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*The First Fateful Shot:
Port Phillip Bay, August 1914*

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THE FIRST FATEFUL SHOT: PORT PHILLIP BAY, AUGUST 1914



MILITARY HISTORY AND
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“Are you going too?” The great adventure, Ballarat at the outbreak of the First World War

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Introduction

“Like a Christmas turkey, fattened on patriotism, Ballarat was ready to be plucked of its finest young men and put into the oven of Armageddon. Within hours the local militia was called to arms from offices, shops, factories, mines and farms, ready to put to the test years of training and to consolidate its reputation as one of the most effective units in the country. Information, rhetoric and sentiment burst like gunfire from the *Courier*, and *Star* on 6 August.”¹

Thus wrote Weston Bate in the second volume of his history of Ballarat, as his strikingly apt metaphor of the war as an ‘oven’ resonates with what we now know to indeed have been ‘Armageddon’ – an apocalyptic event of such widespread destruction and horror as the world had never before known.

This paper will be about how Ballarat finds itself at the outbreak of war, in August 1914. It documents the pride with which the folk of Ballarat farewelled their troops, and follows the city and its people as they attempted to come to grips with this most catastrophic world event. In this small study, we begin to understand the enormity of the damage done by the war to this proud young city, and this fledgling, newly federated country. As Marilyn Lake points out, official accounts “which recast the [the war] as a creative experience, one that gave birth to a nation”² conveniently forget how advanced pre-war Australian society actually was. They had much to lose. The divisive world struggle which ensued left a nation, and a city, bereft.

BALLARAT in 1914

‘Beautiful Ballarat The City of Charm and Beauty’

Weston Bate’s great city of Ballarat – the ‘lucky city’ of which he wrote so movingly and with such insight – progressed through the amazing excitement of the great gold discoveries of the 19th century, with the concomitant creation of a mighty city to match the mighty gold finds, and from thence into the consolidation and settling period of the early 20th century.

But Bate noted that the twentieth century did not bring with it that realisation of the future which the glowing events of the 19th century had augured. Those whom Bate was pleased to call ‘the flower of 19th century Ballarat’ passed away as the 20th century began, and with them passed – perhaps – that sense of adventure, of a pioneer spirit which had sustained and

¹ Bate, *Life after Gold*, p. 48.

² Lake, Marilyn, *Fractured Nation*, p. 2, <http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/lake-marilyn-fractured-nation>

motivated those great men and women of Ballarat's gold mining heyday. Bate argues that for Ballarat, the onset of the 20th century, with Federation ushering in a new nation, was "a challenge as well as a promise"³. This was because the "grand old men"⁴ who had shaped the city had passed away – and with them, their vigour, hope and energy; worse, he points out, there seemed little likelihood of successors. Through the obituary columns and at the head of solemn processions to the cemetery went the flower of nineteenth century Ballarat. "Gone forever", mourned Bate, "was the ethos of earlier times."⁵

Such, indeed, seemed to be the case. In Ballarat, in 1914, there were some quite significant social and community issues. Population was decreasing as the younger generations went to the capital cities to seek their fortunes: in 1901, Ballarat's population was 46,793; by 1921 it had decreased to 36,409.⁶ The falling population represented a loss of the energy and vision which had characterised 19th century Ballarat, so that the fine public institutions and amenities which had been created were now struggling to be supported and maintained.

Public hygiene and public health were both relatively poor. There was no proper sewerage scheme, and there was a dramatic increase in drunkenness and vagrancy⁷; unemployment was also a problem.

Demographically, Bate describes Ballarat's work force as being divided amongst those whose skills contributed to the strong manufacturing base in the region - in 1911, factories employed about one third of the workforce; white collar workers constituted 20% of the total employment, whilst blue collar workers made up the bulk of the employment pool: by 1921 mining and farming (mostly a male province) was 68% of the work force. Unfortunately, we are unable to be more accurate about the structure of the workforce – the Commonwealth census of 1911 was destroyed. But the detail that survives informs us that in essence, at the outbreak of war, Ballarat was a city of factory workers, book keepers, clerks, bank tellers, and shop assistants, with a significant percentage of the regional population working and tilling the land around.⁸

The publication of *Beautiful Ballarat* in July - August 1914 very conveniently and effectively sums up Ballarat's own sense of itself just before the outbreak of war.

Modestly, the city fathers claim that "Ballarat, widely known as the most beautiful and historic inland City in the Commonwealth, is also the most popular tourist and pleasure resort in Victoria ..."⁹

The City", according to the booklet, "has been planned and laid out on a noble scale". Its streets are lined with massive buildings and palatial hotels, a 'splendid' electric tram service

³ Ibid. p 39.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. p 38.

