

‘Willing to fight to a man’: The First World War and Aboriginal activism in the Western District of Victoria

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In April 1916, *The Age* ran a short story headed ‘Aborigines in camp: Others willing to fight’, announcing the presence of two ‘full-blooded [sic] natives’ among the soldiers at the Ballarat training camp.¹ The men’s presence blatantly contradicted popular interpretations of the *Defence Act 1909* (Cth).² Only men of ‘substantial European origin’ were eligible to enlist in the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF), although, in May 1917, the regulations were modified allowing ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal men entry.³ The Aboriginal men volunteering to fight in April 1916 were James Arden and Richard King, Gunditjmara men from the Lake Condah Aboriginal Reserve in the Victorian Western District. In the Condah area there was already an acceptance of Aboriginal men’s participation in sport and labour; during the First World War, this extended to military service.⁴ The men’s ‘splendid physique’ may have justified their acceptance into the military.⁵ James Arden was a ‘well known rough rider’ and Richard King had ‘claimed distinction as a footballer and all-round athlete’. The journalist portrayed the spectacle of the Aboriginal men at the Ballarat training camp to

1 *The Age*, 13 April 1916. PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 3, 1917 correspondence. The newspaper report misspells Arden’s name as Harding. The story also featured in the *Horsham Times*, the *Portland Observer* and the *St Arnaud Mercury*.

2 *Defence Act 1903–1909* (Cth). Scarlett 2014: 3.

3 For changes to military regulations see Winegard 2012a: 54.

4 For public support of Aboriginal enlistment in Hamilton, see ‘Departure of Soldiers’, *Hamilton Spectator*, 29 March 1916: 4. Instances of support can also be found in other locations across Victoria, Scarlett 2014: 55.

5 On discretionary recruitment, see Scarlett 2014: 55.

promote white men's enlistment. Articles announcing Indigenous enlistments were published across south-eastern Australia during the 1916 and 1917 recruitment drives.⁶

Unusually, however, *The Age* report quoted the Aboriginal volunteers. The article reported the two men were 'anxious to get out to the front as soon as possible in order to fight for the Empire'. James Arden added, 'the natives at the Condah station felt that they were real Britishers, having been born under the Australian flag, and were willing to fight to a man if they were accepted by the military authorities'.⁷

James Arden's pledge to 'fight to a man' was a statement of Aboriginal equality with other Australian 'Britishers'. He mobilised a discourse of equality founded in imperial loyalty, national service, personal sacrifice and masculine prowess. He sought inclusion in a white institution by claiming his status as a British subject, but he did so on behalf of the Aboriginal people of 'Condah station'.

Throughout his life, James Arden was a fierce defender of his rights. After discharge from the army, he confronted the ongoing attempts of the Lake Condah manager to withhold his military pension. The manager cast him as a 'trouble maker' and a 'bad example' for the other reserve residents. Nevertheless, Arden would become the first in a long line of men within his family to volunteer for military service. His grandsons Harry and Reginald Saunders volunteered for the Second AIF. Reginald Saunders would go on to become one of the first Australian Aboriginal soldiers to achieve the rank of commissioned officer.⁸

Tracing James Arden's story, as well as the stories of other Western District Aboriginal servicemen and their families, contributes to an understanding of the political dimensions of Indigenous First World War experience. First, this article highlights the connections between Aboriginal grassroots political activism and enlistment in the AIF. There is growing recognition of the ways in which Aboriginal people's post-war disappointment fuelled the political agitation of the 1920s and 1930s.⁹ Most historical narratives suggest that it was not until *after* the First World War that military service, and the concept of loyalty, became linked to Aboriginal citizenship rights.¹⁰ If, as John Maynard suggests, Aboriginal soldiers 'had gone overseas with an agenda in their kit bag', we know little about what this agenda looked like.¹¹ This is not surprising

6 Scarlett 2014: 36.

7 *The Age*, 13 April 1916. PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 3 1917 correspondence.

8 New research from Tasmania has revealed an earlier commissioned Indigenous officer, Riseman 2014b: 187. On Reginald Saunders see Gordon 1965; Ramsland and Mooney 2006.

9 See Goodall 2008; Maynard 2007, 2014; Scarlett 2014; Huggonson 1989; Peterson and Sanders 1998; Jackomos and Fowell 1993; Attwood and Marcus 2009; Winegard 2012a.

