

The (First) “Battle of the Wasser”, 2 April 1915: A Footnote in History?

On the afternoon of Good Friday, 1915, roughly 3,000 Anzac troops, stationed in Egypt for their training, looted and burned brothels and shops in the Wasser – Cairo’s red-light district. They smashed windows, hurled debris onto bonfires in the street, “roughly handled” the fire brigade (war correspondent Charles Bean’s own words) and threw objects at the mounted military police, who attempted to disperse the mob. In return, the military police fired on the crowd, injuring several. According to one account, Anzacs, wildly driving a motor vehicle, ran over and killed a local child.¹ Order was eventually restored in the early hours of the next morning. This riot became popularly known as the “Battle of the Wasser”.²

Bean discounted the significance of the riots in *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, confining his commentary to a footnote: “They were not heroic, but they also differed very little from what at Oxford and Cambridge and in Australian universities is known as a ‘rag’.” In the next sentence, he contended that the subsequent good behaviour of Australians servicemen, who did not partake in a street riot in Cairo in February 1919, overshadowed any previous mischief.³ In 1985, David Kent asserted a now widely-held perception of Bean’s writing – Bean was “an exceedingly selective editor who rejected anything which might have modified his vision or tarnished the name of ‘Anzac’”.⁴ This begs the question: were these Wasser riots tragic outliers uncharacteristic of Australian combatants or do they illustrate broader Australian engagement with Egypt during the First World War?

In liberal democracies, popular and academic historians, competing with state intervention in history writing, often write politicised war histories. As a society, we stuff war through the narrow filter of present-day cultural concerns – the need for a binding myth of national sacrifice, for instance. In Australia, politicians such as John Howard have renewed and expanded the significance of the “Anzac Legend”, reflecting what Jay Winter describes as “the second memory boom” of the late twentieth century.⁵ School history syllabuses, war memorials, commemorations and book prizes have consequently become sites of postcolonial conflict over national identity.⁶

¹ C. E. W Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Volume 1, The Story of Anzac: The First Phase* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1941), 130, footnote 12. Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australians Soldiers in the Great War* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1975), 39.

² Eric Harford Ward diary, MLDOC 1300, Mitchell Library, New South Wales.

³ Bean, *The Official History*, 130, footnote 12.

⁴ D. A. Kent, ‘The Anzac Book and the Anzac Legend: C.E.W Bean as Editor and Image-Maker’, *Australian Historical Studies* 21, no. 84 (April 1985): 376.

⁵ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War and Historical Memory in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁶ On history curricula, see: Anna Clark, *History’s Children: History Wars in the Classroom* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008). Robert J. Parkes, ‘Reading History Curriculum as Postcolonial Text: Towards a Curricular Response to the History Wars in Australia and Beyond’, *Curriculum Inquiry* 37, no. 5 (December 2007): 383-400. Heather Sharp, ‘Historical Representations of Gallipoli in the Australian Curriculum’, *Agora* 49, no. 2 (June 2014): 14-23. On public rituals, see: Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward, “‘It was Really Moving, Mate’: The Gallipoli Pilgrimage and Sentimental Nationalism in Australia”, *Australian Historical Studies* 38, no. 129 (April 2007): 141-151. John R. Stephens, ‘Circuits of Memory: The War Memory Boom in Western Australia’, *Societies* 2, no. 4 (August 2012): 84-100. On book prizes,

This veneration of Anzac troops is an ahistorical form of remembering. The popular embrace of war, as seen in public rituals of commemoration, is increasingly an emotional embrace, whereby participants connect with the past but do not necessarily understand it.⁷ Anxiety over history syllabuses has spanned the political spectrum. But conservative backlash against “political correctness” especially has dictated the frequent re-writing of Australian history curricula. Beginning with the revision of radical 1992 alterations to the national history curriculum, political interference has ensured a move away from progressive pedagogies and a multiplicity of historical narratives and approaches. The desired focus on triumphalist white history among conservatives rests on a nostalgic return to “a golden age of traditional classrooms and textbooks”.⁸ These intertwined phenomena – commemoration and education policy – brush aside the more critical understanding of the past advocated by historians.

Besides a few seminal works, such as *What's Wrong with Anzac?* and *Bad Characters: Sex, Crime, Mutiny, Murder and the Australian Imperial Force*, historians have preferred to investigate the heroic battlefield achievements of Anzac troops than the dark, perverted side of warfare.⁹ As Dale Blaire and Emily Gallagher suggests, modern veneration of the Anzacs pushes atrocities, such as chemical warfare and the “joyful killing” of prisoners, behind a curtain. The democratisation of credible authority on the past lends itself to the mistaken idea that Commonwealth troops rarely used mustard gas during World War One. This allows Australian soldiers to strut on stage with their dirty secrets hidden away.¹⁰ I intend to shine a limelight on a more naked Anzac.

My own reading of World War One diaries, particularly Eric Ward’s diary, in which he dedicated an extensive entry to the “Battle of the Wasser” inspired this project.¹¹ Reading the writing of Charles Bean and Australian soldiers, many of whom revelled in the riots in Cairo, convinced me that there is, worthy of scholarly attention, an overlooked, sinister side to the supposedly harmless larrikinism and good-humoured horseplay of the AIF in the Great War. I do not come to the evidence with a predetermined desire to undermine national myths or promote national fragmentation, despite my distance from the “Three Cheers” version of

see, for instance: John Lyons, ‘Blainey Ire over PM’s History Prize’, *The Weekend Australian*, 17-18 November 2007, 1-2.

⁷ McKenna and Ward, “The Gallipoli Pilgrimage”, 141-151.

⁸ Anna Clark, ‘Whose History?: Teaching Australia’s Contested Past’, *Curriculum Studies* 36, no. 5 (2004): 533-541. Quote p. 539. Anna Clark, “Getting Back to the Facts”: When Politics Meets Pedagogy in History Education’, *The History Teacher* 40, no. 3 (December 2002): 20-25. Parkes, ‘Reading History Curriculum as Postcolonial Text’, 383-400.

⁹ Mark McKenna, ‘Lest We Inflate: Why Do Australians Lust for War Stories?’, *The Monthly*, December 2012, <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2012/december/1363672450/mark-mckenna/lest-we-inflate>. Some historians have touched on the indiscipline of Australian soldiers in World War One but Peter Stanley is the only scholar to give this story book-length analysis. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, ed., *What's Wrong with Anzac?: The Militarisation of Australian History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010). Peter Stanley, *Bad Characters: Sex, Crime, Mutiny, Murder and the Australian Imperial Force* (Sydney: Pier 9, 2010). Glenn Wahlert, *The Other Enemy? Australian Soldiers and the Military Police* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Nathan Wise, “‘In military parlance I suppose we were mutineers’”: Industrial Relations in the Australian Imperial Force during World War I’, *Labour History* 101 (November 2011), 161-176.

¹⁰ Dale Blair, ‘The Nonsense of Universal Australian “Fair Play” in War’, in *Anzac’s Dirty Dozen: 12 Myths of Australian Military History*, ed. Craig Stockings (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2012): 112-137. Dale Blair, *No Quarter: Unlawful Killing in the Australian War Experience 1915-1918* (Canberra: Ginninderra Press, 2005). Emily Gallagher, “‘The First Casualty When War Comes is Truth’: Neglected Atrocities in First World War Australian Memory”, *History in the Making* 4, no. 1 (2015): 54-64.

