

THE RICHMOND WORKING CLASS AND THE GREAT WAR

On the 28th of June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife were shot dead in Bosnia by Gavrilo Princip, a radical Serbian activist and part of the Serbian nationalist group The Black Hand, which was fighting for Serbian independence from Austria. No one knew it at that moment, but Princip's bullet had sent a precarious line of dominos tumbling across Europe, which culminated in the Great War (later World War I) less than a month later.

In far away Australia, in the industrial area of the flourishing Melbourne suburb known as Richmond, no one either knew or cared about Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Richmond's working class, mostly Irish immigrant families with some first generation Australian children, probably wouldn't have known where Serbia was and none of them could have imagined what was coming next. In fact, most of Richmond probably had a hangover that day, given their beloved football team the *Tigers* had just won a game against St. Kilda the day before.¹ When the murder was reported two days later, no one had any idea what it would herald. In fact, those working class who *did* read about it would have probably been inclined to sympathise with Princip and The Black Hand, given they too had experienced first hand living under the tyrannical rule of a hated imperial power.

Even when war was declared in July 1914, those Australians not of British heritage would have found it rather bemusing: the heir to the Austrian throne had been murdered, so they were now being asked to join the British army to go and fight the German Army in France. Even British soldiers were uncertain; on a tour of the Western Front I went on in 2018, the guide told us the story of how British soldiers embarking for France believed there must have been a mistake and they were going to fight the French, not the Germans - after all, it was only relatively recently that Britain and France had put aside years of bad blood. In Richmond, this bemusement was quickly drowned out by hostility, particularly among the Irish working class.

In fact, these people would have been far more interested in the Home Rule Act of 1914, which would finally grant Ireland some of the independence she had been struggling for since the British first landed on her shores in 1170. It was not full independence, but it was something and many believed it was the first step towards true independence for Ireland. A "spirited debate"² took place in May 1914 about the Home Rule Act and was well attended, which shows just how strongly the people of Richmond felt about the possibility that their motherland might one day be free of British tyranny. The speaker arguing against Home Rule was heckled so badly he left the stage. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Irish in Richmond were watching their homeland with interest and were bitterly disappointed when, following the outbreak of war, the British Parliament decided (without any input from the Irish) to put the Home Rule Act on hold.

¹ 'Richmond Wins!', *Richmond Guardian*, 27 June 1914

² 'Richmond Presbyterian Literary Association', *Richmond Guardian*, 2 May 1914

This sense of anti-British feeling, combined with confusion over what it was they were being asked to fight for in the first place and (in some quarters) sympathy for The Black Hand, led to strong, anti-war sentiment among the working class of Richmond. However, this did not stop young men, who would otherwise have been working in factories, from signing up to go to war. Over 5000 young men from Richmond, including many working class, enlisted in the 22nd Infantry Brigade,³ which was comprised solely of men from Richmond and the immediate area. Before the end of the war, the 22nd Infantry Brigade had ceased to exist, having suffered more than 2000 casualties, of which almost 900 were dead. These figures do not include the men who returned with wounded minds and what we would now recognise as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but just those with physical injuries. Including the mentally wounded, the true casualty count would have been much higher.

Compared to other areas, Richmond suffered extremely high casualties and the bubbling anti-war sentiment among the working class became red hot anger as the war dragged on, long after the promised end date of Christmas 1914. It was still raging in 1916, a year in which three events compounded to drive anti-war sentiment to an as yet unseen pitch. The first occurred in Ireland, the mother-country of many working class Richmondites; over Easter of that year, a group of rebels took over central Dublin and declared Ireland a republic. My great-grandfather, William "Bill" Byers, was a child in Dublin at the time and recalled in his journals that "the rebels held the city in a state of siege"⁴. Britain transferred hundreds of soldiers from France to Dublin and began to shell the city, while any Irishman or woman out on the streets was arrested as a rebel, despite the fact that many of them were innocent Dubliners going about their business. Initially, the rebels had little public support - both in Ireland and among the Irish diaspora abroad - but public opinion swung sharply in the aftermath. Despite British attempts to censor the news to "prevent neutral countries from receiving a false impression of the events in Ireland"⁵ it came to international attention that central Dublin lay in ruins from British shelling, many innocent Irish civilians were rotting in prisons, and a wave of contemptuous show-trials followed by executions had been organised by the British.

