

## The Anzac Christmas Card

*The Australians are simply adored by our Allies here. We are called 'White Ghurkhas.' ... To see what our fellows have accomplished makes one proud to think he is an Australian. This is the best advertisement Australia ever had. ... Still have hopes of being home by Christmas.*

*Private Morton Collings, 25 May 1915<sup>1</sup>*

Private Collings, a Boer War veteran, did not make it home for Christmas. Seriously wounded at Gallipoli in early August he was invalided out to Malta before being sent to a hospital in Hampshire, where he would find himself on Christmas day.<sup>2</sup> He was far from home but far from alone.

Between their landing at Gallipoli on April 25 and their final evacuation on December 20, 1915, over 35,000 Anzacs would be killed or wounded, a casualty rate well over 50 per cent of those who fought in this ill-fated campaign. From their monumental and unprecedented sacrifice – and the grief, pride, anger, and anxiety it inspired -- the twin legends of Anzac and the birth of Australian nationhood quickly began to form.

For the more than 25,000 wounded the immediate challenge was how to deal with their physical and emotional trauma, including their guilt about the fallen and their absence from battle. For those charged with their healing came the responsibility of nursing these casualties to the point where they could either re-join their comrades or be repatriated to the care of their loved ones back in Australia. Some were dispatched to Egypt and Malta but most, like Private Collings, ended up in England, where they would remain for up to a year convalescing from their wounds. They, too, would not be home for Christmas.



George Coates, *First Australian wounded at Gallipoli arriving at Wandsworth Hospital, London*, Australian War Memorial

<sup>1</sup> M.K. Collings, 'At the Dardanelles. On the Peninsula. 25 May 1915', *Cowra Free Press*, 14 July 1915, 2.

<sup>2</sup> See Lesley Muir (ed.), *Canterbury's Boys: World War I & Sydney's Suburban Fringe* (Canterbury, 2002), 180; [https://issuu.com/canterburylib/docs/canterburys\\_boys/180](https://issuu.com/canterburylib/docs/canterburys_boys/180); accessed 4 May 2017.

Waiting for some of them in Wandsworth at London's largest military hospital were A.H. ('Remus') Fullwood and those of his middle-aged mates from the Chelsea Arts Club who had enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps (R.A.M.C.) on the eve of the Gallipoli invasion. They must have had little idea how quickly and for how long their services would be needed. For the next eight months they would have to deal with an increase not simply in the numbers requiring treatment but in the severity of their trauma. The physical demands alone of working twelve-hour shifts as a medical orderly certainly took their toll on the 52-year-old Fullwood (who had taken ten years off his age, in order to join the R.A.M.C.). But, as it happened, King and Country now needed Corporal (later Sergeant) Fullwood for his artistic as well as his caring services.

