



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2026 Winner | South Australia

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SEYMOUR COLLEGE

“Evaluate the usefulness of diary entries, letters, and photographs for providing evidence about the contrasting experiences and perspectives of Australians who served in either the First World War or the Second World War”

Diary entries, letters, and photographs convey emotional immediacy, diverse individual identities, and the constructed public memory of the First World War. While diaries and letters show the emotional and moral sides of service, they also display how class, gender, and role affected Australians’ understanding of duty and sacrifice. Meanwhile, photographs present collective and idealised visions of courage. Together, these sources provide valuable but limited perspectives on how Australians experienced and remembered WWI.

Diaries and letters are vital for understanding the immediate and emotional experiences of Australians in combat. They convey the authentic and raw perspectives of soldiers, and as historian Bill Gammage observes, “many...described just what they saw and felt, because the tumult of the hour denied them an alternative”, suggesting that the immediacy of soldiers’ writings gave historians rare access to genuine emotions (Gammage 1974, p. xiii). Lieutenant J.T. Hampson wrote, “I wonder and wonder when this nightmare is to end?”, confessing that he “[could] see no light” in the war (Australian War Memorial, 2025; Source E). His letter conveys the exhaustion and despair of men who had grown disillusioned with the conflict, as fatigue and futility replaced the early patriotism that had motivated many to enlist (Stanley, 2017). Written close to the events, letters offer direct insight into combat stress. However, their usefulness is limited by censorship and their intended audience of family readers. Under the *War Precautions Act 1914*, the federal government imposed strict censorship on soldiers’ correspondence to remove any material deemed harmful to the war effort, allowing officials to remove or alter content before it reached Australia (Rhodes, 2015). This meant letters often presented a restrained or idealised picture of the front, limiting their usefulness as unfiltered evidence of soldiers’ experiences. As Gammage cautions in *The Broken Years*, “none were obliged to be accurate”, indicating that the value of these sources lies in their emotional honesty rather than factual accuracy (Gammage 1974, p. xiii). Aboriginal soldiers reveal further contrasts. Samuel Browning, a fisherman from Fingal, enlisted after the 1917 order that replaced the *Defence Act 1903* which had barred those “not substantially of European origin or descent” (Department of Veterans’ Affairs, 2025). In a letter to his mother, Browning urged her to “tell George to stop where he is instead of enlisting – one is enough from home, so don’t forget,” displaying protective weariness for his brother and a strong sense of familial duty (Browning, 2017). While he does not mention racial inequality directly, his service following earlier exclusionary laws makes the letter highly useful for understanding how Aboriginal soldiers navigated loyalty to a nation that had denied them equality. Yet, like all wartime letters, its usefulness is limited by self-censorship and the expectations of family readers. The diary of Private Jack Thomas Hutton offers another perspective (Appendix A). His self-composed motto to “Do as you are told... Smile at trouble... Never say die... Don’t argue for it ain’t worthwhile” shows an acceptance of discipline and quiet endurance rather than despair or critique (Cochrane, 2018). Unfiltered by censorship or public expectation, it is invaluable for its honesty and immediacy, qualities that photographs or official reports cannot replicate. However, like the other accounts, Hutton’s words offer more of a moral outlook than a full

account of hardship. Overall, diaries and letters are highly useful for revealing the emotional and moral dimensions of Australian soldiers' experiences, yet their subjectivity, censorship, and limited representation mean they convey the emotional truth of the war more than factual detail.

