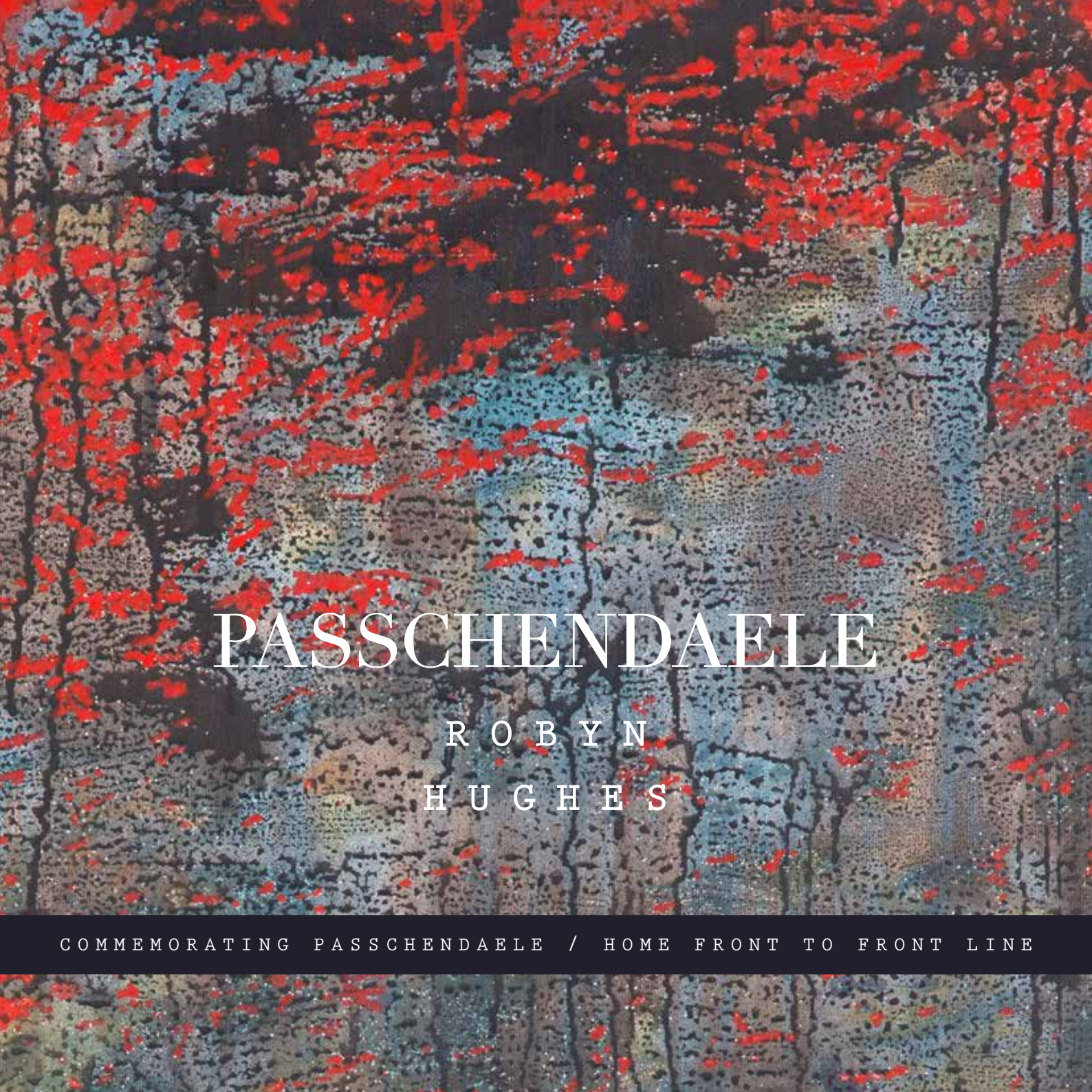


The background is a complex, abstract texture. It features a dense pattern of red, resembling splatters or small flowers, overlaid on a darker, more mottled blue and black base. The overall effect is reminiscent of a microscopic view or a close-up of a rough, painted surface.

# PASSCHENDAELE

R O B Y N  
H U G H E S

COMMEMORATING PASSCHENDAELE / HOME FRONT TO FRONT LINE

# PASSCHENDAELE

R O B Y N

H U G H E S



‘YOU’RE LOADED DOWN WITH 220  
ROUNDS OF AMMUNITION, TWO  
BANDOLIERS OF FIFTIES ONE SLUNG  
OVER EACH WAY... FORTY-EIGHT HOURS  
RATIONS, A FULL BOTTLE OF WATER,  
A SHOVEL OR PICK SHOVED DOWN  
YOUR EQUIPMENT AT THE BACK AND  
A RIFLE AND A BAYONET... ROUND  
EIGHTY POUNDS.

SO... YOU JUST BLUNDERED ALONG,  
BLUNDERED ALONG... IF YOU CAME  
UNDER HEAVY SHELLFIRE YOU’D  
IMMEDIATELY TAKE SHELTER IN  
A SHELL HOLE... NEARLY ALL FULL  
OF WATER... ALONE, I FELT I WAS  
ALONE ALTHOUGH I KNEW THERE  
MUST HAVE BEEN MEN ON EITHER  
SIDE OF ME.’

- NEW ZEALAND SOLDIER, 16 YEARS OLD, 1ST WELLINGTON BATTALION.  
G. HARPER. MASSACRE AT PASSCHENDAELE NOTE 33. FROM SIDNEY GEORGE STANFIELD,  
ORAL TESTIMONY OHAB51611, ORAL HISTORY CENTER, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY.



TO THE FALLEN  
L.B. Millson

# PASSCHENDAELE

G R E G   H A L L

*Writer and Director*

*The Passchendaele Society Inc.*

Glyn Harper, Professor of War Studies at Massey University, wrote in the introduction to his book, ‘Massacre at Passchendaele’,

“At Passchendaele in October 1917, the New Zealand Division took part in two great attacks. The first, on 4 October 1917, was a stunning success although costly in terms of casualties. The other on 12 October, should never have gone ahead in the conditions then prevailing, and saw more New Zealanders killed or maimed in a few short hours than has occurred on any other day since the beginning of European settlement. Though Passchendaele would eventually be claimed as a victory for the Commonwealth forces involved, no victory was more hollow...For New Zealand, Passchendaele is truly an untold story and since 1918, this battle has sadly been all but confined to the scrap heap of New Zealand history.”

The landings at Gallipoli were first commemorated in 1916 and as the years turned into decades and the decades became a century, Anzac Day and Gallipoli and the legends that grew from that campaign became folklore, synonymous with the First World War in the minds of New Zealanders. Truth was obscured in the official rhetoric of heroism, sacrifice, glory and nationhood. Today we tend to use terms like waste, slaughter, loss and futility. For New Zealand, 1916, 1917 and 1918 each produced more casualties than did Gallipoli. On 12th October 1917, at Bellevue Spur in the Battle of Passchendaele, 846 New Zealanders were killed in action. That day became and has remained the worst day of loss in New Zealand’s history.