⁶ Bate, *Life after Gold*, p.39

⁷ Ibid. p.43.

⁸ Ibid, p.41.

⁹ *Beautiful Ballarat* The City of Charm and Beauty, Handbook of the Ballarat Progress Association, publ. Ballarat, 1914, p. 5.

aids public transport, and there are abundant public facilities – indeed, “all the comforts and conveniences essential” to a modern city. “It is acknowledged to be the most beautiful Australian city, being known as the Golden City, the Garden City, and the City of Statues.”¹⁰ In 1914, those things which preoccupied the average Ballaratian were, largely, the minutiae of everyday life, writ small against the backdrop of a federal election, and even smaller – as it turned out – against the huge canvas of the political situation in Europe. At the theatre¹¹, on July 2 1914, one could attend the Alfred Hall and enjoy an amateur concert, with yodellers, a mouth-organ competition, some vaudeville acts, trick cycling, as well as some eccentric juggling and silent comedy. The City Entertainers at the Mechanics’ provided a ‘lengthy and varied programme’, including the Romas, with their heavyweight juggling act, Mr Ivan Marshall, silver tenor, with popular songs, Miss Grace Rooney, dancer, and Miss May Moor, soubrette. As well, Great Scott, the magician and ventriloquist was supplying ‘an abundance of fun’. Peter Dawson was appearing to a packed house at the Mechanics’, and the Coliseum Picture Palace featured two films, “The Stolen Rembrandt” and “The Opium Smoker”. A slightly more thoughtful aspect of the city’s intellectual life was evident on 3rd July, at the City Hall, when Mr David Unaipon, indigenous speaker, delivered a “very interesting lecture” on the laws, customs, and traditions of his tribe.

The *Courier* editorial on 2 July was very preoccupied with the pressing (if unsavoury) issue of sewerage – which Melbourne had, and Ballarat needed. The paper abhorred the unfairness of the situation, which, it believed, was responsible for a death rate which would discredit untutored savages.¹² Drought was an issue in 1914, and falling water storage capacities were published daily, and commented upon anxiously.

Furthermore, we know that police were investigating the theft of a bicycle, that the Grammar School Ball Committee met on 2nd July to finalise arrangements for the Annual Ball, to be held on 20th August, that a batch of five inebriates were taken up before Mr. W. White JP at the Town Court, that a railway extension through the land owned by the Eureka Pottery Company at the Eureka Stockade was being contemplated, and that an “abnormal fog” was witnessed in Ballarat that morning.¹³ As well, there was a meeting of the Operative Bakers’ Society, a Euchre party was held as a fund raiser for the City Band, and – it was noted with some delicacy - 19 years old Alice Mary Smith was arrested on 2nd July on a charge of “having insufficient lawful means of support”.¹⁴

Australia was in the middle of a Federal election in 1914 and in Ballarat, the *Courier* covered the local candidates and their policies in great detail. A comprehensive study of this important event is beyond the scope of this paper: suffice to say that matters of defence and empire suddenly shot to the top of the national priorities, supplanting almost all other considerations.

The matters which occupied the city of Ballarat in the months leading up to the outbreak of war are not, of themselves, fascinating reading. But knowledge of that which preoccupied councillors and citizens gives us a precious picture of life in this country before the world changed forever. Public records reveal that Annual School sports, wrangles over land,

¹⁰ *Beautiful Ballarat* 1914, p. 2.

¹¹ *The Courier*, 2 July 1914

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

abattoirs, night soil, bands and carnivals, the erection of lamp posts, Loyal Lodge meetings, picnics by the lake, the nuisance of rabbits in the Old Cemetery, and the ordering of four loads of sheep manure from the cattle yards by the Croquet Club were all on the agenda. Mr. Frank Burge angrily demanded that he be allowed to shoot cormorants on the lake in May, Mr. William Brew wanted to carry a gun to protect himself whilst walking home late from work, and on 27th April 1914 the 8 Hour Day procession took place. On 23 June, Mr Davis complained at length about the “continuous bellowing of a cow” for three months, and sought permission to get up a petition about the matter!¹⁵

Vaudeville ‘de luxe’ flourished at Her Majesty’s, the Coliseum presented Mischa Elman, ‘the world’s greatest violinist’, model Briton Cars were enthusiastically marketed for their ‘Simplicity, Reliability and Durability’, and Williams the Shoemen offered July specials of amazing range and quality.

