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‘The great madness of 1914–18’: families at war on Melbourne’s eastern and western fronts

At 41 Kooyong Road on Sunday morning, 2 August 1914, James and Edith Lewis and their eight children began their regular walk to the Armadale Presbyterian church. As Brian recalled more than 60 years later:

That first Sunday of August had a feeling different from all previous Sundays, a feeling of being on the edge of something immense and terrible – but exciting. If England went to war, so would we. Andrew Fisher, the Labor leader, had just said so in an election speech: in ‘to the last man and the last shilling’.¹

War seemed inevitable. So their walk to church was solemn, the demeanour of the congregation serious, the remarks of their minister ominous:

War was almost upon us despite his [the minister’s] requests of last Sunday. Today his requests were being supported by every Presbyterian church in the State and all the other churches, even the Catholic, and some notice by God was warranted. Now if God allowed the war to start, Mr Millar expected him to support our just cause. We were not too sure why it was just, we would be better informed in a week or two ... This would be Armageddon with all the first-class nations of Europe at each other’s throats. Let us be worthy of the sacrifice asked of us.²

Passing the railway station on his return from Sunday school, Brian’s brother read the latest news on a placard: Germany had declared war on

Russia, and France had mobilised. Next morning's *Argus* newspaper announced the GREATEST WAR IN WORLD'S HISTORY, for which the British dominions were preparing, Canada having already offered 30,000 troops. And, on Tuesday 4 August, AUSTRALIA JOINS. FLEET AND 20,000 MEN. OFFER BY FEDERAL CABINET. The Liberal government had made these offers while a deeply divided British cabinet was still considering its options, and before any request was made for Australian support.³ Australia was rushing headlong to war in the middle of a general election. Andrew Fisher's pledge, as Labor opposition leader, was a riposte to Prime Minister Joseph Cook's declaration that 'when the Empire is at war, so is Australia at war'.⁴ War for Australia became a *fait accompli*, and the election became a khaki election, fought over the parties' defence records and the depth of their loyalty to the Empire.

Once war was a fact, the newspapers, initially apprehensive, became enthusiasts for war, and were dependent on press releases approved by the British Government and military. Enthusiasm grew most quickly and strongly, perhaps, among the Australian middle and upper classes: politicians, professionals, businessmen and, above all, the clergymen, who displayed a remarkable unanimity of outlook.⁵ The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, for example, charged responsibility for the war to 'German, and especially Prussian, militarism', which it was right for the imperial government and the dominions to resist. This resolution was carried 'amidst a scene of intense enthusiasm', the audience rising *en masse* and singing the national anthem.⁶

Enthusiasm for the war was, however, far from unanimous. There was considerable reserve, even opposition to the war, among socialists and trade union leaders, and suspicion among the broad working class, where it was rightly anticipated that war would disrupt trade, and bring unemployment and social distress in its wake.⁷ Patriotic middle-class Armadale was a world away from Melbourne's industrial working-class western suburbs, where Thomas and Eliza Purcell and four of their six children lived at 21 Berry Street, Yarraville. Tom kept a diary from 1883 until his death in 1920.⁸ Although the volume covering 1914 has not survived, there can be little doubt that the Purcells, devoutly observant Catholics, attended mass at St Augustine's, Yarraville, in the weeks that took the Empire to war. The response of the Catholic hierarchy to the outbreak of war was similar in essentials to that of Protestant clerics, but it was less bellicose and differed in emphasis. 'We as Catholics,' Melbourne's Archbishop Thomas Carr said, 'are called upon by our religious principles, our loyalty and our self-interest to join heartily with our fellow-citizens in aiding the mother country to defend the Constitution

which is certainly the best balanced that the world has ever known.⁹ The war was a just war and Catholics could enlist with good conscience, yet Catholics should pray 'that the horrors of war in Europe may be of short duration'.¹⁰ August 1914 was a fraught month for the global Catholic Church. The day after war broke out, the ailing Pope Pius X, distraught with the failure of his efforts to prevent war, took to his bed, dying heartbroken just weeks later.

Tom Purcell's diary provides striking evidence of the Catholic disposition to lament the war, pray for peace and endorse the peace initiatives of the new pope, Benedict XV. Militant Australian Protestants could comprehend neither Benedict's neutrality nor his indictment of military conscription for prolonging and deepening the carnage.

These subtly different responses of Protestants and Catholics to the outbreak of war, as Michael McKernan has pointed out, 'contained the seeds of future dispute'.¹¹ Protestants believed that war itself would produce spiritual gains: as nothing occurred without God's approval, the war had to be accepted as His redemptive plan for a world that needed spiritual renewal. Catholic leaders regarded the war as a judgement on mankind. They also hoped that Catholic loyalty would lessen sectarianism and secure state financial support for their religious schools. As Protestant imperial patriots became more strident, and their advocacy of enlistment, recruitment and (eventually) conscription more vehement, differences with lay Catholics widened. The issue of Home Rule for Ireland had already placed Irish Catholics and Ulster Presbyterians at loggerheads, and the shelving of Home Rule, the Easter 1916 rebellion in Dublin, and the two attempts to introduce conscription in 1916 and 1917, fuelled fiery confrontations in Melbourne.

A demographic reality underlay these confrontations; in Victoria the Catholic and Presbyterian churches were numerically only the second and third largest denominations (22.3 and 18.3 per cent respectively, after the Church of England with a nominal 37 per cent), but their leaders were among Melbourne's ablest public speakers.¹² The Lewises of Armadale, certain that Presbyterians comprised the largest church, saw their local congregation as an extension of their family: 'a bigger family than our own [that] gives us a feeling of greater security.' Indeed, Brian wrote, 'we are at church because it is comforting to be with others of similar views, a group with no social divisions and no aristocracy, spiritual or temporal, and we are more than satisfied that our group is the most solid and most enlightened'.¹³ Smug and confident Anglophiles, suspicious of foreigners (especially Irish Catholics), their Presbyterianism fed their venom against Catholics, amongst whom the Purcells could be counted the most committed.¹⁴ Tom and Eliza went

to confession and attended mass regularly, raised their children in the faith, sent them to the local parish school, and had the satisfaction of seeing them married in the church. As well as the *Age* and the *Herald*, Tom read the weekly *Catholic Tribune*, was a member of Catholic abstinence, educational, friendly, and charitable societies,¹⁵ and was public spirited in his support for the victims of war. A former member of the Victorian railways union and a branch office-bearer, he remained staunchly pro-union. He kept a record of his life in a diary that he maintained, with some gaps, from 1881 until his death in 1920.

Diaries, it has been suggested, are written not so much for the self, as for an audience, and are shaped by that anticipated readership.¹⁶ Tom's diary, however, seems to have been written, not with an eye to posterity, but rather as a record of his religious devotions, expenditure, friendships, correspondence, and domestic life. Rarely concerned with his emotional life or private thoughts, his diary reveals Tom as a contented married man in the autumn of his life. The diary most clearly resembles (in Katie Holmes's words) 'a means of ordering experience and establishing control over one's life',¹⁷ when Tom tried to make sense of the war in Europe and the troubles at home. Brian Lewis's memoir – not *My War*, but *Our War* – presented as a family memoir, is something of a melange of personal and group reminiscence, and history gathered mostly from the conservative daily morning newspaper, the *Argus*. Lewis's distancing cynicism is that of a veteran of a second World War, which was a consequence of 'the war to end all wars' that his generation had learned to regard as a tragic mistake. The reader of *Our War* can sometimes find it difficult to distinguish genuine 1914–18 memories from the overlay of later experience and reflections. There are factual and interpretive errors, too, but some of these, notably concerning Catholic Archbishop Daniel Mannix, are instructive. Tom Purcell's diary and Brian Lewis' memoir are not necessarily representative Melburnian responses to the Great War, but powerful and illuminating illustrations of the social and political polarisations that occurred in those fraught years on the home front.

The Lewises and the Purcells: from goldseekers to suburbanites

Both Brian Lewis and Tom Purcell were descended from gold rush emigrants, who shaped the first half century of Victoria's history. Brian's father, James Bannatyne Lewis, was the third of 12 children (nine surviving infancy) born to John and Mary Lewis. John is described by his great-grandson and biographer as a 'struggling [gold] fossicker, lucky quartz reefer, oppressive magnate, feckless speculator, and ultimate failure'.¹⁸ The wanderlust son of a London baker, he arrived in 1852 and tried his luck firstly on the Victorian diggings at

McIvor's Creek (Heathcote) before heading to the 'new diggings' at Waranga and the Goulburn. At Whroo, Lewis established an open-cut quartz mine that won him and his partners gold worth £150,000. Ill-judged mining speculations and life as 'a generous spendthrift'¹⁹ brought financial ruin. His sons had to leave Scotch College, the parents separated, and the family dispersed. John spent his final years alone and in poverty.

