

## 10. Neville Phillips and the Mother Country

Jock Phillips

Neville Crompton Phillips (1916–2001), later Professor of History at the University of Canterbury, served in the Royal Artillery from 1939 to 1946. He served from the ages of twenty-three to thirty—years of young adulthood that are usually thought of as among the defining period of a person's life, when attitudes are shaped and life courses chosen. This was a time spent in military service witnessing traumatic events, so the expectation might be that the war years would shape his world view and approach to history for the rest of his life. But this is not really a story of change, so much as one of affirmation. The effect of participation in World War II was not to alter radically Neville Phillips' view of the past, but to confirm his views. It gave new content to his historical work, but not a fundamentally different approach.

Essentially, Neville Phillips' world view was already firmly in place by 1939. To explain this we must explore a little of his family background. His father, Samuel Phillips, was born and brought up in the Jewish East End of London.<sup>1</sup> The name suggests that the family was one of the long line of English Jews, but Samuel's mother was a German immigrant and presumably part of that large influx of Ashkenazi Jews who flooded into the East End at the end of the nineteenth century. The Phillips family lived on Mile End and Sam's father pursued the classic Jewish line of work as a 'clother's cutter'. It was an area of poverty and overcrowding, and in the first years of the twentieth century there was growing anti-Jewish feeling, spearheaded especially by the British Brothers' League, set up in 1902 to restrict Jewish immigration. Whether these were the reasons for young Sam Phillips' departure for New Zealand aged seventeen in 1904 we do not know. Certainly, seven years after his arrival, he married a non-Jewish woman, Clara (known as Claire) Bird, so he had clearly broken with orthodox Jewish traditions of marrying within the race; but Neville Phillips did remember being taken to the synagogue as a young boy,<sup>2</sup> and in New Zealand Sam continued in the clothing trade by becoming a travelling salesman of women's clothing. Whether this was what attracted Clara Bird to him is unclear, but certainly her niece remembers that Clara, who was tall and elegant, had an eye for fashion and enjoyed displaying Sam's samples.<sup>3</sup> The family moved about New Zealand as Sam

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1 Death certificate of Samuel Phillips, 1891 UK Census.

2 Neville Phillips, Interview with author, 12 February 1997.

3 Notes written by Elizabeth Winifred Rathgen, 1987.

pursued his vocation, and, in 1923, when Neville was aged seven, the family was living in Wanganui. Then occurred the traumatic event of my father's life. Sam had taken Neville and some of his friends for a picnic in the December sun at Hipango Park. This was a bush reserve 25 km up the Whanganui River and accessible only by boat. It is said that Neville told his friends to watch his father dive into the river. He did so, but sadly could not swim and Neville apparently saw his father's legs go round and round. The coroner decided that he was accidentally drowned, although teetotal members of Clara's family were convinced that 'strong drink was involved'.<sup>4</sup>

So, at the age of seven, Neville Phillips was left fatherless. His mother, Clara Bird, daughter of a policeman born in India and a mother, Helen Stewart, originally from Maidenhead in Berkshire (near Windsor), earned her living by working as a receptionist in pubs across the lower part of the North Island. She was given accommodation in the pubs, so Neville and his older brother, David, had to find other accommodation. At one stage, Neville certainly lived with his grandmother in Christchurch, but more often he boarded with families in the lower North Island. He was an able child, and managed to win a gold medal as dux at a primary school in Dannevirke and he also won a scholarship that provided a few pounds to help him go on to high school. So in 1928, not yet aged twelve, he went to Dannevirke High School in the same third-form class as his brother, David, who was more than three years older. At Dannevirke, he remembered especially his first classes in Latin and being encouraged in his academic interests by a master called Hogben, the son of the great Secretary of Education (1899–1915), George Hogben. Neville remembered Hogben because he apparently favoured Neville over a girl who had actually done much better in the scholarship examination. At the end of the year, Neville's mother shifted from a Dannevirke pub to a Palmerston North pub, so Neville was transferred to Palmerston North to board with another family and went to the local boys' high school. His brother started work as a mechanic in a local garage.<sup>5</sup>

Neville was at Palmerston North Boys' High from 1929 to 1931—from the ages of thirteen to fifteen. Most of the boys were middle class, and Neville remembered all his life his excruciating shame that when the headmaster invited his form to a party he was the only one who did not have a suit. He was acutely aware of his difference from his peers: he was not only much poorer and lived as a boarder in a strange house, but he was Jewish and considerably younger than most of his classmates. His position as an outsider might have turned him into a social and even political rebel, especially since there were others at the school with a left-wing persuasion such as Jack and Ernie Lewin.<sup>6</sup> It did not. Instead,

4 Death certificate of Samuel Phillips, 9 December 1923; Rathgen notes; Colonial Inquest file for Samuel Phillips, Archives New Zealand (Wellington), Records of the Department of Justice, J46, 1923/1146.

5 Rathgen notes; Neville Phillips, Interview with author, 12 February 1997.

6 Bruce Hamilton, *Palmerston North Boys' High School, 1902–2001* (Palmerston North, NZ, 2002), p. 137.

Neville found solace in two activities. The first was cricket. He had always been interested in sport, and in his younger years had followed closely the success of the Hawkes Bay Ranfurly Shield-winning rugby team. At Dannevirke, he had distinguished himself as a long-distance runner. At Palmerston North, he continued to run and play rugby, but his passion became cricket. Cricket was the 'big thing' at Palmerston North Boys' and the classics master, W. P. Anderson, took a special interest in Neville and encouraged his ability to bowl leg-breaks. The other focus of his life became English poetry. The English teacher was A. C. Zohrab. In his history of the school, Bruce Hamilton writes of Zohrab:

