

A different kind of imperial war

Conference Report: The British Empire and the Great War: Colonial Societies/Cultural Responses, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 19-22 February 2014

Ashleigh Gilbertson
University of Adelaide

Australians are accustomed to regarding World War I as an imperial war. We do this with varying degrees of assent or dissent – the war as the legitimate imperial endeavour of a nation loyal to the British Empire or as an ‘other people’s war’ – but almost always in the binary terms of ourselves and the United Kingdom.

A rather different kind of imperial war was under discussion at the conference *The British Empire and the Great War: Colonial Societies/Cultural Responses* at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, from 19-22 February 2014. ([Full program, including abstracts and biographies.](#)) Organised by Michael Walsh (NTU) and Andrekos Varnava (Flinders University), an interdisciplinary group of established and emerging scholars met to canvas the complexities of British colonial societies’ responses to the conflict.



Nanyang Technological University campus, Singapore (source: Flickr Commons; photo: Venent Osman)

The breadth of the conference was made obvious by its four keynote speakers. Imperial historian John MacKenzie (University of Lancaster) discussed the British Empire during the interwar period and challenged the traditional view that World War I represented the beginning of decolonisation. Military historian Hew Strachan (University of Oxford) sought to explain some paradoxes about the fighting during the war, including about the British army’s performance in colonial theatres and about so-called ‘uncivilised’ warfare. Art historian Tim Barringer (Yale University) used the war memorial, the Chattri, erected near Brighton at the site of cremations of Indian soldiers who died in the United Kingdom, to consider British ambiguity about imperial involvement in the war. Finally, historian Jay Winter (Yale) argued for the centrality of language to various European responses to the war, noting that, for example, the English World War I term ‘war poet’ has no counterpart in other European languages, or in English for World War II.

Barringer’s keynote on the Chattri highlighted a key concern of the conference: the experiences of nearly 1.5 million Indians who served with British forces during the war. Jonathon Black (Kingston

University), Dominika Buchowska (Adam Mickiewicz University) and Santanu Das (King's College, London) examined representations of Indians in war art and literature, while Jamie Andrews (British Library) spotlighted some of the sources about Indians now freely accessible through [Europeana Collections 1914-1918](#), including the Indian mail censor collections. These collections may go some way towards addressing a problem identified by Peter Stanley (UNSW, Canberra) in his paper about Australians and Indians at Gallipoli, that is, a lack of sources from Indian perspectives.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Singapore's relative geographic proximity, scholars from Australian institutions formed the largest group at the conference, outnumbering even the next largest group (American) by four to one. Australian topics were also popular with scholars from other countries. It seems that the Australian national obsession with 'Anzac' (often consciously or unconsciously omitting New Zealand) is also alive and well in international academia.

Still, the Australian topics were refreshingly new. Bart Ziino (Deakin University) examined the relationship between Australians on the home front and the war news they got from newspapers. Joy Damousi (University of Melbourne), Stephanie James (Flinders) and Steve Marti (University of Western Ontario) discussed the experiences of, respectively, Greeks, Irish and Serbians in Australia, further complicating the notion of a binary Australian-empire relationship. Melanie Oppenheimer (Flinders) characterised the work of the Red Cross as one of the most remarkable Australian war stories, in which women mobilised into public roles, while Brett Holman (University of New England) considered the rather bizarre mystery aeroplane scare of 1918.



Japanese signal station and cruiser 'Myoko' near Singapore Naval Base, 1945 [soon after the Japanese surrender]
(source: Australian War Memorial, ART23385; oil on canvas, Ernest Buckmaster)

Among others, Jo Hawkins (University of Western Australia) and Carolyn Holbrook (Melbourne) provided perspectives on 'Anzac' in two very different eras, Hawkins overviewing wartime and 1920s restrictions on the use of the word and Holbrook analysing the resurgence of Anzac Day from the 1960s through to the 1980s. Jennifer Wellington (Yale) compared Australian and Canadian approaches to official war art, especially in exhibitions up until 1922. Ryan Johnston (Australian War Memorial) examined a recent memorial artwork, Tom Nicholson's *Comparative monument (Palestine)*. Andrew Harrison (Australian National University) noted the lack of a commemorative musical tradition in Australia and discussed his own compositions about the Battles of Pozieres and Passchendaele.

More familiar Australian topics were revitalised, too. Alexia Moncrieff (University of Adelaide) considered the consequences of the Gallipoli campaign from a military-medical perspective, John Connor (UNSW, Canberra) and Des Lambley (independent scholar) provided imperial perspectives on the recruitment of the Australian Imperial Force and Janda Gooding (Australian War Memorial) and I revisited the work of the Australian official correspondent and historian, CEW Bean.

An Australian perspective was also provided by a special guest, the musician Eric Bogle. He performed and explained the context of some of his war-themed songs, including *And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda*, written in the context of the anti-Vietnam War movement, *The Gift of Years*, about the RSL's 75th anniversary pilgrimage to Gallipoli, and *Lost Soul*, about an Aboriginal school student's discovery of a relative's grave on the Western Front. Bogle's performance was a timely reminder, on the eve of the so-called Anzac centenary, of the potential power of history – and the need to treat it with care.

Another notable feature of the conference was its presence on Twitter. A small number of conference participants 'live-tweeted' the proceedings to a much larger, international audience using the hashtag #EmpireWW1. The thousand or so tweets sent reached about 37 000 accounts and created about 780 700 'impressions'.

Overall, the conference gave many reasons to be excited about the breadth, depth and quality of scholarship that is likely during the forthcoming World War I centenary, including in the form of the special issues of journals and edited collections that are planned as conference products. Michael Walsh and Andrekos Varnava are to be congratulated on organising such a dynamic conference and many participants eagerly await the follow-up conference the organisers have promised for 2018 or 2019.



A large Chinese military mission which visited Malaya was deeply impressed with the Empire's preparations for its defence. Good humoured, fun-loving, Australian troops have won extraordinary popularity with the people of Malaya. This staff car driver gave a small Chinese boy a lesson in boxing during an interval in an official tour of A.I.F. positions.

[August, 1941] (source: Australian War Memorial, 007377)

Ashleigh Gilbertson is a PhD Candidate in the School of History and Politics at the University of Adelaide. Her thesis is an operational and cultural history of Australians and the Battle of Passchendaele. She blogs at [Milstoral](#).