A crude celebration of Australian militarism

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First Victory, 1914: HMAS Sydney’s Hunt for the German raider Emden

The first thing to be said about Mike Carlton’s book is that it is a travesty of historical scholarship. It provides an account of Australia’s entry into World War I which flies in the face of all historical evidence, including that presented in its own pages.

Carlton’s book is not based on any kind of serious historical reconstruction. Neither primary source documents nor decades of secondary scholarship on World War I are given the careful consideration they are due. He offers instead what amounts to a crude glorification of Australian militarism, and a revisionist account of Australian aims in World War I, all in the service of a contemporary militarist agenda.

The title First Victory is Carlton’s fawning reference to the Royal Australian Navy’s first bloodling in November 1914 when HMAS Sydney sank the German raider SMS Emden near the Cocos Islands, some 2,450 miles off the West Australian Coast.

The book centres on the author’s bogus claim that HMAS Sydney’s victory over the Emden ended an alleged existential threat to the young Australian nation by a German “colossus,” which “looked down upon Australia from the north.”

HMAS Sydney sunk the Emden on November 9, 1914, in a battle which Carlton describes as an “extraordinary story.” “The battle, when it came was short and bloody, an emphatic victory at sea for the newborn Royal Australian Navy. It remains to this day a celebrated epic of naval warfare.”

What actually took place was that after some initial difficulties, the larger, faster, more powerful Sydney overwhelmed the lone Emden with relative ease and continued to shell the vessel even after it was beached.

HMAS Sydney was not involved in an epic pursuit of the German warship. It was one of seven Australian, New Zealand and Japanese warships escorting the first detachments of Australian and New Zealand troops to the European battle front and was diverted when a call for assistance was received from Direction Island in the Cocos Islands, some two hours away.

The Emden had been involved over the previous three months in successful raids attacking British shipping and supply facilities in the Indian-Pacific. But it was not part of a massive German naval force which threatened Australia, as Carlton’s book implies. On the contrary, as soon as war was declared, the German naval fleet stationed at the Chinese base of Tsingtao departed for Europe, leaving the Emden to carry out raiding operations against British and allied interests.

In “normal” times, Carlton’s book would perhaps not have seen the light of day. It would at least have met with criticism from academics and reviewers because of its virtually fictionalised account of well-established historical events. Entire chapters read more like a “boy’s own” adventure series.

But these are far from “normal” times. As the centenary of World War I approaches, a public relations campaign of immense proportions has commenced, spearheaded by federal and state governments, the media, and major corporate interests, to glorify Australia’s role in the slaughter.

Carlton’s book sits comfortably with this agenda. And it has received praise from some of Australia’s leading academics and broadsheet reviewers. Ross Fitzgerald, emeritus professor of history and politics at Griffith University, observed in his own review (published in the November 16 edition of Murdoch’s the Australian) that, “it is gratifying to be told, in some detail, how men of foresight had campaigned for our new nation, which had only federated on January 1, 1901, to have our own navy. This achievement, as Carlton reminds us, was ‘the first for any of the King’s dominions.’”

And he continues: “This absorbing book argues eloquently that the destruction of the Emden by the Sydney off the Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean on November 9, 1914, was not only an emphatic affirmation of the reach of Australian sea power, it was “the first true victory of the war.” Fitzgerald’s review captures accurately the intellectually lazy, complacent and pro-militarist atmosphere that dominates present-day academia.

Carlton, who made his name as a journalist during the Vietnam War, is well aware of widespread public sentiment that World War I was the product of great power rivalry in which the lives of millions were sacrificed.

As he explains in his brief foreword, “There is a modern view that the First World War was a quarrel between the crowned heads of Europe and their arms makers, and, therefore, that distant Australia had no reason to enter the fight.”

He aims to dispel these mistaken notions, but not by exposing the geopolitical motives of Australian imperialism. His history, Carlton explains, is told from “an Australian point of view” with “new facts and perspectives brought into the light of day.” In fact, Carlton concocts a scenario in which the young Australian nation was involved in a heroic struggle for national defence:

“In 1914, the Kaiser’s Germany had a flourishing colonial empire in China, East Asia and the Pacific Ocean. “German New Guinea, Deutsch-Neuguinea [the German translation is presumably added for evil effect],” Carlton writes, “stood at our very doorstep… Our country was directly menaced by Imperial Germany, lying just over the horizon—a threat that our forebears, save for a few pacifists, very well understood and took precautions to counter.”