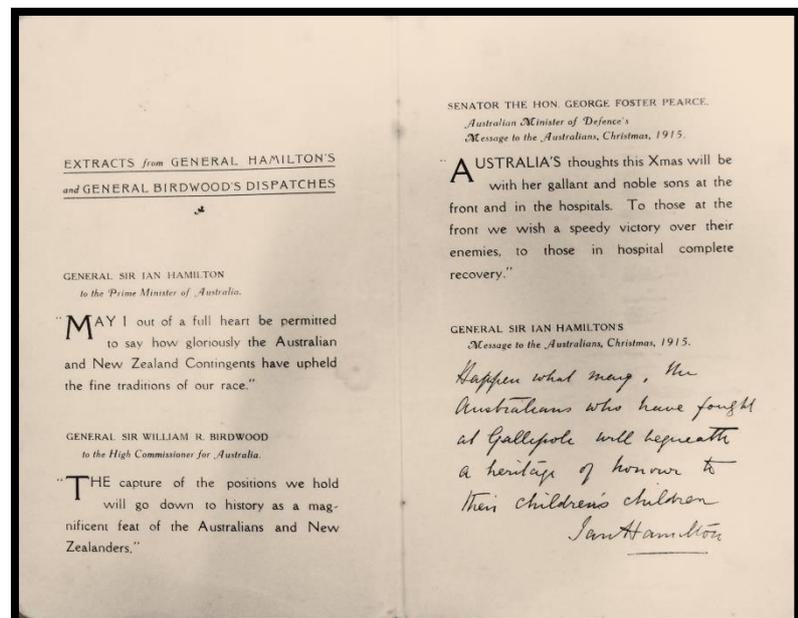
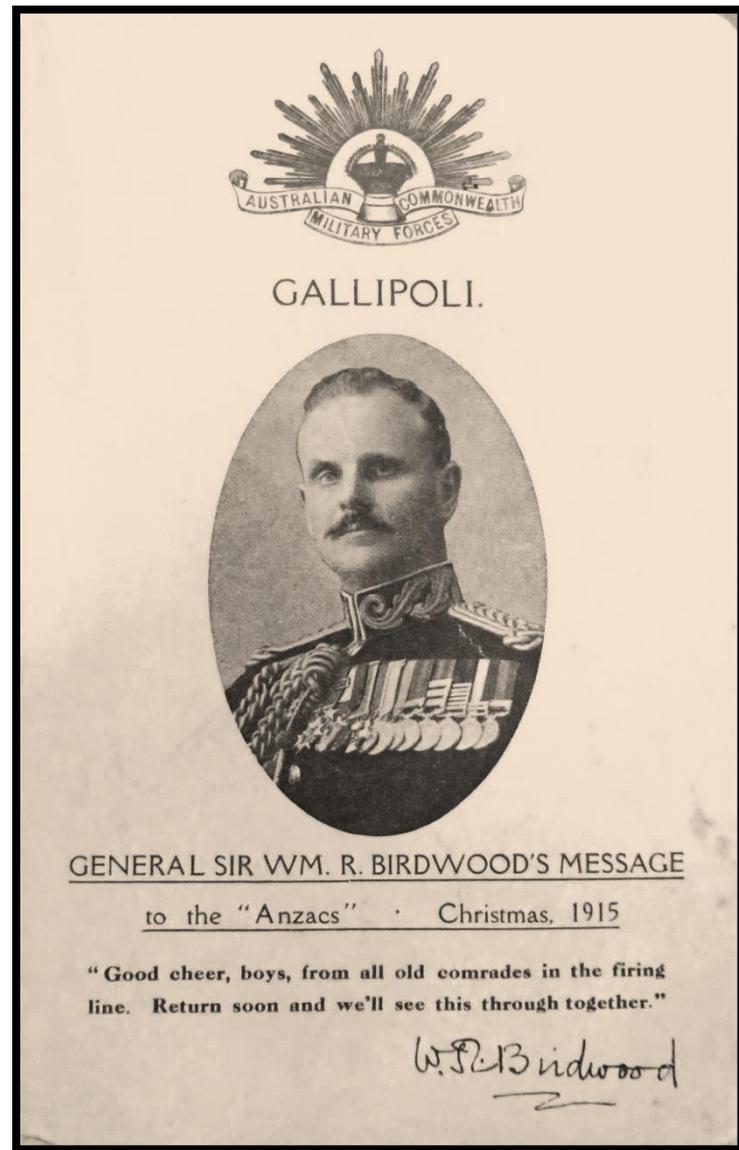


Fullwood at Wandsworth on his promotion to Sergeant in 1917.

Fullwood's recall as an artist arose out of the heroic efforts of London's Anglo-Australian community to ensure that every wounded Anzac, wherever they might be, would have presents and company from home on Christmas day. Organised largely through the London branch of the Australian Natives' Association (A.N.A.), this campaign was spearheaded by Lady Robinson, wife of Queensland's Agent-General, and Lady Birdwood, wife of the Anzacs' Gallipoli commander. Apart from the organization of tens of events and thousands of gifts, great attention was given to the production of an elaborate Christmas card that would also serve as a commemorative booklet honouring the service of all who had shed blood for Australia and the Empire. Lady Robinson herself volunteered to design the card, supported by a committee that would oversee its distribution not only in Britain but to Egypt, Malta, and ships bound for Australia as well. She then nominated Fullwood – a suitable choice as a well-known illustrator, a stalwart of the Anglo-Australian artists' colony, and a medical orderly patriotically caring for wounded Anzacs -- to supply a water-colour painting appropriate for this important occasion.

The result was a handsome tribute, with the trappings of a citation for valorous service. Gracing the cover was the popular General Birdwood himself, pictured beneath a coat of arms, the crown surmounted by bristling rockets (now seen as the rising sun) and bearing the legend 'Australian Commonwealth Military Forces'. Birdwood's signed Christmas message to the Anzacs wished them 'Good cheer, boys, from old comrades in the firing line. Return soon and we'll see this through together.'

