

Place is often ignored by historians. Yet, looking at the program for this conference, it is clear that many of the papers are centred on place. Place can be a community, a region or a locality, a suburb in a capital city, a country town, a district. But why is it important? - Because historical events or processes don't happen in a vacuum. They happen in places and to communities. Communities will filter outside forces and adjust them, reflecting their sense of place. This means the local picture may not always match the more general picture that historians describe – and that matters. Looking at some aspects of the impact of the Great War on North Eastern Victoria suggests why by examining four themes: the role of women, the place of German Australians, knowledge about the war on the front and war memorials.

Did Australian women in the Great War simply wait and weep? Many did, indeed, weep (as did their menfolk). Waiting, however, was never an option. When the war broke out, the gendered roles of men and women were well established, based on experience gained during the Boer War. The men would have charge of the public sphere in the war effort, such as recruitment and farewell socials for the local men who volunteered. The patriotic women would turn their domestic skills to the needs of Empire by joining the Red Cross and knitting and sewing for the war effort. But the region differed in one respect from the national pattern. In the cities, men often occupied the executive positions on the Red Cross – but not in the North East. In every Red Cross branch, the women ran the show. Any male members of the branches were there by invitation only.

From 1916, however, the women increasingly moved into the public sphere. The patriotic women joined the pro-conscription committees but, unlike many of their sisters in the cities, they were active committee members, canvassing, door-knocking and, in some cases, occupying executive positions on the committees. They also took a leaf out of their metropolitan sisters' book by organising women's-only meetings to promote the Yes case. Unlike the city women's meetings, however, the regional meetings were addressed exclusively by women. The Australian Women's National League sent some of its members to the region to address these meetings but most were addressed by local women. The authority of these women rested in the fact that they had family at the front. The loss of the first conscription plebiscite pushed the region's patriotic women even further into the public sphere. Women now served on recruitment committees whose members were responsible for identifying local men 'eligible' to serve. It was a far cry from the comfortable gendered roles evident the regional war effort in 1914.

Women opposed to conscription were equally active. If family memory is to be believed, one woman in a district in the Kiewa Valley was a key player in organising an anti-conscription meeting. Two of her sons had gone to war: one was killed on the Gallipoli Peninsula; the other



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was still serving although he, too, would be dead before the war's end. This hints at the emotional cost of the war. The news of death came by telegram. Mail, however, came by sea and for up to three months after the telegram was delivered, letters written in a familiar hand would continue to arrive home. There is no doubt that families checked the date on each letter, knowing that there would come a time when there would be no more letters or, perhaps, hoping that a mistake had been made. But what of the men who came home 'wounded'? Charlotte Lawrence discovered what that could mean.

Charlotte Lawrence was a labourer's wife and a member of the Rutherglen Red Cross. Her son had been severely wounded and he arrived in Melbourne in May 1918. She travelled by train to Melbourne to see him, but she found a stranger, a son she no longer knew. His physical wounds were on the mend but his mind was not. Charlotte Lawrence returned home and surrendered her Red Cross book, along with the money she had collected during the week. The next morning, she prepared her husband's breakfast and saw him off to work – and then she took her own life.