With this international press came a wave of public outrage, both in Ireland and abroad, and while Britain acted hastily to try and save their reputation, the damage was done. Irish diaspora across the world, including those in Richmond, who had allowed their sons to go and fight for Britain were reminded, once again, that they were second-class citizens in the empire. A year later, the Richmond Guardian reported a meeting at John Wern's Richmond Racetrack where "they applauded the sentiment of Ireland first and Empire second"⁶ demonstrating clearly that the Irish diaspora of Richmond had not softened in their attitudes towards the treatment of their fellow countrymen, nor had they changed their attitudes

³ Australian War Memorial, *22nd Australian Infantry Battalion*, [website] <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U51462>, (accessed 19 September 2021)

⁴ Byers, W, *Unpublished Memoirs*

⁵ 'Dublin Uprising', *The Ararat Advertiser*, 29 April 1916

⁶ 'Australia Not Mentioned At Monster Meeting - Ireland First and Empire Second', *Richmond Guardian*, 10 November 1917.

towards the war, much to the disgust of the unnamed journalist, who believed in “the winning of the war as a first principle.”⁷

The second event of 1916 to drive a wedge between the Richmond working class and any pro-war sentiment was the Battle of the Somme. This catastrophic offensive cost the British Army alone 420,000 casualties, including 125,00 dead (among them my great-great grandfather, Company Sergeant Major John Alfred Byers, M.C) and the 22nd Battalion from Richmond were right in the thick of it. Between 25 July and 7 August 1916, the 22nd suffered 683 men dead and an unknown number of wounded and missing.⁸ The loss of so many would have sent shockwaves through the community; everyone would have known someone who had lost a husband, father, brother or son. Among a population already angry at the events in Dublin just months earlier and pre-disposed to anti-British sentiment, it would have set hard the feelings of many that this was was not their war, it had nothing to do with them and if Britain wanted to fight it, she could damn well do it without sacrificing their sons!

So it should have been no surprise to anyone when, mere months after the devastation at the Somme, Richmond overwhelmingly voted ‘NO’ to conscription, along with the vast majority of Australians⁹. In Richmond, of the 26,349 people eligible to cast a vote, 19,013 did so - more than 72% of the eligible voters - and a whopping 13,480 of them voted ‘NO’ to the question of conscription.¹⁰ Australia, and other British colonies, had been put under heavy pressure from Britain to bring in conscription and desperate propaganda posters claimed there was a shortage of men at the front. This would have rung hollow to the people of Richmond, who were only too aware of just how many of their men had gone to war in the first place *and* the fact that, just months earlier, Britain had managed to pull men from France to violently crush the Easter Rising in Dublin.

Sir William Irvine, a proponent of conscription since the start of the war and a politician who hailed from the upper-echelons of Richmond society, was appalled by the attitudes of the working class. He claimed that those opposed to conscription were “pro-Germans, disloyalists and shirkers”¹¹ only to discover that the people of Richmond couldn’t care less about what he thought of them. As pointed out by Mr. F. E. Tudor, a Labour politician of the time, “Richmond had shown more than any other city in Australia that they were not shirkers”¹² and their high rates of both enlistment and casualties confirm this. The Richmond result of the referendum was mirrored across Victoria and wider Australia and, despite the pushing of politicians such as Irvine, Prime Minister Billy Hughes refused to introduce

⁷ ‘Australia Not Mentioned At Monster Meeting - Ireland First and Empire Second’, *Richmond Guardian*, 10 November 1917.

⁸ Australian War Memorial, *22nd Australian Infantry Battalion*, [website] <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U51462>, (accessed 19 September 2021)

⁹ Staff Writers, ‘From the Archives, 1916: Australia says no to compulsory military service’, *The Age*, October 27 2020

¹⁰ *The Referendum Under The Military Service Act Referendum 1916*, Australia, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1917

¹¹ H. Kothwell, ‘Crowds At Town Hall’, *Richmond Guardian*, 14 October 1916

¹² *Ibid.*

conscription in Australia during the war. While papers such as *The Age* lamented that “the shirker and coward appeared to have gained the day”¹³ it is not hard to imagine that the bubbling resentment in Richmond (and other areas with similar demographics) could have boiled over into violence had conscription been introduced.

The war would end, at long last, in 1918 and the anti-war sentiment in Richmond continued until the end. As the soldiers from the front came home, this anger over the war spilled over into attacks against the men who had fought: they were shunned, ostracised and welcome only in their own homes or the R.S.L clubs being set up across the suburbs. Such was Richmond’s distaste for the war and everything about it that no memorial to the dead was erected until after the end of the second world war. This memorial stands today in Barkly Gardens and commemorates the dead of both wars, although lists no names and the plaques are generic in nature. Other plaques have been added to commemorate the “men and women from Richmond who bravely volunteered to serve their country”¹⁴ during the wars in Korea, Malaya, Borneo and Vietnam and there are plans to include plaques commemorating the conflicts in the Middle East.

To me, this shows that the attitudes of Richmond have not changed deeply over the centuries; they have correctly identified the war as a source of great shame and a dreadful waste of life. The small, generic memorial does not draw the eye nor does it seek attention - it is right for it to be there, but what it remembers is not something to be celebrated. The dead should be remembered, but the needs of the living must take precedence, because it is the living who must ensure this never happens again.

¹³ Staff Writers, ‘From the Archives, 1916: Australia says no to compulsory military service’, *The Age*, October 27 2020

¹⁴ Monuments Australia, *Richmond War Memorial*, [website]
<https://monumentaaustralia.org.au/themes/conflict/multiple/display/33270-richmond-war-memorial/photo/1>,
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