

Michael McKernan: speech to Conscription seminar, Canberra Great War Studies Group, National Library of Australia, 28 October 2016*

I first published on conscription in 1977 (an astonishing 39 years ago)¹. In my article I argued that the Catholic hierarchy in Australia in 1916 was either neutral on the question of conscription or in favour of it. Archbishop Mannix in 1916 argued against conscription, not on religious grounds, but fearing the damage the introduction of conscription would do to the Australian economy and to its people. Workers applauded him in 1916 and Catholic workers dragged the hierarchy into the 'No' camp for the 1917 referendum.

But this evening I want to move from a broad Australian picture to a much more intimate one. Two of my great uncles were killed on the Western Front, one in July 1918, one in August 1918. I experienced the life-long grief this caused to my grandfather, who was always known in our family as 'Barp'. Both of his brothers served in the 14th Battalion and although both nominated themselves Church of England on their enlistment papers the battalion's chaplain [Frank Rolland](#), a Presbyterian (known in the battalion as the 'Cocoa King') officiated at their funerals.

He then wrote to the men's parents, my great-grandparents, about each man's death. In the second letter, after the second death, the chaplain seemed genuinely to grieve for the sorrowing parents. He wrote, in part, that the officers had tried to keep Rupert out of the front line, knowing of the recent death of his brother, Claude, but they were unable to do so because the recent defeat of conscription at home meant the battalion was starved of reinforcements.

Perhaps we might consider, briefly, the possible impact of this statement on the grieving recipients of the letter. Rupert might be alive, they might have reasoned, but for the traitorous, disloyal, possibly Catholic rabble who voted down conscription. Or worse, the parents, William Edward Thomas and Louisa Thomas, might themselves have voted 'No' in one or both referendums, in which case they might have thought of themselves as complicit in their own son's death.

I have long thought it unwise, possibly even cruel, of Chaplain Rolland to have referred to the outcome of the referenda in his letter of condolence. I have wondered if he did this commonly in his condolence letters of 1917 and 1918, and if other chaplains also used the outcome of the vote to excuse the use of well-tested men in the front line. Rolland was not an inexperienced chaplain, or a novice at war. He had enlisted in 1915, and after postings in Egypt and England, had been appointed to the 14th Battalion. He was mentioned in despatches and awarded a Military Cross for his bravery and devotion to duty. His biographer wrote of him: 'His concern was for people, with a special compassion for the ignorant, the wilful and the disadvantaged, for the private soldier, the settler's wife, the schoolboy not academically gifted'.

Perhaps the conscription referendum had deeply unsettled Chaplain Rolland.

Some of you will know Jugiong, an attractive village in a very beautiful area of Australia, dominated by the Murrumbidgee and by the gentle hills that the river has formed over a very long time. When I began to look at Jugiong with interested eyes, I noticed something that is very unusual in any Australian country town or village, or in the older Australian suburbs for that matter. There is no memorial to the men of the First World War in the village of Jugiong. No mournful soldier standing on his plinth; no simple obelisk bearing the names of the men

and women who served, with asterisks marking the names of those who had been killed. No memorial avenue of trees. No war memorial of any kind. And that, I thought, is odd.

Does this mean that Jugiong played little or no part in that awful war? Not a bit of it. A small village of probably not more than 150 people in 1914, Jugiong sent 38 men and one woman to the war, four of whom would be killed at the front. How could the village have felt anything other than great pride at this level of enlistment from its own people; how could the village have felt anything other than great compassion for those killed and their families, who still lived among them? How could they not have done what was being done everywhere else in Australia?

Conscription unsettled Jugiong. Conscription, which Melbourne's Archbishop Daniel Mannix had described as 'the undignified process of spurring the willing steed', an image likely to have great resonance in the bush. At both referendums Jugiong voted 'No' with greater strength of voice than for Australia as a whole, where 'No' won on both occasions, but with a very narrow majority both times.

New South Wales Labor Premier William Holman was a strong advocate for conscription and he left the Labor Party and snatched government in New South Wales from the Labor Party over the issue. Holman, besides being premier, was also Jugiong's local member, for his electorate of Cootamundra included the village of Jugiong. There was a state election in New South Wales in 1917 and Holman's opponent in Cootamundra was a loyal Labor man, prominent anti-conscriptionist and prominent Catholic, Patrick Joseph Minahan. Wherever Minahan went throughout the electorate during the campaign he was accompanied by virulent anti-Catholic propaganda: that Rome and the priests directed their people to vote down conscription; that Catholics were disloyal to the Empire, to the war effort, disloyal to Australia. Conscription, you see, had opened wide the sectarian divisions in Australia and also in Jugiong.

The village voted strongly for Minahan in the election but elsewhere the vote was for Holman and he retained the seat. Soon enough the war ended and the soldiers started to return home. Of the 39 who had gone to war from Jugiong, of the 35 who would return home, 23 of them were Catholics. Just on 60 per cent of Jugiong's enlistments. When overall in Australia the Catholic proportion of men in the AIF mirrored the Catholic percentage in the general population at just on 20 per cent. A war memorial in Jugiong would have put the lie to what the self-styled loyalists had been peddling since the first loss of conscription in 1916: that the Catholics were the disloyalists, that they had not played their part in the war. They had, in fact, carried Jugiong's war effort and were the wealthy classes about to build a war memorial to demonstrate that? This, of course, is my interpretation of the puzzling lack of a memorial, and Jugiong is a tiny part of the national story, but we can see the main lines of that story present even in this small village.

The conscription debate entered into the most sensitive parts of people's lives, divided families and friends, and created hatreds among people and classes that would take many years to heal.

¹ 'Catholics, conscription and Archbishop Mannix', *Historical Studies*, April 1977, pp. 299-314.

* [Michael McKernan](#) is a Canberra historian who has written a number of important books on Australia's wars. *Honest History* thanks him for making this paper available.