

### 5.1.2. New Zealand and the United Kingdom's 'Atlantic Orientation' during World War One

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In his book *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*, Avner Offer set out how influential individuals within the British military and political establishment developed what he called an Atlantic strategy and had it in place at the outbreak of war. On the one hand, that strategy involved cutting off most of the supplies of food and raw materials that had previously reached Germany from the Atlantic. On the other hand, the United Kingdom was to draw in vast supplies from outside Europe. Given the United Kingdom's location, these supplies would necessarily come in from the Atlantic, whether from the Americas, India, Australasia, or Africa. Hence an Atlantic strategy.

Offer's book largely explores pre-war thinking in the United Kingdom and Germany about how economic competition between the two nations should be conducted in both peace and war. It says relatively little about the actual application of the strategy during the First World War.

This paper, on the other hand, is concerned with how a part of that strategy worked out in practice. It argues that due to pressures arising from the war, the British strategy became indeed primarily an Atlantic one. Suppliers of food and raw materials further afield, not least in New Zealand, found considerable difficulty getting the shipping necessary to carry their products to the United Kingdom. To a great extent reluctantly, the authorities in London felt obliged to draw those commodities from producers on the other side of the Atlantic, in the Americas, rather than New Zealand, on the other side of the Pacific. Hence the strategy developed into a truly Atlantic one, not just in the sense of cargo being shipped in from the Atlantic. It became an Atlantic strategy, not an Atlantic and Pacific one. Ships still came out to New Zealand to load cargo, principally meat, dairy products and wool, but they did so for reasons other than economic necessity. Had the logic of wartime economics been strictly followed, few, if any, ships would have come.

Between the advent of refrigerated shipping from New Zealand in 1882 and the outbreak of the First World War, the country's existing export of wool, largely to the United Kingdom, had been supplemented with immense and growing trades in meat (largely sheep-meat) and dairy products, almost entirely to the United Kingdom. These new trades were dependent on purpose-built British-owned refrigerated vessels that typically steamed around the Cape of Good Hope and on to Australia and New Zealand before rounding Cape Horn, or, beginning in 1914, passing through the recently-completed Panama Canal. Most of the transport of immigrants and passengers to and from New Zealand was also on these refrigerated vessels by the beginning of the twentieth century.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 should therefore have occasioned major concern within the New Zealand meat industry at the potential for disruption to shipping to the United Kingdom. However, the timing of the outbreak relieved such concern. As one Dunedin businessman involved in the frozen meat trade declared:

Fortunately the season is practically over for the year, and all freezing works will close within the next few days. If the present situation had arisen in the middle of the freezing season, there would have been only the local demand to deal with. The stock and prices would inevitably have collapsed at once, but all the export stock has already been dealt with, and local demand is now quite sufficient to cope with all the fat sheep and cattle available. As a matter of fact, prices are expected to show a firming tendency. No war on the scale of this gigantic European outbreak is likely to last till December, and until that month the export of frozen meat does not count.

Sadly the businessman's prediction that the war would last only a few months proved almost four years too short and the relatively benign position for New Zealand's meat industry was also not to last. Long before the same time the following year the industry was in crisis and the New Zealand Government was under extreme domestic pressure to do something about it. The problem was that the country's meat cold stores were largely full and producers were fearful that no room would be available for the kill of 1915-16. The stores were full because insufficient ships had come to New Zealand to carry the meat to the United Kingdom. New Zealand Prime Minister Bill Massey was not one to stand aside in such a situation, particularly as farmers were a constituency on which it particularly depended, and a British Colonial Office memorandum in September 1915 noted that 'The complaints from New Zealand as to the shortage of tonnage have been louder than from any other Dominion'.

Nevertheless, these problems continued throughout the war and became particularly serious in 1917 and 1918. The meat-processing industry was obliged to construct ever larger amounts of cold storage, with available capacity more than trebling from 2.2 million carcasses in 1914 to 7.7 million carcasses in 1920. Twelve new freezing works were constructed during the war, largely to accommodate unshipped carcasses. Far from increases in meat production being sought to aid the war effort, the disposal of a decreasing volume of production occasioned immense anxiety. Overall, the quantity of New Zealand's frozen meat exports fell by over a third between 1914 and 1918.

Why did the authorities in London, which had progressively taken control over the British shipping industry between 1915 and 1917, not provide the shipping necessary to shift New Zealand's wartime meat more expeditiously?

In New Zealand's existing historiography the explanation is a simple one: They didn't send more ships because they didn't have them and they didn't have them because so many had been sunk, principally by German submarines. This certainly goes some way towards explaining the difficulties, especially in 1917 and 1918, when the submarine blockade was at its height. However, there are three problems with, or rather three limitations to, this explanation. In the first place, major difficulties with shipping arose in 1915, long before losses to enemy action were significant. Secondly, the statistics that have been quoted on how many refrigerated ships trading with New Zealand had been sunk are based on a misreading of a statement made by a government minister in 1918. This misreading appeared in a book published in the 1960s and has been repeated since, notably in Professor James Belich's standard history of New Zealand. The minister stated that in 1914 99 insulated ships had loaded on the New Zealand coast and this had dropped to 63 in 1917, a reduction of over a third. However, he was not saying that 36 of those ships had been sunk by enemy action. At the most half that number had been sunk. Furthermore, according to the minister's figures the biggest annual decline had occurred before the submarine war was strongly under way. Finally, it needs to be taken into account that United Kingdom shipyards were not idle or given over entirely to naval work during the war. An impressive number of merchant vessels, including refrigerated ones, were launched.