Inside were two pages of dispatches from Birdwood and General Sir Ian Hamilton, who acknowledged 'how gloriously the Australian and New Zealand contingents have upheld the fine traditions of our race.' The Australian Minister for Defence, Senator Pearce, affirmed that 'Australia's thoughts this Xmas will be with her gallant sons at the front and in the hospitals.' In a hand-written Christmas greeting Hamilton added that 'Happen what may, the Australians who have fought at Gallipoli will bequeath a heritage of honour to their children's children.'





The card's blue and gold centrepiece was Corporal Fullwood's own tribute to the Anzacs. Held in place by a slender golden braid, it features a fit and healthy digger proudly shouting his *Coo-ee to Australia* from the shores of Gallipoli. A sprig of wattle blossom binds him to his country and the girl he left behind, ever ready to heed his call. Protecting them both across the wide blue seas rides a powerful fleet, the Royal Navy united with the Australian Commonwealth Military Forces on their way to victory for King and country, the Empire and, as was then commonly proclaimed, 'Civilisation'. Fullwood's water-colour both draws on and elevates these powerful sentiments and symbols into a confident and comforting 'bird's-eye view' of what Gallipoli and the Great War meant to most Australians as they celebrated Christmas, 1915.

By mid-November thousands of these cards – perhaps as many as 50,000 -- had been produced and were ready for distribution. Lady Birdwood and Lady Hamilton, as well as the singers Ada Crossley and Dame Clara Butt, purchased large numbers themselves. However, most were given out by the A.N.A. and the Australian and New Zealand Red Cross. Five thousand alone were despatched to Egypt 'for distribution to the Australians in hospital on Christmas Day by Mrs. Toohey.'<sup>3</sup> Cards were also consigned to hospitals in Malta and on Gibraltar. Margaret Baxter, the Card Committee's secretary, also made sure that they would reach 'the Australians returning to Australia as medically unfit by the transport which left on [December 12]. They will be distributed to the men on Christmas Day, with a message from

<sup>3</sup> 'Historic Christmas Card', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January 1916, 5

Lady Robinson herself.<sup>4</sup> Sure enough, the captain of a returning troopship arrived at Fremantle on 25 January 1916 with the news that ‘On Christmas Day [in Durban, South Africa] the men received greetings from General Birdwood. The greeting took the form of an artistic card with a photo of the general.’<sup>5</sup>

Back in England cards and presents still had to be delivered to the 15,000 Anzacs remaining there. On December 19 a pre-Christmas party – organised by General Monash’s sister, Mrs Rosenheim -- was held at the A.N.A.’s Anzac Buffet on Horseferry Road for 800 ‘seriously wounded warriors from the hospitals, many of them on crutches, or with bandaged heads and arms’, but (with the assistance of their accompanying orderlies) ‘wonderfully agile in spite of all these little drawbacks.’<sup>6</sup> On entry they were personally greeted by Lady Birdwood, her daughter Judith, and Margaret Baxter, who ‘presented to each man a specially designed Christmas card.’<sup>7</sup> Next stop was a Christmas tree ‘bearing more than 200 fairy electric lamps’ and ‘laden with books, tobacco, cigarettes, pipes, and shaving outfits’. A lavish holiday buffet followed, washed down with lemonade for the fever cases and beer for everyone else. The merriment only increased with toasts, songs, a formal concert, and the novelty of mistletoe. Not surprisingly, when it was time for the guests to return to their wards, a number had gone missing, which made some observers realise that ‘a hospital orderly’s job is not quite the most peaceful occupation in the world.’<sup>8</sup> (Given the occasion, it would be nice to think that Corporal Fullwood had been present.) One of the attendees, Private Harold Krabil, would later write home that this was ‘the best afternoon since we have been in England. ... As we drove back to the hospitals the boys made the place ring with “Coo-ees,” which must have been heard for miles around.’<sup>9</sup> Unknown to Harold and his mates as they went to sleep, the last 10,000 Anzacs were being evacuated from Gallipoli, sealing victory for the Turks and the birth of their own nationalist legend.

