



The  
Simpson  
Prize

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# SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 students

2020 Winner

Queensland

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Though the physical fighting of the Great War ended with the Allied victory, Australian experiences of 1919 continued to be blemished by challenges, suffering and the emotional impacts of the war years on both soldiers and civilians. While 1918 was a year marking the end of a costly conflict overseas, 1919 was a challenging time for Australian citizens at home, who dealt with the aftermath of the Great War, the return of soldiers who had been forever changed by the atrocities they had experienced on the battlefield, and doubt surrounding the future in a country deeply dented by the loss of 60 000 Australians. 1919 was the beginning of extreme, long-lasting effects on the Australian population as a result of the Great War.

Australian service personnel could finally return home in 1919, following four years of continuous warfare. The jubilation many citizens of the victorious Allied Nations felt after the signing of the Armistice in November 1918 is captured by Vida Lahey's 1924 painting, *Rejoicing and Remembrance*<sup>1</sup>, through a group of joyful women, and the brightness and energy of the flags and streamers in the background. Yet, soldiers came home mentally and emotionally scarred, unable to completely recover from their experiences. This emotional complexity is also acknowledged by Lahey through a second mourning group, shrouded in dark colours and huddled together in the corner of the work. This complex and layered emotional response to peacetime marked Australian life in 1919. Mental issues, including shellshock, effected over 7000 soldiers between 1916 and 1919<sup>2</sup>, and these conditions did not disappear at war's end. Many returned soldiers were admitted into military hospitals to be treated for these disorders during post-war years, so much so that these institutions became extremely overcrowded<sup>3</sup>. This clearly indicates that though 1919 signalled the end of fighting, the suffering continued for returned soldiers as new challenges, particularly regarding their mental health, emerged.

Despite the huge numbers of affected service people, their challenges were widely misunderstood by those who had not witnessed the frontlines first-hand. Renowned war historian Bill Gammage, whose expertise on the experiences of Australian soldiers dates back to the 1970s, states that, "[stay-at-home Australians] were unable or unwilling to comprehend the magnitude of the soldier's ordeal, or the force of the memories, good and bad, which separated returned men from others"<sup>4</sup>. This caused resentment amongst the returned, deepening the gulf between those who served and those who did not, ultimately making the soldiers' recovery even more difficult. The trauma and resentment felt by many returned men is evident through 'We are the Maimed!', a poem written in 1921 from the perspective of a Tasmanian soldier living with these repercussions of war, which states, 'We are the maimed. Death did deny / Its solace / ... we try to find the peace they know / In Flanders' Fields'<sup>5</sup>. This shows the severe effect the war had, as soldiers began to feel it

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<sup>1</sup> Vida Lahey, *Rejoicing and Remembrance*, Armistice Day, London, 1918, 1924, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C186262>

<sup>2</sup> Craig Tibbits, *Casualties of War*, n.d <https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/article2>

<sup>3</sup> Janet Lynch, *The families of World War I veterans: Mental illness and Mont Park*, 2018 <https://prov.vic.gov.au/index.php/explore-collection/provenance-journal/provenance-2015/families-world-war-i-veterans>

<sup>4</sup> Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian soldiers in the Great War, Illustrated Edition*, Melbourne University Publishing, Carlton, 2010, p. 275

<sup>5</sup> Marina Larsson, *Shattered Anzacs: living with the scars of war*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2009, p.79

would have been better to die than to endure their lives post-war. Furthermore, these complications impacted friends and relatives, who had also experienced the duress of the war years from the home front, but now had to carry the burden of caring for injured veteran relatives.

In fact, while many consider the war to be an atrocious experience for the soldier, more forget that those who remained at home during the hostilities was also very much affected by the Great War and continued to be in 1919 and beyond. When soldiers returned, their emotional and mental burdens were shouldered by their families. A mother of a returned soldier wrote to the Repatriation Department pleading financial assistance to support her middle-aged shell-shocked son, who was now dependant on his elderly parents, writing, "it has been a long war for us"<sup>6</sup>. Likewise, when soldiers did not return, those at home suffered. Owen Gorman, a grieving father who lost his sons, returned the King's Memorial Scroll when it was sent to him in 1921, questioning, "For whom was my son lead out to his martyrdom? God will answer"<sup>7</sup>. For many, the trauma of losing a loved one was compounded by the lack of closure and ability to do familiar mourning rituals. An example of this is Mrs Eileen Colyer, who spent four years searching for her husband's gravesite, who had been killed in France in 1918<sup>8</sup>. Thus, the effects of the war were not only immediate, but continued long after. There is an obvious comparison between soldiers and civilians, as they each dealt with grief, change, and the legacies of war. Moreover, women who had remained at home during the war years were significantly impacted by the after-effects of war from 1919 onwards.

