again writing a letter to her mother and father, as she had done so diligently several times a week since leaving home. As she sat in the “little writing alcove off the lounge”, Lee’s surroundings were very different from the small, spare hut in the desert, in which she had described the extremes of Egypt to her parents back in March 1942.⁵ This time, her vista was not sand and barbed wire, but “huge glass doors” that opened out onto the ship’s deck to admit a “delightfully cool” breeze.⁶ She wrote that:

You can have no idea how wonderful it is to be clean again.... Everything about the ship is so clean that even the dirtiest work is clean in comparison with what we have been used to. No dirty kerosene stoves, no primuses, no scrubbing, all polished wood or stainless steel benches. No sandy old blankets, no dirty sandy shoes (anyhow they are all cleaned for us).... All stains have disappeared and the veils are once again white instead of a dirty limp yellow.⁷

And yet despite her bright, clean surroundings, Lee found herself reflecting on her time in the Middle East in quite a different manner from that letter of ‘extremes’ over a year ago. She wrote that she could not “help thinking how the people on this ship would have their eyes opened at the conditions under which we have lived and worked. Yet those very conditions were excellent considering the circumstances.... I am proud of having been a member of the staff of the best hospital in the M.E. and hope one day to get back to it.”⁸ A month later, back in Suez on a brief shore leave from the *Oranje* she made an even more telling statement. She once again described Suez as “a typical ‘wog’ town. Hot, filthy, and...just really native bazaars.”⁹ But this time she qualified her criticism, writing that returning to the Middle East “was like going home again. Yes it is all in the blood for good now, every little bit of it.”¹⁰

⁴ Stephanie Vanoosten, Letters 1941-1944 Vol. 2, in Papers Relating to War Service, Auckland War Memorial Museum, MS-2002-186, 19 April 1943, p. 392.

⁵ Ibid, 24 April 1943, p. 394.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 394-395.

⁸ Ibid, p. 395.

⁹ Ibid, 22 May, p. 410.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 411.

Appendix A: Maps

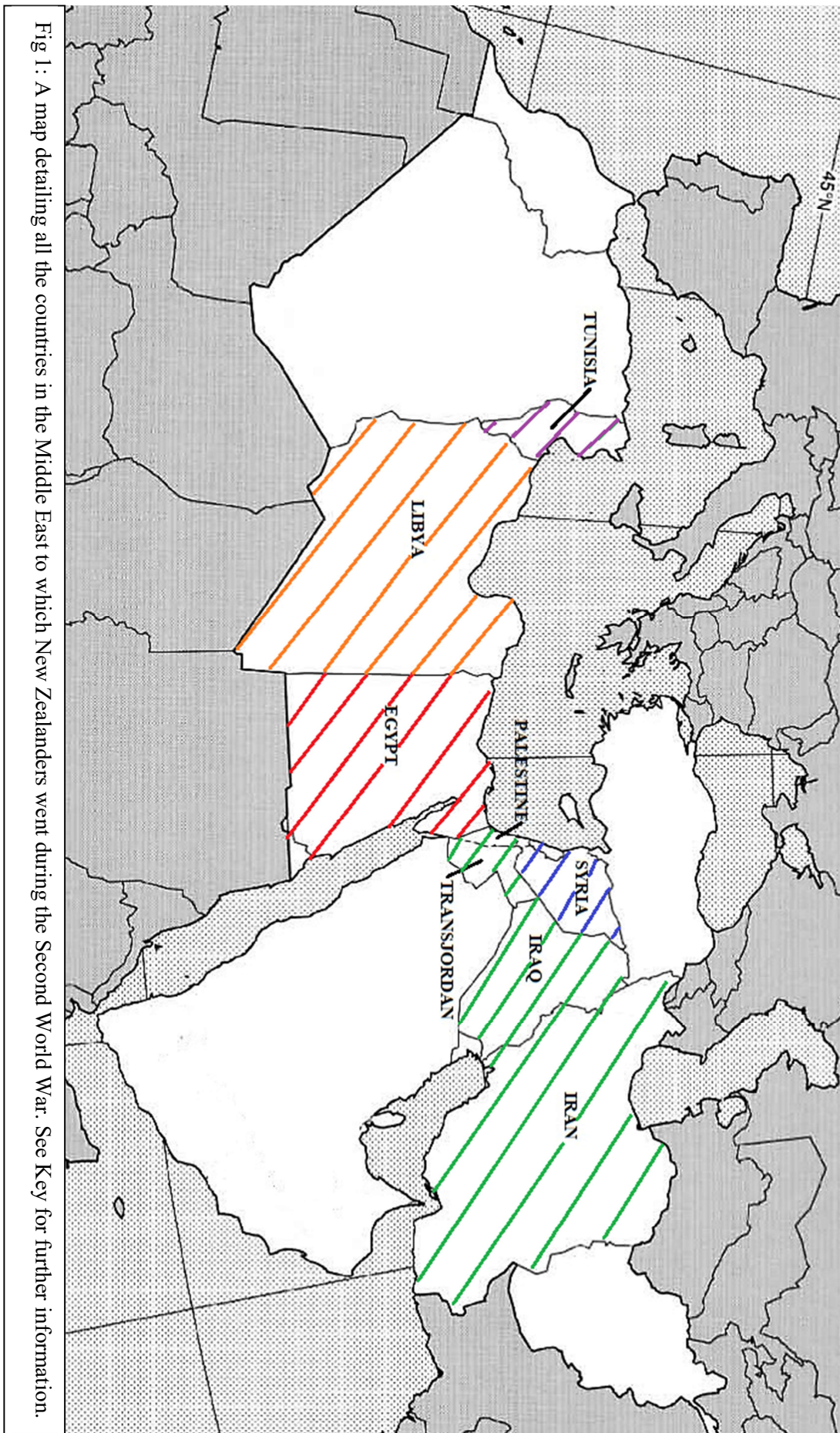


Fig 1 : A map detailing all the countries in the Middle East to which New Zealanders went during the Second World War. See Key for further information.

