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The usefulness of photographs, letters and diary entries in relation to the contrasting experiences of World War 1

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In August 1914, Great Britain and its dominions declared war at Germany, automatically pulling Australia in the war.¹ Soldiers were sent to many places during the war, including the Western Front, Gallipoli, and Northern Africa.² Throughout the four years of war, many artefacts were created, some of the most notable being diaries, letters, and photographs.³ Although they have limitations, personal pieces such as these provide detailed views on the contrasting experiences of those who participated in the First World War.

Letters are effective in providing the personal experiences and opinions of people who served in the war through a written piece. Letters provide information about life on the warfronts and the feelings and opinions of people that participated in the war. Source I, which is a letter by Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) George Bourne in May 1915, shows what life was like in the trenches of Gallipoli, in which George Bourne writes, “The whole of the valley we hold is drenched with the best of Australia’s blood, but the spirit of the men is splendid... Water for drinking is scarce – washing forbidden...”⁴ This shows the living conditions in the trench as dangerous, as it reveals that the valley is ‘drenched with the best of Australia’s blood’, giving a hint at the death toll in the trenches. Soldiers also had very little supplies, which is shown in the letter; “Water for drinking is scarce – washing forbidden...”⁵ Although George Bourne writes of the death of many Australian soldiers, he continues to write in a neutral way, ending his letter with a description of the place: “...climate good – outlook over the sea beautiful.”⁶, ending the letter in a positive way that shows the perseverance of the soldier and their current morale. Source H, which was a letter written by Sergeant Maurice Delpratt in July 1915, describes his story getting captured by Turkish Forces, and gives his views regarding his

¹ ClickView. (2019). *BTN Specials - History of WWI*. [online] Available at: <https://www.clickview.net/au/secondary/videos/44829930/history-of-wwi> [Accessed 28 Jul. 2025].

² Australian War Memorial (2021). *First World War 1914–18 | The Australian War Memorial*. [online] Awm.gov.au. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war> [Accessed 28 Jul. 2025].

³ Darlington, R., Smithies, G. and Wood, A. (2012). *History alive 9 for the Australian curriculum*. Milton, Qld.: John Wiley & Sons Australia.

⁴ Bourne, G. in *Letters from the front*. [text transcript]. Available at: <https://anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au/remember/letters/assets/george-bourne-original.pdf> [Accessed 21 Jul. 2025].

⁵ Bourne, G. in *Letters from the front*. [text transcript]. Available at: <https://anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au/remember/letters/assets/george-bourne-original.pdf> [Accessed 21 Jul. 2025].

⁶ Bourne, G. in *Letters from the front*. [text transcript]. Available at: <https://anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au/remember/letters/assets/george-bourne-original.pdf> [Accessed 21 Jul. 2025].

‘failure’. The letter states, “And here I am, a prisoner of war, having failed in my mission and no longer able to serve my country... With the Australians it is considered a disgrace to be captured...”⁷ This shows what people’s expectations and beliefs were back in WW1, with being captured and turned into a prisoner of war regarded as disgraceful, as well as revealing that Maurice Delpratt most likely signed up because of a sense of duty, as he thinks he has not achieved due to being captured.⁸ Although letters tell the personal experiences of people during the war, they may be limited, as some letters may be biased or have things intentionally left out or censored, making the letter not tell the whole story. An example of this is Source G, where Nurse Laura Grubb does not specify what the strikers were protesting for, which could mean that she was writing from an unpopular view towards the strikers.⁹ Therefore, letters are useful in providing the experiences, feelings, and opinions of those who served in the war, but are limited due to the fact that some important information may be left out or censored, causing the source to be unreliable or incomplete.

Photographs are useful in providing a visual example of the different experiences of those who participated in the war. Photographs can give information about what life was like, as well as show the environment and demographics of those who fought. Source C, a photograph of Official War Correspondent C W E Bean, shows the conditions of the trenches, in which C W E Bean is shown struggling through a muddy trench, which shows the difficulty navigating trenches. Trenches were usually waterlogged, cramped, and exposed to the elements, which is shown clearly in the photograph.¹⁰ Source D, which is an image of Australian infantrymen and members of the Light Horse Regiment on the Gallipoli Peninsula, shows the unhygienic and dirty conditions of the trenches as well as the demographics of those who fought there. Many different people fought in the trenches, which is represented in the photograph, as men of different ages are depicted.¹¹ Although photographs are good at providing a visual example, they can also be limited, as many photographs do not show the whole story and are posed. Source B,

⁷ Delpratt, M. in *Letters from the front*. [text transcript]. Available at: <https://anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au/remember/letters/assets/maurice-delpratt-original.pdf> [Accessed 21 Jul. 2025].

