THE Simpson PRIZE
A COMPETITION FOR YEAR 9 AND 10 STUDENTS

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Serra Mohamed
Sirius College
To what extent did Australians enlist in 1914 to defend the ‘Mother Country’?

The outbreak of World War I was a momentous event in which thousands of Australian men rushed to enlist to defend the ‘Mother Country’ for a multiplicity of reasons, of which reverence for Britain as the ‘mother’ of the fledgling nation was a primary one. However, many groups of Australians had several other reasons for enlisting, including a distorted expectation of adventure, the masculine status attained through participation in the war, and to escape unfavourable living conditions back home. On the other end of the spectrum were those who completely dissented and chose not to enlist at all, or even actively opposed Australia’s involvement in the war. This multiplicity of reasons reveals the complexity of society’s attitudes towards the conflict.

The mother-child relationship between Britain and Australia was perceived to be one rooted in their shared culture, language and history, and an expectation of reciprocal defence if necessary. This status as a nascent country necessitated Australia’s dependency on a mother-like figure in order to mature. The Labor movement gave prominence to the need for Australia’s involvement in the war due to the reciprocity of this relationship with Britain, because they did not want Australians as a collective ‘to be branded as a people willing to take the hand of a mother in [their] time of need, and afterwards see her in trouble and not go out to help her.’ ¹ This perspective is reflected in the general attitudes of men who enlisted, including Lance Corporal F.C., who was ‘prompted by a sense of duty’ ² to enlist. This demonstrates that the strong link between Australia and her ‘Mother Country’ also manifested itself in the common beliefs and attitudes of the majority of Australia’s public. Much of this viewpoint was attributed to their personal connections with Britain.

According to the Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, ‘[the Australian populace] consist[ed] mainly of natives of the three divisions [England, Scotland and Wales] of the United Kingdom and their descendants.’ ³ In acknowledgement of their British origins, many of the men who rushed to enlist felt a deep-rooted sense of duty to the land of their origin, as well as feeling a sense of indebtedness to the nation which had nurtured Australia in the past. Leader of Opposition Andrew Fisher’s pledge to ‘stand beside the mother country to help and defend her to the last man and last shilling’ ⁴ was an almost immediate rallying cry for the nation to collaboratively contribute to the war

¹ Leading Labor newspaper; The Worker 6 April, 1914
³ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Melbourne: Book No. 6 – 1913
effort, one which would define the image of Australia to the world in the following decades. Thus, enlistment figures soared from 20,000 men to 52,561\(^5\) by the end of 1914.

It had been decades since Australia had been involved in a war; therefore, there was a generation of men who had no real idea as to the true horrors of war, rather they perceived the conflict as an opportunity to explore the world beyond their own nation. Their naïve enthusiasm led them to ignore the inevitable deaths and carnage entailed in war. This unrealistic perception was further promoted and reinforced in the minds of the adventurous youth through the media, which disseminated the idea that enlistment would allow recruits to see the world, primarily England and Europe. This naïve, almost child-like perspective also led these men to liken war to an adventure. John Simpson Kirkpatrick, a highly acclaimed stretcher-bearer who served in the war during the Gallipoli campaign, expressed his ardent longing for an adventure and disappointment at the spurious promise to visit England in a letter to his mother; ‘I would not have joined this contingent if I had known they were not going to England.’\(^6\) This expresses his initial expectation that war was an adventure, devoid of its horrors and bloodshed.

The adventurous nature of these men also stemmed from the powerful mythology that war turned boys into men, and that they would return as valiant heroes admired by their fellow countrymen. Widespread use of propaganda in the years of the war, which was designed to glorify war and idealise the men who enlisted, further emphasised the need to serve in the army as a means to mature into men. As expressed by Lieutenant DG Armstrong, it was ‘the greatest opportunity for a chap to make a man of himself; those that come back from this war will be the right sort that anybody would be proud of.’\(^7\)

Those who returned from the war were esteemed and acknowledged by both the government and the general population, for they had proven themselves by their immense sacrifice for ‘the greater good’\(^8\).

\(^7\) Gamage, Bill. The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War
\(^8\) http://www.army.gov.au/~media/Files/Our%20history/AAHU/Focus%20on%20History/ANZACDaySpeech_ExService_2.pdf
Just as the war was an opportunity for some to defend the ‘Mother Country’ through battle, for others it was an escape route from the difficulties faced in Australia. Unemployment which led to economic hardship, drought and even prison sentences were compelling reasons for these men to enlist. In the following extract from a letter to his parents, Corporal Robert Edmund Antill describes the utter desperation he felt when he decided to enlist: ‘Things are so bad out here for there is a drought on. We haven’t had any rain for months so I thought I would join the army.’ The guarantee of adequate food and a pay of 6 shillings per day, almost equivalent to the average wage of Australian workers, were added incentives for those who sought to escape these harsh conditions. Furthermore, enlistment was an especially advantageous option for those facing potential prison sentences. As described by Private W Harne, in one case ‘one or two men, their enthusiasm no doubt quickened by alternative offers of a prison sentence, accepted magistrates’ suggestions to enlist.’ Thus, rather than being driven by patriotism to Britain, enlistment was a convenient pathway for many Australians to escape adverse circumstances. Similarly, Aboriginal Australians also enlisted in the hopes of overcoming hardship. Given their direct ethnic connection to Australia where they had lived for thousands of years, the Aboriginal community in Australia could not identify with Britain as the ‘Mother Country’. For many, enlistment was an attempt to transform social attitudes and prejudices based on racial grounds and to position themselves to be acknowledged and accepted as Australians equal to those of Anglo-Saxon lineage. Despite not being allowed to join the military, over 500 young Aboriginal men who were deemed to be ‘of substantial European origin or descent’, joined the AIF and actively contributed to the war effort as soldiers. Sadly, the aim to be treated equally was proven to be a fruitless effort upon their return.

In addition to the vast majority of those who contributed to the war effort through enlistment and occupying jobs in the home front, there were a minority of dissenting voices which have been forgotten in the layers of history. There were groups of conscientious objectors to the war, many of which asserted that war was a futile effort, and advocated the need for peace. Labor Call, a radical Labor newspaper, described the war as being far from ‘political warfare, but manslaying’, highlighting its violence. Questioning its necessity, the writer imploringly asks the Australian public: ‘What glory is there in today’s warfare? None, whatever; it is only slaughter and carnage.’ Amongst those who shared these beliefs was Vida Goldstein, a prominent figure in the suffragette movement in the 1900s. Over the course of the war, she remained resolutely pacifist and appealed to the citizens of Australia, both men and women, to oppose the war. She expressed objection towards Australia’s involvement in the war by appealing to morality and making religious allusions: ‘History

12 Labor Call 6 August, 1914
will proclaim you false if you are silent now. Come out and be separate from all that makes war."13
These comments illustrate that there were opinions which differed greatly from the highly popularised general attitudes of devotion to the ‘Mother Country’.

Society is a complex organism replete with a multiplicity of views and values, as demonstrated by the diversity of ways Australians responded to the call for enlistment in 1914. As a country, Australia has matured from a burgeoning nation dependant on the ‘Mother Country’, into a nation characterised by its own identity. We acknowledge and revere those soldiers who enlisted, regardless of their reasoning. In contemporary society, rather than treating conscientious objectors with scorn and derision, we view them with a deeper degree of understanding. As we commemorate the centenary of WWI, we can both acknowledge the variety of reasons for enlistment, primarily patriotism to the ‘Mother Country’, and respect those who opted out of the war and even actively opposed it.

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