Australia's South African war 1899-1902 [1]

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Around twenty thousand Australians fought in the great war between the British empire and the republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. Those Australians constituted five in every thousand of their people, or three in every two hundred of their male workers. In South Africa they made up just one in every twenty-five soldiers in a British army of almost half a million.[2] As these bald figures immediately suggest, Australia's contribution to the war was too small to be decisive, and its experience of the war involved too few of its people to make a powerful impact on its society, let alone wrench its history onto some different course. Still, that contribution and that experience were unprecedented for a people who had never before gone to war as a people, and deserve more attention - and more balanced, dispassionate, critical attention - than they've yet received from historians of the war, of Australia, and of the British empire.[3] In this lecture I'll strive for such balance by outlining why and how Australians went to war in South Africa, what their soldiers did there, and the war's legacy for their country and their descendants today.

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1 This lecture, presented at the South African Military Academy on 28 September 1999, rests on research toward a new history of Australians and the South African war commissioned by the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and due for publication in May 2002. Some of that research was done in London, funded by fellowships at the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies and by the Australian army's research grants scheme.

2 These figures, the best estimates we have given the number of Australians who fought outside Australian units and the difficulty of defining an Australian a century ago, are based on estimates arrived at in Chamberlain, *Australians in the South African war*, pp 79, 88-9.

3 The standard works on the subject to date are: P.L. Murray, *Official records of the Australian military contingents to the war in South Africa* (Melbourne, 1911); B. Penny, 'Australia's reactions to the Boer war: a study in colonial imperialism', *Journal of British Studies* 7(1) Nov 1967, pp 97-130 and 'The Australian debate on the Boer war', *Historical Studies* 14(56) Apr 1971, pp 526-45; R.L. Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer war* (Canberra, 1976) and *The circumstances surrounding the siege of Elands River Post: a Boer war study* (Sydney, 1992); C.N. Connolly, 'Manufacturing "spontaneity": the Australian offers of troops for the Boer war', *Historical Studies* 18(70) Apr 1978, pp 106-17 and 'Class, birthplace, loyalty: Australian attitudes to the Boer war', *Historical Studies* 18(71) Oct 1978, pp 210-32; L.M. Field, *The forgotten war: Australian involvement in the South African conflict of 1899-1902* (Carlton Vic., 1979); M. Chamberlain, 'The characteristics of Australia's Boer war volunteers', *Historical Studies* 20(78) Apr 1982, pp 48-52 and 'The Wilmansrust affair: a defence of the 5th Victorian Mounted Rifles', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial* 6 Apr 1985, pp 57-65 and *The Australians in the South African war 1899-1902: a map history* (Blackburn Vic., 1999).

Why and how Australians went to war

The presence of Australian soldiers in South Africa confused and offended some South Africans at the time. 'You Australians and New Zealanders and Canadians', Olive Schreiner lectured the Australian poet-journalist Banjo Patterson during the war: 'I cannot understand it at all, why you come here lightheartedly to shoot down other colonists of whom you know nothing - it is terrible'.[4] Their presence perplexes some Australians today as they prepare to leave behind a British past and embrace a multicultural future. Two Australians talking recently about their uncle who had fought in the war observed, 'I think we were on the wrong side in that one ... The Boers were fighting for their republic, weren't they?'[5]

But Australia a century ago was a different society to South Africa at the time and to Australia today. The place most Australians called home wasn't where they lived. Forty-nine in every fifty of them were either born in Britain or descended from people who were. Few still saw themselves simply as English, Scottish or Irish; but neither did they see themselves as a wholly new people - rather as a young antipodean branch of the old British family, a new Britannia in another world as one early colonist put it. Their economy depended largely on export sales to Britain and on investment and immigration labour from Britain. Their culture depended largely on English magazines, on Scottish university lecturers, on Irish priests and bishops. And in a society where Irish immigrants integrated successfully into the mainstream, there was no solid ethnic bloc that firmly opposed rule from London or membership of empire like, say, Canada's Quebecois. There was no strong central Australian government to calculate coldly whether involvement in a war would suit Australian interests. Indeed there was not even a loose federal government until January 1901, halfway through the war; until then Australia was a collection of six colonies. Even after federation London determined Australian foreign policy, and when the empire went to war Australians followed. What remained in their power to determine was their level of commitment to that war; but that level roughly matched that of their cousins in other parts of the English-speaking world. Like their cousins in Britain and the United States, many Australians were swept up in a wave of martial imperialism that first showed itself spectacularly in 1897 with the celebration of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee. For the next few years the English-speaking people went into partnership with the imperial firms which temporarily enjoyed a controlling interest both in Washington and London, and the South African war, like the Spanish-American war, was a consequence of this.

