



THE Simpson PRIZE

A COMPETITION FOR
YEAR 9 AND 10 STUDENTS

2015 Winner

Australian Capital Territory

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History reveals that in 1914 a considerable gap existed in Australia between the rich and poor, which was reflected in a split in motivations for enlistment for war. Despite the variation in personal reasons between the social classes there was one trait most shared: a commitment to fight for and with the British Empire. Contrary to common belief this was not necessarily just admiration and patriotism; more a result of Australia's underlying fear of how vulnerable they were to surrounding powers without Britain. If you delve deeper into Australia's patriotism you will find it was not as simple as it seemed.

This sense of duty is thought to have come from the propaganda that appealed to the educated; the propaganda that often promoted 'defending the mother country'. However, this is without taking into account that Australia at the time was still a developing country and thus desired to be allied with Britain because of the economic and military support it could offer. Not only that, but Australia was also in a particularly weak financial and military position in 1914. This led to powerful individuals wanting to maintain political links with Britain to bolster economic ties, while the working class was more conscious of the military protection from the Empire. Both groups, however, had mixed motives with points of difference between the classes. Among the wealthy and educated who enlisted many were patriotic and desired to fight for king and country: *"I know no more than that I have sworn 'to obey the King's commands and fight his enemies wherever I am required'"* (F.C Mulvey 23 August 1914). Mulvey is an example of the highly educated individual who truly believed in exactly what the propaganda at the time was stating, *"If England falls you fall! Every man of you must go, as we, too, must go!"* (Sir Rider Haggard in St. John, August, 1914). Self-interest for both the working and upper classes was a big factor when people enlisted to fight for the mother country.

It would be natural to assume that England's colonisation of Australia was a significant reason for our patriotism. However, when considering the financial and military strength that went with being an ally of Britain, and reviewing the classes of people who enlisted based on their sense of patriotism, there is a noticeable divergence between the patriotic grounds of the poor and the rich, the uneducated and highly educated, the unemployed and the employed. The social disparity of the time meant that the wealthy and more educated individuals were often the more overtly patriotic. The uneducated, however, more often than not joined out of a practical need for life's necessities in a socially polarised era. That is not to say that there was only a minority of the lower class who were patriotic; however among the rich and highly educated there was a strong sense of duty, with many also identifying themselves as personifying the physical requirements, *"I feel convinced in my own mind that being suited in physique and occupation and being prompted by a sense of duty and spirit of adventure I can hardly do anything else but volunteer"* (F.C Mulvey 23 August 1914). Mulvey was a professional public servant. He was highly educated and was eventually entrusted with responsibilities in the works department (Trove.nla.gov.au, (2014). 08 Jun 1915).

Just as members of the upper class had similar reasons for enlisting to each other, so did the working class and poorly educated. Most of the working class at the time were struggling to find a reliable source of income. This was because Australia was developing and was in a difficult economic state. When the opportunity to enlist had arisen many of the Australians who flocked to enlist were looking for secure employment. The pay of six shillings a day was quite attractive to the unemployed and was an astounding three times the English army's pay (Ergo.slv.vic.gov.au, (2014). *The rush to enlist*). This made employment one of the key reasons why many Australians enlisted. The explanation why there were so many of the working class enlisted was because they made up the vast majority of the population at the time. In a lot of cases many did not even think of why they were enlisting or what they were doing, they were just desperate for employment: *"Philpott had only about 3 days work left for us and 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. Whoever thought that when I left home that I was leaving for a soldier,” (R.E Antill 1914-1917).

At the outbreak of war in 1914 Australia was an insecure country that was unable to defend itself. Many Australians feared that without the support of Britain they were in a very vulnerable state with respect to the surrounding powers. This underlying fear determined the mindset of many who enlisted. Both the poor and the rich signed up to ‘defend the mother country’ but many did it, not only for Britain, but also for the sake of Australia’s security. Part of the reason that Australians developed this fear was because of the newspapers at the time, most importantly the Sydney Morning Herald, which briskly released an article about the importance of staying with Britain: *“The British Empire stands for the progress of civilisation, and for the welfare of humanity throughout the world. Its defeat would be the end of a system of government which has enlisted its most capable servants in the preservation of freedom and in the protection of the weak”*, (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday, 3 August 1914).

Patriotism and employment were the two central reasons for Australians joining the army in WWI; however these were few among many motivations. Some other reasons included mateship, adventure, moral conviction and the opportunity to travel or return to Britain. For instance, as the famous Simpson wrote *“I would not have joined this contingent if I had known they were not going to England. I would have taken a trip home and had a holiday at home then joined the army at home and went to the front instead of being stuck in this ungodly hole for all that you can see is sand and drill form morning and grub is very poor and not half enough of it”* (Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick, 25 December 1914). In many, if not all, cases Australians signed up for a multitude of reasons but usually with one being their central motivation, whether it was self-interest, a sense of duty or the opportunity to travel.

Australians often enlisted out of patriotism, however this was not sheer affection for Britain nor was it the only reason involved. Being an ally of Britain came with not only military support but also strong economic ties. Australians knew this, which encouraged them to enlist for the sake of the ‘mother country’. Another reason included the division between classes, but one thing that they all shared in common was self-interest. For the working and lower classes the idea of employment was quite attractive, especially the pay; however, this often led to many Australians being unaware of the seriousness of what they were doing. Mateship, a strong moral sense, and the sense of opportunity all drove Australians to enlist as well as their social situation, and over the course of the next four years their dedication and sacrifice changed the face of the nation.

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