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“Spending Ourselves and Our Money”

The Red Cross and the Management of Civilian Commitment
in Australia, 1914–1918

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Abstract: Using local branch reports of the Australian Red Cross, this article charts the shifting emotions that Australian civilians exhibited toward World War I in the years between 1914 and 1918. As the war intensified and its costs increased, civilians themselves consistently revised their hopes and expectations and internalized their own place in a war that increasingly offered little sign of ending. Among these Australians, the central, painful dynamic of the war was a persistent erosion of emotional resilience at the same time their anxiety over loved ones—and even their antipathies toward fellow citizens—demanded and reaffirmed their emotional commitment to the cause in which they were so invested.

Keywords: World War I; Red Cross; culture of war; volunteering; morale

How does one see and explain the civilian commitment to war between 1914 and 1918? In the face of so much death, destruction, and deprivation, why did domestic populations continue to support the prosecution of the conflict? These fundamental questions have fostered more than two decades of scholarship into the cultural history of World War I. Despite the extraordinary productivity of historians in the pursuit of grasping the “culture of war” that civilians and soldiers alike built for themselves, it remains an elusive proposition, for it asks us to enter into the subjective world of feeling and emotion.¹ In plotting the shifting emotional currents of the war

in Australia, this article seeks a better understanding of the ways in which civilians fit themselves to the war and its demands, and in the process—despite their desperate hopes that it should end—provided the necessary will to continue the conflict.

Unlike so many other nations involved in WWI, Australia did not impose conscription for military service. Neither did it exert high levels of government control over the productive effort in support of the war. Although one should be cautious about seeing Australia as entirely unique, this circumstance provides an ideal opportunity to see more clearly how the construction of emotional and psychological mobilization proceeded on the home front.² That mobilization required a persistent effort at managing the erosion of resilience, an endeavor that necessarily proceeded most effectively at communal rather than national levels.

The activities of the myriad local Red Cross branches in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria provide insight into the texture of this effort in a way that Australian historians have probed only lightly, despite asking penetrating questions.³ John F. Hutchinson's groundbreaking study *Champions of Charity: War and the Rise of the Red Cross* might be right in arguing that the "militarization of charity" alone reveals how national Red Cross societies managed to "popularize and to justify the additional labor obligations that men and women—*especially women*—were expected to accept if they were living in a belligerent state."⁴ But even here, there is still a need for an appreciation of just how that process played out and how local Red Cross branches managed the impulses and energies of a voluntary war effort—especially as that effort became strained in the latter years of the war.

Fortunately, the wartime reporting from those branches provides the material for closer study of these very issues. A careful analysis of the discourse and activities of Red Cross branches across New South Wales, together with Caulfield in Victoria, exposes civilians' persistent reassessment of hope and expectation, attended always by fear of loss and bereavement. These fluctuating but ever-present emotions drove the home front commitment to a war in which everything most dear and intimate was at stake. And therein lies the tension at the heart of civilian mobilization in Australia, in which

anxiety and suffering on one hand worked to shore up resilience and dedication to the cause on the other. That tension was fundamental to civilian experience, as the Red Cross used its organizational structure, imperial reach, and capacity to integrate people meaningfully into the war in ways that were necessary to sustaining the effort at home.

A chronological analysis allows one to trace the Red Cross's local management of civilian commitment to the Australian war effort in its various stages. The following sections thus scrutinize the dynamic interplay of emotional expressions in local Red Cross branch communications from the initial mobilization through to the general diminishment of participation at war's end. At each stage, as will become evident, the Red Cross members struggled in varying ways to manage the deeply emotional tension between the anxieties of the home front experience and the productive exercise of wartime commitments.

Organizing in the Shadow of War

Britain's declaration of war against Germany in August 1914 prompted an extraordinary expansion of the Red Cross in Australia that ultimately spawned over two thousand local branches. Many Red Cross branches emerged directly from existing charitable groups, simply reformulating themselves as part of the new wartime organization, or through existing civic and religious networks of women. In August 1914, for instance, the Ladies' Guild at Saint Andrew's Presbyterian Church, in Sydney's Rose Bay, "unanimously decided to start a branch of the Red Cross Society."⁵ In Yass, in regional New South Wales, the local branch emerged from the efforts of the Liberal Association, though it quickly crossed political boundaries so that every women's society in the town could become involved. "Never in the history of Yass," declared the branch secretary, "had such a number of ladies met together for any purpose."⁶