James, the most talented of the sons, graduated from the university as a civil engineer. When he married Edith Haynes (Victorian-born of English parents) in 1888, he was working for the largest engineering contractor in Victoria, David Munro and Co., and, during the 1890s depression, he was in turn director of the Daylesford School of Mines, an engineer with the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, and a noted bridge-builder in northern Tasmania. The family returned to Melbourne in 1908–09.²⁰ For young Brian the move was a decline from social prominence to social anonymity, from bush excitement to suburban routine: 'At Armadale we are just fair-sized fish in a distressingly large pool ... we are just people like everyone else ... Half a mile to the north are the socially desirable houses of Toorak, and half a mile to the south are the big mansions in acres of land for the very rich.'²¹ His older brothers attended Wesley College, one of 'the Six', Melbourne's great 'public' (that is fee-paying, and therefore private) schools. Armadale was bourgeois and boring – until the war came. 'The Melbourne middle class,' Janet McCalman has observed, 'needed the war: here was their historical opportunity to recover self-respect after the psychic and financial disaster of the 1890s.' In addition, their churches were in spiritual decline, science and modern Biblical criticism having undermined distinctive Protestant doctrines. Presbyterians, in particular, had been socially discredited by their central role in the 1890s banking crisis that had laid Victoria waste. They and their fellow Protestants took refuge, firstly in patriotism, and then 'looked increasingly to bigotry to bolster congregational solidarity'.²² Bigoted patriotism was to prove a barren strategy.

By contrast Catholicism around 1900 was healthy, 'more disciplined and effective than it had ever been before in Australia',²³ founded as it was in Victoria on a generation of aspiring Irish, independent and assisted gold rush emigrants, distance and expense having excluded most of the crushed victims of the Irish famine. John and Mary Purcell were among these ambitious and improving migrants. Tom, born in Melbourne in 1853 after his parents' arrival from Kilkenny, Ireland, via South Africa, was the first of four surviving children. When they left Melbourne, however, the Purcells got no further than the Heathcote (McIvor) diggings that John Lewis had rejected the year before. John Purcell was goldmining there by 1854 and, during the 1850s, at

least three of John's siblings joined him, married Irish Catholic partners, and raised their families. This chain migration and settlement gave the extended Purcell clan a strong presence in Heathcote.²⁴

By the mid 1870s, however, goldmining was in decline and Heathcote offered limited prospects for the second generation. Tom's diary for 1883–84 records the exodus of the young, including his three sisters who left for Melbourne where they entered domestic service or the clothing trades. Tom also went to Melbourne where he faced five months of casual work before he was made a permanent hand at the Spencer Street railway goods sheds: 'I got badge No. 172.' Tom was a saver, and was soon able to buy a house block in Yarraville (a subdistrict of the municipality of Footscray), and marry his Heathcote sweetheart Eliza Crowder. Tom and his sisters celebrated Christmas 1887 in their homes at Yarraville, Footscray and Braybrook. As Tom noted with satisfaction on 12 December, after a thunderstorm: 'our tank is flowing over'. The families were living close enough to render mutual support in the challenging years that followed the heady 1880s – the terrible 1890s depression, his in-laws' periods of unemployment, family bereavements, and their parents' ageing and decline.²⁵

The family of James and Edith Lewis, founded in Prahran and Caulfield in the 1890s, completed in Tasmania in the early 1900s, and now finally settled in Armadale, seems to have been a nuclear family with attenuated links to almost all but James's mother and spinster sisters. By contrast, the Purcells came to Melbourne but, rather than disperse, they formed an extended family on the pattern of their parents and their parents' siblings at Heathcote. Ethnic identity, religious faith and class loyalty produced a close-knit Irish Catholic working-class clan struggling through good and bad times in Melbourne's western industrial suburbs. At Armadale, the Lewis family exemplified a contrasting story of geographical and upward social mobility, and material success. Not even forced wartime economies would be permitted to ruffle appearances. Such movements from gold-town Victoria to settle in the western and eastern suburbs, replicated by tens of thousands of families and young couples, epitomised Melbourne's process of growth, social differentiation and political bifurcation in the 30 years to 1914.

'We had a lot of men in the family; would we be involved?'

There was never really any doubt. Most of the seven Lewis boys (and, for that matter, all five Purcell boys) were part of the cohort that was exactly the age for service in the Great War. Sacrifice was the core theme of the faith the Lewis family professed, and patriotic duty and loyalty flowed axiomatically

from their social position. James was 'a confident man who was doing well' and his children were on track for solid professional careers. Keith, aged 23, was a university graduate in mining engineering, working in Tasmania. Athol (21), Phyllis (19) and Owen (18) were at university; Athol in his second last year of law, Phyllis in her first year of Arts, and Owen in his first year of engineering. Ralph (20) was at the Working Men's College completing his final year of geology, and intending to study engineering at university. Ronnie (17) and Neil (12) were at Wesley College, and Brian (nearly 8) expected to follow them. This was the way the Lewises saw the world: father was a leader, and his sons would be leaders; the middle class led and gave orders, and their orders were followed. Modern armies worked that way, too. Brian articulated his family's world view: 'It was a splendid war to be in,'²⁶ and they, as part of the middle class, would lead 'the first middle-class war in our history.'²⁷ When their photograph was taken in 1915, Brian reflected, we were 'well-dressed and comfortable. We would never again have such tidy clothes and we would never all be together again. The war would blow us apart'.²⁸

Yet their initial response to the war was prudent. The Lewis boys did not rush to enlist; Keith offered himself for the engineers but, becoming impatient with the delay, enlisted in the infantry in 1915, and went off to the Dardanelles. Owen, turning 18 and very keen to serve, was persuaded to finish his university year first, as his older brothers were doing. Meantime the family threw itself into patriotic activities, not expecting to be discomfited by the war. A family of ten in an imposing, if rented, two-storey house, the Lewises had two maids ('that put us at the very top of the Armadale social ladder'),²⁹ a washerwoman-charlady, and two gardeners. 'Father carried us and all these people comfortably on his back.'³⁰ Armadale was not the very top socially,³¹ but 'we were solid people'.³² Suddenly the family finances collapsed.

The war disrupted shipping and trade and, when the government forbade the export of gold, Australia's mining industry was devastated.³³ When his consulting work evaporated, James abandoned his Queen Street office and withdrew to his study. Edith, anxious about living on borrowed money, took over the budget and with it family leadership. James seemed to shrink: 'The dashing and romantic father of peace-time began to look like some old bloke who pottered about the place.'³⁴ There was no real hardship, but Brian was humiliated by having to attend the local state school instead of Wesley. His father attempted to join the Australian Mining Corps, but failed the medical. The successful candidate, older and less experienced, was posted overseas to supervise the very tunnelling operations on the Western Front that would later involve James's sons Keith and Ralph.

Working-class Melbourne had more to worry about than injured egos and the struggle to keep up appearances. In good times the Purcells looked upon a hive of activity in Yarraville's wharves, where vessels unloaded cargoes of raw sugar, hemp and guano for the mighty Colonial Sugar refinery, Miller's ropeworks, and a trio of superphosphate works. Yarraville workers depended on farmers' demands for fertiliser, binder twine and farm machinery, and on stevedores' need for wheat stackers during the summer harvest. But the spring rains failed in 1914, delivering Victoria its worst drought for a decade. The drought, together with shipping shortages and the collapse of building and construction, plunged working-class suburbs into gloom. Victorian unemployment doubled in 1913–14 to one in seven trade unionists, perhaps the highest rate since the 1890s depression; food prices began their rise (by 28 per cent to June 1917); wages stalled and real wages fell. Joblessness and want, as well as adventurism and patriotism, boosted enlistments in 1914 and 1915.³⁵ There was no immediate crisis in the Purcell household. Tom, recently retired on a railway pension, and Lizzie, had raised their six children on his slender income, and those still living at home – Tom (aged 25), George (23), Kathleen (20) and Leo (17) – were working as, respectively, a clerk, a sugar boiler at the refinery, a shop assistant, and an apprentice moulder. Tom was able to pay his friendly society dues, support his church, and contribute to many funds raised for the victims of war, notably Belgian relief.³⁶

Schoolboy Brian Lewis recalled the war starting well – 'we were winning easily'³⁷ – with the surrender of German colonies in the Pacific to Australian expeditionary forces, and several British naval victories. Responsibility for the war was clarified by the German attack on Belgium: 'Germany had invaded [Belgium] and so started the war,'³⁸ which made it 'the Kaiser's war, right to the end.'³⁹ Paid by the British Government, Reuters news agency flooded the press with invented or exaggerated stories of German atrocities against Belgian civilians. Eight-year-old Brian Lewis was shocked:

Belgian boys had their arms cut off and were forced to walk over their fathers' bodies, or to carry their decapitated heads – a very difficult thing to do [the children at his kindergarten thought] with no hands – and their sisters went raving mad as a result.⁴⁰

Such propaganda turned some of the wisest heads. Within weeks 'our Germans' went from being the most respected group to 'the most despised and hated.'⁴¹ The Lewises, however, stood by their German relatives and friends.

