



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2025 Winner | Northern Territory

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“Australia’s relationship with Great Britain explains why Australia and individual Australians went to war.”

Discuss the accuracy of this statement with reference to either WW1 or WW2.

British Australian relations had been fundamentally rooted in Britain’s actions of colonialism since the arrival of the First Fleet, “indebting” Australia to the dominance of British influence in every way and patronising a sense of “loyalty” that ensured their service to Great Britain. This relationship catalysed the Australian reaction to World War I and caused them to join the war, but not only in the imperial interests of Great Britain. Realisation of Australia’s independence in both identity and spirit from that of Britain had started to cultivate in the hearts of its subjects. Desire to prove this new independent identity to the world was gaining popularity, and the war provided a blood-soaked stage that allowed for this assertion. Similarly, social expectations and pressures imposed upon young men during the early 20th century to appear strong, manly and patriotic pushed many to enlist so as to satisfy these requirements. Moreover, marginalised individuals, like indigenous people, in the wider Australian community felt a need of belonging and recognition, which the war effort provided a chance to fulfill. Thus, the decision of Australia and individuals within to go to war was not solely due to the Australia-Britain relationship, but due to the growing confidence of the collective spirit.

Continuing British influence on Australia led to the need for a separate Australian identity. After the Federation movement, Australia had become a sovereign nation by 1901, gaining full control of all domestic affairs. Although these affairs were not determined by Britain anymore, they still maintained control of the wider foreign policies and relations¹, dictating Australia’s interactions with other states and cementing its influence governmentally, and culturally². This influence, since the beginning of the empire, had birthed the growing sentiment of Great Britain being seen as “*the mother country*”, and its colonies and dominions “*her sons*”³. Consequently, Australian-British relations from before Federation sustained on, evolving only to change the status of Australia from a colony to a “dominion”. Likewise, British influences on Australian culture and identity still raged, with the imperial sentiment becoming a major basis of people’s perception of what it meant to be Australian. This perception is evident in figures such as Prime Minister Joseph Cook, who on the topic of the war, states that Australians and Australia “*are in the Empire, and for the Empire, and for the preservation and the security of the Empire*”⁴.

¹ Museum of Australian Democracy, Statute of Westminster Adoption Act

² Lundie R. & McCann J, Commonwealth Parliament from 1901 to World War I

³ Simpson’s Prize 2025 Source 1B

⁴ Simpson’s Prize 2025 Source 1C

However, these influences also included the Imperial idea of the English that Australians had no culture to themselves, or that even if they did, that it was worthless – a copy⁵. This perpetuated a sense of inferiority and illegitimacy amongst Australians, as if they were just a mere extension of British customs and traditions. Desire for the Australian identity to be identified as separate and equal to the British, and for the Australian experience to be recognised, stemmed from this discriminatory ideology. It is a persisting idea that war and spilt blood results in independence and liberty; a sacrifice which requires death for life⁶. To join the war would provide a model opportunity for Australia. To demonstrate and prove themselves to the world. To prove that their bravery, resilience, mateship, and character were not just pale imitations of Britain's but uniquely Australian. This decision to join the war to cement the Australian identity in the world would ultimately result in success, showcasing Australian valour and tenacity, and the creation of the ANZAC legend⁷. Thus, the perception by the British of the worthlessness of Australian culture as a whole resulted in the establishment of a separate Australian identity and the ANZAC spirit through joining the war; a 'baptism of fire'⁸ for the young nation and its populace.

Societal pressure has long been a driving force in human behaviour, and it was no different in war-time Australia, shaping perceptions, attitudes, and actions. War had been romanticised as a valiant battle against a purely evil side. As a result, propaganda depicting the war all followed this, the exaggerated ideal of patriotism and heroism. Derived from this sentiment was the culture of men being the primary instigators and perpetrators of war. Expectations of masculinity and honour were placed upon men, achieved through partaking in war⁹. This can be seen in propaganda such as in *Source 1A*, a recruitment poster reminding of 'the men in the trenches' while showing a young man swimming in the surf¹⁰ (Appendix A). Shaming the men that hadn't enlisted, it depicts exactly the societal narrative of war at the time. This glorification of war and idealisation of military service is exactly what motivated many to join, rather than through other means of motivation.