¹¹ Eric Harford Ward diary, MLD0C 1300, Mitchell Library, New South Wales.

Australian history.¹² I merely believe, as Joy Damousi argues, that historians have an “ethical responsibility to engage with a range of perspectives that do not simplify but complicate the story of Gallipoli and the memory of war”.¹³ This is especially pressing considering the politicisation of Australia’s military history. Like Inga Clendinnen, I distrust “history as patriotism or as group therapy”.¹⁴

Aligning with a recent vein of scholarship that promotes training, leave and tourism as central aspects of wartime experience for Anzac troops during the Great War, I will focus on Anzac soldiers’ training in Egypt between 1914 and 1916.¹⁵ I am wary of the overemphasis in military historiography on large-scale battles, high-ranking officers, morbid statistics and maps – “a brutal narrative based on the deployments and motives of commanders with a score sheet of those who performed well and those who failed”, as Michael McKernan asserts.¹⁶ Historiography and popular memory of Australia’s involvement in World War One tends to focus on battlefields, such as Gallipoli, as a site of analysis. In saying that, I acknowledge James Wieland’s stinging criticism of Richard White, the latter of whom argued that Australian soldiers and nurses understood their war through the lens of tourism. I view training and tourism as *an* aspect of wartime service – indeed one that has been understudied – but not *the* defining feature.¹⁷

While Blair and Gallagher concentrate on the traditional battlefield, the destructive possibilities of the First Australian Imperial Force’s indiscipline often emerged while soldiers were on leave, as during the “Battle of the Wasser”.¹⁸ This essay suggests there is a scholarly need to reconceptualise what constitutes a “battlefield”. While Anzac troops did not physically harm sex workers in the brothels they besieged during the riot, in line with Australian notions of chivalry, they specifically targeted female domesticity, making the feminine sphere a battlefield in itself.

Far from seeing war as representative of otherness, as incomprehensible for those uninitiated in battle, I will situate the homefront and battlefront in dialogue.¹⁹ As Bart Ziino

¹² Geoffrey Blainey, ‘Drawing Up a Balance Sheet of our History’, *Quadrant* 37, no.7-8 (1993): 10-15.

¹³ Joy Damousi, ‘Why Do We Get So Emotional About Anzac?’, in *What’s Wrong with Anzac?: The Militarisation of Australian History*, eds. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 95.

¹⁴ Inga Clendinnen, ‘History as a Preferred Past Only Hampers the Way to Clearer Future’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 October, 2003, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/history-as-a-preferred-past-only-hampers-the-way-to-clearer-future-20031016-gdhlzf.html>. See also: Inga Clendinnen, ‘Fellow Sufferers: History and Imagination’, *Australian Humanities Review* 3 (September 1996), <http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/1996/09/01/fellow-sufferers-history-and-imagination/>.

¹⁵ Felicity Barnes, ‘Bill Massey’s Tourists in the Big Smoke: Rethinking the First World War’s Role in New Zealand’s National Identity’, *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 33, no. 2 (December 2015): 89-107. James Curran, “‘Bonjoor Paree!’: The First AIF in Paris, 1916-1918’, *Journal of Australian Studies* 23, no. 60 (January 1999): 18-26. Paul T. Nicholson and Steve Mills, ‘Soldier Tourism in First World War Egypt and Palestine: The Evidence of Photography’, *Journal of Tourism History* 9, no. 2-3 (2017): 205-222. Richard White, ‘Europe and the Six-Bob-a-Day Tourist: The Great War as a Grand Tour, or Getting Civilised’, *Australian Studies* 5 (1991): 122-139. Richard White, ‘The Soldiers as Tourist: The Australian Experience of the Great War’, *War & Society* 5, no. 1 (May 1987): 63-77. Richard White, ‘Sun, Sand and Syphilis: Australian Soldiers and the Orient, Egypt 1914’, *Australian Cultural History* 9 (1990): 49-64. Bart Ziino, ‘A Kind of Round Trip: Australian Soldiers and the Tourist Analogy, 1914-1918’, *War & Society* 25, no. 2 (October 2006): 39-52.

¹⁶ Michael McKernan, *Gallipoli: A Short History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010), xxviii.

¹⁷ James Wieland, ‘There and Back with the Anzacs: More than Touring?’, *Journal of the Australian War Memorial* 18 (April 1991): 49-56.

¹⁸ First Australian Imperial Force henceforth referred to as 1st AIF.

¹⁹ Numerous historians, such as Paul Fussell, have underlined the incapacity of outsiders to comprehend the horrors of war. Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 267-297. See also: Max Hastings, ‘Imagining the Unimaginable’, review of *On War and Writing*, by Samuel Hynes, *New York Review of Books*, 10 May, 2018: 14-18.

writes: “Home, or at least its promises, shaped the experience of war as much as anything that awaited on the battlefield.”²⁰ The behaviour of Anzac troops in Egypt was intimately tied to the cultural baggage they brought from home. But perhaps it was not so much the “promises of home” that influenced the actions and writing of Anzac troops in Egypt, but the criticism, colonial attitudes and moralistic judgement of those on the home front, particularly in relation to venereal disease, which was widespread among soldiers.

Australian servicemen forced their morality onto the local populace, who they engaged with in a uniquely Australian way. Far from adopting the respectful distance of British (and arguably Kiwi) troops, Australian soldiers took a hands-on approach to asserting their racial hegemony. Sexual relationships with prostitutes, violence towards locals, verbal abuse and rioting were key ways in which Australians soldiers engaged with the landscape and its people.²¹

“Our men were cheek by jowl with the natives when they landed”: Australians in Egypt²²

Western writers waxed lyrical about Cairo’s beauty when they observed the city from a distance. Describing the view from the train window, Captain Hector Dinning asserted: “... nothing more beautiful will you see in nocturnal illumination than the lights of Cairo from the Delta... If you want to gaze your fill on the lights of Cairo, go some evening (next time you come on leave) to the Pyramids. You can sit there (without the slightest fear of embarrassing lovers) for an hour. If you wish it you may stay longer. You probably will wish it.”²³ When the landscape adhered to mystical preconceptions of orientalism, enchantment with Egypt brightened written accounts. Australians saw this more “authentic” Egypt when they escaped the crowds of Cairo’s urban rat warrens. Contemplating the horizon in solitude on the steps of a Pyramid was therefore the best way to enjoy Egypt, as was exploring rural regions, such as Rod-el-Faraq, which was, according to Dinning, “pure Arab – untrammelled by European”. The underlying assumption to most Australian accounts of Egypt was that Cairo’s cosmopolitanism had made the city a den of vice. At Rod-el-Faraq, in contrast: “The moon floods the street with a pale opalescence that is the atmospheric counterpart of the intoxicating sunset of the Delta. The light minarets gleam in it. The dilapidation of the crowded dwellings is lost. So is their filth. They are transformed into pearl-fringed masses.”²⁴ Despite his condescension towards Egyptian people, Captain Knyvett too believed there was beauty in Egypt, if only in the desert.²⁵

As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, Western scholars have long adopted a selective, Eurocentric approach to understanding the Orient. By perceiving collective significance in

²⁰ Ziino, “A Kind of Round Trip”, 41. Joan Beaumont similarly integrates the homefront and battlefield. Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2013).

