
The publication of Robert Bollard’s book is timely. As the centenary of that infamous defeat on a Turkish beach looms, the official website for the commemoration proclaims that the, ‘Anzac Centenary is a milestone of special significance to all Australians. The First World War helped define us as a people and as a nation.’ As Bollard explains, however, the reality is far more complex. *In the Shadow of Gallipoli* examines, not so much the ‘blood and guts’ of the battlefields of the First World War but the Australian home-front: what people faced at home, their changing attitudes to the war, and their responses to the social conditions it created. The popular perception of this time is that the Anzacs of World War One were cheered on in their heroism by the Australian people and celebrated on their return by a grateful population. A united people, loyal to the country and to the British Empire stoically supported the war effort – or so it is commonly believed. What this mythology ignores is that the impact of the war quickly began to reveal the stark divisions of class and sectarianism in Australian society – for example, the Anglo-Protestant socio-political elite regarded those descended from Irish Catholic stock with palpable disdain.

Bollard lucidly describes the Australia that existed in 1914. Australia, at the time, was a self-governing ‘Dominion’ of the British Empire, not an entirely autonomous nation; it had no independent foreign policy. In 1914 war was not declared by Australia, support for Britain’s imperial war effort was merely affirmed by a dutiful demesne. As Bollard illustrates, ‘[t]he crowds that lined the streets to cheer the volunteers in late 1914 and early 1915 ... mostly waved Union Jacks, not the 14-year-old Australian flag’ (p. 26).

The traditional view that is held regarding this period is that the war was greeted with unbridled enthusiasm by the Australian people; young men flocked eagerly to the colours. Again, the situation that Bollard describes in this book is more nuanced. The first rush of recruits mainly consisted of trained soldiers with experience of pre-war militias: ‘more like the mobilisation of an existing army rather than the recruitment of a new one’ (p. 27). The majority of the Australian population were working class and for the most part their lot was a six-day working week:

‘boredom if they were lucky and poverty if they were not’ (p. 29). Bollard suggests that the excitement and adventure offered by enlistment might have propelled more men into the trenches than pure patriotic fervour.

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Bollard highlights the problem facing the historian in assessing the popular mood of the time. In 1914 (perhaps then as now), the print media solely reflected the opinions of the ruling and middle class. The working class was largely ignored except when it was lambasted by the newspapers of the day for going on strike or behaving in a larrikin way. Australia in 1914, however, also contained some small but significant currents of radical thought represented by the Victorian Socialist Party, the Women’s Political Association (which included Adela Pankhurst, the youngest sister in that famous suffragette family) and the revolutionary syndicalist group, the Industrial Workers of the World. From the outbreak of the war these groups shouted their opposition and it was a cry that would be increasingly listened to by the Australian working class.

At the start of the war Australia had the highest rate of unionisation of any country in the world. Employers and government had tried to crush the unions in the 1890s but by 1914 the Australian labour movement had begun to rebuild. The war was marked by a series of strikes, the greatest of which occurred in 1917. Starting with railway workshops in Sydney the strike spread through the industrial centres of New South Wales and within weeks Melbourne, too, was engulfed. This strike would eventually involve workers in every state. Bollard observes that ‘the militancy of the Australian labour movement during World War I appears in stark contrast to the ideal of a patriotic home front, of a nation united in admiration for the deeds of the Anzacs’ (p. 40). But myth-making requires some degree of historical myopia and the wartime wave of strikes has tended to be hidden by the ‘shadow of Gallipoli’. Bollard’s illumination of that dark forgetfulness in this book is a necessary corrective.

Bollard recounts how, in 1916 and again in 1917, the labour movement was instrumental in defeating two referendums on conscription. The first referendum was a particularly bitterly fought affair. The meetings of both pro and anti-conscription groups were broken up by their opponents. The pro-conscription mayor of South Melbourne ‘was chased down the street by an irate mob of 700’ (p. 85). There were, however, exceptions to the labour movement’s solid anti-conscription stance. In Western Australia, ‘the campaign followed a dramatically different path’ for the movement was divided with many unions supporting the pro-conscription Labor Prime Minister Hughes (p. 95).

In the Shadow of Gallipoli is an outstanding book. It is a fascinating, yet straightforward, unpretentious historical narrative of an Australia that seems to belong to a profoundly different age. In the context of an increasingly unpopular war, the left and right of politics fought out their differences in the street and in the workplace. Bollard’s history, however, still resonates with the ‘now’. The threads of continuity are clear. Australia’s unions still face concerted attacks from the right of politics: the Australian Labor Party still seems as determined as ever to embrace the policies of its political rivals; trade union leaders are still willing to betray the interests of those they are meant to serve. Contrary to the vision of an egalitarian Australia, Bollard asserts that the class division and political polarisation that existed then continues today. During World War One, however, Australian working people found the courage and ability to struggle against the established order that had commonly held them in contempt; and, as Bollard concludes, that ‘might be history, but it is also a premonition’ (p. 190).

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