



**AFTERMATH: AUSTRALIA  
AFTER THE GREAT WAR**  
ONE-DAY CONFERENCE SATURDAY 6 APRIL 2019  
POMPEY ELLIOTT MEMORIAL HALL  
403 CAMBERWELL ROAD, CAMBERWELL

**KEYNOTE SPEAKER – MELEAH HAMPTON**  
AUTHOR OF *ATTACK ON THE SOMME: 1<sup>ST</sup> ANZAC CORPS AND THE  
BATTLE OF POZIERES RIDGE 1916*

MILITARY HISTORY AND  
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# “AFTERMATH”: AUSTRALIA AFTER THE GREAT WAR



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# Monash and the coup that never was – Australia in the 1920s

## Professor Roland Perry, OAM

To understand the 1920s, and General Sir John Monash’s influence on that decade, we must look **briefly** at what happened before and during World War 1.

In 1883, aged 17, he wrote to his cousin Leo, who was complaining about his life in the US. Monash finished his letter with:

‘I have contracted from Australia a heavy debt,  
And it will ever be my prominent object,  
In some measure, to repay that debt.’

John Monash had a clear vision of what Australia was before the war, what it had to do during it and how the nation should develop after the then biggest global upheaval in history.

He was very much for democracy, but had no influence over the articulation of what Australia was doing in going to war in the first place. Billy Hughes was raving about a ‘race war’; others were espousing the conflict as an Empire clash, and that Australians had to do something for the ‘mother country.’

Some of the volunteers saw it as a chance to go on a holiday with their mates overseas at the Government’s expense, something their circumstances would not have allowed otherwise.

Monash’s vision was unique. He had turned down the chance to command during the Boer War at age 34. His reason, quote: ‘It is British Empire Maintenance. I do not wish to be part of it.’

For that attitude, he received a somewhat weak and misguided missile in the post, in the form of a white feather. Fast forward 15 years to 1914 and the situation was different.

No one outside Germany knew the mentality of the Prussian dominated empire better than Monash.

The reasons:

FIRST: His family had fled the oppressive conditions in Germany to live in Australia;

SECOND: Monash had written, *in German*, to all the major arms manufacturers in that country, under the guise of being a prospective buyer. He received lovely brochures on everything from flying machines to artillery. The Germans were going to put almost all their chips on artillery in an attempt to take control of the entire European continent and other parts of the world.

A senior figure at Krupp wrote back with a hopeful little joke to this inquisitive engineer from far off Melbourne:

‘We [Krupp] sell to Governments in 48 countries around the world; *even our own.*’

The hint was an implied question:

‘Would the **Australian** Government be interested in purchasing our wonderful weapons?’

The THIRD reason for Monash’s comprehension of German intentions was that he had been a senior Australian intelligence officer for two years before the war;

FOURTH: Under the legitimate guise of wanting to see the fatherland of his forebears, he took an extended trip to Germany before the war and visited some of the arms-makers he had written to.

I repeat, NO ONE outside Germany knew the mentality and the muscle of the German Military Empire better than John Monash.

He was steeped in democratic Australia as a fledgling nation and land of opportunity. To him the German Empire, with its brutal ways and disdain for democracy, had to be defeated.

German diplomats tried to stop the British coming into the war in mid-1914 by saying: ‘If you stay out of the war, we won’t come on French soil, we’ll only take French colonies and dominions.’

That was a flashing red-light to the canner members of the British ruling elite, at least those who understood recent European history. The Germans would take French colonies, **and France itself**. They’d get to the Channel and then say:

*‘We won’t invade Britain, if you’ll give us your dominions.’*

Australia and Canada were targets because of their mineral wealth. These two nations were bottomless pits in the minds of the German rulers.

They would be plundered to feed the German war machine.

Its armed forces’ Commander-in-chief, Eric Ludendorff was effectively the Dictator of Germany from the middle of the war. He said:

‘Democracy is maintained by perpetual war...’ or words to that effect.

To Monash the Great War was a conflict of democracy versus military dictatorship.

He began to enunciate this when he became Commander of the Third Division in 1916. When Monash commenced building a reputation as a winning General, he manipulated the thinking of the first Australian Imperial Force. He dared to say and emphasize to every soldier, they were fighting for Australian first, and the British Empire second. No nation of the Empire, not even Canada, was saying this.