²¹ Suzanne Brugger, *Australians and Egypt, 1914-1919* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980), 39-47. Stanley, *Bad Characters*, 28-37.

²² C.E.W Bean, *Bean’s Gallipoli: The Diaries of Australia’s Official War Correspondent*, ed. Kevin Fewster (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2007), 37.

²³ Hector Dinning, *Nile to Aleppo: With the Light-Horse in the Middle East* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1920), 43-49. Quote p. 47.

²⁴ Dinning, *Nile to Aleppo*, 235-243. Quotes, pp. 238, 240.

²⁵ R. Hugh Knyvett, *‘Over There’ with the Australians* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1918), 88-89. See also: David Doull, *With the Anzacs in Egypt: Life and Scenes in the Land of the Pharaohs, as Seen through Australian Spectacles* (Sydney: J. A. Packer, 1916). Bean, *Bean’s Gallipoli*, 37-38. Patsy Adam-Smith, *The Anzacs* (Melbourne: Penguin Group, 2002), 65.

individual actions, Westerners are prone to generalising the Orient.²⁶ Thus, in an instructional manual for Australian troops in Egypt published early in 1915, the author, Charles Bean, provided sketches of racial types soldiers would find on Cairo streets, as if the troops should capture them in a few words or a photograph before quickly moving on.²⁷

When faced with the “Gyppo” at close quarters, however, Australian soldiers were far more ambivalent. On the one hand, the senior military bureaucracy encouraged the preservation of white racial hegemony, warning troops to remain distant from locals. Instruction manuals, hastily published for Australian combatants, reflected this aspiration. As soon as Bean arrived in Egypt, he was ordered to prepare a booklet – *What to Know in Egypt: A Guide for Australian Soldiers*. This doubled as a tourist guide. In it Bean warned: “The only safe rule is never to speak to a native woman at all... A great part of the population is anxious to know the European in order to make money out of him. They will become a nuisance if allowed to be familiar”. The handbook included a dozen helpful phrases in Arabic, including two ways of saying “go away”.²⁸ Writers, such as Hector Dinning, worried about the white woman’s exposure to Egypt and recommended separating her as much as possible from oriental circles.²⁹

Contrary to the hopes of the military bureaucracy, Australian servicemen did not keep Egypt at arm’s length. (Cairo’s brothels proved particularly irresistible.) They took a particularly hands-on approach to commanding Egyptian respect. As Suzanne Brugger argues, Australians interacted with local people and landscapes differently from British troops, who tended to maintain a respectful distance:

The Australian troops’ habit of ignoring the established conventions of behaviour where they felt them to be superfluous, and of recognizing no authority over their actions other than personal inclination thus resulted, paradoxically, both in demonstrations of friendliness towards Egyptians and displays of unrestrained hostility, seemingly conflicting manifestations which were yet akin in their rejection of the accepted social code.³⁰

Charles Bean believed this behaviour inevitably resulted from the cultural clash between Australians and Egyptians.³¹ The conduct of New Zealand troops in Egypt was similar but possibly less extreme. Historians Chris Clark and Joey Hwang have shown that New Zealand soldiers often included disparaging remarks about Australian unruliness in their diaries and letters.³² New Zealand officers encouraged their men “to have nothing to do with the

²⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

²⁷ C. E. W. Bean, *What to Know in Egypt: A Guide for Australasian Soldiers* (Cairo: Société orientale de publicité, 1915), 26-28.

²⁸ Bean, *What to Know in Egypt*, 28, 31. See also: *The Soldier’s Friend: A Practical Guide to Cairo and Nile for A.I.F.*, 2nd edn. (Cairo 1915), Monash Collections Online, accessed 24 June 2018, <https://repository.monash.edu/items/show/35137#..>

²⁹ Dinning, *Nile to Aleppo*, 46.

³⁰ Brugger, *Australians and Egypt*, 45.

³¹ Bean, *Bean’s Gallipoli*, 37.

³² Chris Clark, ‘What About New Zealand? The Problematic History of the Anzac Connection’, in *Anzac’s Dirty Dozen: 12 Myths of Australian Military History*, ed. Craig Stockings (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2012): 54-58. Joey Hwang, ‘The Great War, Colonialism, Native Peoples, and National Identity in Australia and New Zealand’ (Master’s thesis, California State University, 2017), 16-29.

Australians”. Bean noted in *The Official History* “a certain coolness between Australian and New Zealand troops in Cairo.”³³

Australian soldiers relied on hyper-masculine displays of intimidation and physical coercion. Many soldiers considered it their own responsibility to subdue the “Gyppo”, via extralegal violence, into quiet subservience. A seemingly innocuous prize fight between a member of the 2nd battalion of the AIF and a local Egyptian – won by the Australian – warranted mention in the battalion’s unit history precisely because it proved the superiority of Australian masculinity.³⁴ Egyptian boot-shiners frequently harassed and frustrated soldiers with their methods of extracting payment. Dinning recounted a common method of combatting these “boot-boys”: “Brussha-boots, Sair?” Frequently the boot is “put in” in response to this.”³⁵ Captain Kynvett boasted in his memoir:

There was a good deal of Irish blood among us, and many men who would rather fight than go to the opera, so there was some good old ding-dong scraps. Of course the ‘Gyppo’ is no fighter, but he can stand behind and throw stones and can’t resist plunging the knife into an inviting back, so sometimes our boys would get laid out... I saw a pretty ugly-looking crowd dispersed with a characteristic Australian weapon. Firing over their heads had no effect, nor threats of a bayonet charge, but when two Australian bushmen began plying stockwhips, those niggers made themselves scarcer than mice on the smell of a cat.³⁶

In a fit of “racial chauvinism”, Kynvett contrasted the Australian way of fighting with the dishonourable, cowardly and effeminate methods of the Egyptian.³⁷ In an unpublished monograph, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Duke expressed his disdain for Egyptians who cried “like kids” when troops “got a bit rough” with them.³⁸

Australian combatants took the law into their own hands. Kynvett recounted:

Jerry was one of the officers of the picket... Jerry would generally stroll ahead with his cane and walk into the resort of the worst ruffians of the earth with all the assurance of a general at the head of a brigade. He would announce to these, that it was time to close up, and there was something in his bearing that commanded prompt obedience... nothing ever ruffled Jerry. One night a senior officer attached to the

³³ Bean, *The Official History*, 129.

³⁴ F.W. Taylor and T.A. Cusack, *Nulli Secundus: A History of the Second Battalion, AIF, 1914-1919* (Sydney: New Century Press, 1942).

