



The
Simpson
Prize

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SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 students

2020 Winner

Victoria

Tharushi Walisinghe

Presbyterian Ladies' College



SIMPSON PRIZE 2020

Tharushi Walisinghe

“Allied victory brought an end to war, suffering, and challenges for Australia and its people.”

To what extent do experiences of 1919 support this view?



*“This cruel war is over,
But oh! at what a cost —
When we think in silent sorrow
Of the bonnie boys we've lost;
When we think of all the widows,
The fatherless as well,
And the sons of loving mothers,
Who nobly fought and fell.”*

- Theodore I. Pike, *Nepean Times*, 4 January 1919

The words of Theodore Pike capture the sentiment felt by Australia in the years following the “cruel war”, after which 60,000 Australian soldiers never returned.¹ Although the Allies emerged victorious, the war left a maelstrom of destruction, bereavement and turmoil in its wake. Australia had been spared none of the horrors of the battlefield; soldiers had fought battles whose names are now synonymous with bloodshed, and faced the most lethal weapons of the time. To say the war ended as the last guns ceased firing on November 11, 1918, is to take a very narrow perspective. Indeed, the war continued to invade and infect lives to an even greater extent in 1919 and beyond, as men, women and children battled its indelible impacts including the loss of a progressive nationalistic spirit and crippling injuries to body and soul, which in some cases never healed. These persisting challenges are evident in the experiences of subsequent years - challenges that not even victory overcame.

Historical accounts reveal that post-war years did not end the psychological trauma suffered by “totally and permanently incapacitated soldiers”² and their families, who were “broken down” by “brutalities and imprisonment”.³ Sometimes, living with mental and physical scars proved to be harder than combat. For those who failed to suppress memories, recollections of the “crying years” led to social, familial and occupational dysfunction,⁴ which was exacerbated by “higher rates of employment

¹ Burness, P 2015, *Australians at The Great War 1914-1918*, Murdoch Books, New South Wales, p. 9.

² *The Families of World War 1 Veterans 2018*, Public Record Office Victoria, viewed 2 October 2019, <<https://prov.vic.gov.au/explore-collection/provenance-journal/provenance-2015/families-world-war-i-veterans>>.

³ ‘Broken Down V.C. - Victim of Huns’ 1919, *The Newcastle Sun*, 4 January, viewed 1 October 2019, <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/159372161?searchTerm=world%20war%201&searchLimits=l-year=1919%7C%7C%7C-decade=191%7C%7C%7Csortby>>.

⁴ Straw, L 2017, *After the War: Returned Soldiers and the Mental and Physical Scars of World War 1*, UWA Publishing, Western Australia, p. 12.

disruption, suicide, vagrancy, and marital instability” prevalent in veterans.⁵ Frank Wilkinson was one of many soldiers who were left to manage the atrocities of the war. With his family’s dependence on him, Wilkinson saw no other escape than to kill his wife and daughter before shooting himself.⁶ This sheds light on the more unpleasant aspects of war’s aftermath (shell-shock, PTSD and suicide) and how debilitating medical issues affected self-worth and the sense of the importance of family and friends. Predictably, this manifested itself as grief-stricken families and shattered relationships.

Largely overlooked in Australian historiography was the struggle of families, which intensified after 1918. Vida Lahey’s artwork, which depicts women grieving and rejoicing at St Martin-in-the-Fields on Armistice Day, reflects the reality experienced by relatives.⁷ Many rejoiced at the soldiers’ homecoming, yet in time, jubilation turned to despair at the changed man who had returned. With women shouldering the financial burden of supporting families and community efforts being inadequate to alleviate the trauma of repatriated soldiers, families fell apart. Some servicemen did manage to rebuild their lives, such as Sergeant James Matthews, who married Caroline Janetta before returning to Australia in 1919.⁸ Few shared this happy fate. Compounded by desertion and excessive drinking, the collapse of marriages was commonplace - in Western Australia, applications to annul marriages increased from 79 (1918) to 145 (1919).⁹ The stories of women who endured emotional torment remain untold due to public attention on the fallen, which shifted commemoration away from families who experienced fractured relationships. One example is Merilees, daughter of Sergeant Guy Lukin, whose recollections of her father’s drinking habits (“After the war, he became an alcoholic...[my mother] wished she’d known more about how to cope with people with alcoholic problems...I can see her standing over the kitchen sink emptying a bottle of whisky”)¹⁰ provide insight into war’s impacts on the homefront - despite being highly respected, his perception of burdensomeness on his family drove him to suicide. Lukin’s fate is similar to other individuals, for whom the end of war did not equate to an end to suffering.

⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶ Cecil, J & Collins, A 2014, *Anzacs return home: shell shock and tragedies*, ABC Great Southern WA, viewed 2 October 2019, <<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2014/05/02/3996853.htm>>.