In a school devoted to the Spartan and the sporting he had opened new windows in his teaching of English and his production of plays. Boys felt a strong affection for this gentle man who hated the thought of war, but when Hitler unleashed war on the world he believed it was his duty to go, and he was killed in action in Italy in 1944.<sup>7</sup>

He took a shine to Neville, would invite him home, and directed his attention to the great body of English literature. He became a particular enthusiast for English pastoral poetry such as A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. So, feeling a degree of isolation because of his poverty, family situation and Jewishness, Neville came to identify with English culture—both its literary productions and its great game. History was not at this stage determinative in moving him in this direction, but in his last year he did remember studying nineteenth-century British history with a good teacher. This Anglophilia was not unusual among the Jewish community. The great Jewish American lawyer Felix Frankfurter also had a passionate love of England (he also 'grew up in less than prosperous circumstances').<sup>8</sup> What is also of interest is that despite his deprived childhood, Neville aspired to the respectable middle, even upper, class England, not its working-class traditions. It seemed he could escape reminders of his disrupted childhood by adopting a different class persona.<sup>9</sup>

In 1932, not yet sixteen, Neville decided to go to the Canterbury University College. Without any support from the school, and still in the lower sixth form, he had entered the university scholarship examination and won a senior scholarship. It gave him a few pounds to assist his time at university. His favourite teacher, A. C. Zohrab, had wanted him to get a job with the Palmerston North daily paper, but Neville had remembered walking with his father in Christchurch on the way to the synagogue, and as they passed the university grounds, his father said 'one day you should go to university'. Neville recalled thinking that this would become his aim. So he set off for Christchurch, lived

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 120. Interestingly, Neville paid a special visit to Zohrab's grave at Cassino in 1955.

<sup>8</sup> See Michael E. Parrish, *Felix Frankfurter and His Times: The reform years* (New York, 1982), pp. 5, 6–7, 240–1.

<sup>9</sup> Neville Phillips, Interview with author, 12 February 1997.

with his grandmother and got a job as a messenger for the *Sun* newspaper. Intending to study law, he enrolled in Latin and constitutional law.<sup>10</sup> In the latter, he came across James Hight who enticed him from law to history. It also made a difference that the history lectures were after 4 pm, which allowed him time to go to work. Hight was at the time Professor of History and Political Science and also Rector of Canterbury University College. Canterbury-born and educated, Hight set out to establish the career of serious academic historian. His standards were rigorous. Although he had researched and written on New Zealand history, especially *The Constitutional History and Law of New Zealand* with H. D. Bamford (1914), he always believed in the central importance of European history. Neville Phillips wrote of him in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*:

He did not see the Old World until advanced middle age, but throughout his life he was the dauntless foe of insularity and saw his own country as immovably founded on Western civilisation. It would be only a little fanciful to say that he held Richelieu and Mazarin barely less significant for New Zealand than the Maori seafarers and Edward Gibbon Wakefield.<sup>11</sup>

Hight's very first publication was an introduction and notes to Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. His second was a 300-page book, *The English as a Colonising Nation* (1903). So where Zohrab had led Neville Phillips to English poetry, Hight led to his appreciation of English imperial history. The interest in poetry did not die. At the *Sun*, Neville had at first been a messenger, then he worked in the reading room as a copy-holder. But on the side he began writing a regular weekly column of light verse, 'Sunspots', which, modelled on A. P. Herbert's light verse, made witty rhyming commentary on current events. It was a fashionable style. When the *Sun* closed, he was offered a position with the *Press*; and he sat next to Allen Curnow, who, as well as becoming a major New Zealand poet, would himself establish a reputation as writer of light topical verse under the pseudonym 'Whim Wham'.<sup>12</sup> At the *Press*, Neville became a subeditor on the cable page, which further developed his interest in overseas politics and news.<sup>13</sup> This was the mid-1930s, a time when the Labour Government was introducing a series of progressive social and political initiatives; Christchurch was also a place where interesting social and cultural activity was happening. Denis Glover had started the Caxton Press and was surrounded by a group of young

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10 Neville Phillips, Interview with author, 13 February 1997.

11 N. C. Phillips, 'Hight, James, 1870–1958', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 22 June 2007, <<http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>>

12 The first selection of Whim Wham verse to be published as a book was *A Present for Hitler and Other Verse* (Christchurch, 1941). Several other selections have since been published, most recently Terry Sturm (ed.), *Whim Wham's New Zealand: The best of Whim Wham, 1937–1988* (Auckland, 2005).

13 Neville Phillips, Interviews with author, 12 and 13 February 1997.

poets and intellectuals; Kennaway Henderson had established the left-wing monthly *Tomorrow*.<sup>14</sup> But Neville was not really interested in these local cultural developments; his eyes were on the Old World.

Neville did history honours and wrote a thesis under Hight entitled, 'New Zealand and the Mother Country'. It provides us with an excellent sense of Neville Phillips, the historian, in 1937. For a start, one might ask why the subject was New Zealand history, not British or European history. This was entirely understandable. As Chris Hilliard explains, a thesis in history did require a student to work in primary materials and almost no primary materials were available in non-New Zealand history at that stage. So of 363 history theses completed in New Zealand universities from 1920 to 1940, only 18 were not on New Zealand subjects.<sup>15</sup> There were some British *Parliamentary Papers* in the General Assembly Library in Wellington, but Neville continued to hold down a part-time job so travel to Wellington for research was out of the question. In the event, the primary sources he used were those available in Christchurch: the Parliamentary debates, what he called Parliamentary papers (also known as the *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*) and two Christchurch newspapers, the *Press* and *Lyttelton Times*. As for the subject matter, it was about New Zealand political history, but the focus was very much on New Zealand as part of the British Empire. The thesis (which is called on the spine 'New Zealand and the Mother Country, 1868–1901' and on the title page 'New Zealand's Relations with Great Britain, 1868–1901') had a subtitle 'A study in Empire unionism' and the title page also includes a quote from Alfred Lord Tennyson:

May we find, as ages run,  
The mother featured in the son.

