

The role of Australian schools in World War I

Soldier Boys: The Militarisation of Australian and New Zealand Schools for World War I

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Soldier Boys: The Militarisation of Australian and New Zealand Schools for World War I by Maxwell N. Waugh, Melbourne Books, 2014

During the past year—and until November 11, 2018, the centenary of the end of the mass slaughter that was World War I—Australian involvement in the war is being celebrated by an outpouring of propaganda and myth-making, reaching frenzied proportions in the lead up to Anzac Day, April 25, the centenary of the Allied landing at Gallipoli. No section of the population is being spared, including, or, more accurately, especially school children. They are being bombarded with curriculum material and activities all serving to glorify war.

Soldier Boys: The Militarisation of Australian and New Zealand Schools for World War I, published in 2014, demonstrates that the precedent for the indoctrination and priming of a generation of youth for war was initially established by the forebears of the current Australian political establishment in the years prior to World War I.

Written by Dr Maxwell Waugh, a retired former teacher, school principal, and lecturer in the History of Education at Deakin and Monash Universities, *Soldier Boys* is a valuable book that punctures the prevailing myths. It demonstrates that, by 1911, Australia had become a veritable military training camp for the British Empire. It corrects the conception, long promoted by government, media and the film industry, that the boys and young men who enlisted to fight, did so spontaneously and voluntarily as raw, untrained recruits.

In reality, the vast majority who joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), including the “Anzacs,” were the product of a harsh and punitive system of compulsory military training, in both public and private schools, and in the Citizen Military Forces (CMF), aimed at preparing young boys “to be used as ‘cannon fodder’ in the killing fields of Gallipoli and on the Western Front, where 60,000 were killed in action or died of wounds, 150,000 were wounded, and countless survivors of the horrors of trench warfare were left to wrestle with their ‘personal demons’ for the rest of their lives.”

Reviewing his motivations for researching and writing the book, Waugh recalls in the introduction his sense of shock as a teenager in Melbourne upon seeing the powerful 1930 anti-war movie, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and then reading the book of the same name by Erich Maria Remarque. Most of all, he recalls “the repugnance I felt that the German education system had been used so blatantly to recruit the cream of their youth to fight in such a needless war.”

Later, as a teacher, Waugh writes, “I would discover that many thousands of Australian and New Zealand lads had been coerced into enlisting in this brutal conflict, through the respective state education departments and the private school system, in much the same way as their German counterparts.”

“It’s no wonder,” Waugh continues, “that many thousands of young Australian recruits responded so readily to ‘Mother England’s call’, for

here was a ready-made army in waiting. They were an army of fit and disciplined patriots, thanks largely to the schools that helped prepare them for the terrifying, bloody and mindless conflict that was the Great War.” No such system of compulsory military training existed in Britain or any other countries of the British Empire, except New Zealand, in the period leading up to or during the war.

Soldier Boys’ author explains that the major force behind the establishment of the mandatory cadet system was the Australian Labor Party. Prominent Laborite William Morris (Billy) Hughes, who was to become wartime prime minister, had been agitating for a form of military conscription as early as 1901, and members of the Labor Party were prime movers in an unsuccessful attempt in 1903 to establish the compulsory military training of all boys aged 14 to 17.

Following Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War, elements from both Labor and the conservative parties joined together to form the Australian National Defence League, in order “to demand stronger defence alliances with Britain and closer co-operation with other British Empire colonies, such as New Zealand.” While Japanese warships had rapidly become the most powerful fleet in the Pacific, regarded by the burgeoning Australian ruling elite as a potential existential threat, Britain was preoccupied with the growing industrial and military challenge posed by Germany.

In September 1905, as a founding member of the League, Hughes seconded a motion establishing its charter, which called for “Universal compulsory training (military or naval) of the boyhood and manhood of Australia for the purposes of National Defence ...” He continued to agitate for a compulsory cadet service in Australian schools, and in 1908 the federal Labor Party adopted this as party policy.

In 1909, the short-lived first Labor government of Prime Minister Andrew Fisher (November 1908–June 1909) demanded “the 10 to 18 year old component of the Swiss model” of compulsory military training. Later that year, the Labor Party gave its full support to the conservative Deakin government’s enactment of the 1909 Defence Act, which, for the first time in an English-speaking country, required the compulsory military training of all boys between 12 and 18 years of age.

The Australian government had invited the British field marshal, Lord Kitchener, to “advise” on the country’s military preparedness and unsurprisingly, after a two month tour, Kitchener’s report declared that Australia was “inadequate in numbers, training, organisation and the munitions in war.” He came to a similar conclusion about the situation in New Zealand.

