

Conference 2003: War Reporting

Malcolm Ross: New Zealand's First Official War Correspondent

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Abstract

New Zealand, unlike Australia, has not developed an historical understanding of any tradition of war reporting although the country has produced some war correspondents of international standing. During the South African war of 1899-1902, for example, some newspapers did send journalists as war correspondents to cover the activities of the New Zealand contingents. When World War I broke out in 1914, however, newspapers did not act independently to send journalists to the front instead they became embroiled in a dispute with the Government over who was to act as the official war correspondent. While the Australians blithely ignored the Motherland's strictures that one correspondent could represent each Dominion, New Zealand, the dutiful daughter, acquiesced. Against a background of party, newspaper and journalist rivalries the Government attempted to appoint a man to the position without consultation. This move collapsed in the face of the combined fury of the opposition Liberal party and Liberal papers and opposing press associations. After an attempt to gain approval for a second journalist was also blocked, the Government finally consented to a more democratic process of selection. It is ironic that the man who eventually became New Zealand's first official war correspondent - gentleman mountaineer and freelance journalist, Malcolm Ross, was probably more staunchly a Government supporter than the previous two candidates. This paper will outline the contentious events surrounding Ross' appointment.

Controversy surrounded the appointment of New Zealand's first official war correspondent in early 1915 and continued to dog the heels of the man finally selected for that position. Accused by some of vanity, partisanship, toadyism and witless writing, Malcolm Ross is an intriguing subject for historical and media research. Much has been made of his mountaineering exploits late in the 19th century but little academic interest has been shown in Ross the journalist or in the tradition of New Zealand war correspondents. Information concerning Ross as a journalist is fragmentary; not the least because he seems to have left little in the way of personal reminiscences. There are no diaries, unlike those of Charles Bean, the Australian war correspondent; no memoirs of Ross' experiences at the front in World War I, just his published despatches and one slight tome. [1] To learn about Ross one must glean snippets from others and piece together from those fragments an impression of the man. Much of this is negative, and further research is needed to reveal whether this image is fair.

However, this paper will focus solely on how Malcolm Ross became New Zealand's first official war correspondent in 1915 – after eight months of wrangling between the Government and the Dominion's newspapers. In doing so, it will present a vignette of journalist and newspaper rivalries of the time. What the public thought of the issue is not explored. In the telling of this story several names occur that are pivotal, but have since been forgotten. It is hoped that more research will accord these people their rightful place in the history of journalism in New Zealand. It must be understood that this paper is a work in progress and is only a snapshot of what is hoped to be a more complete history of New Zealand's early war correspondents.

Malcolm Ross was a man of many parts by the outbreak of war in 1914. Born in Dunedin in 1862, he went to school and university in that city and became something of a sportsman. His career as a newspaperman began at 20 with a job on one of the leading newspapers of the time, the *Otago Daily Times* (*ODT*). [2] He managed to combine his love of writing with a passion for mountaineering. This probably accounted for him being sent by the *ODT* in 1888 as a member of a paper-sponsored search party looking for a professor missing at the head of Lake Manapouri. [3] In 1883 James Mills, the managing director of the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand, engaged Ross as private secretary. He worked at the company's office but freelanced as a reporter at political meetings for the *ODT*. [4] In 1890 he married Forrestina Grant, who also became a noted outdoorswoman and journalist. Seven years later the family, which now consisted of a son, Noel, moved to the capital, Wellington. Here Ross became the Parliamentary correspondent for both the *ODT* and *The Press* and later the New Zealand correspondent for the *Melbourne Age* and the *Times* of

London . Ross' first taste of war reporting was when he went to Samoa in 1899 to cover the fighting there for his papers. As well as reporting from the Press Gallery at Parliament, the Ross's wrote books on mountaineering in New Zealand [5] and tourist and publicity brochures. [6]