And amidst all this, on 1st August, the Mayors of Ballarat, and Ballarat East called the people of Ballarat to prayer:

“In view of the extreme gravity of the situation in Europe, and the appalling consequences of a general European War, the Citizens of Ballarat are urgently requested to assemble in their respective places of Worship tomorrow, Sunday 2nd August, both morning and evening, to offer Prayer to Almighty God that such war may be averted, and general peace may be established.”¹⁶

The impending war hovered above the city like a vast, unknowable, portentous cloud, and the regional city of Ballarat, as expressed through *The Star*, seemed to view the forthcoming conflict with a curious mixture of smugness and trepidation. Strength through imperial association seemed to be its rallying cry.

“And Great Britain will stand watchful and ready, with the whole Empire behind her. The best we can hope is that our motherland may remain aloof from the conflict, ready and anxious at the propitious moment to tender her services as peacemaker. There will be no passionate outbursts in any part of the British Empire for it is the finest characteristic of our race that, when dangers are greatest, the nation is calm and collected, and responsive to the advice of wise and capable statesmanship ...”¹⁷

And so, at the beginning of August, 1914, Ballarat, in company with the rest of the world, watched, and waited, and held its breath.

OUTBREAK OF WAR

The main source of news in August 1914 was the newspaper, and crowds gathered outside newspaper offices across the nation to await the arrival of the latest cables. Whatever interest there had been in the election was engulfed by the sudden rush to pledge unqualified

¹⁵ VPRS, 02500/POOOO,UNIT 000104, Miscellaneous Correspondence

¹⁶ Ibid. 1 August 1914.

¹⁷ *Star*, 1 August 1914.

Australian help to Britain if war came.¹⁸ Political leaders travelling through the states on the campaign trail quickly moved to assure the population that Australia would stand firm behind Britain, and that party differences would be subsumed by the greater needs of the Empire.¹⁹

On 6th August, in Ballarat, the excitement was intense. The *Courier* reported eagerly on the situation, describing the huge public interest, and the anxious crowd which waited outside the *Courier* office for news. Information was pasted on boards and windows outside the office, and as the crowd increased, so did the struggle for vantage points. The news of the German vessel having been fired on at the Heads caused a sensation – almost more than the actual declaration of war itself. Just about anything “favourable to British interests” was cheered to the echo, especially when it was announced that the 70th Regiment had been ordered to mobilize and proceed to Queenscliff. *The Courier* declared that all were animated by an “Empire Spirit” of loyalty to Britain and Australia, and issued three special editions on this day. These were sold out almost immediately. People were hungry for news, eager for confirmation of Britain’s entry into the conflict at last, and devoted to the noble cause of the war. None doubted its outcome – though the *Courier* speculated on Australia’s role: “What Australia’s part in the war may be is yet in the lap of the gods. Meanwhile the Commonwealth places its trust in the wisdom of its administrators and the valour of its soldiers, and with wider outlook trusts with a faith still greater the strength and glory of Britain.”²⁰

The movement of the Ballarat troops from the moment that war was declared caused great comment in the city, with each development being monitored, discussed, and followed with breathless interest by the press, which dutifully conveyed each detail faithfully to the avidly reading general public.

Almost immediately, word came through that the 70th (Ballarat) Regiment was to mobilise and this generated immense excitement. The *Courier* claimed that the news was received with “mixed feelings”, whilst the *Star* wrote of ‘intense enthusiasm’ being manifested in the crowd which had gathered around the Drill Hall in Curtis Street ‘The greatest eagerness’ was expressed by the men of the 70th, who presumably felt gratified to be the ones ‘going’ ... whilst “positive jealousy is felt by the men of the 71st at what they term the good fortune to be ordered off on active service.”²¹ As the *Star* rather piously remarked, “there are no shirkers now that the pinch has come”.²²

¹⁸ Robson, Lloyd, *Australia and the Great War*, Macmillan, 1970, p. 3.

¹⁹ “This is no time for the obtrusion of party differences. If Great Britain becomes involved in war, the time will have arrived for the display of patriotism that knows no party. ... [at Horsham], Mr Cook said “Whatever happens, Australia is a part of the Empire right to the full. Remember that when the Empire is at war, so is Australia at war.” At Colac, Mr. Fisher urged unqualified support: “Turn your eyes to the European situation and give the kindest feelings towards the mother country at this time Should the worst happen after everything has been done that honour will permit, Australians will stand beside our own to help and defend her to our last man and our last shilling.” *Argus*, 3 August, 1914, p.14.

²⁰ *The Courier*, 6th August 1914.

²¹ *The Star*, 6th August 1914.

²² *The Star*, 6th August 1914.

The so-called ‘mixed feelings’ described by the *Courier* were probably coming from the mothers, and other friends and relations, on whom it was beginning to dawn that this was serious....