As war in South Africa loomed in mid-1899 the Colonial Office in London wanted a token Australian contribution to the war effort. At this stage not all Australians wished to make one. The Boer republics were hardly a threat to the empire's security, and as one Australian politician warned Joseph Chamberlain in 1897, only such a threat would rouse more than a minority of Australians behind a war.[6] But some Australians were keen to join in any fighting, anywhere. Some wanted to try out their men as soldiers, to test their young society in a war, to start an

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4 K.S. Inglis, *Sacred places: war memorials in the Australian landscape* (Carlton Vic., 1998), p 65.

5 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 Jan 1999.

6 J.L. Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chmaberlain volume three: 1895-1900*, London, 1934, p 191.

Australian chapter of the military history of the British people. Even those who opposed the war or were indifferent to it generally agreed that the Transvaal and Orange Free State were obstacles to British progress and economic development in South Africa. And with more than a thousand Australian men working on the Rand in 1899 the uitlander cause enjoyed a quiet sympathy in many families.

As the war broke out, hundreds of Australian workers who fled the Rand with the rest of the uitlanders joined irregular regiments such as the Imperial Light Horse, one of whose organisers and leaders, Walter Karri Davies, had been a mining engineer in Broken Hill. At the battle of Elandslaagte in October 1899 the Imperial Light Horse lost dozens of men killed or wounded. It was probably the first significant action fought by soldiers from Australia since a few thousand had joined in the Waikato campaign in New Zealand a generation before. With war now a reality the governments of the six Australian colonies agreed to recruit, equip and despatch official contingents of soldiers, totalling a thousand in all. Still, this commitment was not a spontaneous gesture; it had been urged by the Colonial Office and by local soldiers and empire-makers keen to see blood. Some Australians said the war was wrong, or that Australian soldiers would not be needed by the British army. Not surprisngly, some historians have concluded that in October 1899 Australians were pushed into an imperial war they didn't want.[7]

That conclusion is extreme, and in any case most initial reluctance and indifference to the war faded two months later. British defeats during the so-called Black Week or 10 to 16 December 1899 seemed to raise the prospect of disaster for the British empire, and therefore for Australia, unless all citizens rallied behind the war effort. What if Britain lost the Cape route to Australia? What if some hostile great power took up the Boer cause, as Germany seemed willing to do after the Jameson raid? These possibilities seem remote today; they did not seem so then. 'Her difficulty is ours', wrote the *Brisbane Courier* of Britain's apparent peril, 'for if she fails ... we shall soon be thrown on our own resources and become prey of envious and hungry powers.'[8] 'If the British forces do not show to advantage against the Boers', reasoned one West Australian, 'there is little doubt but we will have to face France, Russia or Japan' who would 'struggle for the spoil of England's colonies'.[9] It was 'painfully evident', thought a Queensland woman, 'that we are walking on a volcano'.[10] There is the possibility of an enterprise among the great powers of Europe against England', conceded a Sydney suburban newspaper hitherto opposed to the war, 'And in all conscience things are bad enough'.[11]

The apparent crisis seems to have roused most Australians behind the war effort. Many former opponents of it now became supporters. Andrew Dawson, Labour Party leader in Queensland, spoke for them when he said it now seemed 'perfectly clear' that the conflict involved 'a question of whether Great Britain shall hold dominion in South Africa at all' and a danger that hostile powers 'may make a dash for her possessions'.[12] The six colonial governments again raised and despatched a second

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7 Notably Connolly, 'Manufacturing "spontaneity".'

8 *Brisbane Courier*, 19 Jan 1900.

9 *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 18 Jan 1900.

10 *Brisbane Courier*, 11 Jan 1900.

11 *Newtown Chronicle*, 30 Dec 1899.

