

HEROES AND VILLAINS

Gustavus von Tempsky was one of New Zealand history's great characters. Yet we remain understandably wary of glorifying his deeds, explains a historian who worked on this week's TV documentary about the man's remarkable life. BY DANNY KEEGAN

Historians often ask themselves, what are we to make of prominent men and women who inhabit ambivalent historical landscapes?

Did the Italians adore Mussolini or did they revile him? The fact that he was strung up by his toes tells us something – or perhaps it tells us nothing. General Charles Gordon of Khartoum was treated equally harshly by the Mahdi – was it deserved or not? Ned Kelly, scourge of civilised Australia and later hanged – hero or common criminal?

In New Zealand, we have long had our share of people who remain enigmas. The 19th century is full of men and women who made names for themselves and were larger than life, but who now possess an uneasy place in history.

Edward Gibbon Wakefield is one of these – rogue and financial dealer or colonising visionary? The jury is still out. It still galls a little that he would later claim to be “father of the nation”. George Grey was horrified. Not so, he said. If there was to be a “father of the nation”, then, said Grey, “it should be me”. It was an inane argument, of course.

Grey was the master of intrigue, a man of immense contradictions. From the heights of his governorship in 1863, he would later preside over the most dysfunctional ministry we have ever seen, from 1877 to 1879.

At least that ministry produced John Ballance, later to become Native Minister and friend of Maori. But his statue was beheaded by Whanganui Maori occupying Moutua Gardens in 1995.

Ballance is remembered by history as the first Liberal Premier, an industrial and social reformer. But to Maori, he continued the massive purchases of their lands. It was Maori land that he offered to his new constituents, small farmers. And locally, he was the one who made the Parihaka leases perpetual; Maori land never to be in Maori hands. Quite an ambivalent place in history, and one that Whanganui Maori acted on.

Donald McLean was also Native Minister, and another ambiguous character. He presided over Maori affairs from 1869 to

1876, and won huge respect from Maori, increasing Native Department funds massively.

But he also refused Maori demands that the confiscations cease, that the Native Land Court be reined in, and that Maori be granted political autonomy. These days, McLean would almost defy any biographer – what are we to make of him?

GUSTAVUS VON Tempsky was also a man of contradictions. Goldminer, correspondent, settler socialite, Forest Ranger fighting Maori – von Tempsky fits the bill as an enigmatic figure.

Like most of our 19th-century settlers, he came here with a firm purpose – to make his fortune on the Coromandel goldfields. Although disappointed with what he discovered there, he did impress as a writer, corresponding regularly for the *Daily Southern Cross*.

Little in his strict Prussian upbringing prepared him for New Zealand. An early education based around military tactics and classics in Potsdam proved a far cry from a hard life deep in the Coromandel diggings or the primordial Taranaki bush.

On his way from Prussia to New Zealand, von Tempsky did stop off for a time in Central America. He moved to the Mosquito Coast in 1846, aged 18, and joined a Prussian settlement of miners colonising the continent. It was a bold move.

Von Tempsky seemed always to be restless. He drifted north to California in 1849, partly because of his thwarted desire to marry Emelia Bell. Making little headway in the goldfields, he journeyed back to the Prussian colony, now struggling to survive. The trip took 18 months, and it was a journey “fraught with danger and adventure”, as he would later recount in his book *Mitla*.

Still restless, von Tempsky moved his family to Australia in 1858 and worked for a time in the severe Bendigo gold diggings. He found Victoria to be harsh



and unforgiving, a barren land “without soul or redemption”.

In a bizarre twist of fate, he was passed over as leader of an expedition to explore the vast unmapped Australian interior. The expedition, jointly led by Robert Burke and Williams Wills, was a spectacular failure, with both men perishing in the desert.

GOLD ONCE AGAIN caught von Tempsky's imagination, and he moved to the Coromandel in 1862. This brought him face to face with his nemesis – the Maori. He later said he thought that Maori were great fighters, but they

were also stubborn and single-minded.

