



THE Simpson PRIZE

A COMPETITION FOR
YEAR 9 AND 10 STUDENTS

2015 Winner
New South Wales

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There is a lazy historical assumption that Australia fought the war in the interest of Empire and Mother Britain. The conventional, condescending historical view holds that Australians entered the war as British and exited it an independent state: in particular that the Gallipoli campaign served as a “baptism of fire” for the fledgling nation. In 1914 Australia was still culturally, politically and economically linked to Britain but very ready to assert its sovereignty. In fact before the Gallipoli campaign, Australian nationalism infused the enlistment campaign. First, this essay will consider the extent to which Australians were motivated by self-interest or a higher ideal. Secondly, it will compare the two higher ideals of burgeoning Australian nationalism and imperial affection in order to show that the former was more important than the latter in driving enlistment. Finally, it will argue that even service for the imperial cause was ultimately about improving Australia’s strategic position.

While it is perceived that many Australians enlisted because of their bonds to their community, many joined the war effort for personal reasons such as economic self-interest or a sense of adventure. In Source 1, it is evident that soldier Robert Edmund Antill’s biggest motivator was his poor financial situation: the itinerant farm hand says “it hadn’t rained for months so I thought I’d join the army”¹. Lake and Reynolds have, in particular, critiqued the romantic notion that most soldiers enlisted due to a selfless desire to aid the collective good². John McQuilton’s *Journal of the Australian War Memorial* analyses the occupations of the enlistees and found that the labourers were significantly over-represented indicating that people from less financially stable backgrounds are more likely to enlist. Other sources also suggest that a sense of adventure was another main motivator for Australians and that many enlisted for the experience of fighting in a war overseas. In Source 5, John Simpson Kirkpatrick, who is now a famous Australian war hero but who then regarded himself as English, explains the difference in their cause between English soldiers and Australian soldiers³. He states that “men were just simple going mad out there to go to the war”, suggesting that for Australians, it was more about the idea and the experience of going to a war than a higher ideal. John Frank William argues in his monograph ANZACS, Media and the Great War that the media played a pivotal role in producing and circulating romantic images of the life of the soldier and of conflict overseas⁴. In The first report in Australia of the landing at Gallipoli, Ashmead Barlett portrays the soldiers as brave and ambitious heroes who were successful in the war and comments

¹ Australian War Memorial, *Source 1* (Extract from a letter by Robert Edmund Antill, 1914-1917), <<http://www.awm.gov.au/education/simpson-prize-question-2015/>>, Viewed on 18 September 2014.

² Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *What’s Wrong With Anzac?: The Militarization of Australian History* (UNSW Press, 1 August 2010).

³ Australian War Memorial, *Source 5* (Letter about Everard Digges La Touche by his mother, 1914), <<http://www.awm.gov.au/education/simpson-prize-question-2015/>>, Viewed on 19 September 2014.

⁴ John Frank William, *ANZACS, the Media and the Great War* (UNSW Press, 1999).

that “the courage displayed by these wounded Australians and New Zealanders will never be forgotten”⁵. This was a nationalistic, idealized conception of the Australian army, which was designed to encourage young men to associate enlistment with superior morality or human achievement.

For those mostly, or entirely, motivated by a sense of social obligation, Australian identity was more important than their affiliation with Britain. A stereotypical, glib view of Australian cultural history holds that bonds to national identity were very weak before the advent of the First World War. Source 3, a photograph distributed at the time to encourage enlistment, would seem to prove the former view of a servile, deeply colonial disposition among Australians: Australia’s army is presented as ready “At the Empire’s Call”⁶. In fact, Australians had a strong, thriving national voice before this time. E. M. Andrew’s The Anzac Illusion however argues that while most Australians felt culturally linked to Britain they believed even more strongly in a unique Australian identity⁷ Many younger Australians were concerned that Australia was being economically and politically exploited by Britain and felt that the war offered few benefits for their country.⁸ The Australian Government however had social and ideological links to the elite in United Kingdom: they believed that the British Empire was important for Australia’s financial and military security and, as an older generation, felt a stronger sense of kinship with the British.⁹ In order to motivate the youth to join a war effort that was not explicitly or closely linked to Australia’s security concerns, they tellingly deployed Australian iconography and symbols in enlistment propaganda: the State Library of Victoria’s collection of recruitment advertisements includes references to the Australia’s bush landscape, native animals and obsession with the sports and outdoor activities. The Sportsmen’s Thousand poster, featuring Albert Jacka, a well-known Australian athlete and war hero, uses Australians’ unique connection to outdoor activities and draws on the relationship between sport and war in order to encourage enlistment¹⁰. Another recruitment poster uses the classical Australian phrase

⁵ Ashmead Barlett, *The first report in Australia of the landing at Gallipoli*, Hobart Mercury, 12 May 1915.

⁶ Australian War Memorial, *Source 3*, <<http://www.awm.gov.au/education/simpson-prize-question-2015/>>, Viewed on 22 September 2014.

⁷ Eric Montgomery Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion: Anglo Australian Relations during World War I* (Cambridge University Press, 1 January 1993).