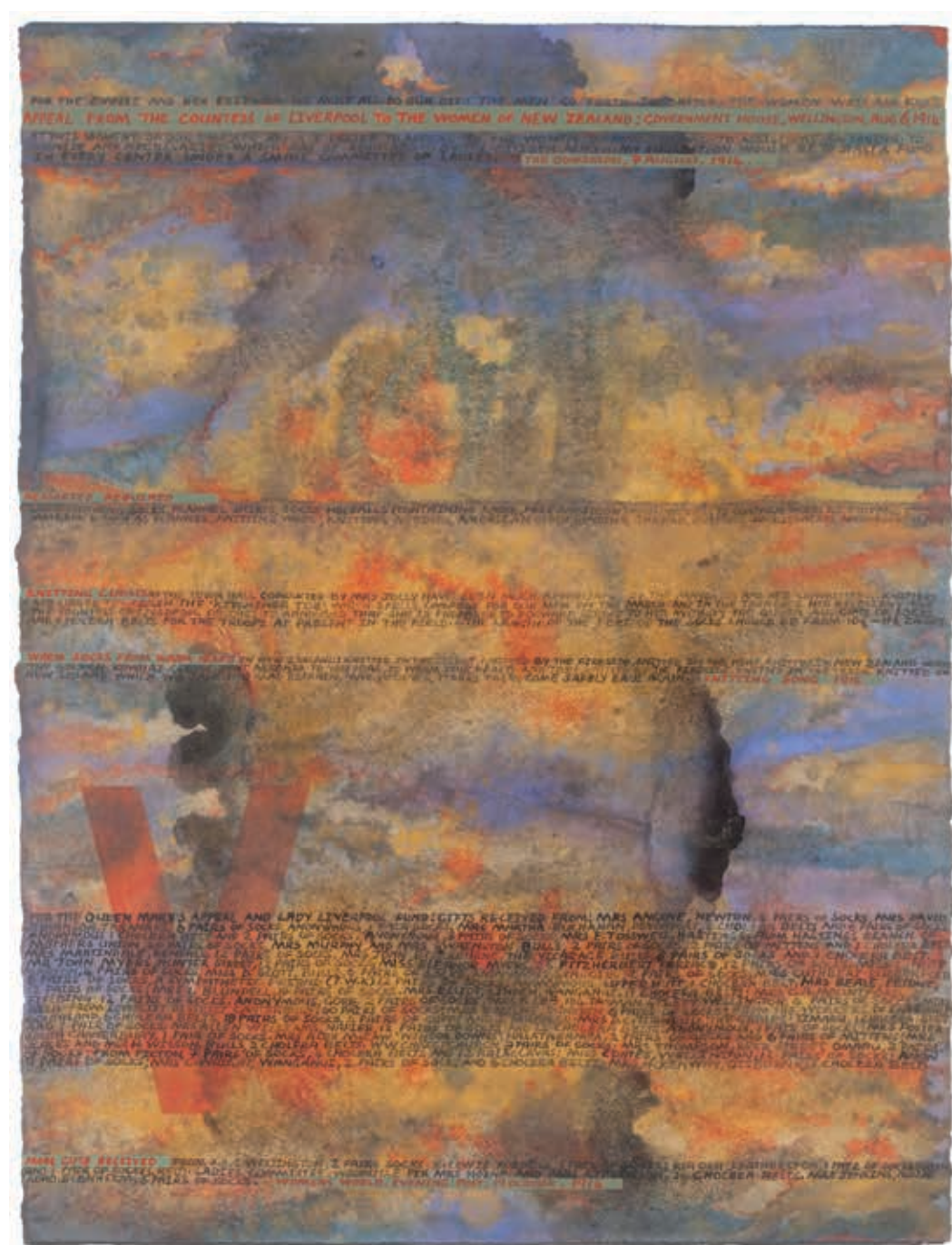
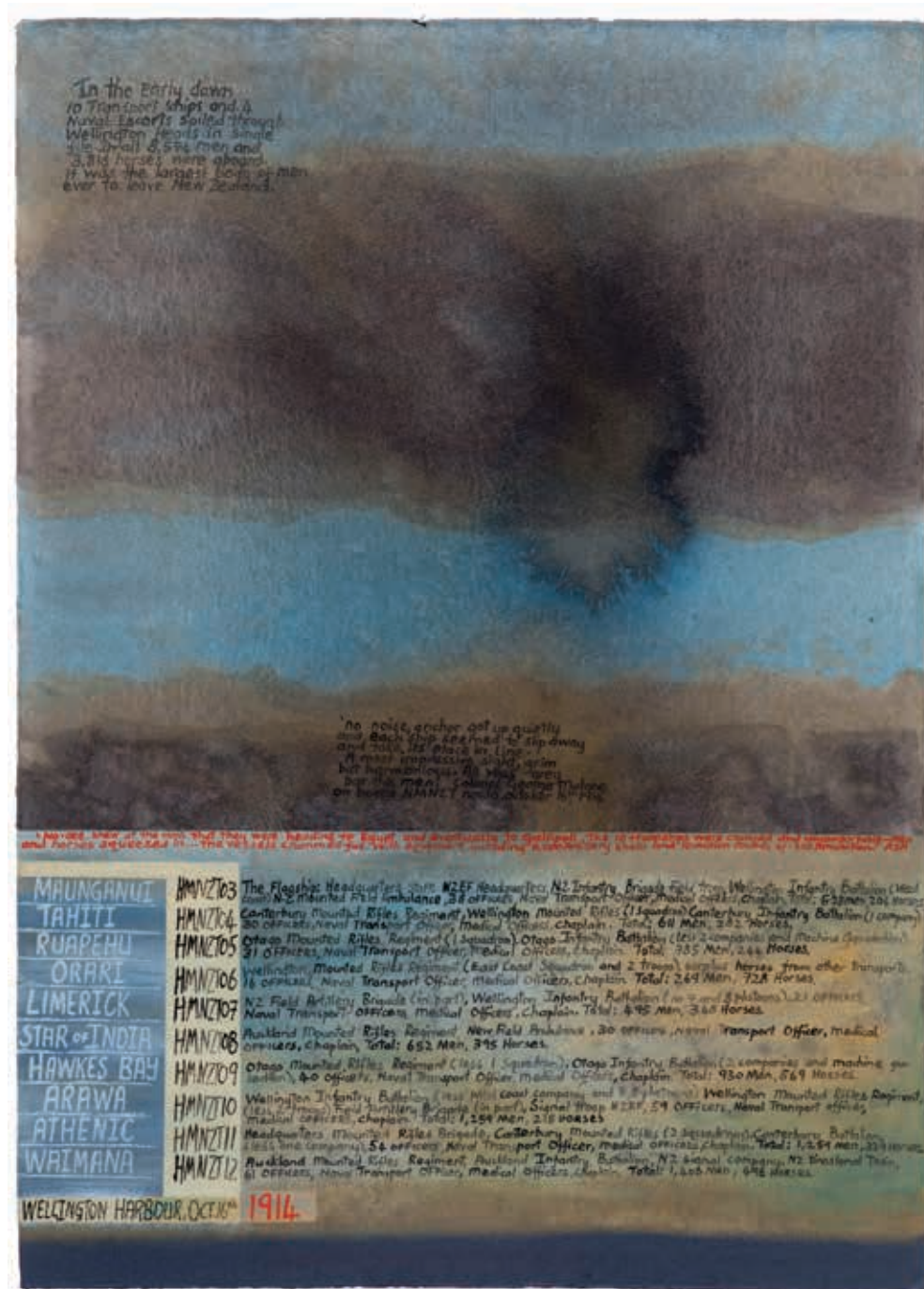
No battlefield holds more New Zealand dead than the 5,000 who lie in Flanders Fields in Belgium. No action deserves national recognition more than Bellevue Spur and no name evokes the futility of war and the faded and flawed dreams of kings and emperors, than does Passchendaele.