The theme of the thesis is the move from colonial hostility towards the mother country to filial devotion. It begins at the end of the New Zealand Wars. Debate over the withdrawal of British troops and forced colonial self-reliance in defence had created a situation when, in Phillips' words: 'Never before or after was mutual regard between imperial and colonial governments at so low an ebb.'<sup>16</sup> The thesis ended at the turn of the century when New Zealand was keenly involved in providing services to the mother country in the South African War and deeply committed to membership of the Empire. It is a triumphant story of what Phillips calls 'Empire unionism'. He sees this as the voluntary commitment

14 Gordon Ogilvie, *Denis Glover: His life* (Auckland, 1999), ch. 7; Andrew Cutler, "'Tomorrow' Magazine: The case of the cultural shadow', in Pat Moloney and Kerry Taylor (eds), *Culture and the Labour Movement: Essays in New Zealand labour history* (Palmerston North, NZ, 1991), pp. 209–24.

15 Chris Hilliard, *The Bookmen's Dominion: Cultural life in New Zealand, 1920–1950* (Auckland, 2006), p. 87.

16 Neville Phillips, 'New Zealand's Relations with Great Britain, 1868–1901: A study in Empire unionism', MA thesis, Canterbury University College, Christchurch, 1937, p. 34.

of colonies to the Empire, creating a situation where the Empire acted as one; and he contrasted it with other forms of imperialism that were essentially rule by force. He sees the British Empire as the exemplar of international government where the colonies are allowed to develop their own identity yet remain forever British. In the first chapter of the thesis, he tries to explain this unique form of imperialism. He sees it as partly the fact that these were colonies of settlement, not exploitation, and that they were based in temperate, not tropical, areas of the world. He sees agriculture as crucial to creating happy British colonies, and he also sees the policy of *laissez faire* in both its economic guise and its political guise (encouraging self-government) as crucial. But he also points to something about the racial characteristic of the British: they were descended from Anglo-Saxons and '[i]n their veins ran the blood of these pioneers, strongly built men, self-reliant, democratic in instinct, and laborious as well as courageous in battle'.<sup>17</sup> It is interesting that in discussing these characteristics he always uses the adjective 'our': 'our success' in the Empire, 'our prowess as seamen', and so on. His identification with Britain is clear; and he also expresses his sense of the importance of British cultural hegemony to the working of the Empire.

In the arts and literature, London is still the Mecca of all Britons, and the writers of Britain are the writers of the Empire. Colonials make their pilgrimage to the Old land, Oxford admits sons of the dominions, British statesmen meet in conference every four years and there are many British conferences of interest other than political.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, in light of Neville Phillips' future writings, the first chapter includes several quotations from the eighteenth-century political theorist of enlightened conservatism Edmund Burke.

Three points are worth making about the thesis. First, the thesis is written with considerable literary grace and without a grammatical or spelling error in sight. It is a fine work of literature of the conventional imperial style. Second, it is not really surprising that Neville Phillips praised the British Empire and British culture. New Zealand in the 1930s was a small, provincial society. As John Beaglehole wrote when he was travelling to London in 1926, it was excellent to be in 'a part of the earth that has really some history behind it & not just a few tuppenny-ha'penny scraps and tenth-rate politics'.<sup>19</sup> Expatriation was a well-recognised cultural phenomenon of the time and anyone who aspired to serious engagement with great minds was likely to go offshore.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand—and this is our third point—Neville Phillips showed some interest in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Tim Beaglehole, *A Life of J. C. Beaglehole: New Zealand scholar* (Wellington, 2006), p. 84.

<sup>20</sup> See Doug Munro, 'Becoming an Expatriate: J. W. Davidson and the brain drain', *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, 2–3 (2003–04), pp. 19–43.



New Zealand nationalism. The thesis concludes with a portrait of some of the leading political lights of colonial New Zealand. Among these, he describes Richard Seddon (Prime Minister from 1893 to 1906), whom he recognises as stimulating national pride. But he also emphasises the limits of this national spirit: 'Seddon was the chief of those who fostered the "mother complex", the tradition of filial respect, and he, more than any other, created for New Zealand the role of the spoiled child of Britain.'<sup>21</sup> There is a hint here that, perhaps, if only briefly, Phillips was being affected by those stronger currents of nationalism in New Zealand of the 1930s. This, after all, was a time when there was some anger at New Zealand's economic dependence on the United Kingdom and there were clear signs of cultural nationalism—not only writers outside the academy such as James Cowan but also those who had been students just before Neville Phillips and aspired to a richer cultural life within New Zealand that would confront distinctive New Zealand issues. There were intellectuals emerging such as John Mulgan, Denis Glover, Allen Curnow, Frank Sargeson, Douglas Lilburn and, not long to appear, the historian Keith Sinclair. If so, then Phillips was paying but a brief nod in that direction. For the dominant impulse of the thesis is that acceptance of Britain's culture was but the logical response for a provincial culture and that the political reconciliation with the mother country by 1900 was a triumph, not a tragedy. In his personal circumstances, Neville Phillips had suffered economically in the 1930s and experienced a sense of being marginal. This might perhaps have turned his anger against the Empire. Instead, the reverse happened and the Empire beckoned.