Tom's diary opened in February 1915 with observations of the weather, family and friends, local news – and the war. He read in the *Herald* the British



The Lewis family in 1915 before it was 'blown apart' by the war: (back, l-r) Ronnie, Owen, Keith, Athol, Ralph; (front, l-r) Phyllis, Mother, Father, Brian, Neil. From Brian Lewis, *Our War* (1980). Reproduced courtesy Estate of Brian Lewis

praise of the Australian troops' conduct during their 'baptism of fire in Egypt' against the Turks along the Suez Canal, and also of the Commonwealth's offer of a third contingent to bring the total to 60,000 (about the number of Australian lives that would be lost in the war). Tom noted 'some losses'. There was more drama in reports of 'desperate engagements' between the German and Russian armies. Despite a six-mile advance into Poland, the *Herald* assured readers, 'Russia's position is considered absolutely safe' owing to the Russians' 'marked artillery superiority over the Germans' whose slaughtered dead blocked their advance. The *Herald* did not report that the 40,000 Russian casualties doubled the 20,000 German dead.

Censorship, as Faye Anderson and Richard Trembath have pointed out,⁴² was imposed at three levels: in the field by Allied armies, by quarantining correspondents from the action, and by correspondents, anxious for lively copy, imaginatively dressing up the scant information they received. As a result, Australian press coverage of the Great War, even by Australian official war correspondents, was from the outset characterised by optimism, anticipations of glorious success, and silence about the horrors and huge casualties. Reports of failure were delayed, uninformative, bereft of truth

and realism, and flavoured with upbeat and victorious terminology. When casualties were featured at all, Allied losses were rarely reported and enemy losses inflated. Serious newspaper readers like James Lewis and Tom Purcell found it difficult to comprehend what was happening on any of the fronts. Brian Lewis: 'The British and French were winning victory after victory ... but the victory seemed to evaporate in a week or two and the names dropped back into obscurity,⁴³ and it was difficult to know what was happening at all in the East. A map of the fronts was fixed to the wall in the Lewis breakfast room, with pins marking the Allied advances: 'moving the pins was a morning ritual done by father after breakfast.' The result was puzzling: the pins moved in the wrong direction in the East, and on the Western Front they shuffled backwards and forwards: 'Every time the [black] pins moved, hundreds of thousands of Germans were killed. We were pleased about that, but would have liked the red [British] pins to move forward.'⁴⁴ Four months of war on the Western Front for France and Germany made 1914 the deadliest year of the entire war. In Europe the immense scale of the casualties was apparent even without the disclosure of actual numbers, but Australians hardly appreciated that both allies and enemies had suffered huge losses that dwarfed those of recent wars.⁴⁵ The British Cabinet had been warned by Lord Kitchener, Britain's new secretary of state for war, that the war would last three years and absorb an army of one million volunteers.⁴⁶ His guesstimate was already proving optimistic.

'Our sort of people demanded that every young man should enlist'
 'Leo and George went up ... to enlist ... unfortunately, both passed'

Keith Lewis was among the steady stream of volunteers from the Armadale Presbyterian church early in 1915,⁴⁷ one of those clean-living Sir Galahads who, in Brian's eyes, enlisted from a deep moral compulsion, in contrast with 'those who went in because they were out of work and the pay was very good'.⁴⁸ Such middle-class boys obeyed the obligations of their class, their patriotism reinforced by the strident patriotism of the Protestant public schools and their churches. 'The people of Australia – that is, our sort of people – demanded that every young man should enlist, and every young man was reminded of it in conversation, by the newspapers, and by Lord Kitchener.'⁴⁹

On 30 April, some days after the British press, Australian newspapers carried news of the Allied invasion of the Gallipoli peninsula. 'The details of the operations', the *Argus* commented, 'are tantalisingly brief.'⁵⁰ In truth, the Australian Government had little idea where their troops' first significant action had taken place. On 3 May, Tom noted 'The first list of Australians

killed in Turkey', on 4 May 'The second list of Australians today over 50 killed total' and, on 5 May, 'over 40 officers of the Australian forces killed'.⁵¹ Not until 8 May was the Gallipoli landing described in much detail, and then by an English correspondent, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, the hyperbole of whose 'eyewitness' account of heroic bayonet charges, written aboard ship in the Aegean, remained fixed in the minds of impressionable boys like Brian Lewis 'and ... never replaced when the real facts filtered back to us. The fantasy became history'. Not for Tom Purcell, whose diary contained no echo of Ashmead-Bartlett but an understanding of the horror contained in casualty lists and letters from the wounded: 'One of the Walters got his arm blown off at the Dardanelles,' Tom wrote on 13 May. 'Several of the Footscray boys wounded [and] over 1000 casualties up to the present.' His son, Leo, keen to enlist, had gone for a medical examination in March while still three months short of his 18th birthday. He would have to await his parents' permission.

From late May, Tom's diary is studded with the names of the dead, wounded and missing, and references to the casualty lists – 'nearly 1000 dead of the Australians' (6 June), 'great number of Victorian soldiers missing' (15 June) – and to the July surge in enlistments. These included his two youngest sons: 'Leo and George went up tonight to enlist' (14 July) and 'George and Leo, unfortunately, both passed' (15 July). Soon Tom and Eliza were visiting them at Seymour military camp. By August many wounded were returning: 'Les Rowe back from the Dardanelles, but going back in a fortnight's time' (15 August), and 'he is looking well' (21 August). But this was sheer fantasy; by Christmas Les had been discharged. The news grew steadily worse: 'over 300 [Anzac] officers fallen' (28 August), '3000 wounded Australians in hospital in England' (10 September). Wounded diggers who came home to Victoria exceeded 5000 in 1915, 8000 in 1916, 16,000 in 1917, and 25,000 in 1918, totalling more than 40 per cent of those who had embarked, and most of them so badly damaged, physically and mentally, that they were of no further use in battle.⁵² This was the home front's constant, grim backdrop.

Why had George and Leo enlisted? One can only speculate. Volunteers under 21 years required parental permission, and Tom and Lizzie probably suspected that, had they refused, Leo would have enlisted under a false name. A strapping young man, 5 feet 10 inches in his socks, weighing 10 stone, and with a chest measurement of 37 inches, he broke his indentures as an apprentice moulder to enlist.⁵³ George and Leo were close, and George may have enlisted to keep him company, but CSR, George's employer, was also topping up their workers' military pay. Certainly the boys wanted to join the

same company and their father used his political influence to secure this. On 11 November, Tom noted, the 'boys went away to the war yesterday. Mum went to see them off'. He clearly disapproved, although there is not yet a hint anywhere in his diary of opposition to the war. He seems to have regarded every enlistment as lengthening a war that he earnestly wanted ended: 'This Sunday,' he recorded on 21 March, 'was a great day in the church praying for the peace of the world, there was a great number at H[oly] C[ommunion] this morning.' On 21 November he joined the Hibernians' procession to support the Wounded Soldiers' Fund. He noted Andrew Fisher's replacement as prime minister by 'Mr Hughes' and, on 29 November there appeared the first hint of Tom's disaffection: 'They are offering another 50,000 men and they cannot get enough for reinforcements.' On 9 December his boys cabled their arrival in Cairo and, on 22 December, the *Age* published the 125th casualty list, with 538 new names. 'They are talking,' Tom wrote on 22 December, 'of conscription for single men in England.'

