



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2026 Winner | Tasmania

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

“The expressions on those dear boys’ faces as they came pouring in with their frightened anxious hunted look combined with the suffering of pain, fear and shock.”¹ In just a few searing lines, Nurse Anne Donnell’s 1917 diary captures the terror etched into those faces of men broken by war. Her words crystallise as to why personal narratives, diaries, letters, and photographs remain irreplaceable windows into the contrasting experiences and perspectives of Australians who served in the First World War.² Official records portrayed the conflict as noble and heroic, but personal writings revealed the despair, fear, and suffering those at war encountered. Diaries and letters give a voice to people who are often left out of historical accounts: the nurses who tended the wounded, the soldiers who endured the trenches, Prisoners of War and the Indigenous Australians whose service was overlooked.³ One of these forgotten Australians was Private Roland Winzel Carter who was both Aboriginal and a POW in WW1.⁴ A voice rarely found in official records. His story, like many reminds us that such personal accounts reveal gaps and silences that exist in historical documentation.

Written from muddy makeshift hospital wards and trenches, these personal records reveal a

¹ Hall, C. (2018, November 10). Nurse’s uncensored diaries celebrate the unsung courage of women in World War I . *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-11/armistice-day-uncensored-diaries-of-army-nurse-anne-donnell/10467734>

² Popova, M. (2014, September 4). *Celebrated Writers on the Creative Benefits of Keeping a Diary*. The Marginalian. <https://www.themarginalian.org/2014/09/04/famous-writers-on-keeping-a-diary/>

³ McKay, J. (2019, April 24). *Telling the forgotten stories of Indigenous servicemen in the first world war*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/telling-the-forgotten-stories-of-indigenous-servicemen-in-the-first-world-war-114277>

⁴ Source B

raw depiction of humanity.⁵ These accounts expose the horror of combat in WW1 and also the endurance, despair, and resilience that defined an entire generation. Evaluating their usefulness means recognising how authentic and honest they are throughout their contrasting experiences and perspectives of Australians who served in the First World War.

Letters lifeline chaos, connecting families, friends and partners to their loved ones battling in Europe. Each envelope carried more than news; it showed exhaustion, fear, and fading hope.⁶ Lieutenant J.T. Hampson wrote despairingly from the Western Front, “I wonder & wonder when this nightmare is to end? ... every man feels that there is a limit to his endurance and that their [death?] is not so far distant ...”.⁷ His words strip away any illusion of glory and expose the mental toll of the endless war. Hampson’s words vividly demonstrate the exhaustion and lack of enthusiasm by the end of the war. In 1918, the war was nearing end and was during the ‘Hundred Day Offensive.’⁸ The Lieutenant’s letter revealed the anti-heroism and psychological impacts of war. Nurse Laura Grubb echoed her frustration. She insisted that if civilians “had to experience what happens in the frontlines, there would be no wars ... it fairly makes one’s blood boil to think of the grasping callous crowd of men there living lives of positive luxury.”⁹ Grubb wrote the letter in November 1917, the height of the 1917 conscription debate.¹⁰ Grubb’s letter likely unsettled families at home and revealed how the attitudes and comforts of civilians affected the morale of those serving at the front.

⁵ Mason, A., & Parton, E. (2018). *Letters To Loved Ones*. Imperial War Museums. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/letters-to-loved-ones>

⁶ Mason, A., & Parton, E. (2018). *Letters To Loved Ones*. Imperial War Museums. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/letters-to-loved-ones>

⁷ Source E

⁸ CWGC. (2023, August 1). *The Hundred Days Offensive: World War One’s Advance to Victory*. CWGC. <https://www.cwgc.org/our-work/blog/the-hundred-days-offensive-world-war-one-s-advance-to-victory/>

⁹ Source G

¹⁰ National Archives of Australia. (n.d.). *Fact Sheet*. <https://www.naa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/fs-161-conscription-referendums-1916-and-1917.pdf>

Grubb's letter is a key example of how letters were important during WW1. They revealed the gap between what soldiers went through versus life back home, putting faces to names and keeping their personalities from being lost. Military censorship erased tactical details and softened despair, creating a selective picture designed to maintain morale.¹¹ Still, when read critically, such letters are invaluable for tracing mood, morale, and evolving attitudes toward the war. Historian, Joan Beaumont notes that they "bridge the private and public spheres, capturing both endurance and the slow corrosion of faith in victory."¹² Although flawed, these emotional artefacts are profoundly human, from men and women in all aspects of war.

"In the privacy of their diaries, soldiers confessed fears they could never voice in letters home."¹³ Nurse Anne Donell's notebook, written between shifts at the 48th casualty clearing Station near Amiens, revealed the truths no letter ever could. Private Archie Barwick's journal describes trench life with grim humour: "We are like drowned rats ... the mud is terrible, but somehow we keep cheerful."¹⁴ Diaries like this capture not only the chaos of the battle combat but also the boredom, the long nights, hunger, and sudden loss of mates. Lieutenant S. R. Traill's March 1918 diary vividly recounts a failed night raid: "Off we started armed to the teeth ... one blasted gun firing short ... a blooming fiasco."¹⁵ The firsthand detail of his writing immerses readers in the confusion and exhaustion of battle. Historian Bill Gammage notes that these personal accounts "reveal the ordinary soldier's

¹¹DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) (2025), Documenting the Australian experience of World War I, DVA Anzac Portal, <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/personnel/documents>

¹² Beaumont, J. (2013). *Broken nation: Australians in the Great War*. Allen & Unwin

¹³ Beaumont, J. (2013). *Broken nation: Australians in the Great War*. Allen & Unwin

¹⁴ New South Wales, S. L. (2017, November 22). *Item 15: Archie Barwick diary, 1 October-14 December 1918* | *Transcription Tool*. Nsw.gov.au. <https://transcripts.sl.nsw.gov.au/document/item-15-archie-barwick-diary-1-october-14-december-1918>

¹⁵ Source F

voice- one of endurance, irony and quiet decency.”¹⁶ He shows even diaries have limits.