So, in 1938, he applied for and—on the strength of the overseas examiner's report—was awarded a postgraduate scholarship to study in Britain, beating out other talented historians such as Jim Davidson.<sup>22</sup> He had long aspired to go to Oxford University—the high academy of imperial values. But the postgraduate award was only sufficient to pay for him to go to London. He would have headed there, but in 1937, the year he wrote his thesis, he had met and fallen in love with another member of the history honours class, Pauline Palmer, whom he married three years later.<sup>23</sup> The granddaughter of a Christchurch banker and daughter of a Hawkes Bay farmer, she was educated at Woodford House for girls. She too was educated in a love of England and she brought with her the values of the rural squattocracy. Her sister, Patricia, had married Jim Nelson, a descendant of the Williams family. Following his schooling at Christ's College, where he was head prefect, Jim went off to Merton College, Oxford, in the early 1920s. There

21 Phillips, 'New Zealand's Relations with Great Britain', p. 264.

22 'Degree Results, 1937, Honours etc.' (uncatalogued), J. C. Beaglehole Room, Victoria University of Wellington Library.

23 At the time, postgraduate history students in New Zealand were identified in their theses and sat their examinations under code names rather than their real names. It is a prescient coincidence that Pauline's and Neville's code names were alphabetically contiguous: 'Also' and 'Alter', respectively. W. J. Gardner, E. T. Beardsley and T. E. Carter, *A History of the University of Canterbury, 1873–1973* (Christchurch, 1973), p. 242n.

he studied forestry and also rowed in the college's boat. Jim looked on those years with real affection, and was determined that Neville should experience Oxford college life, too. So he offered to lend sufficient money to Neville to allow him to go to Oxford. In gratitude for this support, Neville wrote every few months back to Jim and Patricia, and it is thanks to this correspondence that we know something about the Oxford and war years.

Neville applied to Jim's old college and in September 1938 he entered Merton College. At the time, he did not see himself as a future historian. His intention was to continue his journalistic career, so he decided to enrol as an undergraduate in philosophy, politics and economics (PPE). He recalled later that while at Oxford he wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* inquiring about a job as a leader writer.<sup>24</sup> But for the next year it was Oxford that fulfilled all his dreams. 'Dreams'—because the reality of Oxford study was not all that he had hoped. Neville was academically ambitious but he did not enjoy his relations with his tutors and found difficult the strain of writing two long essays a week. At least in describing the life to his future brother-in-law and fellow Merton man, Neville's enthusiasm was fired by the wider Oxford environment. It gave him the chance to escape his colonial and socially deprived past and live out a dream of English aristocratic culture. He rapidly became a passionate Merton loyalist, and was delighted when in the second term he was able to move into college with a view over the fellows' garden to the fields. His letters are full of the politics of the junior common room. By the end of the year, he had been appointed college correspondent for the magazine *Isis*, and tasked with penning a witty record of college doings every fortnight.<sup>25</sup> He went punting on the Cherwell and took a header into the river.<sup>26</sup> He became a devoted college sportsman, playing on the wing for the college rugby team and reporting at length (partly for Jim's benefit) on the college's rowing crew's efforts to 'bump' their way up river. Pauline Palmer had followed Neville to England and was training as a teacher in London. She came up and watched one 'division of toggers'<sup>27</sup>; she apparently thought 'it all savoured too much of the Old School Tie',<sup>28</sup> but Neville thought it was exciting when there was a personal stake in the outcome.

At Christmas, Pauline and Neville went off to Paris, which Neville regarded as 'infinitely more beautiful' than London—'a wretched place'.<sup>29</sup> Together, they went to four plays—a practice Neville continued in Oxford. With Pauline, he also discovered the 'beautiful' English countryside. They managed to meet for

24 Neville Phillips, Interview with author, 13 February 1997.

25 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 11 July 1939.

26 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 30 May 1939.

27 Toggers were the so-called 'Torpid' races among college rowing crews but excluding those who had been in the college eight the previous year.

28 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 5 March 1939.

29 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 29 January 1939.



weekends and there would be walks around Oxford such as along the Thames with tea at 'the Trout Inn'. As warm weather arrived, he became ecstatic at how 'the spring simply changes the face of the earth in England' and he savoured 'the old James II mulberry tree in the garden' where the dons played bowls.<sup>30</sup> There were cycling trips to villages in Berkshire and the Cotswolds; and when Pauline's parents arrived in early summer, they visited gardens and, under Pauline's tutelage, Neville began to learn about English cathedrals and the 'differences between Norm. and E.E. and Dec. and Perp'.<sup>31</sup> Pauline's father took Neville off to a day's test cricket at Lords. Neville looked forward to a vacation to be spent in a small village in Shropshire (no doubt inspired by A. E. Housman) where he could catch up on work. At Oxford there were also the clubs and lectures. Neville was elected (thanks to James Hight's influence) to the Raleigh Club—an exclusive group of 36 who discussed Empire affairs. Before long, he had been made secretary and was marked out as the next president, and the club heard 'fighting imperialist speeches' from assorted aristocrats. He was less enthusiastic about another club: 'The inevitable New Zealanders' club has been formed and I hang my head to think that I've been roped in.'<sup>32</sup> It was called the Pakeha Club. At the first annual dinner in the Merton Senior Common room, the High Commissioner, W. K. Jordan, spoke. The event ended in true Kiwi style when a Balliol man let off a fire extinguisher, and the club president was summoned to the 'Principal of the postmasters' to explain.<sup>33</sup>

So for all his adoration of things imperial and English, Neville could not escape his New Zealand origins. On more than one occasion he acknowledged the presence of other New Zealanders at Oxford and admitted having to vote against one in Merton College politics. He also commented on New Zealand political events. He wrote the day after Walter Nash, the New Zealand Minister of Finance, arrived in England in May 1939 on 'a distasteful mission' of renewing a loan and placating the British and commented: 'Frankly, I'm sorry that New Zealand is so dependent on this country.'<sup>34</sup> There were also some signs of a slight change in his political views. He admitted to attending on one evening a meeting of the Labour Club to hear G. D. H. Cole speak on trade unionism and the need for more militancy. Phillips admired his 'beautifully clear mind', but could not empathise with his outlook and expressed great amusement at the 'common vocative, "Comrades", on the grounds that "Mr" is so beastly bourgeois'.<sup>35</sup> There was also in late February a meeting at the Oxford Town Hall where Stafford Cripps spoke in favour of the Popular Front. Neville especially

30 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 30 May 1939.