12 Queensland *Parliamentary Debates*, vol 83, 20 Dec 1899, p 1473.

group of contingents, another thousand men, and this time without any prompting from London and almost without opposition in the colonial parliaments and press. Soon after this leading citizens helped to raise and despatch a third and then a fourth group of contingents, totalling four thousand men - bushmen, they were called, said to be skilled at scouting and intended to be the eyes and ears of the British army. Now there seemed real danger, and a chance of real fighting, more men came forward to enlist than were needed. Businesses clamoured for war contracts, horse breeders to sell their animals to the army. Here was the real, the popular Australian commitment to the war. That commitment would remain popular even when the apparent threat to the empire's security passed, the Boer republics were occupied, and the war moved into its protracted and disturbing guerrilla phase. Pro-war as well as antiwar groups formed when accounts of farm burning and concentration camps appeared in the press. Political leaders endorsed a war aim of unconditional Boer surrender and annexation of the republics. Early in 1901 the six colonies' governments raised and despatched a fifth group of contingents totalling five thousand men, and a year later the new federal government, having assumed responsibility for Australian defence, raised a sixth group totalling four thousand. Recruiting now proved even easier than it had for the bushmen contingents. In addition, another four or five thousand Australians enlisted in irregular units in South Africa by the war's end. Australian horse breeders sold over twenty-one thousand horses to the army by mid-1902, and during 1901 one in every ten pounds earned from exports was earned from sales to South Africa. The increasingly easy recruiting and in the rising sales figures suggest not only wide imperial patriotism but also an increasing acceptance of war and its opportunities. Australia endured its worst drought on record from 1895 to 1903, and its economy was pulling itself out of protracted depression. The war in South Africa offered steady employment for rural men and a lucrative market for struggling businesses.[13]

In summary, then, Australians went to war pulled by imperial duty and pushed by martial excitement and personal opportunity. They hoped to expand and defend their empire, prove their worth as a young British people - and as a byproduct experience some excitement and make a profit.

The Australian experience of and contribution to the war

The six groups of contingents raised in Australia arrived in South Africa after a cramped sea voyage of up to a month's duration. They encountered a perplexingly different country to the one they left behind, full of large animals and lethal diseases, wealthy capitalists and impoverished farmers, proud proconsuls and people of all colours and religions. The last were probably the most startling for Australians. White men from a society that had brushed aside the original black inhabitants of its continent and who hoped to exclude non-white immigrants from their land suddenly found themselves in a country where Europeans were in a minority and in an army which could not have survived a day without the labour of black and coloured men. Their initial impressions, as you can imagine, were vivid. 'This town and all Africa for that matter alike, is full of black, brown and coffee coloured people', one Australian

13 Sizes of contingents can be found in an appendix in Field, *Forgotten war*. For horse sales and export figures see W. Vamplew ed., *Australians: historical statistics*, Sydney, 1987, p 193, and Wilson to Under Secretary of State Colonial Office, 20 Jun 1902, Public Record Office (London) CO 418/24 f. 527.

marvelled on arriving at Cape Town.[14] Beira, in what is now Mozambique, was 'a nice shop', thought another, with its 'people were all colours shapes and sizes, black white and brindle'.[15] Bill Nasson has written that all white troops in South Africa rapidly absorbed local settlers' views that manual work must be left to non-whites.[16] Australians certainly did, despite coming from a society that prided itself on performing its own labour. 'Of course we have black boys for our servants and to drive our waggons', wrote a soldier to his girlfriend with just a hint of pride.[17] The only way to manage these men, another agreed, was with a sjambok.[18] Native villages were recognised as hordes of food and fodder to be plundered. 'If you have had nothing to eat since last night, and see no prospect of anything to-night', one Australian explained, 'you ride up to your kraal ... draw your carbine from its bucket, insert a cartridge in the breech, and rest it across your legs. The movement is not lost on the head of the household.'[19] But Australians could show benevolence as well as brutality. A black man attached to an Australian officer as his servant wept when his master left for Australia - though he refused the offer to leave South Africa and accompany him.[20]

