

The Simpson Prize: history or civics?

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[John Simpson Kirkpatrick](#) in death – Simpson posthumous – has had a much more interesting life after 19 May 1915 than he had in the preceding 23 years. Indeed, it has been forcefully argued that the Simpson that has come down to us, nearly a century after he was killed at Shrapnel Gully, bears only a vague resemblance to the real Simpson.

Since [Irving Benson's hagiography](#) gave the Simpson story a kick along in the 1960s, we have had debunking by, among others, [Peter Cochrane](#), [Graham Wilson](#) and [a taskforce of officials](#). Simpson was a brave man but, in the pantheon of Australian mythology, Simpson and his *equus africanus asinus* stand closer to the Bunyip and the Yowie than they do to Ned Kelly and Les Darcy.

This article does not attempt to explore Simpsoniana but focuses instead on the evolution of the Simpson Prize and the way the Prize has been used to reinforce the Anzac tradition. The article also looks at who enters and who wins.

What is the Simpson Prize?

According to [the official website](#), the Prize is 'a national competition for Year 9 and 10 students' which 'encourages participants to focus on the significance of Anzac Day and to consider what Anzac Day means to them and to Australia'. Winners travel to Gallipoli for Anzac Day.

Students entering for the 2015 Prize (entries closing in October 2014) are expected to use the [2015 Simpson Prize Australian War Memorial Source Selection](#) and their own research to produce either an essay of 1200-1500 words or an audio visual presentation of no longer than ten minutes, accompanied by a written explanation of no more than 400 words. It is expected that entrants will use a minimum of three of the War Memorial sources but that up to half of their entry will draw upon their own knowledge and research.

An official view of the Prize [is given by](#) Stuart Baines, the Education Manager at the Australian War Memorial.

For over a decade the Australian War Memorial has supported the Simpson Prize, the *premier* history based essay writing competition for Australian school students. In the 2014 centenary, the Simpson Prize has once again inspired students across the nation, and eight lucky winners, one from each state and territory, have today touched down in Istanbul for the start of their tour of Turkey and the Gallipoli battlefields. I have the honour of leading the group again this year and being their battlefield guide.

It is one of the most rewarding parts of my role as Education Manager at the Memorial, the opportunity to explore this part of our history, to inspire and challenge the students and hopefully to encourage understanding. *The Anzac legacy will be in their hands in the future* and with the understanding and experience of this trip they will hopefully find relevance for themselves and place their own value on this part of our history. (Emphasis added)

What is meant by ‘the Anzac legacy’ and what are the implications for these students of having it placed in their hands may be set aside for now. Whether the Prize is indeed the ‘premier’ essay competition in the field may be a matter for consideration by promoters of and entrants in the [National History Challenge](#) and the Anzac-related essay competitions in other jurisdictions, such as [Queensland](#), [South Australia](#) and [Victoria](#).



2014 winners with the Commonwealth Minister for Education, the Hon. Christopher Pyne, MP
(source: Simpson Prize website)

What questions are asked?

The Prize question for 2015 is ‘To what extent did Australians enlist in 1914 to defend the “Mother Country”?’ The War Memorial’s source selection for answering this question includes extracts from a letter from a soldiers’ mother and three letters from soldiers (including one from Simpson) which disclose a range of reasons for enlisting, plus a photograph, captioned ‘At the Empire’s Call’, of soldiers marching through Melbourne, and a strongly pro-war and pro-Empire editorial from the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 3 August 1914. The sources indicate adequately that defending the Mother Country was only part of the story.

Beyond the selected sources, the material put out by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs is one possible resource. The [DVA website](#) includes titles like *Gallipoli*, *Gallipoli and the Anzacs* and *Schooling, Service and the Great War*. The bibliographies cited by winning students in past years suggest they have little trouble in coming up with resources. The Honest History website is another option, particularly the sections under *Resources* headed [Anzac analysed](#), [Reality of war](#) and [Home front](#).