10 Riseman 2014b: 182.

11 Maynard 2014: 426.

considering most Aboriginal men enlisted in the AIF by hiding their Indigenous heritage, or at least not drawing attention to it.¹² But this was not the case in the Victorian Western District.

On several occasions, Gunditjmara men used the moment of their enlistment to proclaim their rights as ‘Britishers’ and ‘natives of the Condah station’ to join the military. These are slight but tangible pieces of evidence that expand our knowledge of the ways in which Aboriginal men expressed the meaning of their military service. In order to build a larger picture of the Lake Condah men’s motivations and loyalties, I draw upon biographical material and the greater context of Western District Aboriginal history. This forms a partial account, but one which foregrounds the coherence of Indigenous people’s simultaneous and overlapping loyalties that were founded in their local, national and imperial identities. Such attempts at narration are necessary for, as historians have noted, Indigenous military service in the First World War is rendered irreconcilable, ‘bizarre’ or even ‘perverse’, when viewed through the nation state as service to ‘white Australia’.¹³

Second, this article explores the struggle of Western District Aboriginal servicemen and their families to maintain access to their military wages and repatriation benefits. Indigenous people across Australia and other settler societies – Canada, New Zealand and South Africa – did not gain equal access to their repatriation benefits and military wages.¹⁴ In contrast to other Australian states, Aboriginal authorities in Victoria did not systematically deny Aboriginal people military allotments and pensions, but judged each case on its ‘merits’.¹⁵ In Victoria, many Aboriginal people, including James Arden, successfully contested the Board for the Protection of Aborigines’ (hereafter Board) attempts to withhold their military allotments and pensions, and their government rations, by claiming their rights as returned soldiers, relatives of men at war, and Aboriginal people.

Finally, this article charts the process by which, in 1917, the demand for land created by the Soldier Settlement Scheme precipitated the enactment of the Board’s long held ‘concentration plan’ to close all reserves, except Lake Tyers in Gippsland. Soldier repatriation resulted in a ‘second dispossession’ of Aboriginal people, and soldier settlement land was not made available for returned Aboriginal servicemen.¹⁶ The Aboriginal war effort figured prominently in Aboriginal people’s arguments against these closures. Gunditjmara claims to equality through war service may be particularly visible in the archives

12 Scarlett 2014: 55–57.

13 Two historians who observe this are Huggonson 1989: 353; Bennett 2014: 466.

14 See Winegard 2012a, 2012b. On South Australia see Pearson 2013.

15 See Riseman 2014b: 188. On Queensland see Pratt 2007: 232–233.

16 Goodall 2008.

due to the dynamics of settler/Indigenous relations in the Condah area and the widespread English literacy of Indigenous people in Victoria in the early twentieth century. However, Aboriginal people elsewhere in Australia made similar public claims for inclusion in the war effort as Indigenous people.¹⁷ Moreover, on a broader level, international scholarship is now revealing shared patterns of expectation, disappointment and politicisation within histories of British Dominion Indigenous military service.¹⁸

In Australia, the centenary of the First World War has given rise to new studies and narratives that explore the history of Aboriginal military service.¹⁹ However, within public commemorations of the centenary the complexity of this history remains subsumed by the hegemonic Anzac legend, and reference to the frontier wars has been evaded.²⁰ The frequently used name 'the fighting Gunditjmara' resists this culture of forgetting. Originally referring to their long conflict with Europeans during the Eumerella Wars of the 1840s, the 'fighting Gunditjmara' is now used by the Western District Aboriginal community to refer to their military contributions for Australia and their considerable achievements in sport.²¹ It is a name that insists that the history of dispossession, and Aboriginal active resistance, remains centrally located in the Aboriginal narrative of 'serving country'. By paying attention to historical sources from the Western District, we can further contextualise the Gunditjmara military tradition, along with the service of other Victorian Aboriginal people, within a long history of diverse engagements with Europeans, and a 'home front' of continuing dispossession, Aboriginal political struggle and protection legislation.