The Defence Act, which came into operation in July 1911, mandated military training of Junior Cadets (12–14 years old) and Senior Cadets (14–18 years old) in every state. It also required compulsory membership for all 18–25 year olds in the CMF. Under the New Zealand Defence Amendment Act of 1910, (amending the 1909 Act following Kitchener’s

tour of New Zealand in March 1910 and his subsequent recommendations) nearly identical conditions applied. In the first year, 92,000 boys had commenced training in Australia. In New Zealand, the numbers in 1911 were around 30,000 Senior Cadets and 22,000 "Territorials" (aged 18–25).

Waugh explains that the second Fisher Labor government (April 1910–June 1913) decided to escalate its war preparations following a briefing by Britain's foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, in the wake of the 1911 Imperial Conference in London. The Labor government delegation, comprising Prime Minister Fisher and his defence and external Affairs ministers, concluded that by 1915 Europe would be at war with Germany.

Waugh describes the ideological campaign developed throughout the school system to promote the British Empire and militarism as compulsory military training was being introduced. "Perhaps the most effective means of inspiring a sense of pride in the Empire to school children," he writes, "was through the monthly school magazines, such as *The School Paper* in Victoria, the *Children's Hour* in South Australia and New Zealand's the *School Journal*, among others."

As well as "patriotic narratives, poems and songs," included in the "Empire Day" edition of *The School Paper* in May 1910, was "An Empire Catechism," which children had to learn by rote, with questions and answers including:

Query: What do you mean by the British Empire?

Answer: That portion of the earth's land surface, which is under the authority of King Edward the Seventh.

Query: What proportion of the earth's surface does the British Empire cover?

Answer: About one-fifth or 21 percent.

Query: What proportion of the inhabitants of the earth are the subjects of King Edward?

Answer: About one-fifth, or about 22 percent.

Central to mandatory training was the disciplining of Australian youth. To become a cadet, a boy had to be at least 4 feet 6 inches in height and undergo a compulsory military examination. Junior cadets had to undergo 96 hours of training each year for two years and senior cadets, 90 hours per year, for four years, followed by another seven years in the CMF. Training included physical training on each school day, and marching drill.

Boys over 14 who had left school, or those unable to attend a school with authorised prescribed cadet training, "were required to attend training under military instructors at designated places and times" including during evenings, weekends and holidays.

Schools were granted allowances to establish miniature rifle ranges, and cadets were required to become proficient at loading and shooting their rifles. Senior cadets had to wear supplied uniforms on parade and were "subjected to an Annual Inspection by a regular army officer." Each boy was allotted to a military district upon leaving school, or encouraged to apply to join the naval training scheme, for which the minimum height was 5 feet 2 inches.

Penalties for evading service could range between £5 and £100 (a huge amount, equivalent to between three weeks and more than a year's wage) or imprisonment.

One of the strengths of *Soldier Boys* is the emphasis Waugh places on the extent of non-compliance with the system of mandatory military training for youth. Even before the outbreak of the war, 27,749 prosecutions were handed down under the Act, resulting in the detention or imprisonment of 5,732 boys. In 1912–13, 265 per week were

prosecuted, rising to 269 per week in 1913–14.

One of the reasons, as *Soldier Boys* points out, was the far more onerous requirements imposed by the system on working-class boys, who had to work and then attend training and drills, whereas their counterparts in the elite private schools could simply extend their school day.

Waugh cites the court transcript of one typically heart-rending case in Chatswood, Sydney in 1912 before the Police Court magistrate. Charles Osborne, a Senior Cadet, pleaded for exemption:

Osborne: I would sooner go to jail than do the drills.

Magistrate: It is very unwise to speak like that.

O: I mean it. I have a good character from my employer. I do my work faithfully, and I have long hours. My father is dead. My mother died only four months ago. I and my brother are the sole support of the family... I have eight brothers and sisters, all under 16, to look after.

M: It may be hard but I have to administer the Act.

O: I am trying to better myself, and I wouldn't be able to carry out my studies if I had to drill. If the court orders me to do the drills, I won't do so. I will put up with the consequences.

M: That is a matter for yourself. You are ordered to make up the 28 hours deficiency, and I will give you three months to do it. You will also have 24 hours in which to pay the 6/- costs.

O: I can't pay them.

M: I won't discuss the matter.

Another critical aspect of the book is its sympathetic treatment of the various individuals, groups and organisations that opposed compulsory military training on the basis of their hostility to militarism and war. These included religious groups, but the majority were secular and socialist organisations.

By the time war was declared in August 1914, for example, the anti-conscription Australian Freedom League, founded by two Quakers in South Australia in 1910, had some 55,000 members.