“One tearful mother, hanging onto the arms of her son, a fine strapping young Australian of the 70th, enquired of her son’s mate, “Are you going too?” The mate was a member of the 71st, and his reply was, “No, worse luck!”²³

The departure of the 70th Regiment to Queenscliff was quite momentous, and was recorded in flattering detail by the press. Everyone was impressed with the arrangements – which were apparently executed smoothly and expeditiously, largely owing to the efficiency of staff at headquarters. A huge crowd gathered at the Drill Hall to watch the arrangements ... old and young, men, women, and children, and “of course a large number of girls, to whom a uniform particularly appeals.”²⁴ The crowd which gathered inside the Hall to watch the ‘fall in’ actually impeded troop movements to such an extent that “all civilians had to be ordered out of the building, and a quarter-guard, with fixed bayonets, stationed at the entrance.”²⁵

The men were entertained to a hot dinner by Mayors Brokenshire and Pittard on their last night in Ballarat; the Mayors also provided breakfast, and straw for bedding in the Exhibition Building, where the soldiers were billeted. Military greatcoats were the only source of warm blankets...

But despite some inadequacies on the accommodation side, the *Star* was impressed with the recruits, and prophesied great things...

“The greatest enthusiasm is being displayed, showing that the fire of patriotism locally burns just as brightly as in other parts of Australia or of the Empire, and the Ballarat boys will nobly play their part in any contingency that may arise.”²⁶

The 70th Regiment’s time at Queenscliff was covered in detail by *The Star*’s Special Correspondent, who proclaimed **THE TROOPS AT QUEENSCLIFF – BALLARAT REGIMENT ALL WELL – COMMANDER PROUD OF HIS MEN.**

Weston Bate is probably closest to the mark when he describes the sojourn as being rather like a “seaside holiday with a military flavour”²⁷. *The Star* reporter noted that the men were well looked after, with every available comfort – although a ‘Letter’ to the *Star* was distressed to report that they had not been provided with any butter²⁸ - a most serious omission.

Butter aside, the Special Correspondent was thrilled by the excellence of the Ballarat troops: “Good luck to them, they are all the very best, and Victoria, Australia, and the Empire should

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Bate, p. 48.

²⁸ *Star*, 21 August 1914.

be mighty proud of them.” Major Lazarus stated proudly, “I have never seen a body of men get down to business, or perform their work with more cheerfulness, than the 70th has. The camp is in perfect condition, and in less than 12 hours, every man is “on the job”.²⁹

Bandmaster Percy Code – also on his mettle, with well-tuned up band instruments – was there to play the regiment back to camp after parade in the morning to the familiar strains of the “Ninety Fives”.

This was the stuff Ballarat people loved and longed to hear – simple, obvious, and fulsome. Undoubtedly, the regiment was merely engaged in ‘making trenches, fortifications and barbed wire entanglements to defend the approaches to Port Phillip’³⁰, and were nowhere near being truly tested, but everyone knew, deep down, that it was coming.

The 71st Regiment – so sad at having been earlier left behind – were sent two weeks later, to relieve the 70th from their arduous duties at Queenscliff. This also caused immense excitement in Ballarat. Every detail of their departure “for the front” was described in the press. Mayors Brokenshire and Pittard were again present to bid them farewell, and urged the lads to remember that they were representing Ballarat in their fight for King and Country. “If they should happen to meet an enemy”, hazarded the mayor, he “fully believed they would uphold the good old Union Jack, under which there was greater liberty than any other flag.”³¹ The troops were given a rousing send-off: “the men were marched through Bridge, Sturt, and Lydiard streets to the Western railway station, there being hundreds of cheering spectators along the streets and at shop doors and windows.” Bunting was on every building, with Union Jacks prominent everywhere. The two Mayors walked with the soldiers, and the band played the regimental march and other “lively airs”, “to which all stepped bravely and briskly out”.

In another nice touch, the railway men had decorated the rail car with miniature Union Jacks, and had written FOR AUSTRALIA AND EMPIRE on the boiler, whilst GOOD LUCK adorned the smoke stack. Finally, “Fluttering its gay flags, the sturdy iron horse puffed out with its load of 600 gallant defenders, to the cheers and farewells of the crowds on the station and over the bridge.”³²

Towards the end of August, Ballarat troops left for Broadmeadows, to join the rest of the Australian Expeditionary Force, on their way to the European front. This, the people of Ballarat realised, was the real thing ... “The grim menace of war was brought home in all its stern reality to the understanding of the people of this centre yesterday, when Ballarat’s soldiers left for Broadmeadows, on their way to the front.”³³ The event was poignant. The crowd started gathering at the railway station in their thousands an hour and a half before the appointed departure time. The soldiers arrived with friends, relatives and sweethearts, who were reported as bearing up bravely, and showing “true Australian pluck”, smiling through their tears as their boys entrained. The marching troops were greeted with ringing cheers as

²⁹ 10th August, 1914.