Lest we forget.



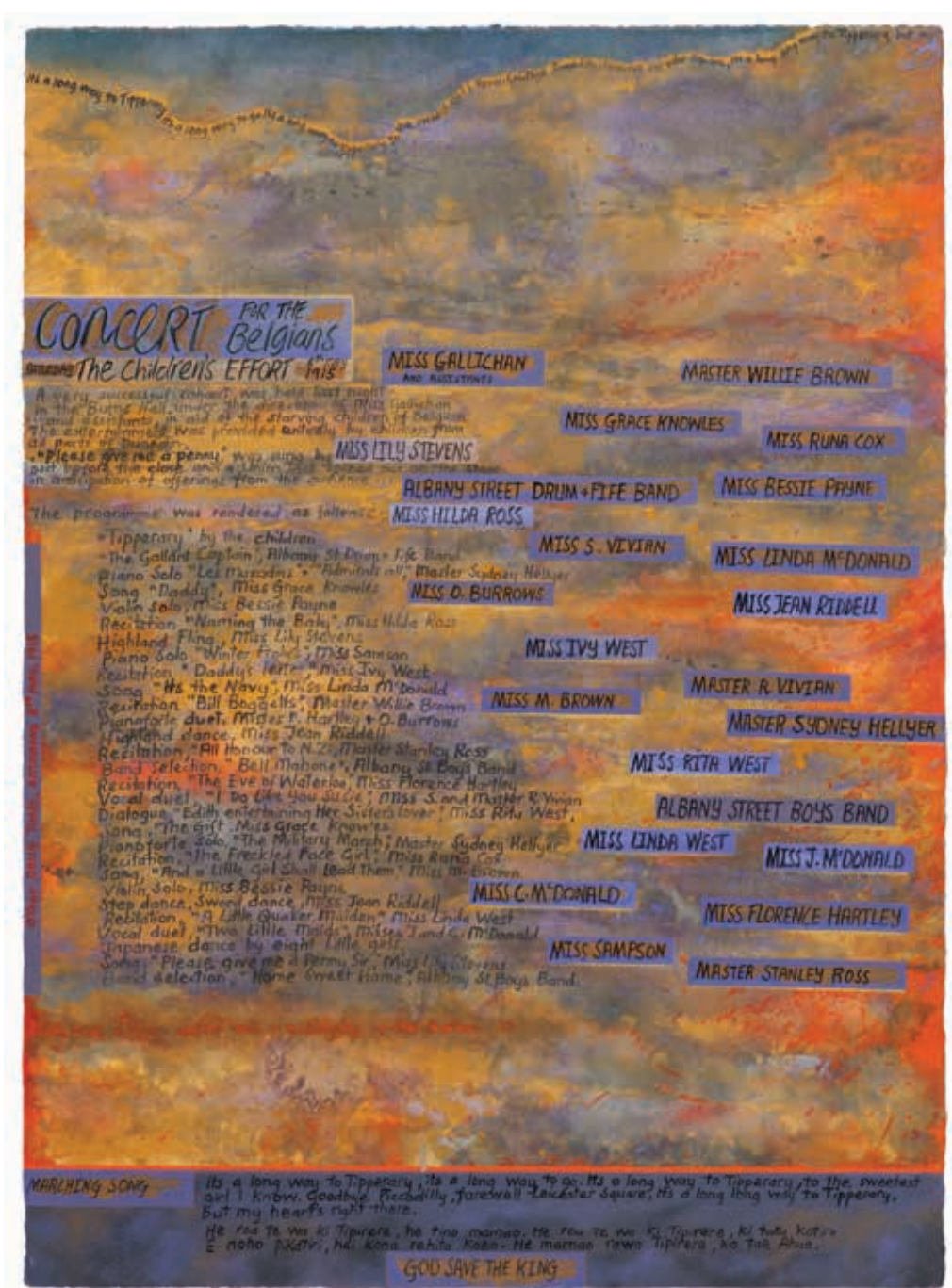


TROOPS BOARDING HMNZT NO.4 TAHITI AND HMNZT NO.11, ATHENIC, 23 SEPTEMBER 1914.  
Courtesy Of Archives Of NZ. Aega 18982, Pc4/1569