In order to adhere to the societal norms at the time, many were driven by the need to uphold family honour and fulfill societal and filial expectations. They felt, such as Lance Corporal F.C. Mulvey, 'convinced in [my own] mind that being suited in physique and occupation and being prompted by a sense of duty... [I] can hardly do anything else but volunteer.'¹¹ However, this sense of duty came not from within, but through expectations being sewn collectively into the fabric of society. A fear of ostracization and bringing dishonour upon one's name and tarnishing their reputation was exactly what brought many to enlist. A pursuit of honour and respect that was not a personal ambition but one mandated by society.

⁵ Melleuish G., Australian Identity

⁶ Schultz J., How the Great War shaped Australia

⁷ Department of Veterans' Affairs, Anzac Legend

⁸ Australian War Memorial, Dawn of the Legend

⁹ Slim H., Masculinity & War

¹⁰ Simpson Price Source 1A

¹¹ Simpson Price Source 1G

Nonetheless, it remained a perception that joining the war was the ultimate test of manhood; a rite of passage in becoming a man¹². To fulfill this perception of themselves was many a young man's goal, to prove they were a man. So, they did. More than 400,000 men enlisted¹³: over a tenth of Australia's population at the time. However, one cannot help but ponder the extent of true voluntarism that existed, considering a culture glorifying masculine ideals. Faced with the societal expectation of embodying honour and strength, it seemed almost inevitable that these men were found compelled to join the war, pressured in a quest of manhood and validation.

Since the establishment of the first British colony, Indigenous Australians have always been treated secondary to Australians of European descent. Through the persisting imperialist notions of the British, First Nations people were denied the same rights and had none or unequal access to any essential services. Prejudice was prevalent and normalised against Indigenous Australians, not allowing individuals to lead a life an otherwise white counterpart could. Isolation, assimilation, and oppression had entrenched themselves deeply within the essence of what it meant to be Indigenous. However, this systemic discrimination led to the growth of a 'pan-national' indigenous identity alongside the rise of a wider Australian identity¹⁴. As a result, many wanted to enforce this identity and better the treatment of Indigenous Australians- to be equal and not discriminated against¹⁵.

The military became a unique avenue for a semblance of equality. In hopes that fighting for the country would bring recognition to their contributions and thus bring forth change, many Indigenous men enlisted. They believed that their service and sacrifices on the battlefield would prove their worth and challenge the prejudices which relegated them to second-class citizenship. Joining the war, they would fight alongside their non-Indigenous comrades, sharing the same hardships and dangers, that would dissolve the racial barriers that would separate them back home. A shared experience where individual identity faded, and collective effort mattered more than any else¹⁶.

Thinking this would continue still after the war, more than 1000 indigenous men enlisted¹⁷, bypassing policies that restricted them from entering the forces: "Half-castes may be enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force provided that the examining Medical Officers are satisfied that one of the parents is of European origin."¹⁸ Nonetheless, despite their significant contributions, Indigenous individuals continued to face ongoing racist and discriminatory practices that overshadowed their well-deserved

¹² The Man Effect, Why Veterans Go Back to War

¹³ National Archives of Australia, Australian Recruitment Statistics

¹⁴ Simpson Prize Source 1E

¹⁵ State Library New South Wales, Indigenous Australian Soldiers

¹⁶ Department of Veterans' Affairs, Australian Indigenous Service

¹⁷ Australian War Memorial, Indigenous Service

¹⁸ Furphy S., Aboriginal Enlistment

recognition and marginalised their invaluable efforts within the war. For while indigenous individuals wished for equality and acceptance in joining the war, these wishes were neither heard nor respected after.

And so, the deep-seated influence of British imperialism and the ingrained sense of loyalty to the Empire undeniably served as key catalysts for Australia's decision to enter the war. Yet, it was the implications of Australia's colonial past that created the foundation for these influences to take root. Though the reasonings for individual Australians decision to join the war differed, they were shaped by the enduring legacy of colonialism in Australia and its lasting impact on its people. However, in a country where the traces of colonialism haven't faded, the relationship between Australia and Britain is one that cannot evolve without confrontation. Australia's future actions will inevitably be swayed by its ongoing connection to Great Britain. Thus, it is in critical introspection and potentiality that the path towards a more independent and evolved Australia can be forged, one that is not solely defined by its historical ties to the British Empire but instead by its own aspirations, values, and place in the modern world.

Appendix A:



Source 1A

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