When Keith Lewis was on his way to Gallipoli, a wall map of the Dardanelles appeared in the breakfast room at 41 Kooyong Road: 'but the pins moved forward just as swiftly as they did on the map of France.'⁵⁴ Brian Lewis's account of Gallipoli is a somewhat confusing melange of recollections of 1915 and insights that appear to have been drawn from later reading. As John Williams makes clear in his study of the Anzac legend as a press-created phenomenon, the landing on 25 April took second place in British papers to the Ypres campaign in Belgium and, after the flourish of propaganda around Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett's dispatches, Gallipoli was 'submerged under a welter of other war publicity' that refocused attention on the war in Flanders.⁵⁵ Tom Purcell might not have had a clear picture of what was transpiring on Gallipoli, but he assembled enough scraps of information to be appalled by the steady escalation of the carnage. The press coverage of the Western Front left him dubious. When on 14 May he read a *Herald* report of desperate battles being waged between Arras and the coast, attended by 'heavy losses' on both sides but 'slaughter' of the Germans, he concluded that 'There has been heavy slaughter on both sides'.⁵⁶ Purcell was right to be sceptical, for the truth was actually the reverse. When the second Battle of Ypres wound down on 25 May the British had lost 59,000 and the Germans 35,000. Tom found the reporting of the Eastern Front similarly doubtful. When the *Herald* assured readers that the evacuation of Warsaw was 'A voluntary, orderly retirement' under 'No pressure by enemy', Tom had already concluded, on the basis of earlier reports, 'Russians being beaten back by the Germans, they have not sufficient arms or ammunition'.⁵⁷

Gallipoli gave the Armadale congregation 'its first death of the war' – Lt Keith Borthwick of the 10th Light Horse. Losses among the extended Lewis family are recalled rather perfunctorily: 'our distant cousin ... lost her fiancée, father and brother. Mother asked her to stay with us to cheer her up, but she remained pretty miserable.' For Brian 'Most of the fun had gone out of the war'.⁵⁸ His account has none of the cumulative power of Tom Purcell's brief diary notes. Gallipoli, having settled into a stalemate, gave rise to 'a sort of sour pride' in the Lewis household, the campaign steeped in controversy and rancour that found its way into the British and then the Australian press. The *Argus* quoted *The Times* view of Gallipoli as 'a costly experiment'. News of Keith's evacuation to Malta disturbed the Lewis family, and the evacuation of Anzac shocked them: 'It had been a bad year.'⁵⁹

In 1916, Owen Lewis, having finished his year of study as agreed, was free to enlist; Athol, intending to marry, hoped the war would be over before he was needed; Ralph 'now was feeling ashamed that he had not enlisted'. So when the three brothers enlisted early in the year they did so from a sense of what we might call *bourgeois oblige*: 'All of our friends claimed to be middle class, and enlistment was expected as a middle-class duty ... and although there [had not been in 1915] any great pressure to enlist, both Athol and Ralph felt that they should join at the proper time.'⁶⁰ Keith, fortunate to be transferred to the Engineers from the 22nd Infantry Battalion before it was mauled in France, came home on sick leave in February 1916. He disappointed Brian because he had 'no stories of the gallantry and glory of war', and preferred mufti to uniform. Keith made an exception on the Sunday all four brothers had weekend leave: 'The whole family went to church, just like the old days, and mother was so proud of her four sons in uniform, all with rank of some sort from lieutenant down to two corporals.'⁶¹

On 11 January Tom Purcell read that the withdrawal from Gallipoli had been completed, but all he knew was that his sons were somewhere in Egypt. They had disembarked at Suez in December, where their unit (B Company, 29th Battalion, Tivey's 8th Brigade of the 5th Division) was responsible for defending a sector of the Suez Canal. Tom wrote to them regularly, sometimes twice a week, and they replied every week or fortnight. Censorship ensured that he rarely knew exactly where they were. Instructions issued in December 1914 to cover correspondence stipulated:

Letters and interviews [with soldiers] may state what 'Private Brown of the 105th Regiment' has seen, and describe the incidents of war, but names of places, dates, names of other ships or units, or of senior commanding

officers, must be left blank unless actually passed by the Censor. It is no excuse to say that the incident occurred some time ago.⁶²

'All is well on Somme Front'

There were long delays in war news. The first Australian arrivals in France during March were announced only two months later. 'There is a great number of the Australians in France', Tom noted on 11 May. Postal delays of up to two months further increased anxieties. On 8 July Tom and Eliza received letters and cards from Egypt that said the boys were preparing to leave Egypt, but they already knew from the *Age* of 28 June that Colonel Tivey's brigade had arrived in France. In any case, the five to six weeks' delay in receiving letters eliminated the risk of revealing salient details to the enemy.⁶³ Censorship could not prevent letters conveying the despair at the loss of mates, the decimation of entire units, and the terrible slog of war, but in obscuring press reportage of the reality of war and in disguising differences between defeat and success, censorship created home-front confusion, alarm and distrust. Lord Kitchener imposed tighter field censorship on the Western Front than General Ian Hamilton had at the Dardanelles. Vigilant press officers accompanied war correspondents, yet even on the occasions when they were given direct access to the front, correspondents adhered to the official script in writing only about valour and courage.⁶⁴

'Not much news of the war this week', Tom wrote on 28 January, in a diary entry brimming with information about the productivity of his 12 laying hens. Shortly there was high drama: 'Great fight near ... Verdun one of the fiercest battles of the war. Germans have gained ground enormous losses'.⁶⁵ Needless to say, Tom never learned the actual losses: 100,000 on each side by April, and perhaps 250,000 each by July. On 3 July he reported 'Great bombardment by the British for a distance of about 25 mile front'. Thus opened the British offensive on the Somme, the first day of which cost them 50,000 casualties, the first fortnight 100,000, and a total of 400,000 by the time it ended in November. 'Nothing resembling the actual catastrophe', John Williams comments, 'was reported in the press at that time', but the people at home could hardly be duped into regarding the Somme as a glorious victory.⁶⁶ Nor was the Lewis family: 'we could see the gains on the map in the breakfast room, nearly six miles in one place, but the main German defences were still intact'.⁶⁷ Despite continued assurances of victory on the Somme, 'our maps did not show it'.⁶⁸

On 19 July the Fifth Australian Division, composed of Gallipoli veterans and raw troops from Egypt (including George and Leo's 29th Battalion) was thrown into battle at Fromelles in northern France, in a diversion intended

to dissuade the Germans from diverting forces to the Somme. Poorly planned and executed, the attack across the Flanders mud was a pointless exercise that cost 5333 Australian lives in 27 hours. Fromelles, barely reported in the Australian press, was a defeat disguised as a victory. CEW Bean's dispatches camouflaged the result as 'something like an honourable draw',⁶⁹ and an editor subtitled one of them to assure readers 'All is well on Somme Front'.⁷⁰ Tom and Eliza Purcell had been anxiously scanning the casualties: 'two lists ... in the *Herald* tonight' (17 August). Their neighbours received a cable 'stating that [their son] will be on his feet again in a couple of months'. But it turned out that Bob Crow had had a foot blown off, and Mr Robinson's son had lost a leg. Then, on 6 September, 'Charlie Faux reported wounded and Bob Howey and Delahey reported missing'. Four days later 'Hunt was telling me that one of his grandsons is missing'.⁷¹ On 12 September they knew eight men whose names were included in two casualty lists totalling 1230 wounded, 163 dead and 173 missing. Such lists contrasted with up-beat reports of victorious advances: 'Great charge made by the Irish Brigade in Flanders gaining nearly a mile.'⁷²

Letters from Leo and George spared their parents the terror of Fromelles. On 19 August, the day the Australians attacked, Tom and Eliza had comforting news from their sons: 'from 2nd to 11th July, they were then billeted in a barn 20 miles from the firing line.' On 7 September cards and a letter, the latest dated 18 July, described 'a raid on German trenches and great casualties on both sides. George has joined a bombing battery of four guns. A Great number of Tivey's Brigade wounded'. This had been just before the main assault at Fromelles. On 23 July the Australians relieved the British at Pozieres, suffering huge casualties. Bean privately described Pozieres as 'a ghastly mincing machine', but one of his dispatches reported 'fairly light' casualties and he continued to write about the Australians' bravado and eagerness for battle. Press coverage was contradictory and evasive.⁷³ From this point, the Australian press preferred British correspondents' even more colourful reports 'from the front', which were usually based on official army communiqués.⁷⁴

Denied balanced reports of Western Front battles and aggregated casualty statistics, readers yet saw from the casualty lists that there was no hope of a quick victory in Europe. Casualty lists carried a bleak message, and enlistments declined dramatically from their mid-1915 peaks during the recruitment drives. Whereas in July and August 1915 enlistments had totalled over 62,000, after Pozieres in 1916 this dropped to 6000 a month. Conservative politicians and businessmen, concerned that Victorian patriotism was flagging, began not merely suggesting but urging conscription. Trade unions and the Victorian Labor Party, querying the notion of equality of sacrifice as working-class living

standards declined, were reluctant to back recruiting, let alone compulsory service. At home the terminology of a frighteningly industrialised war was dominated by euphemisms for the dead and the vanished ('the fallen' and 'the missing'), for their replacements ('reinforcements'), and now for military conscription ('national service'). Prime Minister Billy Hughes visited Britain where conscription was being introduced to ensure that enlistment did not drain manpower from essential industries such as coal mining, metals and munitions. Australian trade unions feared military conscription here would destroy arbitration and the ideal of a living wage, and bring industrial conscription in their wake.