Opposition was particularly strong among left-wing opponents of the Labor Party, including the International Workers of the World (IWW), which was to win growing support in the working class against Laborism, militarism and conscription during the war, before being brutally repressed by the Hughes Labor government.

Waugh quotes the *Socialist*, the newspaper of the Victorian Socialist Party, which denounced the training of boys so that "they may know how to fight as soldiers, and shoot down or bayonet the lads of other countries... Now is the time to protest against the folly of this compulsory training in organised murder. Now is the time to make up your minds NEVER TO TAKE THE MILITARY OATH which deprives you of your will and conscience."

As the prosecutions intensified, the *Socialist* began supporting individuals and groups of defaulters. Broken Hill, the mining town with long-standing militant union traditions, became a centre of much opposition to the Defence Act. The father of one boy, Alfred Giles, was prosecuted for refusing to let his son register as a cadet. Alfred was imprisoned for two weeks. On his release, the Amalgamated Miners Association presented the boy with a gold medal to commemorate his principled stand.

In New Zealand, opposition among the youth themselves was even more vocal. A number of young men of military age formed a group calling itself the "We Won'ts," which became known as the "Passive Resisters Union." With a membership of socialist leanings, it published *Repeal*, a monthly paper, and so widespread became the opposition, that, according to Waugh, only the outbreak of World War I saved the mandatory military

training system from abolition.

In the 1914 federal election campaign, held as the war began, Australian Labor Party leader Fisher campaigned for the defence of the British Empire “to the last man and the last shilling.” When war broke out, a contingent of over 20,000 was offered up as the first cannon fodder.

Waugh makes clear just how central the schools were in propagating the avalanche of political propaganda that was manufactured by the government in support of World War I. The school syllabus was modified for the duration of the war, with teachers placed under relentless pressure to inculcate the pro-imperialist, pro-war message.

Every issue of Victoria’s monthly *The School Paper* for senior grades was devoted to war material designed to indoctrinate students in patriotism and the glories of the British Empire. It became “a major source of war articles, stories, poems and patriotic songs, all designed to brainwash young minds and encourage recruitment into the armed forces.”

The September 1914 issue, the first after the war had broken out, began with a banner headline “Britain at War,” followed by an extract from King George V’s speech declaring war on Germany.

In the following editions, the ongoing reports on military confrontations listed German losses, but make no mention of any of the Allied casualties. *Soldier Boys* carries photographs of some of the pages of the magazine, with illustrated articles such as “Brave Deeds at Gallipoli”, “How a Victorian won the Victoria Cross”, “Simpson and his Donkey at Gallipoli” and others. The New Zealand *School Journal* featured similar material.

Many of the boys who “voluntarily” enlisted, were products of this compulsory military training scheme and the propaganda that went with it. Groups of private school students featured prominently, and, while there were still very few public secondary schools, those that did exist matched the private schools in enlistments and, subsequently, in the growing number of casualties.

Given the level of pro-war indoctrination in the schools, it is unsurprising that hundreds of under-aged Australian boys enlisted illegally in the AIF, some of them as young as 14.

Nevertheless, by 1916 the euphoria had dissipated as the reality of the extent of the catastrophes at Gallipoli and on the Western Front had begun to emerge. Opposition to both the war and the Hughes Labor government started to grow, expressed in the defeat of two referenda on conscription—one in October 1916 and the other in December 1917—promoted by Prime Minister Billy Hughes.

In an important section on the destruction of democratic rights during the war, *Soldier Boys* details the victimisation of German-Australians and their schools, especially in South Australia, where many families of ethnic German background lived and their children often attended Lutheran schools. South Australian legislation requiring the closing down of these schools was passed in late 1916. All the teachers and principals were dismissed, and found it impossible to obtain other employment. And there were many cases of internment. The Queensland state government also closed down its Lutheran schools, as did the government of New Zealand. Like all other schools in Australia, however, the Lutherans had been obligated to conduct compulsory cadet training.

Soldier Boys dispels the myth that it was the spontaneous rapture for adventure that led so many young Australians to sign up in 1914. It irrefutably demonstrates how Australian and New Zealand governments in the lead up to the war consciously worked to prepare through the schools, a compliant, trained and indoctrinated young population and then assemble the military force pledged by Labor leader Fisher in his notorious election commitment to Britain.

On the hundredth anniversary of the Gallipoli disaster, today’s powers-that-be are utilising similar methods, centred once again in the school system, to prepare and condition a new generation of Australian youth to

sign up for war.

Author Maxwell Waugh is not a Marxist, and his deeply felt opposition to World War I remains at the level of moral outrage and indignation at the terrible waste of young lives. But his historical research provides a significant and compelling addition to the historical record of Australia’s role in the war, providing information that has not been readily available before. *Soldier Boys* is a book well worth reading.



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