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Western Australia

Christine Hartley
Shenton College

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

by **Christine Hartley, Shenton College**

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”. George Santayana

This year marks the 90th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice ending World War I. This ‘War to end all wars’ forged a strong sense of nationalism and pride which was strengthened by Australia’s first appearance on international stage. It also created a society divided by racism and persecution. This was particularly evident in the inner suburb of Subiaco, Western Australia. This microcosm of war-time Australian society clearly shows that despite the deprivations and devastation that World War I caused, the hardships and sacrifices made need to be commemorated as acknowledgement of the impact war has on both the war front and the home front.

When war broke out in 1914, Subiaco was a thriving suburb. Its population had doubled over the last decade and it had established its own Post Office, Fire Station, Tram Line and Municipal Offices¹. Yet this offered no protection against the impact of war – “You just pick up life because you just have to go on. None of us can lie down and die just because we want to, not that we did want to, but you just have to accept things”.²

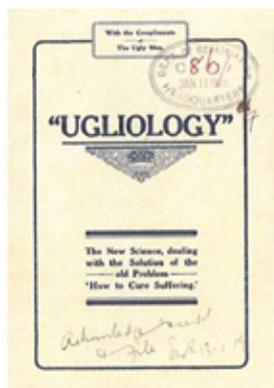
The toll on human life from the Great War was high. In Western Australia more than a third of the men between 18 and 44 enlisted – more enlistments per head of population than any other state from Australia.³ Subiaco contributed 10% of its local population⁴, and the average age of enlistment was a relatively old 26 years⁵. The reasons for such a high proportion of enlistment are not clear, however most men felt that it was their responsibility to defend their home and country. “... I accepted the fact it was every man’s duty to fight for his country, if it was worth living in. And surely this Australia of ours is more than worth living in”.⁶

Over 66 streets in Subiaco suffered at least one death as a result of World War I, with the news delivered by telegram branded with a red cross announcing the distressing news.⁸ Inevitably, the pain and suffering caused by the enlistment of Subiaco men and the subsequent death of many of them impacted the local community.

Despite the high levels of unemployment and poverty that were affecting the rest of the nation, Subiaco bucked the trend. Residents banded together to form and support an astonishing variety of war charities and patriotic groups whose purpose was to support soldiers on the war front through the provision of goods, foodstuffs and letters⁹. These included The Patriotic Fund, Ugly Men’s Voluntary Worker’s Association, Trench Comfort Fund, the Red Cross, The Ladies Benevolent Society, The Citizens Charity and The Soldiers’ Parcels and Packets Fund.

An unusually cohesive community spirit developed in Subiaco, perhaps ‘born of pioneering hardship,¹⁰ that was thought to be unique to

Figure 1: The Ugly Men’s Voluntary Worker’s Association was a group of volunteer tradesmen who wanted to relieve the living conditions of the wives of soldiers at the front



Subiaco. Given the state of the economy at the time, the support these organisations received was surprising. In reality however, it was likely a reflection of their strong sense of community heightened by the growing sense of pride and nationalism that had developed in response to the glorified reports of success experienced by Australians on the international scene¹¹. This new sense of national identity however, caused problems at a suburban level. It was the general expectation that one man from every family would go to war and this expectation was particularly evident in Subiaco. This unwritten code of responsibility meant that families that did not adhere to this code were subjected to ‘due’ harassment¹². White feathers in the letterbox, verbal persecution and other blatant methods were used to induce enlistment. Viv James, a long time resident of Subiaco recalled that “... they used to have meetings and they used to sing that song too, ‘We Don’t Want to Lose You but We Think You Ought to go’¹². You know you felt bloody lousy...”¹⁴

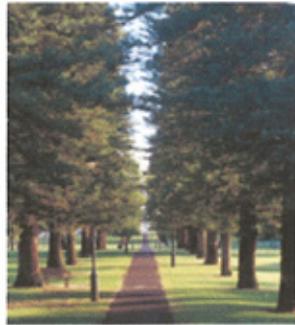


Figure 2: In November 1981 a portion of Kitchener Park was formally returned to the name Mueller Park.

Perhaps one of the most devastating impacts World War I had on the community of Subiaco was the discrimination and racism that extreme patriotism provoked, particularly against the Germans. Refused service at shops, their children harassed in the schoolyard, some families were forced to move home. In extreme cases, those with ‘suspicious’ surnames were sent to internment camps established at Rottneest.

The patriotic obsession with all things British even caused the change of name for some established roads and parks. Mueller Rd, Mueller Park and Ferdinand Street, all named after German botanist Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller, were changed to Roberts Road, Kitchener Park and Winthrop Avenue, respectively¹⁵.

The end of “The War to End all Wars” eventually came to a close in 1917 with the signing of the Armistice. Subiaco resident Ellen Stokes¹⁶ clearly recalls the day.

“... I suppose about 9 o’clock in the evening we got word that it had got signed and that the war had finished and I can tell you everyone – I think myself included – went ruby mad. ... and it was the gentleman living across the road said to me ... ‘go and get [your children] out and let them hear the rejoicing because they’ll never hear the rejoicing of another war again.’ How wrong was his prophecy?”