Meanwhile news of the Anzac Buffet party and the commemorative card was instantly reported not only in Australia’s capital cities, regional centres, and many country towns but in England as well.<sup>10</sup> So was Queen Mary’s acknowledgement on Christmas Eve of the ‘Christmas card which the Australian women in England have sent to the wounded men in England, Malta, and elsewhere.’ “‘I am sure,’” H.M. observed, that ‘this will give the greatest pleasure to the gallant Australians, who endured so much with such wonderful courage.’”<sup>11</sup>

The first Australian newspaper to sight and fully describe the Anzac Christmas card was the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which received its copy from the redoubtable Margaret Baxter, who wanted “‘Australia to know that Lady Robinson and I are determined that our dear, brave lads shall not be forgotten by their fellow countrymen in England.’” The *Herald* was therefore also the first to confirm on 1 January 1916 that the headlined ‘HISTORIC CHRISTMAS

<sup>4</sup> ‘Social and Personal’, *Telegraph* [Brisbane], 12 February 1916, 8.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Returned via South Africa. Gifts Showered on Soldiers. Fremantle. Tuesday’, *Evening News* [Sydney], 25 January 1916, 4.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Anzacs Party. Christmas In London, Presentation of Christmas Cards (See Illustration.)’, *The Telegraph* [Brisbane], 12 February 1916, 8 and 16.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Australians in England. Christmas Entertainments, London, December 19’, *The Telegraph* [Brisbane], 20 December 1915, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, ref. 6.

<sup>9</sup> ‘With the Australians in England’, *Numurkah Standard* [Victoria], 23 February 1916, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Apart from the *British-Australasian*’s coverage on December 16 and 23, see, e.g. ‘The Anzac Christmas Card’, *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 24 December 1915, 4.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Message from Queen Mary, London, Dec. 24’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 December 1915, 5.

CARD' featured 'a reproduction of a water-colour drawing by Corporal Fullwood, the well-known Australian artist – *Coo-ee to Australia* – showing an Australian soldier on Gallipoli, with the battleships on guard upon the water, coo-eeing to the girl he left behind him.'<sup>12</sup> However, it was not until February 12 that Fullwood's picture was reproduced in the pages of Brisbane's *Telegraph*, along with the acknowledgement that it was by 'Corporal A.H. Fullwood, whose work is well known to Australians and who formerly was a contributor to the *Bulletin* and other illustrated publications.'<sup>13</sup> His *Coo-ee to Australia* also appeared a week later in Melbourne's *The Leader*, under the caption 'General Sir William Birdwood's Christmas postcard, sent to every Australian soldier under his command.'<sup>14</sup>

Many of the Anzacs also posted their cards back to Australia for safe-keeping with their loved ones who, in turn, wanted to spread the news of this honour through their local papers. We learn in the *Nhill Free Press*, for example, that Private Ira Gunn had forwarded Birdwood's 'finely illustrated' Christmas souvenir soon after receiving it.<sup>15</sup> The Mayor of Newcastle, Alderman Kilgour, was 'justly proud' of the 'very artistically arranged' card which his son had sent him.<sup>16</sup> Bendigo Councillor Abbott likewise passed his son's card to the local paper's duly impressed editor.

*The card is a remarkable, if not a historic production, and recipients will unquestionably treasure it as a souvenir of the war and of the Australian landing, fight, and evacuation of the peninsula. ... The centre-piece is a decorative sketch by Corporal Fullwood of London, depicting an Australian soldier clad in khaki on the coastal rocks, cooe-ing to his lass, who, with outstretched hands, stands afar off on Australian shores. The battleships of the Navy form a splendid background, while the spray of wattle on the foreground makes the picture essentially Australian.*<sup>17</sup>

There were many other such tributes to the card and what it meant for those who received it, even when it reminded them of the carnage that had occasioned it. For example, 'The whole makes a beautiful memento and is naturally much prized by Mr and Mrs E.J. Davey, whose son was all through the thick of the fighting, and, as will be seen in his letters elsewhere, was one of six survivors out of 48 men on the attack on Lonesome [*sic*] Pine.'<sup>18</sup> And while Sergeant Jack Cheyne of Heyfield, Victoria, was grateful for "'a lovely post card from General Birdwood, handed personally to each of us [at Harefield Hospital] by his daughter,'" he was also preparing himself to leave 'once more for the front, there to finish doing my little bit for the Empire. ... I know well what to expect, and death is a trifle. My months of absence have got to be made good. Should I go down – maybe in Serbia's cause or on the Syrian desert – kindly pass the word on to my friends.'<sup>19</sup> An equally stoic Sergeant Jack Henry, when mailing his card back home, could not help adding that "'There is a lot to be done yet, and you know we all have to do our bit, and then a bit more for the man who stays at home who knows his place is with us in the firing line, but is too selfish to think of anything but his own pleasures and welfare.'<sup>20</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Op.cit.*, ref. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, ref. 6.

