

The History Council of NSW

is pleased to award the



• MAX KELLY MEDAL •

for
2008
to

Grant Mansfield

for his essay

The Costs of War: patriotism and price-fixing during the opening months of the Great War in Australia

Prime Minister Andrew Fisher's cry in July 1914 that Australia would support Britain to 'the last man and the last shilling' is often seen as emblematic of the total military and economic commitment that the young dominion offered to the 'mother country' in this great world crisis. Yet the winner of this year's Max Kelly Medal, Grant Mansfield, peers behind this response to illuminate that not all took Fisher's clarion call literally. In the first weeks of the war there was growing public and political anxiety that the business community were taking advantage of the war and opting for profit over patriotism. Dramatic price increases were greeted as an affront not only to the hip-pocket but to the notion of a 'just-price', which lay at the very heart of the idea of a moral economy in British communities. The public view was that economic self-interest too should make way for patriotism. Mansfield shows that – in a country where government intervention to protect the consumer from monopolies and other unsavoury business practices had become an article of faith – the advent of war added a new layer of patriotic fervour to public expectations of how businesses ought to act. Governments were again placed under enormous pressure to step in and Mansfield points out that the matter of price regulation topped the agenda at the emergency Premiers conference held one week after war was declared.

While sections of the labour movement saw the price rises as confirmation of an evil capitalist war, Mansfield shows that this was an argument less between capital and labour than one which raged within the business community itself. Concerned at being depicted as unpatriotic, many businesses – publicly at least – expressed the view that price rises were against the spirit of the time in which sacrifice was to be endured by all.

Nevertheless this rubbed uneasily against another view which held that while wars come and go, the imperatives of business endured. These fractures and fissures within the business community were not easily resolved. And as time wore on, Mansfield shows that the statements of sound intent by businesses 'increasingly looked like little more than cynical public relations exercises designed to curry public favour, rather than firm undertakings to be guided by patriotism in their dealings with consumers'. A growing public backlash, led and fed by the mainstream press, thus reveals a more complex and complicated approach to the notion of economic patriotism in the early weeks of the war. In essence, this led to the articulation of what Mansfield suggests was a 'practical patriotism...a philosophy that, in effect, provided a practical cover to aggressive and exploitative business behaviour'. Increasingly, the consumer became the meat in the sandwich as the issue of price-fixing and price gouging sparked a blame game between retailers and wholesalers. The essay shows that the business community were judged to have acted outside the boundaries of what was considered an acceptable patriotism in which sacrifice was seen to extend to all realms of society, including the economic sector.

A hallmark of the essay is its clarity of expression and its ability to convey the essence of a sometimes complex debate in plain, jargon-free English. The scholarship is founded on rigorous primary research, combining an extensive coverage of both the major metropolitan and regional print media with some useful archival material. The argument is tightly focussed and Mansfield goes some distance in convincing us to take a more careful look at the early weeks of the war. Not all, it seems, wanted to see the 'last shilling' disappear from their own coffers.





• MAX KELLY MEDAL •

2008

Judges' Report

Fifteen entries were received for this year's Max Kelly Medal. The judges found the standard to be high. The winner of the Max Kelly Medal for 2008 is Grant Mansfield for his essay "The Costs of War: patriotism and price-fixing during the opening months of the Great War in Australia".

The judges also highly commend the following entrants:

"An Incubus upon the district": Private property, civilisation and the Field of Mars Common
By Jane Taylor

This is a challenging, incisive, well researched and richly contextualised piece of historical writing, opening up a new front in the history of land reform in Australia. Jane Taylor shows how the Report of the NSW Government's Select Committee on the Field of Mars Common in 1862 was intimately connected to a set of broader anxieties and fears concerning the colony's future. Exploring the link between private property, morality and order on the one hand, and communal ownership, disorder and criminality on the other, Taylor rescues the question of the commons from obscurity and places it firmly back in the front-line of historical inquiry. Taylor illustrates that far from being a dry argument about land tenure, many thought that the progress and the civilisation of the colony itself were at stake. An impressive achievement.

US citizenship for Australian war brides: its impact on their lives
By Robyn Anne Arrowsmith

This lively and sensitively written piece explores the dilemma for Australian World War Two brides who returned to America with their new husbands and took up American citizenship, but in doing so forfeited their rights as Australian citizens. Robyn Anne Arrowsmith draws on a rich vein of oral history to show how these women – an estimated 15000 Australian WW2 brides went to the US – dealt with the loss of citizenship and nationality upon marriage. It was a painful process for many. As Arrowsmith shows they had become 'aliens in their adopted country'. The result is a compelling and engaging study of citizenship and the role of the war bride as wife and mother.

