

Abstract

For 126 years, from its first settlement by England to the beginning of the Great War of 1914 to 1918, Australia had been a cultural backwater and wasteland, unknown and unwanted. It was founded as a prison to relieve England's overcrowded gaols and prison hulks; a place where Britain's undesirables were discarded and dumped, whether for 7 or 14 years, or even for the term of their natural life. Over the course of the 19th century, new born Australians began to develop a desire for belonging, not only as free men and women, but also as internationally recognised as such. Australians were slowly breaking away from their convict past and developing a taste for freedom and mateship. This idea appeared in songs and poems, and as the 19th century went by, Australians were trying to find their place in the world. To provide context, the thesis begins by briefly looking at some important events prior to Australia's involvement in World War One. Beginning with the origins and effects of the convict era, the thesis looks at an important period which was to shape how Australians looked at themselves, in diminishing degrees, up until the 1960s, and how they dealt with the issues of the so-called "convict stain". It then traces Australian life through the first recordings of the "Australian type" with the Currency lads and lasses, then the Cornstalks, and then William Wentworth's "Australasian" in 1823, when the Australian was first mentioned in poetry. The thesis also highlights some of the more significant events in early Australian history from the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 to Federation in 1901. Each of the events mentioned is included to show the developing climate of the Australian character and how the country slowly moved from the obscurity of *terra nullius* to Australia; from prison, through colony to Federated nation.

To provide further context in relation to the Australian involvement in the Great War, an outline is given of the three campaigns in which Australia fought. Gallipoli, as the most significant moment of Australia's military service, shaped Australian attitudes for the rest of the war, and even beyond. The eight months on the peninsula helped formulate the near mythical status of the Anzac soldier. The Sinai, often referred to as the forgotten war, established the Australian horsemen who were romanticised in Australian literature before and after the war. And the Western Front polished the mythical and romanticised Australian into a soldier feared by Germans. All three theatres of war gave rise to poetry ranging from comedy to tragedy, and in so doing, brought to birth a national sense of identity which had never before

existed. Yet while the British poets would become bitter, Australian poets never lost the sense of patriotic duty. Writing on the funeral cards of her sons Albert and Douglas, both of whom were killed in action, Mrs Meggy, herself a poet, demonstrates this clearly: “He died so gloriously that the shadow of our loss, dark as it seemed at first, is already melting in the radiance of his gain. To die young, ardent, to die swiftly, in perfect health, to die saving others from death, to die scaling heights, to die and to carry with you into the fuller, ampler life beyond all the freshness and gladness of May. Is that not cause for joy rather than sorrow? He is one stage ahead of us on a journey which we all must take.”

A short commentary on Tyrtaeus’ elegiac poetry and the significance of Great War poetry in general is followed by a comparison with English war poetry, and then a short look at the Australian bardic poet from whom Australian poets seem to take much inspiration. Prior to the main body of the thesis are the criteria used for inclusion. These criteria establish the requirements each poet must fulfil in order to be considered part of the canon which has resulted from the research.

The thesis is divided into five chapters which look at significant developmental components in the rise of national identity seen through Australian poetry of the Great War. However, the poetry is put into context by the inclusion of other writings. In chapter one, “Who’ll come a Waltzing Matilda with me?” the thesis addresses the early attitudes to war in Australia, which were filled with patriotic fervour and an eagerness to join up and fight. It also explains that Australian involvement had been predicted by Australian poets in William Wentworth’s 1823 “Australasia” and Henry Lawson’s 1895 “The Star of Australasia”. In chapter two, “Kangaroo Feathers”, the thesis looks at some elements of the Australian sense of humour and the importance of mateship which is bound up with the notion of the Billjim. The idea was that whatever Australians did, they did together, and in so doing, they formed a much stronger national bond than had existed prior to the war. The third chapter, “Greek Gods and Bronzed Anzacs”, looks into the way Australians saw themselves. The attachment to Greek mythology was formed at Gallipoli, but it affected Australians in a way that made them something like historically distant co-participants in the legends of war. Many poets took inspiration from the surrounding Greek histories of Troy and the Hellespont, known from classical antiquity. The large volume of Thermopylaen epitaphic poetry shows that the young nation of Australia felt more than a mere connection with ancient times; rather, it felt itself as a continuation. Chapter four, “Theatres of War”, looks at Australia’s changing attitudes to war. It was not a change from patriotic fervour to despondent cynicism as seen for example in British

poetry in the development from Rupert Brooke to Siegfried Sassoon, but rather a change from high patriotic enthusiasm to a deeper love of Australia. Australian poets would have moments of complaint, but never a sense that it was all for nothing. In the final chapter, “We will remember them”, the thesis looks at how Australian memory of the dead and wounded affected them; how the loss of mates had brought about a national awareness of the cost of war, taking the national consciousness away from a desire to be part of the wider world to wanting to simply be free in the new land of their birth.

Australian Great War poetry helped record the shaping of the Australian character by bringing Australians out of a feeling of being colonial convicts to a sense that they were free men and women of the British Empire. The Australian national sense of identity had risen as the “Star of the South” in what Australian poet Henry Lawson called in 1895 “...the lurid clouds of war”. William Wentworth had declared in 1823 that Australia, “the last born infant would arise in a future war to glad the heart of the parent [England’s] eye.” The Great War, then, was to be the poetic baptism of Australian identity, and Australian poets would record in verse Australia’s emergence from *terra nullius* to international significance. Australians now saw their increased sense of self-worth as a far more significant canvas for mateship and intellectual emancipation. The national character then was a shared freedom where mateship evolved from enjoyable adventure to fraternal duty. In all this, Australian Great War poets produced a record which, supported by other texts, shows how Australia’s national identity developed in the Great War.

The research is based primarily on archival research, and considers the primary source material as the key to unlocking both historical and characteristic insights into the rise of Australian national identity, while the secondary source material aids these insights. The research has been conducted by firstly establishing strict criteria for the inclusion of poets, followed by the gathering of material on their lives and work. This was done by various means, such as starting a Face Book page and getting the general public involved, making contacts with families, visiting the Australian War Memorial, and years of searching libraries, specialist bookshops, diaries, and private collections. Over that time I managed to build my own Australian Great War library which became my primary point of reference. To help focus my research and provide a central location of primary material I developed a website which provides poems, biographies, photos, articles, service records and links. Because there is almost no secondary material on Australian Great War poetry, it fell to me to generate discussion by creating a journal and a newsletter, both of which, along with the website, now form the central

archive of Australian Great War poetry which is being referenced by other interested parties. It is because of all this that I was able to research this thesis, and thus write a comprehensive work which demonstrates the rise of national identity in Australian poetry of the Great War.