³⁵ Dinning, *Nile to Aleppo*, 45. Numerous other sources corroborate this Australian tradition of kicking (and striking) swindlers. See, for instance: K. S. Inglis, ‘Letters from a Pilgrimage’, *Canberra Times*, 15 April 1965, 2. A. W. Keown, *Forward with the Fifth: The Story of Five Years’ War Service Fifth Inf. Battalion, A.I.F.* (Melbourne: The Specialty Press, 1921), 62. Kynvett, ‘*Over There’ with the Australians*, 83, 93-94, 98-99. E. J. Rule, *Jacka’s Mob* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1933), 32.

³⁶ Kynvett, ‘*Over There’ with the Australians*, 90-91.

³⁷ Mario Ruiz applies the label of “racial chauvinism” to Kynvett’s writing in Mario M. Ruiz, ‘Manly Spectacles and Imperial Soldiers in Wartime Egypt, 1914-1919’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 3 (May 2009): 362.

³⁸ C. R. Duke, ‘An Anzac Looks Back’, unpublished manuscript, F 940.426092 D877a, Australian War Memorial, 37, quoted in Brugger, *Australians and Egypt*, 41.

commandant came down in a tearing rage, and began to dress Jerry down for having presumed to close up a certain gambling resort without consulting the authorities.³⁹

In his diary, Private William Burrell documented with relish that he “raided native & french brothels : 11 arrests : nearly all in bed : fun galore raiding & searching the houses : officer stopped one with his revolver”. He closely noted the number of arrests, making a mental scoresheet. The next day, he added to his tally: “raiding brothels again... got 6 in bed”.⁴⁰ While historians face difficulties in accessing official records of misconduct in the armed services during the Great War, there is, as Brugger asserts, expansive documentation of theft, violence, verbal abuse, vulgar harassment of women and rape in memoirs, letters, diaries and newspapers, so expansive indeed that Peter Stanley has written an entire book on the theme of Anzac misbehaviour during the Great War.⁴¹

Far from regretting their mistreatment of local Egyptians, the vast majority of Anzac troops revelled in the destruction they caused in Cairo. This glee manifested itself in soldierly writing in frequent narrative humour. In diaries, memoirs and battalion histories, where the authors discuss training in Egypt, the “Gyppo” looms large as a conniving but easily subdued figure, almost as a court jester. Euphemisms – “high spirits” – and humour bathe their pages in sanitary liquid. As Captain Hector Dinning of the Australian Light Horse quipped in his memoir, *Nile to Aleppo*: “it is the combination of the soldier and the Gyppo that has produced most of the Cairenese humour we love. And it is the humour of the place we shall remember longest – not its monuments.”⁴²

Bean’s *Official History of Australia in the War* and unit histories frame training in Egypt as a jovial period prior to the commencement of more serious fighting and true hardship.⁴³ Battalion histories, published in limited numbers soon after the war for the battalion’s members, conform to two distinctive moulds. Either the authors relied heavily on the adjutant’s unit diary, which usually made a dry, objective account of the battalion’s past, or they drew from wider contemporary writing and the personal papers of troops. The latter methodology nurtured a more personalised, humorous and anecdotal account.⁴⁴ In the history of the 11th battalion, Walter Bedford described how “The orange-sellers used to come round with baskets, but soon found that was no good, as the fruit had a mysterious way of disappearing. Afterwards, they used to carry the oranges in huge pockets sewn into the folds of their voluminous garments, but... the troops had a way of turning them upside down and all the oranges would cascade from their

³⁹ Knyvett, *Over There with the Australians*, 95-96.

⁴⁰ William Burrell diary, MLMSS 1375/Item 1, State Library of NSW, 73-74.

⁴¹ Brugger, *Australians and Egypt*, 37-45. Stanley, *Bad Characters*.

⁴² Dinning, *Nile to Aleppo*, 264.

⁴³ Bean, *The Official History*, 115-139. Walter C. Bedford, *Legs Eleven: Being the Story of the 11th Battalion (A.I.F.) in the Great War of 1914-1918* (Perth: Imperial Printing Company, 1940), 31-49. Norman K. Harvey, *From Anzac to the Hindenburg Line: The History of the 9th Battalion, A.I.F.* (Brisbane: William Books & Co., 1941), 13-21. Keown, *Forward with the Fifth*, 44-75. Captain C. Longmore, *The Old Sixteenth: Being a Record of the Battalion, A.I.F., during the Great War, 1914-1918* (Perth: History Committee of the 16th Battalion Association, 1929), 27-33. Thomas A. White, *The Fighting Thirteenth: The History of the Thirteenth Battalion, A.I.F.* (Sydney: Tyrells, 1924), 23-25. Eric Wren, *Randwick to Hargicourt: History of the 3rd Battalion, A. I. F.* (Sydney: Ronald G. McDonald, 1935), 28-43.

⁴⁴ This second type of unit history often clearly demarcated the line between those the soldiers adored and those they disliked. As of yet, there is no historiographical writing on the conventions and methodologies of World War One battalion histories. This assessment comes from my own reading of Australian battalion histories from the Great War and from discussions with Peter Hobbins.

pockets...” While conceding that soldiers were often “too importunate”, Bedford excused these actions as “high spirits”.⁴⁵

In Australian eyes, the “Gyppo” was an obsequious mimic attempting to extort tourists by replicating their habits and slang. Mimetic performance featured prominently in interactions between Australians and Egyptians. As the sociologist John Urry argues in *The Tourist Gaze*, tourist expectations and cultural stereotypes inform heritage commodification. Local populations reflect back the “tourist gaze” in order to benefit financially.⁴⁶ This was certainly the case in Egypt during the Great War, where locals renamed their shops. Australians could find in Heliopolis “The Fair Dinkum Store”, “Ribuck Goods” and “The Melbourne Store” – apparently next door to the “Sydney Store”.⁴⁷ Mimesis often led to ridicule, as in the memoir of Captain Knyvett: “The Australianese that the ‘Gyppos’ picked up is not commonly used in polite society; maybe they thought it correct English, but it was sometimes very embarrassing when walking down the street with a nurse. And some polite merchants were sorely puzzled when the effect of their well-chosen words and bow was an unintentional biting of the dust.”⁴⁸ Another Australian soldier described in a letter the Australian habit of teaching Arab news-boys insulting, obscene cries.⁴⁹

In Australian eyes, cultural difference was both a cause of suspicion and a necessary condition of imperialism that had to be maintained. Scholars, such as Michael Taussig and Homi Bhabha, have shown imitation’s ambiguous power in the colonial encounter. Bhabha argues that the coloniser encourages one type of mimesis in the hope of creating a “reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.” The colonised, meanwhile, practice a second form of mimesis, which destabilises rather than buttresses power.⁵⁰ In the context of Australian war memoirs, Bhabha’s assertion that “colonialism... repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce” rings startlingly true.⁵¹

Inspired by the increasing recognition of the multi-faceted literary constructions of Australian wartime experience, I believe Australians used writing as a tool for the instantiation of authority and as a form of – what I call – literary colonialism.⁵² Soldiers assumed a multiplicity of guises while writing about Egypt. They were Australians, soldiers and tourists, sometimes all at once. By adopting an enlarged perspective of war that acknowledges the role of the Australian soldier as both a tourist and combatant, we can reconceptualise the notion of duty.⁵³ In addition to military responsibilities, Australian troops considered it a duty to educate themselves in foreign countries. They sometimes lamented their failures to do so, as Richard White has

⁴⁵ Bedford, *The Story of the 11th Battalion*, 40. Bean also used the phrase “high spirits” in *The Official History*. Bean, *The Official History*, 128.