Enlistment

In Victoria, joining the military was one of the few acts Aboriginal men living under the Protection Acts could undertake without asking the Board's permission.²² The *Aborigines Act 1910* (Vic) determined whether Aboriginal people were eligible to live on a reserve depending on their official racial status as either 'half-caste' or 'full-blood' and gave the Board extensive powers to

17 For example, Cherbourg Aboriginal men stated they were 'coloured members of the Empire', Pratt 2007: 226.

18 For transnational perspectives see Winegard 2012a; Marti 2015; Maynard 2014; Sheffield 2015.

19 Examples include the Serving Our Country Australia Research Council Linkage Project; the 2014 NAIDOC Week theme of 'Serving Country: Centenary and Beyond'; the Queensland Theatre Company's 2014 production *Black Diggers*, which toured Australia in 2015. For broadcast narratives on Indigenous service, see Bennett 2014.

20 On memorialisation see Reynolds 2013; Lake and Reynolds 2010.

21 'A fighting spirit', *The Age*, 24 April 2006, www.theage.com.au/news/features/a-fighting-spirit/2006/04/24/1145861286782.html.

22 In 1916 the Board stated that it was not in opposition to 'half castes' enlisting if the military would accept them. Broome 2005: 199.

monitor Aboriginal people's movement, work, material possessions, association with other Aboriginal people and where their children lived.²³ In 1916, Board regulations further restricted the movement of Aboriginal people on and off reserves, with a view to reducing reserve populations.²⁴ The Framlingham station, near Lake Condah in south-western Victoria and home to the Kirrae-wurrung, had been closed in 1898. It remained an unstaffed reserve.²⁵ Lake Condah and Coranderrk were under threat of closure. Employment in the army provided Aboriginal men a chance to escape the control of the Board, and to provide their families with homes off the reserves.

At Lake Condah, local sympathy for Aboriginal enlistment meant that James Arden and Richard King could take matters further. In 1916, James Arden was 43 years old, a father of six, and a horse breaker by trade.²⁶ Richard King, a descendant of Gunditjmara leader 'King Billy of Yigar', was 32 years old, single and working as a labourer.²⁷ When Arden stated that the 'natives at the Condah station' were 'willing to fight to a man', he spoke for a community that was on the verge of being exiled from their reserve. By tethering the Lake Condah men's right to enlist to their status as 'Britishers' born under the 'Australian flag', he invoked a historical relationship with the Crown that underwrote Aboriginal people's occupation of reserves and the policy of Aboriginal protection.²⁸ Arden's claim to British subjecthood on behalf of his people also countered the racial exclusions of the *Defence Act* that required Aboriginal men to negotiate recruitment on an individual basis through denying their indigeneity.

Carrying further political implications was the newspapers' description of Arden and King as 'full-blooded natives'. This was unusual due to the exclusion of Aboriginal people from the military, plus the Board classified the men as 'half-caste'.²⁹ It is possible that Arden had told the newspaper he and King were 'full-blooded', and this would indicate a pride in his Aboriginality. If this were indeed the case, this identification could also represent defiance of the Board's definition of Aboriginal people according to 'caste', which dispossessed

23 The *Aboriginal Protection Act 1886* (Vic) had created legal categories 'half-caste' and 'Aboriginal' which had age and gender qualifications, Chesterman and Galligan 1997: 29. See also Land 2006; Ellinghaus 2001.

24 Broome 2005: 203.

25 Framlingham and Coranderrk were government run stations; Lake Condah and Lake Tyers were Anglican missions. I will refer to all four as reserves. For Framlingham, see Barwick 1981; Critchett 1992.

26 James Arden, service no. Depot 573 discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/; NAA B2455.

27 Richard King service no. 579, discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/; NAA B2455. On the King family, see Cole 1994: 43.

28 For Indigenous peoples' status as British subjects, see Chesterman and Galligan 1997: 81; Evans et al. 2003: 65–68; relationship with the Crown, see Mitchell 2010; Curthoys 2008; Nugent 2012.

29 Note on newspaper clipping of *The Age*, 13 April 1916. PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 3 1917 correspondence.

Aboriginal people of their land and their Indigenous identity.³⁰ A claim to be 'full-blooded' would strengthen a statement of belonging to the Lake Condah reserve.

