



**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*

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# “AFTERMATH”: AUSTRALIA AFTER THE GREAT WAR



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**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE HELD AT  
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# The Tragedy of the Great War in Australia

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World War 1 was a truly terrible event for Australia – it was a tragedy that broke the nation’s heart and fractured the nation’s soul. More than 60,000 young men were dead. More than 150,000 were wounded, mutilated, gassed, disabled. Thousands of families and communities were devastated by loss and grief. So many brave, talented, idealistic men went to their death or took their own lives after they returned home. Others who returned often bore terrible scars, physical and psychological. Shell shock was prevalent. Few lived through the horrors of trench warfare unscathed.

The society they returned to – from 1915 - had been torn apart by political, ethnic, class and religious divisions. Everyday politics was poisoned by mutual accusation, bitterness, paranoia and recrimination. Significantly less than half the men eligible to enlist actually did so – many suffered the shame of receiving white feathers or felt obliged to wear ‘rejected volunteer’ badges. So-called loyalists on the home front denounced Bolsheviks, Sinn Feiners, Catholics, the IWW and those they called shirkers. After the great strike of 1917 and the acrimonious conscription plebiscites of 1916 and 1917 – and the consequent formation of the new Nationalist party led by WM Hughes - the Labor party was banished to the political wilderness for years to come. Not until 1929, on the eve of the great Depression, was another Labor Prime Minister, James Scullin, voted into office.

Justice HB Higgins, the esteemed author of the living wage, elaborated in the famous Harvester judgment of 1907 as a wage sufficient for workers defined as ‘human beings living in a civilized society’ was forced by the machinations of British-born Prime Minister Hughes

to resign from the presidency of his cherished Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration. ‘Hughes as prime minister’, Higgins wrote to his American friend, Professor of Law at Harvard and future Supreme Court Justice, Felix Frankfurter, in mid-1917, ‘has been behaving impulsively, wildly, hysterically’. Three months later, during the second conscription referendum, Higgins wrote to Frankfurter again: ‘The feeling on both sides is very bitter. Hughes seems to have lost his head, and rages like one possessed; flings accusations of lying, treason, cowardice everywhere’.

For Higgins the war brought a double loss. Forced resignation from his beloved Court; but far more profound and long-lasting was the loss of his only son and only child, Mervyn, killed on the battlefield. In a poem called ‘The Shadows on the Slope’ Higgins wrote: ‘Now, no hope more, the dreaded thing has come’. Elsewhere he recorded: ‘I have been condemned to hard labour for the rest of my life’. In 1921, after the war had ended, and after his resignation from the Court, he lamented the destructive effect of the war: ‘In the Court of Conciliation I dealt with life. The work was constructive’ but ‘Hughes is ruining our Australian experiments’. He wrote again to his American friend: ‘You say that progress is in a straight line, but what ground have we for assuming that there is progress, in the highest sense at all?’ The sense of disenchantment was profound.

Higgins sought solace in the new creed of internationalism and the burgeoning disarmament and peace movement. I have returned recently to examine Higgins’ pioneering jurisprudence, and its impact on American progressive reformers for my new book, just out with Harvard University press, *Progressive New World: How Settler Colonialism and TransPacific Exchange Shaped American Reform*, which I draw on today to describe the idealism that characterized Australia prior to World War 1.

In 1902, Higgins had written an essay called ‘Australian Ideals’ in which he said the new Commonwealth was torn between two forces – the ideal of the ‘common good’ – expressed in the name of the new nation - and the power of private greed, between the ideal of equality and the ideal of militarism. He wrote this essay in response to Australian participation in the Boer War, which like many radical liberals he had opposed. Perhaps in the last few years we have been caught between those forces again: the ideals of the common good and private greed, the ideals of equality and militarism.

My very first book, based on my Masters thesis, was *A Divided Society: Tasmania During World War I*. The argument was evident in the title. In the conclusion I wrote about the impact of the war in the island state: ‘Class was set against class, creed against creed, district against district, soldier against civilian’. Historian Stuart Macintyre echoed this argument in the chapter title of the relevant chapter in his volume of the *Oxford History of Australia* he called ‘A Nation Divided’. I wrote my Ph.D thesis on the major policy outcome of the war, soldier settlement, a thesis published by Oxford University Press as *The Limits of Hope: Soldier Settlement in Victoria 1915-38*. I was fortunate for my research to have access to the rich collection of personal files held in the Public Record Office, containing thousands of letters from the settlers and their wives telling, for the most part, of their hardship, despair and sense of betrayal.

The majority left the land in the 1920s and 1930s oppressed by a heavy burden of debt – eventually written off - and a profound sense of failure. One settler wrote that it was simply scandalous for the government to send him an account for 393 pounds after he left his block. ‘If brought under the notice of the Public would make them cry aloud their indignation at such an infamous swindle to entice a man after fighting for his country, on to a block of land that was worthless wait til he was penniless and then drive him off’. Another protested in similar vein: ‘After wasting 10 years of the best part of my life on a proposition which the

Commission admits is hopeless...I do not want to be forced out with a debt chasing me.