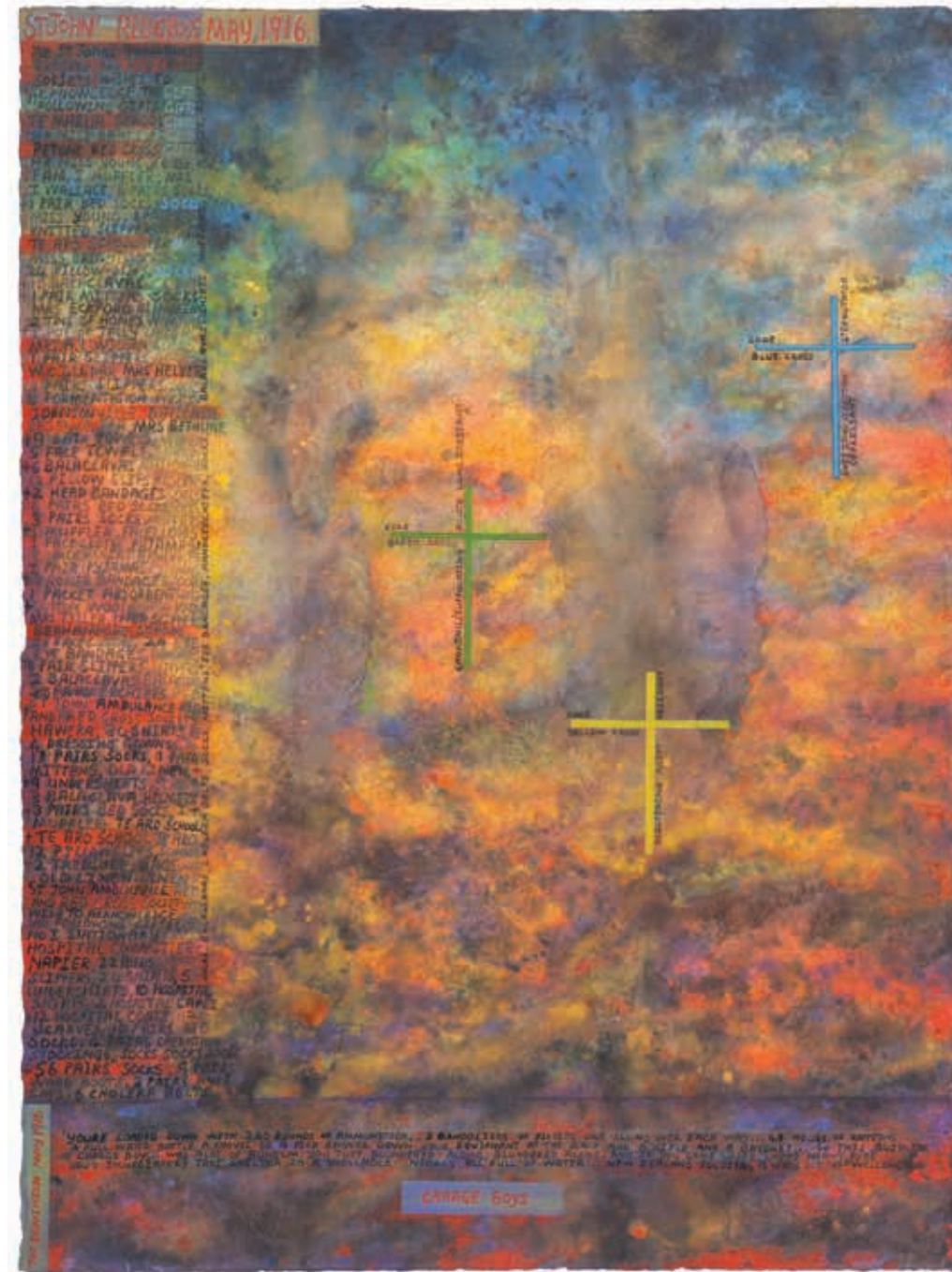
SOCKS FOR SOLDIERS  
Acrylic and ink on paper. 2015.

GOD SAVE THE KING  
Acrylic and ink on paper. 2016.



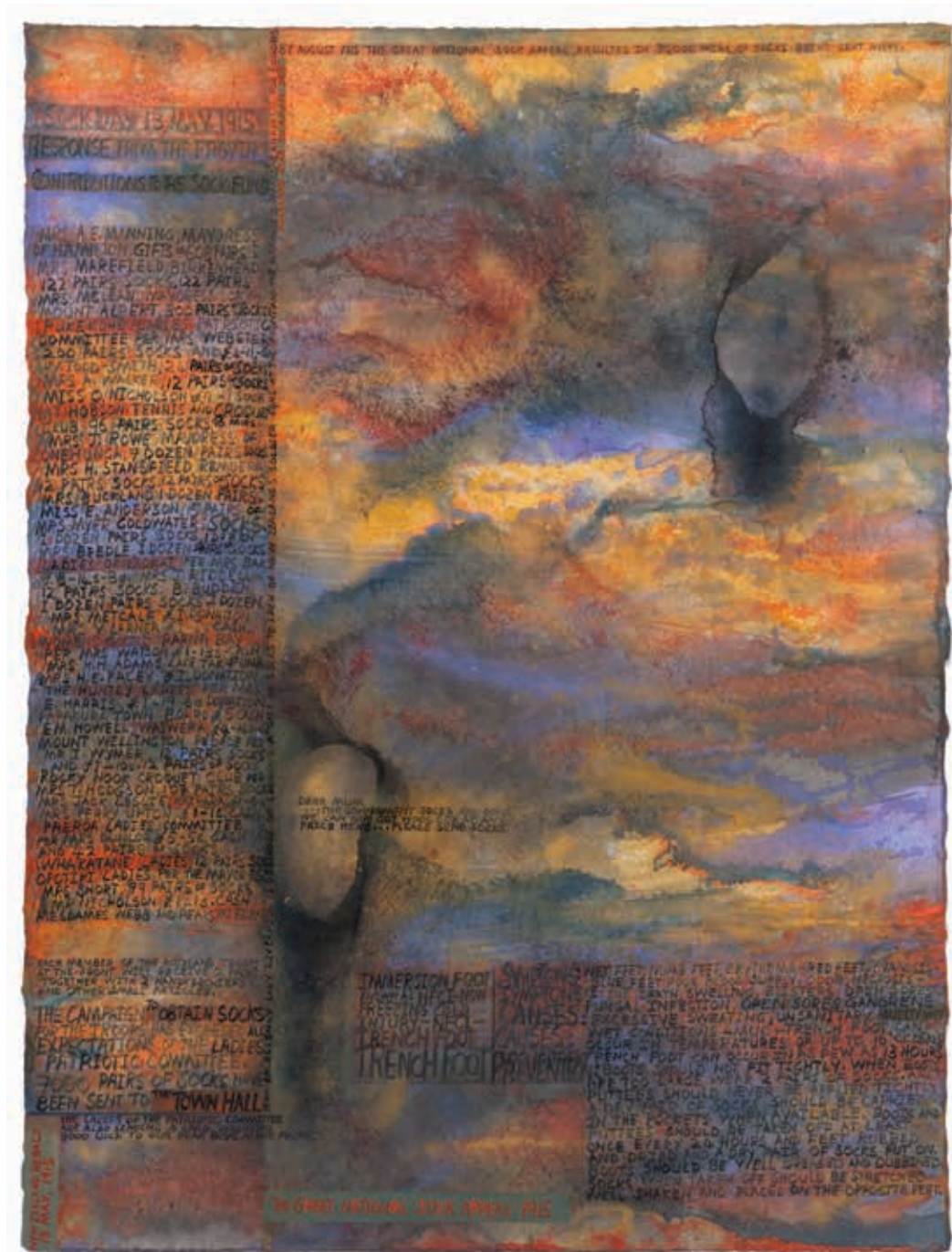
TARANAKI TURKEY RAFFLE  
Acrylic and ink on paper. 2016.

RED CROSS YELLOW CROSS  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 2016.



DEAR MUM PLEASE SEND SOCKS  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 2016.

FOR EMPIRE AND FOR FREEDOM  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 2015.





