

# Book launch

*Conscription Conflict and the Great War* (eds Robin Archer, Joy Damousi, Murray Goot and Sean Scalmer, Monash University Publishing, Clayton, Vic., 2016, 220 pp.)

© Joan Beaumont  
29 October 2016

---

In the extraordinary tsunami of books that have been released to coincide with the centenary of World War I very few have focused on the home front. Yet the home front is in its own way as important as the battles fought on the Western Front and in Palestine. Certainly a remarkable number of Australian men enlisted and served overseas. But most Australians stayed at home. Many of these were women and children; but even among men of aged 19 to 60 years, nearly 70 per cent did not enlist.

The home front therefore needs to be seen as an integral part of the national experience of war. In my *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (2013) I imagined it as being in a dialogue with the battlefield, events on one affecting and shaping events on the other. Nowhere is this clearer than in the two extraordinary referenda, or more technically plebiscites, held in Australia in October 1916 and December 1917 about whether conscription should be introduced for overseas service. The bitterness of these debates was attributable not just to the gravity of the issues being discussed but to the fact that both campaigns were fought out against the backdrop of two of the worst battles of the war, the Somme and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ypres (Passchendaele). The conscription debates were thereby infused with passion and hysteria as mass grief and frustration at a war that seemed beyond the power of any politician or military commander to end was deflected onto opponents at home.

Much of the writing on the conscription campaigns dates from the 1970s and 1980s. It was written by a generation of academics that had been threatened and radicalised by the use of selective conscription during the Vietnam War. When this personal interest faded, so too did the academic interest in the issue of conscription. Between 1935, when Leslie Jauncey documented the actors and sources of the wartime campaigns, and today there was no book-length treatment of conscription.

So it is especially commendable that we have now marked the centenary of the first conscription vote with a book that provides us with new interpretations of events that were, as Robin Archer and Sean Scalmer say in the Introduction, 'by any standard really unique'. Simply seeking the consent of citizens for conscription was unique, but that the citizens should answer 'No' in the midst of passionate wartime emotions and heavy censorship was 'more striking still'.

A book launch does not allow a full coverage; but in brief, the book is divided into four sections: Origins; Campaigns and Results; Comparisons; and Legacies. A recurring theme across the book is the importance of ideas, and liberal ideas in particular, in the conscription campaigns. Doug Newton opens the book by examining liberalism in England, the political tradition inherited by the vast majority of Australians. Seeking to explain how it was that the great majority of British Liberals sided with Prime Minister Asquith when he introduced conscription in early 1916, Newton argues that while 19<sup>th</sup> century British liberalism equated conscription with continental despotism, some prominent Liberal personalities had no principled objection to conscription. New Liberals meanwhile were willing to tolerate compulsion in social reform, and hence were vulnerable to argument that compulsion was necessary in a military emergency.

Robin Archer continues the discussion of the importance of liberal ideas with his chapter on the Australian labour movement, the strength of which is widely agreed to be one of the key variables accounting for the defeat of the conscription campaign. Liberal arguments, Archer maintains, were central to how Labor anti-conscriptionists framed their opposition. Their socialism had grown out of the radical wing of the liberal tradition, just as Christian dissent had fed into it. Hence the labour newspaper, *The Australian Worker*, spoke of the safeguarding of individual freedoms (speech, assembly, press) and the rights of the workforce to be protected from the increasingly authoritarian and militaristic state led by W.M. (Billy) Hughes. Archer also argues that the labour movement sought to counter attacks from the pro-conscriptionists that it was 'disloyal' by emphasizing its identification with the British liberal tradition: as anti-conscriptionists, they were loyal to British *ideas* as opposed to what Britain *was doing*.

