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Queensland Remembers 1914-1918

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Battle Front and Home Front: perspectives on Queensland Museum histories of the First World War

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This publication has been prepared as a result of research carried out in Queensland Museum throughout the centenary of the First World War (2014–2018). The introduction explores the range of topics and artefacts identified in this research and makes connections across the histories revealed. The volume shows that there is a continuing desire by audiences to participate in remembering the multiple and interconnecting realities of war.

❑ First World War, Queensland Museum, commemoration

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FIG. 1. Anzac Legacy Gallery at Queensland Museum, Southbank.

On 4 August 1914, following months of rising political tension across Europe, Great Britain announced that it was at war with Germany. Shortly afterwards Queensland issued its own proclamations of war, an indication of the way the state viewed its autonomy within the new Commonwealth of Australia (Saunders). This was not the first time that Queenslanders had been called to arms. Well before Federation in 1901 Queensland had not only raised its own militia but also its own mounted infantry (the fore-runners of the Light Horse Regiments which were to acquire iconic status in the Middle East during First World War) and had later sent some troops to the Boer War of 1899–1902 in South Africa (Hamilton 2015).

From the 1880s Queensland even boasted a naval capability intended to protect its ports and harbours, with a growing fleet of steam-powered gunboats and supporting vessels (Gillett 1982: 29–57). But the war proclaimed in August 1914 was very different from these earlier experiences of local defence or geographically constrained battles. In its long duration and in its globally scattered battle fronts, in its use of new technologies and in its voracious consumption of combatants and materiel, the war of 1914–1918 provided a horrendous new experience of war that impacted on almost everyone and every aspect of life, not just the battlefield participants but society as a whole.

From 2014 to 2018 a growing desire across Australia to remember this First World War, those who fought and those who supported them in the workplace, those who cared for the injured and those who waited at home, saw a lengthening roll call of centenary events and observances in the form of historical displays, military re-enactments and the restoration of war memorials. In Queensland many of these were made possible by dedicated government funding as part of the Queensland Anzac Centenary Program.

Major new historical exhibitions opened, notably the redeveloped *First World War Galleries* at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and the *Sir John Monash Centre* situated in the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery in northern France, which tells the story of Australians who fought on the Western Front throughout the First World War (Sir John Monash Centre).

Queensland Museum was also active during those four years, planning and developing a major new permanent gallery (figure 1) in partnership with the *Anzac Centenary Coordination Unit* with Anzac centenary funding, for its South Bank Brisbane campus presenting:

the War and its impacts from the multiple viewpoints of those in the front-line as well as their families, friends and associates back in Queensland. It examines the War's legacies, historical and contemporary, especially those which have had a lasting or profound impact on this state, and its peoples. It also reflects on Queensland today – a multicultural society, which has its strength in its unique Indigenous cultures, its place in the Pacific and a strong sense of identity (Queensland Museum).

In tandem with the development of this new gallery, there was an intensive program of research into Queensland Museum's collections of social, military, technological and transport history.

Much of this research helped inform the selection and interpretation of objects in the new First World War gallery, but space alone precluded all the artefacts featuring in this research from being included in the new gallery. In the case of the horse-drawn Australian Army General Service Wagon, and the Hunslet narrow gauge steam locomotive, it was more appropriate that these objects feature in new displays at other Queensland Museum campuses, Cobb+Co Museum in Toowoomba and The Workshops Rail Museum in Ipswich respectively. But their inclusion here in the present volume of *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* provides an additional platform for more widely sharing their histories as well.

Each of the following papers has been authored by a member of the Cultures and Histories Program at Queensland Museum, and for some this has been their introduction to the world of peer-reviewed research. All have entered energetically into the challenge of exploring new meanings and finding new interpretations for both material and

intangible cultural evidence within and outside the museum. A number develop detailed object biographies which explore design, construction and use of museum artefacts, noting changes in significance over time as they became museum display items. Some papers touch on the history of Queensland Museum and the way in which its First World War collections were developed, whether as war trophies allocated to the museum after the war ended, or acquired more recently.