Also already in evidence were the emotions that would drive these people for the duration of the war. Feelings of patriotism could

certainly provoke action. But more compelling were feelings of suspense and anxiety, which Red Cross work promised to ameliorate. The Melbourne newspaper columnist Vesta recommended Red Cross work to women in just those terms shortly after war broke out in August 1914: "So the work to be undertaken by the Red Cross Society will serve a double purpose. It will contribute material aid to those who are engaged in the conflict, and it will steady the nerves and calm the minds of those of us who feel the suspense keenly, and whose imaginations are too vividly conjuring up the real meaning of war."⁷ That an emotional reckoning should be the part of women in the war was at the heart of E. C. Smith's 1914 morality play in the first issue of the *NSW Red Cross Record*, in which she had a female character exclaim: "How much harder it is to be a woman than a man. . . . It needs such patience—such endurance—such courage—such bravery to sit still here in the sunlight knitting—sewing—waiting—waiting—Oh this waiting!"⁸

Despite recognizing such difficulties, however, branch secretaries were soon articulating a determination to continue their efforts until the war concluded. Grenfell, New South Wales, branch organizers Jeannie Taylor and E. R. Richardson thus insisted that "until the war is finally ended we are anxious that Grenfell and district should do its share in the great work of providing for the sick and wounded, and so carrying on the splendid work of the Red Cross."⁹ From the very beginning of the war period, then, both anxiety and a parallel determination to serve were grounding the Red Cross's growing efforts.

Still, the fact that Australian forces would not yet join in large-scale fighting for months could dampen early activity. Patriotic fervor, and even sympathy for the plight of the Belgians, suffering under German occupation, could carry activity only so far. This dynamic was apparent in smaller communities such as the New South Wales town of O'Connell, where secretary Kitty Harris reported in February 1915 that "we started our branch with a membership of forty, but am sorry to say have now got down to a mere handful." The branch had sent a few items to headquarters, "and hope[d] to go on to the end doing our best."¹⁰ Elsewhere, however, others were beginning to acknowledge the deeper roots of commitment to the war and

its demands. At the rural Singleton branch, northwest of Sydney, the branch secretary insisted that “ardour in this branch has not abated—nor is it likely to do so, for we have too many friends and relations among the troops to allow us to ‘forget,’ even if our patriotism became luke-warm, and of that there is no danger.”¹¹ Having loved ones away, if not yet fighting, provided impetus to work. Signs that the war was only intensifying in 1915 also prompted calls to a more serious attitude toward the conflict. At rural Kempsey, the mayor told a Red Cross meeting: “Now is the time to show the spirit of service and to do something to provide comfort for those fighting for us. I would ask you to give this matter your serious thought, and so comport yourselves towards these funds that when war is over we shall be able to answer our consciences that we did what we could.”¹²

Despite such urging, some branch secretaries admitted to feeling that they were swimming against the tide. One wrote anonymously to give her peers encouragement in the face of indifference and criticism, declaring, “I believe that a time will come when every non-combatant man or woman will feel ashamed if they cannot point to some work they accomplished at this time. Our work will be a lasting memorial to us, and will well repay us for the weary hours we have devoted to it.”¹³ Clearly, the encouragement was needed: others also insisted on praise for the “energetic and enthusiastic women” who “meet with opposition and disappointment often.”¹⁴

The Visceral Motivation of Battle

The entry of Australian forces at the end of April 1915 into the fray of the Gallipoli (Dardanelles) Campaign, in modern-day Turkey, made real all the incipient fears and anxieties that had been simmering since August 1914 and set a new emotional tempo for the war in Australia. Reflecting later in the war, *NSW Red Cross Record* editor Eleanor Mackinnon could still feel the weight of Australia’s full induction into the war and “the shock of the 1st Casualty List. . . . Those first dark days of Gallipoli fell upon us as a stroke from God.”¹⁵ The shock produced an urgent impulse to contribute something, anything, to the war effort. As Isabelle Wallace Turner reported from Greenwich,

her branch was “still very active and the enthusiasm greater since the sad news from the Dardanelles has made every woman realize the necessity of further efforts.”¹⁶ The Red Cross was ready to meet that urge; it was a feeling that North Sydney branch secretary Ruby Eaton detected in her members. The “special call for comforts for our men,” she wrote, “makes all the centres anxious to send out as much as possible.”¹⁷

The explosion of activity that ensued culminated in an enormous fundraising effort in July 1915, conducted jointly by various patriotic societies under the banner of Australia Day. Some branches ceased producing goods in favor of raising funds, realizing that money was more quickly and easily transmitted abroad by the Red Cross. But others yet saw therapeutic value in occupying the hands of their members. The support that such groups could offer was on show at the Singleton branch, where Sarah Wood described the feverish activity of four members “rattling along at a great rate” on their sewing machines, while others sewed buttons and tapes (see fig. 1). And, she noted, “all the while conversation goes on of ‘Our own brave boys at the front,’ and how best to help them.”¹⁸ In Sydney Town Hall, women gathered in the rooms of the “Lady Mayoress” to sew for the Red Cross. Their conversation exposed the impulse at the base of their activities: “‘I have a boy with the 13th Battalion; he’s only 18.’ ‘Mine’s 20. He’s in Egypt now’—that is all that is needed.”¹⁹