Simply because I was an 18 year old hero in the war and upon my return had sufficient faith in human nature to believe the lies told of the Mallee'. And there were many more.

Soldier settlers' sense of disillusionment and loss of faith in their society reflected the loss of Australian idealism more generally. Before World War 1, the new Commonwealth of Australia was an intensely idealistic nation, self-consciously a new society, whose values were defined in opposition to those of the Old World, a new society dedicated to ending the social hierarchies, aristocratic privilege and political inequalities that marred the Mother Country. In Australia, the democratic reforms of manhood suffrage and the secret ballot had been introduced in most colonies in the 1850s. Australia began to forge an international reputation as an advanced democracy. Womanhood suffrage followed, introduced in South Australia in 1894 and at the federal level in 1902. It was this democratic vote – cast by women as well as men – that ensured that conscription would be defeated in 1916 and more decisively in 1917. Manhood suffrage, by contrast, was not introduced in Britain until 1918, and womanhood suffrage not fully until 1928. In the Old World, in the Mother Country, men were sent to war, ordered to lay down their lives for their country, before they could vote.

When Australian suffragist Vida Goldstein attended the first international woman suffrage conference in Washington DC, in 1902, the year in which Australian women were enfranchised, she was hailed as the representative of the most progressive democratic nations in the world – Australia and New Zealand. An American delegate wrote in her autograph book:

To Australasia all the world gives ear;

Youthful, audacious, unrestrained and free.

No immemorial bonds of time decree

Shackle her progress nor excite her fear.

She beckons elder nations in her path

Of bold adventure and experiment.

Such international tributes offer an interesting perspective on Australia the nation before the war. Bold, self-confident, innovative and leading the world through example. A progressive advanced democracy. People empowered by manhood (and increasingly womanhood) suffrage to pass a body of social legislation the world admired.

Australia led the world in the introduction of the secret ballot, the 8 hour day, payment to members of parliament, compulsory schooling, the public ownership of utilities, the first children’s court, the first legal minimum wage (in Victoria in 1896) and wages boards, the concept of a ‘living wage’, mothers’ pensions, old age and invalid pensions, the first labor government in the world (in 1910) and the Maternity Allowance introduced in 1912. Visitors from around the world crossed the seas to see these ‘state experiments’ for themselves.

One of them, Professor MB Hammond from Ohio State University wrote in the *American Economic Review* to praise the role of HB Higgins, author of the ‘living wage’:

He has certainly expressed, at greater length and with greater clearness than has anyone else, the ideals which have animated the Australian people and the Australian lawmakers in placing on the statute books the body of social legislation which has drawn the eyes of all the world to Australasia, and which marks the most notable experiment yet made in social democracy.

Australia’s social legislation was world historic. The advent of women’s political rights was also hailed as an achievement of world historic significance. The ‘greatest victory ever won for women’, said international observers, an ‘object lesson’ that would surely ‘help the cause of human liberty throughout the earth’. In 1902 when all (white) women were granted full political rights Australia had become the most democratic country in the world.

In a book called *Australia From a Woman’s Point of View* published in 1913, just one year before the outbreak of World War 1, Jessie Ackerman the American feminist and Woman Christian Temperance Union organizer declared of Australia’s enfranchised working women that they had

Grandly and nobly risen to the discharge of their duty as citizens, so far as actual voting is concerned... That the results have told is unmistakably written in political events... It has altered the very course of a nation, and made a volume of history in a day as it were, all of which is due to the unrelenting, ever-acting agencies of organization.

This was Australia before the outbreak of World War 1: a self-confident trail-blazer, independent-minded, an innovative, progressive democracy. Australian journalist Alice Henry, who arrived in the US in 1906, reported: ‘Australia was a word to rouse interest... I arrived at a moment when Australia was beginning some of her most notable experiments in social legislation, and Federation having been accomplished, Americans generally were feeling a sense of sisterly interest in this new country’.

After the war, Australia became a rather more cautious and conservative country, wracked by political and social divisions and rancorous recrimination. The aftermath might be defined as a period of post-traumatic stress. It was also – paradoxically perhaps – more of a man’s world with new masculine heroes – the Anzacs – although as we have noted many of them came to

feel bitterly betrayed. Although Australian women had been hailed for the greatest victory ever won for women in 1902, nearly four decades would pass - not until 1943 - were the first women elected to the federal parliament. Vida Goldstein had been an independent woman candidate for the Senate and House of Representatives five times and defeated each time by men representing the major political parties. Other women candidates failed to win pre-selection or if they stood as independents failed to be elected to the national parliament.

