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Surgeon, Scientist, Artist: ANZAC Intellectuals on the Western Front

Central to our historical and popular understandings of Anzacs on the Western Front is the unique character they brought to their struggles: one filled with larrikinism as much as loyalty, robustness as much as regimentality. This essay argues, however, that remembering Anzacs as “larrikins” free from “formalities”¹ undermines an important aspect of Australians’ experiences on the Western Front: their role and contributions as intellectuals and thinkers. Take one compelling example: Melbourne doctor Helen Sexton volunteered to use her scientific prowess to help the war effort in France, believing it was “their duty to use their medical training and experience to alleviate suffering,” wanting “to share the patriotic burden.”² Her erasure is just one example of the missing stories of professionals on the Western Front. Looking to the work of Anzacs in the fields of medicine, sciences and the arts, this essay argues that Australian intellectuals played a crucial role on the battlefield, helping considerably in the immediate war effort, but also creating enduring innovations that have shaped our national history. These lesser known stories from the Western Front provide us with an opportunity to reevaluate our national character, not simply as one of bravery and determination, but also as one of intelligence and innovation.

One of the most striking marginalised stories of educated Australians professionals on the Western Front is perhaps those working in the field of medicine. Amidst the chaos, Anzac medics spread compassion which “[knew] no nations and no races,”³ working at clearing stations, not too far from the Front Line. Here they were frequently in danger and not properly

¹ For a typical anecdote see Carlyon, L. (2006). *The Great War*. Sydney: Macmillan, p.4.

² Sheard, H. and Lee, R. (2019). *Women to the Front*. Sydney: Penguin Random House Australia.

³ Medical Journal of Australia (1915) as quoted in Joy Damousi, “Australian Medical Intellectuals and the Great War,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*: Volume 53, Number 3, 2007, p.1.

equipped with basic protective gear such as steel helmets and masks.⁴ Although our historiography has acknowledged the service of nurses⁵, as noted above, Australian women such as Helen Sexton, noted above, served as doctors, including in the battles of Verdun and the Somme. There were only 129 registered Australian female medical practitioners when the war broke out, but many volunteered to help the sick in France or in London. Despite these contributions, women endured significant discrimination, and were denied the symbols of authority that designated their ranks. In a historical parallel, the stories of women were largely written out of the official Australian Army Medical Corps records. Australians not only healed the bodies of soldiers, but also played a central role in acknowledging the psychological impact of conflict and trauma.⁶ Through their experiences living and treating patients on the battlefield, Anzac intellectuals “challenged many of the assumptions held by the medical profession, especially with regard to the relationship between the mind and the body,” developing the field of psychiatry to help deal with shell-shocked soldiers and ultimately, trauma⁷. The contributions contained in these lesser known stories not only preserved life on the Western Front, they continue to positively impact upon our society today.

Another neglected narrative of intellectual prowess on the Western Front was the technical and scientific role taken on by soldiers, which enabled the rapid generation of munitions and other equipment for battle. Whilst their contribution “has been overshadowed by the heroism of ANZAC troops in mainstream military roles during stalemate in Europe,”⁸ “more than 120

⁴ Australian Nurses (1937). *Work Near Front Line*. [online] Available at: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article17646207> [Accessed 8 May 2020].

⁵ See for instance: Bassett, Jan. *Guns and brooches: Australian Army nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

⁶ Joy Damousi, “Australian Medical Intellectuals and the Great War,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*: Volume 53, Number 3, 2007, pp. 436-450.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Roy MacLeod, 'The "Arsenal" in the Strand: Australian Chemists and the British Munitions Effort, 1916-19', *Annals of Science* 46: 1 (1989), p.45.

Australian scientists, whose particular technical skills were urgently needed by the expanding munition industries” came to Britain’s assistance.⁹ Allies were in fact initially dependent on German munitions “but output would increase seven-fold by March 1916 and 28-fold by March 1917.”¹⁰ The drastic increase was only possible because of the assistance of Australian scientists, such as Major R. V. Morse, an engineer in the NSW Government Tramways Department who performed invaluable work in the trenches on the Western Front. Here “all the principal tunnels... were electrically lighted, ventilated, and kept dry with electrical pumps by means of machinery brought from Australia.”¹¹ At other times, wires broke because of shellfire, however the “broken wires were always repaired without any loss of time.”¹² There were many pressures on scientists and technicians in battle, however it is clear that Australians were able to make quick repairs and supply munitions without hesitation. This critical effort was highlighted by Marjorie Masson, daughter of a Melbourne Chemistry Professor and wartime secretary to *Repatriation Magazine*, who argued in that magazine in 1919 that “the soldier who should be the first to understand the importance of the chemist or the physicist, does not always realise that without the aid of pure science the war would have been lost”¹³ On the Western Front, Australian scientists had an important role as the “applications of scientific techniques had visible military consequences” throughout the duration of the war.¹⁴ The story of science on the Western Front is largely neglected but it is a significant part of our successes in the First World War.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Roy MacLeod, 'The "Arsenal" in the Strand: Australian Chemists and the British Munitions Effort, 1916-19', *Annals of Science* 46: 1 (1989), p.48.

¹¹ Western Star and Roma Advertiser (1919). *Science in War*. [online] Trove. Available at: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article98195259> [Accessed 23 May 2020].

¹² Ibid

¹³ Roy MacLeod, 'The "Arsenal" in the Strand: Australian Chemists and the British Munitions Effort, 1916-19', *Annals of Science* 46: 1 (1989), p.46.

