SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 students

2019 Winner
Australian Capital Territory

Jett Aplin
Telopea Park School
Simpson Prize 2019
Jett Aplin
“Australia will suffer much in the struggle that seems ahead ... Thousands of unemployed will be created ... We must protect our country. We must keep sacred from the mailed fists of this splendid heritage. But we hope no wave of jingo madness will sweep over the land, unbalancing the judgement of its leaders, and inciting its population to wild measures, spurred on by the vile press, to which war is only an increase of circulation, and every corpse a copper. God help Australia! God help England! God help Germany! God help us!”

- Henry Boote, *The Australian Worker*, 6 August 1914, p. 17

Henry Boote, associate of Andrew Fisher, editor of *The Australian Worker*, voice of the Australian Workers Union, predicted on the eve of war what would come to Australia should we spoil our “splendid heritage” with the “mailed fist” of imperialist war. The suffering that was going to become especially apparent during the aftermath of the First World War, in the wake of a 64% casualty rate for men that fought by 1918\(^1\), came to be known as the ‘grey years’. This inter-war period notably saw bereavement, grief, and economic, social and cultural ruin make themselves apparent as a counter to the military victories of the AIF. The nascent nationalism that clouded many Australians’ vision, powered by a vicious propaganda campaign propagated in defiance of grief by war correspondents like Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett (“this race of athletes ... equal to Mons and Neuve Chapelle”)\(^2\) had proved during and after the war, disguised for many the genuine after-effects. With this now cleared, it can be argued that 1918 (and the metaphor for the aftermath of the war that it represents) could be considered a victory to little extent for Australia and its people.

Negating the shallow triumphs as results of the end of the war were numerous domestic/international challenges and mistakes that would affect Australia for decades to come. Australian citizens and soldiers were left financially and morally exhausted, adolescent Australia was stricken with unimaginable bereavement while being forced to deal with the repatriation of returned soldiers. Further, economic wellbeing and general morale were depleted combined with a disenchanted working class, and a war with no materialistic gain for Australia, also gave rise to dangerous ideas and economic conditions bred through the actions of a myopic leadership. Thus, this essay will argue that 1918 can be

---

\(^1\) Scott, E. (1941). *Australia during the war: the official history of Australia in the war of 1914-1918*. Vol. 11. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, p. 874

considered a victory to little extent, from perspectives on individual, domestic and global scales.

Viewed from an individual perspective, the Australian public unknowingly witnessed sentiments trumping logistics in 1918 and the aftermath of the First World War. Reverend Tom Thorburn’s letters in the town of Forbes (“I was roused by a voice – ‘the bells are ringing’ … we burst out into “Praise God from whom” etc. Then the ‘Te deum’ song as I have never heard it sung & perhaps never will again.”)\(^3\) and Sir James Burns’ speech to the Highland Society (“Sir James Burns, who presided [the meeting], paid a glowing tribute to the soldiers and sailors. The singing of the National Anthem and of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ concluded a meeting which will long be remembered”)\(^4\) highlight the domestic congregations of relief and elation (see Source 2 for image). Captain Keith Doig, MC’s letters while stationed in Rouen (“We went quite mad. We cheered and we sang and we went into Rouen”)\(^5\), make no secret of soldier celebration further away from the Western Front. Yet, while the theme of immediate gratification as a result of the signing of the Armistice was recurring, it often did not count on or deliberately ignored the deferred costs of the war, like the significant psychological trauma brought by battle in the case of Signaller Bill Harney (“I rode 800 miles … to forget about it all … I was somehow or another ashamed of the war”)\(^6\) and the loss of loved ones in some of the most vicious battles of the war, in the case of Judge Henry Higgins (“My grief has condemned me to hard labour for the rest of my life.”)\(^7\).

It is also likely that the families of missing soldiers were even more grievous (see Source 7). Yet, as Carolyn Holbrook writes\(^8\), the idea of victory was sustained by the vast majority of

\(^3\) The Reverend Tom Thorburn. *Tom Thorburn’s letter from Forbes on 15 November 1918 to his sister Tot Thorburn at Meroogal, Nowra. June Wallace papers, Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection.*

\(^4\) Highland Society, (1918, 13 November). *The Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 11


\(^7\) John Roberts’s diary, Sept-Nov. 1918, SLV MS 8183, box 265/4

Australians due to the “martial nationalism” that many had subscribed to before the war, encouraged by soldiers in letters to their families in the name of patriotic stoicism, “psychologically ratified” by the bleeding of Australian soldiers, consolidated by thousands of Australian war memorials commemorating all who served. The view of the Australian pre-war intelligentsia that war would keep Australia full of “determination, self-reliance, energy and enterprise” and that “A nation’s born where the shell falls fast” was upheld by the pseudo-scientific social Darwinist theory which sustained many bereaved families. But as reality set in, the Australian Government struggled to repatriate returning soldiers while spending exorbitant sums on commemoration. After looking through the eyes of individuals on the Western Front and the home front, it is also important to look at the impact of larger issues on Australia as a nation, direct economic and political consequences of the war that changed the inner workings of the country.

