Chapter Ten

'Nature's children': Australians at war

Along with its commander, Major General William Throsby Bridges, the first contingent of Pearce's imperial expeditionary force sailed from Australia on 1 November 1914, a mere three months after Great Britain had, on its Empire's behalf, declared war against Germany. The Australian and New Zealand troops were disembarked not in England or Europe but in the Middle East where they were to complete their training and help protect the Suez canal from a possible Turkish attack. While not unexpected by Bridges and his staff officers, this destination and role disappointed some among the soldiery. It was, as Troop Sergeant Hampton wrote to his former commanding officer of the Kerang Light Horse, 'rather queer enrolling to fight the Germans and being away on the sands of Egypt' (*Kerang New Times*, 23 February 1915).

Hampton like many others in the force was probably concerned that the war would be over before the assembled Anzacs, described by a female member of the Anglo-Egyptian community in Cairo as 'splendid types, all of them; in the very prime of their lives', could take on the despised 'Hun'. The same lady thought the colonials to be very much 'Nature's children…They climb the Pyramids, ride donkeys and camels, and have apparently made up their minds to "do" Egypt as thoroughly as the most ardent and enthusiastic of tourists' (cited in the *East Charlton Tribune*, 31 March 1915). 'Doing' Egypt involved more than seeing the sights or attending tea parties sponsored by Britain's diplomatic community. Long-schooled in the politics of 'white Australia', some of the diggers were outraged when the 'gypos', as they racially denigrated the Egyptians, sought to short-change them in the bazaars, or supplied them with bad drink or diseased prostitutes. Such incidents caused continuing friction between the troops and the local population which erupted in the so-called 'Wazza riot' that took place on Good Friday in 1915 (Fewster, 1984). This saw Cairo's red-light district ransacked and set alight by drunken diggers who earned the public rebuke of Australia's official war correspondent, and purveyor of the soon-to-be-established Anzac legend and associated 'digger myth', Captain Charles Bean.

Bean's reproachful reports of the riot and earlier incidents of alleged ill-discipline among the expeditionary forces reflected his own difficulty in equating the soldiers' actual behaviour with his idealised (and overly romanticised) conception of them: men for whom 'life was not worth living unless they could be true to their idea of Australian manhood' (cited in Meaney, 1985: 230. See also Thomson, 1989). Even so they provoked heated discussion in newspapers back home. Some middle class commentators, such as *Scriptus* writing in the *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, followed Bean's lead, sniffing predictably if somewhat incredibly, that the soldiers' behaviour 'brings home to us the foul deeds these drink-sodden maniacs might have committed had they had been allowed to proceed to the front' (cited in McQuilton, 2001: 26). Some sought to correct or at least to balance the record. The editor of the *East Charlton Tribun*e, for example, assured his conservative and largely Protestant readership that 'there is good evidence of an independent nature to show that the official correspondent with the Australian troops rather overdrew on his imagination'. This evidence included, also incredulously perhaps, the alleged testimony of the chaplain of St Andrews Church of Scotland in Cairo that 'on Sunday evenings' there, 'the churches are crowded with soldiers who voluntarily come from the camps five to eight miles distance' (*East Charlton Tribune*, 1 May 1915).

Those among the soldiers involved or affected took aim at Bean himself and the others who had deigned to criticise them. A Private Ira Gunn wrote his aunt in Donald that the authors of the articles 'ought to be ashamed of themselves, as they are making us out to be a lot of drunken wasters'. While admitting that 'some of our fellows went astray', the young soldier sought to excuse their (and possibly his own) behaviour by adding that 'these things will occur where thousands of men are assembled. Australians do not know what kind of place Cairo is, and they do not realise the temptations there are here for a large force' (*East Charlton Tribune*, 14 April 1915). In a letter written a few weeks before landing at Gallipoli, John Burns told his cousin Kitty Laurence in Narrandera that while Cairo was rough in places, she should not believe everything she read about it in the newspapers. 'There is a Captain Bean in the 5th Batt that wrote home to the papers and gave us a fearful name. They are giving him a devil of a time now'. Aware possibly that he and his brother Roy would soon be in action, John ended his letter with his 'best love to all and everybody' at home and 'a lot of fat kisses from Egypt, not Egyptian ones though'.

Both Ira Gunn and the Burns brothers may also have been aware of the lines of a poem then circulating among the troops in Egypt that were, no doubt, brought to the attention of the official correspondent (and, we might surmise, had some impact on Bean's subsequent reporting of Australian men and women at war):

> Ain't yer got no blankey savee
> Have yer got no better use
> Than to fling backhome yer inky
> Products of yer pen abuse.
>
> Do you think your God Almighty,
> 'Cos you wear a captain's stars?
> Do you think us chaps beneath you
> Men of drink; of bars (South Africa)?
>
> Cease your wowseristic whinings;
> Tell the truth and "play the game",
> And we only ask fair dinkum,
> How we keep Australia's name.
>
> (cited in the *East Charlton Tribune,* 14 April 1915).

Among the primary considerations of the Commonwealth Government at this time was how to maintain the stream of soldiers and materiel now flowing from Australia's shores to imperial ports in England and the Middle East. By the eve of the Gallipoli landings, the government had provided the War Office in London with over 70,000 troops (43,000 of whom were already serving overseas). Australia's Minister for Defence, George Foster Pearce, had made it clear from the beginning moreover, that this number did not 'by any means mark the limit of our effort'. Echoing his leader's earlier pledge for Australia to help and defend the British Empire 'to our last man and our last shilling', Pearce went on to warn the citizens of Australia that eventually '[e]very man whom we can train and equip will be sent' (cited in the *East Charlton Tribune*, 10 February 1915). Unlike Fisher who made his promise during an election campaign and tended generally to put Australian interests above those of the Empire (Meaney 1985: 218), Pearce, as we have seen, may have had more personal (and darker) reasons for keeping his word.