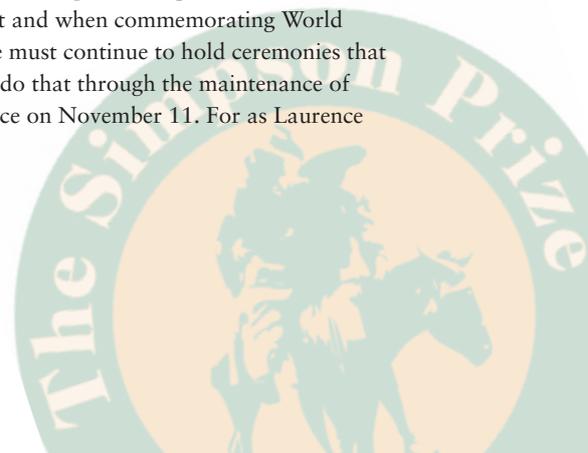


Figure 3: The Subiaco Fallen Soldiers Memorial was unveiled on 25 November 1923

Numerous families in Subiaco suffered the loss of a loved one and many of those who did return were injured either physically or mentally¹⁷. To commemorate Subiaco’s war dead, local residents formed the Fallen Soldiers Memorial Committee in 1919¹⁸. The use of memorials to remember those that died serving their country is a common and just practice, their purpose best summarised by George Santayana who believed ‘those who cannot remember the past are condemned repeat it’.

By definition *commemorate* means “to preserve in memory through ceremony.” Thus, despite the devastating effect World War I had on society, war should be remembered and preserved by all Australians as a reminder of the event that defined the individuality that we pride ourselves on today. The sense of purpose in a community such as Subiaco was forged through hardship that is considered a basic trait of our identity. Our Australia is a product of its past and when commemorating World War I we are acknowledging those that fought to make it so. We must continue to hold ceremonies that recognize the events of the past influence our future and we can do that through the maintenance of the traditional dawn service of Anzac Day or the minute of silence on November 11. For as Laurence Binyon¹⁹ so poignantly put it

*“At the going down of the sun, and in the morning,
We will remember them.”*



Endnotes

- 1 Van der Straaten, M. 1959 pg. 7
- 2 Stokes, E. Oral History
- 3 Hopper, P. nd
- 4 Spillman, K. 1985
- 5 Hopper, P. nd
- 6 Stokes, E. Oral History
- 7 E. Hof, Personal Communication
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Newman, J. Letters
- 10 Spillman, K. 1985 pg. 205
- 11 Ibid
- 12 Spillman, K. 1985 pg. 207
- 13 For full lyrics of this song, see Appendix 1
- 14 Spillman, K. 1985 pg. 206
- 15 Fullwyn, G. 1983 pg. 1
- 16 Stokes, 1977
- 17 Oliver, 1995
- 18 Hopper, P. Nd
- 19 Binyon, L.

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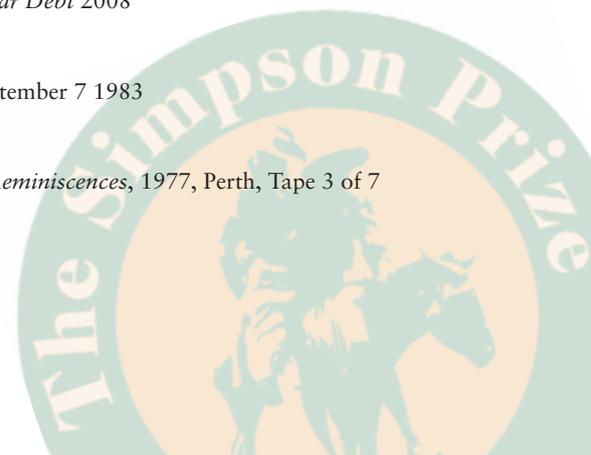
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Appendix 1

YOUR KING AND COUNTRY WANT YOU

We've watched you playing cricket and every kind of game,
At football, golf and polo you men have made your name.
But now your country calls you to play your part in war,
And no matter what befalls you
We shall love you all the more.
So come and join the forces
As your fathers did before.

Oh, we don't want to lose you but we think you ought to go.
For your King and your country both need you so.
We shall want you and miss you
But with all our might and main
We shall cheer you, thank you, bless you
When you come home again.

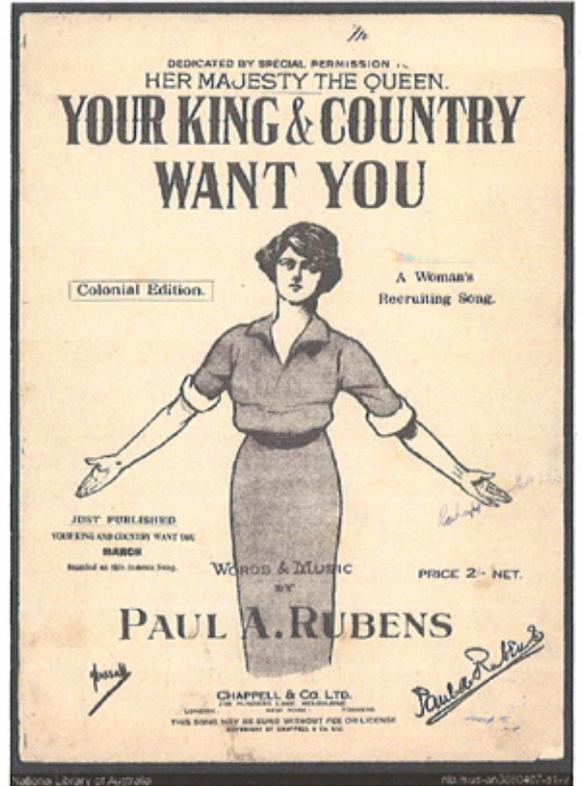


Figure 4: This song was written in 1914 and used at recruiting rallies as a means of persuading young men to enlist for military service.