It is presumed that the move to Wellington coincided with the development of the friendship between Ross and the leader of the Reform Party, William Massey – an amity which led later to numerous calls of favouritism when Ross seemed to land sought-after positions. The Ross's lived in Hill St where they frequently entertained Massey and "others of the right wing". [7] There is even a suggestion that at some stage Massey boarded with the Ross's. [8] Massey was said to be intolerant of those who did not hold his own "somewhat narrow religious and political outlooks and principles". [9] So as friends it can be assumed the two men shared the same conservative views. Was it Massey who helped Ross obtain a favourable posting in March 1904 with Lord Ranfurly, the Governor of New Zealand, when he made a state visit to the Bay of Plenty and the Far North? His pamphlet " *Through Tuhoeland* ", described the journey. [10] As well, Ross acted in a secretarial capacity for the Dominion Commission, which visited New Zealand in 1913 - another fortuitous appointment. [2]

By the outbreak of war in August 1914, Malcolm Ross at 52 had made his mark – both as an outstanding mountaineer, a journalist and a confidante of men of power and influence in the small Dominion. In his small way he reflected the dominance of southern men and conservative newspapers in New Zealand at the time. Both the *ODT* and the *Press* for whom Ross wrote were leading Reformist papers aligned with the Government of William Massey, which was elected in 1912. There was fierce competition between the Reformist papers and those of the Opposition – the recently ousted Liberal Party of Joseph Ward. However, Guy Scholefield, claimed the journalism was non-partisan. "It was an axiom, understood by all, that the news columns should be strictly non-party and objective." [7] Another reason for this may have been the strong grip the United Press Association had on the dissemination of news in the Dominion, which resulted in a certain standardisation of content. [11]

The rivalry between the parties and their respective newspapers erupted in Parliament when it was learned that Ross had stolen a march on his journalistic confreres in August 1914 just after war was declared. At the last minute, the commandant of the New Zealand forces, General Alexander Godley, had invited Ross to accompany the Dominion troops when they sailed for Samoa to seize the German wireless station there on August 16, 1914 . A hornet's nest was stirred up on Ross' return about four weeks later with Ward accusing Massey of discrimination in favour of Reformist newspapers and of favouritism towards Ross. If journalists were to go with the Expeditionary Force, they should be representative of all sections of the press in the Dominion, said Ward. It was pointed out that several other journalists had applied to go to Samoa , although the Government denied any knowledge of these applications. [12] This dispute was a just a foretaste of what was to follow in the appointment of the official war correspondent.

At the same time as Ross was steaming for Samoa, the New Zealand Government was being informed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies that if it so desired one war correspondent, representing the whole press of the country could accompany the British Forces in the field. [13] This was even more urgent when it was learned that Australia was sending Charles Bean as its official correspondent. Once it was discovered that Australia was sending a journalist to accompany the Australian forces the focus turned to whether New Zealand would follow suit. The main concern was which New Zealand journalist was going to get the job, how he was going to get it, who would pay him and for whom he would be writing.

First to make a move in promoting a particular journalist was the editor of the *ODT*, W.H. Triggs. The *ODT* already had a well-established tradition of sending journalists to cover wars – notably the New Zealand land wars, the Samoan troubles, the South African war and Far Eastern conflicts. [14] In mid September the paper offered the services of Guy Scholefield for the position of New Zealand war correspondent. [15] Scholefield, an experienced southern journalist, was in London acting for a syndicate of "Government " papers – the *NZ Herald*, *Press*, *ODT* and the *Evening Post* - a "loose organisation" called the New Zealand Associated Press. [7] Whatever it was called, the Opposition certainly didn't like its "colour". Hot words were exchanged in Parliament after it was revealed that on the recommendation of the High Commissioner in London , and agreement by Cabinet, but without further consultation, Scholefield's name had been forwarded as war correspondent to the Imperial War Office. Joseph Ward was incensed. He thought a course similar to that taken in Australia ought to have been pursued in New Zealand . In Australia the press came together and voted on the journalist who was to represent them all. [13] As Scholefield sourly

noted after the debacle, the Liberal papers had not taken any steps to have a foreign correspondent of their own. [7]