Key¹

Egypt: 2(NZ) Div. stationed here from **12 February 1940** until **5 October 1943** when Div. left for Italy. New Zealanders remained in Egypt until Maadi Camp disbanded **26 February 1946**



Libya: New Zealanders came in and out of Libya several times as the Allies advanced and retreated: **26 December 1940-28 February 1941; 18 November 1941-2 January 1942; 11 November 1942-1 March 1943**



Syria: 2(NZ) Div. moved to Syria after returning from Libya in January 1942. There were stationed in the Lebanon Mountains **26 February 1942-19 June 1942**



Tunisia: 2(NZ) Div. eventually reached Tunisia after advancing through Egypt and Libya. They were there from **3 March 1943** until their return to Egypt which began on **15 May 1943**



Countries New Zealanders visit on leave: New Zealanders visited **Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq** and **Iran** on leave throughout the course of the war.

¹ All dates taken from Robin Kay, *Chronology: New Zealand in the War 1939-1946*, Historical Publications Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1968.

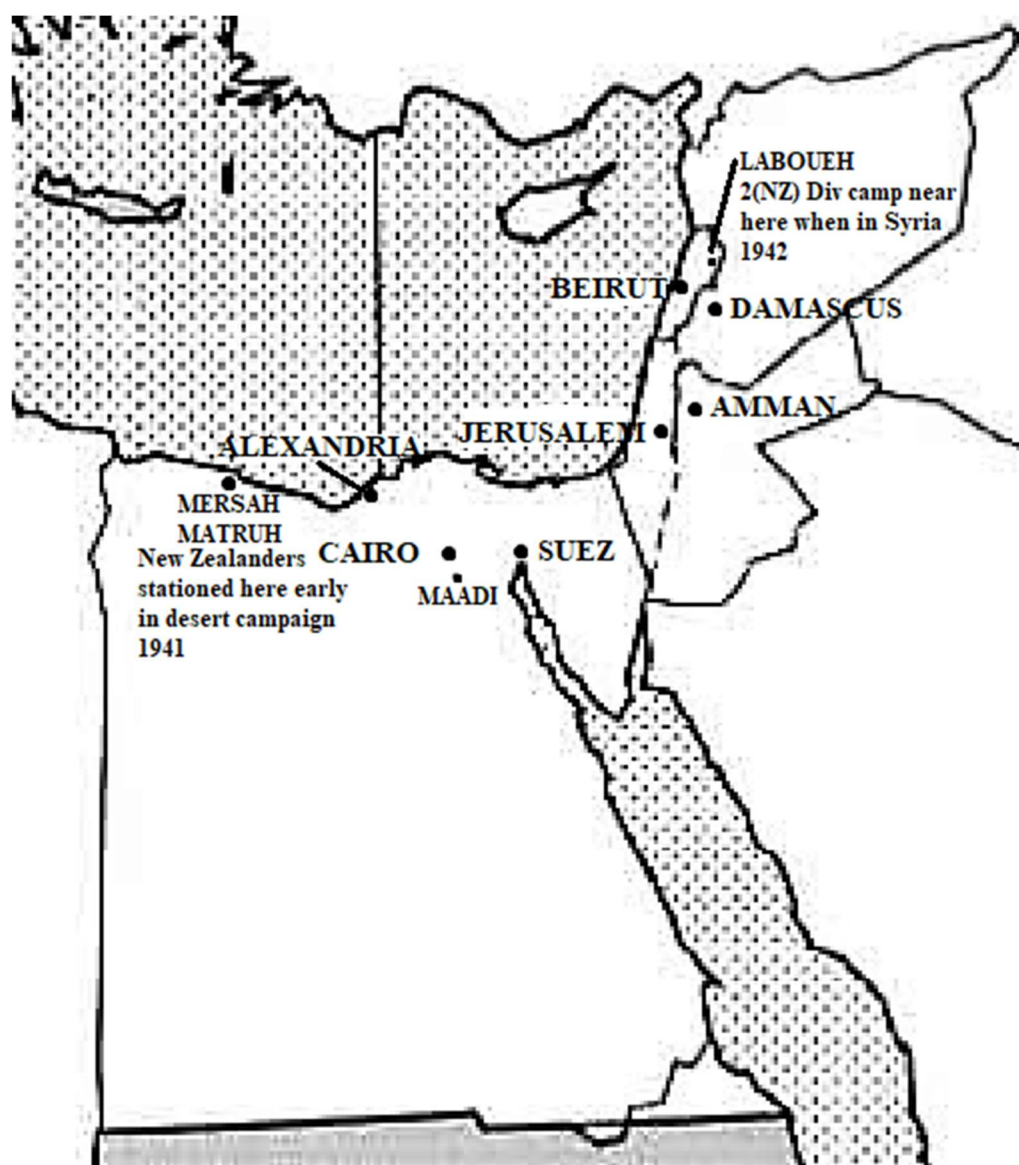


Fig 2: Map showing Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan and Syria. Includes key service and leave locations visited by New Zealanders during the war.



Fig. 3: Route of the 8th Army (including 2(NZ) Div.) advance through Egypt, Libya and Tunisia 30 October 1942 – 12 May 1943. Following the fall of Tunis and surrender of Axis forces in the Middle East, the New Zealanders would return to Egypt along the same route before leaving for Italy.²

² Maps and key all created by the author.

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