As the government in Australia promised London more and more soldiers, so it increased the pressure on individual Australians to contribute to the war effort both at home and in the trenches. The initial drafts for Australia's expeditionary force had been readily filled with volunteers like Sergeant Hampton and his colleagues who hoped to see action before the war ended. By the middle of 1915 most of those who wanted to enlist had already done so or had been rejected as medically unfit, and the number of young men coming forward had begun to wane. This was in spite of the concerted efforts of local recruiting and patriotic committees, sympathetic clergymen and newspaper editors, and such anonymous scribblers as 'Sister' and 'Soldier's Relative'.

Writing before the first casualty lists appeared from the Gallipoli campaign, 'Sister' wondered 'why is it that in some homes there are four or five, sometimes more, sons all fit to be soldiers, and yet none of them ever think it their duty to volunteer, while in other homes two or even three are going'. Making clear what 'she' thought was the main reason for the men not enlisting, 'Sister' declared it was 'the duty of we women not to discourage them, because by doing so we are choking noble and patriotic impulses and making softies and apron string danglers out of them instead of men' (*Kerang New Times*, 2 February 1915). In a letter to the *Donald Times* on 10 December 1915, 'Soldier's Relative' reminded the young men of the Wimmera townships of Donald and Watchem that 'there are national duties which supersede all local claims and attachments. The verandah posts along Woods Street do not need supporting, nor were they erected to support young men with "cold feet"', the letter writer continued. He or she ended their lecture with the accurate, if dismal, insight that 'enlistment means lasting honour, while non-enlistment means lasting disapproval and lasting suspicion of your actual manliness'.

Australia's identity was being constructed around a new 'other': a man who refused or elected not to fight in its politicians' imperial wars, the so-called 'shirker'. The shirker was to become one of the targets of the draconian *War Precautions Act* introduced in 1914 by Labor's then Attorney-General, the messianic William Morris Hughes. Under the Act Australia's defence and intelligence agencies were provided with far-reaching powers of surveillance and censorship as well as the right to arrest and intern 'alien' and other citizens thought to pose a threat to the country's security. Although not unreasonable in themselves, the Act's provisions provided a vehicle for generating support for the war by illuminating certain 'outsiders' from whom loyal Australians

could disassociate, and upon whom they could project their anger and their fears. The provisions of the Act would also later be used by Hughes to intimidate and silence his political opponents during the 1916 and 1917 conscription campaigns and, as Gerhard Fischer argues, to facilitate the adoption of a more centralised, authoritarian and partisan system of governance.

> The invention of a threatening enemy figure dramatised the war experience and offered a convenient ideological smokescreen behind which the growing divisions in Australian society could be covered up and glossed over, diverting attention from social inequalities and class differences sharpened by the conditions of a wartime economy under the simultaneous challenge of accelerated industrial change (Fischer, 1995: 467).

Those who were singled out, persecuted and gaoled for being disloyal to the cause included not just shirkers, but radical socialists, pacifists, Sinn Feiners and other Irish nationalists, unionists and even members of Melbourne's Chinese community whose shops were attacked by a mob that congregated in that city following the announcement of the outbreak of the war and proceeded to demonstrate its imperial loyalty by smashing the windows of all the foreigners' shops it could find (*The Argus*, 6 August 1914, cited in Meaney, 1985: 218-20). The main target of the government's propaganda campaign, and of the growing sense of public unease and hostility, however, was the 'enemy within' or 'enemy alien'. As Gerhard Fischer (1989) and Raymond Evans (1987) have detailed, these were said to be located largely within the country's German-Australian community although members of other nationalities were also viewed with suspicion especially after two Turkish nationals ambushed a train at Broken Hill in January 1915, killing four people and wounding seven more. This incident led the *East Charlton Tribune*, for one, to demand that 'prompt effective and summary action' be taken to 'secure the protection of the community…or else we will have fanatics running amok all over the place, dealing out death and injury'. Such aliens, the paper continued, should be housed in concentration camps which 'must not be made beds of roses'. Rather they 'should be institutions wherein the "simple life" is led, and where those who are interned should earn the cost of their keep' (*East Charlton Review*, 6 January 1915).

Under Hughes' reign naturalised Australians and Australians of German or Austrian origin were spied and reported on, whispered about, falsely accused of subversion or treason, subjected to arbitrary searches, and arrested and interned by police or men in

suits from the Department of Defence. Their assets were confiscated, jobs taken away, children victimised at school, and the names of the townships their forebears had established during the colonial era changed or Anglicised. As the war progressed the tenor of the government's anti-German propaganda became increasingly hysterical and racist (Maclean 1995: 85-8). German soldiers were portrayed by such cartoonists as Norman Lindsay as gorilla-like and distinctly Asiatic in appearance. The German people were declared by politicians, newspaper editors and clergymen across the country to be uniformly bloodthirsty, inhuman and racially inferior to those of British stock. The German state was said to be a tyrannical, brutal and un-Godly regime, aggressive and militaristic, and intent on defeating Britain and taking control of its imperial assets.

Such views were widely expressed by leaders of the Wimmera community. In an editorial written to mark the second anniversary of the war, the editor of the *Donald Times* wrote, for example, that:

> …in the greatest combat yet known to civilised people…Germany with malice aforethought set out on a brutal campaign against the laws of God and humanity…Militarism has been the means of placing Germany in the same category as that of wild animals thirsting after human blood and failing in her purposes, turns and casts her revenge on an innocent civilian population (*Donald Times*, 8 August 1916).