⁷ Simpson Prize Source 1: Lahey, V 1924, *Rejoicing and remembrance, Armistice Day, London, 1918*, Painting, Australian War Memorial, viewed 1 October 2019, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C186262>>.

⁸ Simpson Prize Source 8: *Wedding portrait of James Reginald Matthews and Caroline Janetta Matthews* 1918, Photograph, Australian War Memorial, viewed 1 October 2019, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1028878>>.

⁹ Straw, op. cit., p. 94.

¹⁰ Straw, op. cit., pp. 93-94.

From a national perspective, 1919 heralded the onset of massive social and economic challenges, which transpired to cause even greater hardship for a fledgling nation like Australia. Of the 330,000 men who enlisted, 14% (58,790)¹¹ never returned, with a further 150,000 injured.¹² The government faced the unprecedented task of repatriating 167,000 men needing resettlement and employment.¹³ John Monash recognised that the biggest problem was returning soldiers with a “minimum of hardship on the community and on the individual”.¹⁴ Remedies to this, which he outlined in his Repatriation and Demobilisation address, included creating employment opportunities, apprenticeships, learning of new trades and soldier settlement, in which 40,000 soldiers were placed on farmlands.¹⁵ Nevertheless, soldiers with ailments such as pneumonia and disabilities were often neglected, and authorities hardly understood how conditions like PTSD could develop afterwards. Society, as described by historian Bill Gammage, was “recoiling from [war’s] horror” and keen to “forget those tragic years”, which prevented it from comprehending the “magnitude of the soldiers’ ordeal”.¹⁶ The expected “return to normalcy” was almost unattainable for veterans, who experienced life as a void which they filled with drunkenness and debauchery.¹⁷ This was one of the factors contributing to nation-wide social issues.

1919 brought a devastating blow to the economy, which was compounded by insufficient efforts to mobilise economically for the war. As an imperial dominion, Australia's prosperity was intricately linked with overseas conditions, so as Britain’s economy slumped, Australia also experienced a downward spiral of crushing debt and inflation.¹⁸ Unemployment reached a record high of 29% in 1932 and between 1914 and 1920, GDP declined by 10%.¹⁹ As Ian McLean observes, “Had this occurred in

¹¹ Simpson Prize Source 7: Butler, A (Ed.) 1943, *Special problems and services*, vol. III of The Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, 1914–1918, Australian War Memorial, Melbourne, p. 900.

¹² Straw, op. cit., p. 80.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Simpson Prize Source 2: Australian War Memorial n.d., Address on Repatriation and demobilization by John Monash, viewed 25 October 2019, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1341638>>.

¹⁵ Straw, op. cit., p. 84.

¹⁶ Simpson Prize Source 5: Gammage, B 2010, *The broken years: Australian soldiers in the Great War*, Melbourne University Publishing, Victoria, p. 275.

¹⁷ Ekins, A (Ed.) 2010, *1918 Year of Victory: The end of the Great War and the shaping of history*, Exisle Publishing, New Zealand, p. 227.

¹⁸ Yule, P 2016, *Organisation of war Economies (Australia)*, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, viewed 2 October 2019, <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/organization_of_war_economies_australia>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

peacetime it would have been classified as a depression.”²⁰ Other factors also threatened to unravel the fabric of society. Returning soldiers experienced the darker side of humanity and felt isolated by those who undermined their efforts. Social divisions grew with the emergence of anti-German feeling, communist paranoia and tensions between Catholic and Protestant denominations.²¹ Chaos erupted in the form of industrial revolts as strikers sought higher wages to compensate for increased living costs. Consequently, 5 million working days were lost in 1917, and this figure swelled to a record 6.31 million in 1919.²² Servicemen became embroiled in public violence, including the 1919 Red Flag Riots.²³ Nevertheless, nationhood is recognisable as a positive outcome of the war, as is the praise for soldiers’ indomitable spirit, pride in the country’s achievements and a newfound confidence about its place in the world. But negating military ‘victory’ are the catastrophic losses sustained by Australia, encompassing a calamitous death toll, economic disintegration and a generation haunted by years of carnage.

1919 was a pivotal year in transforming Australia’s position on a global scale, however the international discussions which facilitated this change arguably led to more tension and ultimately conflict. The efforts of PM Billy Hughes, a pugnacious promoter of national interests, effectively catapulted Australia onto the international stage. He vociferously articulated a set of war aims at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, and his reputation as “little David facing the American Goliath”²⁴ was cemented when US President Woodrow Wilson questioned his authority, as the leader of “a mere five million people”, to intervene in world affairs.²⁵ To this, Hughes scathingly replied, “I speak for sixty thousand dead”.²⁶ Hughes’s passion for pursuing control of German New Guinea was fuelled by fear of being controlled by “vandals filled with an unholy lust for world domination”.²⁷ At a time when Australia feared threats to its White Australia Policy, Hughes also vehemently opposed the Japanese delegates’ proposal to insert a racial equality clause in the League of Nations Covenant. Another major event of 1919 was the Treaty of

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bongiorno, F 2016, *Post-war Societies (Australia)*, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, viewed 2 October 2019, <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/post-war_societies_australia>.

