

*“They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.”*

So goes ‘The Ode’ a famous (or infamous, depending on your view) stanza espoused every ANZAC and Remembrance Day in Australia, and in ceremonies honouring fallen soldiers across the Western world. It is part of a poem called ‘The Fallen’ by Laurence Binyon and was first published in 1914 by *The Times*.¹

But what do we remember? And, perhaps more importantly, *how* do we remember?

Australia has, in my opinion, a strange and rather grotesque obsession with a single battle of the first world war; I am speaking, of course, of the disastrous Gallipoli Campaign. As early as 1917, *The Age* proclaimed that the anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli on 15 April 1915 would “In the coming years...mean the supreme commemoration of Australian nationhood.”² Disgustingly, they were right and these days raising the subject for anything other than to praise ‘our boys’ for their heroism, honour, loyalty and sacrifice is fraught with peril, especially in the age of the Twitter pile-on.

But Australians did not fight *only* at Gallipoli and Gallipoli itself was a botched, poorly planned and badly executed campaign that ended in catastrophe. The Australia New Zealand Army Corps (ANZACs) suffered 26,111 casualties, of which 8,141 were deaths.³ Among the wounded was my great-grandfather, Henry Gibson, serving in the Otago Regiment. On the first day of the Gallipoli Campaign, 50% of his regiment were wounded or killed⁴ and he spent the rest of his life as a janitor at the Otago Dental School, unable to do skilled work because of his injuries.

However, he was a lucky man. The community of Otago banded around him when he eventually came home; he and his wife were supported and he was a revered community leader until his death in 1962. He and other veterans were given pride of place at the opening of memorials in their home towns and his job was his for life. Had he still been living in Richmond, where he was born in 1882, his experience may have been very different.

Richmond in 1914 was a strange mix; the protestant Anglo-Irish had been the first to arrive as the local Indigenous people - primarily the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung - were driven out. By the time the first world war broke out, the suburb was primarily made-up of working class Irish, who tended to be Catholic, along with a large proportion of poor English immigrants. The war likely recieved enthusiastic support among the early Anglo-Irish still living there,

¹ Australian Army, *The Ode*, [website] <https://www.army.gov.au/our-heritage/traditions/ode>, (accessed 19 September 2021)

² Staff Writers, ‘From the Archives, 1917: ANZAC Day for a nation still at war’, *The Age*, April 25 2019

³ The Australian War Memorial, *Gallipoli*, [website] <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/gallipoli>, (accessed 19 September 2021)

⁴ The New Zealand War Memorial

who considered themselves English rather than Irish and felt they were superior to the native Irish Catholics, and many of their husbands and sons would have been wealthy enough to pay for officer commissions in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). However, anti-war sentiment among the poorer, mostly Irish working class population in Richmond (and wider Australia) mirrored that of the mother country and many Irish and those of Irish-descent believed the war had nothing to do with them and was, primarily, an English war.

In fact, in 1914, many Irish and Irish diaspora across the world were more interested in the Home Rule Act, 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. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Irish in Richmond were watching their homeland with interest and were bitterly disappointed when the British Parliament decided (without any input from the Irish) to put the Home Rule Act on hold until after the war. This decision would have far reaching consequences, both for Ireland and the Irish diaspora.

However, while anti-war sentiment was high, plenty of young, working-class men enlisted in the AIF, along with their wealthier counterparts. None of these men were professional soldiers and, for the most part, they saw going to war as a great adventure and a chance to escape the kind of menial, back-breaking work their parents were doing. Propaganda issued by the British Army heavily implied that the war would be just that and many first-generation Australians of Irish or English parentage thought going off to war would be a great opportunity to see the country their parents were from and maybe catch up with some relatives still living back home.

As we know, the first world war was no adventure and was instead a blood-bath from start to finish and men came back crippled mentally and physically from their experiences. The unreasonably harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles ensured their sons would go to war again not twenty years later, although few were perceptive enough to realise this at the time. One was William Dyson (1880 - 1938), a newspaper cartoonist who became Australia's first war artist. He was commissioned as a lieutenant in 1915 to capture "characteristic drawings of life in the trenches."⁵ This experience affected him deeply and his cartoons afterwards became decidedly scathing of the war, to the point that Sir John Monash argued with him over his depiction of the diggers. In May 1919, Dyson produced an illustration for the *British Daily Herald* disturbingly titled 'Peace and Future Cannon Fodder' which predicted the very outcome that would come to pass in 1939. Dyson didn't live to see it, but the satirical man would have probably liked the irony.