He had earlier warned his readers that 'Germany has longed for many years to establish herself in overseas dominions, and Australia provides one of the best opportunities for German extension' (*Donald Times*, 28 January 1916). His colleague at *** find a further example *** In this regard at least, they had taken their lead from Australia's prime minister who had no qualms in arguing during the conscription campaign that 'Germany has long coveted this grand and rich continent…and if she won, she would certainly claim it as an important part of her spoils. For this reason', Hughes assured his credulous listeners, 'the ramparts of our native land were on the allied trenches in France. If Britain fell, in Australia there would not be warfare but massacre. We would be like sheep before the butcher' (cited in Horne, 1979: 79).

The idea especially that Australia was directly threatened by Germany or that it would automatically be 'handed over' or 'reallocated' to the victorious Prussians in the event of a British defeat in Europe was always a fanciful one despite the attempts of certain Australian historians, even now, to prove it had some basis in fact. As Gerhard Fischer (1995: 457) rightly argues, such recent

speculations in particular 'reveal more about their origins within a colonial-imperialist tradition of Australian historiography than they contribute to a realistic assessment of alternatives for Australian political action in the 1914-18 war'. Yet at the time the idea was consistently advanced by government ministers and others engaged in the recruitment and conscription campaigns. It also informed the growing prejudice shown towards, and incidents of violence enacted against, Australians of German or central European origin. One of numerous such incidents, exhibiting many of the characteristics described above, was an attack by a mob of soldiers on leave on the shop of the Geelong wine merchant, Frederick Winter. As reported in the *Donald Times* ill-feeling towards the establishment was first aroused 'when some rumour spread as to disloyal toasts having been honoured at the shop, and flippant references made to the death of Lord Kitchener'. Although Winter, whose father was one of the pioneers of Germantown (renamed … in 1915), denied the accusations, 'everyone knew' the newspaper report continued, 'that the soldiers were determined to wreck the place'. A police guard was deployed to protect the building against the gathering throng whose 'threatening mood found expression in a shower of stones'. In the evening however

> …a diversion was created lower in the street where a rush of police to arrest a soldier made an opening for the raiders to attack Winter's shop. The front door was smashed to splinters in a few seconds, and a crash of bottles showed that the bar shelves had suffered. There was no sign of the occupants, and no resistance was offered to the attack, which was as short as it was merry. The throng when the soldiers withdrew sang "Australia will be there", and now and then showers of stones rattled on the deserted building (*Donald Times*, 13 June 1916).

The shirker was also the dark shadow in Bean's constructions of the 'digger myth' and associated Anzac legend. In the official historian's considered view a true digger and therefore a true Australian 'would not give way when his mates were trusting to his firmness', would not fail 'when the line, the whole force, and the whole allied cause required his endurance', and would not have 'made it necessary for another unit to do his own unit's work'. Most importantly he would not 'live the rest of his life haunted by the knowledge that he had set his hand to a soldier's task and had lacked the grit to carry it through' (cited in Meaney, 1985: 230). These lofty and impossible ideals were later used by others to condemn those who were opposed to conscription, to judge those who would not enlist and, even, to set the standards for acceptable service within the military itself. Speaking at a

reception at his home town of Ruthven in western New South Wales in July 1916, Sergeant-Major Sam Dickson, told his audience that the ship on which he came back to Australia had 808 returned men on board of whom only 280 had been at the front. The rest 'comprised men injured in Egypt, or poor fellows stricken with illness there' but also, the veteran of the Gallipoli campaign added,

> … a fair proportion of malingerers…who were never any good to the country and never would be. Some of them joined the ranks only to prey on their comrades, and never intended to go to the front. They were not men—but things. They had not enough spirit to fight, but they were adept at going through [others'] kit bags (cited in the *Donald Times*, 28 July 1916).

In concluding his remarks the young warrant officer told his audience that he 'felt strongly on the point, for too many of these wasters had got into the forces'. Such views became widespread, fanned by the propaganda and passions generated by the conscription campaigns described below. They not only were used to shame the shirkers at home, or to motivate attacks by returned soldiers on anti-conscription meetings or suspected aliens, but led many soldiers who had not served at the front to feel guilty and somehow responsible for the deaths of their comrades (Thomson, 1994).

The attacks on shirkers by returned soldiers and 'war whoopers' were motivated in part by the results of a census, conducted in September 1915, revealing there were still some 60,000 men in Australia who, while eligible for active service, had not yet attempted to enlist. The presence of so many 'eligibles' as they were called, prompted Hughes, who had replaced Andrew Fisher as Prime Minister at the end of October 1915, to announce plans to expand the size of Australia's expeditionary forces by a further 50,000 men. In a 'call to arms' posted out to Australia's eligibles in the weeks leading up to Christmas, Hughes argued that although the nation's soldiers at Gallipoli had 'carved a niche in the Temple of the Immortals' in their battles against Prussian despotism, more could have been done. '[H]ad the number of our forces been doubled', the prime minister insisted, 'many brave lives would have been spared, the Australian armies would long ago have been camping in Constantinople, and the war would have been practically over'. 'If you love your country', if you love freedom', the persecutor of shirkers and aliens ended his letter, 'then take your place alongside your fellow Australians at the front and help them achieve a speedy and glorious victory' (cited in the *Donald Times*, 17 December 1915).