Nearly all twenty thousand Australian soldiers in the war, whether members of Australian contingents or locally-raised irregular units, fought as mounted riflemen - horsemen who rode for mobility but usually dismounted to fight. Much was expected of Australians in this role. Before the war they had been trumpeted as 'the finest type on the face of the earth for mounted riflemen'.[21] Some Australians today believe their soldiers lived up to this reputation. Most did not, at least during their first few months in action. Australians were amateur soldiers. Their society maintained part-time volunteer forces for defence but no professional army. No recognisable war had ever been fought on their soil. Few had any experience of battle or military discipline. Some Australians who enlisted for South Africa were wild frontiersmen, more killers than soldiers; some others were city men who worked in offices and factories, took the tram to work, and whose riding and shooting abilities were modest. All enlisted for only a year at a time, not the war's duration. Their units began as collections of untrained men and inexperienced officers. They were disbanded just as hard-won experience was turning them into cohesive, trained regiments. But the real reason why

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14 Press clipping, 'News from Sergeant Barham', 9 Dec 1899, Mitchell Library (Sydney), B1680.

15 Ryrie to Dick, 15 Feb 1901, National Library of Australia (Canberra), MS 8544.

16 W. Nasson, 'Tommy Atkins in South Africa', in P. Warwick ed., *The South African war: the Anglo-Boer war 1899-1902*, Harlow, Essex, 1980, p 131.

17 Quoted in F. Bekker, 'Soldiers of the queen', unpublished typescript, 1999, Australian War Memorial (Canberra), not as yet catalogued, p 10.

18 G. Witton, *Scapegoats of the empire: the story of the Bushveldt Carbineers*, Melbourne, 1907, p 17.

19 J.H.M. Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk: being some account of the less notable features of the South African war from the point of view of the Australian ranks*, London, 1902, pp 47-8.

20 Murray to wife, 3 May and 6 Oct 1900, National Library of Australia (Canberra), MS 2245.

21 Quoted in B. Gammage, 'The crucible: the establishment of the Anzac tradition 1899-1918' in M. McKernan and M. Browne eds., *Australia: two centuries of war and peace*, Canberra, 1988, p 150.

Australians could not live up to pre-war hopes were numeric, geographic and logistic. There were too few Australians to exercise any decisive influence. And distances were too great in South Africa, fodder and water too scarce, for mounted riflemen, however skilled, to outrun, pin down and encircle their enemy as practised a hundred times in peacetime volunteer camps around the British empire.

A tiny troop of Australian cavalry accompanied Methuen to Magersfontein and back in December 1899, but most members of Australian contingents missed the Black Week battles. The first significant concentration of Australians fighting in Australian units occurred at Colesberg late in 1899, where they formed many of the mounted troops deployed by John French and later Ralph Clements to delay an advance by Grobler while Roberts assembled his massive column to the west. Some Australians were sent to pacify Prieska and other regions in Roberts' rear. They may have been brutal in their work. John Merriman took up the cause of local inhabitants who complained of 'marauding' Australians, mere 'swashbucklers' who ' arrested inhabitants, drove off stock, and shot a few people without greatly caring who they were'.[22] Around Colesberg the Australians skirmished hard, showing impetuous eagerness but little judgement. In February 1900, at Pink Hill west of the town, they fought their first major engagement, holding a position too long and losing nine men killed. The dead were widely mourned back home.

At least one Australian at Colesberg behaved with the brutality Merriman denounced. In November 1899 Charles Cox, a captain from Sydney, ordered a Cape policeman to shoot Jan Dolley, a family servant, for refusing to obey a trivial order. For Colesbergers the casual shooting exemplified the excesses of martial law in their district, and one of their politicians joined other critics of martial law in publicising the shooting. The case was investigated and charges laid, but Roberts and Milner seem to have obtained immunity for Cox. He appeared in court but only as a witness when the case was tried, before a special court set up to deal with 'crimes of a political nature', in October 1900.[23]

After Roberts took Bloemfontein two thousand Australian horsemen joined Canadians, New Zealanders and British regular mounted infantry to form Edward Hutton's brigade that would lead the advance on Pretoria. Before the war Hutton was the loudest advocate of the war-winning potential of mounted troops fighting with rifles rather than swords, and had held colonial commands in New South Wales and Canada. At the Vet River, two days out of Bloemfontein, Hutton showed what his brigade might do. In a wide outflanking manoeuvre he marched it fifteen miles to the extreme right of Boer trenches strung out behind the river. The regular mounted infantry and Canadians dismounted and began to cross a ford, threatening a flank attack. As the Boers began to waver, Hutton sent his Australians in a wild dash across a bridge and into the heart of the enemy position. It should have been a massacre, but Hutton chose his moment well and backed up the exposed men with a second attack

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22 P. Lewsen ed., *Selections from the correspondence of John X. Merriman volume three 1899-1905*, Cape Town, 1966, pp 140, 142.