Within the Red Cross—despite the organization’s stated principles involving the care of the sick and wounded—attitudes resembled nothing more than the attitudes animating Australians in all other patriotic groups, for these members and branches were simultaneously enmeshed in a whole range of associated causes. Thus, in one sense, the Red Cross was just one entity in a great outpouring of effort and emotion in 1915 that would remain the benchmark of effort for the remainder of the war. What the organization’s founders had managed to achieve, however, was a stable framework for organizing civilian contributions that gave it an important place in the continuing war effort. From the very beginning of the war, neither branch members nor branches themselves refrained from participating in all manner of patriotic work. Many reported sending funds and items they had produced not only to Red Cross headquarters but also

A group of busy workers at Singleton.

Red Cross Society, Singleton, at work for our sick and wounded and the Christmas gifts going forward to hospitals. This splendid country branch has done wonderful work. Among other feats, three tons of jam have come into the Produce Department.

Fig. 1. Singleton branch Red Cross workers, 1915. *NSW Red Cross Record*, December 1915.

to societies dedicated to supporting soldiers at the front lines. The reality for Red Cross workers was that their activities regularly crossed those boundaries without any sense of contradiction. This was why Olive Cherry would later report so openly from Portland, New South Wales, that “besides Red Cross work the members have assisted enthusiastically every other patriotic movement in the town.”²⁰

In May 1915, the extent to which branches were reporting such activity prompted Mackinnon, as editor of the *NSW Record*, to assert clearly the boundaries of Red Cross work, expressing a concern that Australians could not expect their enemies to observe the reciprocal care of prisoners if the Red Cross in Australia was not committed to neutrality. Tellingly, however, Mackinnon did not advise branch secretaries to withdraw from other forms of work but only to refrain from mentioning it in their reports.²¹ Lest any readers doubted the Red Cross’s nationalist credentials, the journal later reassured them that, “although the Red Cross is international in character, as far as its care for friend and foe is concerned, it is also a daughter of the British Red Cross, and is in no way precluded from honouring the gallant souls of our own nation, or of being foremost among those who mourn for the bravest and best of its sons.”²² For its part, the Red Cross leadership in New South Wales was itself engaged in working for the benefit of other societies, including the YMCA and the War Chest, the “great Sister Society” that provided for soldiers in trenches and camps.²³ The Caulfield branch in suburban Melbourne, Victoria, felt justified in publishing the annual report of the local Citizens’ Patriotic League in its journal, the *Caulfield Branch Red Cross Record*: “As so many of our members are also connected with the Patriotic League, we feel that the common interest attached to this report justifies its publication.”²⁴ Part of the issue was that the Red Cross developed its organizational machinery so well that other patriotic groups sought to utilize its resources. Yet the mutual feeling was always there. The Red Cross, Mackinnon would declare in 1918, “stood shoulder to shoulder [with other patriotic societies] with one heart and one mind.”²⁵

Still, as the war further intensified on the battlefronts, the pressure and willingness to accelerate domestic efforts increased accordingly. Annie Robbins reported from Kangaloon in September 1915 that the

branch's activities had grown more stressful, with "every member of our Society working incessantly since hearing such sad news from our dear brothers at the Dardanelles."²⁶ The potential and actual impact of the war was very much on the minds of Red Cross workers, as branches began to report that members' loved ones were dying at Gallipoli. Here emerged clearly the dynamic that would run so powerfully through the war at home, in which fear and anxiety constantly reaffirmed individual commitment to the war even as they consumed the emotional resources required to cope. From rural Darlington Point, Daisy Ida Kook entreated Red Cross workers to "remember the great sacrifice of our wounded soldiers. However hard we work it is but poor compensation for their sacrifice, so let us keep on working."²⁷ It took considerable effort to stave off persistent and growing anxiety, a reality one Sydney Red Cross meeting in September took the time to acknowledge: "The meeting closed with a tribute to the Australian women for their level-headed self-control. They have kept on working steadily in spite of all the disquieting rumors and discussions of the past few weeks."²⁸ Here, too, was acknowledgment that the first tremendous outburst of the nervous energy that had gripped Red Cross branches in 1915 did not immediately expend itself, but instead set more clearly the terms for Australians' ongoing efforts to prosecute the war.