¹⁴ Roy MacLeod, 'Sight and Sound on the Western Front: Surveyors, Scientists, and the 'Battlefield Laboratory', 1915-1918, *War & Society* 18, no.1 (2000) p.25.

Victory was also dependent on the contributions of Anzacs to the information war which was occurring behind the scenes, another greatly underappreciated part of the Australian experience during the war. In order to develop strategies to defeat the enemy, the collection and application of information was necessary, carried out by skilled and talented Australian bureaucrat-soldiers. This genre of work is exemplified by Source 1b, a photograph of the Central Registry Office in France. Here, officers recorded the outcomes and experiences of soldiers in order to develop effective communications and strategy. The masses of papers in the image speak to the scale and significance of this information, which was then transmitted locally and globally through the involvement of Australians in the postal service. As seen in Source 4, a propaganda film on the wartime postal service, sorting, shipping and delivery kept Australians connected on the battlefield and the Home Front. The work of these bureaucrats and civil servants then further complemented the work of other intellectuals: for example, Australian geologists used field notes to help Anzacs become more knowledgeable about the landscape and stratigraphy on the Western Front, ultimately assisting military tactics.¹⁵ Whilst then the work of John Treloar (Source 1b) was crucial to establishing Australian history - in contributing to the Australian War Memorial - ordinary soldiers were also enlisted as historians on the Western Front. In Source 1a, the huge boxes of souvenirs in the large warehouse space, and the staff dedicated to the collection of records conveys the significance of battle souvenirs and the way it both shaped and captured everyday experiences of the war. Despite the conventional stories of heroic Australian larrikins fighting for their nation on the front lines, scientific and bureaucratic contributions were a vital factor as to which side won or lost the war.

¹⁵ Roy MacLeod, 'Sight and Sound on the Western Front: Surveyors, Scientists, and the 'Battlefield Laboratory'', 1915-1918, *War & Society* 18, no.1 (2000) p.33.

Artistic and literary culture on the Western Front proved central for the morale of troops: this lesser known story of the ANZACs also literally produced many other lesser known stories to commemorate. Different forms of art and literature provided an outlet for Diggers to remember the emotions and events of the war for posterity. There were a variety of troop publications to creatively record experiences, which was “a valuable thing... for men with no... legacy other than as a soldier within a larger military machine, knowing that their creative efforts... might be preserved was perhaps a comforting thing.”¹⁶ Anzacs’ creative intellect is exemplified by Source 5, Harold Septimus Power’s artwork depicting the evacuation of wounded horses. This painting not only provided an illustration of an unusual experience in the war: not the battlefield action, but the care of service animals. This everyday scene also demonstrates Power’s creativity as seen in the way that his detailed watercolour strokes even note the faint outline of smoke among the clouds in the background. The emancipatory power of art was clear in that “everything was of interest; everything was possible; everything should be considered and tried; every problem had a solution.”¹⁷ Off the battlefields, many troops also sought “to provide a souvenir and record of the war experience,” solidifying their memories and creating their own legacies.¹⁸ Amidst the traumatic events on the Western Front, many soldiers used the arts and literature to process the “constant barrages and the ever-present fear.”¹⁹ The arts offered “the solace of religion, the relief of humour, the fantasy of escape,” an element of humanism to help survival.²⁰ For many Anzac

¹⁶ Edmund King, “A Captive Audience? The Reading Lives of Australian Prisoners of War, 1914–1918” in S. Towheed et al. (eds.), *Reading and the First World War* (Palgrave, 2015)

¹⁷ Anne-Marie Conde, “John Treloar, Official War Art and the Australian War Memorial,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*: Volume 53, Number 3, 2007, p.455.

¹⁸ Amanda Laugesen, “Australian Soldiers and the World of Print During the Great War,” in M. Hammond et al. (eds.), *Publishing in the First World War* (Palgrave, 2007) p.105.

¹⁹ Amanda Laugesen, “Australian Soldiers and the World of Print During the Great War,” in M. Hammond et al. (eds.), *Publishing in the First World War* (Palgrave, 2007)

²⁰ Amanda Laugesen, “Australian Soldiers and the World of Print During the Great War,” in M. Hammond et al. (eds.), *Publishing in the First World War* (Palgrave, 2007) p.94.

POW's "almost any book... on any subject" was seized as an "opportunity to cultivate [their] mind, improve [their] knowledge, and, at the same time alleviate the tedium of captivity."²¹

In Australia, the First World War has often been seen as "shorthand for nationhood."²² while the Western Front alone would constitute "the worst war in [Australian] history".²³ Although conventional Australian narratives reveal the "tragedy of military and political incompetence, the anguish of the trenches and the enormity of the sacrifice"²⁴, the lesser known history of Australian intellectuals on the Western Front is an essential part of understanding the legacy of the First World War and our nation's history. The work of Anzac Medics, Scientists, Bureaucrats and Artists show us that Australian soldiers were not simply brave and heroic, but left an important cultural and intellectual legacy.

²¹ Edmund King, "A Captive Audience? The Reading Lives of Australian Prisoners of War, 1914–1918" in S. Towheed et al. (eds.), *Reading and the First World War* (Palgrave, 2015)

²² Schultz, J. (2020). *Making Nations*. [online] Griffith Review. Available at: <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/making-nations/> [Accessed 10 May 2020].

²³ Australian Parliamentary Library (2016). *The Western Front*. [online] Available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/AnzacDay2016/Western [Accessed 28 May 2020].

²⁴ Roy MacLeod, "Sight and Sound on the Western Front: Surveyors, Scientists, and the 'Battlefield Laboratory', 1915–1918, *War & Society* 18, no.1 (2000): p.25.

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