⁴⁶ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: SAGE, 2002).

⁴⁷ Keown, *Forward with the Fifth*, 66. Knyvett, ‘*Over There*’ with the Australians, 82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 83.

⁴⁹ R. W. W. Adams letter, 7 June 1915, quoted in Brugger, *Australians and Egypt*, 43.

⁵⁰ Homi Bhabha, ‘Of Mimicry and Men: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’, in ‘Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis’, special issue, *October* 28 (April 1984): 125-133. Quote p. 126. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁵¹ Bhabha, ‘Of Mimicry and Men’, 126.

⁵² Ziino, ‘A Kind of Round Trip’, 44. James Curran, ‘The First AIF in Paris’, 19.

⁵³ Curran, ‘The First AIF in Paris’, 18-26. Nicholson and Mills, ‘Soldier Tourism in First World War Egypt and Palestine’, 205-222. White, ‘Europe and the Six-Bob-a-Day Tourist’, 122-139. White, ‘The Soldiers as Tourist’, 63-77. White, ‘Sun, Sand and Syphilis’, 49-64. Ziino, ‘A Kind of Round Trip’, 39-52.

shown.⁵⁴ They presented themselves as ethnographic amateurs intent on revealing Egyptian culture to a naïve audience at home.⁵⁵ Australians subjugated Egyptian people and countered the threat of mimesis through literary farce. Australian writers couched Egyptian imitation within the tropes of orientalism, whereby locals adopted Australian practices and slang in conniving demonstrations of economic opportunism. These chroniclers depicted Egyptians as lewd, submissive and unclean. They gave readers little scope to envision an honest, transformative zone of cross-cultural contact, devoid of scheming ulterior motives.⁵⁶

This contempt for Egyptians is all the more stark considering Anzac troops, alongside continuing racism, temporarily reassessed their views on other races, including Maori and Aboriginal people, during World War One. Some began to view non-white combatants in a more favourable light.⁵⁷ War broke down numerous social barriers, but it did nothing to improve the image of the Arab in Australian eyes.

Scholars seem to have overlooked the racial and gender dynamics embedded in the unrest on Good Friday, 1915.⁵⁸ In the secondary literature and popular memory of the Great War, where writers and film-makers have acknowledged unsavoury incidents in Egypt (rare in itself), they tend to showcase these events as indicative of harmless larrikinism. Movies, such as Charles Chauvel's *Forty Thousand Horsemen* and Peter Weir's *Gallipoli*, portray the misbehaviour of Australian troops as cheeky and humorous.⁵⁹ Bill Gammage argues that riots in Egypt "betrayed some of the worst aspects of the Australian character" but also seems to justify the actions of Anzac troops by elaborating on the harsh conditions they endured in Egypt:

They had come across half a world to fight for one of the noblest causes that uplifted men. They were sustained by notions of splendour and battle and glory... And they had been dumped on bare sand among hordes of natives so persistent that a man had to buy a stick to beat them off, they were obliged to drink 'poisonous' beer or none at all, they

⁵⁴ White, 'Europe and the Six-Bob-a-Day Tourist', 126, 130-131. White, 'The Soldier as Tourist', 70-71. White, 'Sun, Sand and Syphilis', 55. For an example of the disappointment in not receiving an adequate education in Egypt, see: Knyvett, *Over There' with the Australians*, 98.

⁵⁵ Few Australians had visited Egypt. The Englishman Martin Briggs summarised the situation succinctly in his memoir *Through Egypt in War-Time*: "In the good old days before the war, Egypt was the happy hunting ground of millionaires. Now we of the E.E.F [Egyptian Expeditionary Force] have entered their preserve in our hundreds of thousands, obtaining admission by the simple expedient of donning a khaki uniform." Martin S. Briggs, *Through Egypt in War-Time* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1918), 5.

⁵⁶ My argument here is inspired, in part, by Melinda Hinkson's reading of the status of Indigenous Australians in central Australia during the interwar period. Melinda Hinkson, 'Beyond Assimilation and Refusal: A Warlpiri Perspective on the Politics of Recognition', *Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 1 (January 2017), 86-87.

⁵⁷ Brugger, *Australians and Egypt*, 147. Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 91-94. Hwang, 'The Great War', 33-36. Christopher Pugsley, 'Images of Te Hokowhitu A Tu in the First World War', in *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, ed. Santanu Das (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 200-203. Peter Stanley, "'He was black, he was a White man, and a dinkum Aussie": Race and Empire in Revisiting the Anzac Legend', in *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, 213-227. White, 'Sun, Sand and Syphilis', 56.

⁵⁸ At a broader level, Peter Stanley critiques historians for their apathy in grappling with the racial dimensions of the Anzac Legend. Stanley, 'Race and Empire', 213-227.

⁵⁹ In one scene of *Gallipoli*, Frank Dunn and three mates pillage the shop of an Egyptian who has sold them a trinket at an inflated price. As the camera lingers on Barney, who realises they have targeted the wrong shop, the scene closes on a humorous note. Their behaviour appears inconceivable only because they attacked the wrong vendor. *Gallipoli*, directed by Peter Weir (Associated R&R Films, 1981). *Forty Thousand Horsemen*, directed by Charles Chauvel (Famous Feature Films, 1940). Sean Richardson, 'What Shall We Do with a Drunken Sailor?', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June, 2002, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/what-shall-we-do-with-a-drunken-sailor-20020605-gdfc9a.html>.

were expected to endure heat, sand, dust, flies, and monotony without hope of alleviation... It was not for this that they had come. They dubbed Egypt land of sin, shit and syphilis, and set about devising their own entertainment.⁶⁰

However, Gammage's argument does not stack up when we consider Richard White's analysis of reasons for enlistment in the AIF.

White has revised the traditional view on enlistment in historiography. He contends that the conventions of writing an anthology of Australia's involvement in the Great War constrain historians.⁶¹ He denounces scholarly reliance on diaries and letters written after the authors had signed up for an armed service. These accounts often highlighted grand reasons for enlistment, such as patriotism and duty. White believes, rather, that many Australian servicemen, especially the working-class majority, saw World War One as a chance to obtain employment in a volatile labour market, to combat boredom, to travel and to experience new parts of the world.⁶² Australian soldiers and nurses experienced the Great War through the lens of tourism more than participants of other nations.⁶³ In a way, by training in Egypt, some Australian troops got exactly what they wanted – an exotic location they would otherwise never have explored.⁶⁴

Using the oppressiveness of a monolithic military bureaucracy as a departure point, Kevin Fewster, meanwhile, views the two Wazza riots through the prism of Australian resistance to authority. Focusing on the attacks on British military police, officers and Australian pickets during the riots, rather than poor quality alcohol, prostitution, venereal disease and colonial attitudes, Fewster offers an insightful analysis that ultimately, however, overlooks the racial and gender dimensions to these events.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Bean noted in his diary that one participant he interviewed "was quite fair – he said police could not help firing they had to do something." Perspectives on the riot varied widely but this participant was certainly not so forgiving and empathetic towards the local Egyptian population. He described the riot as "the fun of your life".⁶⁶

While Fewster correctly indicates that no sex workers were assaulted during the riot, we cannot ignore the psychological warfare conducted by Australian and New Zealand soldiers, who specifically targeted *feminine* spaces normally sacred and off-limits. This left sex workers hysterical and screaming. The men threw intimate belongings – dresses, mattresses, wardrobes, chests of

⁶⁰ Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 35-49. Quotes pp. 36, 40.