James Arden had confidently positioned himself as a community spokesperson, and he may well have been one. Like many Aboriginal volunteers, Arden had throughout his life sought to wrestle free from the paternalism of the Victorian authorities. He had overtly confronted and defied missionaries and station managers. For years, he and his wife Christina (née Austin) and their children had lived on and off the reserves.³¹ Arden had been employed on white people's farms and this brought him into conflict with reserve managers who wished to control his movements. When, in 1912, the Board forced him to move to Lake Condah from Framlingham, Arden told the missionary John Henry Stähle that he would not be attending the Anglican services on the mission. Furthermore, he would not let his children be sent into service in white people's homes. He threatened the missionary with a police summons if he interfered with his affairs.³² From the biography of his grandson Reginald Saunders, we learn that James Arden had considerable cultural knowledge. Saunders, who lived with his grandparents when he was a boy, recalled that his grandfather would speak for 'hours' about the violent struggles between the British and the Condah Nation. Arden could still speak the Wannon language.³³

James Arden and Richard King were not the only Lake Condah volunteers to make public statements of Gunditjmara patriotism. By 1916, Lake Condah was a community already significantly committed to the war effort. From a community of around 60 people, at least nine men had enlisted and many others had attempted to do so.³⁴ In March 1916, the *Ballarat Courier* reported: '11 stalwart men from the Lake Condah Mission Station accompanied by Recruiting-Sergt Campbell marched through Gray Street to the recruiting office [Hamilton]'. Eight of the men were accepted and all were 'heartily congratulated on their patriotism'. This was a performance of loyalty that won the men local celebration and press coverage. Yet the men, when making final arrangements to go to Ballarat, ran into opposition of an unidentified nature, and were rejected. The *Portland Guardian* recorded 'great indignation' at the news of the men's rejection.³⁵ Arden and King's presence at the training camp some weeks later was perhaps less objectionable than the group of eight 'stalwart' Aboriginal

30 See McMillan and McRae 2015.

31 See Grimshaw et al. 2002. Arden letters throughout the book.

32 PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 4, Bundle 6.

33 Gordon 1965: 37–38. On dispossession in Western District, see Clarke 1998; Critchett 1990.

34 Population statistics, Victoria. Board for the Protection of Aborigines 1912: 6. Of the 108 currently known Aboriginal men who enlisted in the AIF from Victoria, 33 were from south-western Victoria. See Bakker 2014: 2.

35 Cited in Martin 2014: 18.

men in an otherwise all white military camp. Regardless, Arden and King rearticulated the hope that the First World War would provide the opportunity to confront and dispel military racial discrimination, and to promote the rights and recognise the strengths of the Lake Condah people. These assertions of belonging and identity reflected not only the opportunities of the First World War, but a long history of adaptive engagement with Europeans.

In the post-frontier period, Western District Aboriginal people utilised European technologies and contemporary political discourses in pursuit of Aboriginal agendas. In the 1870s, there were ongoing reports of 'rebellion' and 'insubordination' at Framlingham and Lake Condah, over issues of labour, wages, and mobility.³⁶ Increasingly, Aboriginal people used their English literacy to write letters to white allies and officials, including the Queen's representative, the Governor.³⁷ In the early 1900s, Maggie and Ernest Mobourne saved the Lake Condah reserve from closure through a campaign that articulated their identities as Christian mission residents, honoured the Condah elders, and galvanised the support of 348 settlers.³⁸ Western District Aboriginal people also socialised and worked with local settlers, and competed with, and against, them in sport. Reserves regularly hosted well-attended sports carnivals.³⁹ Through participation in sport, Aboriginal men won esteem, respect, as well as what Richard Broome describes as 'moments of dominance'.⁴⁰

By the turn of the twentieth century, citizenship and soldiering had become inextricably linked in white Australia's political discourse.⁴¹ Martin Crotty has shown how, throughout the First World War in Australia, the figure of the citizen soldier was 'hailed as a model citizen' at the apex of the new social hierarchy, and as such could lay a superior claim to rights and privileges, because of his sacrifice and service to his country.⁴² Joan Beaumont has demonstrated that British loyalty (alongside masculinity, military obligation and racial homogeneity) was central to conceptions of Australian 'Imperial citizenship' during and after the First World War.⁴³ Victorian Aboriginal people, as mobile and connected people, were party to the nationalist and imperial discourse on the rights and obligations of 'Australian citizens', particularly those of the soldier.