Shifting to Endurance

While a reasonable hope had remained that the war might end soon, the tension between prosecuting the war and bearing its emotional costs had been contained relatively effectively. The first round of the Red Cross branches' annual meetings, which commenced in mid-1915, provided an opportunity to reflect. If there were those who retained a genuine hope that the war might end within months, if not sooner, elsewhere a graver attitude had begun to emanate from the branches. The expansion of the war was troubling, not least to the Victorian Red Cross's divisional leader, Lady Margaret Stanley. By October she likened the war to "the spreading of some horrible and hideous disease," in which "one can see less and less where and

when it will all end!”²⁹ The prospect of a winter campaign in Europe, and the reality of ongoing death and wounding, further reinforced the sense of being enmeshed in the war, but still Red Cross workers reflected their awareness of that sentiment as they rededicated themselves to the work.

Nowhere was this dynamic more clearly articulated than in the wealthy Sydney suburb of Vaucluse, where the branch leadership observed that “the work of our branch has been going on quietly and steadily, but the members feel that the time has come for greater effort, a larger output, in view of the winter campaign and the increasing needs of our hospitals and those nearer the front. The novelty of the work has gone; we must brave ourselves for a long pull and a strong pull, and if we ‘pull all together,’ our boys will not go short of warm clothing or comforts in their need.”³⁰ The impetus behind that attitude was hardly below the surface. The report continued, pointing out that “the pain and loss of war has touched, and is touching, us closely. Now is the time to show the stuff we are made of.” Emotional commitment to the war was hardening, spurred rather than eroded by loss and affirmed by ongoing fears about the welfare of those still remaining at the front.

By early 1916, a shift was occurring in the greater systematization of war work. This was clear to contemporaries, who not only saw it happening in the organization of branches but also were themselves psychologically adjusting to their place in fighting a war that showed less and less sign of ending. The *NSW Record* rendered the change for its members as a shift from working through a sense of duty to working for an interest in what the Red Cross could offer. War work was, the journal declared, “a great privilege,” but one that flowed from grasping “the full significance of this awful war.”³¹ From 1916, the arrangement of charity work settled much more into the kind of organizational and longer-term planning required to continue indefinitely. Early that year, the New South Wales Red Cross headquarters reported with some pride not only on the continuing expansion of branches but also on the nature of that expansion. The organization of branches was such that “there is not the necessity now that there was at first to fling themselves wildly into immediately needed work, though even now no time is wasted; everything is proceeded with

upon a real business basis.”³² Later, the *Caulfield Record* made the point directly: “The great development of modern life, organisation, has joined hands with the Red Cross, and the ideal of organised mercy has been realised in this war to an extent unimagined before.”³³

Moreover, those in the Caulfield branch were observing how Red Cross work was becoming ingratiated in the lives of women across the social spectrum as the work became more and more systemized. A closer look at how the branches actually produced their goods quickly relocates most of the labor back into domestic spaces. While work groups in Red Cross rooms were the visible sign of volunteer work, the enormous tallies of items the branches produced were based on work in the home. A contributor to the *Caulfield Record* from Melbourne’s East Malvern Congregational Church Guild gave a sense of how Red Cross work functioned as a part of everyday life at home. She pointed out that completing the articles “can only be done by ceaseless work, and by using every spare minute. A pair of socks in the dining room, a pair of mittens in the drawing room, and a Balaclava in the nursery or work room would mean that that precious five minutes would be always utilised and our knitting always with us.”³⁴ In light of this reality, the class dimensions of the work were entirely clear to the branch leadership, which acknowledged that for women engaged in paid work or managing the home “without assistance,” opportunities to contribute to the Red Cross were restricted. Middle-class women were to be alternatively encouraged by the chance to join in the modern world of organized work and bureaucracy or reprimanded for their neglect of selfless duty, for they “must learn how to do things in the best way, to do them at the proper time, to do them with due regard to the rights and work of others, and, in short, to fit as a piece of mosaic into the general scheme of things.”³⁵