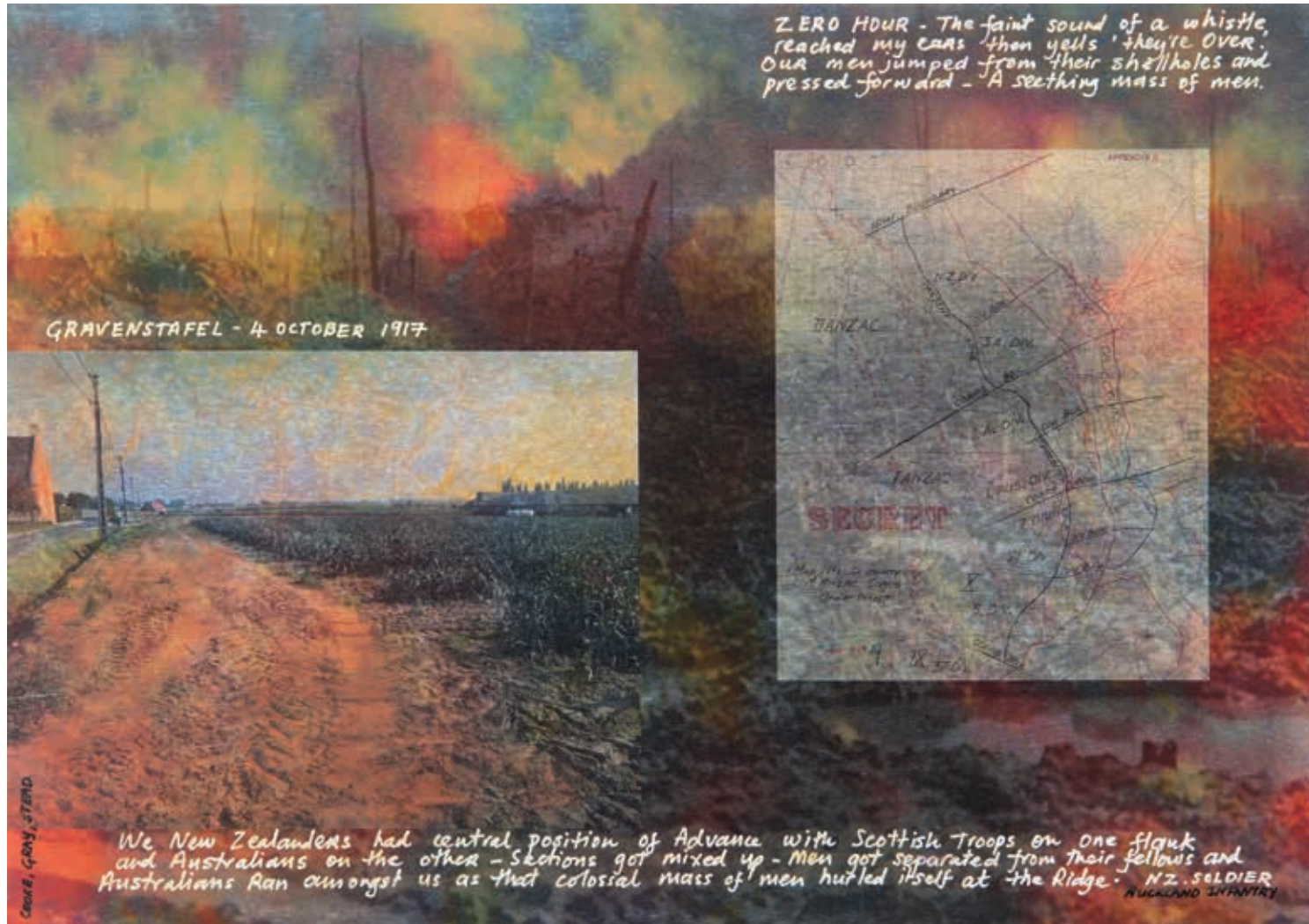
QUEEN MARY'S APPEAL TO  
THE WOMEN OF THE EMPIRE  
Mixed media on paper. 2016.

MESSINES RIDGE  
3.10 AM, JUNE 7TH, 1917.  
Mixed media on paper. 2016.



THE FAINT SOUND OF A WHISTLE  
ZERO HOUR, OCTOBER 4TH, 1917.  
Mixed media on paper. 2016.

DRY SOCKS A GODSEND  
Mixed media on paper. 2016.



# PAINTING PASSCHENDAELE

E L I Z A B E T H  
R A N K I N

*Professor Emeritus*

*University of Auckland*

Robyn Hughes first engaged with military history when, in 2012-14, she painted a series on the Second World War battle of Monte Cassino, drawn to visit that site and explore its narrative because her own father had been a soldier there seventy years before. But, as the centenary of World War I approached, her attention moved back in time to that earlier conflict. Remembering a comment by General Sir Bernard Freyberg at Cassino that warned against it becoming another Passchendaele, she began to research the third battle of Ypres that had aimed to take control of the ridge on which Passchendaele village stood, near the northern end of the Western Front where British and German forces had been struggling to outflank each other since 1914.

The Ypres Salient, a triangle of land where the Allies had pushed back the German line,<sup>1</sup> seemed the best place to break through and win back north-west Belgium and its ports, used as bases for

the German navy and its highly effective submarine attacks on Allied shipping. After initial success at Messines in June 1917, British High Command planned to seize the rest of the ridge that ran north to Passchendaele, deploying large contingents of troops from the Commonwealth to fight alongside the British forces. It was during this October campaign that New Zealand divisions achieved their greatest victory of the war at Broodseinde on the 4th, and suffered their greatest defeat at Bellevue Spur on the 12th. Third Ypres, also known as the Passchendaele Offensive, resulted in huge loss of life of Allied troops, with many units decimated. Private Monty Ingram from Whakatane, for example, recounted how, after the battle of 4th October, only 30 men could be mustered from his company of 120.<sup>2</sup> Amongst almost 12,000 graves at Tyne Cot Cemetery near Ypres are those of 520 New Zealand soldiers, 322 unidentified, and the memorial wall

there records 1,176 New Zealanders amongst the names of nearly 35,000 who fell in battle and who have no known grave.<sup>3</sup>

The main suite of paintings in Robyn Hughes’ new series follows a similar format to the previous one, worked in acrylic on unstretched canvases laid on the floor. While the loose paintwork was not to be understood as a representation of Cassino, but as a visual metaphor of the violence and trauma experienced by the troops, here the painterliness also embodies a more direct reference to the Ypres battlefield. Below the brilliant bursts of gold and crimson that suggest exploding shells and gun fire, the darker pigments that seep and pool on the canvas evoke the viscous water-logged terrain.

In personal letters and diaries, official despatches and histories, there is constant reference to the mud that made soldiers’ day-to-day life wretched, and military progress well-nigh impossible. The high

rainfall of October 1917, combined with the excavations of trench warfare and constant shelling, had turned these once well-drained and orderly fields into a treacherous quagmire. As it became increasingly difficult for the Pioneer and Engineer divisions to construct roads and boardwalks, so heavy artillery could not be advanced to support the infantry, and pack-animals with ammunition also foundered in the mud and water-filled shell holes. Yet despite these severe disadvantages, rendering the troops appallingly vulnerable and the likelihood of success remote, High Command kept ordering advances, intent on breaching the German line. Drove of men were gunned down as they attempted to cross the mire of no man’s land to overpower the well-defended German positions with their invincible concrete pill-boxes and tangles of barbed wire.