In the Campaigns section Frank Bongiorno picks up Archer's critique of the traditional materialist argument, which argued that the conscription conflict was the result of a factional struggle between industrial and political wings of labour, and stresses again the importance of ideas to the anti-conscriptionist cause. But Bongiorno also places great weight on the role of individuals. Not Mannix and Ryan, neither of whom were important in 1916; but rather a virtual army of men and women known in labour and radical circles but barely beyond. Men such as Thomas J. Miller and the better known Henry Boote, an unsung hero of the No case, if ever there was one. As the president of Political Labor League in NSW at a public meeting in Sydney Town Hall said, 'You will see here no Prime Ministers, no Premiers, and no Lord Mayors, but you will see the people's representatives, who will tell you there is no need of conscription in Australia'

From Bongiorno we turn to Joy Damousi who focuses on those who supported conscription. As she says, we await a systematic study of the Yes advocates. But they were certainly active in the University of Melbourne. As Damousi shows, some academics struggled to reconcile the intellectual dilemmas that conscription posed, and turned to internationalism. But others were stridently Yes. Alan Leeper, for example, proposed that the University should not accept any student who failed to give a good reason for not enlisting. Similarly the British Medical Association of Australia conducted its own plebiscite suggesting the government should compulsorily enlist doctors.

Next comes Murray Goot with his finely-grained analysis of the conscription results. These were the days before compulsory voting but the turnout was remarkable: 82.8 per cent of electorate voted in 1916 and 81.3 per cent in 1917 when the vote was held on a working day Thursday not a weekend, Saturday. These turnouts were greater than at any national referendum before introduction of compulsory voting. Surely there is no greater indication of the passionate levels of engagement of the Australian public with the conscription issue! Goot goes on to challenge established conclusions about voting patterns, including the well-known model of Glenn Withers. Goot concludes that the defeat of the referenda cannot be attributed to the rural vote; that those of German background were not responsible for the No vote prevailing in SA; and that the vote of those who had migrated from UK cannot explain the size of the Yes vote in Western Australia. Alas, we still lack a definitive answer as to how various cohorts of Australians voted, but on the evidence left to us we will never really know.

Comparisons: John Connor provides a useful overview (a boon to all teachers!) of conscription across the British Empire. He concludes that three factors appear to have been significant in explaining the differences: how close the conscription debate was to a particular country entering the war; whether legislation or a plebiscite was the means of introducing conscription; and how strong the labour movement was. Of particular interest (in that it is rarely discussed) is Connor's description of colonial West Africa where the British thought they needed to introduce conscription because French West African conscripts were evading their own government by escaping over the border into British West Africa. However, the British did not introduce conscription for fear of rebellion in that colony. Also of interest is that Hughes seems to have learned from his mistake of putting a very opaque question to the Australian electorate in 1916. In 1917 he proposed a form of conscription that was like the successful New Zealand system: that is, he proposed setting a target for recruitment each month and only resorting to conscription of single men if that target were not met. It made no difference. The defeat of the 1917 referendum was almost certain, given that little had changed since 1916 other than the number of casualties, which had soared.

The Comparisons section continues with Ross McKibbin's analysis of Australia and Britain, including why the British labour movement did not split as the ALP did. One reason was timing, but McKibbin also suggests that the British labour movement had been coopted into the management of the war. Whereas in Australia conscription meant only military conscription, in Britain it meant both military and civil — but civil conscription in a form that had been negotiated with labour. Hughes made few attempts to negotiate these kinds of accommodations, a failure which lends credence to the view that he might have won the campaign if he managed his critics more astutely.

Finally, Sean Scalmer provides an appropriate bookend by considering the way in which conscription has been remembered in the labour movement. The original legend of the conscription struggle was that it signified a democratic victory and the championing of the anti-militarist principle. But this view did not retain its currency over the century. It was complicated by later events in Labor history, especially the introduction of a modified form of conscription by the ALP's hero, John Curtin, during the national crisis of 1942-43. Hence, the dominant memory of conscription within Labor became the more unsettling one of division and bitterness within the movement itself.

This book is critical in the best sense, a major and very overdue contribution to Australian historiography of the war. Like all good historical writing, it is anchored in detailed and close reading of texts, such as Labor newspapers and empirical evidence, and thereby requires us to rethink our understanding of the past.