In the first half of 1916, Australians continued to reorganize their relationship to the war both practically and intellectually, as they grappled with its nature, its costs, and its demands on them. That transformation in thinking, in which the war increasingly became an everyday reality to be endured in both lives and thoughts, was buttressed by appreciative letters from soldiers at the front. These letters formed one part of a mutual encouragement and sustenance between

home and battlefronts, legitimating the work Australians were doing at home and inspiring civilians to redouble their efforts. As the *NSW Record* observed, “for so long all this work had to be carried on in hope, with little real proof that the men knew of and benefited by the unselfish labour of the Red Cross workers.”³⁶ Branch work meetings provided forums for disseminating that encouragement, as women shared news from the front. At the Lady Mayoress’ Sewing Guild, women brought “letters from their boys to read, telling of life in the trenches, and very often of their stay in hospital. Then we hear praise of the Red Cross work.”³⁷ Within the organization itself, the sharing of information about branches’ activities also acted to deepen levels of commitment. The *NSW Record*’s real and acknowledged benefit was in fostering a sense of communal effort—and even competition—among the several hundred branches in New South Wales. In Bendemeer, Ruby E. Blair was delighted “to read . . . of the good work done by the various branches. We feel that we can never do enough for the brave lads who are enduring such hardships on our behalf.”³⁸ Australians still hoped genuinely for an end to the fighting, but this hope sat very much alongside an acceptance of the demands the war was making and determined assertions of a willingness to continue. Thus, in rural Scone in June 1916, May Stevenson insisted that, “although we are all hoping and praying that the war will soon be brought to an end, we are willing to continue working and doing all we can for our brave men as long as the need for Red Cross work lasts.”³⁹

Despair, Anger, and the Maintenance of Resolve

The heavy fighting along the Somme front in France in July and August 1916, in which Australian battalions suffered casualties on a scale well beyond their experiences at Gallipoli, fostered a shift to a kind of desperate resolve on the home front. The annual Red Cross reporting season that coincided with the fighting offered insight into the change. At Chilcott’s Grass, New South Wales, near the regional center of Lismore, Helen Holmes was beginning to respond to the battlefield events with less certainty about her small branch’s

capacity to cope. “We hope to carry on our work to the end of the war,” she wrote, “though we sincerely trust this ‘trial of the nations’ will soon be over, and the load of responsibility be lifted from our men folk.”⁴⁰ But as Australians became more and more mired in the Somme campaign, with all its losses, some of the early hopefulness began to fade. Writing their report in August for the following month’s journal, Florrie and Lucy Paff of Krambach noted that “the work is steadily going on, and we hope, as long as this war lasts, enthusiasm will never tire.”⁴¹

Enthusiasm *was* giving way, however, not just to resignation but also to more and more circumspect hopes. In July, Sarah Wood, at Singleton, had hoped that “the present year will see the close of this great conflict,” but several weeks later, in the face of high casualties and little progress, she had lowered her sights: “War losses have left some sad hearts in this district, but our duty, and intention also, is to continue for the relief of pain and suffering, so we take heart and go on.”⁴² The terrors of the Somme had had their effect: few secretaries dared again to print their hopes that the war would soon be over, and yet, loss in the community again seemed to firm rather than erode the resolve to continue. Members of the Parkes branch noted in November that while “our town has not been without its sorrows,” the death and wounding of loved ones had “strengthened rather than weakened the high resolve to continue even more vigorously the good work of the Society.”⁴³

The year 1916 was also marked by an embittering of social relations in Australia, especially through a vicious public debate in September and October over the issue of conscription, which was fueled by casualties in the Somme campaign. The debate—and ultimately the narrow defeat by public vote of the proposal to introduce conscription—not only exposed more clearly the alignment of Red Cross work with the prosecution of the war itself but also positioned that work as an expression of antagonism toward those deemed not to be sacrificing for the cause. Eleanor Mackinnon, editor of the *NSW Record*, had been a prominent advocate of a pro-conscription vote. She described the loss as “an ill day for the honour of Australia; a sad day for her gallant soldiers; and a heart-breaking day for the men and women who have honestly tried to do what

they could to form a second line of defence behind the men in the trenches.”⁴⁴

In the branches one finds similar sentiments, despite the organization’s official eschewing of political and religious matters. Caulfield branch president Agnes Dunbar reminded members of what the men at the front were doing for them and continued to expound the arguments that had so recently animated and antagonized Australians. There were some in the community, she charged, “who seem to think that it really does not concern us very much, that ‘*we* are safe, whatever happens’: ‘it is not *our* war,’ etc. It *is* our war—it is Britain’s war; it is Britain’s, and Britain’s war is ours.”⁴⁵ Those circumstances were surely on Mackinnon’s mind, as much as the gloomy outlook for the war, when she wrote a Christmas message to the membership in December: “Our Red Cross work must not slacken, but in the tension of nerves and tiredness, from which each of us suffers, it is hoped that the ‘really’ Christmas spirit may smooth over difficulties, and engender good feeling among the workers in all patriotic movements.”⁴⁶ Taking that message on could be a challenge, for even as the likes of Emily Russel in Kensington asserted that while attending to the work remained “a labour of love for our faithful band of earnest workers,” that labor of love was increasingly coming to define more exclusively those who saw themselves as sacrificing for the cause as against those refused to do so.⁴⁷