31 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 11 July 1939.

32 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 20 May 1939.

33 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 11 July 1939.

34 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 30 May 1939. See also Keith Sinclair, *Walter Nash* (Auckland, 1976), ch. 14.

35 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 29 January 1939.

applauded his attacks on Chamberlain, for he agreed that ‘in international dealings this present government has neither honour nor acumen’. The shadows of war were lengthening, and Neville concluded his account: ‘British foreign “policy” has drifted for so long that it is now next to impossible for us to get out of the present mess without dishonour or without war.’<sup>36</sup>

The year in Oxford had confirmed for Neville Phillips the excitement and stimulus of living in a place with real culture, tradition and history. The reality of England confirmed the dream he had had since his days as a Palmerston North schoolboy, but the outbreak of war confronted him with a tough choice. There was never much doubt where he would stand. In November 1939, he wrote to Jim Nelson that he had left Oxford and was waiting in London to be called up. He admitted that it was not an enjoyable decision and at times he considered himself ‘an utter fool’. He did not relish fighting, but it was a just war, and ‘it seemed unfair that, after sharing the privileges of Englishmen, as I have done at Oxford, I should shirk their responsibilities’—apart from the fact that ‘New Zealand is as closely interested as England in unseating Hitler’.<sup>37</sup> So the loyal imperialist, the man who had always dreamed of the wonders of English culture, was forced to pay for his beliefs and he did not shirk from the responsibilities. Later he was quite frank that war scared him. But he decided that he could serve in as safe a way as possible. As an Oxford student, he was fairly certain of being awarded a commission as an officer, and was promised this when interviewed at Oxford within the first month of war. Further, he quickly decided to choose the artillery because this would place him far from the front and therefore in a less exposed situation.<sup>38</sup> So he chose his war service—an officer in the artillery it would be.<sup>39</sup>

After a couple of weeks waiting round, which he used learning German and brushing up on trigonometry for range-finding, he was formally called up in mid-November 1939. Two weeks later, he decided that army life was ‘much overrated’. He had been sent to spend three months as a private learning the basics at Gosforth on the Hampshire coast. The food, he noted, would do for ‘Lord Bledisloe’s pigs’,<sup>40</sup> but was inadequate for adult men and he expressed jealousy of the rations allowed New Zealand soldiers as reported in the *Weekly News*. The bathing arrangements were primitive—two baths, no showers, very

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36 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 5 March 1939.

37 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 3 November 1939.

38 Neville Phillips, Interview with author, 15 February 1997.

39 Interestingly, Pauline Phillips claims that Neville’s old mentor James Hight was furious that he had abandoned Oxford to become a soldier.

40 Charles Bathurst, First Viscount Bledisloe, was Governor-General of New Zealand, 1930–35.

little hot water—and all for 200 men.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, after working from 6 am to 4 pm every day, they could then unwind, which is perhaps why Neville remembered the period later as ‘the most relaxed period of his life’.<sup>42</sup>

He found ‘many barbarians’ among his fellows, but also some who were congenial, including, to his delight, a Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge, next door. There was also a chance for some leave, which included tea with the former New Zealand Labour MP Ormond Wilson, who, to Neville’s approval, had ‘come back from Russia very disgruntled with the Communistic experiment there’,<sup>43</sup> and also a week in Devon close to where Pauline was teaching and where he enjoyed cycling to attractive villages. Then followed five months at an officer cadet training unit at Larkhill on the Salisbury Plains. He worked hard doing papers on gunnery, map reading and, to his discomfort, learning about the insides of a motorcar. The food and bathing conditions were much improved.<sup>44</sup> Neville was quite pleased with the marks he received for the various tests. But he was disappointed at his final grade (C) and others suggested that this was because the grading officer had discriminated against him on the basis of his Jewish background.<sup>45</sup> The upshot was that he was not appointed to a divisional field regiment, but to a position of lesser status with an army field regiment (the 140th) based at Bournemouth. This experience did not lead to any radical alienation, nor were his class aspirations disturbed by his observation that the greatest strain in his life was the behaviour of certain cadets: ‘bad cases of arrested development, due, I fear, to the curbing influence of the English public school. They still get adolescent enjoyment out of drinking excessively and still more out of talking about it.’<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, he wrote of his enjoyment of the regimental sports when the cadets all sipped tea under a marquee that savoured of a ‘parish garden party’;<sup>47</sup> and he continued to find solace in the cultural traditions around him. There were visits to nearby Stonehenge and Salisbury with its cathedral, and a weekend at Winchester where the cathedral was explored, and he also took an approving look at Winchester College—the oldest of the public schools.<sup>48</sup>

Then followed some two years of training at various places in the United Kingdom—at Lincolnshire, Berkshire, Motherwell in Scotland, the Isle of Wight, Winchester, Sway in Hampshire and periodically back at Bournemouth. In November 1940, he married Pauline and in August the following year she gave birth to their first child, Elizabeth. How training and fatherhood changed his

41 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 4 December 1939.

42 Neville Phillips, Interview with author, 15 February 1997.

43 Ormond Wilson, *An Outsider Looks Back: Reflections on experience* (Wellington, 1982), ch. 6.

44 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 18 February 1940.

45 Neville Phillips, Interview with author, 15 February 1997.

46 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 3 May 1940.

