

Making Sense of the War (Australia)

By [Bart Ziino](#)

Summary

This article examines Australians' attempts to make sense of a war on the other side of the world, in which they were involved primarily as a member of the British Empire. It interrogates the processes of understanding and meaning-making among Australians from 1914 to the Second World War, and it argues that despite distance from the main fronts, Australians expressed a series of practical and sentimental rationales legitimating their involvement in the war. That reasoning was never uncontested, however, and it was tested during two public debates on conscription, which highlighted more regional concerns about the effects of involvement. The cultural power of the Anzac tradition helped to paper over those differing conceptions, but it too was never absolute in its capacity to define the meaning of the war.

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Introduction

That [Australia](#) was on the other side of the world from the major fighting fronts, and entered the conflict as a [dominion](#) of the British Empire, inevitably shaped how Australians made sense of the First World War, both during and after 1914-1918. Like all such processes, [making sense of the war](#) was contested at different levels of society, and among different communities of thought and experience. Though isolated from the main fronts, Australians had both strong sentimental and practical reasons for conceiving of the war as legitimate and

inherently in their interests. In a practical sense, they were able to make sense of the war through several channels of communication, and were obliged to debate the war and the nature of their commitment to it when the question of [conscription](#) was twice referred to the public in 1916 and in 1917. In the developing [Anzac](#) tradition, Australians were not only shown a way of understanding the war as meaningful, but themselves helped to shape its contours in their communal commemorative work. Anzac's positive conceptions of the war's meaning were never unchallenged, though their dominance in public was rarely seriously contested, and a second world war reaffirmed their centrality.

War through the Lens of Empire

Australians' responses to the outbreak of war in 1914 have assumed significant (if not always well-grounded) [historiographical](#) proportions, especially as a measure of Australian affections for the British Empire.¹ The fact that Australian foreign policy was expressed through [British government](#) agencies has led to easy assertions either that it was natural that Australians should join the war, or that they had no choice but to do so. Neither attitude acknowledges much agency on the part of Australians in contemplating the war and its issues. The more mature reading is that Australians had a series of interests in the war that made their commitment in 1914, whether enthusiastic or with resignation, understandable.

Australians' interests extended from those that might be rationally calculated to the purely sentimental. For the latter, it is hard to underplay the broad affections for [Britain](#) and the [Empire](#) in an Australia that had federated through an act of the British Parliament, whose democratic institutions were the progeny of those in Britain, and whose people, if not born in the United Kingdom (just over 13 percent in 1911) could very often cite family still there or migrant ancestors in living memory. Thus, it is unsurprising that Australians should see their involvement in the war in its very early moments as supporting Britain's war in Europe, though it does not imply unthinking or naïve support. Since the 1990s historians have argued that Australians were not necessarily imbued with tremendous enthusiasm, so much as their [entry into the war](#) was accompanied by nervousness and a recognition of its gravity.² Elements of the radical labour [press](#) counselled against involvement on the grounds that the war was the tool of capitalists, but they remained very much on the margins of opinion — and even at odds with other elements of the [labour movement](#) — in 1914.

Seeing the war essentially as a call to support Britain was underpinned not just by cultural affinities, but by strategic and economic realities, and increasingly by an articulation of the principles that emerged to justify British involvement. The war quickly affected the Australian economy with the withdrawal of European trade, and thus reasserted the centrality of British markets. Australians might have also been conscious of the German presence in the Pacific

and [Germany](#)'s broader economic and political ambitions.³ Subsequent news reports of the behaviour of the German armies in [Belgium](#) crystallised the nature of the enemy, and therefore the nature of the war itself for a great many Australians, who might otherwise have been reserved about too strong a commitment to the war. The example of Belgian suffering was deeply effective in reframing the war as a defence of small nations and resistance to the immoral exercise of power. In 1915 [heavy casualty lists](#) and renewed news of German outrages, notably the [sinking of the *Lusitania*](#), saw an intensification of feeling against Germany and reassertions of British moral righteousness. The proliferation of [propaganda](#) in Australia from this time — especially in its representations of the bestial and [uncivilised enemy](#) — helped to reaffirm the “crusade” mentality that [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau](#) and [Annette Becker](#) detect in French civilian support for the war.⁴