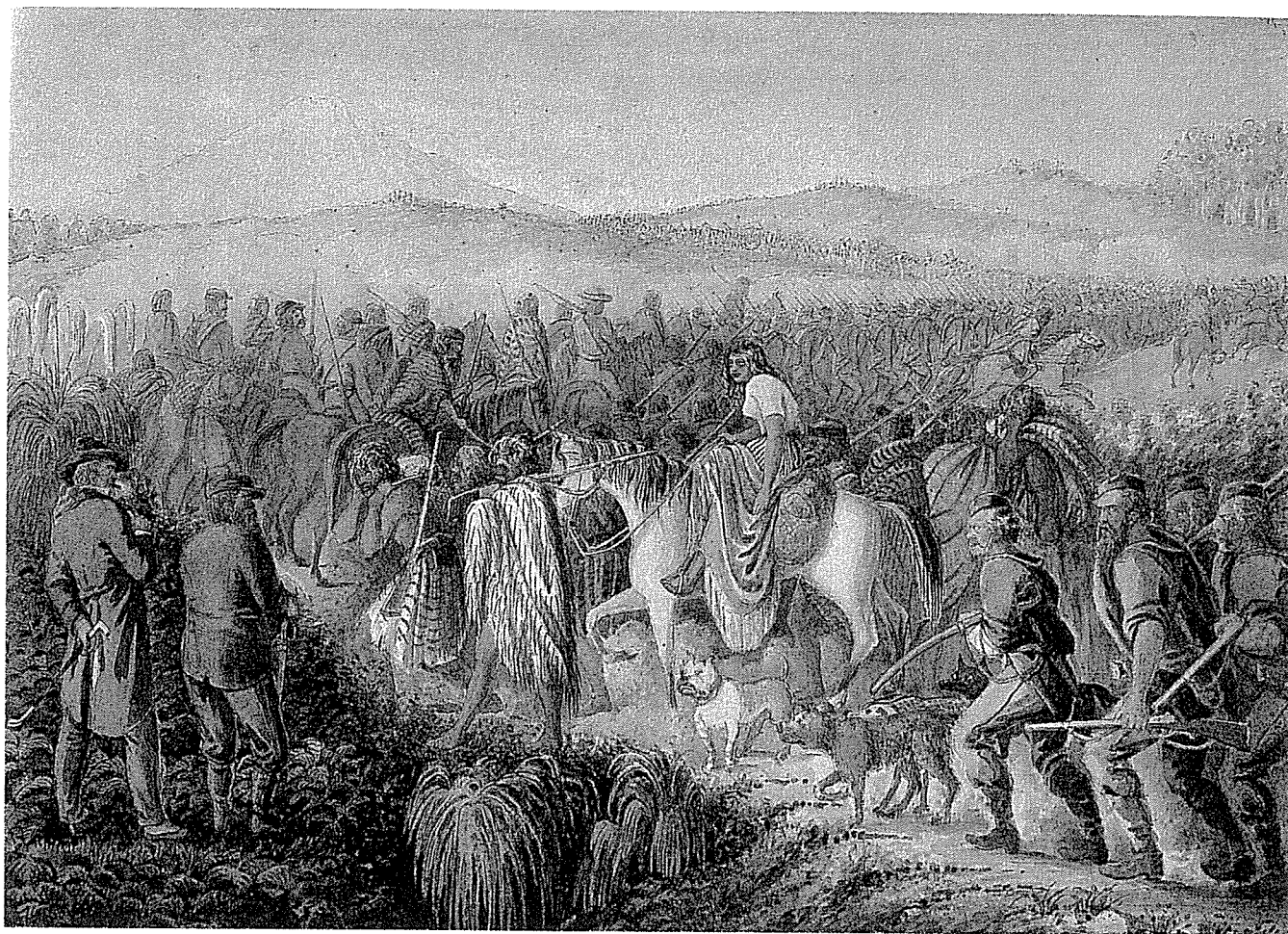
When war broke out in the Waikato, following Grey's invasion in 1863, von Tempsky was excited. He had seen action before, as a member of the Royal Bluefields Militia, and later as a naval volunteer, fighting against Nicaragua in Central America in 1847. He was lured to the fray once again.