While soldiers' writings reveal the inner emotions of men in combat, the experiences of women and families show equally powerful but contrasting perspectives of wartime identity. Letters, diaries, and photographs are particularly useful in showing how gender, age, and familial role shaped Australians' experiences of duty and suffering. Nurses were crucial in military medical service, with over 3,000 volunteering for active duty through the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) (Frances, 2014). Their motivations ranged from patriotic duty to "do their bit" to a desire for independence and travel; Sister Jessie Tomlins reflected that nursing had "opened opportunities that [she] would never have had" (Australian War Memorial, 2025; Lowe, 2020). However, the writings of nurses expose the diversity of wartime service experiences. Sister Anne Donnell's diary in Appendix B reflected curiosity and excitement at the unfamiliar world of Sri Lanka, yet Sister Claire Trestrail later wrote that "no words [could] describe the awfulness of the wounds" (Australian War Memorial, 2025; Cochrane, 2018). These contrasting experiences highlight the unique roles of nurses as well as the emotional toll of women's service. This complexity is further evident in Nurse Laura Grubb's 1917 letter from the Western Front, where she confessed it made her "blood boil" to hear of Australian workers "living lives of positive luxury" amid the strikes at home (Australian War Memorial, 2025; Source G). This referred to the 1917 New South Wales railway strike, where thousands of workers protested against the new timecards introduced by the Railway Commissioners (Ellmoos, 2018). Her outrage reflects how some nurses perceived the industrial unrest as a betrayal of the men suffering at the front. The letter is highly useful for offering a nurse's perspective on wartime sacrifice and supports Kirsty Harris's argument that "female nurses demonstrated that compassion, quietness, and commonsense still existed in the world away from the battlefield", which highlighted the importance of the moral and emotional care women provided to soldiers (Harris 2011, p.139). Nevertheless, Grubb's anger and moral stance suggest bias, meaning her tone is not representative of all women's wartime experiences. However, her emotional letter remains valuable because it reveals moral and gendered expectations of wartime service that other accounts lack. Another facet of wartime identity is captured in the photograph of Trooper Andrew Yeates and his son Private James Yeates on the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1915 (Appendix C; Source D). The image embodies the intergenerational and familial nature of enlistment, symbolising how patriotism and service become part of family identity. It is useful in humanising the idea of wartime service by showing how loyalty to country often spanned generations. However, as journalist Fay Anderson observes, Australian war photography has long been shaped by "sanitised imagery [that] obscures our understanding of war and trauma," favouring idealised photographs of ANZAC valour and sacrifice over the harsh realities of combat (Anderson, 2015). The posed and calm nature of the Yeates photo conceals the brutal realities of Gallipoli, revealing more about how Australians wished to remember the war than how it truly was. Together, these sources reveal that Australians did not experience or remember war uniformly, but through diverse encounters and perspectives.

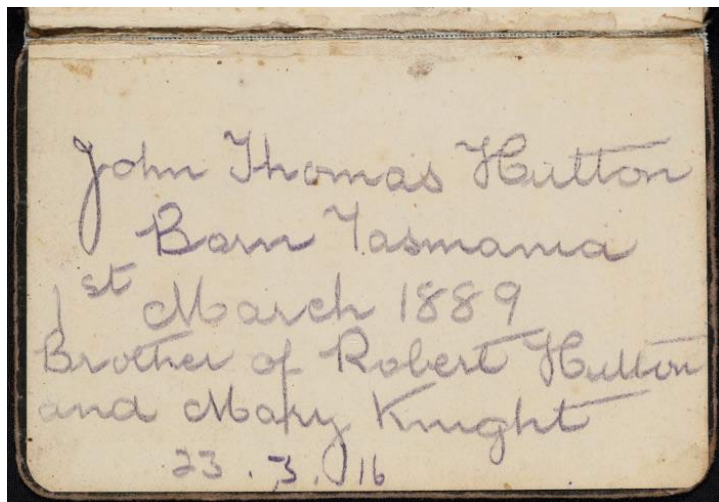
Official photographs and correspondents shaped how Australians perceived and remembered WWI, constructing the vision of courage and endurance that became the ANZAC legend. Because Australian troops served under British command, soldiers were prohibited from carrying private cameras, meaning that only official photographers were permitted to document the conflict (Bellinetti, 2022). This was due to the Allied defeat at the Battle of Mons in 1914, where the British commander-in-chief “routed out” all photographers to manipulate public opinion and preserve the war effort (McGregor, 2015). As a result, the public saw the war almost entirely through a curated lens. Frank Hurley’s 1918 composite photograph *Over the Top* is a famous example (Appendix D). Depicting soldiers charging through no man’s land with explosions in the distance and aircraft overhead, it presents a dramatic representation of action that early cameras could not have captured in real time (Cooke, 2025). Hurley openly defended this technique, explaining that “to include the event in a single negative...the results are hopeless,” and that only by combining separate images could “some idea...be gained of what a modern battle looks like” (Wishart, 2017). The photograph is useful for visualising the danger, scale, and technology of modern warfare and for understanding how Australians were encouraged to view their soldiers – courageous and united. However, its constructed nature limits its usefulness as direct evidence of combat. As war correspondent C.E.W. Bean argued, these composites were “fakes” that distorted the “plain, simple truth,” showing the difficulty of balancing authenticity with artistic representation to compose a perfect image (Wishart, 2017). The photograph of Bean on the Western Front in 1916-17 in Appendix E reinforces this curated perspective (Source C). Standing knee-deep in mud, Bean symbolises the observer who transformed raw suffering into an ordered historical account. His mission was to record the “sacred records” of the experiences of Australians for Australia’s official memory while attempting to balance accuracy with public expectation (Jolly, 2013). Journalist Fay Anderson notes that while Bean “tried to communicate more truth,” the public “didn’t want that candour,” preferring a “more hagiographic view” of the war (Gooding, 2018). Official photographs, while invaluable for visualising the environment and symbolism of war, are ultimately constrained by their purpose. These official photographs and Bean’s reporting did not just display the heroism of soldiers, but they actively shaped Australians’ collective memory of the war, promoting the ANZAC legend and influencing national identity.