The reasons for Australia’s entry into the war are the exact opposite of those advanced by Carlton. Like every other power, Australia was driven by aggressive imperialist ambitions.

Germany did have some colonial possessions in the Pacific, including the Solomon Islands, Nauru, Samoa, the Marshall, Mariana and Caroline Islands. New Guinea had been acquired with British consent in 1899. But they were miniscule compared to the colonies of the British Empire. It was precisely its lack of colonial territories that drove Germany to war with Britain.

Australia had long coveted German possessions, amid resentment over Britain’s endorsement of German New Guinea. Indeed, one of the central motives for federation in 1901 was to allow the separate colonies to speak with one voice when it came to defending the burgeoning interests of Australian capitalism in the region.

But in order to acquire a position on the world stage, the historically weak Australian ruling class, dependent economically on Britain and
facing a combative working class, required the strategic leverage provided by
the British Empire.

The new nation’s imperialist ambitions were focused firmly on the
Pacific. The very first action of Australia in the Great War was the seizure
of Rabaul, the main administrative town in German New Guinea, in
September 1914, one month after the official declaration of war.

By Carlton’s own account, Rabaul, like Germany’s other meagre
possessions in the Pacific, was practically deserted. Five ships of the
newly-formed Royal Australian Navy, including the state-of-the-art
HMNS Sydney and HMNS Australia, arrived to seize the colonial centre.
But in Carlton’s words: “There was nothing there. Nothing. Simpsonhafen [the so-called administrative capital in Rabaul] was
empty.”

The Australian forces had orders to take Rabaul and to destroy the
German wireless station located there. This was a mission accomplished
by a farcically small detachment of Australians: “Two of the people
carried heavy sledge hammers, pliers and similar work tools.” The entire
“operation” lasted just 20 minutes, after which the detachment promptly
left.

Herbertshöhe also in Rabaul, was “taken without a shot,” while at
nearby Kabaukau, Australian forces found “a Chinese cook and four
terrified New Guineans cowering in a room.”

The only significant battle occurred on September 11, when Australian
forces went to seize a wireless station at Bitapaka, near Rabaul. It was
captured with a superior military force within 24 hours, the Australians
suffering six dead and four wounded. One German officer died together
with 30 native police, while another German officer and ten native police
were wounded.

The Australian occupation of German New Guinea was formally
proclaimed during a ceremony at Rabaul on September 13, 1914. So much
for Carlton’s “colossus” hovering to the north.

By his invocation of “national defence” as a rationale for Australia’s
entry into World War I Carlton invents nothing new. Since the dawn of
imperialism the ruling classes have always sought to clothe their predatory
appetites in defensive guise.

In his preface to War and the International, written in 1914, Trotsky
took aim at the leaders of social-democracy who acted as recruiting
sergeants for World War I, renouncing internationalism on the basis of
“national defence” and alleging a common interest between the working
class and the national bourgeoisie: “All talk of the present bloody clash
being a work of national defence is either hypocrisy or blindness,” wrote
Trotsky.

“While the simpletons and hypocrites prate of the defence of national
freedom and independence,” Trotsky continued, in words that have lost
none of their force, “the German English War is really being waged for
the freedom of the imperialistic exploitation of the peoples of India and
Egypt on the one hand, and of the imperialistic division of the peoples of
the earth on the other.”

The horrific realities of World War I, which became apparent within
months of its outbreak, meant that the Marxist conception, outlined here
by Trotsky, while buried at first under a wave of state-sponsored
patriotism, rapidly began to enter popular consciousness, both among
soldiers and on the home front, continuing to shape the outlook of
successive generations.

As recently as 1995, Australian military historian Joan Beaumont noted
that, “Australians traditionally have shown little reverence for military
institutions. They have been suspicious of militarism, distrustful of the
claims of the state on its citizens for compulsory military service and often
ambivalent about their country’s contribution to the wars of the twentieth
century.”

Since the late 1980s, concerted efforts have been made to overcome this
deep suspicion. In 1990, Bob Hawke became the first Australian prime

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