'Mannix ... Milton's Satan ... a force of evil'

Brian Lewis was beginning to think that the Old Boys praised at Wesley for dying gallantly for their country 'had gone uselessly and inevitably to slaughter'. At home there was no rush to read reports of victories that they no longer believed in. 'On and on the war was going; it would go on and on and no end was in sight. We had started and would have to see it through.'⁷⁵ Melbourne's patriotic middle class began to look for scapegoats. First it had been Australians of German origin. But, by 1916, loyalist animosity was focused, increasingly, upon Irish Catholics, and upon Coadjutor Archbishop Dr Daniel Mannix. 'We detested Mannix', Lewis recalled. 'To us he was Milton's Satan, handsome, vivid and intelligent, but a force of evil.'⁷⁶ The war had become for Protestants a quasi religious war with its pantheon of heroic figures – soldiers, stretcher bearers, nurses – and now, in Mannix, the extreme Protestants had found their devil. This demonised Mannix produced for Brian 'memories' charged with doubtful facts: that 'Dr Mannix ... started giving trouble as soon as he arrived',⁷⁷ that 'Mannix had opposed the war from the outset',⁷⁸ and that, as 'Carr's coadjutor [that is, before May 1917], Mannix spoke often and fluently against the war and against conscription'.⁷⁹ None of these statements can be supported, but what Brian Lewis (and presumably his family) believed (or came to believe) about Mannix illustrates the power of anti-Catholic sectarianism that predated the issue of conscription, and indeed the war itself.

Whatever private feelings Mannix may have harboured at the outbreak of war, for almost two years he made no public statement at variance with the official Catholic position taken by Archbishop Carr.⁸⁰ Conscription roused him. Protestant churchmen, having synthesised war and Christianity, regarded conscription as a legitimate means to an end, even as a moral imperative, so that by early 1916, before conscription became a live political

issue, Protestant support was clear.⁸¹ In the Catholic view, conscription was a political and not a doctrinal or moral issue, so the church was officially neutral. But the position of the Catholic press swung from support for conscription in 1915 to one of opposition by early 1916. This occurred before the Easter Rising in Dublin, as a result of growing Irish Catholic working-class resentment of home-front sufferings and of rising sectarian Protestant disparagement of Catholic loyalty and Catholic enlistment levels.⁸² Furthermore, Protestant spokesmen doubted Catholic sincerity in deploring the Dublin uprising and reaffirming loyalty to Empire. At Kooyong Road, the perfidy of Irish revolt far outweighed the brutality of British reprisals: 'now we called all Irish "Sinn Fein", and that was worse than being called a Hun.'⁸³ Previously fearful of the intolerant Ulster faction in the Presbyterian church, after Easter 1916 and during the conscription debate, 'we began listening to the propaganda of the Ulster Protestants', which descended to the scurrilous and semi-pornographic.⁸⁴

While it is true that sectarian Protestants 'prepared the ground that Mannix won among Catholics later in the year',⁸⁵ and British behaviour after Easter 1916 caused Mannix to doubt Britain's war motives and objectives, the archbishop's opposition to conscription also reflected his maturing emotional and intellectual engagement with working-class struggles for economic justice. This identification, his latest biographer avers, following the lead given by Val Noone, 'began at St Mary's [West Melbourne]', the nub of an industrial district that housed some of Melbourne most struggling Catholic families.⁸⁶ Irish Catholic working-class opposition to conscription was not religious in origin, nor was it sparked by the troubles in Ireland. Rather, it was part and parcel of a gathering working-class opposition to the Melbourne business and commercial elite's push for compulsory overseas service in 1915–16.

'[Today] will decide if [Australians are] to be shackled by militarism or ... remain a free Country' (referendum day, 28 October 1916)

When in August 1916, Prime Minister Hughes announced a referendum on conscription, Tom at first got the message badly muddled,⁸⁷ but his confusion did not last long. Early in October his son Tom was one of thousands of single men aged 21–35 called up for training for home defence for the duration of the war. With battle casualties mounting and enlistments in free fall, Hughes, anticipating approval of conscription at the plebiscite on 28 October, intended to have sufficient reinforcements ready for immediate dispatch to Europe. The move backfired by adding to the ferment of a referendum in which, as Lewis recalled, both sides condoned violence: 'In the industrial suburbs no

pro-conscription meeting was possible; it was almost as dangerous to have an anti-conscription meeting in a middle-class suburb.⁸⁸ This misstates the situation. Most municipal councils, including Labor councils, denied anti-conscriptionists access to public venues. As Judith Smart has established, working-class animosity erupted when anti-conscriptionists were denied access to venues for their meetings. They took to the streets and vacant allotments, and disrupted conscription meetings to refuse conscriptionists a hearing.⁸⁹ On 18 September Tom reported that ‘an immense gathering in Anderson Street [Yarraville] carried a resolution against conscription unanimously’. That day saw Tom’s only reference to the Irish troubles: ‘a great gathering at the T[own] Hall for to take up a collection for the poor of Dublin.’ On 11 October: ‘I was at an anti-conscription meeting last night [in Footscray] there was one fight and a woman bashed another fellow and nearly a third fight.’ He also attended anti-conscription meetings in Melbourne: (Saturday 21 October) ‘I went in to see women and children march in procession to [the] Yarra Bank there was an immense crowd gathered Mrs [sic] Pankhurst and others spoke against conscription’. His diary also registered concerns about cheap labour rumoured to be replacing conscripts: (26 September) ‘96 Maltese came here by boat’. And the war casualties kept coming: (28 September) ‘Mat [sic] Brophy has been killed in France’; (8 October) ‘Charlie Faux died of wounds’; (10 October) ‘Tom [his son] sent in his claim for exemption today. Les Lolton of Korumburra died of wounds’.

Tom branded the press coverage of the final week of the conscription debate ‘a great week of lies’. On referendum day, 28 October, he wrote: ‘This was a lively day and one of the most important for Australians in its history today will decide if they are to be shackled by militarism or whether we are to remain a free Country’. Sunday 5 November found him at the Yarra bank to celebrate the NO victory and to hear Frank Anstey attack Billy Hughes’s decision to keep in camp for a month those called up for military training. Tom’s son, who had duly registered at Yarraville but had applied for exemption on health grounds, had his case heard in open court, as did a neighbour who, having two brothers in France, was needed in the family construction business. Men given temporary exemption from training by these courts (which were staffed by local magistrates, and whose proceedings were reported by the local press) were pressured to offer themselves later for overseas service. On 23 November Tom noted with satisfaction the release of the trainees. Henceforth he simply referred to the prime minister as ‘Hughes’; no more ‘Mr Hughes’. As Christmas approached – (12 December) ‘Mum is boiling C. pudding today Dobbie [of] Footscray died of wounds’ – Tom was scouring

the press for rumours of peace: (16 December) 'Germany is talking of peace'; (22 December) 'American President is asking both sides to state terms with a view to peace'.