Entitled *Lament*, Hughes’ large canvases form a timeline of the conflict of 1917,

with inscriptions written against the murky ground in the lower section of each work offering a terse commentary on the unfolding conflict for viewers who choose to read them closely. It is a compilation as personal as the handwriting itself, reflecting Hughes’ own endeavour to sort out the complex events, with dates and place names, the divisions involved and the casualties inflicted. But it also includes affective individual impressions recorded by New Zealand soldiers, so different in tone from the propagandistic rhetoric of national newspaper headlines she has quoted too, such as ‘Miracle Men’, ‘Victorious Advance’, and ‘Splendid Horses’, picked out in larger print. Hughes’ own response is captured in the repeated refrain of how many lives were lost for so little advantage, poignantly summed up on the final panel: ‘Godley’s Corps advanced about 700 yards for a cost of 11,650 New Zealand, Australian and British casualties. 16.6 casualties per yard gained.’

Boldly painted across the upper part of the canvases over the vivid band of light that runs through all five works, are the names of key sites for New Zealand troops – Messines, Polygon Wood, Gravenstafel, Bellevue Spur, names selected to represent this campaign on the Western Front for the inscriptions above the window embrasures of the Auckland War Memorial Museum – and finally the name encompassing the ongoing battle – Passchendaele. Here there is a personal connection for Robyn Hughes, and not merely because she is an Aucklander: her maternal grandfather, Leonard Belton Millson, had been involved in the creation of the Museum. He and her great-grandfather were architectural and monumental sculptors in Manchester, where they ran a studio and foundry, but the son immigrated to New Zealand from Britain for his health, as he suffered from tuberculosis, rendering him medically unfit to serve in the army.

The well-known Auckland sculptor Richard Gross, also British by birth, had spent time at the Manchester studio, and the two men came to collaborate as R.O. Gross and L.B. Millson, with a sculpture foundry in Station Street, Newmarket. Gross had been commissioned to carve the frieze of the Museum and Hughes’ grandfather worked with him, although he did not live to see the memorial building completed in 1929. While Millson’s wife remembered that it was this project with Gross that had prompted him to come to New Zealand, he had probably arrived earlier. His drawing of a commemorative wreath is for the New Zealand fallen of Gallipoli and Flanders, and has a scroll with dates not yet fully unfurled, so that the final digit is obscured – 1914 to 191.. – suggesting that it was made before the war ended.

Millson’s drawing is a reminder that the victories and tragedies at the front were very much a part of the life of New Zealanders at home. Hughes became engrossed with the role that women played in the war, not only in nursing or taking up positions left vacant by men, but fundraising and providing ‘comforts’ for soldiers, such as handmade balaclavas, socks and scarves, her interest aroused

in part because her own mother had been a prolific knitter, albeit much later. Hughes wanted to acknowledge this important, often overlooked, part of the war effort, and created a set of works entitled ‘Home Front’, paralleling the Passchendaele series, with bands of text overwritten on painterly grounds on Portofino paper, more delicate in tone and texture than the war works, and on more intimate scale.

What particularly caught Hughes’s attention in her research for these paintings was that the volunteers’ names and contributions were fully reported in newspapers, usually in the women’s pages, but sometimes alongside reports on the war. The *New Zealand Herald* of 13 May 1915, for example, amongst headlines such as ‘Dardanelles Casualties’, ‘Life in the Trenches’ and ‘Supply of Munitions’, reports ‘Gifts for Soldiers: Lady Liverpool’s fund’ with detailed lists of women and their contributions, ranging from Mrs A.E. Manning, Mayoress of Hamilton, who sent in 608 pairs of socks, to many individuals who donated a dozen. The names form a band on the left margin of one of Hughes’ fluid paintings, offset against lists of foot ailments suffered by soldiers who had to march such arduous

distances, often in sodden conditions that caused the dreaded ‘trench foot’. It made invaluable the two pairs of socks that the Countess of Liverpool, wife of the New Zealand Governor, aimed to supply to every soldier, and she was untiring in her efforts to encourage knitters and coordinate their contributions for transporting abroad; she also worked with Miria Pomare to support the Maori Pioneer Contingent, and even found time to supervise the production of *Her Excellency’s Knitting Book* in 1915. St Johns and the Red Cross were also active,<sup>4</sup> and an analogous painting acknowledges the donations they assembled for hospitalised soldiers, its floating crosses referring to the effects of the horrific poison gases used in the war, and evoking too the many that died of their wounds and disease.

The *Herald* records a card accompanying one consignment of socks, ‘Wishing good luck to our dear boys at the front, from the women and children of Auckland’, which reminds us that young people were playing their part as well. In another painting Hughes documents a children’s ‘Concert for the Belgians’ in Dunedin, with the names of the participants. In yet another she

records anecdotes of schoolchildren’s involvement in knitting, together with the rousing ‘Knitting Song’ they sang while they worked, inscribed on a vertical band that mimics a long piece of knitting, just as the lines of lettering suggest rows of repetitive stitches.

The practical ‘comforts’ created a direct link between home and the battlefield, sending the men a message about the patriotism and support of the makers, young and old – and more personal emotions. For their wives, mothers and sisters especially, the act of knitting, squeezed in amongst household chores, must have created space for reflection about loved ones in service, with fond thoughts as well as anxieties about their wellbeing. The many knitting groups would have provided camaraderie and a sense of shared purpose amongst the women and provided some solace at times of loss. Hughes’ works seek to embody all these nuances.

The meanings embedded in both the Passchendaele and Home Front series are also the subject of a third set of works that Hughes has created as part of her World War I suite, where she inserts her own experience as a contemporary

reflection on the war a century later. On a visit to the Western Front sites in 2015, she traced the men’s advances and retreats on the battlefields, imagining the mud and carnage she had read about, but finding the land returned to the neat fields that preceded the war. In these works on Rives paper, photographs that she took of the restored landscape are overprinted with handwritten text, newspaper clippings and maps, conjoining past and present, and acknowledging once again the contributions of the thousands of volunteers who had served, whether in the armed forces or on the home front. The overlaid imagery, a pictorial collage unified with the muted colour of gouache washes, captures something of the complex layers of meaning that infuse the history of the war – and her works.

A number of historians remark how little known Passchendaele is to New Zealanders, Glyn Harper in particular expressing the hope that his writing will ensure that it ‘will remain an untold story no longer’.<sup>5</sup> Robyn Hughes’ works – which stand at the interface of art and commemoration – fulfil the same mission in visual form.

<sup>1</sup> Fourteen miles long and three miles at its widest point, the Salient was exposed to German attack, and suffered casualties at a rate of 7000 a week without taking any offensive action (Glyn Harper, *Massacre at Passchendaele*, 2000, 16).

<sup>2</sup> *In Flanders Fields*, 2006, 65.