Amongst the larger artefacts is arguably the museum's best-known war object *Mephisto*, an A7V Sturmpanzerwagen which took part in the First World War from March 1918 and is now the only surviving German tank from that war. After its retrieval from a battlefield in northern France in July 1918 the tank arrived at Queensland Museum the following year, hauled through Brisbane's streets behind a city council steam roller, and becoming a familiar exhibit for generations of visitors beneath a small and incongruous shade shelter outside the museum's grand building (Hopkins-Weise & Czechura 2018). Nicholas Hadnutt's paper '*Engines of Destruction: biographies of a museum's war trophies of a generic artefact*' recounts this long history of *Mephisto* and the other smaller war trophy guns allocated to Queensland Museum in the context of cultural biography, and considers the way these exhibits' meaning has altered in response to changes in public attitudes to the commemoration of war.

Some artefacts manufactured for war have a much longer peace-time use, such as the Hunslet narrow gauge steam locomotive which was constructed to War Office specification in Leeds, England, in 1916, for service on the light railways on the battlefields of northern France. In '*War Department light railways of the First World War*' David Mewes explores not only this military utilisation of narrow gauge railways but also shows how the Hunslet locomotive's brief use in the First World War was dwarfed by its much longer use on the cane fields of Queensland. In a demonstration of 'swords into ploughshares' the Hunslet was reconditioned by the manufacturer after the war and then sold to North Eton Central Mill in Mackay where it worked until 1964

hauling trucks of sugar cane from the fields to the mill for processing. The Hunslet has now been restored to its 1916 appearance and placed on display at The Workshops Rail Museum.

Whilst railway technology was well developed by the time of the First World War, aviation was much less so. The war itself stimulated not only the technology of powered flight but also helped create a generation of aviation-minded individuals who were able to see peace time applications of the new technology, such as Bert Hinkler and Charles Kingsford Smith who became popular heroes for their long distance flights after the war. In '*From Aero Clubs to Aviation Companies: tracing the development of Queensland aviation through the experiences of Thomas Macleod 1910–1919*' Jennifer High explores another early Queensland aviator, less well known than Hinkler and Kingsford Smith, who transitioned from pioneering enthusiast to officer in the new Royal Flying Corps (fore-runner of the Royal Air Force) to becoming a director of Q.A.N.T.A.S. Limited (which was to become national carrier QANTAS). Significantly Macleod left an archive which provides a personal insight into the early years of Queensland aviation, its origins, military achievements and commercial potential, pointing towards the vital role civil aviation would soon come to play in connecting remote regions and countries.

It is easy to view the First World War as a war of complex mechanical technologies like aviation and battlefield tanks. But the First World War was also dependent on the centuries-old technology of horse power for transporting people and materiel. Jeff Powell, in '*Australian Army General Service Wagon Mark X: researching the historical context of a generic artefact*', describes a number of unexpected findings regarding a First World War horse-drawn wagon purchased from a New South Wales farm for the collections at Cobb+Co Museum to help tell the role of the horse in war there. Mass-produced in Britain by a railway carriage manufacturer rather than made by an Australian coachbuilder as might have been expected, through Powell's paper this Army wagon now tells larger stories about design, manufacture and national identity in time of war.

Other papers in this volume, in charting the social and organisational infrastructure of the battle front and home front, remind us that war is about more than materiel, and by drawing on more ephemeral artefacts, and on archival and photographic evidence – or with regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers, absence of evidence – show that it is a very human, sometimes inhuman, activity in its planning, execution and aftermath. Tracy Ryan's paper *'Forgotten organisations from the First World War'* shows us the value of ephemeral items, like the small buttons and badges in Queensland Museum's collections, in remembering the fundraising and charitable work of bodies such as the Red Cross and less well-known organisations like the National Committee for Relief in Belgium and the Strength of Empire Movement.

