

Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize

Essay

Elsie Oldfield

The Great War: Tasmania's Lasting Contribution

Evaluate Tasmania's contribution to the Great War (1914-18) on both the home and battle front. Consider incorporating the stories of local soldiers and/or home front activities in your analysis.

The Great War, a monumental conflict that altered the 20th century, extended its devastating influence beyond its European battlegrounds, drawing countries from across the globe into its destruction. Even Tasmania, a small Australian state, experienced the profound impact of the Great War, with its transformative contributions leaving a lasting mark on the state's identity. Efforts on the home front, including the redefined social roles and exemplary work of women, provided vital support, while extraordinary courage of its soldiers on distant battlefields proved crucial to the conflict. Examining local stories, including those of Frank Macdonald and the sacrifices of First Nations soldiers like Private Marcus Blake Norman Brown, reveals how this engagement left a lasting mark on the state's identity.¹

When the Great War began in 1914, Tasmania's home front efforts were driven by community spirit and adaptability. Voluntary organisations, predominantly led by women, became a defining part of daily life. Thousands of Tasmanians contributed their time and effort to groups like the Red Cross and the Comforts Fund, which coordinated fundraising, produced warm clothing, and assembled parcels for soldiers.² This widespread commitment was exemplified by figures like Catherine Roberts, known as 'The Lonely Lady with the Flag,' who raised money and led parades in Hobart, as published in *The Tasmanian Mail* (Figure 1)³. With many men enlisted, women stepped up in roles in the workforce that had previously been closed to them.⁴ This challenged gender roles and sparked a broader re-evaluation of women's place in society. A Tasmanian soldier wrote in 1916:

“Everything is going on as in ordinary times, except that most of the farm work is being done by women, who are just as brave as the men.”⁵

This statement, from the *Huon Times*, reflects how women's roles were not only vital to maintaining Tasmania's economy, but also respected by those on the battle front. These contributions redefined the social role of women and were essential to both the state and the broader war effort. Furthermore, Tasmania's major industries - including the timber, mining and agricultural industries - were rapidly adjusted to meet military demands, their increased output directly sustaining the Allied campaign.⁶ The state also established a network of recovery homes and hospitals, such as the Lady Clark Convalescent Home in Claremont, to support the recovery

¹ First World War." Companion to Tasmanian History. University of Tasmania Library.

https://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/F/First%20World%20War.htm.

² Women and World War One." Centenary of ANZAC Tasmania.

https://www.centenaryofanzac.tas.gov.au/history/women_and_war/women_and_world_war_one.

³ Tasmania's war: 1914-1918." Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. <https://www1.exhibition.tmag.tas.gov.au/home>.

⁴ Women and World War One." Centenary of ANZAC Tasmania.

https://www.centenaryofanzac.tas.gov.au/history/women_and_war/women_and_world_war_one.

⁵ Mrs. F. W. G. Adams of Tasmania." *The Weekly Times*, February 19, 1916, 21.

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/135815465>.

⁶ First World War." Companion to Tasmanian History. University of Tasmania Library.

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of wounded servicemen.⁷ These community-supported facilities provided crucial care and showed lasting commitment to servicemen's well-being.

Women's service extended to the battlefield too, fundamentally changing Tasmanian society. Tasmanian nurses showed immense courage, serving abroad in dangerous conditions like casualty stations and hospital ships.⁸ Facing overwhelming pressure, disease, and the constant trauma of war, their devotion was critical. For instance, Clare Deacon, born at Pipers River Tasmania, enlisted as a staff nurse for the Australian Imperial Force in 1914. Following an effort in rescuing patients from shattered wards and burning buildings during a bombing incident, she was awarded the Military Medal (Figure 2) for her exceptional bravery.⁹ Awarded or not, these women faced major risks while providing vital frontline care. Their collective volunteer efforts and willingness to take on new roles in the workforce challenged existing social norms, reinforcing the importance of their contribution by showcasing remarkable leadership and resilience.

Tasmania's dedicated support for the war was further reflected in the 1916 and 1917 conscription referendums. These arguments reflected national disagreements between those who wanted compulsory military service, to boost troop numbers, and those who supported individual freedom and workers' rights. Despite passionate campaigns on both sides, Australia ultimately rejected conscription.¹⁰ Notably, Tasmanians defied the national trend, voting 'Yes' for conscription in both the 1916 (56.17%) and 1917 (50.24%) referendums,¹¹ directly reflecting the state's profound and sustained support for the war effort. The state's deep commitment to boosting troop numbers for the Allied cause was directly demonstrated by the fact that 15,485¹² Tasmanians (from a population of approximately 200,000)¹³ formed local units, notably the 40th Battalion, which would go on to have a significant and lasting impact on the Western Front. This loyalty to the British Empire and a sense of duty was also evident in individuals like Alec Campbell, who, at only sixteen, falsified his age to enlist,¹⁴ showing the eagerness to serve that was common among many young Tasmanians who hoped for a short, glorious war.

Tasmanian troops were soon confronted by the brutal realities of war, distinguishing themselves with courage on battlefields far from home. Their early efforts at Gallipoli displayed immense resilience during harrowing conditions, laying the groundwork for their reputation. However, it was on the Western Front that they made their greatest contribution, with formations like the 40th Battalion involved in important battles such as the Somme, Messines, and Passchendaele¹⁵. In

⁷ Australian War Memorial. "Portrait of Sister Olive Haynes in nurse's uniform." Australian War Memorial. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C228891>.

⁸ Women and World War One." Centenary of ANZAC Tasmania.

https://www.centenaryofanzac.tas.gov.au/history/women_and_war/women_and_world_war_one.

⁹ Women in World War 1." 165 ANZACS. <https://165anzacs.org/women-in-world-war-1/>.