Diary entries, letters, and photographs offer highly useful, though limited, evidence of the contrasting experiences and perspectives of Australians who served in the First World War. While diaries and letters show the courage, despair, and duty that come with service, photographs display the curated ANZAC memory of service. Their usefulness is restricted by subjectivity, censorship and audience expectations, but together, their contradictions and overlaps show the complexity of Australia’s wartime experience. As Bill Gammage observed, these sources “throw light on how Australians passed from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, on how the days of Empire gave way to the tradition of ANZAC, and on how men came to be as they are in Australia” (Gammage 1974, xiii). Collectively, these forms of evidence show that Australians experienced and remembered the war as many interwoven stories carrying their own experiences and perspectives.

Word Count: 1498 (excluding referencing)

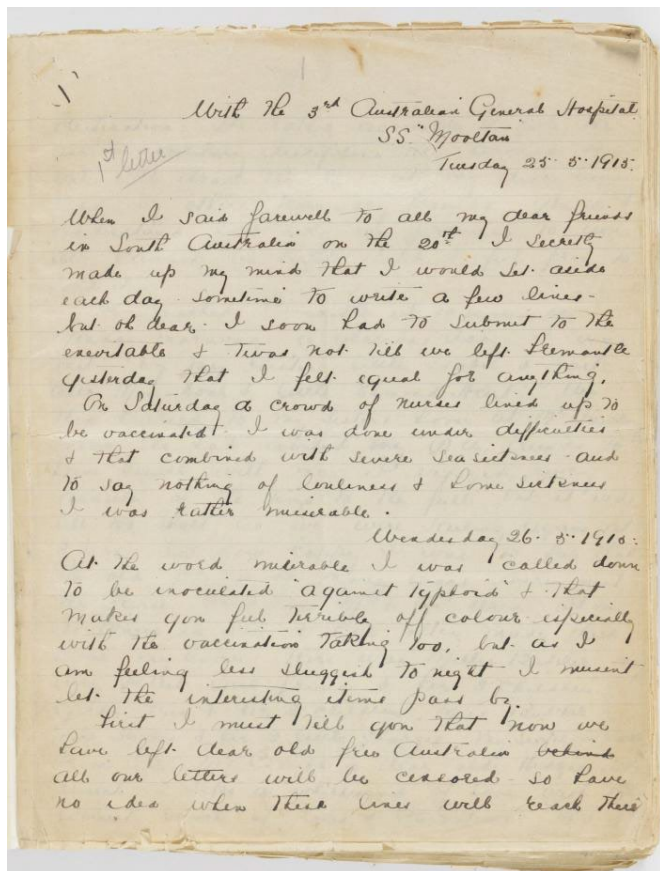
Appendix

Appendix A: Extract from J.T. Hutton's Diary, 1916 (State Library of New South Wales)



Cochrane, P. (2018) *World War I diaries*, State Library of New South Wales. Available at: <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/world-war-i-diaries> (Accessed: November 3, 2025).

Appendix B: Series 01 – Anne Donnell circular letters, 1915 (State Library of New South Wales)



Cochrane, P. (2018) *World War I diaries*, State Library of New South Wales. Available at: <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/world-war-i-diaries> (Accessed: November 3, 2025).

Appendix C: *Photograph of Australian infantrymen and light horsemen on Gallipoli Peninsula featuring Trooper Andrew Powell Yeates and Private James August Yeates, 1915 (Australian War Memorial – Source D).*



Australian War Memorial (2025) *The Simpson Prize 2026*, Gov.au. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> (Accessed: November 3, 2025).

Appendix D: *'Over the Top,' on the Western Front, France, 1918 by Photographer Frank Hurley (Australian War Memorial – Source A)*



Australian War Memorial (2025) *The Simpson Prize 2026, Gov.au.* Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> (Accessed: November 3, 2025).

Appendix E: *Photograph of Captain C.E.W. Bean, Official War Correspondent, in a trench on the Western Front, 1916-1917 (Australian War Memorial – Source C)*



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