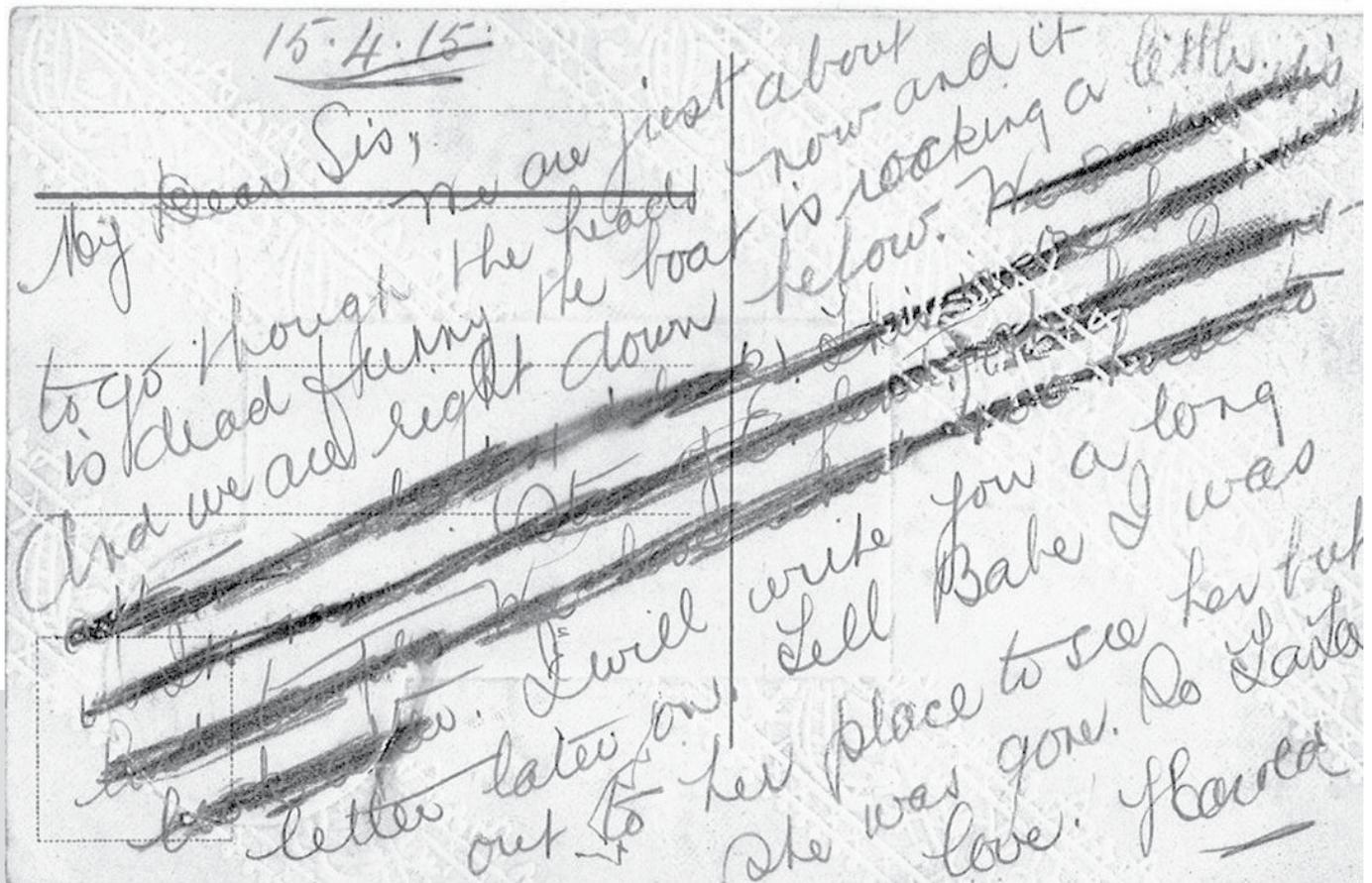
Historians generally paint a bleak picture of the treatment of German Australians during the Great War. Overnight,

people who had been regarded as model citizens prior to 1914 had become pariahs. German language schools and newspapers were closed down, German place names were changed, Lutheran churches were torched, German Australians were interned and then deported, and those of German descent were denied the right to vote by the government. The Schwarer family in Wodonga shows what the latter meant.

John William Schwarer enlisted in 1914 and was killed in action in September 1917. In December, his mother and his siblings turned up to vote in the second conscription plebiscite. His mother was allowed to vote but not his brothers and sisters. She had made the mistake of marrying a German Australian, now dead for seven years. In the same plebiscite, the local doctor, Rudolph Schlink, was also denied the vote because his grandfather was German-born. It looks like a typical example of the treatment of German Australians during the Great War – except that it provoked community condemnation and protest. With a brother at the front, his siblings should have been entitled to vote. And, if Dr Schlink's loyalty was doubtful, why had he been appointed MO in 1914 to examine local men volunteering for war, a position he still held in 1917? And his only son, who was in Germany completing his medical training in 1914, had been interned there as an enemy alien. When police headquarters learnt that a German Australian by the name of Fred Bartel was captain of the Kiewa Rifle Club, and kept the clubs rifles and ammunition in his home, they sent two detectives to investigate. Their investigations met with a hostile response from the locals at Kiewa. The

detectives were ridiculed and letters of protest were sent to the Chief Commissioner of Police. Bartel was a loyal citizen; he had family at the front, they had gone to school with him and had known him all their lives. These were not isolated incidents. Official investigations into the loyalty of German Australians in the region met with a wall of silence and a refusal to cooperate with the police. These men weren't 'Germans'. They were men the locals knew, Australians who served on patriotic committees and sent their sons to war.