⁶¹ These books usually begin with a chapter titled "Australia on the Eve War" or something similar, in which the author illuminates formal ties to England and dual loyalty to nation and empire. The genre naturally pushes historians towards emphasising the continuity of this political context in the next chapter, which typically highlights the prodigious rush of Australians to enlist. Richard White, 'Motives for Joining Up: Self-Sacrifice, Self-Interest and Social Class, 1914-1918', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial* 9 (1986), 9-12.

⁶² White, 'Motives for Joining Up', 3-16.

⁶³ Curran, 'The First AIF in Paris', 18-26. White, 'Europe and the Six-Bob-a-Day Tourist', 122-139. White, 'The Soldiers as Tourist', 63-77. White, 'Sun, Sand and Syphilis', 49-64. Ziino, 'A Kind of Round Trip', 39-52.

⁶⁴ As scholars such as Richard White and James Curran have shown, the desired destination for the Australian tourist-soldier was Europe and for the British-born the motherland – England. There *was* widespread disappointment that the troopships were diverted at the last moment to Egypt. However, this disappointment was not as unanimous as is often made out and Australian troops relished the opportunity to explore Egypt even if, by the end of their training, they had tired of it. Curran, 'The First AIF in Paris', 16-28. White, 'Europe and the Six-Bob-a-Day-Tourist', 122-139. White, 'Motives for Joining Up', 3-16. For an example of approval as Egypt as the location for training, see: Bean, *Bean's Gallipoli*, 33. Wren, *History of the 3rd Battalion, A.I.F.*, 28.

⁶⁵ Kevin Fewster, "The Wazza Riots, 1915", *Journal of the Australian War Memorial* 4 (April 1984): 47-53.

⁶⁶ Fewster, 'The Wazza Riots', 48.

drawers, even a piano – from windows onto the bonfires they had started. Bean recorded in his diary troops throwing household objects, such as kettles, at the military police.⁶⁷ Since the Anzacs desecrated and invaded the feminine sphere, popularly labelling the riot a “battle”, this essay suggests there is a scholarly need to reconsider what constitutes a battlefield. As Ian Harrison suggests, the AIF’s first “battle” occurred in Melbourne at the Broadmeadows camp where trainees rioted following a gang-rape.⁶⁸ The “Battle of the Wasser” thus sits within a line of soldier riots focused on proving Australian manhood.

One frequently-cited long-term grievance that prompted the riot was the spread of venereal disease (VD) among Australian troops. Peter Stanley points out that the rate of VD among Anzac soldiers in Egypt (10%) was probably lower than among those of equivalent age living in urban centres like Paris, London and Melbourne (12-15%).⁶⁹ So the furore regarding Anzac misconduct in Egypt, which played out in newspapers during the early years of the Great War, had more to do with perceptions of non-Western women in Egypt than reality.⁷⁰ Misconceptions like this undoubtedly fuelled Anzac rage.

We will likely never know the specific incident that caused the riot on Good Friday, 1915. The Australian Private John Jensen suggested in a letter home that an English soldier had discovered his sister working as a sex worker in Cairo. This Englishman attempted to set his sister free but her employers “threw the brother out of a window”. After recovering, he spread his story among the troops stationed in Egypt, thus sparking the “Battle of the Wasser”.⁷¹ This story is improbable. No other evidence supports Jensen’s claim. Like any large-scale public disorder, memories of the event are self-serving.⁷² While there were some French, Italian and Greek sex workers, I have not found any documented cases of British sex workers in Cairo at this time. Jensen’s letter reflects concern about the destabilising influence of the Orient on white women.⁷³ There is occasional reference to the stabbing of a Maori soldier in a brothel (in Bean’s diary and *Official History*, for instance).⁷⁴ According to Brugger, the Egypt-based, Italian newspaper *Messaggero Egiziano* noted the day before the riot the persistence of a rumour in which a sex worker had accused a Maori of being a cannibal.⁷⁵

Regardless of these stories’ accuracy, these examples illuminate the (temporary) reshuffling of racial hierarchies during war and the embeddedness of colonialism and orientalism within tensions. They render the treatment of Egyptian men and women more stark. Using Egypt as a reference point, Richard White has demonstrated that Anzacs were comparatively well-behaved in Marseille and England due to “cultural dependence”: “In Egypt they themselves

⁶⁷ Fewster, ‘The Wazza Riots’, 45.

⁶⁸ Ian Harrison, “A Terrible Emptiness: Anzac Masculinity and Memory” (Master’s thesis, University of Melbourne, 2003).

⁶⁹ Stanley, *Bad Characters*, 35-36.

⁷⁰ For discontent on the home front expressed in newspapers, see, for instance: ‘Conduct of Troops’, *Argus*, 1 April, 1915, 10. Bean, *Bean’s Gallipoli*, 49-51.

⁷¹ Letter, Private John Jensen, 28 August 1915, http://alh-research.tripod.com/Light_Horse/index.blog/1973775/first-wassa-egypt-april-2-1915-john-jack-jensens-account/. Accessed 27 June 2018.

⁷² Frank Chung, ‘Underbellydance: How a Brush with the White Slave Trade Sparked the First Battle of the Anzacs’, *news.com.au*, 2 April, 2015, <https://www.news.com.au/national/anzac-day/underbellydance-how-a-brush-with-the-white-slave-trade-sparked-the-first-battle-of-the-anzacs/news-story/123d51fb53067b95ce11650fe43faf33>.

⁷³ Philippa Levine, “Battle Colors: Race, Sex and Colonial Soldierly in World War I”, *Journal of Women’s History* 9 no. 4 (1998): 104-130.

⁷⁴ Bean, *Bean’s Gallipoli*, 56. Bean, *The Official History*, 130n12.

⁷⁵ Brugger, *Australians and Egypt*, 147.

had represented civilisation because they were white. Here [Europe] they were insignificant. They behaved themselves because they were thankful and over-awed, because civilised behaviour was appropriate to Europe in their scheme of things, and because Europe's respect was important to them."⁷⁶

There were dissenting voices – soldiers who recorded disapproval of the “Battle of the Wasser” in their personal diaries. One Australian private labelled Good Friday, 1915, as a “bad day for Australian troops” due to “a horrible riot in Esbekia.”⁷⁷ Bean claimed that opinion among soldiers was divided on the riot. One interviewee “thought things had gone much too far”.⁷⁸ However, these private, minority grievances have become overshadowed by a group mentality and the institutionalisation of Australian military history via Bean's *Official History* and battalion histories, in which the authors very rarely spoke out disapprovingly. Anzac misconduct in Egypt was not a case of a hushed cult but a brazen, unapologetic example of mob rule.