⁸ Delpratt, M. in *Letters from the front*. [text transcript]. Available at: <https://anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au/remember/letters/assets/maurice-delpratt-original.pdf> [Accessed 21 Jul. 2025].

⁹ Grubb, L. in *The Simpson Prize 2026*. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war> [Accessed 28 Jul. 2025].

¹⁰ Baldwin, H. F. [photograph] 1916-17, *Informal portrait of Captain C E W Bean, Official War Correspondent, knee deep in mud in Gird trench, near Gueudecourt in France, during the winter of 1916-1917.*, Australian War Memorial. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C54553> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

¹¹ Traill, S. R. [diary] Mar. 1918, p. 198 in *The Broken Years*, (2010) Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

which is a portrait of Private Roland Winzel Carter, is an example of this, as the portrait is posed and does not show the portrayed soldier's struggles during the war.¹² The photograph also does not show the soldier's achievements during the war, and fails to tell Private Carter's experiences in the war. Although photographs are good at providing visual representations of the experiences of those in the war, they are limited due to the fact that many pictures are posed and do not tell the whole story.

Diaries and diary entries are also useful in providing contrasting experiences and perspectives of those who participated in the war and tell us a soldier's personal feelings and opinions on the war. Diary entries can provide information about daily developments, events, and routines. Source F, which is a letter written by Lieutenant S. R. Traill, shows that soldiers fought during the night, as the diary entry shows that they went on the raid at 1:30 am. Raiding posts was dangerous, with soldiers sometimes being prone to friendly fire, as the diary entry states: "...and of course one blasted gun was firing short, and right over the ground we intended to crawl over."¹³ This shows that soldiers had to improvise in the face of danger, as well as show courage, as the letter showed that "three men rushed the post".¹⁴ Many diaries provided the writers feelings and emotions. Source F shows the frustration of when they found no one in the post, in which Source F states that the mission was a 'blooming fiasco'¹⁵, suggesting that Lieutenant Traill is disappointed at the outcome. There were also feelings of eagerness prior, as they were 'in the mood for sport'.¹⁶ Source J, which is an extract from a diary entry by Frank Hurley, shares the experiences of what it was like to be in the trenches. He states: "Here the awfulness of the battlefield burst on one."¹⁷ This reveals how quick and instant battles started, and shows how conflicts at that time were fought. Source J also shows that battles during the war were loud and noisy, and consisted of many sounds. "The great howitzer & batteries were in full operation & the ear-splitting din was followed by the scream of a hail of shell which swept over our heads to the enemy

¹² Traill, S. R. [diary] Mar. 1918, p. 198 in *The Broken Years*, (2010) Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

¹³ Traill, S. R. [diary] Mar. 1918, p. 198 in *The Broken Years*, (2010) Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

¹⁴ Traill, S. R. [diary] Mar. 1918, p. 198 in *The Broken Years*, (2010) Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

¹⁵ Traill, S. R. [diary] Mar. 1918, p. 198 in *The Broken Years*, (2010) Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

¹⁶ Traill, S. R. [diary] Mar. 1918, p. 198 in *The Broken Years*, (2010) Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

¹⁷ Hurley, F. [diary] Aug. 1917 – Aug. 1918, p.18-19 in *Series 03: Frank Hurley diaries and related papers, 21 August 1917 – 13 August 1918, kept while official photographer to the Australian Imperial Force.*, [text transcript] Available at: https://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/_transcript/2012/D14653/a2826.htm

lines.”¹⁸ Although diary entries are efficient in showing the soldier’s personal feelings and emotions, they may not be completely reliable. This is because they are usually one-sided, leading to a lack of perspective. Additionally, not all soldiers kept diaries, with many preferring to write letters or send home postcards. Those who did write diaries intended them to be read by family later on, as something to use to confirm a memory or fuel a reminiscence.¹⁹ Thus, diary entries are useful in providing contrasting experiences and perspectives, but are affected by sometimes being one-sided or biased, with some soldiers not keeping diaries at all.

Throughout the war, many personal records such as diaries and letters were written, with many helping historians learn about experiences and perspectives of Australians during WW1. These personal texts provide details about living conditions, events and emotions. Although personal records are useful, they have limitations that could make them less reliable. Nowadays, it is important to preserve and protect these artefacts, as they represent Australia’s courage during times of crisis and conflict.