What then accounts for the early decline in the availability of ships, if not enemy action? Much of this decline was due to the requisitioning of ships by the Admiralty. Initially several such ships were requisitioned in order to carry the main body of Australian and New Zealand troops to Egypt. However, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, quietly detained most of those vessels in Egypt, contrary to a decision of the British War Council on which he served. He clearly wished to have the ships available to transport troops elsewhere in the Mediterranean, almost certainly to attack Turkey, a campaign that hadn't been approved by the War Council and which would certainly have been vetoed by Lord Kitchener, the unquestioned supremo on the Council, had he known that large numbers of troops would be involved. Once Churchill got his troops and they were landed on

Gallipoli, to disastrous if glorious effect, they had to be supplied with food. As the eastern Mediterranean was not well-supplied with cool stores, refrigerated ships were important there for storing food. After Churchill's Gallipoli adventure was abandoned, Lloyd George's Salonika project took over as in terms of taking up shipping, not least insulated tonnage. All in all, the Admiralty, particularly under Churchill was extremely active in commandeering vessels. In October 1915 the Liverpool Steam Ship Owners' Association estimated that 'on the average during the first 12 months of the war, 20 per cent of the British Shipping ordinarily employed in Ocean Oversea Trade has been requisitioned by the Admiralty or otherwise employed on Government services'. Perhaps inevitably, there was a tendency for the officers at the Admiralty to retain ships after they had been requisitioned, just in case and in order to avoid going through the legal process again. Certainly the Ministry of Shipping, which was concerned with commercial rather than military transport, felt that a lot of requisitioned tonnage could be better employed.

On top of all this, there were two factors that meant that refrigerated ships which had neither been sunk nor requisitioned and which were therefore available to come to New Zealand went elsewhere. The first of these factors was that New Zealand primarily produced sheep-meat for the British civilian market whereas the British military wanted beef. This was also the case with the troops of its allies, France and Italy, which tended to need British refrigerated shipping to carry that beef. Within the New World, the pre-eminent beef producers were in the Americas and Australia, especially Queensland. Perhaps the unkindest cut of all came when New Zealanders learnt that the British authorities were selling New Zealand sheep-meat on the civilian market in the United Kingdom, and using the profits to buy more beef from the Americas.

Above all, there is the second of the reasons why the available ships were sent elsewhere. This is what I have termed 'the tyranny of distance' (adapting Geoffrey Blainey's phrase) or 'the food-miles factor'. In a situation where shipping was in short supply and demand for food was high, it made little sense to send ships around the world to collect meat from New Zealand when it could be acquired much more quickly from across the Atlantic. The advent of the Lloyd George Government in the United Kingdom at the end of 1916, pledged to reorganising the country's economic life in the interests of winning the war, meant that this iron logic came to the forefront of policy. Sir Joseph McLay was appointed Shipping Controller and in early March he told British shipowners operating to Australia and New Zealand that he would be taking control of their ships. It was announced that the aim was 'to ensure the most economical and advantageous use of the vessels'. Ominously for New Zealand's meat producers, the statement referred to transfers of vessels 'to employment with countries nearest the United Kingdom'. The essentials of the new policy had been outlined the previous month by the Admiralty Director of Transports, writing on behalf of the Shipping Controller. He noted that emphasis would be placed on the most efficient use of British shipping:

In pursuance of this policy it is now proposed to withdraw forthwith several vessels from the Australia and New Zealand trades. These trades involve an extremely high mileage and therefore a proportionately small carrying capacity per ton per annum ... If these steamers are diverted to the North Atlantic trade they should be able to perform three voyages for every one they complete on their present route, and assuming therefore the same proportion of meat or cereals and other foodstuffs to be available for shipment their import capacity will be three times as great.

Prime Minister Massey was apprised of this policy at the Imperial War Conference in London in 1917. On his return he stated that 'it was realised that cargoes could be brought to England more quickly from America than Australasia, and ships were withdrawn from this end for that purpose'.

Understandably, Massey continued to bombard Sir Joseph McLay with demands for more ships, both in order to demonstrate to New Zealand producers that he was representing their interests and to ensure that pressure was maintained to get as much tonnage as possible. At the 1918 Imperial Conference McLay told Massey plainly that 'we are bringing enormous quantities of meat from the River Plate. We can bring in two cargoes easily as compared with one from New Zealand and Australia and it has been an absolute necessity to bring imports from the nearest point.' Later an official from the Ministry of Food told the New Zealand Prime Minister that while the Ministry preferred to buy from Australasia, 'The Minister of Shipping points out that we can get four cargoes from North America in the time we can get one from Australasia'.

I'd like to conclude by referring to Rudyard Kipling's description of New Zealand as 'the last, loneliest and loveliest'. The First World War confronted New Zealand agricultural producers and particularly those producing meat, with serious problems in getting their commodities away to the only substantial market open to them. Sinkings by enemy action and probably more importantly the requisitioning of ships restricted the number of refrigerated vessels available. This situation was worsened by the fact that New Zealand was not producing the meat, beef, that was given priority by the Imperial authorities and their allies. Above all, the conflict confronted the British Empire, and particularly New Zealand, with a situation in which food-miles were a very immediate consideration. In peacetime the transport of frozen meat, mainly sheep-meat, from New Zealand to the United Kingdom was a profitable trade. In wartime other imperatives came into play. During what was regarded as a life-and-death struggle, it was seen as vital to maximise the quantity of meat entering British ports and to bring it from half-way around the world compromised this. In those terms New Zealand was indeed the last, as Rudyard Kipling described it. That the authorities in London continued to send ships was not primarily out of economic necessity but because they saw New Zealanders as kith and kin who were loyally standing with the Empire and contributing men to the war at a rate only exceeded by Britain itself. The last, perhaps, but not the loneliest.