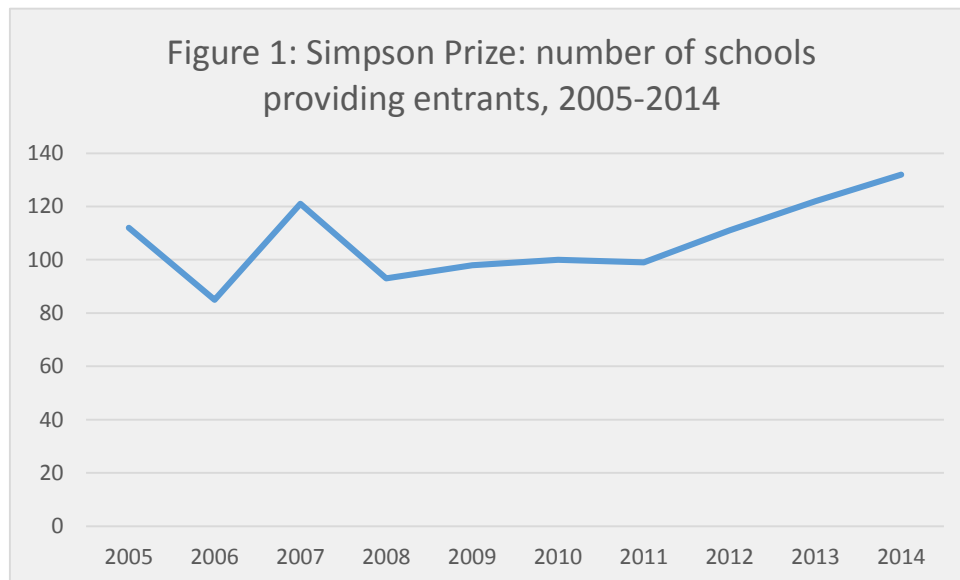
The 2015 question is a genuine history question; it is about causes, about why people do things. By contrast with the 2015 question, however, all but two of the 16 questions 1999-2014 (see Appendix to this paper) had some reference to the Anzac 'spirit' or 'legend' or qualities associated with Anzac or specifically with Simpson. Unlike the 2015 question, most of them were not about causation but about the relevance of Anzac tropes to how modern Australians should do things or the values they should hold. These questions were thus primarily to do with civics education rather than history.

Who runs the Prize?

The Prize is [funded](#) (\$190 000 annually) by the Australian Government through the Civics and Citizenship Education program of the Department of Education, which also keeps statistics. It is currently administered by the History Teachers' Association of Australia (HTAA) though the actual work is done by the History Teachers' Association of Victoria (HTAV). Until 2009 administration was by the Australian Federation of Societies for Studies of Society and Environment (AFSSSE).

Which schools have entered students for the Prize?

The Commonwealth Department of Education has supplied us with statistics for the numbers of schools which provided Simpson Prize entrants in the years 2005-14 (Figure 1). The average number of schools over this period was 107, with the highest number 132 in 2014 and the lowest 85 in 2006.



How do these numbers compare with the total number of schools in Australia which offered Years 9 and 10? According to [the latest available figures](#) from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) there were 2706 secondary and combined primary-secondary schools in Australia in 2013. The proportion of secondary schools which have students entering for the Prize is thus around 4 to 5 per cent or barely one school in twenty.