In light of a grimmer attitude toward the duration of the war, and the embittered social relations in the wake of the failed conscription vote, Red Cross leaders grew more willing to acknowledge their members’ tribulations. The Caulfield branch had launched its own newsletter to maintain its members’ interest in the work, “which, after nearly three years’ war, might be expected to be flagging a little.”⁴⁸ Shortly after, the publication was calling for sympathy for wives and mothers of soldiers, “living under a strain which is well nigh unbearable,” and reminding other Red Cross workers of the virtues of “helping those who give as well as those who receive.”⁴⁹ In Sydney, Mackinnon was certain that more pain was coming for the community. She again prescribed Red Cross work as a remedy for the tensions that remained: “If there are dark moments ahead, may the noble work of your brains and hands be potent to ease the bur-

den of our hearts.”⁵⁰ In January 1917 the *Caulfield Record* similarly reminded its readers that Red Cross work could stave off anxiety: “It is a fact that material work fills the heart and keeps healthy the blood and prevents gnawing anxiety from inflicting serious injury.”⁵¹

At the same time, however, in their efforts to sustain the will to continue, those same leaders oscillated between sympathy for those feeling the weight of the war and cajoling their members to greater efforts. Agnes Dunbar at once recognized and then subordinated women’s weariness to the object of their work and worry:

Some people have said, “I’m tired of giving to this and that.” They may be, and doubtless we all are, but—and this is a big “But”—we are not so tired as the men in the trenches or in the fighting line, men, some of whom have not had a day off for two years, no Saturday half-holiday, no quiet Sunday to rest both mind and body, no loving care of wife or mother, no loving caress of little child to lighten hardships. . . . Let it never be said of us that we are “tired,” that we have “done enough.”⁵²

Some branches went so far as to reprove their own members. Henty branch secretary William Brett pointed out that while the branch had “some splendid workers and supporters . . . a large number remain passive. Why, I wonder?—when the work is so great and such a benefit to our soldiers.”⁵³ Nevertheless, the growing resentment that the burdens of war appeared not to be shared equally focused most antagonism outward. Jean McKinnon of the Nabiac branch reserved her greater criticisms for those who failed to contribute funds to allow the branch to persist: “Oh, that people would give more liberally of their abundance. The defenders of our Empire should not be allowed to want for anything. They are giving their all, and ‘nothing’s too good for them now!’”⁵⁴

Grief and Fearfulness in the War’s Crescendo

The patterns of the fighting in 1917 tended to push Australians back onto their diminishing emotional resources to cope with their anxieties. Some bullish statements about branches’ enthusiasm

tended to coincide with the brief period in which the fighting became mobile again, as the Germans withdrew to their new and powerful defensive complex along the western front, the Hindenburg Line. In the Sydney suburb of Roseville, Winifred E. Myers was optimistic enough to claim that her members “take an even keener interest now than in the beginning of war.”⁵⁵ By the end of the year, however, the military situation was at its nadir for the Allies, with the Russians having withdrawn from the war, the Italian front collapsing, and French units refusing to join new offensives. The British armies, including the Australians, had lost even more heavily in their offensives in Belgium than on the Somme the previous year.

At home, the situation was also marked with tension, and not only because a second vote on conscription in December 1917 repeated the rejection of the first proposal. Even more personally, the visceral experience of bereavement was increasingly common among branch members. The *NSW Record* had noted sadly in August that the Red Cross was “not exempt from having losses at the front. Hardly a week goes by but that one or other among us is not touched by the hand of the Great Reaper. It is some slight comfort to be working amongst those who have also suffered.”⁵⁶ By the end of the year, more and more branches were reporting the grief and bereavement so evident in their communities.

The Red Cross was even beginning to see its own members succumbing to the weariness and torment. Most prominent was the death in December of Mary Owen, who had been conspicuous in founding the New South Wales division in 1914. Obituaries noted that her death had been hastened by her overexertion in Red Cross work, an observation that no doubt struck a chord among her fellow workers, so many of whom were also struggling to cope with the demands of the war and the anxiety it induced.⁵⁷ Thus, when prompted to contemplate the year ahead in the *NSW Record*, Mackinnon could find little with which to encourage workers besides their own record of achievement. She hoped that the year would bring members “such happiness as we can look forward to during these tragic times.” There was nothing to do but accept that “the only way in which one can endure and carry on is simply to work and work for our boys wherever they may be.”⁵⁸ The calls to the original princi-

ples of the war remained, suggesting—as historian Joan Beaumont has argued—that they were not so bankrupt or hollow as later reflections on the war have suggested.⁵⁹ The Lady Mayoress' Sewing Guild knew its group had suffered numerous bereavements, but still its leaders appealed to members to see that their sacrifice “may have helped to free the world of tyranny and strife.”⁶⁰