²² Ekins, op. cit., p. 229.

²³ Ekins, op. cit., p. 230.

²⁴ Moyal, A 2019, 1919: The triumph of Billy Hughes, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, viewed 4 October 2019, <<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/1919-the-triumph-of-billy-hughes/>>.

²⁵ SBS News n.d., *Effects of WWI lingered long in Australia*, New South Wales, viewed 29 September 2019, <<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/effects-of-wwi-lingered-long-in-australia>>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Beaumont, J 2015, *War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Australia)*, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, Berlin, viewed 30 September 2019, <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_aims_and_war_aims_discussions_australia>.

Versailles - a peace settlement which caused the “war to end all wars” to lead inexorably to World War

2. Hughes’ success in these objectives was undermined by his failure to secure his most treasured aims: Germany’s exclusion from global trade and the extraction of reparations that would cover Australia’s war costs. Australia hoped victory would strengthen the empire, but ironically, the war undermined Britain’s hegemony in Europe. Despite Hughes’ efforts in diplomatic discussions in 1919, challenges were created instead of solved, and these persisted in the future.

A century ago, Australia was facing the tremendous task of rebuilding a broken nation. Victory may have brought an end to war, as defined by the combat between armed forces, but this did not extend to the economy, society, families and individuals - perhaps it is better termed a ‘pyrrhic victory’. The stories of the fallen are glorified, yet those who suffered lasting mental and physical wounds remain on the periphery of the ANZAC legend. The suffering of 1914 to 1918 can be captured by statistics, figures and facts, however 1919 signalled the beginning of another war - a war that was waged in the minds of veterans, inside countless Australian homes and by a nation which had lost nearly everything. This ongoing hardship was immeasurable due to the vast amount of people it affected. Armistice heralded victory but not triumph. The grief which plagued countless generations shows that the war itself never really ended, but continued to overshadow all aspects of Australian life for decades to come.

Cover Page Photos

Stretcher bearers of the 6th Field Ambulance carrying the wounded from an Advanced Dressing Station to a waiting motor ambulance for conveyance to the Casualty Clearing Station 1918, Photograph, Australian War Memorial, viewed 5 October 2019, <<https://www.army.gov.au/our-history/history-in-focus/wwi-the-western-front>>.

Women waiting for soldiers to return in Sydney, 191 n.d., Photograph, Australian War Memorial, viewed 5 October 2019, <<https://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2014/10/27/4115733.htm>>.

Appendix

Source 1: Artwork

The painting depicts groups of women mourning and rejoicing at St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square, London, on Armistice Day, 11 November 1918.



Lahey, V 1924, *Rejoicing and remembrance, Armistice Day, London, 1918*, Painting, Australian War Memorial, viewed 1 October 2019, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C186262>>.

Source 2: The John Monash address, 26 November 1918

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>>

Source 5: Quote

“Yet before the last veterans reached home the cheers were already dying away, and it soon became clear that the soldiers’ rewards would be less than had been promised during the war. Worse, ‘when I got home in 1919 Ex Diggers were singing for a living in the streets. Men without arms and legs, some in wheelchairs’ [H. Brewer reminiscing in 1967]. Probably that was not common in 1919, but it became more so with time, as stay-at-home Australians, weary of war, recoiling from its horror, and sickened by the number of victims, tried to forget those tragic years as quickly as possible. They could continue in ways and occupations they had not quit, and they easily resumed pleasures and relaxations the war had caused them to abandon. They were unable or unwilling to comprehend either the magnitude of the soldiers’ ordeal, or the force of the memories, good and bad, which separated returned men from others. They wanted a return to normalcy, and they expected returned men to show a similar desire.”

Gammage, B 2010, *The broken years: Australian soldiers in the Great War*, Melbourne University Publishing, Victoria, p.275.

Source 7: Statistical data on deaths in the Australian Imperial Force

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Year	From battle casualties	From non-battle casualties	Total	Progressive total
1914	-	14	14	14
1915	7,819	655	8,474	8,488
1916	12,823	873	13,696	22,184
1917	20,628	1,108	21,736	43,920
1918	12,553	1,687	14,240	58,160
1919	27	597	624	58,784
1920	-	6	6	58,790
Totals	53,850	4,940	58,790	58,790

Butler, A (Ed.) 1943, *Special problems and services*, vol. III of The Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, 1914–1918, Australian War Memorial, Melbourne, p.900.

Source 8: Photograph

Sergeant James Matthews, 7th Battalion, and his British bride, Caroline Janetta, on their wedding day in London, 13 April 1918. Matthews later returned to Australia with his wife on 25 February 1919.



Wedding portrait of James Reginald Matthews and Caroline Janetta Matthews 1918, Photograph, Australian War Memorial, viewed 1 October 2019, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1028878>>.

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