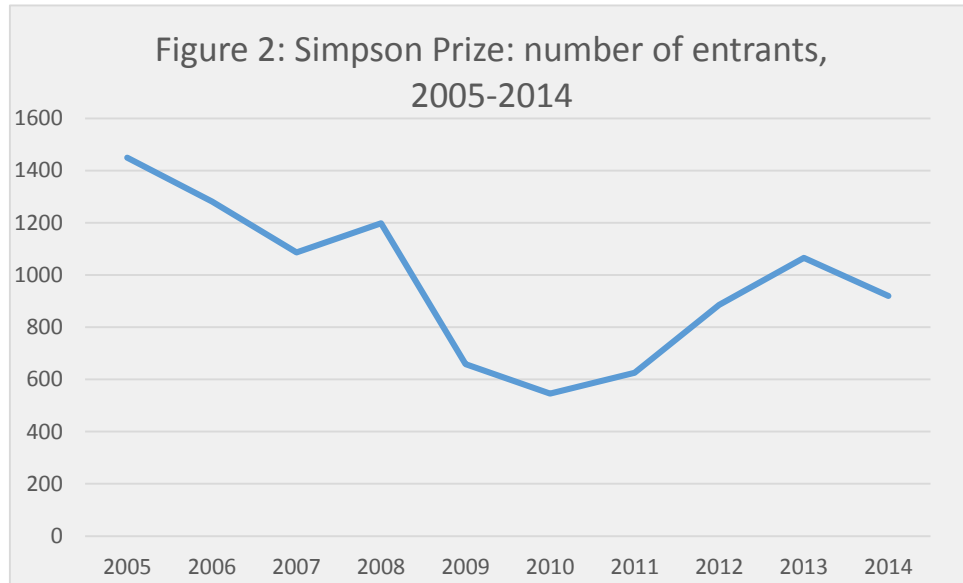
Privacy considerations preclude the HTAV from divulging the names of schools which provide entrants for the Prize so it is not possible to analyse the affiliations of these schools, that is, whether they are government or non-government. The HTAV believes, however, that entries in recent years have been 'evenly spread' between independent, Catholic and government schools.

If entries are indeed evenly spread (say, roughly one-third from each affiliation) then Government schools are *heavily under-represented* among schools providing entrants and independent (non-Catholic private) and Catholic private schools *over-represented*. [ABS figures](#) show that government

schools make up around 57 per cent of total secondary and combined primary-secondary schools, non-Catholic private schools about 26 per cent and Catholic private schools about 17 per cent.

How many students have entered for the Prize?

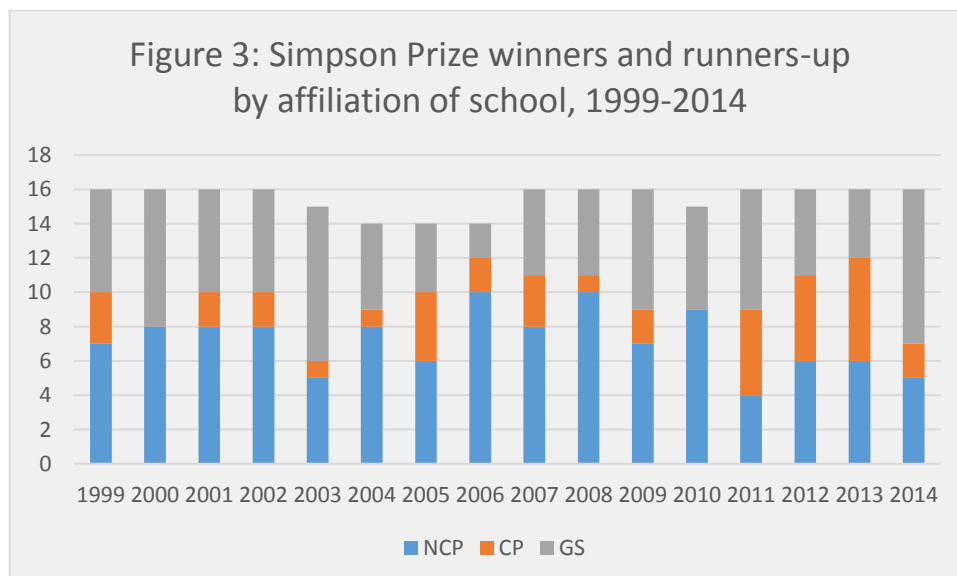
Figure 2 shows the number of entrants over the years 2005-14. The average number of entrants over this period has been 972, with the highest number 1450 in 2005 and the lowest 546 in 2010.