23 *Supreme court reports: decisions of the Supreme Court of the Cape of Good Hope during the year 1900*, vol 17, 30 Oct 1900, pp 561-8; *Age* (Melbourne), 5 Dec 1900; South African Conciliation Committee, *Martial law and conciliation: being the experience of two members of the Cape parliament*, Cape Town, 1900, pp 4-5.

that broke through. By evening Hutton's brigade was camped on the other side of the river. It had lost just four men wounded, only one seriously.[24]

Vet River showed the weakness as well as the strength of mounted riflemen in the war. The long ride out to the flank, the impetuous dash - such was their strength. But what was needed were horsemen who could not only edge a few hundred of the enemy out of a position but run down and round up thousands of them, as Sheridan's men had done at the close of the American civil war in 1865. It was an impossible goal in South Africa. During the rest of the advance to Pretoria the Boers largely avoided the British army and Hutton's horses, however hard they were flogged, could not catch them. After Pretoria fell some Australians helped hinge Botha out of his position at Diamond Hill, but once again the Australians, like other mounted riflemen, proved unable to outrun and encircle a substantial number of opponents.

Meanwhile several thousand Australian horsemen had landed at Beira to rail inland and form the bulk of Federick Carrington's Rhodesian Field Force, created to prevent a repetition of the uprising three years before by the Shona and Ndebele peoples, block the Transvaal's northern border, and penetrate south to Mafikeng and Pietersburg. Carrington's Australians were the bushmen raised after Black Week, counterparts of Canada's and New Zealand's roughriders and considered likely to beat the Boers at their own game. Distance, disease and dotage wasted whatever skills these bushmen possessed. Moving from Beira to Bulawayo took months, fever weakened many men, and the aged Carrington lost his nerve and stood still rather than invade the Transvaal. While they waited some Australians objected to serving under Raleigh Grey, one of Carrington's colonels and a former Jameson raider, perhaps signalling that these Australians at least were willing to defend the empire, even extend it, but not for the benefit of the Randlords.[25] As Carrington's military inability became clear his command was gradually stripped from him and fed into what is now North West province, roused by De La Rey and Smuts into resisting recent British occupation. At Swartruggens on the Elands River in August 1900 three hundred Australians joined two hundred Rhodesians to resist a two-week siege by the Rustenburg, Wolmaranstad and Marico commandos. The stand was 'one ray of consolation' for British arms in the turbulent region, according to the *Times history of the war*.[26] Back in Australia much pride was felt at what its men had done, and one poet rejoiced that 'On Australia's page forever / We had written Elands River / We had written it for ever and a day!'[27]

By now there was talk of coining a medal for Australian veterans of the war, of building war memorials in Australian capital cities, of holding a victory day. Victory receded as the war moved into its ugly guerrilla phase and as the fifth group of contingents from Australia arrived in South Africa in April and May 1901. Large units of these horsemen roamed the highveld far from the railways and spreading

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24 Hutton to Nell, 6 May 1900, British Library (London), Hutton papers, MS 50091; C. Miller, *Painting the map red: Canada and the South African war 1899-1902*, Montreal and Kingston, 1993, pp 226-8.