47 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 3 May 1940.

48 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 13 March 1940.

world view is not very clear. The letters to Patricia and Jim become spasmodic and his memory of those years was not strong, so there are only isolated hints. He achieved steady promotion and by 1941 had reached the heights of being a captain. He became conscious that being an officer was certainly affecting him. He wrote: ‘One has to be somewhat of a bully—or more than somewhat—in order to force all the necessary knowledge down eight men’s throats and it’s good for the cultivation of that quality which the C.O. never tires of demonstrating—“the aggressive spirit”’.<sup>49</sup> We also get some hint of his character in those years from another interesting source: a reminiscence written by a signalman in the regiment who reported to Neville. In Joe Berry’s account, *Unwillingly to War*, ‘Captain Phillips’ comes across as quite a demanding officer with high standards. He was described as ‘a scholarly man who did not smile readily’<sup>50</sup> and who was in his element poring over maps. Yet there was another side. Joe Berry tells a lovely story that concerned Gunner Jonah who was in Neville’s troop. He came from south Wales where he had worked in his parents’ café, and he endured much ribbing about the affinity between chips and his chunky figure. One day Neville was teaching a course in which his ‘academic bent was given full rein’. But it was after lunch, it was warm, and most of the class was asleep. ‘Captain Phillips’ asked a question that no-one answered. He called on Jonah, who managed only a few mutterings. ‘Gradually the captain’s pose relaxed and a hint of a smile flickered at the corners of his mouth. In a voice with just the right amount of mock disbelief he asked, “Is this the face that launched a thousand chips?” There were roars of laughter.’<sup>51</sup>

Neville’s letters also suggest that he became increasingly intolerant of the Nazis; and interestingly, in a reversal of his earlier comfort about being in the artillery, he saw as one advantage of becoming a troop commander that he would then be positioned up front in a forward observation post directing the guns, ‘where you can see what havoc you’re working among the swine on the other side. And they are swine, have no doubt about it, especially the insolent, fanatical young Nazis. They have been schooled in evil and they must be destroyed.’<sup>52</sup> Eventually, after a nostalgic night and morning wandering around Oxford, where he found the view of Merton Fields ‘the same as ever—the best in England’, he heard in November 1942 that he was off to North Africa to join the First Army. The real war was to begin.

Neville landed at Bone in Tunisia in late January 1943. Two weeks later, he went into the line with the Hermann Göring regiment opposite. It was a ‘touchy sector’ and there were mines and Stuka bombers to be aware of. Joe Berry’s

49 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 2 January 1941.

50 Joe Berry, *Unwillingly to War* (Hull, UK, 1996), p. 8.

51 Ibid., pp. 17–18.

52 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 1 June 1941.

account presented the sector as rather more dangerous than Neville recalled, and Berry remembers one occasion when the troop slept in and he woke up to a torrent of abuse from Captain Phillips ‘for our damned slackness’.<sup>53</sup> But they had marked artillery dominance, and Neville was lucky to be saved from a potentially fatal moment. On the third day of action, he was returning on a motorbike from serving on a court-martial panel and was thrown. He hurt his leg, and this meant that he was unable to go forward with the infantry to serve in the observation post (OP) directing the guns. A replacement served instead and two days later the Germans surrounded the farmhouse where the OP was positioned. The officer and his two signalmen were found dead. Neville recalled this incident repeatedly and in a letter several months later he described it as a ‘bad day’ not only because of the deaths but also because he and the gunners were sprayed with machine-gun fire.<sup>54</sup> After a month of wet weather, he was involved in an attack on 23 April 1943. This time, Neville was up front as OP and, with some exhilaration, he watched the infantry move forward.

It was the beginning of the end in North Africa. Following the fall of Tunis and Bizerta, the Germans decided enough was enough. Neville was impressed with them. He described them even in retreat as a ‘tidy race’ and ‘a fine lot...fit, well fed and well clothed’. The Italians impressed him less. Neville was pleased at his booty: a nice sniper’s rifle and three machine guns. By 21 May, when he wrote to Patricia and Jim, he was enjoying a bivouac in an olive grove 180 m from the sea. He looked out on ‘ruins ancient and modern’—the ancient ruins of Carthage and the modern wrecks of ‘Boche and Wop planes’ at the airport. He found prices exorbitant and, interestingly, apart from two glasses of vermouth and muscat, all he had been able to buy was a fountain pen for 15 shillings so that he could write, and a volume of *Horace* with a translation in French—a bargain at two bob because no-one else was interested in the classics at this point.<sup>55</sup>

In late 1943, probably in November, Neville came with the 140 field regiment to Italy as part of the Fifth Army. There he shared the Allied line with the New Zealanders. The British Army was located at the waist of Italy, just north of Naples, with the route north blocked on the east by the Sangro River and on the west by high hills with the monastery of Monte Cassino overlooking the major route. We know little about Neville’s experiences there. He wrote one very brief and highly censored letter to Patricia and Jim in March 1944 in which he describes the rain and the mud and the accompaniment of his men singing *Drink to Me Only*. He writes of seeing many ruined villages. Although his unit

53 Berry, *Unwillingly to War*, p. 40.

54 Neville Phillips, Interview with author, 15 February 1997; Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 21 May 1943. The incident is also recalled by Berry, *Unwillingly to War*, pp. 42–3.