36 NAA B313, Box 3, Item 49 Framlingham Station 1876, Box 10, Item 176; Christie 1979: 195.

37 See Critchett 1992; Broome 2005; van Toorn 2005, 2006; Barwick 1998; De Costa 2006; Curthoys and Mitchell 2012; 2010; Grimshaw 1999; Grimshaw and Nelson 2001; Grimshaw et al. 2002.

38 Van Toorn 2005: 26–27. See also Critchett 1998: 167.

39 For Condah Indigenous-settler relations, see Gordon 1965: 38–40.

40 Broome 1980. See also Hunter 2008.

41 See Lake 1992. See also Garton 1998.

42 Crotty 2007: 193.

43 Beaumont 2007: 172.

Aboriginal people, in the Western District or elsewhere, did not use explicit 'rights talk' in their bid to participate in war. They did not have access to the political platforms and settler support that would be important in the post-war struggle mounted by organisations such as the Australian Aborigines Progressive Association (AAPA). Rather, their relationship to the British Crown, and the tradition of asserting masculinity through participation in sport and labour, presented Aboriginal men the chance to prove their equality with other Australian 'Britishers' in what was being touted as the greatest test of manhood yet. In the process, the Gunditjmara patriots James Arden, Richard King and the group of 11 Condah men laid claim to the attributes of what would later emerge as a 'soldier citizenship' – courage, willingness to fight and sacrifice.⁴⁴

Entitlements

For James Arden and Richard King, successful enlistment did not mean they were sent overseas for 'active service'. Richard King died in the Ballarat training camp of 'influenza with heart failure' two months after enlisting.⁴⁵ James Arden, too, fell ill and suffered in military camp for seven months with meningitis before returning to Lake Condah. During this time, his wife Christina and their children moved briefly in response to the Board's request that she hand over some of her military allotment to pay for her keep on the reserve.⁴⁶ When James returned to Lake Condah from military camp, he was entitled to a military pension of £12 per month, which he applied for and received.

Australian military pay and the post-war welfare system were considered generous compared with those of other British Empire countries.⁴⁷ For example, as a private, Chris Saunders from Lake Condah earned six shillings a day and sent four shillings as an 'allotment' home to his crippled mother.⁴⁸ Outside the military, Aboriginal men found intermittent work, occasionally earning the same wages as white men on railways and in other manual labour.⁴⁹ The military offered a regular average wage accompanied by other benefits. Returned servicemen were eligible for disability pensions, including allowances for their dependents, and preference in government employment and occupational

44 Bennett 2014: 466. See also Janowitz 1976.

45 Richard King service no. 579, discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au; NAA B2455.

46 Grimshaw et al. 2002: 292–294.

47 Murphy 2011: 107–129.

48 Saunders to Board, 29 August 1917, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 3 Coranderrk folder.

49 For Percy Pepper's employment, see Flagg and Gurciullo 2008.

training.⁵⁰ Several Aboriginal families in Victoria received military pensions, but whether Victorian Aboriginal families applied for and received war gratuities, a one-off payment upon discharge, remains unclear.⁵¹

With increased pressure to close reserves and allocate land for soldier settlement, the Board sought to reduce its expenditure. From 1916 onwards, local authorities were required to monitor Aboriginal people's income closely, and families receiving government rations and income from the military came under scrutiny.⁵² The struggle to gain access to repatriation benefits was a common veteran experience after the First World War,⁵³ but Aboriginal people, now caught between two 'welfare' systems, had to contend with the direct attempts of the Board to withhold their military allotments and pensions.

When James Arden returned to the reserve in October 1916, his military pension meant that he could refuse to work for the manager on the reserve for government rations. The manager, William Galbraith, took particular offence at the way Arden spent his money, and informed the Board that he 'intends buying a billiard table and is going to Hamilton to buy a £65 piano ... [their] children are dressed in finery far above their station'. This display of material gain symbolised a rise in Arden's social position inappropriate to his 'native' status. Galbraith questioned Arden's right to receive the military pension of £3-2-6 weekly. The manager told the Board that Arden was fit and well and capable of working. In response to the Secretary's request that he hand his pension 'over to the Board to be utilised in the maintenance of [himself] and family or to be held in a trust', Arden replied:

I beg to say that I can not see my way clear to hand my money over to the Board, I think I deserve the money I am getting no one knows the pains and sufferings I underwent the Meningitis and I further state that I have started a banking account of my own.⁵⁴