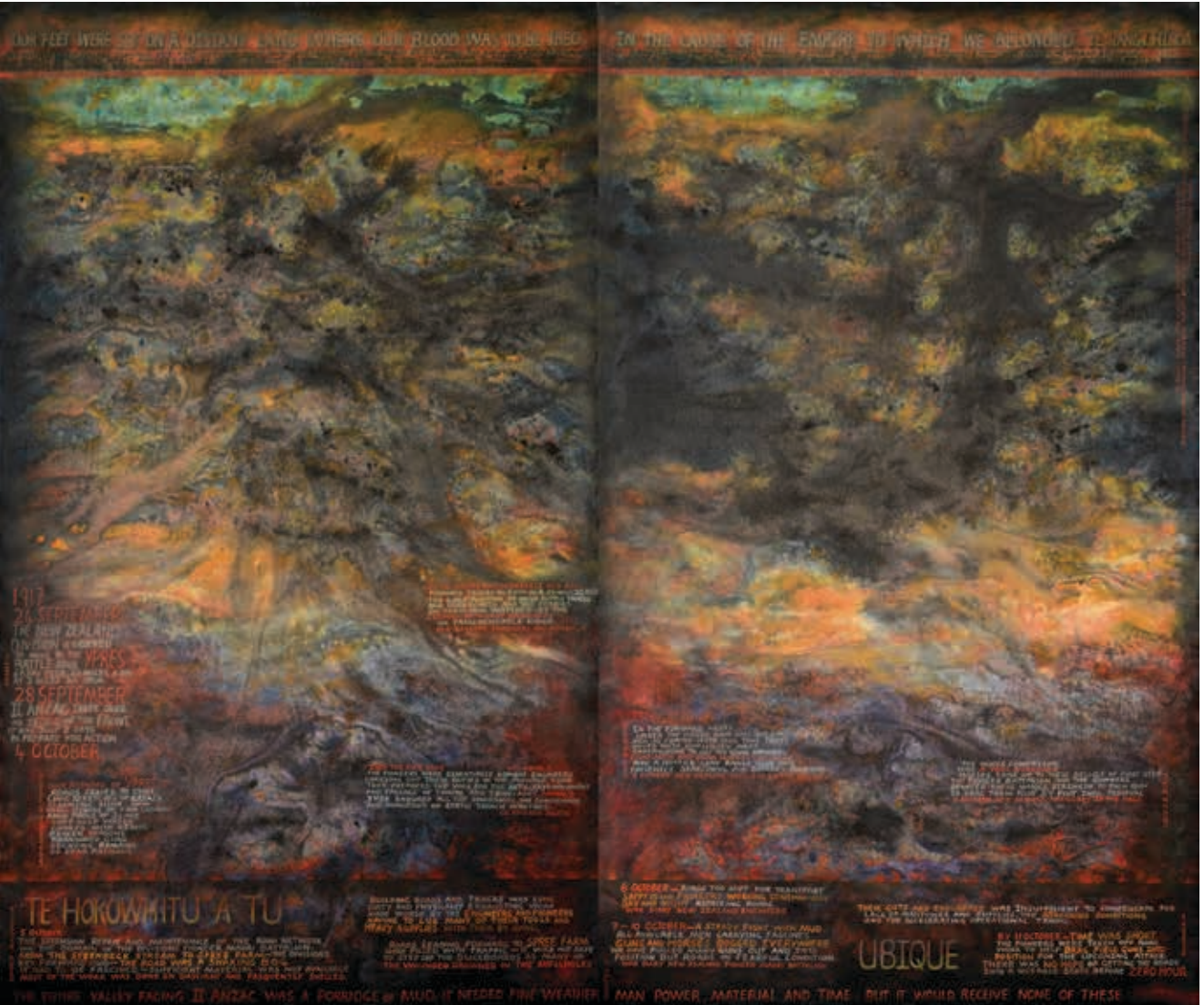
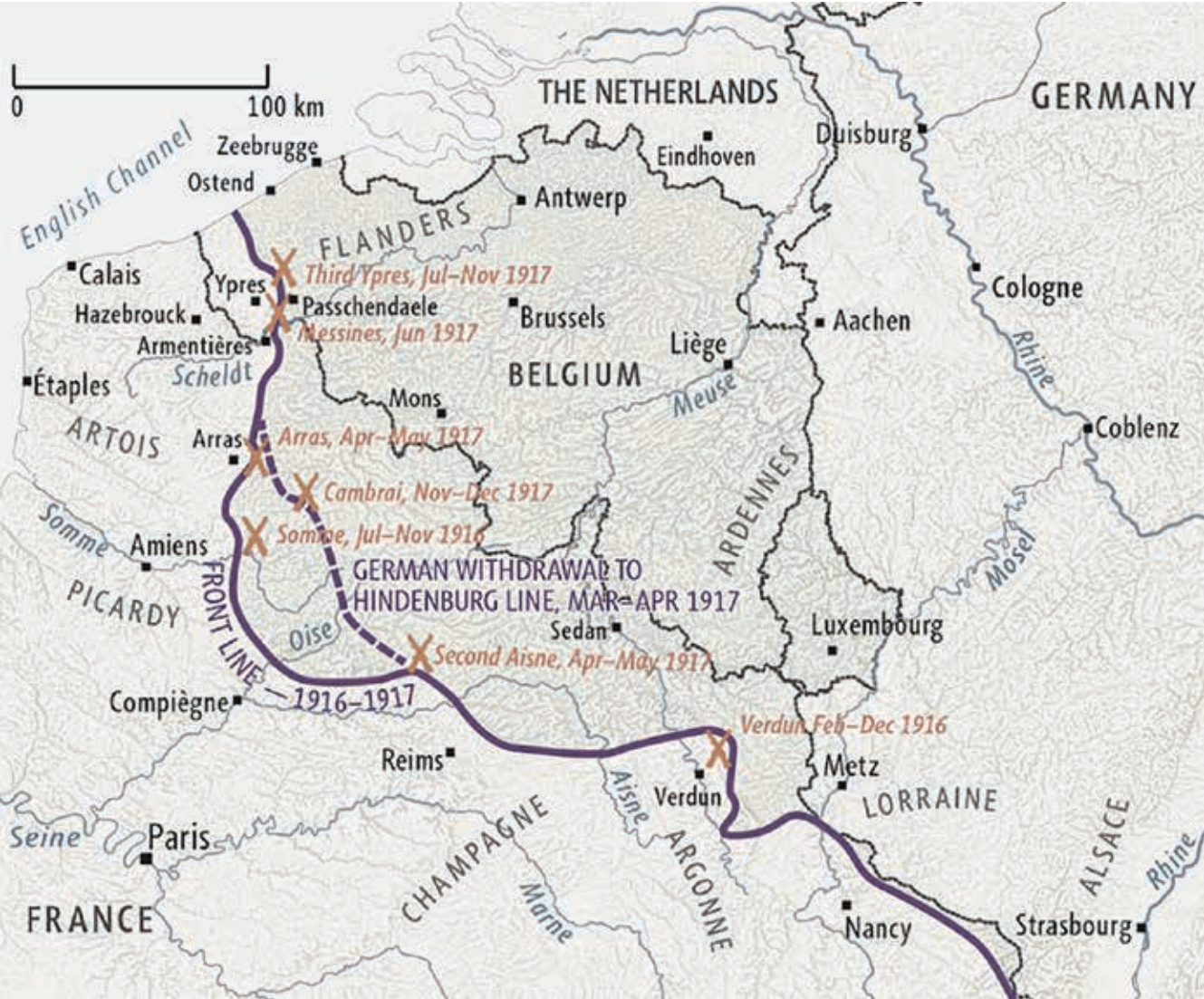
<sup>3</sup> Not all sources agree on the exact figures: these are from New Zealand History online <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/tyne-cot-cemetery>. New Zealand’s government made the decision that the country’s soldiers be buried and commemorated near the battlefields where they had fallen, rather than at the main memorial site for Ypres at Menin Gate. More are buried at nearby Buttes and Messines cemeteries.