55 Neville Phillips to Patricia and Jim Nelson, 21 May 1943.

was based at Venafrò, about 16 km east of Cassino, he would talk in later years of the terrible psychological effect of the Monte Cassino monastery watching over all their doings, and when he came 10 years later to write about the New Zealanders' experiences in the crossing of the Sangro and the battle for Cassino, official records were supplemented with personal memory. But of the details of his experiences in Italy, we know only isolated bits. He would often speak of the capture of the Umbrian town of Perugia, which is recalled in Joe Berry's book, *Unwillingly to War*.<sup>56</sup> He was clearly impressed by the beauty of the Umbrian and Tuscan countryside, which he would remember fondly in later years. He learned to speak Italian and developed a taste for the local vino; and during those hard months of war he grew closer to the men around him, especially two who would become lifelong friends: Roland Foxwell (later a wine merchant in the south of England) and Edward Chadwyck-Healey. Chadwyck-Healey, the grandson of a distinguished lawyer who became a baronet, was educated at Eton, decorated in World War I, and became the Prime Warden of the Fishmongers Company and the Third Baronet of Wyphurst.<sup>57</sup> Neville's association with Sir Edward Chadwyck-Healey was the closest he came to the English aristocracy. But most of his Italian sojourn is largely a blank. He did write to Patricia and Jim again in November 1944. By that time, Cassino had fallen and it was a steady march northwards against stubborn German resistance. In his letter, Neville notes that he had had two week-long holidays: one in Florence and one in Rome. Sadly, he notes that his rambles about Rome have left no paper for 'that much more worthy city, Florence. I shall only say it is quite equal to its fame.' This comment is confirmed by the fact that he did send Pauline a book about Florence. Of Rome, he describes piazzas, great churches, fountains, statues, columns and obelisks 'by the score'. But he found the city 'impresses without charming'. He visited St Peter's and saw the Pope, but the highlight was undoubtedly a visit to a palazzo where he was shown through rooms full of paintings of the Italian Renaissance placed there for safe-keeping. 'The paintings', he wrote, 'certainly opened my eyes. I don't expect ever to see such a collection again.'<sup>58</sup>

The dénouement can be quickly told. The march up Italy and the end of the war saw Neville briefly at Cremona in charge of a camp of Polish evacuees, which he always described as one of the least pleasant periods of his life, which confirmed in him a hostility to Russian communism. Eventually, he was demobbed, and the choice came as to what he should do. He was a husband with a four-year-old daughter, so returning to Oxford was never an option. There was a possible job in the West Indies, which did not appeal. Pauline was eager to get home, so when his old mentor James Hight offered him a position lecturing in history at his alma mater in Christchurch it seemed a heaven-sent opportunity. He

56 Berry, *Unwillingly to War*, pp. 141–50.

57 <<http://www.thepeerage.com/p21302.htm#i213019>>

58 Neville Phillips to Jim and Patricia Nelson, 26 November 1944.



accepted and returned to Canterbury University College. Within three years, he was appointed to the Chair of History—at the age of thirty-two—so war service had not held up his career despite his having returned without an Oxford, or a higher, degree.

So how had the war affected Neville as a person and a historian? More than five years in the British Army fighting Nazism had confirmed, not upset, his essentially conservative political values and his belief in the value of British civilisation. He had come to like his fellow soldiers and his friendships provided a long-term pull back to England. His experience as a successful soldier reaffirmed his sense of the legitimacy of armed conflict and a pride in his own service. In later years, he would often judge a man by his war record. His experience as an officer in command of troops for five years had given him greater personal confidence and an authoritarian style of command. It is revealing that in his account, Joe Berry recalled meeting the New Zealanders when the regiment reached Cassino in February 1944. Berry was impressed with two things about the Kiwis: 'The divide between officer and other rank was much less pronounced in their army than in ours and they had an easy friendliness which, in my experience, none of our other allies were quite able to match.'<sup>59</sup> So Neville developed a way of directing others that was rather different from the style that might have evolved from five years as an officer in the New Zealand forces. That style was later used effectively when he became Professor of History and later Vice-Chancellor at Canterbury.<sup>60</sup> He had come to believe that social structures had a necessary hierarchy that should be respected and supported. In this way, too, the war strengthened, rather than disrupted, his values.

In terms of his historical interests, the war had two effects. First, when in the early 1950s he was looking for additional income to support a growing family, Neville was offered the chance to write the official history of the New Zealand forces in Italy. He readily accepted and the result was an outstanding book. The book has a fine architecture, beginning with the difficult crossing of the Sangro River and ending with the battle for Cassino. It is beautifully written (the last paragraph is a particularly fine example of English prose),<sup>61</sup> clearly structured and it is

<sup>59</sup> Berry, *Unwillingly to War*, p. 100.

<sup>60</sup> Yet we might also note that Joe Berry (*Unwillingly to War*, p. 178) writes with real affection of Neville and he was impressed when, on the occasion of the regiment being disbanded, Neville summoned him to his office to wish him well even though Berry had not served directly with him since North Africa. Later, he asked Neville to write a foreword to his book.

<sup>61</sup> N. C. Phillips, *Italy. Volume 1: The Sangro to Cassino* (Wellington, 1957), pp. 353–4. 'The historian of the battles of Cassino who revisits the scene finds no relief from the difficulty of commemorating them in a way that will do justice to the New Zealanders who fought there, but he is impressed anew by the need for making the attempt. For except in its boldest features, the face of the land has changed even in so short a time. To stand on the summit of Point 593 on the tenth anniversary of the peace was to be engulfed in a tranquillity made the more immense by the emphasis of a few simple sounds—the chime of a cowbell, a skylark's glee and, far below beside the new white abbey, the shouts of black-robed novices as they skirmished with a football. Earth heals her own wounds, and the husbandry of a thousand peasants has tended the growth of twelve