³⁰ Bate, p. 48

³¹ *Star*, 22 August 1914.

³² *Star*, 22 August 1914.

³³ *Star*, 4 September 1914.

they swung along onto the platform. Despite the best efforts of the police, the station platform was quickly crowded with relatives and friends, whilst those on the wrong side surged across the rails and climbed up onto the platform where the troop train waited. As the band played ‘*Auld lang syne*’, the train pulled away, and amidst the cheers of thousands and the waving of forests of handkerchiefs, Ballarat’s soldiers went forth to answer the call of duty.³⁴ And the question, as yet largely unspoken, was beginning to be whispered: how many would return?

BROADMEADOWS

The *Star*’s Special Correspondent reported with enthusiasm on what he euphemistically called THE MARCH OF THE BALLARAT CONTINGENT³⁵ to the camp at Broadmeadows. Again, the picture presented by the Ballarat press was wholly favourable, and hit just the right note, touching the heart strings of the proud folk at home. The men were marched twelve miles, with kit, which seemed an extraordinary feat to the correspondent, and he was pleased to report that every man went through without complaint, and not a single man dropped out of ranks.



Australian Expeditionary Force at Broadmeadows

And, in a piece of reporting which still has the power to move us, the correspondent described the comments of those who watched the troops marching, thus – “During the march through Melbourne”, he said, “one could hear on every side comments such as **“That’s the Ballarat crowd,”** or **“Those are the boys from Ballarat”**. And the tone of voice in which these comments were made showed that the admiration and respect which was given in other

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *Star*, 21 August 1914.

days to the old 3rd Battalion, (later the 7th and 70th), was in like manner being given to the present members of that Battalion.”³⁶

THE HOME FRONT

Meanwhile, back in Ballarat, the costs and difficulties of managing a world war at home were beginning to be realised. The Australian government, of course, was effusive in its support, urging Australians to “sit tight now, and see the thing through.” The Prime Minister called for steadfastness in determination, taking comfort from the power and might of the Empire... “Our resources are great, and the British spirit is not dead.” He spoke of the “great fabric of British freedom”, and exhorted his countrymen to “gird up our loins, and remember that we are Britons.”³⁷

In Ballarat, a flurry of patriotic meetings ensued, with the Lady Mayoress heading up a brigade to “take up different grades of work to assist our noble boys, who have gone forth to defend our country.”³⁸ Supplying the necessary clothing was high on the agenda: sewing machines were loaned by Singer, makers of pyjamas, sweaters, and knitted socks were rallying to the call, and local companies were donating flannel, calico, blankets, and money.³⁹

Patriotic outbursts occurred at the drop of a hat – in trains, at meetings, and at concerts – probably because people did not know how else to express their pent-up enthusiasm and patriotism. At the Ballarat Liedertafel on 6th August, ‘active sympathy’ for the cause ‘inflamed the imagination’ and excited the aspirations of loyalists present. A member spontaneously sang the opening bars of the National Anthem, and “in an instant, the full body of voices, numbering some 80 odd, took up the air. And right lustily was it sung.”⁴⁰ The ANA also indulged in a patriotic demonstration, the football team began to worry about depleted ranks, the Stock Exchange was closed “TILL FURTHER NOTICE”⁴¹, and the City of Ballarat Band rendered an open-air concert in Sturt Street, playing “patriotic airs”.⁴²

The council correspondence reveals the new enthusiasm of the public and their desire to ‘help’ the great cause in any way possible. These ways were small, but meant much to those who initiated them. On 1st September, “owing to prevailing circumstances”, the Ballarat and District Caledonian Society cancelled their Fair, to be held in the City Hall on 16th September, and replaced it with a monster Euchre tournament and Cinderella dance on 22nd September, “solely in aid of the British Red Cross Fund”.⁴³ James Davey, manager of Stevens’ Ballarat Fur Emporium, contacted the council in October 1914 to offer a full length fur coat ... made to measure for a Nurse. As well, the offer included two fur vests for the

³⁶ *Star*, 21 August 1914.

³⁷ *Star*, 6 August 1914.

³⁸ *Star*, 13 August 1914.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Courier*, 6 August 1914.