25 Methuen to Roberts, 22 Sep 1900, Public Record Office (London) WO 105/25, folder 52.

26 B. Williams ed., *The Times history of the war in South Africa 1899-1902 volume 4*, London, 1906, pp 428-9.

27 Wallace, *Circumstances surrounding the siege of Elands River Post*, p v.

blockhouse lines, joining in repeated efforts to run down Botha in Mpumalanga and Kwazulu-Natal, De la Rey in the North West, De Wet in the Free State, Smuts in the Western Cape. As mounted soldiers they were not involved in guarding concentration camps and garrisoning towns, but much of their time was spent doing other dirty work - burning farms and slaughtering livestock. In May 1901 a Queensland unit burnt down an entire town, Bethal, between Middelberg and Standerton.[28] 'I pitied the women and children who knelt before us and begged an prayed that their houses and food might not be destroyed', reported one Australian officer after another occasion of arson, 'but it was an order, and my finer and humanitarian instincts had to be sacrificed'.[29] Many Australians thought good would come from such efforts. The Boers, they thought, were an obstinate and primitive people resisting the march of progress. 'This will be a good country in a few years after things are quiet', judged one Australian soldier, 'but it would not be much till the Boers are all done with.'[30]

Though the war's conventional fighting was over, it was at engagements at Wilmansrust in June 1901 and Onverwacht in January 1902 that Australians lost their greatest number of men in single actions - eighteen dead and thirteen dead respectively. Both engagements were defeats, Wilmansrust without even a leavening of heroism. Stuart Beatson, the Indian army officer who commanded the contingent from Victoria defeated there, thought the problem was cowardice and called his men white-livered curs. On hearing this three Victorians suggested to their comrades that they refuse to fight under their general again. Such a suggestion seemed reasonable to men who were more citizens than soldiers, in civil life accustomed to asserting their rights against overbearing employers. Beatson, a regular, saw things differently and had them tried for mutiny. Sentenced to death, the three Victorians were sent instead to England to serve prison terms. They were soon released at the order of an embarrassed army legal department.[31]

There were more death sentences for Australians after officers of the Bushveldt Carbineers, a unit raised in Pretoria partly from Australian veterans to police what is now Northern province, were tried for shooting unarmed prisoners. Australians were easily enraged by examples of Boer atrocities, real or imagined. As citizen mounted riflemen, untamed by military discipline and often ranging beyond the eyes of senior officers, they found few obstacles to venting their rage. In the second half of 1901 a squadron of Bushveldt Carbineers stationed north of Pietersburg began routinely killing their prisoners, armed or unarmed, men or boys. An investigation led by an Australian-born intelligence officer, Frederick de Bertodano, led to the arrest of the squadron's officers. After a series of trials Harry Morant, who had lived half his life in Australia before enlisting for the war, and Peter Handcock, a blacksmith from the Australian country town of Bathurst, were executed for murder. A third Australian, young George Witton from Melbourne, was sent to an English gaol. A fourth, the Carbineers' colonel, was sent back to Australia in disgrace. Many Australians were shamed by what their officers had done. Others remembered a recent short story written by Rudyard Kipling in which a Sikh cavalryman praised Australian

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28 Murray, *Official records of the Australian military contingents to the war in South Africa*, p 477.

29 Quoted in Wallace, *Australians at the Boer war*, p 303.

30 Newlands to sister, 23 Oct 1900, La Trobe Library (Melbourne), MS 9506/7.

31 The best study of Wilmansrust and the subsequent muting is in G. Souter, *Lion and kangaroo: Australia 1901-1919 the rise of a nation*, Sydney, 1976.

soldiers as modern men who would not shrink from using brute force when it was needed. 'Very proper men, with a just lust for the war', the Sikh observes.[32] Coming from the empire's most respected poet this was high praise. But now, after the punishment awarded Morant and the others, the military authorities seemed to be saying that Australians could no longer play the auxiliary soldier's ancient role of licensed killer, that Australians were no longer valued for the rough frontier qualities they were supposed to be bringing to the British army. Some Australians were confused and angry, just as those three young Victorian soldiers had been after Beatson's savage rebuke. Such feelings contributed, albeit slightly, to the apparent paradox that the first war fought by Australian soldiers left little public legacy behind it in Australia.[33]

In essence, Australian soldiers experienced the war as citizen mounted riflemen, suppressing resistance, sometimes too eagerly, in the harsh manner auxiliary soldiers had long used. Australia's military contribution to victory was a modest one, inevitably so given the relatively small number of Australian soldiers and their lack of military experience. If the customary view that Australians were brilliant scouts and natural soldiers is an exaggeration, can we go further and ask whether the presence of Australians in South Africa was redundant, even harmful, to British arms? Douglas Haig, French's chief of staff, thought so. Maintaining dozens of barely-trained auxiliary mounted units in the field in a barren country, he felt, simply strained resources so greatly that the British army was bogged down and victory delayed.[34] Australians and other citizen mounted riflemen were meant to give wings to the British army. For Haig, at least, they merely gave it an anchor.