After having found purpose in volunteer work for war organisations such as the Red Cross<sup>9</sup>, many women<sup>10</sup> were required to care for their veteran husbands and relatives post-war, impacting their freedom, financial stability, and emotional wellbeing. War historian Marina Larsson, who has studied the effects of the return of soldiers and life post-war on women, found a jump in divorce rate after the war<sup>11</sup>, as women struggled to deal with a future caring for their wounded husbands. She discusses how, "the plight of these women demonstrates how the physicality of war... made its way into the family home, transcending the body of the soldier and touching the lives of kin"<sup>12</sup>. For some women whose relatives did not return, their desperation to find them caused great strain on their lives. In the case of the 'Unknown Soldier of Callan Park', a soldier so shell-shocked he was unable to provide

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<sup>6</sup> Marina Larsson, 'Family casualties', *Griffith Review*, n.d, <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/family-casualties/>

<sup>7</sup> National Archives of Australia, 2019, *Shell-Shocked: Australia after the Armistice*, <https://www.naa.gov.au/collection/snapshots/shell-shocked/index.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Papers of Colyer, Henry Maxwell. AWM PR00599

<sup>9</sup> Australian Government, *Women in Wartime*, Australian Stories, 2015, <https://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/women-in-wartime>

<sup>10</sup> Marina Larsson, *Anzac Legacies, Chapter 2: The part we do not see*, Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd., Victoria, 2010

<sup>11</sup> Marina Larsson, *Shattered anzacs: living with the scars of war*, University of New South Wales Press Ltd., New South Wales, 2009, p.81-82

<sup>12</sup> Marina Larsson, *shattered anzacs: living with the scars of war*, University of New South Wales Press Ltd., New South Wales, 2009, p.82

information on who he was, many women came forward claiming to be a relative<sup>13</sup>. This shows the kind of bereavement that women felt when they were given no closure as to the whereabouts of missing or dead loved ones, demonstrating how 1919 was a time of struggle as women came to terms with the consequences of war on both them and their families, and how these consequences so greatly affected the purpose and independence they had found while volunteering during the war.

These consequences for women signify that 1919 was a year of challenge and suffering for the people of Australia, as they learned to live in a country, and a world, that had been deeply impacted by global conflict and the transition to modern warfare<sup>14</sup>. Though Australia had never been a front line and had not seen the physical destruction of war, war's end left Australia in a position of uncertainty and changing global involvement. Economic imbalance and the challenge of repatriation caused instability, creating hardship and insecurity for many Australians. The Australian government's 1918 repatriation advertisement is reliable evidence of the struggle of soldiers unable to return to the livelihood that had sustained them pre-war<sup>15</sup>. Disabled men had to be retaught and put into new professions, evident in the autobiography of A.B Facey, a returned Gallipoli soldier, who identifies the challenges of finding suitable employment as an injured veteran<sup>16</sup>. The same problems were posed nationwide. According to a speech made by General John Monash in 1918<sup>17</sup>, there were 'something like 200 000 individuals' to rehabilitate and employ. In the same speech, Monash highlights the difficulty of bringing such a large number of service people home, enquiring, "At what rate shall we be able to send the men home?" and discussing the great demand for ships from all nations. Therefore, the end of the war had clearly not put an end to the challenges facing Australia, particularly in an operational sense.

Though there were logistical ambiguities associated with war's end, the most challenge came when the Australian people looked back at 4 years of loss and bloody warfare and wondered, '*what now?*'. A *Gentle Sobbing in the South*, written by soldier-poet Leon Gellert offers the last three lines 'There are lines of buried bones: / There's an unpaid waiting debt: / There's a sound of gentle sobbing in the south.'<sup>18</sup> These final lines comment on how Australians waited for the sacrifice of the Anzacs to be repaid, without knowing which direction they were headed in next or how life would go on after losing so many young soldiers to an overseas war, with particular emphasis on how this caused grief and profound loss among the people, signified by the impactful last line.

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<sup>13</sup> Jen Hawksley 2010, '*Long time coming home: the unknown patient of Callan Park*', Anzac Legacies: Australians and the aftermath of war, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne. p. 61

<sup>14</sup> Scott Michael Rank Ph.D, *History on the Net, Effects of World War 1*, 2019, <https://www.historyonthenet.com/effects-of-world-war-1>

<sup>15</sup> Repatriation film, Repatriation Department, Australia, c. 1918. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/F00139>

<sup>16</sup> A.B. Facey, *A Fortunate Life*, Penguin Books Australia, Victoria, 1981

<sup>17</sup> Address on *Repatriation and demobilization* by John Monash to divisional and brigade commanders on 26 November 1918, pp. 19–20, 24–25, 30. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1341638>

<sup>18</sup> Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs, *Gallipoli and the Anzacs*, n.d, <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/history/conflicts/gallipoli-and-anzacs/locations/walk-around-anzac-battlefield-sites/anzac-cove>

The Allies' victory may have signalled the beginning of peace, but it far from ended suffering and challenges in Australia, as the people continued to struggle with the aftermath of the war, and thousands mourned the loss of loved ones. The return of emotionally and physically wounded soldiers caused great burdens on both themselves and their families, particularly women who had to forgo their newfound purpose to care for veterans. Finally, the instability of the nation and uncertainty of its direction caused grief and further suffering for Australian people. While 1918 may be a year denoted by the success of the Allies on the frontlines, 1919 is equally marked as the beginning of the fight for normalcy and stability once the guns fell silent.

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