Accompanying the prime minister's 'call to arms' was a 'Christmas card' sent out by the country's recruiting committees asking all young men of military age to indicate whether and when they were prepared to enlist for the war. Those who were not prepared to join the fight were to submit their reasons for not doing so. The cards were to be filled in, signed and returned 'at once' to a local recruiting centre. Two of the hundreds of thousands of letters containing Hughes' admonitions would have arrived at the Lalbert post office in the Wimmera district, been collected by Samuel or Fanny Free on one of their buggy trips into town, and then read by the two boys to whom they were addressed, the couples' eldest son, Sam, and his younger brother Bert Free. Sam and Bert were the grandsons of William Free and Eliza Flavell. Born in Corack in 1893 and 1894, they had moved with their parents and siblings to Lalbert in around 1900 where they settled on a farm adjoining that of Henry Edward Hickmott and his family.

We don't know whether and how the brothers answered their 'Christmas cards' although the fact they did not enlist until the middle of the following year, may indicate that they, like many others identified by the war census, were either in no hurry to go or had decided to delay their decision at least until after the harvest was completed. Unlike the previous year when wheat had had to be brought into the region to feed the farmers' starving stock, the 1915 harvest was a bountiful one. It was triggered by drought-breaking rains that had brought joyous crowds from their beds to watch the long awaited water again flowing down the Avoca river and over the weir at Charlton. These and follow-up rains made travelling along the outback roads in winter a slippery and dangerous pastime, but they also produced some of the biggest wheat yields yet seen in the district. By the time of the arrival of Hughes' missives, all the farmers in the Wimmera, and their sons, were toiling from dawn until after dusk each day stripping, bagging and carting wheat for the Empire. Their wives and daughters were similarly labouring over hot stoves preparing meals for their menfolk as well as running the household and seeing the younger members of their families off to school. Even then they would find some time in the evenings to sew or crochet items for the local Red Cross society or for one of the many functions held across the district to raise money for Australia's war effort.

Sam and Bert Free enlisted together in Melbourne on 24 July 1916 where, along with a number of other recruits, they swore on the

Bible to 'well and truly serve our Sovereign Lord the King', 'resist His Majesty's enemies', and 'cause His Majesty's peace to be kept'. Their attestation papers showed Bert to be 22 years and three months old, unmarried and a farm hand by occupation. He was just over five foot six inches tall, had blue eyes and, like many others of British stock, a fair complexion. His photo, taken in his uniform a few months later, reveals a wide-eyed, innocent even vulnerable countenance, someone who was probably young for his age, had lived a secure and comparatively sheltered existence, and had yet to experience life or love beyond his immediate family circle. Sam was taller and fifteen months older. Also single he had thinner and tighter lips than his brother and more watchful eyes. He was also heavier and had a darker almost brooding complexion that he may have inherited from his mother's side of the family.

We don't know why the two brothers decided to enlist when they did. It is possible although unlikely given their ages and backgrounds that, just as Roland Leighton had done in England in 1914, they had come to see the war in largely abstract terms: as horrible yet also somehow attractive and potentially enobling, 'something whose elemental reality raises it above the reach of all cold theorising' (cited in Bishop and Bostridge, 1999: 30). They may simply have followed the example of a number of others among their friends and acquaintances—including their first cousins Roland Shepherd from Coonooer Bridge, and Don McCallum from Corack East—who had gone before them. Perhaps like so many others they saw enlistment in the AIF as a chance to travel and see England, or to escape from the hardships and monotony of outback farming. Or they may, like 'Ossie' Davey from Donald, have gone so that their younger brothers would not have to go. An ironmonger by trade, Private Henry Austin Davey was, according to the *Donald Times*, a man who possessed 'no instincts of war'. Although he 'feared the lack of physique demanded by [the] military authorities', he decided to represent his family 'at the post of danger' because he of all of the sons was 'best fitted'. Davey enlisted in … He subsequently

> …stood hardships upon the desert with more seasoned troops…took part in the great Somme battle…For two years past marvellous were the number of his escapes. Amidst thousands of killed and wounded he was without a scratch. Later on, however, wounds and suffering came from a shell that killed most of those around him. It is presumed that after recovering from shell shock that a summons came to return to the front. There he fell among the valiant dead [although] some peculiar circumstances surrounding recent correspondence cause some

> close friends to still entertain hopes for his safety (*Donald Times*, 12 June 1917).

Or the Free brothers, or their parents, may have simply succumbed to the ever-growing pressure—flowing from their national and community leaders, from their countrymen and women, and even from among their friends and family—finally to answer the call to do their duty and enlist. For as John McQuilton describes in his account of *Rural Australia and the Great War* (2001: 42-7), the first half of 1916 witnessed a new campaign to recruit soldiers to serve not at Gallipoli but on the Western Front. The campaign had been announced by Billy Hughes before he left for England in November 1915. It commenced in January the following year and was to provide the 50,000 additional troops Hughes had promised London as well as the reinforcements required each month to support Australia's existing forces overseas. This time the responsibility for filling the new quotas—41 enlistments plus 14 reinforcements a month in the case of the Donald Shire—was given to local and district councils, rather than specially convened recruiting committees. The councils were to be assisted by military recruiters who were based at regional recruiting depots and were required to tour their regions, address meetings, and interview those who had received Hughes' 'Christmas cards'.