<sup>14</sup> 'Illustrations', *The Leader*, 19 February 1916.

<sup>15</sup> 'Soldiers' Letters. Anzacs in London', *Nhill Free Press*, 11 February 1916, 3.

<sup>16</sup> 'Corporal Kilgour', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 12 February 1916, 5.

<sup>17</sup> 'Coo-ee to Australia. The Gallipoli Christmas Card', *Bendigo Independent*, 6 March 1916, 8.

<sup>18</sup> 'A Memento from Genl. Birdwood', *Burra Record*, 5 April 1916, 3.

<sup>19</sup> 'A Soldier's Letter', *Heyfield Herald* (Vic.), 24 February 1916, 3.

<sup>20</sup> 'Interesting Soldier's Letter', *Leader* [Orange, NSW], 14 February 1916, 4.

The last card-inspired story concerns Private Louis Salvatore ('Spud') Murphy, a bandsman turned stretcher-bearer who was so severely wounded at Gallipoli that he had to be sent back to Australia well before Christmas, 1915. His final months in England were spent at Harefield Hospital where he met Lady Birdwood and her daughter. According to Spud,

*'Lady Birdwood took a furnished cottage close to the hospital, so as to be near the Australian soldiers. Her daughter was nursing in the wards. A couple of mates and myself were lucky in being singled out for special kindness and hospitality. We used to go to tea at the cottage nearly every evening, and were made thoroughly at home. Lady Birdwood called for us regularly and took us round. She is the best type of English lady, and our general has a Heaven-sent helpmate.'*

Now back in Manly convalescing with his brother-in-law, Spud "got a surprise last Saturday [15 January 1916], when I received this beautiful Christmas souvenir and kind letter from Lady Birdwood. They're the kind of people who don't forget you." Sent from Thurlby Hall, Lincoln, and dated November 30, the letter read in part:

*'This card has been published for the boys at home in hospital, but I know you will like to have one – as a souvenir of your time with the Anzacs. Though you will not be able to go back, you will always be glad you have done ... your share in helping to keep the flag flying for the old country and her sons. We shall think of you on Xmas Day and hope that you will be having a happy time with your people. ... Judith sends her love, and with all good wishes, your sincere friends, Janetta Birdwood.'*

"Now isn't that letter something to be proud of?" said Spud.'

Between his time at the *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia* in the mid-1880s and the onset of the First World War, Fullwood had produced hundreds of illustrations that had been seen by tens of thousands in Australia and around the world, helping to define perhaps more than any other artist how Australians and others saw themselves and their country. But his art-work for Birdwood's Anzac Christmas card was probably his single most significant and poignant contribution to the formation of Australia's visual culture. For it officially commemorated what many Australians ever since have come to regard as the great watershed moment of their nation's history. It had the imprimatur of the Anzacs' most popular commander, not to mention the Queen. It was created to offer healing and hope to thousands of 'wounded warriors' and their families at the very moment when the experience and tragedy of Gallipoli were most keenly felt. And its impact was not only amplified in the countless newspaper articles that recorded what it meant to its recipients but preserved by countless families as a tangible keepsake of their loved ones' service as well.

On the other hand, Christmas, 1915, was merely a brief pause in a war whose cycle of death and destruction was already spinning out of control on the Western Front. Many of those wounded at Gallipoli, like Private Collings, would soon be returning to the firing line. And for Fullwood it was time to resume his 'day-job' as a medical orderly at Wandsworth's 3<sup>rd</sup> London General Hospital. For the next two years he would be fully occupied caring for an unrelenting rush of casualties from the Somme, including Australia's first V.C. winner at Gallipoli, Captain Albert Jacka. Only in 1918 would Fullwood be called upon again to put his art at the service of his country as one of Australia's official war artists.

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