The British were recruiting volunteers to fight against “rebellious Maori” in the Waikato. Von Tempsky said he would recruit a force of goldminers, but his offer was declined.

He was not easily deterred. He turned his attention to the Forest Rangers, being recruited to match Maori fighters in the bush. This was a task for which the British were considered to be singularly unsuited.

Von Tempsky accompanied a raiding party of Forest Rangers as a correspondent. But it was soon clear that he was no ordinary writer. He had good military skills and was promptly recruited into the Rangers as a commissioned officer.

As a Forest Ranger, von Tempsky was soon introduced to Thomas MacDonnell, who would later take overall command of the Armed Constabulary. MacDonnell is remembered as a man of high principle, but dubious military nous. In 1868, he marched the Armed Constabulary and



Above, von Tempsky's painting "On General Chute's March, West Coast" (1866). He has drawn himself, carrying his trademark sword. Left, von Tempsky in his Forest Ranger uniform in 1863.

Kupapa Maori into a disastrous defeat at Te Ngutu o te Manu. He faced mutiny and was dismissed. Today, he is not a well-known figure. But, along with most of our British and settler military leadership, he sits in a sharply contested historical space.

MacDonnell and von Tempsky were together during the dangerous reconnaissance mission at Paparata in 1863. This action earned von Tempsky a commission as captain. However, he did not receive the decoration, which was retrospectively awarded to MacDonnell in 1886.

Von Tempsky took part in most of the later engagements of the Waikato war, fighting alongside the British Army, after the Maori King's home was taken in December 1863. He was present at the massacre at Rangiaowhia, an event he described in detail.

He was also later witness to the Maori retreat at Orakau. By some accounts, he joined the pursuit and slaughter of Maori fleeing for the safety of the Puniu Stream. Other accounts suggest that he witnessed the pursuit and killing of Maori with horror and disgust.

Von Tempsky later saw action in Wanganui and in south Taranaki, but he is said to have been humiliated when passed over for higher command. He was arrested for disobeying orders and placed

on trial, which received sensational press coverage. Von Tempsky won huge public sympathy, and the charges laid against him were dismissed.

IN 1865 AND 1866, von Tempsky rejoined the column and took part in General Chute's "scorched earth" march around Mt Taranaki. It was an operation designed to destroy Maori villages and Maori capacity for waging war. During this campaign, he further developed his talent for fine literal painting.

After 1866, during a lull in the fighting, von Tempsky returned to his family in Auckland. He was a charming dinner guest, an accomplished musician and, by all accounts, a great singer. But the final chapter in von Tempsky's life was also the most tragic. When Titokowaru's war broke out in south Taranaki in 1868, he rejoined the fray. He was posted to Hawera as Inspector (Major) in the Armed Constabulary, under the command of MacDonnell.

When the nearby redoubt at Turuturumokai was attacked in the dead of night, von Tempsky wanted to assist. But he was stopped by fellow officer William Hunter, with whom he had a furious midnight row.

Many of his closest friends were killed there. Von Tempsky was sure that an attack upon Titokowaru's bush base camp was necessary. By some accounts, he now seemed tired of frontier bush-fighting. Maori warriors were resilient, and difficult to beat. The last photos taken before his death reflect advancing age and weariness.

The attack on Te Ngutu o te Manu would be his last foray. Von Tempsky commanded a company of sodden and tired Constabulary ordered to outflank Titokowaru. He wanted to mount an attack from the rear, but it was a trap. His men were being cut down by a furious fusillade of fire coming from the bush around the pa.

He died before the stronghold was even reached.

This week's documentary *Von Tempsky's Ghost* seeks to answer some of the questions raised by the celebrated life and strange death of this remarkable new settler, who strode across New Zealand's troubled landscape like a German colossus, but was ultimately consumed by the fires that he helped fan among its ferns.

DNZ: Von Tempsky's Ghost, TV1, Monday, 8