This dispute brought to light the whole question of how one journalist could fairly represent all papers in the Dominion. By 1911 there was a staggering 193 publications classified as newspapers in New Zealand. Of these 67 were dailies, 32 tri-weeklies, 26 bi-weeklies and 68 weeklies serving a population of just over one million. [16] It was said that 80% of these were supporters of the Government. [17] Naturally, in a competition to find a single war correspondent, the Liberal or "Wardist" papers wanted to be sure that any news would be available to all newspapers in the country impartially. Another question was who would pay for the war correspondent's work – his syndicate, all the papers in the Dominion or the Government? Harry Brett of the *Auckland Star* was among those who did not support the proposal to appoint Scholefield. To his mind papers couldn't afford the cost, the service would be poor, and the despatches would be heavily censored. [18] Scholefield's application was eventually withdrawn in the face of such opposition and because the NZAP would not agree to the journalist representing all Dominion newspapers. [19]

"The fly in the amber was that Scho's 'stuff' would not be available to all the newspapers in the Dominion and Government journals would thereby effect a 'scoop'." [20]

There was much discussion about why only one New Zealand reporter was to be allowed to accompany the New Zealand forces. It was galling in the extreme to New Zealand journalists that not only was Australia sending Bean as its official representative but other journalists had been approved as well, notably Peter Schuler, Charlie Smith and "Banjo" Patterson. [21] This was despite the Imperial authorities insisting that the Dominions could only send one each. The New Zealand daily newspapers made "one great mistake", according to the *Free Lance*. "They should have sent their men to the front and taken the [sic] chances." [22] But a major consideration, as noted by Brett, was the cost. The competition among so many papers in such a small country had its financial cost and many could not afford to support their own war correspondent.

Another consideration in the matter of the appointment was freedom of the press. Questions were asked about how a journalist could be expected to act freely if he was writing on behalf of, and being paid, by the Government. This in effect made him a civil servant subject to the constraints of that position. Editorial independence would be severely compromised.

"If a correspondent is to be of any value in the matter of letting friends of our troopers know how they are faring, he must occupy an independent position, and not simply be the paid servant of the Government responsible for seeing they are properly cared for." [19]

With the Scholefield nomination knocked back, the debate simmered on into the new year until another contender was proposed, again by the Government. The Minister of Internal Affairs, H. D. Bell, suggested as a candidate H. T. B. Drew, the recent editor and proprietor of the *Manawatu Daily Times* who now worked on the *Evening Post*. In a letter to the United Press Association chairman in January 1915, he said if papers of both parties wanted to send Drew to the front, the Government would give him the "imprimatur of the New Zealand correspondent". [23] The association wouldn't have a bar of another Government suggestion and urgent discussions were held over the proper course to be taken in this vexed matter of the appointment of a war correspondent.

It was clear, because of the "painful contretemps" [20] of Scholefield's appointment, that some sort of formal process was needed to select the journalist. It was evident the Australian method of giving a vote on the issue to all journalists was not going to be followed. In early 1915 the Government suggested to the Press Association that applications for the position should be called for from all the Dominion's journalists. In March 1915 the process of selection was agreed upon. Four editors from throughout the Dominion would meet, consider the applications and narrow the number down to four. The editors' recommendations would then be sent to Cabinet for the final choice to be made. The Press Association undertook to impartially distribute the "letters" (i.e. despatches) to all papers that applied for them, for a distribution fee of 1/-. [24]

In early March the 12 conditions of appointment were published, and it became obvious that any official war correspondent would have to work under restrictions which were irksome in the extreme. [25] Despatches had to be sent to the High Commissioner in London not directly to New Zealand and by post not telegraph.

“Such news as reaches New Zealand in these circumstances will be censored and then distributed among the newspapers. And in all probability such news will be worth less than nothing,” noted the *Free Lance*. [26]

The Government would not get “any journalist of much standing at that rate”, notwithstanding a promised stipend of £400-500 a year. This prompted another acerbic reaction from the *NZ Observer*.

“Let us hope that the amount will be nearer the latter figure than the former. Genial and brilliant Charlie Bean, Australia's official war correspondent, gets £600, to say nothing of his captain's commission and captain's pay and perks.” [20]

After listing 11 conditions, the rider of the 12th was that the New Zealand Government retained the right to add other conditions and directions as it saw fit.