Rather than acquiesce to their demands, Arden decided to do away with the Board's support and 'to leave the Station'. By June 1917, the Arden family had moved into a rented house nearby in Dunmore West. Since he was officially a 'half-caste', the Board and manager had no power to stop him. He retained his pension but Galbraith attempted to have it 'reduced' by claiming that Arden was 'able to earn his own living'. He could not understand how 'a native under the circumstances is getting so much'.⁵⁵ In a letter to Ann Bon, member of the

50 Lake 1992: 319.

51 Winegard 2012a: 248-249. For an example of denied war gratuity, see Alexander McKinnon service no. 2230, discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au; NAA B2455. I am grateful to Bruce Scates for this reference.

52 Minutes of Board meetings, 4 July 1916, NAA B314.

53 See Garton 1996; Larsson 2009.

54 Arden to Board, no date on letter, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 3, 1917 correspondence.

55 Galbraith to Board, 8 June 1917, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 4, Bundle 1.

Board and advocate for Aboriginal people, Arden let his opinion of the manager and matron be known: 'I must really say that no one can stand their ways, they are not fit they are to [sic] fond of drink'.⁵⁶

In 1918, reserve managers reported that there were six people in the vicinity of reserves in receipt of both rations and military allotments: two at Coranderk, three at Lake Condah, and one at Framlingham.⁵⁷ Not all families of men at war were in receipt of rations or living on, or near, Aboriginal reserves.⁵⁸ At Lake Condah, Galbraith singled out the Carter family who, in 1917, had left the reserve to live on five acres in Dunmore. Agnes Carter received government rations and money from her nephew in the AIF, Robert William Taylor, and her sons who were working on farms and railways.⁵⁹ Galbraith saw the new prosperity of families like the Carters and Ardens as an insult to the white 'race', and a disturbance, even inversion, of the racial hierarchy: 'To see a black fellow strutting about in a white waist coat like William Carter is beyond a joke while the white race is labouring'.⁶⁰

In response to Galbraith's reports, the Board advised the Defence Department that it would be in the best interests of the soldiers to hold in a trust the military allotments of the six people identified as receiving both rations and allotments. The Defence Department wished to know if the people were 'in any way dependent upon the allotments for their maintenance', but suspended the payments. With some assistance from local authorities, all six people, including Agnes Carter, successfully appealed for the reinstatement of their allotments.⁶¹ Bessie Rawlings at the nearby Framlingham reserve, whose 'dear only son' Reginald Rawlings had 'gone to give up [his life] for king and freedom', was another of these petitioners.⁶²

Frustrated in its attempts to stop Aboriginal people's military allotments, the Board decided to cut their rations. Without rations, Agnes Carter struggled to make ends meet for over a year before applying again to the government for assistance. She wrote to the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Allendale: 'In fact sir I was given to understand that I would be kept on being a Ward of the state, I being a old age (Halfcaste) came under the Act of the Aborigines, I was to be kept by the Board all my life'. She explained that although she received a military allotment of £1 per week from a nephew 'who went away

56 Arden to Bon, 12 June 1917, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 3, 1917 correspondence. For recent discussion of Ann Bon, see Cruickshank and Grimshaw 2015.

57 Board notes, December 1918, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 7, Bundle 1.

58 Purnim Local Guardian to Board, December 1918, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 7, Bundle 1.

59 Robert William Carter service no. 2216, discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au; NAA B2455.

60 Galbraith to Board, 12 January 1918, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 7, Bundle 1.

61 PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 7, Bundle 1.

62 Parker to Rawlings, 2 July 1918, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 6, Bundle 1.

to the (front) to fight for (king) and (empire)', high food costs made living on this money difficult.⁶³ Carter's argument for entitlements under the *Aborigines Act 1910* (Vic), and as an Australian with a relative at war, was successful. Not all appeals to entitlements were successful, however. In the case of one Western District Aboriginal woman, concerns about her mobility and sexuality influenced the Board to withhold her husband's military allotment and to institutionalise her children.⁶⁴ Despite the fact that, as she stated, her family earned their 'own living like white people' and troubled the government for 'very little help', the Board would not vary its decision.