As McQuilton describes in the case of north eastern Victoria, each of these innovations represented a mixed blessing. The local councils knew better who had already enlisted and who had not but were also sensitive to the undercurrents that had led large numbers of eligible enlistees either not to return their cards, or to indicate they did not intend to volunteer for military service. The use of dedicated military recruiting staff proved effective in some areas especially where they enjoyed local connections or had seen active service. But as McQuilton relates in the case of Beechworth's recruiting Sergeant Rathbone, they could also be both insensitive and alienating and their efforts counterproductive:

> Rathbone, an Englishman, gave stirring speeches at recruitment meetings, filled with a patriotic fervour that drew prolonged applause. But they were also intimidatory. Beechworth was riddled with shirkers, he warned, men with little or no honour. He blamed Beechworth's mothers for what he saw as a poor response to the campaign: then assured that the mothers of dead sons received consolation from God (McQuilton, 2001: 45).

The Free brothers did their initial training at the large Army camp at Seymour to the north of Melbourne. As a consequence, they

were able to receive visitors and to go home on leave where they proudly displayed their new uniforms and enjoyed the attention and adoration of the local community. Listening to her boys' accounts of their Army training and manoeuvres while serving them breakfast in the farm's comfortable kitchen, Fanny would have delighted in how robust and handsome her sons were looking especially in their soldiers' outfits. Her mother's pride would have been tinged though with the poignant sorrow of their impending departure, and an unspoken fear that one or other of them may never return. For the needs of the war were building and it soon came time for them to leave Seymour for Melbourne and then England where they would be reinforcements for Monash's 3rd Australian Division then undergoing training on the Salisbury Plain. It is likely that Samuel and Fanny invited their friends and relatives to either their farmhouse or the local school hall to farewell their two sons. In a, by now, accustomed routine, speeches would have been made congratulating the young men on their decision to do their duty and suggesting they would give a good account of themselves. The guests of honour would have thanked those present for their kind words and good wishes and, with their friends, enjoyed a sumptuous supper, dancing under the stars and, at the end, the sweet sorrow of joining hands and together singing Auld Lang Syne.

Samuel and Fanny would undoubtedly have been proud of their sons, although the return of the wounded and shell-shocked veterans of Gallipoli together with the mounting casualty lists from the battles of Fromelles and Pozieres in France, where Australian forces suffered over 28,000 casualties, would also have given them cause for concern. Their fears for their boys would have been brought home by the news of the death of James Perry who died of wounds in September 1916 while serving with the 60th Battalion in France (*Donald Times*, 5 September 1916). 'Wheeler' Perry as he was known, had been at primary school with Sam and his older sister Frances. He had enlisted in … and left behind a young wife and two small boys. His younger brother, Herbert, had been killed in action at Bullecourt a few months earlier. But like most parents then and since, Samuel and Fanny would probably have endeavoured to downplay their fears for the sake of their children and the good of the nation. For the prevailing view at the time was that outward displays of emotion were unmanly and inappropriate. As the newsletter of the *Sailors' and Soldiers' Fathers Association of Victoria* informed its readers, they 'should be fought, for no purpose that is any good to ourselves or to our boys is served by any [such] weakness or despair'. Mothers in particular

'should resist with their will power any suggestion of depressive thoughts, just because by doing so they are not playing the enemy's game for him' (cited in Damousi, 1999: 29-30).

As good Methodists, Samuel and Fanny were likely to have sought comfort from their local minister who, if he followed the pattern set at Donald and elsewhere across the Wimmera, would have affirmed to his flock the divine righteousness of Australia's participation in the war, reminded them of their obligation to maintain the values and ideals for which their sons were fighting, and sought to reassure them by reflecting on such texts as 'in your patience ye shall win your souls'. The boy's family may have also been heartened by the letters published in their local newspapers from soldiers serving at the front. These sometimes hinted at but invariably downplayed the horror and hardships encountered by the troops in France and Belgium. As the war progressed, many also vented the frustration and anger they clearly felt on the 'shirkers', 'wasters' and members of the 'Bourke Street crowd' who preferred to remain at home rather than enlist. A letter published in the *Donald Times* from Private Cyril Gregan to his parents at Olinda near Melbourne is a typical (and revealing) example. It begins in a jaunty mood, describing life at the front as 'glorious…a series of feasts and fasts…with fine men and good mates, [and] with a laugh and a jest when things seem at their worst'. We get a sense that all is not quite right, however, when Gregan then exclaims: 'For Heaven's sake, don't expect me to tell you anything about the war. D— the war!' His sudden outburst is satiated by switching attention away from the conflict itself (and those, perhaps, who were responsible for its conduct) onto the shirkers at home. 'I know this', vows the former student of St Patrick's College in Melbourne, '[I]f I return home and see a man has not got the colours up, he can expect no recognition from me. Such a man has deserted his country…[and in the unlikely event that we lose] I look to the enemy to see to the punishment of those few low mongrel curs who by their inactivity, prove themselves traitors' (*Donald Times*, 28 July 1916).

The sense of confusion, anger and doubt we can detect in Gregan's letter was, by 1916, present also within the wider Australian community. The initial euphoria accompanying the outbreak of the war had dissipated with the departure of the soldiers and the mounting casualty lists. The level of feeling would be revealed by the public reaction to the decision, made by Billy Hughes in August 1916, to conduct a referendum in Australia on conscription. As we have seen in the earlier chapters political

controversy has long played a part in Australian public life. Yet the feelings against the transportation of convicts, or in response to the Chinese gold seekers, or during the industrial strikes of the 1890s paled against those generated by the conscription debates. As Ernest Scott, the official (and broadly conservative) chronicler of *Australia During the War* later wrote with some trepidation: 'if the bitterness, abuse, misrepresentation, anger, and hatred pertaining to the whole of … [Australia's past political] disputes could have been pooled, the volume thereof would not perhaps have equalled the fury of the storm which burst upon Australia when the conscription issue was brought before the people for decision' (Scott, 1943: 341-2).