Before moving on to discuss the war's legacy for Australia I should mention that at least one Australian fought for the republican cause during the war. Arthur Lynch, brought up near the Victorian country town of Ballarat, went to Pretoria in 1899 as a journalist for the London *Daily Mail* to report on the war. He quickly felt the pull of ancient Irish loyalties. Offering his services to Kruger, he raised an Irish brigade, which counted just seventy men, and led it in action for six months. Lynch then escaped overseas to become an advocate for the Boer cause, and toward the end of the war was elected to the House of Commons as a nationalist member for the Irish seat of Galway. Arrested, tried by an English court for treason and sentenced to be hanged, Lynch claimed immunity as an Australian. Popular pressure obliged the government to release him.[35]

The war's legacy for Australia

At first that legacy was visible and respected. Perhaps a thousand Australians died in South Africa, and another thousand suffered serious wounds or disease. Up to two hundred small war memorials were erected across the country in honour of these

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32 R. Kipling, 'A sahib's war', reprinted in his *Traffics and discoveries*, London, 1949, pp 87, 100.

33 The best accounts of the episode are K. Denton, *Closed file*, Sydney, 1983, and A. Davey ed., *Breaker Morant and the Bushveldt Carbineers*, Cape Town, 1987.

34 Quoted in S.D. Badsey, 'Fire and the sword: the British army and the arme blanche controversy 1871-1921', PhD thesis, Cambridge, 1981, p 154.

35 A. Lynch, *My life story*, London, 1924, pp 151-95; D.P. McCracken, *The Irish pro-Boers 1877-1902*, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 1989, pp 141-9.

men's sacrifice. When the war ended Alfred Deakin, Australia's prime minister, and Edward Hutton, now in Australia as its first general officer commanding, said the war would help forge an Australian identity just as the war of independence had helped forge one for the Americans.[36] But the war had been too minor, too brief, too comfortably distant for most Australians to provide the new federation with any foundation symbols and mythology. Above all, the war had not been a test, as one newspaper later explained.[37] No body of Australians larger than a few hundred men had made a reckless charge to glory, or held a superior number of Boers at bay. None of the notable actions fought had the right flavour to capture popular imagination for long. Australians at Elandslaagte had not fought as Australians but as members of a South African corps; Pink Hill involved mostly Victorians; Elands River saw too little blood spilt; Wilmansrust was too shameful; Onverwacht was unknown. No national monument to the war was erected in Australia, not even an equivalent of New Zealand's Ranfurly Veteran's Home. No national day derived from the war was commemorated after 1902, as Canada's veterans commemorated Paardeberg Day. No Australian official history of the war appeared, though a half-hearted official record was published, belatedly, in 1911. None of the war's battles or skirmishes or ambushes or sieges would ever rouse coming generations of Australians to poetry and veneration; Elands River would not be written on Australia's page for ever, or even for a decade.

But if the war could not serve the function of the American war of independence for Australia, perhaps it approximated the American experience of the Seven Years war. During that war's North American campaign, militiamen from Virginia, New York and other colonies fought beside British regulars and quietly decided they were a superior type of soldier. Many Australians returned from South Africa with a similar conviction. Even before he left for home one Australian soldier wrote from Pretoria:

> It seems they can't do without the Australians and Canadians, who have already done most of the dirty and dangerous work. The Boers cannot make us out; one Boer (a prisoner) asked me the other day, if we Australians value our lives at all. I said why? He said it does not seem like it. He also said that the Boers can generally tell when they are fighting Australians, as the bullets whistle ever so much closer than the Tommies' bullets do. And also when our troops are advancing, he says the Australians ride like wildfire (or words to that effect). The Boers reckon that they would rather meet a hundred Tommies than twenty Australians. I overheard a good argument between two Tommies in Pretoria. One would like to know why the Horsetralians were called Horsetralians; and the only conclusion they could come to, was that it was because they were all so used to horses.[38]

Australians today have largely forgotten their country's part in the South African war (not to mention much of their country's history, indeed any history at all). Australia's military tradition is still popularly deemed to have begun on Gallipoli in 1915, the well-publicised courage shown there and the great loss of life constituting the test Australians then looked for and almost compensating for what is seen today, at least by most journalists and politicians, as a regrettable national tendency to fight

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36 Inglis, *Sacred places*, p 62.

