Newsmaps told of war’s progress

SUCH is the breakneck pace of change, it is easy to forget that during World War I, the chief source of news was newspapers.

Long before the days of radio, TV and digital media, people depended on print to learn of the distant battles and campaigns in which Australians were involved.

As Martin Woods, curator of maps at the National Library of Australia, reminds us in his engaging new book, Where Are Our Boys: How Newsmaps Won the Great War, newspaper maps, or newsmaps, played a pivotal role in explaining the progress of the conflict to those at home.

The book takes a different tack to most accounts of the war in that it tells how the conflict was fought and won from the reader’s perspective.

Largely an outgrowth of technology such as telegraphy and news by cable, newsmaps made geographical images available on a mass scale, providing an avid readership with daily war updates.

Even papers in smallest communities featured maps of places previously unknown to many, Gallipoli being a prime example.

Yet all was not always what it seemed. Reports were often coloured by strategic sensitivities and censorship rules, which dictated what could be published.

Rather, a semi-fictional war story of Anzac successes and sometimes, disasters, emerged, drawn from scant news cables, out-of-date cartography and often the writer’s imagination.

Even so, the maps proved invaluable to domestic morale, allowing readers to feel closer to faraway loved ones and friends.

Richly illustrated and with more than 200 map images, this wonderful book is a feast for the eyes as well as the mind.

Where Are Our Boys, NLA Publishing, $49.99