

Chapter 2

'But why did you enlist?'

The rumour about sending troops became fact ... This caused a lot of excitement. We all felt that we should go—we were fit and another thing that appealed to us was that we would be travelling overseas and would be able to see what the other part of the world was like.

— A.B. Facey, *A Fortunate Life*

In the aftermath of World War 1, old Anzacs usually looked bewildered when they were asked, or even *that* they were asked, 'Why did you enlist to fight a war that was based in Europe, fought for selfish European reasons, a war that achieved nothing other than madness and mayhem?'

In books like Bill Gammage's *The Broken Years* and Patsy Adam-Smith's *The Anzacs*, there are numerous personal recollections of those who rushed to enlist in the heady days of 1914. A reasonable summary of those responses would be, simply, 'It seemed a good idea at the time'. Over the century since, many veterans rationalised their reasons as being allegiance to Britain, loyalty to their mates, love of the flag—or all of the above. There was an undeniable loyalty and connection with the British Isles because many of the men who enlisted in the Australian and New Zealand armed forces had actually been born in Wales, Ireland, Scotland or England. But it seems that most volunteers in 1914 felt destined to be part of an exciting adventure, a war that would be fought quickly, effectively and won decisively; an experience not to be missed.

Conscription was legislated in New Zealand, but not in Australia despite the Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, holding two referenda to mandate it during the war. Although eligible men in both nations volunteered eagerly, comprising an overwhelming majority, there were many men who did not wish, or seek, to go to war. Some were understandably fearful, others had to look after farms or parents, some were

employed in essential industries so could not be released, and yet others were conscientious objectors. All of them would be plagued with the tag 'shirker' and subjected, in many cases, to disgraceful blame.

Those who did enlist—together with their relatives back home—could not have anticipated the reality: the slaughter at Gallipoli; the hopeless, mindless bogged-down devastation of the Western Front; the brutal bayonet battles of the Middle East; the pointless sacrifice of young men, deemed to be expendable cannon fodder in the ineptly prosecuted battles planned by scheming politicians and plotted by pompous, blundering commanders.

Disillusionment was immediate once the actual fighting began. It is significant that the original Anzacs referred to the men who enlisted in subsequent years as 'the real soldiers' because those reinforcement troops elected to fight even after the casualty lists for Gallipoli had been published and the horror had been realised. On the other hand, the original Anzacs, who sailed together from Albany, Western Australia in November 1914, were better characterised as young adventurers, going overseas to have some fun on a well-paid working holiday.

Below

A soldier wearing the New Zealand WW1 uniform distinguished by the 'lemon squeezer' hat with four dents representing mountain peaks as well as providing fast run-off for rain.



This New Zealand WW1 hat badge, with crown located at the top, showed allegiance to the British monarchy while the word 'Onward' captured the optimism and motivation for service.



This Australian hat badge, popularly known as the 'rising sun' badge, was worn in WW1. It became the template for subsequent Australian general service badges.



Above
A soldier—Trooper Harry Bunyan—wearing the Australian WW1 uniform with the distinctive slouch hat.

It is not hard to work out why the recruiting booths were jammed in Australia and New Zealand. Here were two 'young' nations that had never had an opportunity to show the rest of the world just how good they were in terms of nationalistic pride and military prowess. In both cases, the recruits were the product of male-dominated colonial societies, established by the British authorities as part of an Empire that felt it had the right to dominate and control the planet. These 'colonials' considered that because of their subjugation of the tough new homelands—romanticised by poets and other writers—they were healthier, stronger and more capable, indeed superior, to their imperial masters. They only needed the opportunity to demonstrate these qualities.

England may well have been referred to as 'The Motherland' but there was, and is, in the world a regrettable dominance by men that manifests itself in a consequent stance that arguments are best settled by force, aggression or bullying.

The propaganda leading up to the war had been extremely effective. Lord Kitchener, the Imperial (British) Commander-in-Chief, had visited the Dominion of New Zealand and the Commonwealth of Australia

in 1910 and it was naturally assumed that he was also the Commander-in-Chief of the two colonial outposts. Kitchener reviewed the various contingents of Rifles and Light Horse. He must have been pleased at the sight of the cadets (all white males aged from 14 to 26 years old) whose training was compulsory in Australia at the time. Enlist now boys: Follow the Flag. That was the message.

The principal dissenters to this conscription of children into a cadet corps were the Irish Catholics who opposed the militarism mainly on grounds of its being instigated by the greatly despised English. Lord Kitchener was probably not told of the thousands of Irish-Australian families prosecuted for defying the Defence Acts, a set of laws that came into effect in 1911 which made enrolment of boys into the Cadet Corps¹ compulsory. However, the vast majority of Australian families approved of the training and participation: it meant flags, bands, uniforms, discipline and Boys' Own activities.

The education authorities fully supported the war, with the Director-General of Education in Victoria, Frank Tate's reaction being typical of those in leadership positions at the time: a war would give teachers 'the capital opportunity to impress on children their civic obligations and to promote a zeal for social service'². It is arguable that the most significant places for effective propaganda were the schools. The war was seen as a test of patriotism generally, but nowhere more so than in the exclusive boys' schools. In some ways it was an extension of the interschool competitions: the Head-of-the-River regatta, the cricket matches, the rugby and football competitions. All schools reported with pride the numbers of old boys who enlisted, and school magazines delighted in showing the previous year's First Cricket XI, now in uniform. Catholic schools, at the exclusive level, were able to flaunt impressive statistics to refute charges of Catholic disloyalty.

In his excellent book *The Australian People and the Great War*, Michael McKernan describes how schoolmasters spoke of 'the nobility of sacrifice, the righteousness of the Empire's cause and the good that war would produce'. He mentions an outstanding pupil, J. D. Burns, of Scotch

1 The Corps was set up as a consequence of a generally held belief at the time that Australia should have a citizen army, that young men should have the basic training to defend the country. There were Cadets, Senior Cadets and Militia, covering ages from 12 to 26.

2 Quoted in Michael McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, p. 51.

College, Melbourne, who was moved to write his poem 'For England' when he heard of the carnage at Gallipoli:

The bugles of England were blowing o'er the sea
As they had called a thousand years, calling now to me
They woke me from dreaming, in the dawning of the day
The bugles of England—and how could I stay?³

Burns left school to enlist, and arrived at Gallipoli with the reinforcements in August 1915. Tragically, like thousands of others from both sides of the conflict, after only three weeks in the trenches, he was killed.

R. E. G. Cunningham of Sydney Grammar School left school to enlist at the age of fifteen. He served at Gallipoli and in France, was badly gassed at Passchendaele, after which he was repatriated to Australia. He returned to school at the age of eighteen, and *The Sydneian* of September 1918, noted that Cunningham gave admirable and valuable assistance with the training of the school cadets.

In contrast to the later Vietnam War, there was no predictable polarisation along party lines in the so-called Great War of 1914–1918. Politicians spoke with one voice about 'the dawn of nationhood'. And, in this period of history when the Church was a highly significant force in the opinions and beliefs of society, most clergymen exhorted their male parishioners to enlist: it was to become yet another holy war, another means of purging evil.

The only senior clergyman to dissent at this time was Irish-born Coadjutor Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, who described it as a 'sordid trade war'. But Mannix's principal motivation was his implacable hatred of the British, based on a long history of the brutal oppression of the Irish by Britain. In 1916 and 1917 he would lead the anti-conscription campaigns in the two referenda held in Australia on this issue.



Coadjutor
Archbishop
Dr Daniel Mannix.

3 Quoted in McKernan, p. 46.