⁴¹ *Star*, 6 August 1914.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ PROV Ballarat, 1st September 1914.

soldiers. The preferred recipients of these garments were to be, if possible, “for the service of persons going from Ballarat.”⁴⁴ But Stevens (High Class Furriers) were clearly not above advancing sales on the back of the war. On 14 August, their advertisements were large and unashamed ...”WAR VERSUS FURS Owing to the serious crisis that has arisen on the Continent, there will be a big advance in the price of FURS next season, as three-parts of the Furred Skins used in Australia are imported from RUSSIA. This means that they will rise fully 100%, and we advise the public to buy now ...”⁴⁵

Jansen’s, the Ballarat department store, was also adamant that ‘wars and rumours of wars have not affected the rush of business which commenced at their Birthday Bargain Fair on Friday, and continued on Saturday ...’⁴⁶ And one can only applaud the resourcefulness which motivated Richards and Co. Photographers to advertise as follows, on 13 August ... “It is advisable for those who intend volunteering for defence of the Empire to have their portraits taken by Richards and Co. without delay. When they reach England our volunteers will have very little time wherein to be photographed. Consequently it is to their advantage to do so now.”⁴⁷

On 1st October 1914, the Ballarat City Clerk, Mr. Morton, sent Lt Col W K. Bolton (C.O. 8th Battalion) three pairs of field binoculars which had been donated by the citizens of Ballarat “for the use of the Expeditionary Force”, whilst the boys of the Church of England Grammar School sent the Mayor £4-10-0 as a contribution to the Patriotic Fund. This amount was raised from their own pocket money, without asking their parents for any special contributions.⁴⁸

The onset of the war was also seen as a potential boon to local industries and the local economy, which, it began to be evident, could profit from the multifarious requirements of a nation at war. The woollen mills in Ballarat were operating at peak production, having been requisitioned by the Federal Government to complete orders for material for the Defence Department. All private orders were ordered to be held over for several months, until the Defence needs were satisfied.⁴⁹

The Christmas of 1914 seemed to confirm the economic upturn which – seemingly – the onset of war had at least in part inspired. Proprietors confirmed that their volume of trade was up to former years, and even exceeded expectations and “There was life, animation, and joy everywhere.”⁵⁰ But even the festive high spirits, the *Star* reported, could not totally eliminate the shadow of war: “Behind all the animation was the still silent, though unexpressed, thought of the war. Everyone felt, more or less strongly, the overhanging shadow of the great

⁴⁴ PROV Ballarat, October 1914; also see 8118/P1, UNIT 14, Council Letter Books, 1914, 943, 27th October, 1914.

⁴⁵ *Star*, 14 August, 1914.

⁴⁶ *Ballarat Star*, 3 August 1914.

⁴⁷ *Star*, 13 August 1914.

⁴⁸ VPRS 02500/POOOO, UNIT 000105, Letter, 16th November 1914.

⁴⁹ *Star*, 6 March 1914.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

international cloud. Though this was no reason for the denial of the festive spirit, yet Christmas, 1914, will ever remain as the Christmas of the Great War.”⁵¹

The job of those destined to stay behind should not be underestimated: theirs was the task of keeping society running, and on an even keel, whilst ‘the boys’ were away. As well as enlisting, mobilising, and equipping the expeditionary force, they were also tasked with managing a society which had had its heart ripped out when the men marched off to war. The small details of everyday life still needed attention, as did the home front support network of comfort funds, patriotic events – concerts and the like – and the responsible and tactful management of those families (and others) left behind who wished to support the war.

Reports in the local newspapers indicate that civic leaders were becoming daunted by the enormity of the task before them. Mayor Pittard speculated that “As custodians of affairs of much importance, big responsibilities loom ahead, and it may be we, as a local body of control, may be called on to exercise many new duties...” Even at this early stage, he was dubiously forecasting trade disturbances should the war be of any considerable duration...⁵² And just as the war was announced, local councillors in Sebastopol were pronouncing on the fact that many people were already taking advantage of the crisis. Food prices, according to Cr. E. Jenkins, were rising – “Prices all round were on the upgrade, and ought not to be, seeing that Australia was isolated and far away from the scene of operations.” He urged that the council take immediate action to stop these higher rates, especially given that the country was abundant with food at the present time. The epithet of ‘traitor’ was used to describe those dastardly individuals who attempted to raise prices ... these villains, he claimed, “did more for the pulling down of the Empire than those against whom we were fighting.”⁵³

The Star delivered to the people of Ballarat, on 11th August, a reassuring and confident assessment of the strength of Australia’s financial resources as they marched into war for the Empire. Despite predicting enormous expense for the new Commonwealth, the *Star* quotes politicians and financial authorities as being confident of Australia’s ability to meet the costs, and honour her obligations to Britain and the Empire. Gold reserves were at the top of the list of comforting assets, in no small part due to the riches of the Ballarat fields ... “No country in the world has such ample reserves of gold...” The country was solid. And better still, the *Star* even predicts a potential bonanza for Australia as her products become increasingly valuable to Great Britain and Europe in the coming crisis: “... our product will probably “win through” to Europe, and perhaps at an enormous increase in present prices. “Trade will find a way out” is the accepted maxim.”⁵⁴

Fear of ‘the enemy within the gates’ flourished in Australia throughout the war, and this paranoia was rampant in Ballarat from almost the minute war was declared. Civic authorities hastened to defend hitherto solid citizens who had suddenly become incredibly suspect

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Star*, 13 August 1914.