Tom Purcell was adamantly opposed to conscription, but it is striking that, aside from a reference to the Dublin relief appeal in Melbourne, his diary for 1916 contains no mention of the Irish troubles, of Protestant sectarianism, or of Dr Mannix, whose two references to conscription in 1916, brief and conciliatory, were barely acknowledged by the Melbourne press.⁹⁰ If, as some historians have insisted, his early remarks sparked a public and very Protestant furore, then Tom Purcell did not register it. In January 1917, Mannix ignited press and Protestant fury when he described the conflict as 'an ordinary sordid trade war' and questioned the purity of Britain's war aims.⁹¹ But his critics ignored the main thrust of his address: 'It was impossible to find money to develop Australia. But ... it could be found in millions to hurl Australians to their death in Europe'. War was distorting the Australian economy, causing unemployment, and undermining workers' right to work for a living wage. 'What wonder if idle, starving men find themselves driven into socialism?'⁹²

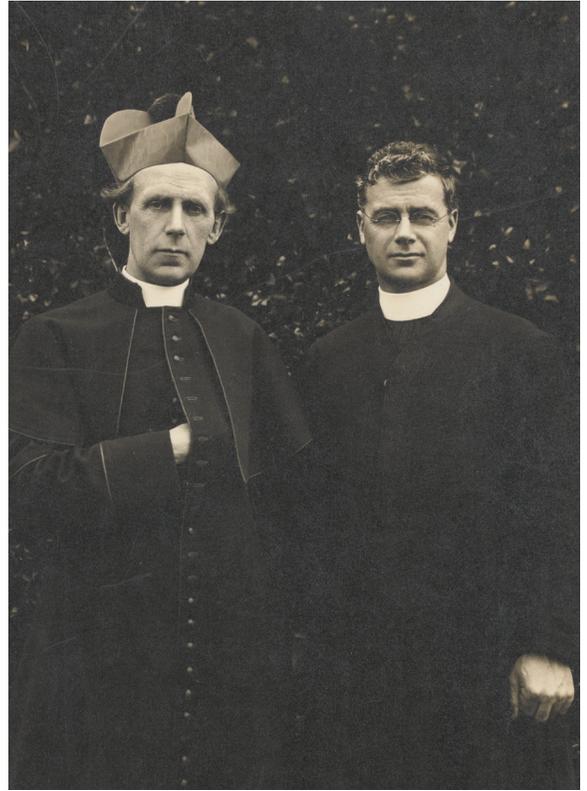
Although Mannix gave workers, and especially Catholic workers, greater confidence to speak out, the resistance to conscription, as the archbishop must have known, had been initiated by trade unionists, socialists, the Industrial Workers of the World, pacifists and the women's movement. These forces, rather than Mannix, sustained the anti-conscription campaigns in 1916–17.⁹³ In April 1917 Tom heard Mannix denounce Protestant bigotry at Moreland, and was impressed,⁹⁴ but his diary also testifies to the appeal exerted by anti-war radicals. He heard Adela Pankhurst speak at a street meeting in Middle Footscray on 20 April, and next evening he heard Senate candidate Vida Goldstein demand civil, legal and wage equality for the sexes, and denounce 'the new cult of National Service [which] meant industrial conscription and the loss of all that has been gained by arbitration, wages boards and unionism'.⁹⁵ A week later on Sunday 29 April, Tom was at the Yarra bank where 'Miss Vida Goldstein and Miss Pankhurst [,] Fullerton etc Fleming, Lynch etc etc' spoke. And the following week (6 May) he was again at a 'Great gathering on the Yarra Bank' to hear Goldstein and Pankhurst. Tom's enthusiasm outlasted the election. On Sunday 13 May he attended a 'women's peace meeting' that was addressed by Mrs Singleton, Miss Fullerton, Miss John[s], and Rev Frederick Sinclair, whose denunciation of the exploiters of the poor affected him strongly.

Moved by Pankhurst, the Socialist Party of Victoria had declared its warm admiration for the archbishop's bold, incisive, and courageous denunciation

of the sordid trade war.⁹⁶ But Mannix was hardly interested in the approval of doctrinaire socialists. He and his confidante and fellow campaigner for educational justice for Catholic schools, Fr William Lockington, understood the attraction of socialism among workers, and issues of war, conscription and peace could not be left to the socialists: ‘They need not fear bigotry’, Lockington told the Australian Catholic Federation, but rather the ‘active, subtle and unscrupulous enemy in their midst ... working with dire persistence to hurt Australia ... the anti-Christian revolutionist’.⁹⁷ Mannix’s attempt in 1913–14 to galvanise the Catholic vote in support of state aid to religious schools had failed – Catholic workers simply refused to abandon the Labor Party – and now he was identifying himself with working-class opposition to the war.⁹⁸ During 1917 his speeches would increasingly echo what Val Noone has identified as anti-imperialist rhetoric derived from liberal, Marxist and syndicalist sources,⁹⁹ and he would claim working-class support beyond his Catholic base.

‘I don’t remember ever being worse off in my life’ (‘Soldier’s Dad’)

The Lewises could not have comprehended working-class want, let alone working-class anger with conservative demands for the inordinate sacrifice that conscription of their menfolk would bring. Wartime wages freezes, inflation and irregular unemployment had undermined living standards, and workers were angered by federal Labor’s abandonment of a price control referendum, as well as the refusal to release stockpiles of foodstuffs for which there was no shipping. Unemployment and poverty exposed men to ‘economic’ conscription. As early as March 1915 Tom had written of the local foundry employing Leo, ‘They have put off five factory hands and two more are going this week’. And, the following day: ‘All the men off today at H[olden] and Lewis excepting the boys.’¹⁰⁰ Recruiters’ targeting of industrial workplaces implied that declining enlistments were a working-class responsibility. Certainly the war hit middle-class incomes and broke up families, but families such as the Lewises had extra resources. Their credit was good, and they coped reasonably well on regular military allotments from four sons, and by taking in near relatives as paying guests (‘We could not take boarders’).¹⁰¹ His school fees covered by Owen’s military allotment, Brian was able to go to Wesley after all. On the other side of Melbourne, in Footscray, ‘Soldier’s Dad’ wrote to his local paper urging Protestants harping on the drink question to talk instead about the great questions of the day – ‘Food Prices, House Rents, Unemployment, and Conscription’. ‘Another Soldier’s Dad’ agreed:



Left: Thomas and Eliza Purcell. Courtesy Tony Purcell

Right: Archbishop Daniel Mannix with Fr William Lockington SJ, 1917. Lockington was parish priest at Richmond 1913–16 and rector of St Patrick's College, East Melbourne 1916–23. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection H2010.174/29

I have three sons at the Front (two of whom have made an allotment of pay to their mother), but, like 'Soldier's Dad', I have had a very hard time for the last 12 months; in fact, I don't remember ever being worse off in my life. I am quite unable (probably owing to age) to obtain any form of employment other than a day or two now and again, whilst my own trade is at a standstill. But I'm still expected to smile 'with pride', and to 'keep the homes fires burning', although it is mighty hard sometimes to find a match to set them going.¹⁰²

These fathers wrote at a time when thousands of Melbourne families had just been through the greatest industrial convulsion since the maritime strike

of 1890. Unemployment, intermittent work, and short time combined with the inflation of food prices and rents to produce suffering and resentment that boiled over in the spring of 1917. In August Melbourne waterside workers' refusal to handle food exports until domestic food prices were lowered became entangled with a New South Wales wharfies' strike in support of railway workers who were resisting the imposition of speed-up systems of labour control. The unionist principle of refusing to handle 'black' goods (goods handled by non-union labour) had a snowballing effect, and carters, drivers and seamen were quickly drawn in. A month later, Tom Purcell noted, 'No sign of strike being over yet. Ropeys came out'.¹⁰³ Yarraville's rope workers had joined their neighbouring sugar refinery and fertiliser plant workers. With raw materials and coal supplies exhausted, factory closures put more out of work than were on strike. At Fitzroy, Fr Lockington took up the cause of the destitute female confectionary workers. Coal shortages and the consequent rationing of work meant that Melbourne was not back at work until November. When, at the height of the dispute, secretary for labour Henry Murphy revealed publicly in the Archbishop Mannix's lecture series that employers had been making large profits by passing labour costs on to consumers, Dr Mannix commented 'Was there not in that a great temptation for strikes in Australia?'¹⁰⁴ Brian's memoir suggests that the Lewis family could only comprehend protest and dissent as disloyalist, Irish and Catholic. 'Archbishop Mannix,' Brian recorded in all seriousness, 'leads the faction which controls the extreme trade unions that hamper the winning of the war.'¹⁰⁵ He was echoing accusations of trade union treachery, when the Great Strike of 1917 was in fact an ill-coordinated rank-and-file revolt that collapsed in acrimony and bitterness.¹⁰⁶ The war that showed no sign of ending and the ferment on the home front were generating acute levels of anxiety among those with loved ones at the warfront. The Lewis family's anxieties were being displaced onto Melbourne's Irish Catholics.¹⁰⁷