¹⁰ Conscription referendums." Defining Moments: Australian National Museum. <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/conscription-referendums>.

¹¹ 1916 Conscription." Museum of Australian Democracy. <https://moadoph.gov.au/explore/democracy/1916-conscription>.

¹² WWI enlistment statistics." Australian War Memorial.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/enlistment/ww1#state>.

¹³ A Soldier's Death." *The Mercury*, January 20, 1915, 3. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/10362747>.

¹⁴ Alec Campbell: The Last Anzac." Centenary of ANZAC Tasmania.

https://www.centenaryofanzac.tas.gov.au/history/shared_stories/alec_campbell.

¹⁵ Australian War Memorial. "Tasmanian soldiers leaving Hobart on the troopship *Karamu*." Australian War Memorial. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U51480>.

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these conflicts, the battalion's courage and endurance were crucial in securing Allied advances and preventing enemy breakthroughs. Defined by harsh trench warfare that exposed Tasmanians to artillery bombardments, gas attacks, and constant disease, these battles demanded immense challenges and sacrifices.

The bravery of individual Tasmanians, such as Private Lewis McGee, exemplifies the state's contribution. Born in Ross Tasmania, McGee was awarded the Victoria Cross for his incredible courage at Broodseinde Ridge in October 1917, where he rushed a German pillbox under heavy machine-gun fire.¹⁶ This act of bravery, facing direct enemy fire to neutralize a defensive position, was a critical turning point in the advance demonstrating the personal sacrifice required to achieve objectives in the brutal trench warfare of the Western Front. Another local story is Frank MacDonald's, who stands out in Tasmanian military history for his exemplary service as a signal repairer. Notably, he received the Military Medal, a recognition of both his courage and steadfast commitment under fire.¹⁷ In the chaos of the front lines, maintaining communication was vital for coordinating attacks, relaying intelligence, and ensuring the safety of troops. MacDonald's dedication to repairing signal lines, often under enemy bombardment, directly contributed to the operational effectiveness and survival of his unit, displaying an indispensable heroism. His story, like many others, highlights the resilience and dedication of Tasmanian soldiers. Despite immense hardship, they made significant contributions to the Allied war effort, a testament to the state's sacrifice.

The war also saw the significant, yet largely unacknowledged, contribution of Tasmanian Aboriginal soldiers. They courageously served their country despite legal and social systems denying them basic rights. For example, legislation such as the Aborigines Protection Act (1909), and its later adjustments, gave state authorities control over the lives of Aboriginal people, including their residency, employment, and children, essentially alienating them from their own country¹⁸. However, despite this discrimination, approximately 74 Tasmanian Aboriginal men still enlisted.¹⁹ Private Marcus Blake Norman Brown, a Tasmanian Aboriginal soldier from the 40th Battalion, is a powerful example of this sacrifice, as he fought and ultimately died for a nation that suppressed his basic civil rights²⁰. His death highlights the significant contributions made by Aboriginal soldiers despite the persistent inequalities they faced, underscoring the war's enduring and complex legacy in Tasmania.

Tasmania's contribution to the Great War, across both its home front and distant battlefields, was undeniably profound and pervasive, reflecting a commitment disproportionate to the state's size. Tasmania's eager patriotism produced disproportionate enlistments, and the courage of men like Frank MacDonald and Lewis McGee, alongside the rest of the 40th Battalion, distinguished them

¹⁶Sergeant Lewis McGee VC." Centenary of ANZAC Tasmania.

https://www.centenaryofanzac.tas.gov.au/history/tasmanias_victoria_cross_legacy/sergeant_lewis_mcgee_vc.

¹⁷ Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize." Department of Premier and Cabinet, Tasmania.

<https://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/cpp/community-policy-and-engagement/frank-macdonald-memorial-prize>.

¹⁸ Defence Act 1909 (No 25)." Australasian Legal Information Institute.

https://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/num_act/apa1909n25262.pdf.

¹⁹ Aboriginal soldiers." Tasmania and World War I. State Library of Tasmania.

<https://libraries.tas.gov.au/slat/tasmania-and-world-war-i/aboriginal-soldiers/>.

²⁰ Tasmania's WWI First Nations Anzacs." CAMD Tasmania. <https://camd.org.au/tasmanias-wwi-first-nations-anzacs/>.

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on far-distant battlefields. Meanwhile, the state's home front mobilized with fervent patriotism, where industries adapted to military needs and volunteers, especially women, undertook vital work that challenged existing social norms. Women demonstrated a resilience and capability that reshaped traditional expectations of their place in society. However, these contributions came at a price. 3163 Tasmanians died,²¹ and numerous other men and women returned with physical and mental scars.²² The war reshaped Tasmanian society, exposing deep divisions within the state, evidenced in the conscription debate, and highlighting the often-unrecorded sacrifices of Aboriginal soldiers like Marcus Blake Norman Brown. Ultimately, Tasmania made its mark on the Great War, and in turn the conflict permanently reshaped the state's identity.

²¹Australian War Memorial. "Tasmania's Roll of Honour for World War One." Australian War Memorial. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/LIB100048428>.

²² Australian War Memorial. "Great War nurses." Australian War Memorial. <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/nurses/ww1>.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Catherine Roberts, known as 'The Lonely Lady with the Flag,' featured in *The Tasmanian Mail*, 2 December 1915, p. 17. Courtesy of the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office. Tasmania's war: 1914-1918." Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

<https://ww1exhibition.tmag.tas.gov.au/home>.



Figure 2: Military Medal, awarded to Staff Nurse Clare Deacon for her exceptional bravery on the Western Front. "Centenary of ANZAC - Tasmanian Nurse Awarded the Military Medal."

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