⁵³ After further angry exchanges about the prices of flour, meat and bread, the motion was carried.

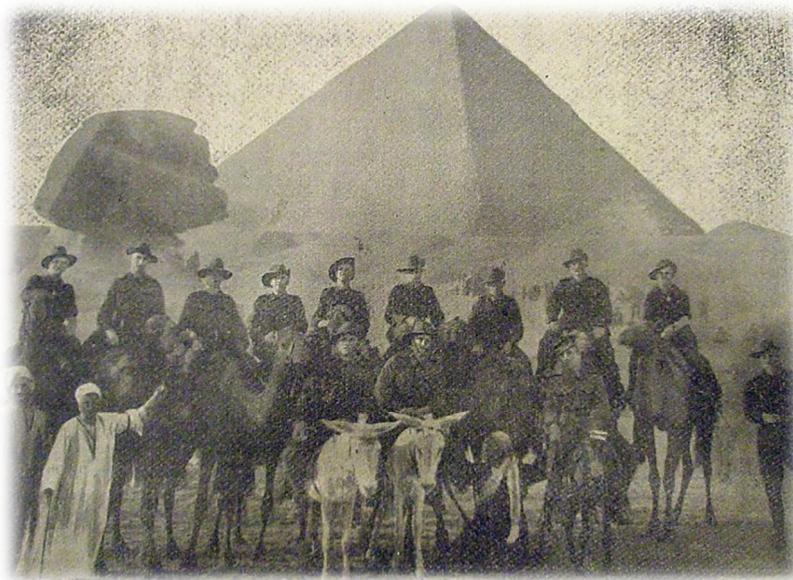
Star, 6 August 1914.

⁵⁴ *Star*, 11 August 1914.

merely because of a name or a nationality. Mayor Pittard sounded a warning to the general populace about the decent treatment of “our fellow German citizens ... We bear testimony to their many good qualities, and should not hold them responsible for the action of those in authority in their fatherland.”⁵⁵ On 22 August, the *Star* was shocked to report that two of Ballarat’s most highly respected and popular citizens, Messrs. George and Henry Tonner, had been the victims of unfounded and absurd reports, and letters appeared in the papers vehemently defending the blameless gentlemen in question. The extreme of patriotism, of course, as Bate points out, unfortunately gives rise to the promotion of hatred.⁵⁶ The *Star* was adamant: “It should be remembered that Australian German residents are entitled to the fullest protection of the British flag. ... Genuine patriotism can find ample scope for the most ardent manifestation without wanton affronts to any section of our fellow-citizens.”⁵⁷

In November 1914, the Australian Expeditionary Force (the boys from Ballarat amongst them) was sent off to Egypt. The feat of enlisting, provisioning and embarking the First AIF, and the staggering speed with which the troops were sent abroad in response to the imperial summons, was remarkable.

God, they believed – and were told – was on their side. It only remained to teach the dastardly Germans a lesson, sort out the geography of Europe once and for all, and they would be ‘home by Christmas’. It would be an adventure: “To fight for one’s country in such a war as this, and to die for it, is to gather from human life the best and most glorious it has to offer.”⁵⁸



Ballarat Boys in Egypt

Then, on 29th April, 1915, the Ballarat *Star* came out with the following headlines:

⁵⁵ *Star*, 13 August 1914

⁵⁶ Bate, *Life After Gold*, p. 49.

⁵⁷ *Star*, 21 August 1914.

⁵⁸ *Star*, 12 March 1915.

AUSTRALIANS IN ACTION ENGAGEMENT IN TURKEY SPLENDID COURAGE DISPLAYED

“As soon as the House of Representatives met today, the Prime Minister, (Mr. Fisher) made the following statement:

Some days ago the Australian War Expeditionary Forces were transferred from Egypt to the Dardanelles.