always informed with his own experience. In the Preface, he acknowledges that he ‘shared this experience with friends from the British homeland’ and that ‘there are things that only soldiers know’. The book confronts two contentious political issues. The first was the question as to whether, once the North African campaign was won, the New Zealand forces should have returned home like the Australians to defend the South Pacific in company with the Americans. Neville had no doubts of the answer. He denied that in choosing to remain in the Mediterranean theatre ‘New Zealand acted not boldly but traditionally’, and he also denied that the act represented ‘New Zealand as still the satellite of Britain’. Rather, he saw the decision as ‘one of the great maturing moments of the national life...never did a New Zealand parliament make a more difficult, a more adult or a less insular decision’.<sup>62</sup> Yet it is interesting that while pointing out the practical factors—the lack of available shipping, the difficulties of transferring men from North Africa into the jungles of the Pacific—Phillips also emphasises the effect of pleas from General Freyberg, President Roosevelt and above all Winston Churchill, who ‘addressed sentences resonant with the cadences of Gibbon and ornamented by a reminiscence of Tennyson’. Churchill’s message, which Phillips quoted in extensor, began with a tribute to the New Zealand division (‘There could not be any more glorious expression of the links which bind together the hearts of the people of the British and New Zealand isles’) and concluded that the New Zealanders should remain in the Mediterranean on the grounds that ‘[i]t is the symbolic and historic value of our continued comradeship in arms that moves me’. Phillips, author of ‘New Zealand and the Mother Country’, fully approved the sentiments.<sup>63</sup>

Second, he discusses at length the justification for the bombing of the historical abbey of Monte Cassino. He certainly considers the argument that the bombing was a ‘wanton act of terror and vandalism’, and he concedes that the evidence of German use of the monastery before the bombing for military reasons is weak.<sup>64</sup> But what sways him is the duty of the commanders to their troops. The men believed, rightly or wrongly, ‘that “Jerry” was sitting in the “wee white house”...it was a constant intruding presence: it looked into everything, it nagged at their nerves and became a phobia and an obsession’.<sup>65</sup> Here his personal memories of the monastery watching over everything below clearly had an effect on his view. But it was the strategic arguments that won him

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successive springs. Ruins are dismantled and new buildings arise on the sites of the old. Men remember but their memories fade and finally die with them. And of the deeds bravely done and the hardships bravely borne, soon nothing will remain but the imperfect record itself.’

62 Phillips, *Italy*, pp. 24–5.

63 Ibid., p. 30.

64 Ibid., p. 211.

65 Ibid., p. 217.

over. When it came to the hard task of breaking through the Cassino front then heritage and history had to give way. Neville showed himself a soldier first, a defender of heritage second.

*Italy, Volume 1* was well received.<sup>66</sup> Yet Neville told New Zealand acquaintances that the task of writing the history was not enjoyable and he gave up writing the second volume when the task became too onerous. He wanted to get back to the English history that he loved. On research leave to Britain in 1955, which was designed to allow him to visit the Italian battlefields, he also spent time in Sheffield working on the papers of Edmund Burke. He also collected books on eighteenth-century English politics so that he could continue his real historical love when he got home.<sup>67</sup>

The other long-term effect of his war experience on Phillips' history was to leave him with an enduring love of Italy and the Italian Renaissance. After the 1955 trip, he began to teach a course on the Italian Renaissance, which he illustrated with slides of Renaissance painting and architecture. There were few occasions when Neville lit up with greater enthusiasm than when talking about this subject, and it was my very great privilege to accompany him on a tour of Renaissance art sites in 1963. He never published on the subject, but it always remained a passion and his lectures on the subject are still remembered fondly by his former students.

After 1956, his historical research and publications concerned the history of the British ruling class. Edmund Burke, quoted with affection in his thesis, remained an enduring interest, and, drawing on his researches in 1955, he published about Burke.<sup>68</sup> He became deeply interested in Namierite political history and before long was counting division lists from the eighteenth-century House of Commons.<sup>69</sup> As head of department, he was forced occasionally to show an interest in New Zealand history, overseeing the history of Canterbury and helping young historians such as Philip Ross May.<sup>70</sup> But this was always a distraction and former members of the department recall it being a discouraging place to undertake serious research on New Zealand history. Neville's primary love remained the British ruling class. It was no surprise when, after retiring

66 For example, 'Review by Francis West', *Landfall: A New Zealand quarterly*, 11:1 (1958), pp. 84–7.

67 As well as *Italy*, Phillips wrote occasional pieces on contemporary affairs—for example, 'Collectivism and the British Commonwealth', *Landfall*, 1:3 (1947), pp. 174–85; 'The Referendum: A retrospect', *Landfall*, 3:3 (1949), pp. 307–20.

68 N. C. Phillips, 'Burke and Paine: The conservative and radical minds', *Landfall*, 29 (1954), pp. 36–46; N. C. Phillips, 'Edmund Burke and the County Movement, 1779–1780', *English Historical Review*, 76:254 (1961), pp. 254–78.

69 N. C. Phillips, *Yorkshire and English National Politics, 1783–1784* (Christchurch, 1961); Phillips, 'The British General Election of 1780: A vortex of politics', *Political Science*, 11:2 (1959), pp. 3–22; Phillips, 'Namier and His Method', *Political Science*, 14:2 (1962), pp. 16–26.

70 Philip Ross May, *The West Coast Gold Rushes* (Christchurch, 1957, 2nd edn 1962). *A History of Canterbury* was published in three substantial volumes between 1957 and 1965.

from his role as Vice-Chancellor, he decided with Pauline to move to England. There they lived just outside Canterbury, enjoying regular walks in the 'garden of England' until his death in 2001.<sup>71</sup>

Neville Phillips as historian was little affected by the war; a chronicler and admirer of the British Empire was how he entered the war, and, for all the personal torments of those six years, that remained essentially his role as a writer of history.

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<sup>71</sup> See obituaries in *Independent* [London], 11 July 2001; *Press* [Christchurch], 12 July 2001; *New Zealand Herald*, 14 July 2001.