How do these numbers compare with the total numbers of students in Years 9 and 10? [ABS statistics](#) for 2013 show there were 555 823 students in Years 9 and 10, so the number of Simpson Prize entrants is around 0.2 per cent of total Year 9 and 10 students. (The authors have not attempted to establish how many students *attempt* essays for the Prize but do not actually enter them. Some schools may only enter the best essays from their students.)

Which schools have provided the winners of the Prize?

Figure 3 shows the schools attended by winners and runners up, 1999-2014, under affiliation of school. NCP is non-Catholic private, CP is Catholic private and GS is government school.



The most notable feature of the graph is the small number of winners and runners-up from Catholic private schools, at least up until 2011. (Eighteen out of 39 Catholic school winners and runners-up have come in the four years 2011-14.) While *non-Catholic* private schools clearly provided more winners and runners-up than Government schools in ten years out of 16, the predominance is not overwhelming and it has decreased in recent years. Indeed, over the five years 2010-14 there have been more winners and runners-up from government (31) than from non-Catholic private schools (30). Table 1 shows aggregates.

Table 1: Schools providing Simpson Prize winners and runners-up, 1999-2014

Affiliation of school	Number of schools	Winners and runners-up
Non-Catholic private	54	115
Catholic private	29	39
Government	57	94
Total	140	248

The individual schools which have been most successful in providing winners and runners-up have been the following: Canberra Grammar School (10); Friends School, Tas. (10); Wilderness School, SA (8); Canberra Girls Grammar School (7); Prince Alfred College, SA (7); Nightcliff High School, NT (6); Palmerston High School/Senior College, NT (6); Marist College, ACT (5); Hornsby Girls High School, NSW (4). These nine schools between them have accounted for 63 winners and runners-up (25 per cent). The other 131 schools have provided 185 winners and runners-up between them.



2014 winners and runners-up with Ministers and officials (source: Simpson Prize website)

Notable runs among schools have included:

- Canberra Girls Grammar School: four winners or runners-up 1999-2002;
- Canberra Grammar School: nine winners or runners-up 2003-08;

- Friends School, Tas.: seven winners or runners-up 2006-12;
- Marist College, ACT: five winners or runners-up 2009-14;
- Nightcliff High School, NT: six winners or runners-up 1999-2003;
- Palmerston High School/Senior College, NT: six winners or runners-up 2007-12;
- Wilderness School, SA: four winners or runners-up 1999-2003; four winners or runners-up 2006-09.

It will be noted that small jurisdictions have a better record, simply because they have a smaller pool of schools providing entrants. There might be a case for an extra category of 'at large' winners, chosen regardless of jurisdiction. This could partly redress the current disadvantage of entrants from larger jurisdictions such as New South Wales and Victoria.

Beyond noting the effect of the size of state and territory pools, we have not attempted to explain why some schools have been more successful than others. Some hypotheses might relate to the enthusiasm of individual teachers, a school tradition of participation in what is seen as a 'prestige' extension activity, coaching of students to a template (facilitated by the similarity of the questions over a number of years), and the attractiveness of the Prize offered (a trip to Gallipoli). We have not looked for evidence to support or reject any of these hypotheses.

What is the standard of entries?

Neither of the authors of this article are teachers so we have no way of benchmarking the essays produced against what should be expected of Year 9 and 10 students. We frankly do not know whether the idea that this is the 'premier' Prize is borne out by the standard of entries. Nor do we have any desire to criticise entrants who were doing their best.

We are content merely to make a couple of points. First, an obvious feature of the entries is that 'civics education' type questions received civics education type answers. The questions in 1999 and 2007, for example, were very similar:

1999: The events at Gallipoli in 1915 and subsequent conflicts have all contributed to the creation of the ANZAC tradition and spirit in Australia. This is commemorated every year on ANZAC day. How did the events at Gallipoli or subsequent conflicts shape the ANZAC tradition and spirit? What does the ANZAC tradition mean to Australia?