Some were rewritten after the war, shaped by the fading memories or a desire to shield families from trauma. They are raw and honest but never fully objective.¹⁷ When compared, these diaries show the different experiences across ranks and genders, nurses faced grief and endless work, whilst infantry wrote of fear, mateship, and survival. Together their stories form a picture no official record could match.

When soldiers could not describe with words, their images did. Frank Hurley’s photograph “Over the Top” captures men clambering from trenches as bombs rain overhead a frozen moment of chaos and courage.¹⁸ Hurley was Australia’s appointed photographer of WW1 and WW2. Hurley’s lens transformed destruction into visual history, each frame a fragment of truth.¹⁹ Yet even the camera could lie! After a fellow photographer, Charles Bean, witnessed Hurley falsifying images, Frank admitted to combining negatives to “capture the essence” of battle.²⁰ His pieces like ‘The Battle of Zonnebeke’ produced powerful, theatrical images inspiring pride but also masked the true horror. Photographs in newspapers shaped home-front morale.²¹ They reinforced ideals of bravery and unity while softening the brutal realities nurses and soldiers described. Still, candid images of stretcher-bearers sloggng through mud or nurses tending the wounded offer counter-narratives: quiet heroism,

¹⁶ Gammage, B. (2010). *The broken years: Australian soldiers in the Great War*. Melbourne University Publishing.

¹⁷ *Why Do Historians Value Letters and Diaries?* (2025). Gmu.edu.
<https://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/letters/whydo.html?>

¹⁸ Source A

¹⁹ Australian War Memorial. (n.d.). *Frank Hurley (1885-1962) | Australian War Memorial*.
Www.awm.gov.au. <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/focus/frank-hurley>

²⁰ Wishart, A. (2017, March 6). *Truth and photography*. Www.sl.nsw.gov.au.
<https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/truth-and-photography>

²¹ Australian War Memorial. (n.d.). *Official War Photographers | The Australian War Memorial*.
Www.awm.gov.au. https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/official_photo

exhaustion, and importantly, compassion. Visual sources, therefore, serve dual purposes of commemoration and documentation. Their usefulness lies in their raw and emotional resonance, but they demand a cautious eye. Alistair Thomson observes, “photographs fix memory yet also construct it; what they show becomes what we remember.”²²

The true power of these sources emerges when they are read together. A censored letter might claim a “quiet day,” while a diary from the same soldier records relentless shelling. Hurley’s triumphant imagery of men charging contrasts starkly with Donnell’s description of “frightened, anxious, hunted” faces. This demonstrates the variety of contrasting perspectives that existed. Men wrote of duty, fatigue, and mateship; women like Donnell and Grubb confronted endless suffering with stoic compassion. Soldiers on the frontline spoke of mud and noise, nurses wrote of silence- the hush of operating tents after bombardments. Reading these voices side by side allows historians to reconstruct a fuller emotional landscape of the war. The “Anzac experience” was not singular but layered: heroic and horrific, proud and despairing, personal and collective.²³

Individually, diaries, letters, and photographs offer partial truths; together, they form the heartbeat of historical understanding. Their usefulness rests on triangulation, testing one another to reveal gaps, exaggerations or shared themes. Letters capture the emotion but risk censorship. Diaries preserve the raw details but may distort memory. Photographs immortalise scenes yet can stage them for effect. Gammage reads soldiers’ irony as emotional

²² Thomson, A. (2013). *Anzac memories: Living with the legend* (2nd ed.). Monash University Publishing.

²³ Department of Veterans' Affairs. (2019, December 17). *The Anzac legend*. Anzacportal.dva.gov.au; Australian Government. <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/personnel/anzac-legend>

defence; Beaumont uses letters to track moral fatigue; Thomson examines how veterans later re-told events to fit national myth. Each scholar treats subjectivity not as a flaw but as insight. The usefulness of personal sources, therefore, lies precisely in their imperfection: they show how Australians felt war, not merely how they fought it. Accounts are woven together. Donnell's horror, Hampson's despair, Grubb's anger, Hurley's artistry, they reveal the full spectrum of human response to extraordinary trauma. They remind readers that history is not composed of facts alone but of individual stories interpreted through emotion, culture, and memory. At the same time, their limitations must be acknowledged. They largely represent literate, English-speaking Australians and exclude Indigenous servicemen or non-combatants whose stories were rarely recorded. Many letters were destroyed, and most photographs were taken by official male photographers.²⁴ Recognising these silences prevents romanticising the archive and pushes historians to seek voices still missing from the national record.

Personal records of Australians in the First World War remain the most human evidence possessed. The hunted faces in Donnell's diary, the despair in Hampson's letters, the fury in Grubb's words, and Hurley's cinematic images together are chaotic, tragic, but deeply moving. They demonstrate that the WW1 was not a single narrative of heroism but a tapestry of clashing emotions and perspectives. To evaluate their usefulness is to accept complexity. Diaries, letters, and photographs do not hand us a simple truth, yet when read together, they illuminate the realities of Australians at war more vividly than any official communiqué ever could. They preserve the voices of those who withstood mud, fire and grief, ensuring that a

²⁴ Imperial War Museums. (n.d.). *Voices of the First World War: News From The Front*. Imperial War Museums. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-news-from-the-front>

centuries later their stories still speak, reminders of courage, fragility, and the enduring cost of war.

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