When Goldstein's friend, the novelist, Miles Franklin returned from the United States to Australia in the mid-1920s she was shocked at the demoralization and despondency she encountered everywhere. It seems to me, she observed, writing to her American friend Margaret Drier Robins in 1924,

it seems to me that Australia, which took a wonderful lurch ahead in all progressive laws and women's advancement about 20 years ago has stagnated ever since. At present it is more unintelligently conservative and conventional than England and I am sad to see the kangaroo and his fellow marsupials and all the glories of our forests disappearing to make room for a mediocre repetition of Europe.

The Australian natural environment as well as its political culture were both newly subordinate to Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce's imperial strategy of 'Men, Money and Markets'. The 1920s saw a huge boost in British immigrants and investment and new orientation to British markets for our primary produce. Bruce became Prime Minister in 1923, but so out of sympathy was he with Australia's iconic state experiments that when he tried to abolish the Arbitration Court he lost his seat of Flinders in the federal election in 1929.

The soldier settlement scheme was a central vehicle for Bruce’s vision. British investment would help settle men on the land to grow produce for British markets. As early as 1915, Sir Rider Haggard from the Royal Colonial Institute in London had arrived in Australia on a mission to persuade state and federal governments to provide for British returned servicemen in new schemes of land settlement. Despite the previous record of land settlement failure – in so-called ‘closer settlement’ schemes - Australian governments also came under pressure from 1915 to remove disruptive Australian returning soldiers from city streets and settle them on the land. In my essay ‘The Power of Anzac’ in the Bi-Centennial volume, *Two Centuries of War and Peace*, I documented the challenge posed to authorities by unruly, law-breaking, returned soldiers, increasingly arraigned before city courts for a range of criminal behavior.

By early 1916 returned soldiers were so frequently involved in riot and violence in the streets that the press warned there was an ‘urgent problem’ at hand. ‘Decisive action will have to be taken by authorities to maintain public order in the streets’ said the *Age* newspaper.

Further repetition of the disgraceful outbursts which have become so frequent and which are constantly growing more dangerous cannot be permitted. They are a most serious reflection on the administrative capacity of the Defence department and determined action is necessary to put an end to them.

Three veterans of Lone Pine charged with assaulting a barman at the Austral hotel drew a sharp rebuke from the prosecutor. No longer excused as heroes they were now described as ‘terrorists’. The assailant of a female boot machinist was described by the police magistrate as a ‘drunken blackguard in his Majesty’s uniform’. Yet Australian participation in the war relied on voluntary enlistment. As Frank Clarke, member of the Legislative Council and member of the Victorian Recruiting Committee recognized, the soldiers’ activities were

creating ‘a public opinion against the army’. Disturbances in the street were militating against recruiting.

Authorities insisted that it was imperative to get soldiers out of the cities at the earliest possible moment. Moreover, Australian voters’ rejection of conscription meant that progressively more had to be offered to returned soldiers to persuade men to enlist. And so the government rushed into an indiscriminate scheme of soldier settlement – reasoning that it would be good to get wounded men out into the country air - and in 1922 it passed an Empire Settlement Act that that would also cost the country millions. Within a decade the accumulated losses on the soldier settlement scheme were estimated to be 23.5 million pounds. The future leader of the Country party, John McEwen, who took up an irrigation block at this time commented: ‘The whole thing was, of course, ludicrous’.

Under the stress of war and its traumatic aftermath the old political parties – Labor and Liberal – fragmented – the new National party comprised an unlikely alliance between ex-Labor and anti-Labor people - and two new political forces were born: the RSL – or RSSILA as it was originally called - and the Country party, born of the Victorian Farmers’ Union in Victoria. Both drew strength from aggrieved soldier settlers and expressed the discontent of returned soldiers more generally. After a prolonged contest between different returned soldiers’ organisations claiming to best represent them, the RSSILA, with the support of the new Nationalist party, won out. It was a uniquely powerful lobby group promised direct access to federal Cabinet at all times.

In conclusion. In his contribution to the festschrift essays presented in my honour, recently published as *Contesting Australian History*, the Sydney historian Stephen Garton suggested that there was ‘an underlying sense of tragedy’ in much of my work about Australian opportunities lost. I think he is right and that it was indeed my earliest work on World War 1

and its aftermath that formed that sense of tragedy. For the disillusionment and divisions that marked the aftermath of war can't be fully understood, I suggest, without an understanding of the years of intense idealism that preceded the outbreak of war. To address and assuage the sense of loss, grief and shock that enveloped the nation, monuments and war memorials across the country – in even the smallest towns - paid tribute to the men who enlisted and the many thousands who didn't return. At the same time the Anzac legend – the idea that the nation was born on the shores of Gallipoli – was promoted to offer meaning for what might otherwise be experienced by survivors as an unbearable and meaningless waste of life. But the sense of tragedy remains with us, I think, even as more triumphalist narratives later gathered strength.