It is often claimed that those at home knew little about the reality of the war for the men and women at the front, thanks to censorship. Officers were expected to censor letters written by the men, and the men themselves often exercised a form of self-censorship. On the home front, the censors were certainly vigilant when it came to papers published in the capital cities but they seem to have overlooked the country papers, for many of the letters published were frank in their descriptions of the war. Ted Hamilton, writing from Gallipoli, described the sickening stench of the dead Turks after the failed Turkish counter-offensive in May. He also described the sickness that plagued the men and openly admitted that the action he most feared was the charge across open ground in daylight into Turkish machine guns. He would die in one such charge. Bob Homewood, writing home about the death of William Flinn, described what, even then, would have been seen as a war crime. Flinn was shot by a surrendering German officer. Flinn's mates then proceeded to shoot not only the officer, but also the men surrendering with him. He added, 'very few prisoners were



A postcard, sent by a digger to his sister and censored by an officer.

taken after that'. Agnes Jones, serving as a nurse, wondered about what the war had done to her vocation. She knew that most of the men she nursed back to health would return to the front, and questioned the justice in that. She also believed that the dead were 'really the best off, as they are finished with the heart scalding that those left behind are suffering'. And she offered comfort to the bereaved women at home with the simple comment: 'I think it would do many an Australian woman's heart good if she could see how beautiful the resting place of her boy is'.

Time has leant the local war memorial a suggestion of common intent, a burying of wartime divisions, even a catharsis. But if we look at their history, they also whisper of division, discontent and attempts to explain, or impose, meanings related to the sacrifice demanded by the Great War. For example, whose names should appear on the local memorial: all who went or only the dead? How did you define 'local'? In what order should the names be listed: alphabetically or in the chronological order in which the men enlisted. And then, who should build it: contractors at the cheapest price or returned men looking for work? These matters found expression in Rutherglen and the key players were Margaret Denehy and the local Mugs Company. (Mugs were groups of men of eligible age who formed concert parties to raise funds for the war effort).

In August 1918, the local Mugs Company announced a series of concerts to raise funds to build a memorial to honour Rutherglen's fallen. Margaret Denehy denounced the proposal in a blistering letter to the local paper. Far better, she wrote, that they enlist to help fill the gaps left by the 'deaths of our gallant lads'. Denehy's husband had enlisted in 1914. Two other women supported her. One was a war widow, the other had three sons at the front. The Mugs proposal was an insult to the dead, they wrote. The Mugs responded in similar style, justifying why they had not enlisted and suggesting that Margaret Denehy was on a good wicket: her husband was an officer and her allotment from his salary was more than he had earned before he enlisted. Then they went ahead with their concerts.

The controversy was reignited after the war when a committee was formed to examine proposals for Rutherglen's memorial. From the beginning, the committee could not agree on the form of the memorial. The Mugs and the returned men on the committee wanted only the names of the dead to be recorded. Other members wanted all who volunteered to be named. The committee was hopelessly deadlocked. A public meeting was called in January 1920 to decide the issue. Few turned up: even the chair of the committee was absent. Perhaps the town was tired of the conflict; perhaps it wanted to put the war behind it. But the meeting did resolve the deadlock. Rutherglen's memorial would only honour the dead – and it would be substantial, an obelisk standing several metres high, costing £700. The Mugs had raised £300. The council agreed to contribute £150. Fund raising activities provided the balance, an indication that the town had not turned its back on remembering its dead but had become heartily tired of the interminable wrangling within the committee. Unemployed returned men built the memorial, which was unveiled in

Rutherglen Park in 1921. It lists the names of 113 men from the town and district who would never return.

The building of the Oxley memorial, when set beside Rutherglen's, was trouble-free. The site and form were chosen without much rancour and the committee decided that all who served would be named, including the two women from the shire who had served as nurses. The dead would be listed alphabetically on the panel at the front of the memorial. Those who returned were to be listed alphabetically on the side panels. Yet, Oxley is also a classic example of the way a memorial can capture not just the history of the years 1914-1918 but also a community's history, for Oxley lies in the core of Kelly Country. There, listed in an austere alphabetical order, are the names of key families in the Kelly Outbreak, squatters, police and sympathisers. On the front panel, the name of FA Foster appears. He was Kate Kelly's son and Ned Kelly's nephew. After Kate's death, Fred lived with his grandmother. We will never know what Mrs Kelly felt when her grandson informed her that he had enlisted. We do know, however, that, like many other bereaved in the region, she mourned his death. And we do know that no one raised any objections to his name being listed on the memorial.

The North East's war was conducted within the broad parameters of Australia's Great War, and there were many similarities – yet it was also a different war. The women displayed a greater degree of agency than might have been expected from a rural community. To find them on recruitment committees was a surprise. I have no doubt that most people in the region believed in the barbarism of the Hun and German atrocities, yet they were able to clearly differentiate between the enemy promoted by propaganda and the people they knew. There is little doubt that the people of the North East knew far more about the realities of the war than is often assumed, thanks to the letters published in the local papers. And if the memorials in the region are any guide, they are as much a symbol of the divisions spawned by the Great War as they are commemorative monuments designed to remind future generations of the cost of that war. These differences reflect the simple fact of place. So, if the history of your place, whether it be locality, community or region, differs from the metanarrative, celebrate that difference, because therein lies the real richness of history.

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