As an entire nation, Australia in 1918 and afterwards, had been completely shaped by the war, from the homogeneously contented and relentlessly optimistic place that it had been in the winter of 1914. The working class was extremely disillusioned with the war in 1918, and many trade unionists were fiercely anti-war and some even joined the growing Australian Communist Party. As Prime Minister Billy Hughes controversially extended the War Precautions Acts, power was centralised to the Federal Government from the states, taxes were raised, and political polarisation grew dramatically. This was a cause for the fierce labour strikes throughout 1918: hateful and sometimes violent clashes of conservatives and socialists, returned soldiers and trade unionists, Protestant zealots and fanatical Catholics.

1918 also saw the start of the rapid change from underemployment to unemployment, as rapid industrialisation during the war meant that the demand for unskilled labourers who had left to fight and were now being repatriated was low, especially as victims of debilitating injuries (see Source 5). On a domestic level, Australia in the short-term was

---

incredibly different from the First World War, almost entirely for the worse; aside from the Depression, the interwar period is arguably the worst economic phase in Australia’s history.

From a global perspective, Australia had experienced a loss in the immediate aftermath of the war. Billy Hughes, the nationalistic icon, failed in most of his objectives at the Treaty of Versailles, (a result of the 1918 Armistice). Hughes had reached out to President Wilson for security in the Pacific for support of the annexation of German Pacific colonies and against Japanese threats, but Wilson took little notice and spoke with insincerity on the topic. Hughes had drawn the muse of the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau but had outright angered and destroyed relations with US President Wilson, who would go on to disparage Hughes to the public and in private, including making threats about disallowing a visa to Hughes10. Most importantly, however, the Prime Minister had made a significant contribution to the conditions that ushered in the ascension of Hitler and, subsequently, the Second War. He had appealed to Lloyd George’s insincerity in his declaration that Germany would not pay indemnity, and, with the aid of South Africa and New Zealand, Hughes turned the Big Four against each other (outnumbering President Wilson to allow two articles ordering Germany to pay full war reparations, yet this number was still limited the to a ‘payable’ amount to appease the President).

As John Maynard Keynes, a British treasury official, has famously written in his book The Economic Consequences of the Peace, the sum required by the following Reparations Commission set up in the Treaty of Versailles, crushed Germany to the point of ruin, hyper-inflating its economy and placing the country in extreme debt. Most importantly, Hughes added fuel to the fire at the Paris Peace Conference, making the conscious effort to alienate Japan and making the decision unawares to feed the country’s militarist tendencies, which developed rapidly into imperialist war aims (this was against the advice of his Director of

---

Military Intelligence and Japanese experts). Australia relates to the effects of the ‘new Thirty Years War’ (inter-war period) as the denouements which had been somewhat induced by Australia itself, through its interactions with the global community, that would come back to haunt the nation in years to come.

The irony is not lost on this author that a socialist propagandist managed to correctly predict the miserable outcome of the war. But it should be recognised that 1918 and the aftermath of the war had birthed a nation, just not on distant battlefields where innumerable numbers would perish in the ‘crying years’. Nationhood is recognisable as an effect of the War, but is really an effect of the responses and decisions that followed. The youngest country participating in the Great War had suffered negative consequences comparable (relative to size) to other fighting nations (bereavement and grief, financial exhaustion and depletion of morale), but also negative consequences that had the ability to hold Australia accountable, which would haunt this young nation (social polarisation) and the world (political polarisation, the rise of authoritarianism) for decades to come.

The responses which came in future leadership, the pushes for independence, egalitarianism and economic liberalisation that came in later years, as direct results of the mistakes of the ‘grey years’, were the true mothers of modern-day Australia. However, this cannot save 1918 from the loss it was, as Australia failed to recognise the “jingo madness” that had swept the nation, clouding decision-making and leading to years of suffering for many Australians.

Cover page photographs

Soldiers returning home by ship docked at Outer Harbor, South Australia

The Australian delegation to the Treaty of Versailles

---

Appendix

Source 2
Sydney, New South Wales. 11 November 1918. Crowd in Martin Place celebrating the news of the signing of the Armistice. This date was celebrated in later years as Remembrance Day.


Source 5
Southall, England. A group of disabled AIF members attend the Australian Red Cross Society’s workshop.

"The term 'missing in action' has long brought anguish to the families of servicemen lost in war. Of the 60,000 Australians who died in the First World War, over one-third were recorded as 'missing'. Almost half the Australians who died on Gallipoli have no known grave. Many bereaved families were haunted for a generation by the memories of sons, brothers, fathers and husbands who had disappeared without trace. The scale of the loss made this a shared national experience, starkly recalled today in scores of overseas war cemeteries with headstones inscribed with Kipling's simple words: 'An Australian Soldier of the Great War ... Known unto God'”.

Australian Red Cross Society Wounded and Missing; Enquiry and Bureau Files, 1914-1918 War


Roberts, John Garibaldi. *Diaries and Correspondence 1915-1921*. September-November 1918, MS 8183 Box 265/4


Thorburn, Tom. The Reverend Tom Thorburn to Tot Thorburn. November 15, 1918. In *June Wallace papers, Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales*.