Exile

Aboriginal people had little access to the benefits of the soldier settlement scheme, but the scheme had a widespread effect on the Aboriginal population. Stephen Garton, when discussing the choice of the word 'repatriation' for the schemes designed to assist returned soldiers, has pointed to the role Australia's blood sacrifice at Gallipoli played in legitimising settler dominance in Australia. Gallipoli symbolically gave birth to Australia's nationhood and Australian soldiers were to be given special assistance to ensure that they claimed their new 'birthright'. Repatriation was, then, 'a final act of dispossession of Indigenous peoples'.⁶⁵ This was quite literally the case with soldier settlement scheme implementation.

Established in 1917 by the Commonwealth government to provide returned servicemen with land and assistance, soldier settlement was integral to the repatriation program.⁶⁶ In Victoria, local branches of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA) put significant pressure on the Board to make Aboriginal reserve land available to them.⁶⁷ Aboriginal reserves were temporarily gazetted Crown land.⁶⁸ However, because the Board did not hold any title to the land, it could not sell it for profit as desired. Instead it could hand the land over to the Closer Settlement Board for the price of improvements only; profits from its sale would go to the Lands Department.⁶⁹ The sale of land

63 Parentheses in original. Carter to Campbell M. L. A. Allandale, 1 May 1919, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 7, Bundle 1.

64 See letter to Board, 22 May 1919, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 7, Bundle 1. For examples of child removal during the war, see Horton 2010, 2012; Grimshaw et al. 2002.

65 Garton 1996: 75.

66 At least one Victorian Aboriginal man received land under soldier settlement, Percy Pepper. See Flagg and Gurciullo 2008. Also Pepper 1980.

67 Barwick 1998: 306–307.

68 Coranderrk was permanently gazetted; see Barwick 1998.

69 Secretary Closer Settlement Board [CBS] to Secretary Board, 2 September 1919, NAA B313 Lake Condah 1919 folder.

at Lake Condah and Coranderrk was thus held up, but in preparation for the sale all but a few elderly remaining residents were put under increasing pressure to leave.⁷⁰

While it may have been within the Board's interest to assist Aboriginal people to become independent of government support, the Board's indifference worked to the opposite effect. Patricia Grimshaw has documented the Board's failure to assist Eliza Saunders, one of the few residents remaining at Lake Condah, to buy a house for herself and her son, Chris Saunders, who was serving in the war.⁷¹ James Arden also made several attempts to buy a piece of land. In December 1919, he wrote to Board member Ann Bon asking permission to reside temporarily on the old reserve, while he waited to hear about his application for a piece of the 'Soldiers land'.⁷² The result of this application is unclear. Arden had also tried to enlist again but was judged 'unfit for service'.⁷³ He remained living near the reserve for the rest of his life, where he provided a home for his grandsons when their father Chris Saunders returned from the war and was forced to travel to find work.⁷⁴

By 1924, Lake Tyers remained the only Victorian reserve under the administration of the Board. Small communities clung to areas around Coranderrk, Lake Condah and Framlingham, but the Board hoped to transfer these people once the required houses were built.⁷⁵ In July 1925, John Egan, an Aboriginal man living on the old Framlingham reserve site, wrote a letter of protest about the sale of the reserves to the *Portland Guardian*. It was printed under the heading 'Aborigines Rights':

Remember, Sir, that these Mission Stations have all given their loved ones to serve in the Great War. The writer has lost a brother (killed in action) over there: a family near Heywood gave five sons, a sixth being rejected ... Do the traditions of the British race condone such an action as forcibly making exiles of us?⁷⁶

Several weeks later, Egan sent the *Horsham Times* a letter titled 'Aboriginal's Sound Plea', which further commented on post-war treatment: 'The writer has lost a brother killed in action and also eight cousins who did "their bit," ... It seems, being colored [sic], the Repatriation and R.S.S.L.[sic] do not apply to them.'⁷⁷

70 Barwick 1998: 306–307.

71 Grimshaw and Nelson 2001: 305.

72 Arden to Bon, 1 December 1919, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 7, Bundle 1.

73 Arden to Parker, 22 May 1918 Milltown, PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 7, Bundle 1.

74 Gordon 1965: 37.

75 Barwick 1998: 310; 'Lake Condah: New Home for Five Aboriginals', *Camperdown Chronicle*, 17 July 1919: 4.

76 'Aborigines Rights', *Portland Guardian*, 20 July 1925: 4. Settlers at Hamilton supported the Aboriginal claim to the Lake Condah reserve: PROV VPRS 1694, Unit 7, Bundle 4.