¹⁸ Hurley, F. [diary] Aug. 1917 – Aug. 1918, p.18-19 in *Series 03: Frank Hurley diaries and related papers, 21 August 1917 – 13 August 1918, kept while official photographer to the Australian Imperial Force.*, [text transcript] Available at: https://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/_transcript/2012/D14653/a2826.htm

¹⁹ Cochrane, P. (2018). *World War I diaries*. [online] State Library of NSW. Available at: <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/world-war-i-diaries> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

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Appendix

Simpson Prize sources

Source A

‘Over the Top’, the Western Front, France, 1918. Photographer, Frank Hurley. (AWM EO5988B)



Source B

Portrait photo of Private Roland Winzel Carter from Point McLeay, SA. Carter was wounded and captured on the Western Front in 1917, held as a Prisoner of War in Germany and released at the end of the war. (AWM 2017.727.1.3)



Source C

Captain C E W Bean, Official War Correspondent, in a trench on the Western Front during the winter of 1916-1917. (AWM E00572)



Source D

Australian infantrymen and light horsemen on the Gallipoli Peninsula. The soldier on the left at the back, smoking a pipe, is Trooper Andrew Powell Yeates of the 9th Light Horse, aged 54. The soldier in the foreground is his son, Private James August Yeates, who served with the 3rd Australian General Hospital. Photo taken May 1915. (AWM C00667)



Source F

Diary entry written by Lieutenant S. R. Traill, the Western Front, March 1918. (Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 2010, p. 198)

I found that I was to take 9 men and rush the MG post discovered the other night ... Artillery support was given, and Lewis guns told off to engage neighbouring enemy guns... Off we started armed to the teeth with revolvers and bombs at 1.30 am. On arrival at our deploying point, the artillery started, and of course one blasted gun was firing short, and right over the ground we intended to crawl over. So we waited a while and shivered on the wet cold ground and then started off, found the posy ... [three of us] rushed the post and found the birds had flown, evidently scared by our erratic guns. One shell had lobbed right at the foot of his parapet. After that we crawled around and tried to find patrols or runners until near daylight. Nothing doing, a blooming fiasco... We were well in the mood for sport too, and looked around for a likely pill-box, but [no luck]

Source G

Extract from a letter written by Nurse Laura Grubb from the Western Front, 14 November 1917. (AWM: PR83/040)

The strikes and general unrest all over Australia are doing a great deal of harm. I do wish one half of these agitators could be compelled to come out here and live under the conditions the men simply have to put up with — there would be no strikers, there would be no shirkers, it fairly makes one's blood boil to think of the grasping callous crowd of men there living lives of positive luxury and armies of men out here.

Other sources

Source H

An extract from a letter from Sergeant Maurice Delpratt, written in 1915 in Constantinople.

"...And here I am, a prisoner of war, having failed in my mission and no longer able to serve my country, but in good health and looking forward to the day when the war ends and I can go home. With the Australians it is considered a disgrace to be captured. It was bad soldiering on my part to get within the enemy's advanced lines, but I know you will understand it is not lack of courage makes a man do that..."

Source I

An extract from a letter from Lieutenant Colonel George Bourne, written in 1915 in Gallipoli

“...The whole of the valley we hold is drenched with the best of Australia’s blood, but the spirit of the men is splendid – especially the Infantry – whose contempt for danger would do credit to the best Regulars. We have had some rain - & as the position we held is a watercourse, the bivouacs in the gullies are even more uncomfortable than the trenches on the ridges under these conditions – so far, the saturated ground has not been responsible for much sickness – this there are great possibilities in this direction. There was a nine hour armistice last Monday to bury dead which were lying between the trenches & stinking us out. It is said 3000 Turks & a good number of ours were buried. Water for drinking is scarce – washing forbidden (this small parties are sometimes allowed to go down to the beach at night as a great treat) & firewood practically non-existent – the ridges round our valley are something like One Tree Hill & covered with dwarf Holly bush & no trees – climate good – outlook over the sea beautiful.”

Source J

An extract from a diary written by Frank Hurley, official photographer of the Australian Imperial Force, written during 21 August 1917 – 13 August 1918.

“...Here the awfulness of the battlefield burst on one. The great howitzer & batteries were in full operation & the ear-splitting din was followed by the scream of a hail of shell which swept over our heads to the enemy lines. Things were very quiet however, & our harassing fire was only lightly replied to.”