Despite these stringent terms many Dominion journalists were keen to put “their best toes forward” [20] for the job and there was much speculation about likely contenders. One can only hazard a guess as to what might have compelled them to want to become a war correspondent. Mark Pedelty rates a number of “pleasures” such as pay, promotion, notoriety, identity and fantasy as the likely reasons for journalists wanting to take up this calling. [27]

“The hearts of journalists of all descriptions, competent and incompetent, hopeful and hopeless, from Auckland to the Bluff, have been afluttering and feverish energy and much weighing of pros and cons characterise many newspaper camps just now.” [20]

Many names of likely journalists were thrown up for consideration, notably H. W. Nixon, Andrew Burns, E.V. Hall, John M Hardcastle, F. W. Doidge, Leo Fanning, H.T.B. Drew and, of course, Malcolm Ross. What distinguishes the first five journalists was their prominence within the nascent New Zealand Journalists' Association. All of them had been in the forefront of establishing the union around the country in 1912. [28]. Of these journalists, however, Ross was seen by many as being the front runner, albeit more for the fact of his movement in influential circles than for the quality of his writing or his standing within the journalism community.

“At first thoughts, the plum was considered certain to go to His Vainness, Malcolm Ross, but his cake is already considered dough. Malcolm starts his story thus wise: - ‘I went to the war. I had much trouble to get to the war. My head swelled with the heat of the sun. My horse fell from under me. I told General Blank how to conduct the siege. I believe we shall win,’ and so on.” [20]

The four-man committee of editors was selected and comprised a careful representation of both sides of the political spectrum with two Liberal editors, T.W. Leys (*Auckland Star*) and M. Cohen (*Dunedin Star*), and two Reformist editors, C. Earle (*The Dominion*) and W.H. Triggs (*The Press*). [29] Forty-six applicants were reduced to four - Malcolm Ross, F. Doidge of the *Auckland Star*, E. Walters, of the sub-editorial staff of *The Press* and Ernie Hall of the *Evening Post*. Cabinet approved Ross and in April he became the country's first official war correspondent, to the merriment of the *NZ Observer*. It marked the appointment of Ross with a satirical poem entitled “Me!” [8]

The paper also noted that two of the other finalists were well-known journalists, Ernie Hall and Fred Doidge.

“The latter probably feels relieved to know that he was even in the race at all with a man who carries every kind of gun that can be used this side of the firing line. Many ‘tickets’ would have gone on Ernie had Malcolm Ross decided to take the editorship of the London *Times*, or the command of the Allied armies, or the chairmanship of the London County Council or the presidency of the United States. Long before any names were mentioned at all the whole press world which knows the inner working of the great brain of the authorities exclaimed: “It's a ‘cert’ for Malcolm.” [8]

Many felt Ross got the job because of his political connections, in particular his friendship with the Prime Minister. Massey was forced to defend this accusation of favouritism in Parliament a couple of years later. As Ross was a personal friend of his, Massey said he had not interfered in the selection. He had asked his colleagues to look through the testimonials and announce who was to be the man for the job. [30] It is not hard to see why the Reform Government approved Ross. He had the right pedigree in all respects. Massey's

Government, as bound by the Imperial Government, seemed certain to favour the man considered the most likely to understand the requirements of his masters and willing to subject himself to the disciplinary practices that were to be a feature of the war. A few days after his appointment Malcolm Ross was on a ship bound for Egypt and eventually the Dardanelles , arriving there on June 24, 1915 . He joined the three Admiralty accredited correspondents - Ellis Ashmead Bartlett, Lester Lawrence, and, of course, Charles Bean. [31]

This brings to an end the study of the factious and protracted appointment of New Zealand 's first official war correspondent. Malcolm Ross obtained the post as predicted, although it is doubtful he would have got the nod from his fellow journalists if a vote had been held amongst them. Efforts to appoint other journalists failed and it was the Prime Minister's favourite who triumphed. Future research will concentrate on how well Ross performed as correspondent, considering the considerable difficulties he faced in executing his brief as set out in the conditions of appointment. A judgement needs to be made whether the disciplinary practices and practical difficulties faced by Ross as a World War I war correspondent weighed against exceptional writing or whether Ross was never equal to the task.

Endnotes

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