At their Armadale church an honour board had been erected to honour those who had enlisted and to encourage others. The problem was that the congregation had only one single eligible man remaining, so boys under 21 began either inflating their ages or obtaining their parents' consent, and married men with children joined them. When Athol Lewis embarked in February 1917, the family initiated a Friday evening ritual: James read a chapter from the Bible, they knelt for the Lord's Prayer, and then the boys' weekly letters were read aloud. 'All four brothers were in danger and we all prayed for them.'¹⁰⁸ The family's Sunday rituals were standard for liberal Presbyterians at this time, but the institution of family prayers is a striking sign of their

acute stress, for such worship had been declining among Protestants.¹⁰⁹ The Purcells also had their rituals; every mass was preceded by the pope's prayer for peace in Europe, and there were special masses for George and Leo, for wounded friends, and for the souls of friends killed at war. Claims that Catholic enlistments were lagging were met by Catholic rebuttals. On Sunday 8 April 1917 a Catholic Young Men's Society honour board was unveiled by the parish priest at St Augustine's church, Yarraville. 'Leo's name is on it,' Tom wrote that evening:

[President of the society] Vaughan said that Catholics were unjustly accused of not having done their share whilst over 600 young men from various C[atholic] societies have enlisted, 15 from Yarraville, one having been killed. Fr Egan unveiled the board and Mr McClosky responded on behalf of the relatives and friends of those who volunteered.

Protestant comparisons of enlistment according to religious affiliation were founded on foolish rivalries, prejudices and ignorance. Tom's diary was full of references to his friends' sons who had been killed or wounded, or were missing, and it is doubtful that he recorded only Catholic casualties: (31 January) 'Nare's eldest brother 26 wounded on 13 Nov'; (31 January) Aunt Annie's wounded son Jim was saved by an officer who gave him all his drink while they lay undiscovered, but 'the poor fellow [the officer] died'; (8 March) Rawlings's family was notified of his death on 17 February, with a mass for him on the 18th; Gordon T was 'amongst the seriously wounded list'; (15 March) 'Mary Duckworth's boy killed in February in France after 2 years and 5 months service'; (24 March) Mr Doupe received a letter from the chaplain who attended Harry as he lay dying; (31 March) 'Jim Dunstan died of wounds rec[eive]d in France'; (Sunday 22 April) 'One of the McArdle boys has been killed in France, they got word on Saturday'. And so the news kept coming.

Although military authorities seem never to have published aggregate casualty figures in 1917, and the war news remained evasively general in tone, neighbourhood talk, obituaries in local newspapers, and casualty lists in the daily papers made it evident in 1917 that the AIF was engaged in its most intensive fighting so far in the war. In the 12 months of 1917 there were 55,000 Australian casualties, about 40 per cent of the total over the 42 months from April 1915 to November 1918. Enlistments continued to decline. By the end of 1917 recruitment campaigns aiming to raise 5500 volunteers a month failed to yield much more than half the target. The collapse of volunteering virtually ensured another, and even more bitterly fought, referendum.

'There are as many lies as truths appearing in the press, it all helps to fill up space'

The Purcells and the Lewises continued their attempts to make sense of press coverage, which gave little sense of the battles in which Australians were engaged. Neither family appears to have realised that the major Allied offensives at Arras and on the Somme took place against an enemy that had withdrawn to heavily fortified and more defensible positions (the Hindenburg Line). These included Bullecourt where, during the first 24 hours of battle in April, the Australians lost 3400 men, and a further 7000 in two weeks of the second battle. 'Despite the horrifying statistics,' historians Anderson and Trembath comment, 'the conflict was still reported using the standard euphemisms ... Australian always did well.'¹¹⁰ CEW Bean's despatch on first Bullecourt – 'Australians make history' – was designed to boost recruitment. Tom Purcell now dismissed press claims:

Mon[day] 14th [May] ... there was a casualty list in the Herald of Saturday over 1000 wounded 200 killed. It is reported today Bullecourt has been taken from the Germans. It may or may not be true, there are as many lies as truths appearing in the press, it all helps to fill up space. So long as it brings in the cash, what does it matter £ S. D.

The First Anzac Corps was withdrawn from the Somme and thrown into General Haig's Flanders offensive (Third Battle of Ypres). 'Here,' Brian Lewis wrote, 'we were told nothing' of the slaughter, and 'we could not see [the gains] on our maps.'¹¹¹ The Ypres salient had cost 250,000 Allied dead. The three Australian divisions were withdrawn in mid November, their grievous losses – 6500 men, one-fifth of their operational strength – softened by stories of Anzac heroism.¹¹²

Unable to trust their newspapers, families turned to their boys' letters from the front. Australians (and New Zealanders) were already prolific correspondents, ranking fourth in the world for the number of letters (67) sent annually per head of population.¹¹³ But the war released a tsunami of correspondence between the home and war fronts: almost 4000 million letters, newspapers, and packets went through the Australian mail service 1914–19.¹¹⁴ Tom Purcell wrote at least once a week to his sons, and received replies most weeks; Brian Lewis remembered his brothers' weekly letters as 'Four personal accounts of the war, all written in a different style and all written vividly'.¹¹⁵

Historians disagree about the historical value of wartime letters. Paul Fussell found them unreliable as 'factual testimony about the [Great] war', because of their 'unique style of almost unvarying formulaic understatement',

reflecting 'a decent solicitude for the feelings of the recipient'.¹¹⁶ Martyn Lyons, writing on French wartime correspondence, agreed: soldiers' letters and postcards, banal, formulaic, and platitudinous, were designed not to reveal the truth as much as to disguise it.¹¹⁷ Although many Australian military and social historians have used soldiers' letters, few appear to have commented on the many thousands of letters and extracts from letters published in local weekly and regional and metropolitan daily newspapers across Australia, and fewer have asked what effect this correspondence had on home front opinion of the war or on civilian morale. The Purcell and Lewis letters were not published, but Brian tells us that his brothers' letters (or at least some of them) were copied and circulated to friends and aunts.¹¹⁸ Brian describes the letters as comforting, good humoured and optimistic. And yet he also writes about letters from Gallipoli concerning the poor performance of Britain's New Army under mediocre English leaders, before these subjects were openly discussed in the opinion columns of the press, as well as letters that told of incompetent and callous British leadership in France.¹¹⁹

Whatever censorship was applied to letters, it is clear from Tom Purcell's diary, from his admittedly rare comments, that there was enough in them to unnerve their readers.¹²⁰ Even when designed to assuage loved ones' worries, letters were at least six weeks out of date by the time they were received. On 16 April 1917 Tom and Lizzie 'got several letters from Leo and George [the] latest dated 15 February, they have been on the Somme front since November [1916], and were then on the move, their Div[ision] the fifth having suffered the greatest losses of any'. Such uncensored comments about losses to divisions, brigades, and more commonly battalions and sub-units, were common in letters published in the press. Concerning further letters, received on 5 May but dated about 26 February, Tom wrote: 'George and Leo ... were then [*sic*] well.' There was no telling, as parents read letters, what had befallen their sons. 'The Pope,' Tom wrote on 17 August 1917, 'has made an appeal to all nations in favour of a lasting peace but is criticised by the English press. What a pity the critics could not be placed in the front ranks.' On 3 September he noted 'Plenty of gas where Leo is now' and, on 1 August, he learned that George had been in hospital since mid June. At the end of the month he was advised that George was to be invalided home. In fact, George had been in hospital almost continuously since March, but it seems that his parents had not been advised, and he had not worried them with his health troubles, which dated from July 1916. Promoted bombardier and then a corporal with duties as gunner and bombardier, George had his eardrum shattered and the temporal plate in his skull broken by explosions, shrapnel hits and the noise of trench mortars.

He also had cardiac troubles arising from his heavy work carrying shells. With George on his way home, Tom transferred his anxieties to Leo, who was in Belgium, according to the letter he received on 20 September. Another letter, written on 2 September and received on 6 November, contained the news that several of Leo's mates had been killed or wounded. Leo had another year of war before, in September 1918, he was invalided to England with a gunshot wound, and sent home in January 1919.