<sup>4</sup> Heather Nicholson records figures from the New Zealand Red Cross Record: the Canterbury depot alone received 64,126 sewn and knitted items in the first six months of 1916, a reflection of extraordinary dedication and labour (*The Loving Stitch*, 1998, 86).

<sup>5</sup> Harper, *Massacre*, 11.

THE WESTERN FRONT  
1916 - 1917. Geographx, Fenton & Lord.

IN THE CAUSE OF THE EMPIRE  
Acrylic on canvas. 2016





ZERO HOUR

1 2 T H    O C T O B E R    •    B E L L E V U E    S P U R    •    1 9 1 7

O.E. Burton. *The Silent Division*

*New Zealanders at the Front 1914 – 1919. Chapter XXIII, the Battlefield of Ypres.*

‘FROM THE AFTERNOON OF THE 4TH  
OCTOBER HEAVY AND CONTINUOUS  
RAIN FELL ON THE BATTLEFIELD.’

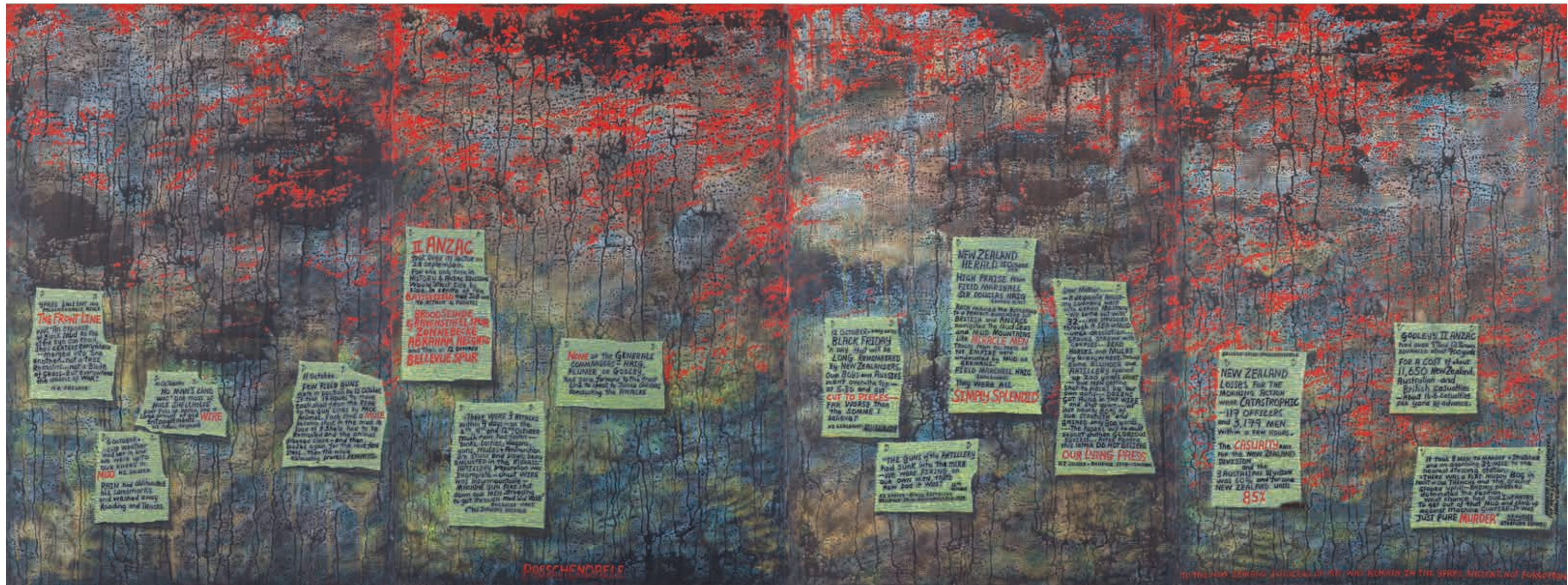
‘The torn earth relapsed into a morass... carrying parties floundered forward sometimes waist deep in mud, taking perhaps two or three hours to move forward across a mile of ground. Pack mules were bogged... the task of making passable tracks and restoring roads was a hopeless one. The artillery men had the herculean task in moving forward the field guns... through the slough. But when with almost incredible labor they had the guns in position, they could find no stable platforms in the mire. Dumps of ammunition could not be pushed forward... so shells had to be carried forward by the men themselves. As for the heavies – the howitzers – they could not be moved at all. The enemy strongholds on Bellevue Spur were practically undamaged and the great belts of barbed wire in front of them were still intact. This was the position when the New Zealand 2nd and 3rd brigades took their place in the line in readiness for the attack at 5.25 a.m on 12th October.’



WAIST DEEP IN MUD OCTOBER 11TH, 1917.  
Mixed media on paper, 2016.

LIMITS OF ENDURANCE  
Mixed media on paper, 2016.





WALKING ZONNEBEKE  
Mixed media on paper, 2016.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?  
Mixed media on paper, 2016.



BATTLEFIELD, OCTOBER 1917  
Official Australian Photo PA COLL-1547-04-1/217

VISIT TO PASSCHENDAELE 2015  
Photograph. R. Hughes.





A SEA OF MUD  
Mixed media on paper, 2016.

TYNE COT, ZONNEBEKE, BELGIUM  
Mixed media on paper, 2016.





A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

Design - Hannah Gordon

Photography - Paul & Sherrill Cutler, Andy Taylor, Ken Downie

Introduction - Greg Hall, Writer and Director of The Passchendaele Society Inc.

Essay - Elizabeth Rankin, Professor Emeritus, University of Auckland

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L I B R A R I E S   &   C O L L E C T I O N S

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AND ARTS  
TE KÖPŪTU A TE WHANGA A TOI

**NORTHART**