Led by Monash in a 100-day blitzkrieg in 1918, Australia took on 39 German Divisions and defeated every one of them and in so doing liberated 115 French towns. The most important Victory was at the Battle of Amiens [August 8 to 11, 1918], which in essence was planned and executed by him.

Ludendorff said after it:

‘The 8<sup>th</sup> of August 1918 was the blackest day of the war for the Germany Army....We cannot now win the war, we can only defend.’

The eventual Allied victory was at a massive cost of 15 million dead worldwide, 10 million of them soldiers, sailors and airmen. This was concurrent with and followed by the Spanish flu that killed another 20 million people. Australia lost 60,000 and 145,000 wounded in the War. From 1919 on into the 1920s, and for decades afterwards there were casualties from gas, psychiatric issues, including Post Traumatic stress, venereal disease, lingering wounds and osteo problems. This did not include the problems of relatives that grieved, sometimes for many decades.

In 1955, aged 8, I met my great uncle Talbot at his Mansfield dairy farm. I was an asthmatic as a child. Talbot had a ‘wheez’ of permanent breathlessness.

‘Has Uncle Talbot got asthma?’ I asked my father.

‘No,’ came the reply, ‘he was gassed in World War I.’

Talbot was 55. He had suffered with the affliction for 36 years.

Another soldier of thousands to be gassed was General Sir Stan Savige. He was the nation’s most experienced soldier over the two world wars. He was wounded twice, and contracted Beri Beri and Malaria in World War 1. Along the way he killed about 300 Turks on Gallipoli and in Persia/Iran.

After innumerable close calls, he developed a fair dose of survivor’s guilt.

In the early 1920s, it prompted him to create Legacy to help the widows and children of the fallen. A century on, Legacy is still helping servicemen and women and their families from all our wars.

\*

PM Billy Hughes went well out of his way to keep Monash out of Australia before the Federal Election of 1919 by putting him in charge of repatriation of the troops. Hughes knew that if Monash stood for office in any electorate, he would be elected and become Prime Minister.

Monash, **the least idle mind ever born**, had to do something. He began the Victorian State Electricity Commission from scratch.

Monash had ‘stolen’ the technology from Germany just after the war. He wanted the best engineers to build the power plants. So he invited them out from Germany.

Hughes and others objected. Monash eloquently told them ‘Get over it.’ The war was over. Yallourn was constructed by Germans. That was begun in 1921.

In the following year, author D H Lawrence arrived in Sydney 4 May 1922 on the same boat as my Scottish maternal Grandparents. My grandfather George, a naval architect, chatted a lot with Lawrence, and his, quote ‘friendly German wife, Frieda.’

George went on to make design modifications on warships including The Sydney.

Lawrence went on to write ‘Kangaroo’, the first fiction novel written about Australia by an outstanding foreign writer. Mark Twain earlier had a crack with a turgid economic treatise. It was non-fiction.

The renaissance man of Australian cinema, Tim Burstall asked me to select 100 pages of ‘Kangaroo’ on which the movie could be based. It wasn’t a tough assignment.

In 1986, ‘Kangaroo’, the movie, covered the real political conflict between extreme left and right in the 1920s. He depicted well the undercurrent battles on-going in Australia, which spilled into the streets of Sydney. The left, early in the 1920s, were inspired by Lenin and Trotsky. They wanted revolution. Monash was approached to lead it.

He rejected any overtures outright.

The political right in Germany was inspired by Ludendorff acting as a front-man for Wolfgang Kapp in 1920, and in 1923, a former Corporal from WW1, who Monash missed killing at Messines Ridge, *by that much*.

*His name was Adolf Hitler.*

In Germany, National Socialism was about to emerge. How different was this from Communism? One was expanded socialism in the hands of a dictator and a few henchmen---the Nazi Party leadership. The other was expanded socialism in the hands of a dictator and a few henchmen---the communist party leadership.

*[We laugh and cry at what’s happening in the US today. Half a century after the rest of the planet has realized, fully, the folly of state control of the means of production, the hard-left has emerged with all the fervor of the over-ambitious, the under-educated, and simply, the utterly ignorant. I digress.]*

In 1923, an event occurred in Melbourne that inspired thousands across the nation for all the wrong reasons. The Victoria Police went on strike over pensions they did not have. The State Government panicked while mobs roamed the city and suburbs, looting, robbing, mugging and murdering.