While propaganda was important in producing those attitudes, we should be wary of the idea that distance from the battlefields made it easy for the [censorship](#) apparatus to obscure the realities of the war, and that Australians failed to comprehend the war in its true nature and dimensions.⁵ Australians read the press intelligently, and with reference to other, often private, sources of information. What the newspapers *could* tell their readers, directly and cumulatively, was the scale of the war and its costs. [Casualty lists](#) in the press indicated the immediate impact of the fighting, and while official communiques did not always offer clarity as to the conditions of that fighting, private correspondence both complemented and challenged what one might find in the newspapers. That correspondence could be extremely blunt, and its regular publication, especially in the local press, informed a potent understanding of conditions at the front.

Defending White Australia

There were arguments to be made regarding the defence of Australia, too, that insisted on seeing the war through the lens of Empire. Pre-war Australian [defence planning](#) had been conducted in concert with imperial defence strategies and resourcing, and the philosophies of that planning were much invoked in 1914: could Australians reasonably expect to defend themselves without the security conferred by the Royal Navy? Importantly, Australians in 1914 were not thinking solely of dispelling a German threat, but of a longer-term anxiety centred on Asia, and specifically on [Japan](#). Australians had asserted their dedication to the principle of a White Australia in the foundational legislation of the new federation, and that policy would survive as one of few social ideals unchallenged by the divisions of the war. White Australia spoke to Australian pride in British racial superiority; it also spoke to an ambition for a more democratic and equal society, though based on an assumption that non-white people's living standards would erode that potential. Thus, support for Britain could be

construed as the defence of White Australia against an avaricious Japan (though an ally) that would take its opportunity when British power had been diminished by defeat in Europe. Despite fears about the extent to which Britain was sensitive to Australian anxieties in Asia, Australians could and did conceive of the war in terms of upholding British power and thus their own security.⁶

Religion and the War

Religious faith also offered particular ways of seeing the conflict. Michael McKernan has argued that Protestant churchmen especially painted the war as ordained by God, a punishment for a society that had lost its faith.⁷ Despite McKernan's critique of this "clerical thesis" as a failure to address the major moral issues of the war, the persistence of such an interpretation was reflected in war anniversaries, intercessions, and ultimately thanksgiving services that spoke to a society that had lost its way. The heightened language of those events aside, however, churches were often the first sites of communal efforts to make sense of the war, interpreting the war for their congregations, providing support and familiarity for those in mourning, and helping in turn to shape national modes of understanding the war.⁸

In a more corrosive fashion, sectarian divisions between Catholic and Protestant Australians increasingly defined the war as a test of loyalty to the British Empire. Especially in the wake of the [Easter Rising](#) in Dublin in 1916, Protestants styled themselves as defenders of the Empire's integrity, against the doubtful loyalties of Irish Catholics, whom they claimed owed their allegiances to the pope, rather than to the king. Both sides retreated into various defensive organisations, and their differences would outlast the war for decades, diminishing in Australia only in the 1950s.

National Narratives: Anzac

Individual and communal experiences fed—and fed off—powerful national narratives formulated about the war. These narratives owed much to currents of Australian [nationalism](#) that had been developing long before the war, and which took the events at [Gallipoli](#) in 1915 as their vindication. The flowering of nationalism in the 1890s imbued the bushman figure with uniquely Australian virtues of resourcefulness, mateship, and egalitarianism. Official correspondent and later official historian [Charles Bean \(1879-1968\)](#) was important in articulating the idea that the behaviour and performance of Australian soldiers at Gallipoli had proven the national character. Yet the popular appeal of such ideas had gathered momentum well before Bean's work could be genuinely effective. What Richard White has called a "ready-made myth" soon had its champions in the press and politics, and they coalesced especially around the anniversary of the landing, which would come to be known

as Anzac Day.⁹ Thus in 1917 the *Sydney Morning Herald* declared that with the Gallipoli landing came “the beginning of a new period in our national history and in our relations with the rest of the world.”¹⁰ The landing thus marked the moment in which Australia had become a nation, when it achieved its place in Britain’s imperial brotherhood and fully joined the march of history.