Figure 1. Evidence of burning in the Wasser after the riot. Courtesy J.F Smith collection, State Library of NSW.

Official memory, as encapsulated in Bean's *Official History* and battalion histories, presents the (first) Wasser riot as a merry “drunken rag” of soldiers blowing off steam, albeit one that at times threatened to become uncontrollable.⁷⁹ A. W. Keown wrote: “pandemonium... reigned around. Cab horses with fashionable hats and dresses; furniture hurtling from upper story windows; a soldier playing ragtime on a much-damaged piano, are all snapshots of the hectic night.”⁸⁰ The unit histories that mention the first Wasser riot (four out of the ten I have

⁷⁶ White, “Europe and the Six-Bob-a-Day Tourist”, 132-138. Quote p. 136.

⁷⁷ Alfred Prichard Kington Morris diary, MLMSS 2886/Item 1, Mitchell Library, New South Wales.

⁷⁸ Fewster, “Wazza Riots”, 48.

⁷⁹ For references to the riot as a “rag”, see: Bean, *The Official History*, 130n12. Keown, *Forward with the Fifth*, 73.

⁸⁰ Keown, *Forward with the Fifth*, 74.

examined) often included direct quotations of banter exchanged between participants, creating a light-hearted tone.⁸¹

Bean relegated his commentary on the “Battle of the Wasser” and the subsequent “Second Battle of the Wasser” (31 July 1915) – also involving almost exclusively Anzac soldiers – to an extensive footnote that takes up more than half a page. The rare, incongruous foray into footnoting surely reflects Bean’s struggle to situate the riots within a predetermined storyline.⁸²

Bean’s history was a government-commissioned project central to the creation of the modern “Anzac myth”. Historians argue that, after travelling in outback New South Wales in the first decade of the twentieth century, Bean became convinced that Australia’s rural environments had cultivated a distinctive national character. Bean perpetuated a myth – now recognised by scholars with labels such as the “Australian Legend” or “Pioneering Legend” – that the bushman represented the “typical” Australian.⁸³ From at least the 1880s, writers, such as Banjo Patterson and Henry Lawson, and artists, particularly of the Heidelberg School, embedded rural values within Australian consciousness through poetry, newspapers, plays, ballads and paintings.⁸⁴ We cannot separate Bean, and the self-expression of Australian troops he encountered, from this cultural backdrop. As Bill Gammage asserts, “the conditions of battle produced a great reflowering of the bush tradition”.⁸⁵

The “Battler of the Wasser” thus offered a conundrum for Bean. In war, Australian soldiers were, in his eyes, resourceful, stoic, brave and sceptical of authority. They valued imitative, endurance, mateship and fair play. Few of these traits manifested themselves during the Good Friday riot. Bean probably felt he had to include an incident that received significant press coverage at the time of its unfolding. However, he struggled to assimilate such a story into his narrative.

A lack of remorse and guilt defines the majority of written accounts of the first Wasser riot. Captain Knyvett explicitly stated: “I doubt if any one [sic] who took part in the battle of the Wasir, except maybe the military police, are ashamed of what they did.”⁸⁶ Lance Corporal Eric Ward meanwhile described the riot in his diary as “the greatest bit of fun since we have been in Egypt”.⁸⁷ Bean interviewed an artilleryman immediately after the riot who claimed it was “the fun of your life”.⁸⁸ Knyvett unapologetically claimed:

Every large city has its sore, but Cairo has an ulcer. This vile spot made the clean lads from the wind-swept plains and scented bush of Australia absolutely sick... for him [the Australian] to see dirt is to want to

⁸¹ All ten units were present in Egypt during the riot. For banter, see: Keown, *Forward with the Fifth*, 74. White, *The Fighting Thirteenth*, 24.

⁸² Bean, *The Official History*, 130, footnote 12.

⁸³ Bean, *Bean’s Gallipoli*. Kent, ‘C.E.W. Bean as Editor and Image-Maker’, 376-390. Dudley McCarthy, *Gallipoli to the Somme: The Story of C.E.W. Bean* (Sydney: John Ferguson, 1983). Alistair Thomson, ‘Reviews’, *Historical Studies* 21, no. 82 (April 1984): 146-149.

⁸⁴ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958). For critiques of Ward that still subscribe to the nationally-defining impact of rural environments, see: J. B. Hirst, ‘The Pioneering Legend’, *Historical Studies* 18, no. 71 (October 1978): 316-337. Richard Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia* (Fremantle: Curtin University Books, 2005), 163-192.

⁸⁵ Bill Gammage, ‘Anzac’, in *Intruders in the Bush: The Australian Quest for Identity*, ed. John Carroll (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 62.

⁸⁶ Knyvett, ‘Over There’ with the Australians, 91.

⁸⁷ Eric Harford Ward diary, 2 April 1915, MLDOC 1300, Mitchell Library, New South Wales.

⁸⁸ Fewster, ‘The Wazza Riots, 1915’, 48.

remove it.... Things moved quite warmly for an hour or two: ladies of low degree scuttled like rats and panders dashed for safety, while “owners” in princely motorcars turned almost as white as their livers as they saw their “warehouses of virtue” going up in flame... the burning of those pest-houses must have risen like incense to heaven...⁸⁹

Employing the extended metaphor of illness and plague, Knyvett inferred that the Wasser district of Cairo deserved to be ‘cleansed’, a sentiment that comes through in unit histories, such as *Forward with the Fifth*. Keown argues that the Wasser was “a festering sink of iniquity that was well purged by fire. The First Division look back on this as the only job they left unfinished.”⁹⁰

As historians, immersing ourselves in the material culture of the past can help us fill the gaps in the written record, empathise and understand. Two artefacts suggest that Anzac troops openly – maybe even proudly – discussed their destruction of the Wasser. A Greek counterfeiter manufactured a medallion in the first Wasser riot’s aftermath. One side read “The Battle of the Wassaa”. The other read “I was there”.⁹¹ The Australian War Memorial possesses a fascinating object collected in February 1919 from a Gallipoli trench by the Australian Historical Mission. It is a dug out sign with “The Wozzer” inscribed on it (figure 2), presumably manufactured by Anzac troops. Soldiers in all theatres during the Great War used nomenclature to humanise the nightmare landscape.⁹² The Wasser was clearly iconic in the folklore of the 1st AIF. It seems unlikely that Anzac troops would name a trench after a dark part of the force’s recent history.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

RELAWM00416

Figure 2. Improvised trench sign from Rhododendron Ridge (Gallipoli). Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.

⁸⁹ Knyvette, *Over There' with the Australians*, 91-93.

⁹⁰ Keown, *Forward with the Fifth*, 75. See also: White, *The Fighting Thirteenth*, 24.

⁹¹ Stanley, *Bad Characters*, 36.