37 Inglis, *Sacred places*, p 68.

38 Byers to mother, 18 Aug 1900, La Trobe Library (Melbourne), MS 9691.

other people's wars. The South African war is too small, too messy, too British, to find much place in the school curricula and university history courses of a peaceful, multicultural country. Received opinion about the war among teachers and tutors seems to view the war as a preview of Vietnam, and therefore a Bad Thing best left alone. Academic analysis of the subject sparked briefly from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, but it was largely confined to debating public opinion about the war and the initial Australian commitment to it. The increasingly large proportion of Australians whose family origins lie outside Britain probably feel, like most historians, little interest in the subject or sympathy for it.

The Australians most likely to remember the war are those who strongly sense a connection with the old British Australia: descendants of soldiers from the war, family historians, local history societies, military history societies. They are often active in transcribing soldiers' diaries, restoring war memorials, searching out family connections with some contingent or other. A few see a higher purpose in their activities, hoping to overcome the ignorance and derision of Australia's British period and its military achievements by the new multicultural and republican middle class. Reg Watson, grandson of a Tasmanian soldier and author of several self-published works on the war, defiantly concluded his self-published history of Tasmania's war dead with a large drawing of a state flag and the motto 'Proud to be Tasmanian'.[39] Max Chamberlain, a Victorian historian, intended his most recent manuscript on the war 'to retrieve for the Australians who served a hundred years ago the respect they deserve', so that 'young Australians ... may respect these brave men as do we who remember them'. In holding this aim he wondered whether he was 'drawing the fire' of potential critics.[40]

Perhaps, as with other episodes of Australian military history, a liveable consensus is emerging between memory and ignorance, pride and shame, monarchic British past and republican multicultural future. We can detect it in the words of the two Australians I quoted early in this lecture who were talking about their uncle who had served in South Africa:

> 'I think we were on the wrong side in that one ... The Boers were fighting for their republic, weren't they? ... He was a very typical Australian of his era. ... It was one of those things you did, going off to fight a foreign war. It was a long time ago, the start of this century. But we should never forget.'[41]

The ideal representative of this consensus is Harry Morant. Of the entire half million members of the South African Field Force his name alone lives on in popular Australian memory. A folk mythology in Australian society, perhaps in all societies, holds notable criminals and murders to be heroes because they are against the established order. Morant the Bushveldt Carbineer lives on as Morant the bushranger, a Ned Kelly in khaki. This mythical figure was the hero of a film by Bruce Beresford released in 1980. 'People come out of that movie', said Jack Thompson, an actor in it; 'saying "Fuck them, fuck the bastards." That is the guts of it.'[42] If the film makers intended 'them' to be the military, for their audience 'them' is always the British.

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39 R.A. Watson, *"Heroes all": Tasmanian casualties in the Anglo-Boer war*, Anglo-Saxon Keltic Society, Blackman's Bay, Tas., n.d., p 61.

40 Chamberlain, *Map history*, pp vii, 98.

41 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 Jan 1999.

42 Quoted in A. Hoy, 'Martyr from the bush', *Bulletin* (Sydney), 22 Jun 1999, p 48.

Morant - English born and raised, whose last thoughts were of his fiancée in Devon - is now an honorary full Aussie in reward for his martyrdom as yet another victim of a long history of British bastardry said to run from the flogging of convicts at Botany Bay to the fall of Singapore and the Maralinga nuclear tests. A documentary due for release soon promises to confirm Morant's status as an Australian hero and martyr, in the words of its researcher to expunge 'Australia's residual cringe about the Boer War, and the Morant/ Handcock stain on the Anzac tradition and the nation's otherwise impeccable war record.'[43] Australians who fought in South Africa, like those who fought on Gallipoli, seem set to be rescued from obscurity and tidied up for our age by a televised surgical excision of any offending traces of imperial patriotism or crimes against their innocent victims.

[43] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 Apr 1999.