2007: Consider what values and characteristics demonstrated by the ANZACs at Gallipoli and later reinforced at the Western Front, continue to influence Australians today.

The [winning eight entries in 1999](#) and [the winning eight entries in 2007](#) were competent, well-researched, well-written affirmations that the Anzac tradition, born in Gallipoli, was indeed alive and well in modern Australia. The way the questions were written could hardly have produced anything else, although three 2007 winners did attempt deeper analysis. One made a subtle judgement about the many founders of the Anzac tradition:

Yet the distinction of Simpson in today's society stands in stark contrast to that of other soldiers of the Great War. As one non-soldier on a battlefield, Simpson is commemorated more than the tens of thousands of Australian soldiers who carried guns.

Another 2007 winner began like this:

The characteristics and values displayed by the ANZACs during the First World War were the product of warfare, death and destruction – it is impossible for more than a shadow of these attributes to have filtered down into the comfortable and contented lives we lead now.

The second notable feature of the entries over the years is that when entrants were given a meatier question they rose to the occasion. In 2009, the question was: ‘World War I had a devastating effect on Australian society. Why should we commemorate our participation in this conflict?’ While some of the winners still seemed to be answering the more traditional Anzac legend/Simpson’s qualities question (perhaps responding to coaching according to a template) a couple made a real attempt to balance the impacts of war upon Australia with the exploits of those who served. For example:

The devastation caused to Australian society by the Great War meant the loss of countless lives and times of extreme hardship for families. It is true that through participating in the War, the Anzac legend was created and consequently the assertion of Australia as an independent nation. However, this does not seem sufficient reason to honour a conflict that caused such destruction. Yet, it is not in spite of the shattering effects of WWI on Australia that we commemorate the Anzacs it is because of them.

The 2014 question – ‘How well does the Anzac legend tell the story of individual Australian soldiers during World War One?’ – also gave entrants some opportunity to match legend to reality. Most of the winners took this opportunity in quite sophisticated ways. They grasped that there was censorship, they understood the distortion of reality, they identified what we now call ‘spin’, they were sceptical of Ashmead-Bartlett. One entrant’s concluding paragraph is reasonably typical:

Ironically, the genuine though more modest story of the hundreds of thousands who fought and tens of thousands who died, of their desire to fight well and of their facility for pragmatism and cooperation, spoke more eloquently and inclusively of the obvious potential and democratic aspirations of their country than the legend ever would.

To a considerable extent, the tendency of the answers in any year would have been influenced by the mandated Australian War Memorial sources provided. (How different would the essays be if there were no mandated sources? Does having at least some mandated sources assist markers to compare answers in terms of how well students have used a common set of references?) Yet, even from our fairly superficial survey of entries we can tentatively confirm the view expressed by one of the HTAV administrators of the Prize that ‘in recent years the judges have seen questioning of the legend or myth in quite a few entries’.



2014 winners lay wreaths at the Australian War Memorial (source: Simpson Prize website)

What is the significance of the 2015 question?

The Prize questions since 2009 have moved cautiously away from the virtually interchangeable questions of the first decade of the competition. The questions in 2012 ('Why has Australian commemoration of ANZAC Day increased in popularity in recent years?') and 2013 ('What does an investigation of primary sources reveal about the Gallipoli experience and to what extent does this explain the origins of the ANZAC Legend?') even allowed for quite sophisticated consideration of causes while still requiring some immersion in the 'legend'.

The 2014 question ('How well does the Anzac legend tell the story of individual Australian soldiers during World War One?') partly returned to the old pattern. It required entrants to match individual behaviour against a stereotype, without displaying the degree of civics education exhibited by the boilerplate questions of earlier years. It required the exercise of more judgement than most of the earlier questions.

The 2015 question ('To what extent did Australians enlist in 1914 to defend the "Mother Country"?') is of a different order, focusing sharply on 'how far' and 'why' questions, and not requiring any comparisons with the 'legend'. The question encourages entrants to look at why men enlisted, to link the action of enlisting to the feelings of individuals and the attitudes of the society they lived in. More than any of its predecessors, it is a question about historical causation. The 'to what extent' also invites some statistical analysis of enlistment numbers.