Whether or not such abstractions could still draw action from committed Australians, it remained true that anxiety, tension, and fear proved extraordinary motivators as the battlefield situation grew more dire. In response to the precarious military situation, the tempo and strain of the work once again accelerated as branch members drove themselves harder. Whereas the hot summer months had usually precipitated a lull in work, in 1917–18 a number of branches persisted through that period or kept a watchful eye on the situation. From Berrigan, Florence Verso reported that despite trying heat, the branch members “consider that we should not cease our efforts, but continue to work as a just tribute to our brave men who are working night and day for us amid such awful strife and hardship.”⁶¹ In Caulfield, branch leaders also encouraged unceasing effort, appealing “to our workers not to fail us. To knit every spare minute, and to organize as many private knitting circles as possible, which we find from experience give such splendid returns.”⁶² Some were prepared to dispense with the social aspects of Red Cross work in favor of working even harder for the men at the front at a time of crisis. Workers at Coonamble's sewing circle, Edith L. Button reported, “have unanimously voted afternoon tea ‘off,’ as though the cup certainly cheers, it also certainly delays.”⁶³ A terrifying German offensive commencing in March 1918, which seemed to threaten the entire Allied position over the next several weeks, supercharged those feelings and rendered the strain on individuals again entirely apparent to their fellows. In East Maitland, branch secretaries later noted regretfully that their president “has not been in good health for some time. She has worked hard and constantly for the cause.”⁶⁴ As the military situation became more alarming, the *Caulfield Record's* rhetoric became more strained and drew ever more harsh distinctions between sacrifices at home and at the front: “We must not shirk our duty, and in our own way we will be helping those gallant souls.

Anyone who shirks does not deserve to be saved; any woman who does not do her utmost is not worthy of the lads out there. Death for them, so that it may be life for us. Just think what is happening to-day. We are accepting their great sacrifices; let us in return live nobly, act nobly, and work nobly.”⁶⁵

Driven by their fear of losing the war, and more directly by their anxieties over loved ones, Australians were again galvanized by the very thing that was draining them, both physically and emotionally. This indeed was Rose Keast’s experience at the Broken Hill Red Cross. In taking on enormous amounts of work, she admitted, she was subjugating her deep anxieties about her son’s welfare to her work: “While I am working it keeps me from thinking of my own troubles.”⁶⁶ Aware of the toll her anxiety was taking, she had already confided to him that “I only long to live till you come home again.”⁶⁷ Such trials were all too evident to a former branch president in Parramatta, who praised the “splendid women” of the branch, who were “true heroines, fighting their fears and sorrows in constant loving toil.”⁶⁸ In July, “E. Mc F.,” writing in the *NSW Record*, expressed only what her readers already knew: “The war is always in our minds. We cannot do other than bear constant company with the men who are fighting for us.”⁶⁹

The exhausted yet determined efforts of those in the branches reflected the level of community support that remained in Australia in 1918. This support became especially evident when the national executive appealed for a new effort to improve its finances and declared “Our Day” as its major fundraising event. The preparations for Our Day focused energies within branches, providing a renewed sense of direct engagement with the war and its needs. Even before the appeal, branch secretaries had been asserting their communities’ continuing goodwill. Ivy Somerville had noted in January 1918 that the Jiggi branch’s funds were almost exhausted, “but we feel sure when an appeal is made, notwithstanding the many calls made on the public, contributions will be forthcoming to carry on the good work.”⁷⁰ Other branches had already been working, or would soon commence working, much more intensively in their communities, especially in conducting house-to-house collections. In Melbourne, the East Caulfield sub-branch had twenty-three women whose

work each week was to move from house to house and establish regular donations or deliver materials for knitting and sewing. One of these women made no fewer than 150 calls per week.⁷¹ Not all in the community appreciated such approaches—one street collector admitted that “sometimes the people are not very sympathetic”—but Kate Harbutt in Vacluse still felt that the collecting, besides “enabling us to keep our work going . . . binds us all together in a common interest.”⁷² In the smaller rural district of Baan Baa, Annie Cowrie-Thomson also found community solidity with the Red Cross, as “nearly every house in town and district displayed the Badge,” indicating a household giving to the cause (see fig. 2).⁷³ Elsewhere, branches reported positive responses to a series of lecture tours and talks circulating in New South Wales for their benefit. Most notable was the celebrity soldier Tom Skeyhill, ostensibly blinded in combat (but actually a charlatan), who visited numerous districts and used his appeal to raise funds and attract new members. The journalist and writer Louise Mack—who had reported from Belgium at the outbreak of war—also toured and conducted charity auctions. The success of the Red Cross’s fundraising effort in 1918 was extraordinary: by August it had produced £285,000 in Victoria and upwards of £350,000 in New South Wales. It was a sign of both the continuing will within the branches and support for the cause in the wider public.

