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**Tasmania**

**Madeleine Foote**  
***The Friends' School***

# *World War I had a devastating effect on Australian society. Why should we commemorate our participation in this conflict?*

**by Madeleine Foote, *The Friends' School***

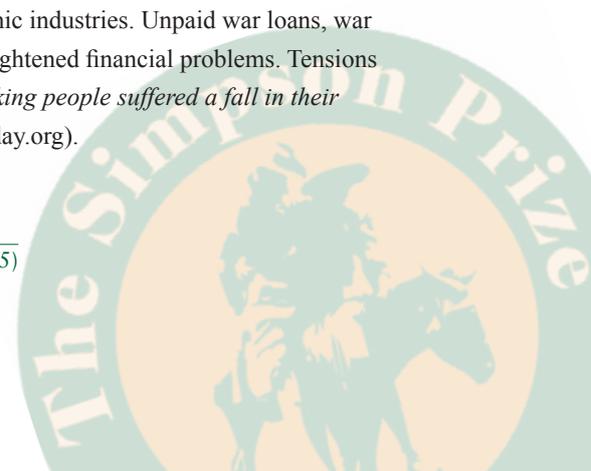
From the darkened beaches and scrub-covered hillsides of Gallipoli calls the sonorous cry of a bugle in one last, emphatic march. Those present bow their heads respectfully in remembrance of the gallant soldiers and nurses who served and died for Australia and Great Britain, decades previously. Yet few of these patriotic spectators would see beyond the much romanticised and glorified exploits of war and truly understand why they commemorate such a disastrous conflict. The deaths of thousands<sup>1</sup> of ANZAC diggers during WWI triggered devastating consequences for their immediate families, for the Australian economy and subsequently for Australian society. Such tragedy, for a nation barely in its adolescence, was unprecedented and World War I was considered in many ways Australia's 'baptism of fire' (*Sydney Morning Herald* quoted MacDougall, 2005 pg. 29). A country once viewed as merely a faraway dominion of Mother England became increasingly liberated from its roots as the war progressed. Australia's participation on the Western Front and Gallipoli was a poignant period in history and must never be forgotten, for the sacrifice made, bravery shown and hardship endured.

There was never any legitimate reason for Australians to enter the war. Unemployment, desire for adventure and sense of duty became strong incentives for recruits. In the first five months after the war declaration 52,561 men had been accepted into the 1<sup>st</sup> AIF. Of all the Allied Forces the Australian Imperial Force was the sole one to consist entirely of volunteers throughout the war (Anderson, pg. 58) despite two referenda aimed at enforcing conscription in 1916 and 1917. Social pressure greatly influenced young recruits. Those who refused to enlist or who were incapable of doing so were given the white feather 'a symbol of cowardice' (Anderson, pg. 40) by chauvinistic women. Therefore it was ultimately society that pushed these men into the field and consequently paid the price.

For those on the home front, the most direct consequence of the war was the removal of 331,781 men to serve overseas. More than 200,000 of these soldiers were tradesmen and labourers by profession and their absence left a gaping hole in key economic industries. Unpaid war loans, war profiteering as well as the loss of German markets further heightened financial problems. Tensions and bitterness grew amidst the public as '*many ordinary working people suffered a fall in their purchasing power, and their standard of living*' ([www.anzacday.org](http://www.anzacday.org)).

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<sup>1</sup> 59,342 Australians died during WWI (Pedersen, 2007 pg. 405)



The war continued seemingly forever with the number of casualties rising steadily. Letters from exhausted soldiers on the battlefield dictated the shocking conditions of the trenches, the rotting corpses, torrential shelling and lethal winters. The attitude towards the war became one of distaste towards the government and Britain. By Armistice Day Australia had amassed a total of 59,342 fatalities from wounds and disease. Many of these soldiers had families who were dependent upon them, and government assistance was minimal. The war left Australian families in deplorable conditions.

