

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 blooding 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 sank 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 *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 geo-strategic 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 minuscule 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 HMAS Sydney and HMAS 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 Kabakaul, 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

minister to attend an ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) dawn service at Gallipoli, in modern day Turkey. His speech marked a critical step in resurrecting the so-called "ANZAC legend" that had been so discredited in the aftermath of the Second World War.

In 1915, more than 10,000 ANZACS were killed as part of a reckless attempt devised by then First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, to secure a sea route to Russia, then a British ally. So great was the loss of life that a concerted propaganda campaign was immediately launched back in Australia to dress the slaughter in the most heroic colours, a campaign that Hawke's speech echoed eagerly: "Because these hills rang with their voices and ran with their blood," he intoned, "this place, Gallipoli, is in one sense, a part of Australia."

When the Liberal-National government took office in 1996, these efforts were intensified, with Prime Minister John Howard promising a "root and branch renewal" of Australian attitudes towards the nation's past. Howard denounced what he called the "black armband" view of history for the attention it lavished on past crimes, and for deriding Australia's great "achievements."

Especially over the last decade, the ruling establishment has sought to promote ever-more militaristic forms of nationalism. In the lead-up to this year's WWI centenary, a tsunami of books has appeared celebrating every aspect of the nation's war effort, including the role of indigenous soldiers and of women on the home front (both as a nod to identity politics and to portray the war as an all-inclusive effort).

Overcoming the deep suspicions about the origins of WWI cannot be left to overtly right-wing nationalists and drum beaters. Enter Mike Carlton. He is particularly useful, having assiduously cultivated a public profile as an opponent of official cant. In 2003, he ridiculed the lies used to launch the war on Iraq, including "weapons of mass destruction." But since then, like the broader "left" liberal layer of the well-off middle class of which he is a part, Carlton has turned sharply to the right.

Part of this turn is the creation and promotion of the most noxious forms of Australian nationalism, rooted in the same kind of blood and soil mythology that characterises some of the most right-wing and fascist movements in Europe.

In Chapter 1 Carlton writes: "As the nineteenth century drew to its close, the genius of the Australian people burst from the bonds of both a real and imagined colonial inferiority. It was as if some exotic new southern flower had bloomed in explosive profusion, ushering in an age as golden as the wattle itself. Native born or immigrant, convict stained or landed squatter, Australians created for themselves and enjoyed a ferment of political, commercial and artistic activity unmatched before or since."

For Carlton, the consummate achievement of this golden age was the establishment in 1913 of the Royal Australian Navy, which gave material clout to the already developed predatory ambitions of Australian imperialism.

"Men of foresight," Carlton intones, "had campaigned for the newly federated nation to have its own navy, the first for any of the King's dominions. They succeeded in building that navy against great odds, and, in doing so, they saved their country." And they laid a course "for an Australian future that resonates to this day."

First Victory, Carlton explains, sets out to show, "how we, the people, carried ourselves when the great guns began firing."

Today, the great guns and even deadlier weapons of the major powers are being readied once again. The danger of a new imperialist world war looms. Carlton's book is an ideological adjunct to these military preparations.



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