⁸ John Conner, *Anza and Empire: George Foster Pearce and the Foundations of Australian Defence* (Cambridge University Press, 11 April 2011).

⁹ Eric Montgomery Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion: Anglo Australian Relations during World War I* (Cambridge University Press, 1 January 1993).

¹⁰ Empire Calls, *Sportsman’s Thousand*, <<http://empirecall.pbworks.com/f/1287798153/Sportsmen's%20Thousand%20AWM%20ARTV00026.jpg>>, Viewed on 1 September 2014.

“Coo-ee” to create a sense of connection with the war in distant Europe¹¹. Patriotic links to Australia and its interests were the primary ideological or communal motivators for Australian enlistees: that is why the government opted to deploy them so extensively in recruitment propaganda.

It is important to survey, however, the role that imperial rhetoric did play in the call for enlistment. Propaganda posters took advantage of Australia's special connection to the ‘mother country’ in the interests of the war effort. The authoritative power of Britain over Australia is depicted in the *Who's Absent* poster, where the rich powerful man, representing the English state, is controlling the Australian soldiers¹². The *50,000 More Men* poster frames Australia's participation in the war as a result of a moral obligation to defend Britain.¹³ However many of the ‘Australians’ this material was targeted at would be more sensibly regarded as British citizens: a significant minority of those residing in Australia identified as British nationals and thus enlisting, for them, meant fighting for their native country rather than the “Mother Country”¹⁴.

Even insofar as Australian enlisted because of the needs of the British empire, Imperial identity was often, at heart, about national connection: sources reveal that soldiers were more concerned about what Britain's fate meant for Australia rather than Britain's national security per se. John Connor's study *Anzac and Empire* reveals that the Australian military establishment understood winning the war as vital for Australia's security: Britain's geostrategic might protected Australia from any international threat¹⁵. While this is to be expected, he further notes that the troops recognized that Australia's security was closely linked to Britain as its closest ally. John Griffith's work *Imperial Culture in Antipodean Cities* puts this perspective; he argues that Australian citizens saw empire as a bargain where sovereignty was traded for security¹⁶. Source 4, a private letter written by an Australian soldier, Lance Corporal F.C. Mulvey confirms the idea that supporting the ‘mother country’ in the war was the best way to defend Australia. Mulvey writes “Australia's fate is going to be decided on the continent and not out here”¹⁷. Similarly in

¹¹Trove, *Cooee*, National Library of Australia, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/22440536?q=+&versionId=27136616>>, Viewed on 1 September 2014.

¹²Propaganda and WW1, *Who's Absent*, Charles Sturt University, <http://hsc.csu.edu.au/modern_history/core_study/ww1/posters/page75.htm>, Viewed on 3 September 2014.

¹³ Australian War Memorial Collection, *50,000 More Men*, Australian War Memorial, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ARTV00021/>>, Viewed on 4 September 2014.

¹⁴ John Griffith, *Imperial Culture in Antipodean Cities* (Palgrave, March 2014).

¹⁵Eric Montgomery Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion: Anglo Australian Relations during World War I* (Cambridge University Press, 1 January 1993).

¹⁶ John Griffith, *Imperial Culture in Antipodean Cities* (Palgrave, March 2014).

¹⁷Australian War Memorial, *Source 4* (Extract from a letter by Lance Corporal F.C. Mulvey, 2nd Light Horse, AIF, 23 August 1914), <<http://www.awm.gov.au/education/simpson-prize-question-2015/>>, Viewed on 21 September 2014..

Source 6, an article published in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1914, the writer declares that “we could not be sure of our existence for a year or for a day” if Britain was to fall in the war¹⁸ Ironically, the national pride was invoked to encourage them to fight for another nation, Britain. The author writes “Australian people will not be behind their fellow subjects in Canada and New Zealand”: this plays upon a classic colonial anxiety; Australians are encouraged to enter the war because of their nationalistic pride in being a part of an international system of empire. The writer also argues that even if the motives of the soldiers were to defend Britain, that it was not necessarily about the actual ‘mother country’ but more about its imperial system and ideology, which the Australians believe “stands for the progress of civilization and for the welfare of humanity throughout the world”. In this sense, it is less about the survival of England and its inhabitants per se and more about what British values represent to Australians, and the longevity of the colonial order.

Australia was somewhere between a colony and a nation: this essay acknowledges that tension. It was, however, far more along the spectrum to sovereignty and patriotic identification than widely assumed. It is hard to fathom for modern Australians that an independent, proud nation could participate in a distant war in the interests of a foreign power, but notably it has happened since in Vietnam and Iraq. Indeed, national and international identity is not a binary: the two are profoundly linked. In this case, some Australians were motivated by their individual interests, others for collective causes. Of those who fought for their community, most of them had strong links to Australia and Britain but insofar as Australians cared about Empire because it was because it ultimately improved Australia’s position.

¹⁸ Australian War Memorial, *Source 6* (“A United Empire”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday, 3 August 1914), <<http://www.awm.gov.au/education/simpson-prize-question-2015/>>, Viewed on 22 September 2014.

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APPENDIX

50,000 More Men



Who's Absent?



Enlist in the Sportsman Thousand



Cooee