One issue may be, however, the extent to which teachers familiar with questions built around the 'legend' will be prepared to facilitate movement away from traditional tropes. Some competitions in earlier years, even though the question for the year was 'non-traditional', still drew winning entries that were heavily freighted with 'legend' themes. Familiar templates may take some shifting.

The authors of this paper have not attempted to investigate how Prize questions are set and who influences their setting but it will be interesting to see if this new approach – historical analysis trumping civics education – can continue. Further, if the emphasis on historical causation rather than desirable qualities persists, what will be the effect on entrant numbers and upon interest among teachers and schools? It would be worth considering whether this change has contributed to the increase since 2009 in both the number of schools providing entrants and the number of entrants: see Figures 1 and 2 above. Will these indicators continue to rise?

More important, perhaps, is the political question. Will the change of emphasis be acceptable to a Coalition Government – and an Australian War Memorial administration – who see the Anzac 'legend' as a central pillar of what it means to be Australian? They could point to the official objective of the Prize, encouraging students 'to focus on the significance of Anzac Day and to consider what Anzac Day means to them and to Australia'. Government paymasters might say a competition which is paid for by dollars labelled 'Civics and Citizenship Education' had better ask questions relevant to civics and citizenship education.



Simpson Prize promotion, [History Teachers' Association of NSW website](#)

What is the future of the Prize?

The answer to this question depends to a great extent on the answer to the question posed in the previous paragraph. Rigorous, evidence-based answers to genuine history questions may sit incongruously, however, with the name of the Prize, given that Simpson has long since morphed from a historical into a mythological figure. Does this matter?

'Simpson, in death', [according to Les Carlyon](#), 'acquired a fame he never had in life. His was an affecting story and the public warmed to it. Simpson became a folk hero and this is never going to change and that is perhaps no bad thing.' A recent winner made a similar point.

Historians are constantly engaging in controversy as to whether the true sequence of events has been manipulated over time – but does it truly matter? Do Australians need to know the “truth”? A more appropriate question is whether the “truth” itself is as important as it is perceived to be. The ANZAC Legend has become central to the Australian identity, built to separate Australia from the mother country in a surge of Nationalism. It is simply the representation of qualities which Australians admire. Therefore, it is not necessary to engross ourselves in questioning the historically accurate sequence of events, but encourage the aspiration of qualities we value.

This winner, like Carlyon, comes down firmly on the side of civics education. The scepticism about ‘truth’ does not reflect an understanding that all history is interpretation and that ‘truth’ is a slippery concept. The scepticism arises instead from a preference for the inculcation of values, even if they are values grounded in myth. Views like this channel a tradition in which civics education templates in various civilisations have drawn upon everything from ‘the city on the hill’ to ‘ein volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer’. They have all included a generous dollop of myth.

We come back then to the relationship between history and mythology and how governments can manipulate that relationship. We are left with three questions, only one of which has a reasonably clear answer. First, do governments have a role in civics or citizenship education? Civics is essentially what the Simpson Prize has been about in the past and may be again, despite the change in the 2015 question.

Secondly, if the answer to that question is ‘yes’ – and it probably has to be, for who else should ‘do’ civics? – how well does that civics education priority, bolstered as it is by government money, square with educational priorities? To put it another way, how far did schools and teachers involved with the Simpson Prize over the years promulgate to students a particular view of our national story, one which effectively obscured history under a layer of civics education based on myth? Should we be relaxed or not about this state of affairs continuing? Do the pedagogical and extension benefits of the Prize outweigh considerations of whether the subject matter being taught is myth or history or a bit of both?

Thirdly, if civics education is inevitable, how far does it need to be linked to military history? Could the following be a reasonable alternative approach to civics education?

- Here [listed] are some values that are respected in many countries around the world and that involve selfless community service.
- Who displays these qualities in Australia today?
- How do Australians benefit from the exercise of these qualities?

