



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



# SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

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For over a century, Australia has celebrated ANZAC day on April 25, commemorating its soldiers who fought for the Allies in World War I (WWI) from 1914-1918. Initially a small-scale remembrance affair, it has since swelled into a nationalistic celebration. This increasing patriotism has caused controversy, causing some to question our narrow, self-flattering ANZAC legends. Moving into the 21st century, there has been an effort to establish a more balanced representation, by bringing lesser-known war stories to public attention. A significant aspect of this is the documentation of members of various minority groups who served the country in WWI, particularly on the Western Front. Many hopeful personalities in Australian politics and media see this as a great accomplishment; an effective way to replace masculine, Eurocentric war myths with the true Australian experience. Yet in reality, the movement is far from success. Upon closer examination, one can see the ANZAC myth is not only still in existence, but escalating. The circulation of lesser-known Western Front stories is having a negligible effect on Australia's fascination with the noble, young white 'Digger'. Lesser-known stories are referred to in a chiefly tokenistic manner, are themselves manipulated to fit a self-glorifying national image, and, regardless, are ultimately ignored.

The use of 'lesser-known stories' to reshape Australian war history is narrow and tokenistic. Stories of females in war are a critical example. Rather than remind the public of this group's enormous collective contributions and sufferings during the war period, modern politicians prefer to recount engaging tales of specific remarkable individuals, serving as no more than shallow tokens which make the politicians telling them appear more open-minded. These stories overshadow far more consequential information that comes as less of a surprise but is disregarded nevertheless. For example, many museums and other government-endorsed databases have begun circulating lesser-known stories of Australian female artists on the Western Front. The John Monash Centre website has an entire webpage dedicated to the contributions of artists such as Isobel Rae, who produced pastel drawings in a British coastal army base. Whilst women like her should indeed be commended for their cultural contribution, it is unreasonable that the achievement of this individual female artist is recognised by the website in greater depth than the 3,000 Australian female nurses and doctors serving on the front-line Australian Army Nursing Service. These women's contributions were crucial, often performed complicated and previously male practices such as surgery and administering anaesthetics. (Frances, 2014). This is not to mention the thousands of women who worked diligently and skilfully in various industries after being hurled into the workforce due to lack of young men at the home front. There is hence great irony in the fact that trivial individual stories such as Rae's are modern society's choice of 'revisionist' historical education tools, rather than the overwhelming collective struggles of the minority groups they belong to. By presenting only such obscure stories, one suggests to one's audience that involvement of said minority group was novel, thus perpetuating existing stereotypes. The truth about Australia's war experiences, is not to be found in an obscure story but in well-documented and circulated facts which are simply being ignored.

Thus emerges a second point; not only are 'lesser-known stories' shallow and tokenistic, but they themselves are often selected specifically for the fact they portray Australia in a positive light. Great evidence of this can also be found in tales of Aboriginal soldiers such as Private Douglas Grant, who at the Western front, braved grenade fragmentation wounds and capture into German camps. Whilst Aboriginal soldiers such as Grant were immeasurably courageous, accounts of them popularised by Australian politicians and writers often skew their stories to glorify the actions of Caucasian Australians and obscure Australia's systemic racism. The narrow Eurocentric perspective of these sources thus provides great contestability. In Pegram's account of Grant in *Surviving the Great War*, for example, he specifically selects quotes which suggest it was his Scottish-Australian "foster parents" imbued him with his "love of home", desire to fight, and other admirable attributes. Pegram also omits any indication of the extreme systemic blockades and discriminations he faced as an Aboriginal soldier besides an indirect remark about "racist regulations". This story has therefore been carefully manipulated to obscure the dark actions of the Australian government against Aboriginal people and provide the illusion they were given given the opportunity to fight, and respect for it. In truth, they were denied basic rights and healthcare, and often barred from participating in this war for their own country, on account of a 'defective physique' (Scarlett, 2008). Those who did manage to serve in the war were met with none of their deserved respect upon their return; one anonymous Cherbourg soldier recounted "They place(d) me under the act and put me on settlement like a dog" (Phelps, 2014). Similarly, stories of International Australians participating in the war are greatly skewed. For example, Warrant Officer Harry Hoyling, of Chinese descent, who is depicted serving in France in photographs of the Australian War Memorial ([AWM P01315.002](#)). Whilst these stories are admirable, one must appreciate that they are selected for public display



to give an impression that the Australian war experience was fair, noble and positive, for all ethnically diverse citizens, when in truth many were subject to great persecution. Some even faced internment in a camp for fear of being an “enemy alien”. This policy had little military purpose more so than an embodiment of great xenophobia; approximately 6,890 Germanic and Middle Eastern Australians were interned during WWI (Fischer, 1989). These direct and indisputable facts are far more accurate than lesser-known stories of the rare, respected international Australian soldier from a trusted Allied country, such as Hoyling.

Moreover, even with all the drawbacks and corrupt qualities of ‘lesser-known’ stories aside, the ultimate truth is that they are still futile tools with which to attempt to reeducate Australian society. There is no Western Front story, fact or figure in existence that could overcome Australia’s ignorant patriotism and disproportionate obsession with the Gallipoli campaign. Even if we were to bring more historically accurate and balanced stories to public attention, people would cling to their patriotic myths instead. For example, it has now been over a decade since an influx of newly analysed WWI data has indicated that particularly on the Western Front, Australian soldier disobedience and desertion rates were disproportionately large for the size of our forces; In October 1918 the monthly total of courts martial offences was 716 cases, ‘four times the Canadian total of 164 for that month’ (Ekins, 2010.) Even when faced with factual accounts such as these, Australians still prefer their story of noble underdogs valiantly sacrificing their lives. This is especially evident in our celebration of the Gallipoli campaign in Turkey and its 9,000 Australian fatalities, an event which is given a disproportionate amount of attention in comparison to the 46,000 Australian lives later lost on the Western Front (Victoria State Government). In truth, the Gallipoli campaign was an astonishing military defeat, of which Australians only made up 5 percent of forces, characterised with an unnecessary loss of life and brutal tactical ineptitude. Nevertheless, Australians have turned the event into a celebration, which has given rise to enormous services, celebrations, and pilgrimages to the beaches of Gallipoli. In a 2011 interview, historian Mark McKenna recalled a conversation with some Australian back papers who, when asked about their visit to Gallipoli, replied “‘it’s not about them [the Diggers]; it’s about us’.” (Stephens, 2015) Historian Michael McGirr writes that this modern shift from commemoration to self-celebration is concerning. It ignores the tragedy of Australia’s violent history, fails to respect those who suffered in it, and instead glorifies our relationship with violence. “People now seem to believe that in looking at the Anzacs they are looking at themselves. They aren’t. The dead deserve more respect than to be used to make ourselves feel larger.” (McGirr, 2004).

Lesser-known stories from the Western Front can teach little to Australian society, so suffocated by nationalism and the appeal of the Gallipoli campaign’s young white ‘Diggers’. The only lesser-known stories that are given the opportunity to surface are manipulated to fit existing stereotypes. Some historians, such as Dr Martin Crotty, speculate that this blind patriotism will soon die out, as the younger generation learns to filter and debunk the myths of mateship and righteousness held by older, traditional Australians. However after an inspection of the way this supposed revisionism is undeniably biased, one is inclined to take the more skeptical position of Dr Carolyn Holbrook, who argues the myths “will remain huge for a good while yet,” (Australian Geographic, 2017). Lesser-known stories will ultimately not prove necessary nor effective tools in changing this patriotism; the only solution is a genuine collective movement to come to terms with our past and what it truly means to be Australian.

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