But back to Richmond and the predominantly Irish Catholic working class population. How did they react at the end of the war? More than 5000 men from the Richmond area enlisted in

⁵ "Everyday and everybody". *The Labor Daily*. New South Wales, Australia. 1 September 1931. p. 4. Retrieved 19 September 2021 – via Trove.

the AIF; more than 2000 of those were wounded and almost 900 were killed. While anyone who lost a father, husband or son to the hell of the first world war felt it, it was felt particularly deeply by the working classes. Australia was, for them, a land of new hope and opportunity; many of them were working in hard, menial jobs in an attempt to make a better life for their children than what they would have had in Ireland, and now many of them had lost their sons to a conflict started by the old, hated enemy: the English. This anti-war sentiment would have been compounded by an uprising in Dublin in 1916 (later called the Easter Rising); initially unpopular among a population whose sons were dying overseas, public opinion swung sharply in the aftermath. Central Dublin lay in ruins from British shelling, many innocent Irish civilians who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time were arrested as rebels, and the entirely predictable response of contemptuous show-trials followed by executions saw many Irish and Irish diaspora around the world turn firmly to the side of the rebels.

This event may have also influenced Australian attitudes, especially among those Irish-Australians, in the 1916 referendum on conscription. While *The Age* lamented that “the shirker and coward appeared to have gained the day”⁶ Australians overwhelmingly voted ‘NO’ to conscription. It is not a stretch to suggest that many Irish-Australians, influenced by what was happening in their home country and having lost their sons to the old enemy, would have felt strongly about the referendum and would have been among the record turnout that saw more than 50% of eligible Australians cast a vote on the issue.

This building of events came too close to the end of the war to sway public opinion to the side of the soldiers and, by the time the war ended in 1918 and the soldiers slowly began trickling back, they found a nasty surprise awaiting them in Richmond.

They were not wanted. They were not conquering heroes returning home to an adoring population, but rather shunned pariahs who had participated in something shameful. This would have been incredibly unpleasant for any man, let alone someone who had been through a devastating and traumatic experience. In Richmond, anti-war sentiment ran so high that no memorial to the dead was installed, although individual parishes maintained honour rolls of the dead among their congregations.

It was not until after the second world war, more than twenty years later, that this oversight was rectified. A small memorial in Barkly Gardens 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”⁷ during the wars in Korea, Malaya, Borneo and Vietnam and there are plans to include plaques commemorating the conflicts in the Middle East. This speaks still to the

⁶ Staff Writers, ‘From the Archives, 1916: Australia says no to compulsory military service’, *The Age*, October 27 2020

⁷ Monuments Australia, *Richmond War Memorial*, [website]
<https://monumentaustralia.org.au/themes/conflict/multiple/display/33270-richmond-war-memorial/photo/1>, (accessed 19 September 2021)

attitudes of Richmond 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.

Sadly, we are yet to learn that lesson and Australia as a whole could take a leaf out of Richmond's book. Today, ANZAC Day is treated like a celebration and we congratulate ourselves as if spending twenty-million lives on a fruitless cause is something to be proud of. My Bebe (great-grandfather), a veteran of the second world war, espoused it perfectly in the last years of his life "governments love heroes, because heroes are dead; soldiers are a problem, because we're here to tell the little people what really happened". Sadly, *The Age* predicted this response in 1917, saying "today it may seem as cruel irony that in the golden years of peace the Anzac anniversary shall be high festival. For the tears will be dry; the agony forgotten; and the generation that now suffers will have passed. The men of Anzac, and the mothers of the men, have paid the price of the nation. The nation shall rejoice in the future."⁸

But, despite our decision to rejoice over the horrors of the past, the Richmond war memorial offers us an important insight into the views of the people who lived through these terrible times. They saw what we fail to see: pointless death and shameful slaughter, all for an empire that treated its poor as second-class citizens, destined only for death. I hope it's not too late for us to recall these truths and to examine *how* we remember, because, if the people of Richmond then could see us now, they would have only one thing to say: "Australia, you've forgotten."

⁸ Staff Writers, 'From the Archives, 1917: ANZAC Day for a nation still at war', *The Age*, April 25 2019