Queensland Government Railways (QGR) were the largest employer in the state during the First World War and recognised the importance of providing support for railway staff who enlisted through the establishment of the Railway Patriotic Fund. During the war QGR had key strategic roles of transportation (including running recruitment trains), communication (involving post and telegraph systems) and manufacture: not only did the railway workshops continue building and maintaining rolling stock but the production of munitions was also attempted (albeit unsatisfactorily). The war was a difficult time for QGR management who faced many issues including coping with the loss of staff who enlisted (some to run the narrow gauge railways in northern France), falling revenues and increasing trade union activism. Robert Shiels in *'Duty, debt and picket lines: the Queensland Railway Department during the First World War'* has tapped into archives held at The Workshops Rail Museum to show how the Railways Department endeavoured, despite many challenges, to continue to deliver its vital services on the home front and support its staff on the battle front.

Long before the war had ended there were strong feelings at the Ipswich Railway Workshops about creating a suitable monumental memorial to honour those fighting. David Hampton's paper *'We remember: the Ipswich Railway Workshops War Memorial'* traces the efforts made from 1915 onwards to construct the memorial, detailing fundraising,

design (noting its deliberate similarity to the Boer War monument at the London and North Western Railway's workshops at Crewe), construction and final unveiling in 1919. Hampton observes that this process of memorialising those who served and those who died was mirrored in the construction of 61 similar memorials across the state. The Ipswich Railway Workshops War Memorial was refreshed in 2016 and, like other community memorials, continues to provide a focal point for commemorations on Anzac and Remembrance Days.

In parallel with communities participating in First World War commemorations in increasing numbers in recent years, so too have community groups, stimulated by opportunities to access Commonwealth and State funding, been developing heritage projects exploring wartime histories of their localities. Joanna Wills, one of Queensland Museum's regionally-based Museum Development Officers, tells of one such project in *'Treasures from the Tablelands: communities, collaboration and collections'* as she describes the genesis and delivery of Atherton Tablelands Heritage Network's Anzac treasures of the Tablelands exhibition. The Atherton Tablelands project is remarkable for the number of its participants, with thirteen collection-holding groups coming together in a series of training workshops leading to a collaborative exhibition which showcased highlight objects from each organisation. Wills queries whether the success of such a project can simply be valued quantitatively (such as number of participants pulling the project together, number of visitors) and concludes that for its participants it was rather in the transformative development of new skills, knowledge and social interactions that the project can be seen to have a lasting value.

In *'Exhibiting absence: (Re)Presenting Indigenous histories of the First World War'* Sylvia Cockburn and Alethea Beetson explore some other histories absent from the large scale telling of First World War history in Australia. The paucity of evidence in museum collections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers' war service is a product of the way these soldiers' contributions were widely neglected and overlooked in the years after the war. Cockburn

and Beetson pose the question ‘How do object-focussed museums exhibit stories whose tangible remains are absent from their archives?’, noting that these challenges ‘need to be viewed in the context of deeper conflicts between history, memory, national identity and the Indigenous experience’. Beetson provides examples of the way drama (Queensland Theatre Company’s *Black Diggers*), public sculpture (City of Sydney’s Indigenous War Memorial *Yininmadyemi – Thou didst let fall*) and intertwining artefacts with commissioned contemporary artworks by Maori artists (New Zealand at War in Auckland War Memorial Museum) have presented hitherto forgotten histories. As the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War approaches the challenge will continue for museums to recognise, collect and convey more diverse and inclusive narratives of Australia’s war histories.

Moving between the battlefield and the museum, Geraldine Mate’s paper ‘*Dark Tourism: collections and memories of war*’ explores the phenomenon of thanatourism (or dark tourism, ‘the act of travel to sites of death, disaster or the seemingly macabre’) and the way in which soldier participants’ souveniring of their war experiences (both on and travelling to the battlefield) is part of a continuum that can include museum exhibitions intended to convey something of the war experience for contemporary audiences. Seeking to ‘understand how these objects represent alternate yet equally authentic experiences of war’ Mate examines six groups of artefacts and photographs collected by First World War soldiers whilst on active service and subsequently donated to Queensland Museum, finding that these mementoes ‘can be regarded as outcomes of, or elements of, a form of experiential tourism in amongst the dark of war’.

Coming now to the present, on historic battlefields both real (for example tourism to Gallipoli or the Western Front) and virtual (such as a museum display, often using soldiers’ souvenirs), there is clearly a continuing desire by audiences to participate in remembering the multiple and interconnected realities of war.

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