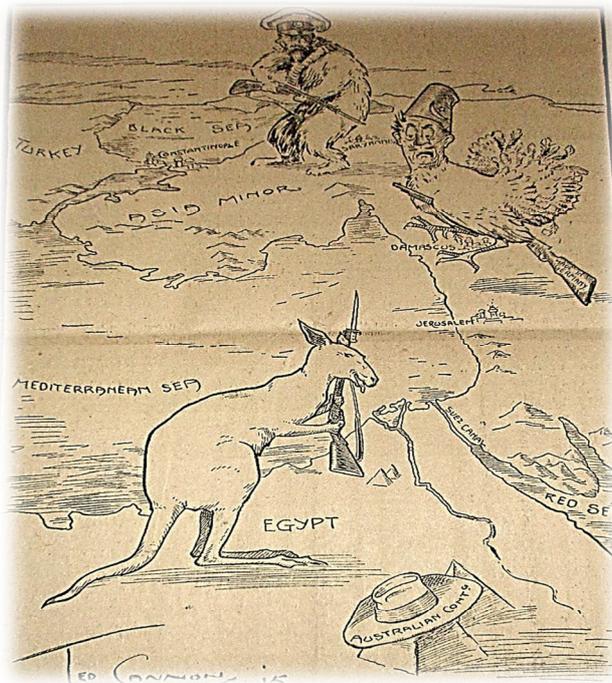
They have since landed, and have been in action in the Gallipoli Peninsula.

*News reaches us that the action is proceeding satisfactorily.”*⁵⁹

With a huge sigh of relief, the Australians at home had heard of their men in action for the first time, and learnt that they had not been found wanting. Congratulatory telegrams and proud statements confirmed the news that the Australian troops had performed with courage and splendid gallantry.

But the Ballarat papers printed the whole of the Australian casualty lists, and these were startling and shocking. It was obvious that many Victorians, and Ballaratians from every neighbourhood of the city, and every walk of life, lay dead on the Gallipoli peninsula. By the 14th December 1915, 127 Ballarat men had lost their lives.⁶⁰ Ballarat, along with the rest of the country, began to realise that the Empire was not perhaps quite as impervious to defeat as had been initially asserted.

No doubt now - it was NOT going to be over by Christmas.



The Turkey: “Drat Those Animals; I’m Afraid I’m A Dead Bird.”

⁵⁹ *Star*, 29 April 1915.

⁶⁰ Bate, *Life after Gold*, p. 53.

CONCLUSION

It is no longer enough to examine the Great War in the somewhat simplistic frame of reference offered by 'patriotism', the so-called discovery of national identity, and those terrible casualty lists.

It is my contention that we can understand better what was happening in those terrible four and a half years of war if we examine more closely at a microcosmic level the social, political and economic challenges which occurred on the Home Front as the war proceeded.

Ballarat is my chosen focus.

It seems evident to me that those 'Ballarat boys' were not simply 'marching off to war' - the Great Adventure. These young men, and the society they left ostensibly to defend, were about to witness what really could be called the demise of imperial Europe: the failure of international law, the breakdown of political negotiation, and the disintegration of the fragile social fabric which had bound Australia securely to ideas of empire. The onset and terrifying progression of the Great War ripped apart many of the certainties on which the Australian social structure was built, and permanently damaged its concept of Empire, and the 'hands across the sea' idea which had been such a sustaining stalwart of the nation's culture since Federation. Far from discovering itself as a nation, it might be argued that during the years of the war, Australia's image of itself was severely shaken, and grievously damaged.

And at home in Ballarat, although its lads had not been found wanting, "Ballarat the beautiful" had to begin to redefine itself - a most painful and heart-wrenching undertaking. The innocence and optimism of pre-war Ballarat - and Australia - was gone; their world would never be the same again. The old complacencies were blown away, and the old alliances were floundering.

Marilyn Lake defines the situation with insight and acuteness:

"In World War 1 Australia lost its way. Its enmeshment in the European imperial war fractured the nation's soul."⁶¹ She points out that the war, in effect, could have been said to have sounded the death knell of that "distinctive, pioneering, brave, independent-minded democracy"⁶² which Australia had pioneered in the years after Federation.

A nation comes into being at Gallipoli? Maybe better say - a confidence-shattering reconfiguration of everything they had thought they knew.

*'E sez to me, 'Wot's orl this flamin' war?
The papers torks uv nothin' else but scraps.
An'wot's ole England got snake-'eaded for?*

⁶¹ Lake, Marilyn, *Fractured Nation*, p.3, <http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/lake-marilyn-fractured-nation>

⁶² Lake, Marilyn, *Fractured Nation*, p.4, <http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/lake-marilyn-fractured-nation>

An' wot's the strength uv callin' out our chaps?"

'E sez to me, "Struth! Don't she rule the sea?

Wot does she want wiv us?" 'e sez to me.

C.J. Dennis, *The Moods of Ginger Mick*, 1916.