⁹² British soldiers gave their trenches names such as Piccadilly and Old Kent Road, as well as more brutally realistic names, such as Dead Man’s Alley and Hellfire Corner. Ross J. Wilson, “‘Tommifying’ the Western Front, 1914-1918”, *Journal of Historical Geography* 37, no. 3 (2011): 338-347.

Over time the dark episode has dropped out of collective memory. Suppression has followed initial celebration. Of the ten unit histories I have examined concerning units that trained in Egypt prior to the Gallipoli campaign, four mention the first Wasser riot. Of these four, three were published during the 1920s.⁹³ While a small sample size, those published in the 1930s and 1940s generally omit the event. In *The Anzacs*, Patsy Adam-Smith discusses conversations she had with ex-servicemen decades after the Great War in which these men were not so eager to admit to involvement in the riot: ““Many men had given me the details of the famous ‘Battle of the Wazzir’ but none wanted their name mentioned.”⁹⁴ Chest-beating patriotism, ignorance, government interference in the history field and sympathy for Australian servicemen (rarely extended to Egyptians) have all played a part in creating public silence on the “Battle of the Wasser” and encouraging scholarly inattentiveness. With the government spending an estimated \$552 million on the Great War centenary – more than any other country – it is astounding that some stories, however unsavoury, escape consideration.⁹⁵ Today, silence is tantamount to approval and an inability to learn, as a nation, from past mistakes.

The “Battle of the Wasser”: A Footnote in History?

I do not buy the arguments of historians, such as Bean and Gammage, who saw the “Battle of the Wasser” as an explosion of boredom and pent-up frustration with a country that had disappointed the participants.⁹⁶ At face value, the riot may seem like boisterous but harmless skylarking but there were far more sinister undertones – misrepresentation of non-Western women and racism, both in behaviour and literature. We must excavate deeper than simple larrinkinism to ascertain the root causes. Nor do I believe, however, that soldiers directed their anger primarily towards the military police in a display of anti-authoritarianism.⁹⁷

As Justin Fantauzo and Robert Nelson suggest, the Western Front did not witness the most severe crisis of masculinity, as commonly believed. The crisis was more pronounced in “sideshow” theatres such as Macedonia, Palestine, Egypt and Mesopotamia. While contemporaries and historians have portrayed action on the Western Front as emasculating – due to the lack of opportunity for individual, heroic action and face-to-face fighting – anxiety about public perceptions of war plagued soldiers in eastern theatres more profoundly. The Wasser was one such testing ground for masculinity and the vigour of a British, Anglo race. In a uniquely Australian way, Australian soldiers cheerfully assumed the mantle of asserting a

⁹³ The three published in the 1920s are the following: Keown, *Forward with the Fifth* (1921), 73-75. Longmore, *The Old Sixteenth* (1929), 33. White, *The Fighting Thirteenth* (1924), 24. The exception is T. P. Chataway, *History of the 15th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force, War 1914-1918* (Brisbane: William Brooks & Co., 1948), 11.

⁹⁴ Adam-Smith, *The Anzacs*, 71.

⁹⁵ Ian McPhedran, ‘Government Spending More than \$8800 for Every Digger Killed during WW1’, *news.com.au*, 3 September, 2015, <https://www.news.com.au/national/anzac-day/government-spending-more-than-8800-for-every-digger-killed-during-ww1/news-story/34808367386af87773c8e4326d2a46e8>. Robbie Mason, ‘The “Battle of the Wasser”: A Footnote in History?’, *Honi Soit*, 25 April, 2019, <https://honisoit.com/2019/04/the-battle-of-the-wasser-a-footnote-in-history/>.

⁹⁶ Bean, *Official History*, 115-139, Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 35-49.

⁹⁷ Fewster, “The Wazza Riots”, 47-53.

rejuvenated martial spirit and a Eurocentric, racial hierarchy.⁹⁸ The “Battle of the Wasser” was the culmination of countless, organic displays of manhood and race.

To truly come to terms with our nation’s past, it is vital that we in the present acknowledge the sinister side to Australia’s involvement in warfare. This is too often glossed over and excused as harmless larrikinism. Like the Anzacs in Egypt, modern armed forces in regions like the Middle East increasingly target civilian spaces. There is increased public pressure to win hearts and minds not just on the home front but on the battlefield as well – no easy task. When combined with male tribalism, these factors create a dangerous cocktail, as evident in recent inquiries into the potential involvement of Australian special forces in war crimes in Afghanistan.⁹⁹ There is thus a societal imperative to reconceptualise what constitutes a “battlefield” and to learn from the past mistakes of Australian servicemen. Learning from history should not equate to moralistic judgement of past actors according to our current behavioural and cultural norms. These men were products of their time. I hope I have not veered too far into condemnation in this essay. Moreover, it is questionable whether past attitudes towards non-Western peoples have dramatically changed, if tomes like Edward Said’s *Orientalism* are anything to go by.¹⁰⁰

In light of recent diplomatic tensions between Turkey and Australia/New Zealand over the place of the Gallipoli campaign in national identity, it is even more vital that we look beyond the struggles and losses of our own soldiers to the suffering of those they interacted with.¹⁰¹ Increasing understanding of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the expansion of public space within which it is acceptable to discuss trauma mean that, slowly, Australians are beginning to commemorate suffering rather than celebrate heroism on Anzac Day.¹⁰² But what about enemy combatants and civilians who suffered when we invaded their homes?

The Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz in *Palace Walk* details the life of a lower-middle class family in Cairo from 1917 to 1919. Mahfouz includes telling descriptions of local frustration with intimidating, violent and intrusive Anzac troops.¹⁰³ It is perhaps within literature, freed from the constraints of censorship and suffocating public memory, within war memoirs and within private diaries, even sometimes within unit histories, that we begin to see a more animated, lifelike Anzac, different from the figure frozen in stasis within the minds of government bureaucrats. These sources are not necessarily hard to find. They are not inaccessible to the public. But in library storage collecting dust and on mantelpieces as unopened trophies they do seem neglected, perhaps even wasted.

⁹⁸ Justin Fantauzo and Robert Nelson, “A Most Unmanly War: British Military Masculinity in Macedonia, Mesopotamia and Palestine, 1914–18”, *Gender & History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 587-603. Christopher Lee, ““War is not a Christian Mission”: Racial Invasion and Religious Crusade in H. S. Gullett’s *Official History of the Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine*”,

⁹⁹ Dan Oakes and Sam Clark, ‘The Afghan Files’, *ABC News*, 11 July, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-11/killings-of-unarmed-afghans-by-australian-special-forces/8466642>.

¹⁰⁰ Said, *Orientalism*.

¹⁰¹ Michelle Grattan, ‘Christchurch Attack Strains Australian-Turkish Relations Ahead of ANZAC Day’, *The Conversation*, 20 March, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/christchurch-attack-strains-australian-turkish-relations-ahead-of-anzac-day-113932>.

¹⁰² Christina Twomey, “Trauma and the Reinvigoration of Anzac: An Argument”, *History Australia* 10, no. 3 (January 2013): 85-108.

¹⁰³ Naguib Mahfouz, *Palace Walk*, trans. William Maynard Hutchins and Olive E. Kenny (London: Black Swan, 1994). Ruiz, ‘Manly Spectacles’, 363-366.