All four Lewis boys were in the thick of the fighting in 1916–17, as tunnellers or artillerymen in France and Belgium.¹²¹ Owen had left Australia in May 1916, Keith finished his leave and re-embarked in June 1916, Ralph joined him in March 1917, and Athol went as a gunner in February 1917. Ralph was the first casualty. A letter received on the first Friday of July 1917 suggested he had a safe position in his tunnelling company HQ but, on the following Monday, the family was advised that he had been severely wounded by gunshot. Ralph was the only survivor of a heavy bombardment. His leg would be saved, but soon after a head wound put him in hospital for six months. Ralph arrived home in February 1918, his face scarred and dented by shrapnel, and seeming to Brian unusually quiet and rather shaky. Owen, who had transferred to the Flying Corps, was next to be wounded, twice, the second time seriously with twenty bullet holes and the loss of a couple of toes. He was patched up and sent back to France in November. Keith was still with his tunnelling company and Athol with the medium artillery when news came that Owen had been killed in action on 12 April 1918. He was just 21. The family continued with its Friday ritual of reading the weekly letters from Keith, Athol – and Owen: 'For five more Fridays those letters from the dead were read and filed.'¹²² The family's mourning was restrained. Edith had been proudly wearing the badge, issued by the government to encourage enlistment, with its four bars signifying her four serving sons: 'Now she was entitled to add a star to one of the bars. She never wore that badge again'.¹²³

Ronnie was now 20 and free to enlist without his parents' permission, but the family did not want him to go. So he agreed to finish his university year in college, 'but it was a nasty year for him'.¹²⁴ Virulent Ulster Protestant sectarianism had alienated Catholic support for conscription, the Lewises thought, and now the Ulster men were pressuring eligibles like Ronnie to enlist.¹²⁵ The Lewises, noticing more and more that some of the patriots' sons had either failed to enlist or had taken safe jobs behind the lines,¹²⁶ were grateful, however, when John Monash, an old friend of James from engineering days, removed Athol from danger.

Their sister Phyllis was engaged to Bob Menzies, a promising, socially acceptable law student who, although eligible to serve, gave no signs of enlisting. Menzies's two elder brothers were serving overseas, but their parents had decided that Bob would remain at home to support them, as necessary.¹²⁷ Even though they discouraged Ronnie from enlisting, the Lewises seemed unable to comprehend the Menzies wanting to reserve one son. Nor could they understand Bob Menzies' support for conscription – 'We felt it odd that Bob should be concerned with sending unwilling men to the war'¹²⁸ – when conscription perhaps offered him the only chance to defy his parents' wishes. Tensions increased: 'Owen had been killed and Bob was safe at home.'¹²⁹ The engagement was broken off.

The year 1917 had reached a crescendo with the second conscription referendum, taken just five days before Christmas. 'The bad feeling of the first referendum,' Brian Lewis thought, 'became bitter hatred in the second. It was not impossible that the violence might have developed into real civil war.' He attributed the bitterness to Archbishop Mannix, now speaking from public platforms as well as church premises, and ridiculing the talk about equality of sacrifice:

The wealthy classes would be very glad to send the last man, but they have no notion of giving the last shilling, nor even the first. (Loud applause). I warn you not to be under the delusion that the capitalists will, in the end, pay for the war ... In reality, the burthen in the end will be borne by the toiling masses of Australia. (Applause).¹³⁰

On 21 December Tom Purcell recorded the 'Great victory for no against conscription'. The NO vote had increased, and in Victoria the vote had moved, narrowly, from YES to NO. 'The referendum,' Brian Lewis observed, gave us a nasty Christmas present ... A miserable Christmas and a sad end to a very bad year.¹³¹ He managed, however, to draw comfort from the defeat of conscription. After four years of madness, logic, perhaps, was not to be expected: 'If [unwilling conscripts] had been sent they would have smeared our image of our fighting men's self-sacrifice. Our Armistice and Anzac days would not have been so moving.'¹³²

'It had been a sordid war ... nothing like we had imagined in 1914'

All the home-front sound and fury simply confirmed the Purcells and the Lewises in their entrenched positions on enlistment, recruitment and conscription. Nationally, public opinion was not as volatile as we sometimes imagine.

The conscription issued cleaved Australia in two: the NO vote in 1916 was 51.6 per cent, and it rose to 53.8 per cent in 1917. Victoria voted 51.9 per cent YES in 1916, and 53.4 per cent NO in 1917. It was foolish of Billy Hughes and his backers to think that they could produce a shift in public opinion sufficient, not only to produce a majority for YES, but to deliver a decisive enough victory to preserve social order and a national commitment to see the war through. Hughes overestimated the volatility of public opinion. The vote against conscription in 1916 was delivered by less than two per cent of some 2,500,000 voters. Some 50,000 fewer votes were cast nationally in the 1917 referendum, almost 20,000 of them in Victoria. It was as if a section of the electorate, exhausted, could not decide one way or the other. The narrowness of the results, and the withdrawal of electors in 1917, shows just how fraught the referenda were.

A sophisticated attempt has been made to explain the voting,¹³³ but the simplest analysis reveals that in Melbourne the class factor was hugely powerful: industrial working-class subdivisions voted NO – Yarraville voted 71 per cent against in 1916, and 74 per cent against in 1917 – and middle-class residential subdivisions voted YES – Armadale voted 73 per cent in favour in 1916, and 72 per cent in 1917. The pattern was repeated across the metropolitan area. Melbourne was almost evenly split on the issue, the class division contrasting starkly between suburbs north and west of the Yarra, and those east and south.

Notions that Australia's war was 'a middle-class war', and that the working class, and Irish Catholic workers in particular, did not enlist proportionately in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), were nonsensical.¹³⁴ Judging from Robson's 1973 analysis of the occupational profile of the AIF, we may say that it broadly reflected the social composition of the male workforce,¹³⁵ and that was true also of religious affiliations.¹³⁶ Loose comparisons of suburban enlistments across Melbourne – such as Michael McKernan's comparison of Richmond with Camberwell and South Yarra (a district of Prahran)¹³⁷ – are misleading, as they make no allowance for the pools of available eligible men. Comparisons on a municipal basis, taking into account eligible male populations, discredit notions of a working-class/middle-class disparity in enlistments,¹³⁸ confirming the occupational analysis that reveals the AIF to have been a socially representative Australian army. The conservative patriots' campaign for conscription in pursuit of equality of sacrifice was thus based on a false premise. But the valid working-class resentment of conservative failure to conscript wealth and to arrest falling living standards fed resistance to conscription that might have compounded the existing inequality of sacrifice.

Tom Purcell's diary reveals a man caught up by the turbulent issues of enlistment, conscription, and a just peace. His passions were aroused when two of his sons enlisted, the Labor Party split and Catholic loyalties were impugned. It is not clear that Ireland's wrongs motivated him, but events in Melbourne enhanced his Catholic identity: Tom swelled with pride at the great spectacle presented by Archbishop Carr's funeral in May 1917:

one of the largest in [the] southern Hemisphere ... It took nearly two hours to pass a given point ... immense crowds ... all along the route ... must have created a great impression and caused many people to think what a mighty institution the Catholic Church is and the unity of it.¹³⁹

His diary records the sharpening of his traditional working-class convictions, his readiness to listen to radical ideas, and his resentment of attacks on his archbishop, his church and his pope. But he appears not to have become a hater. Wanting the war to end as soon as possible, he expressed no support for volunteering or recruitment and attended no purely patriotic events. He supported war's victims. The threat of conscription perhaps made him fear for his other sons. He listened to anti-war speakers avidly, but did not necessarily identify himself with their views. He attended masses that prayed for peace and for the safety of his sons and their comrades in arms, regarded the war as a moral tragedy, and placed his faith in the pope's peace efforts. As a Catholic he acted as his conscience dictated, and not as governments bid.

Our War, though covered by a patina of hindsight, strikingly exposes a family's dogged devotion to the notion of 'victory'. 'It had been a sordid war', Brian mused, echoing Archbishop Mannix, 'nothing like we had imagined in 1914.'¹⁴⁰ But the war had been just and had to be fought to the end, whatever the cost, to them as a family or to the nation. War weariness, though acute, did not lead the Lewises to question the wisdom of war, even when they became aware that the press, the politicians and the generals lied to them. The Lewises gave more than most families to the war effort and remained hostages to their ethnic (English), religious (Presbyterian), and middle-class identity.¹⁴¹ The terrible blow of Owen's death perhaps made defeat doubly unthinkable, because defeat might define his death as wasteful.

The diary and the memoir tell us that Australia did not go to war united in 1914–15, and that the nation was even more divided by war's end. The world's most advanced democracy, so far from Europe, was never willing, despite what its leaders promised in 1914, to commit all of its able-bodied men and resources to the open-ended, industrialised war that it quickly revealed itself to be. We might draw comfort from that.