“Loyalty” versus “Disloyalty”

The emergent Anzac legend had its politics, as it endorsed those who called for more men to emulate and uphold the example of the Anzacs’ loyalty to Britain. The heavy casualties on the [Somme](#) precipitated the first of two attempts to reinforce the Australian Imperial Force by conscription, in October 1916 and again in December 1917. Those devoted to the full prosecution of the war in this manner increasingly divided the community in terms of “loyalty” and “disloyalty” to the Empire at war. The accusations of self-styled “loyalists” frequently misrepresented their opponents’ attitudes towards the war, but they did help to reassert the foundations of their commitment to the conflict: support for the Empire whose fortunes they saw as one with Australia’s interests and traditions; resistance to German militarism and the defence of the rights of small nations. What the debate over conscription showed was not so much fundamental debate about those precepts, but the extent to which the level of commitment represented by conscription enhanced or compromised those goals.¹¹

Thus, both sides mobilised similar themes in the debate, but were divided on how and where those principles were best defended. Anti-conscriptionists, professing to defend democratic rights, charged that conscription represented the same negation of personal freedoms represented by the German political system the Allies were fighting. Perhaps more importantly, the question of defending White Australia assumed significant proportions in voters’ calculations and especially in the analysis that followed. Could White Australia best be defended on the battlefields of Europe, or was the Japanese threat enhanced by sending men away from Australia? Even among those at the front, the correspondent [Keith Murdoch \(1885-1952\)](#) suggested, the issue was persuasive: “They have nearly all been away from home now for two years or more, striving against an enemy who is not to them nearly as great an object of enmity and dread as the Japanese.”¹² At home anti-conscriptionists rendered the message rather more simply and directly as a threat to working and living conditions, under the banner “Preserve the White Race. VOTE NO.”¹³

The loss of the two conscription votes did little to shift the fundamental understanding of the war as a problem of resisting German aggression, even if demands for a negotiated peace

gathered adherents as the war continued at terrible cost through 1917 and into 1918. The many who saw sacrifices distributed unequally between the classes baulked at that inequity, but few acceded readily to the view endorsed in the radical press and amongst some peace advocates that the continuing war was a conspiracy foisted on the workers in the interests of industrialists and financiers. More significant was that the stigmatisation and polarisation of the campaigns were endorsed by a conservative ascendancy in politics. The result was that in public the war became more insistently portrayed by the nation's leaders, by major newspapers, and the emergent returned soldiers' organisations as an expression of Australian loyalty to the Empire.¹⁴ In formal [commemorative space](#) the result was the same: by the time soldiers returned victorious from the war, Anzac had taken on a particular, conservative, political form that celebrated imperial loyalty as the highest civic value.¹⁵ At the same time, Prime Minister [William Morris Hughes \(1862-1952\)](#) reclaimed the defence of White Australia as a major success of Australian soldiers on the battlefield, and of himself at the peace table. Returning to Australia in 1919 he declared that "White Australia is yours", and that the principle had been preserved "at least as safe as it was on the day when it was first adopted."¹⁶

Anzac and the Remaking of the War Experience

Hughes was speaking to the need to make sense of the war all over again at its conclusion. The meaning of victory, mass death, and social division all demanded consideration and definition. Inevitably that process played out through the shaping of the Anzac legend, which had already established itself through the institutionalisation of Anzac Day.¹⁷ The legend insisted that the "fallen" had died for a purpose in helping to raise Australians to a consciousness of their nationhood and national character, though always within the context of supporting the Empire rather than emerging from its constraints. To this end, the legend also insisted that Australian society had been united behind its soldiers and the Empire, despite what those who had endured the war well knew. The nature of Anzac Day itself was contested less around this point, however, than around whether it should be a day of mourning or of celebration. That debate coalesced around the proclamation of Anzac Day holidays in the various states and it exposed the malleable nature of the legend and the various tributaries that gave it its vitality. Those who sought expression of private grief on Anzac Day—not least of all the various churches—were those now raising their own memorials to the experience of the war. In developing and conducting their own forms of commemoration in tandem with the Anzac tradition developing on a national level, these communities—including their share of grieving Australians—were important shapers of Anzac Day observance.¹⁸