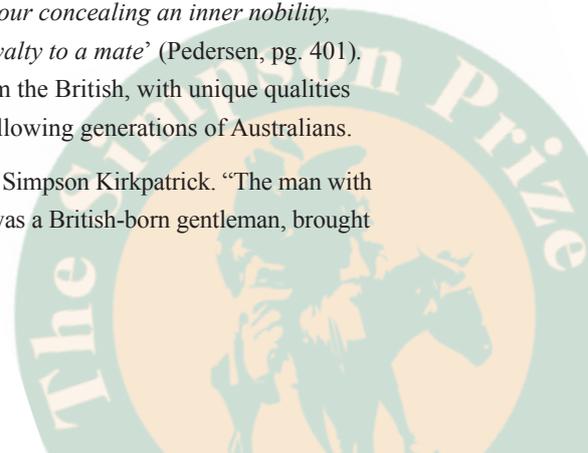
Discontentment amidst the public raged prompting them to find a scapegoat. Zealous xenophobes targeted German or pro-German persons whom they viewed as 'enemy aliens'. German internment camps became sickeningly bounteous throughout Australia. In Tasmania, the thirty-strong crew of the German steamer, *Oberhausen*, was detained and held as "prisoners of war" on Bruny Island. Even after the Armistice, Germans were continually mistreated and alienated. It seems therefore, unfitting that such inexcusable actions be commemorated; yet contemporary Australians must acknowledge the heinous assaults on German people because to ignore would simply be to condone.

"*When the Empire is at war, so also is Australia.*" Famously asserted the then Prime Minister Sir Joseph Cook (quoted in MacDougall, 2005) of Australia's involvement in the Great War on the 5 August 1914. Australia had become a federated nation just thirteen years before the war broke out, thus Imperial ties were strong. The legal and educational systems remained English, whilst the Australian economy and defence still depended greatly on Britain. This was undoubtedly a factor in the incredible eagerness and jingoism exhibited by the Australian people through contributions to the war effort. As the war advanced this loyalty shifted from imperialist to nationalist. Attitudes in Tasmania, which had never completely accepted herself as Australian, changed drastically and "*perhaps for the first time most Tasmanians thought of themselves as Australians*" (Lake 1975, pg. 192). We should therefore commemorate the war for its part in amalgamating Australia as a nation.

At the beginning of the war, Australian troops were considered ill-trained, high-paid, colonials and shown little respect by British officers and soldiers alike. They were referred to as "six bob-a-day tourists" in reference to their daily wage of six shillings compared with a British soldier who was paid only one. The casual approach and complete disregard for authority, coupled with a much higher wage than the British instigated resentment and demonstrated the polar differences of the Australians to their European cousins. Australians rarely saluted and responded terribly to army discipline. Wrote Lt.-General William Birdwood of the Anzacs "*You can't treat these fellows like soldiers, with barrack-ground discipline.*" (Macdougall, pg. 36).

Yet despite first impressions Anzac contingents soon proved themselves strong contenders on the battlefield. The failure of Gallipoli was but one of many battles fought by Australian and New Zealand soldiers. Lauded Anzac military successes included the capture of Hamel as well as that of Messines. Whatever the outcome, each endeavour demonstrated the Australians' ability to shine even under genuinely trying circumstances. The traits Anzacs displayed and should be commemorated for are the '*initiative, resilience, a rough humour concealing an inner nobility, disrespect of authority in its outward forms and, above all, loyalty to a mate*' (Pedersen, pg. 401). Like their nation, the Australian soldier separated himself from the British, with unique qualities that were remembered by allies and foes and eventually by following generations of Australians.

The great allegory for Australia and the Anzac troops was John Simpson Kirkpatrick. "The man with the donkey" epitomised everything it was to be an Anzac. He was a British-born gentleman, brought



to Australia in his travels, and was a member of the AIF who landed at Gallipoli on April 25<sup>th</sup> 1915. As a stretcher-bearer for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Ambulance Simpson revealed his human qualities of courage and endurance. There is little question that Simpson's deeds were exaggerated as propaganda – he was *a man who was flawed as any other* (www.awm.gov.au). Simpson may have survived only three weeks in Gallipoli, yet media embellishment and propaganda canonised his legacy, much like the Anzac legend. Simpson is commemorated not for his military prowess – he was a non-combatant – but for his endearing bravery and sacrifice in the face of adversity.

The devastation caused to Australian society by the Great War meant the loss of countless lives and times of extreme hardship for families. It is true that through participating in the War, the Anzac legend was created and consequently the assertion of Australia as an independent nation. However, this does not seem sufficient reason to honour a conflict that caused such destruction. Yet, it is not in spite of the shattering effects of WWI on Australia that we commemorate the Anzacs it is because of them. Death, racism and nationalism shown in war should be remembered with significance, because society is indebted to those who suffered for the country we now call home.

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