Yet despite that evident willingness in the community to support those at the front, the antipathies central to the war’s domestic politics ran deep in the effort to mobilize and then remobilize. In August 1918, Mackinnon declared that those “who will neither work nor give” still owed much, while Red Cross workers could “still go forward with serene confidence, content that in spending ourselves and our money we are paying a debt of gratitude which has been incurred for us by heroic sacrifice and suffering on the part of our men.”⁷⁴ Mackinnon’s reference to “spending ourselves” was important, for this was just what had been occurring now for four years. In the following month Mackinnon noted how important it was for encouragement from others to continue, for “as the months and years go on, the strenuous work begins to tell on the workers.”⁷⁵

Fig. 2. Blanche and Christina Vines, of East Melbourne, posing in 1918 with Red Cross house badge displayed in window. Courtesy Museums Victoria, <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/773658>.

Conclusion

The armistice that ended the war in Allied victory in November 1918 induced deep expressions of relief at home in Australia: "It is with a much lighter heart that I write these few lines to-day," Keast told her son on receipt of the news.⁷⁶ Yet if the armistice signaled the end of the emotional trial for so many, the Red Cross leadership was determined to insist on the continuing need for the organization. "The most important point to emphasise," Mackinnon insisted in March 1919, "is that for us the war is not over; it cannot possibly be over for many years if the Red Cross does its duty to the returned sick and wounded men." The need would last, she thought, for a generation.⁷⁷

Those branches that continued their reports endorsed that perspective. But their efforts faced a new challenge, as their peers in the voluntary effort rapidly demobilized in the months after the armistice. The Victoria division reported later in 1919 that, in response to "the want of incentive and lessened need for Red Cross work," some two hundred branches had ceased operations or indicated an intention to do so. The report noted an expectation that "in the near future there will be a much more extensive demobilisation of our Red Cross forces."⁷⁸ Many and perhaps even most Red Cross workers seem to have held on to Singleton branch secretary Sarah Wood's 1916 vision of a time "when there will be no longer need for Red Cross aims and work."⁷⁹ As a result, the evidence of those who had simply survived the ordeal is largely lost in the branches that began to melt away. One cannot know how close Australians' capacity to continue came to breaking down before the end of the war released them. Keast's experience may offer some clues as to the effects the ordeal had had, for after reuniting with her son on Christmas Day, 1919, her health quickly began to fail. Three weeks later she died, at the age of forty-eight.

In December 1918, in an appreciation of Australian women's contribution to the war, the *NSW Record* declared entirely fairly that women had taken an enormous part in a war that had demanded much from them. But one key part of that experience it preferred to hide away. "We need not dwell on the suspense she endured and the

sacrifices she bore so courageously,” the paper declared; “these are intimate matters.”⁸⁰ While the *NSW Record* went on to insist that “her public services have been as splendid as her private fortitude,” it was already obscuring how thoroughly public work and private emotion had been linked in driving commitment to war over four long years. The rapid mobilization of voluntary labor in the Red Cross had relied not only on existing organizational structures but also on the simultaneously productive and corrosive emotional tension between commitment to war and the deep anxieties integral to the experience. The tempo of that relationship accelerated after Australians joined the action at Gallipoli and reasserted itself in the recognition that the war would require an enduring spirit even as its long and unrelenting course gradually induced grief and even despair. The effort to remain actively committed to the war under those circumstances relied on structural factors at branch level as well as emotional interventions via the press and directly in the streets and at the doorsteps of private homes.

That such activities worked was surely a testament to that broad acceptance that the war had to be won and also to the uncomfortable reality that men were genuinely suffering. It was a reality that the leadership of the Red Cross was increasingly willing to invoke, both as an expression of bitterness toward those who seemed aloof from the war effort and as a way of provoking ever more profound exertions from its own ranks. The bleak war situation in 1917 and into 1918 drew much from the reservoirs of war workers’ resilience, emphasizing again the central dynamic of a civilian war effort that drained volunteers’ vitality at the same time that it inspired constant emotional recommitment to the cause they shared with their loved ones at the front. How long such a relationship to war could be sustained on the Australian home front was a genuine question. If that question became moot when the Allies’ enemies collapsed, what remains clear is that organizations like the Red Cross structured and sustained Australia’s domestic effort, working in tandem with individuals to make possible the home front culture of war that enveloped and drove them forward in the terrible conflict they both made and endured.

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