If solemnity was winning out over celebration in marking the experience of war, mourners themselves were moving to the periphery of public commemorative activity. Joy Damousi has shown how the sacrifices of those who sent their loved ones to the war—mothers' sacrifice of sons especially—faded from public view as returned soldiers literally took centre stage in annual Anzac Day parades.¹⁹ Perhaps the privileging of one sacrifice over another was to be expected, given the claim that Australian soldiers were supposed to have bequeathed that consciousness of national identity to their people. The press repeated the theme annually for decades. In 1937 the Melbourne *Argus* declared that:

A nation which could not in emergencies produce its own heroes would be bankrupt in the highest moral qualities. The example of fortitude in face of heavy odds is an abiding influence; and that example the Anzacs set in a style which will be an inspiration to the manhood of Australia for all time.²⁰

The literary products of the war too spoke to that positive—even chauvinistic—theme, as they argued that Australian men had excelled at war, shading their enemies and counterparts alike (though Mark Sheftall has shown that variants of this narrative also flourished in [New Zealand](#) and [Canada](#)).²¹ Robin Gerster's thesis that "big-noting" characterised Australian war literature is receiving some moderation, but the key point is that Australian narratives of the First World War tended to compare starkly in their celebration of masculine martial qualities with a European war literature increasingly focussed on a narrative of tragedy and futility.²² That insistence on the positive value of the war experience impressed some visitors to Australia, who were also determined to assert that the war had not been meaningless. In 1934, the permanent vice-chairman of the Imperial War Graves Commission, Sir [Fabian Ware \(1869-1949\)](#), was pleased to find that Australians "had suffered less than most other countries from that deadly legacy—post-war cynicism."²³

Armistice Day and Anzac Day

It would not be entirely true to say that Australians were at odds with Europeans over how to understand the war, even if in Australia we see the most fulsome rejection of the "war books" of the 1930s. Armistice Day especially allowed the articulation of similar narratives of war to those seen in Britain and elsewhere, where the hope that the dead had achieved long-term peace dominated.²⁴ Originally, Armistice Day's insistence that together the Empire's troops had secured peace through victory complemented the more nationalistic claims of Anzac. This language faltered, however, against a revision of the war experience at the end of the 1920s. It was replaced by an inversion of itself, a forward-looking idealism that tried to

vindicate the sacrifice in the maintenance of peace. Thus, on Armistice Day 1929 the *Sydney Morning Herald* warned that “the epoch of war will have been rescued from the futility which some are prone to allege of it if the world will learn from it better political education.”²⁵

The international instability of the 1930s gave some impetus to those who would recast the war as a moral lesson, and who bucked against the Anzac legend’s seeming veneration of war. As another war loomed, however, Australians could in some ways escape the decline of one myth of the war—that it had been fought for peace—by a retreat into more familiar territory. The Anzac legend continued to insist that the Great War had been fought to a great and sacred purpose. In attempting to negotiate and reconcile the memory of the two anniversaries as another war approached, the *Argus* suggested:

Armistice Day in a special way is for the dead, just as Anzac Day in a special way is for the survivors. The two sentiments are not separable entirely. The men of Anzac stand for action, for vision, and for hope. Armistice Day bespeaks rest, contemplation, and accomplishment. There is neither consolation nor truth in the barren creed that these men fought to no purpose.²⁶

Conclusion

Australians negotiated with two languages of commemoration in making sense of the war. The advent of the Second World War bankrupted the hopes reposed in the vision of its predecessor as a lesson in peace. At the same time, the new war offered an opportunity to affirm the Anzac legend’s claims to reflect national character in a new generation of soldiers who were — as one popular cartoon had it — “In step with Dad!”²⁷ The Anzac legend itself would transform again over time, in such ways that obscured the centrality of defending the British Empire in Australians’ conceptions of the First World War. “If you were born at the turn of the century you would understand,” one veteran reflected in the 1960s.²⁸ Understanding those sensibilities afresh and on their own terms remains a challenge.

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Notes

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 11. See Beaumont, Joan: *Broken Nation. Australians in the Great War*, Sydney 2013, p. 223. ↑
 12. Keith Murdoch to General Birdwood, 27 December 1917. National Library of Australia, MS 2823/2/5. ↑
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