After returning from England at the end of July, where he had been feted by the British establishment, Hughes came under enormous pressure to institute some form of compulsory national service within Australia. By now a fierce advocate of the war against Germany, he was keen to follow Britain's example and introduce universal conscription. Aware of the potential consequences of such a policy for the future of both his party and his government, he initially was obscure about his intentions. This changed with the arrival, on 24 August, of a cable from Britain's Secretary of State for the Colonies which informed the Australian Government that because of the heavy casualties suffered during the first battle of the Somme, its forces in France would have to be reinforced from Monash's 3rd Division then undergoing training in England. In order to keep intact its existing forces, furthermore, Australia would over the next three months need to supply some 50,000 reinforcements as well as a one-off draft of 20,000 men. The government was being asked, in short, to send to the front 70,000 additional troops in the three months from September 1916. Yet voluntary enlistments for the three months leading up to this period totalled less than 20,000. The number of troops required 'were utterly unattainable by the voluntary method' and left Hughes, who was determined that Australia's expeditionary force remain intact, with little option than to turn to conscription (Scott, 1943: 338).

The figures supplied from England were, as it turned out, grossly inflated in part to help (or force) the Australian Government to adopt conscription (see Scott, 1943: 358-9). But they were enough to lead Hughes finally to take a stance, and to set him on the course that would end his government, render the Labor party ineffective as a national political force for the next two decades, and divide and poison the Australian community. The need for

some form of conscription had long been advanced by the country's newspaper editors, conservative political elites, and such organizations as The Universal Service League, The Australian Women's National League, and the Australian Natives' Association whose annual conference at Warrigul in Victoria in March 1916 urged 'the Federal Government to take immediate steps to fully utilise the services of every citizen and the resources of the Commonwealth' (cited in Scott, 1943: 334).

Conscription was generally supported by the leaders and letter writers of the Wimmera although not always with great conviction or enthusiasm. Responding to a government suggestion that local councils convene public meetings to discuss the introduction of conscription, the president of the Donald Shire, Councillor Cantwell, argued for example, that it was 'no business of the council' and an inappropriate way of spending ratepayers' money. 'The gathering of support for conscription should be left to others', Cantwell told his fellow councillors. As the Australian Natives Association 'took the matter up' so 'they should carry it through' even though, he added wryly, '[s]ome of those who made all the patriotic speeches were afraid to go around with the petition' (*Donald Times*, 19 May 1916). Cantwell's colleague and editor of the *Donald Times* D. E. Reid, although in favour of conscription, nonetheless gave coverage in his newspaper to the anti-conscription case. This was probably due to Reid's keen sense of civic duty and fair play although it may have been motivated, as well, by his evident dislike of some of the key proponents of conscription.

These included in particular, the former Victorian Senator and current member of the National Referendum Council, Senator St Ledger, who on the government's behalf addressed a pro-conscription meeting at Donald's St George's Hall on 6 October 1916. Like some of the region's recruiting sergeants, St Ledger spent as much time denigrating his opponents and possible waverers in the audience as elaborating the case for conscription. Those advocating 'No', he assured his listeners 'are enemies of the Commonwealth—tyrants of the worst class—and are worse in our midst than the Hun who fights his own battle'. Those women who are concerned about sending their loved ones to their death would, he told the crowd, have the blood of Australia's 230,000 volunteers on their heads. And those who worried that conscription would take away the country's rural labour force while not necessarily cowards, were nonetheless 'using an argument a coward would use. The farm is a very safe place when

bullets are whistling', the city-based politician informed his audience of farmers and farm labourers (*Donald Times*, 10 October 1916).

Reid's report of the 6 October meeting provided no sense of the atmosphere of the gathering or its effect on those who attended, reporting simply that at its conclusion the meeting passed by acclamation a motion supporting conscription. That Reid, and possibly others in the audience at St George's Hall, were not impressed by the bellicose St Ledger was made clear three days later when the paper reported that ex-Senator Ledger 'met with a little opposition at his meeting at Birchip [a neighbouring town] lately, which compelled him to remark "that the interjectors were a set of larrikins, even worse than those at Collingwood"'. Noting that the editor of the *Birchip Advertiser* had stated that 'in future steps should be taken by the chairman to "bundle the culprits out"', Reid retorted that '[s]ometimes it so happens that interjectors are supported by a majority and we suggest that the next chairman "looks before he leaps" at the next meeting of this kind' (*Donald Times*, 13 October 1916).

The following week the *Donald Times* published a piece entitled 'CONSCRIPTION. Argument Against. Stop! Look! Listen!' which had been written by Adela Pankhurst from the women's movement. Reid justified the article's inclusion to his readers (and possibly the Commonwealth Censor) by stating that 'Electors have had the opportunity of hearing Ex-Senator St Ledger on conscription. The above has been forwarded to us for publication to enable electors to draw their own conclusions and vote according to their conscience' (*Donald Times*, 24 October 1916). The editor's early strong views on conscription seemed, like those of some of his readers, to have been moderated by the bitterness of the campaign and its divisive effect on the community.

While the citizens of Donald and Birchip were listening to the entreaties of St Ledger and other speakers, Sam and Bert Free travelled by train to Melbourne, had their photos taken at the Central Studios at Ripponlea, and with hundreds of other young men, waited to board troopships destined for England. They departed Melbourne on the SS Port Lincoln on 20 October 1916, each sending their mother a post card before they embarked:

> Well mother we were paraded today and told that we are to embark at 8.45 on Friday morning at the new Port Melbourne pier on the Port Lincoln but can't say for sure when we will be clear of the heads, but I

suppose I will be able to send a wire from Melbourne. Well Mother don't worry we will be back among you again before 15 months and don't forget to pray for us occasionally. We will still be on the water at Christmas they reckon, but we may be landed by new year.