77 'Aboriginal's Sound Plea', *The Horsham Times*, 7 August 1925: 5.

The imperial citizenship that had called men like William Egan to arms in the name of ‘liberty and freedom’ proved an empty hope. As Egan pointed out, the war sharply highlighted the contradiction of Aboriginal people’s political status as British subjects and wards of the state. His trenchant attack on the Board was part of a mounting wave of Indigenous activism across Australia, and indeed the British Empire.⁷⁸

With the closure of the Victorian reserves, Aboriginal people lost their homes on the last remnants of their country. After the Second World War, some of the reserve land at Lake Condah and Coranderrk was divided up and sold for soldier settlement blocks. White men who had served alongside Lake Condah men in the Second AIF received blocks of the old reserve land.⁷⁹ By 1951, only the church and the cemetery were left of the Lake Condah Aboriginal Reserve, and several years later the ‘much loved’ St Mary’s Church was blown up with dynamite. It would take the Gunditjmara over 30 years to gain back some of the reserve land at Lake Condah and Framlingham under land rights legislation.⁸⁰ In 2012, after a long community campaign, a commemorative plaque to Indigenous service was erected in the Western District centre of Warrnambool.⁸¹

Conclusion

Situating Aboriginal people’s participation in the First World War within a local context foregrounds the simultaneous and overlapping loyalties, and political exigencies, which shaped their bids for inclusion and claims for entitlements. On the eve of being exiled from the Lake Condah reserve, Gunditjmara patriots’ declarations of their willingness to fight for the ‘Empire’, as British subjects, were also assertions of local belonging. Taken together, the public statements of volunteers and correspondence about entitlements testify to the fact that Aboriginal people held hopes and expectations that their war effort would lead to greater recognition of their status both as Aboriginal people and as Australian citizens. While these desires were not framed in ‘rights’ language, they were no less crucial and coherent to those articulating them. Taking a broad view of political activism, Aboriginal people’s participation in the First World War can be framed within a narrative of persistent struggle over issues of governance, land and justice.

78 See Maynard 2007, 2014, 2015; Attwood and Markus 2004, 2009; Scarlett 2014; Grimshaw et al. 2002; Goodall 2008; Riseman 2014a.

79 Gordon 1965: 37. For John Lovett’s legal case over a denied soldier settlement application, see Burin 2012.

80 McVicker et al. 2007: 47–49.

81 ‘Indigenous servicemen honoured’, *Standard*, 1 November 2012, www.standard.net.au/story/785897/indigenous-servicemen-honoured/.

Aboriginal participation in the First World War did not lead to broad structural change in Aboriginal people's political status. Nor did it secure Aboriginal people access to reserve lands through the soldier settlement scheme. In the short-term, however, local Aboriginal protest over post-war treatment brought pressure to bear on Victorian authorities and demonstrated, once again, that Aboriginal people had the power to disrupt mission regimes. Some Western District families made small material gains during the war, which also challenged mission regimes, but ironically the Board thwarted most opportunities for becoming independent of government support. In the long-term, the experiences of Aboriginal servicemen and families formed part of the wider picture of inequality Aboriginal people continued to face in the early twentieth century. Myriad injustices shaped their political awareness and gave Aboriginal people new purchase upon the language of citizenship so central to post-war political discourse. 'Returned soldier' and 'citizen' were titles to add to the political categories, variously invoked by Aboriginal people, such as 'British subject', 'Australian', 'mother', and 'Christian'. In reality, though, they were deprived of the privileges and rights these titles bestowed.

By the outbreak of the Second World War, the ties between citizenship and military service had been strengthened nationally and internationally and it seemed a more promising context in which to pursue a citizen rights agenda.⁸² As Richard Frankland, a descendant of James Arden, suggests in his film *Harry's War* about his uncle Harry Saunders, Aboriginal enlistment in the Second AIF from the Victorian Western District and across Australia points to sheer persistence on their part to see improvement for their people.⁸³

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⁸² Peterson and Sanders 1998: 9–17; Maynard 2014.

⁸³ Frankland 1999.

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