The Government went to Monash. Could he stop it?

Being Civic-minded and a fine lawyer, he believed in the rule of law. He obliged and raised a brigade of 5000 ex-diggers inside 24 hours. That was by Saturday night. The diggers, relishing the chance for any form of combat, went into action. There was a curfew in city and suburban streets as the diggers, organized as they had been on the Western Front, easily accounted for the mobs.

As one digger put it to *The Age*: ‘We took on the best of the Prussian divisions and smashed them. This action in Melbourne was a doddle by comparison.’

On Monday, 5 November 1923, Monash lifted the curfew and left his modest army in charge of all police stations. The next day 125,000 people turned up to watch ‘Bitali’ win the Melbourne Cup.

Monash was in attendance, and was cheered.

He had demonstrated with swift and brutal precision what could be done with about 3 per cent of the ex-diggers at his disposal. Ambitious minds began to consider what he could do with 170,000 diggers in taking over the Federal Government.

Australia’s economy began to decline in the mid-1920s. The pressure mounted for a *forced* change of Government. Monash was the only name that came up as a possible dictator. By this time, the example on many people’s lips, especially extremists, was Italy’s Benito Mussolini.

By 1929 Monash was being openly asked by newspapers, magazines and radio commentators, was he prepared to take over the country?

Monash, always without equivocation, gave a resounding ‘NO’.

But the pressure for change was accelerated with daily front-page items of Australia’s economic decline.

*[Only one series of events managed to push negative comment and reporting off the front pages of the nation’s papers. That was the emergence of a young cricketer, named Don Bradman, hitting massive scores of a hundred, 200, 300 and 400, who regularly took the country’s collective mind off the gloom. Yet the momentum, in public and in secret, for a coup was not submerged.]*

Monash was approached by then Sydney-based Major General Grimwade, of the Melbourne elite family. He and a group of powerful Sydney-siders wanted him to form an army and takeover ‘Canberra’.

Monash wrote just about the best of his 75,000 letters in response. No better letter of import and moment, has been written in Australian history.

It summed up a philosophical attitude, which was a benchmark of the nation’s *mentality*.

**He said:**

**‘What do and your friends want me to do?**

**To lead a movement to upset the Constitution, oust the jurisdiction of Parliament, and usurp the Governmental power?**

**If so, I have no ambition to embark on High Treason, which any such action would amount to.**

**What would you say if a similar proposal were made by the Communists and Socialists?**

**What if they wanted to seize political power for the benefit of the proletariat and the extinction of the bourgeoisie, as they have done in Russia?**

**Would you not call that Revolution and Treason to the Crown and Constitution?**

**Depend upon it, the only hope for Australia is the ballot box, and an educated electorate.**

**You and your people should get busy and form an organization as efficient, as widespread, and as powerful as that of the Labor Party.’**

He ended the letter with a line of pure Monash power, brilliance and logic:

**‘If it be true that many people in Sydney are prepared to trust to my leadership, they should also be prepared to trust to my judgement.’**

Despite this denunciation of any moves to create a coup, Prime Minister Scullin was compelled to act in an attempt to avoid it.

He promoted Monash to General, and sent him and his partner Lizette Bentwitch on an open-ended diplomatic mission to India for the opening of New Delhi.

This move kept Monash out of the country at the beginning of the 1930s. The ‘boil’ of the 1920s dictatorial upheaval was lanced only when John Monash died in October 1931.

There was no other character then, later or now who could have staged such a coup, typical of what we see through Asia and in many other parts of the world today.

Relatively speaking, we live in a kind of quasi-Utopian democracy, half-surrounded by a sea of dictatorships in South East Asia. Look at China, Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, Myanmar and others. I am very aware of the difference. I live in the region half the year and visit those countries regularly.

Monash’s unmatched influence over the outcome of World War 1, his clear articulation in support of democracy in the 1920s, and his rebuking of those who wanted a military coup, set a pattern; a mentality that became a blue-print for the nation for a century.

Monash repaid his debt of gratitude to Australia during War and after it.

As he said:

**Depend upon it, the only hope for Australia is the ballot box, and an educated electorate.**

Thank you