Your loving son Sam.

Just a few lines to let you know we embark on Friday, we are ready to go at a minutes notice but we will not get on the boat until Friday morning, they say [it] will be a week out side the bay before we sail. I will write before I sail so Good Bye and Good Luck until I come back. With love from

your Loving Son Bert

The two brothers, and their colleagues-in arms, would have cast their vote in the conscription referendum before they set sail from Melbourne. The rest of the country voted a week after the boys' departure, on 28 October. As this date neared, both sides increased their efforts to influence the outcome of the referendum. Those supporting conscription were especially active, sponsoring meetings and speeches, and bombarding individuals and the press with information, arguments and propaganda of various sorts. This included a song written by a Mr Fleming whose verses, Senator the Hon. Thomas Givens proclaimed, 'sing with a true national spirit and voice a sincere and genuine Australian aspiration'.

We're asked to back Australia,
To keep her pure and free.
We're asked to back Australia,
What will the answer be?
For hearth and home and honour,
For mothers, sweethearts, wives,
For children and for country,
For those who've given their lives.

Chorus
Australia stand impatient,
She wants to curse or bless,
And this shall be our answer,
Yes! Yes! Yes!
And this shall be our answer,
Yes! Yes! Yes!

Often denied access to the nation's town halls and other meeting places, the antis also organised themselves especially in the cities where bands of factory and other workers, female as well as male, gate-crashed pro-conscription gatherings. Noisily interjecting themselves into the proceedings, they booed, verbally harassed and counted-down speakers, chanted slogans, stamped their feet in unison, and sang popular refrains. When the meetings were adjourned or abandoned, they dallied, carousing and even dancing with the police who were despatched to disperse them. 'A carnival spirit—the revelling of some inner-city girls in a brief, illusory moment of power—had gripped those left in the hall' (Smart, 1989: 210). The prime minister, too, was in a state of near-frenzy. He threw himself into the 'Yes' campaign, travelling across the country giving speeches, encouraging his supporters, and pressing his officials and friends in England to 'secure and forward exhortations from the British and French labour leaders', and ensure that Australia's troops, especially those serving in the trenches, vote in favour of conscription.

To cap off his frenetic campaign, Hughes placed an advertisement in all the country's newspapers on the day before the poll, appealing to voters to 'maintain Australia's honour' and 'vote against Germany'. Summing up both the tenor and the key themes of the 'Yes' campaign, the prime minister told his readers they must decide 'whether Australia is to be dishonoured or maintain her glorious place among the Allies'; 'whether Australia intends to perform her fair share in defeating the enemy of humanity and civilisation'; and whether 'your fellow-Australians in the trenches are to be abandoned and your Allies betrayed'. 'Every possible falsehood has been invented', Hughes continued, 'by those who oppose the national cause'. And 'every conceivable means of intimidation, often directed by German hands, has been used'. Arguing that 'all lies and all tremors should be…cast aside' on polling day, the prime minister appealed to the Australian nation 'not to let itself be dishonoured; not to become a "quitter" in this great crisis', and to 'prove itself worthy of the illustrious honor [sic] which the Australian soldiers have already won for their country' (*Donald Times*, 27 October 1916).

Given his own high standing in the community, the official and other obstacles put in the way of the anti-conscriptionists, and the fact that conscription was supported by most of society's elites, Hughes was confident of winning the vote. He was so confident in fact that prior to the referendum he and his Minister for Defence, Senator George Pearce, used their powers under the Defence Act

to call-up for service within Australia all unmarried men between the ages of 21 and 35. Those who were medically fit were required to enter camps immediately and begin military training so they would be ready, once conscription was legislated for, to reinforce Australia's forces at the front. Commonwealth courts were also established to enable farmers, conscientious objectors and others eligible under the regulations to seek exemption from military service (see McQuilton, 2001: 64-8).

Contrary to the expectations of most commentators, the Australian people voted against conscription. The vote was close and the final result remained unclear until the week after the poll. It eventually showed that overall, 1,160,033 people voted against the government's proposal while 1,087,557 voted for it, the difference of 72,478 being only 11,000 more than the number of informal votes cast. More significantly for the government, three of the six states—New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia—voted 'No'. Sixty-two per cent of the 16,515 voters in the Wimmera voted in favour of conscription, the second highest proportion in Victoria (the highest was in the middle class electorate of Kooyong in Melbourne where 67 per cent of electors voted 'Yes'). The results for the shire of Donald reflected those for the Wimmera although there were some internal variations: 37 of the 67 voters from the hamlet of Witchipool, for example, voted against conscription.

The soldiers' vote was also not quite the result the prime minister and his supporters hoped for. Overall, 55 per cent of those serving in Australia's expeditionary forces supported conscription, while 45 per cent of the country's servicemen and women opposed it. There is some indication, however, that the troops in the trenches—in whose name Hughes and his supporters fought their divisive and often vindictive campaign—may have voted against conscription. The relevant figures were never released. In his book *Australia During the War*, however, Ernest Scott states in a footnote, that prior to polling day Hughes was warned by the journalist Keith Murdoch in London that 'the campaign for votes among the soldiers at the front had been a failure. The speakers—prominent Australians from London—could not, he said, even get favourable meetings' (Scott, 1943: 352). In a letter sent from the front early in November 1916, Private Les Chandler told his family: 'It may seem curious, but I believe the majority of soldiers on active service are against conscription in Australia'. 'I've spoken to a number of [sic] the subject and listened to the general discussions', he added, 'and the opinion is pretty freely voiced that we can't afford the men'.