These questions follow the template-matching tradition of the Simpson Prize without its khaki tinge. They would elicit answers which highlighted the role of police, fire and emergency services workers, doctors and nurses, teachers and so on, as well as members of the armed services. A change in this direction might also be considered by the promoters of the various state Anzac-related prizes.

Conclusion

As keen observers of Australian history and society we welcome the apparent new direction of the Simpson Prize towards asking proper history questions; we hope it continues. There are certainly more robust competitive models than ones that involve recycling the same or similar questions year after year in a way that encourages ‘cookie-cutter’ responses.

If the change to asking real history questions persists, perhaps the intrinsic interest of the questions will play a larger part in students’ decisions to enter than may have been the case in the past. Even if civics education reasserts itself an emphasis on non-military models might give the Prize wider appeal.

We do not necessarily oppose civics education but we believe it should be decoupled from military exemplars. There are many equally or more worthy – and more universally relevant – models in Australia and in the world than those that derive from the deeds of John Simpson Kirkpatrick and his fellow Anzacs during the invasion of the Ottoman Empire a century ago.

Finally, civics education should be separated from the teaching of history. History is – or should be – about contesting, evidence-based interpretations. Civics education is about inculcating particular behaviours. Civics education and history do not belong in the same timetable slot.

David Stephens is Secretary of Honest History and Steve Flora is a volunteer researcher. Honest History is a broad coalition of historians and others, committed to frank debate and expressing a diversity of opinions on specific issues. Views in this article are the authors’ own.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

A03116

Private A J Currie (left) and 202 Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick (who enlisted as John Simpson), 'The Man with the Donkey'. Both of the 3rd Field Ambulance, in Blackboy Camp in Western Australia. The skeleton was used for instructional purposes and is wearing a slouch hat. C. September 1913 (source: Australian War Memorial, A03116)

Appendix: Simpson Prize questions 1999-2014

1999	The events at Gallipoli in 1915 and subsequent conflicts have all contributed to the creation of the ANZAC tradition and spirit in Australia. This is commemorated every year on ANZAC day. How did the events at Gallipoli or subsequent conflicts shape the ANZAC tradition and spirit? What does the ANZAC tradition mean to Australia?
2000	The story of John Simpson Kirkpatrick is one of courage, mateship, determination and sacrifice. He has come to symbolise the ANZAC spirit.
2001	Gallipoli was a turning point in Australia's history. Assess the impact of the ANZAC experience on Australia and Australians since 1915.
2002	The ANZAC spirit was born in Gallipoli in 1915. Since then it has been demonstrated not only by Australians in war but also by those whose contribution has been in other fields.
2003	How and why Australians have commemorated the ANZAC experience.
2004	Ordinary people doing extraordinary things.
2005	In 2005, Australia commemorates the 90th Anniversary of the Gallipoli campaign and the forging of the ANZAC tradition. What elements of the ANZAC tradition and spirit have remained constant in Australian society?
2006	Courage, mateship, determination, resourcefulness and a sense of humour are identified as characteristics of the ANZAC tradition and spirit.
2007	Consider what values and characteristics demonstrated by the ANZACs at Gallipoli and later reinforced at the Western Front, continue to influence Australians today.
2008	To what extent was Simpson a hero? How have his historic qualities been demonstrated by other Australians since 1915?
2009	World War I had a devastating effect on Australian society. Why should we commemorate our participation in this conflict?
2010	Are there voices missing from the Anzac Legend?
2011	Has the ANZAC legend changed over 95 years?
2012	Why has Australian commemoration of ANZAC Day increased in popularity in recent years?
2013	What does an investigation of primary sources reveal about the Gallipoli experience and to what extent does this explain the origins of the ANZAC Legend?
2014	How well does the Anzac legend tell the story of individual Australian soldiers during World War One?
2015	To what extent did Australians enlist in 1914 to defend the "Mother Country"?