Deborah Gare and Madison Lloyd-Jones, *When War Came to Fremantle, 1899 to 1945*, Fremantle Press, Fremantle, 2014; pp. 144; RRP AU $45.00 (Hardcover).

Anzac has long been a popular topic for Australian readers, and *When War Came to Fremantle, 1899 to 1945*, was one of many histories released as centenary commemoration fever reached a peak toward the end of 2014. While it does include the First World War, the book also addresses phases of fighting and comparative peace from the Boer War through to the end of the Second World War. It is a social rather than a military history, in which life on the home front in Western Australia’s port city of Fremantle is viewed through the lens of war.

The book is a quality hardcover production with an emphasis on photographs, some rare, and all beautifully presented in glossy high resolution. The visual representations provide an immersive sense of what Fremantle was like during these past eras, from warships in the harbor, to streets aflutter with banners and flags. Scenes of departure and arrival, loss and gain, were very much embedded in the daily lives of local people in the past. In the present, Hirsch and others have noted that photography plays a powerful role in the development of postmemory: the immediacy of images can provide a sense of reliving events that occurred in previous generations.\(^1\) Our national experience of war has become part of the Australian subconscious, and many of the scenes of farewell, reunion and remembrance are immediately familiar and emotive as a result.

One of the best features of the book is the comprehensive inclusion of women’s experiences, too often under-acknowledged in histories of war. Each chapter includes details of work and life, from nurses to war brides and beyond. Women’s roles have been integral to every phase of Fremantle life during times of conflict, and they receive ample attention here. Less evident are the experiences of Fremantle residents whose identity did not match that of the majority. For many Italian and other ‘alien’ residents of Western Australia who were arrested and interned during both the First and Second World Wars, life in a time of conflict was considerably different to that of their neighbours. Though there is brief mention of Fremantle’s Italian community in some chapters, I would have liked to see more attention given to this aspect of the history.

---

This leads me to one intermittent concern with *When War Came to Fremantle*: that some of the content is prone to recycling established legends without adding a great deal of critique. The authors have described this volume as a ‘history of emotions,’ suggesting that it can assist us to ‘achieve a greater understanding of the human experience—our experience’ (p. 6). There are important contributions toward that effort in this book, but there are other places where the inclusion or the omission of particular detail provides an incomplete understanding.

The arrival of the hospital ship HMAT *Kyarra* at Fremantle in July 1915 is one such instance. As the first ship to return carrying wounded soldiers from Gallipoli, the *Kyarra*’s voyage was the subject of intense media attention across Australia. *When War Came to Fremantle* relates the tale with heavy reliance on those contemporary newspaper reports, describing the ship as containing, ‘Beds of disabled, feverish, bandaged and shell-shocked survivors… stacked from floor to ceiling’ (p. 37). Examination of a wider range of reporting and original military records suggests a somewhat different picture. Of 487 men on board, only 80 had seen any active service, only 37 were suffering wounds received in battle, and ‘there [was] among them no one particularly disfigured.’

The rest were returning with a range of pre-existing conditions or ailments that had rendered them unfit for service before they could be tested by war. The *Kyarra*’s return was indeed a highly symbolic and emotional moment for a nation reeling with recent loss, but the story also represents a missed opportunity to examine the contextual biases behind these narratives, and the ways they have shaped our broader Anzac impressions—for better or worse—over the past century.

It’s a small detail, but as Martin Crotty and others have warned in recent years, ‘historians of Australians at war carry an unusual burden of responsibility.’ Those writing about the subject, ‘have a public and professional duty to do their best to correct’ misinformation in a topic of such heightened emotion. Indeed, Crotty goes on to recommend that the key to assuming that responsibility is to bring solid academic research to a broader public audience by means including ‘the military history books that now constitute such a central part of the Australian publishing industry.’ This book, compiled by academic authors for a broad readership, attempts and largely achieves just that.

---

2 ‘Arrival of *Kyarra*, *Kalgoorlie Western Argus*, 13 July 1915, p. 35; ‘Back from the Front: Australians on the *Kyarra*, *Western Mail*, 16 July 1915, p. 34. See also original records such as: National Archives of Australia, ‘Incoming passenger list to Fremantle "Kyarra" arrived 9 July 1915’, K269, 9 JUL 1915 KYARRA [online], http://soda.naa.gov.au/record/9870669/1 (Accessed 13 January 2016)

3 M. Crotty, ‘War Stories in Australia: Scholarship, Memory and Public Intellectualism’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2011, p. 148

4 ibid, p. 149

5 Ibid, p. 153
However, my feeling overall is that the 144-page length is too short to do the subject complete justice, reducing the detail in many places to brief snippets. Despite this, it provides an accessible connective summary for the photographs, and a solid overview of Fremantle life across decades shaped by international conflict. The images are the true gem in this volume, given ample space to shine and worth hours of attention. The resulting book should be of interest to lovers of local, military and popular history.

The authors conclude by stating something that my own research into Western Australia’s Great War years strongly supports: that ‘our understanding of the whole can only be shaped by comprehension of local experiences. We can detect in Fremantle’s experience of war, therefore, insights into the broader Australian story of the twentieth century’ (p. 134). We shall need to provide those insights in greater depth to gain a truly comprehensive understanding of the times, but each piece of the puzzle is welcome progress toward that collective goal, and When War Came to Fremantle is a valuable contribution.

Claire Greer - University of Western Australia