Echoing the arguments raised by many anti-conscriptionists at home, the naturalist and acquaintance of C. J. Dennis, went on to say:

> This is a fight to the finish, but we've undoubtedly winning, and in armies that are numbered by the millions, a few hundred thousand men, especially pressed men, don't count for much. Australia's future is depending on the presence of those men 'apres le guerre' for immigration will be out of the question for years to come (Chandler, 1988: 72).

What are we to make of these results? The first thing to say is that the 1916 vote on conscription seemed broadly to be aligned along class and sectarian lines: middle class electorates across the country generally voted in favour of conscription while working class and largely Catholic electorates generally opposed it. As John McQuilton (2001: 70) and Marilyn Lake (1975: 81) describe in the cases of Victoria and Tasmania, the experience of rural communities was more complex, with opinion often evenly divided or fluctuating across electorates. McQuilton puts this down to the fact that although intensely loyal, rural communities are also generally independent and self-regulating. Their patriotism, in short, is tempered by the land on which they live and their past struggles to gain and hold it. As a consequence he suggests, '[t]he farm would not be lightly thrown away'.

Second, the closeness of the overall vote suggests that the final outcome may have been determined less by class or other systemic considerations as by a range of personal, local and tactical (mis)calculations, experiences and concerns: the intimidating behaviour of both sides and their supporters; the perceived bias or inconsistencies of exemption courts and trade unions; the personalities of such key participants as Hughes and the Roman Catholic Coadjutor-Archbishop Daniel Mannix; and, most of all perhaps, the decision by the prime minister to call-up Australia's youth during the conscription campaign and, incredibly in the circumstances, have fingerprinted those who registered for the call (Lake, 1975: 69; Smith, 1974: 17-8). This is not to suggest that principles and values were unimportant, they were, although not necessarily in the way we might expect. For an interesting aspect of the conscription campaign was the extent to which members of the opposing sides, for all their mutual accusations and vitriol, were motivated often by similar concerns and beliefs.

Speakers from both sides, for example, sought to exploit the strong and long-held racial prejudices and fears of white Australians.

Supporters of conscription argued that voluntary recruitment would see Australia's racial stock unduly diminished, and that an allied defeat in Europe would leave Australia vulnerable to a future attack by Japan. As the prime minister himself argued before one of his many gatherings: 'On our very borders are teeming millions, jostling each other for space, striving virtually for a foothold on the earth's surface…the White Australia policy keeps them back…if the allied armies were defeated they would come in their millions (cited in Lake, 1975: 74). Hughes and his followers thus wanted more troops in part in order to obligate Great Britain to defend Australia's place in Asia, and to give the country's leaders the moral suasion to claim ahead of Japan, Germany's former colonies in the Pacific.

At the same time, Hughes opponents claimed conscription would strip Australia of its Anglo-Celtic workforce and provide an opportunity for government and employers to import cheap coloured labour thereby further reducing the living standards and political influence of the country's working class. In an episode reminiscent of the *S. S. Afghan* with its Chinese passengers, they were able to point to the arrival by ship of 98 Maltese immigrants in September 1916, saying it was evidence of the government's sinister intentions. It represented no such thing but that mattered little in the circumstances. As Joan Beaumont notes, the 'hysteria generated by the incident was such that the Government had to divert a further group of Maltese en route to Australia to Noumea rather than allow them to land' (Beaumont, 1995: 48).

Opponents and proponents of conscription tended also to subscribe to the anti-German feelings and activities described earlier in the chapter, and to the racist assumptions that informed them. As Pam Maclean argues, many pro- and anti-conscriptionists held common assumptions about the subordinate status of women within society and their roles in either supporting or opposing the war. Even such outspoken opponents as Adela Pankhurst urged 'women to oppose the war because its slaughter ran contrary to women's allegedly uniquely life-giving mission' (Maclean, 1995: 69). Both sides, finally, expressed their loyalty to the British Empire and, while differing over how the war should be supported, remained generally in favour of the Australia's continuing participation in it. The conflict in Europe had its opponents certainly, whose number grew with time and the mounting casualties, but they remained always in the minority.

There were differences of course: on the morality or otherwise of compelling young men to fight and kill others; on whether Australia and Australians weren't already doing more than enough to help win the war; on who within society were (and should be) bearing the economic and physical costs of the conflict; and on the implications of conscription, and the war itself, for the future of domestic politics and class relations in Australia. In this last regard, many among the country's working class saw conscription as a means of further subjugating the workers and reducing the power of organised labour. Others were concerned that it would serve to militarise the nation. Their opponents were alarmed by the disloyalty and disorder that conscription, and the war more generally, seemed to be generating within certain sections of society. Left unchecked, these developments could get out of hand, not only serving further to undermine the war effort, but also challenge existing systems of authority and privilege. It could even lead to revolution.

These last concerns were far from new, reflecting the fears and worries of earlier generations and earlier struggles and debates between key sections of society, debates over who should run the country and on what basis; who should own the land, control the economy and benefit from the nation's resources and the toil of its workers; and how, finally, should Australians see themselves: as dependent or independent members of the British Empire. The conscription campaign served to highlight the tensions and cleavages that had always existed within Australian society and the preferred Australian imaginary, cleavages that had their roots in white Australia's historical past and could never be overcome by events such as war or be subsumed within a unified culture … Or could they? Was this war, the war to end all wars, of such power and import that it would end the differences and facilitate, one way or another, the establishment of a fully unified and … nation. This question will be taken up in the final chapter after we complete the examination of the impact of the war on the Free family and the region in which they lived.

(9,185 words).