



Someone Else's War

John Connor

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HTAV

As Australians it can be difficult looking at World War I outside of our own nation's involvement. While this can be a natural impulse, it is a myopic viewpoint that ignores Australia's contribution as part of a wider Imperial effort. This is where the likes of books such as John Connor's *Someone Else's War: Fighting for the British Empire in World War I* assist immensely. Through synthesising a wide range of primary and secondary sources, Connor's book focuses on a depiction of a war as a shared experience across the British Empire that 'brought together individuals from across the world who otherwise would never have met.' It touched and affected the lives of all across the Empire.

Connor displays an unusual approach structurally as he divides his book into alternating chapters of two types: event and subject. Event chapters are marked by the year and focus on particular military events and the involvement of the wider empire. Subject chapters cover the entire war and illustrate important aspects that effected the entire Empire, from material concerns such as shipping trade and munitions manufacture, to conscription debates and opposition to the war. Both reflect a trans-national approach and allow Connor to convey snapshots of events reflecting the wider imperial contributions to specific military campaigns and then, in the subject chapters, convey the wider echoes and implications of the war.

The first of the event chapters, '1914: The *Emden* in the Indian Ocean,' exemplifies this approach. While the narrative of a lone German light cruiser terrorising shipping in itself is interesting, the impacts of these raids are even more significant. The ship was involved in the barrage of Madras, which did not fulfill German hopes

of prompting an Indian rebellion but was nonetheless (as Connor describes) a blow to British prestige in a delicate colonial situation. It led to the closure of merchant traffic in the Bay of Bengal, with immense effects on the Indian economy. An intriguing 'thread' Connor follows is the export from Bengal of the jute fabric that was used to make wheat bags for shipping grain. Those familiar with Australian economic and farming history will see the obvious implications – that it would be difficult for the Australian grain harvest to reach the market. This interconnectedness of colonial trade is integral to an understanding of the Imperial war effort, which was motivated by far more than simple patriotism.

The chapter 'Shipping, Trade and Rationing' expands on this discussion, illustrating the vulnerability to merchant shipping and the diversion of shipping to feed the war effort. This would have had a great effect on the economies on numerous British colonies, and Connor deftly describes the results for the likes of New Zealand, Nigeria, the Seychelles and North Borneo, among others, with severe consequences to economies and indeed lives due to food shortages.

It is not just the economic effects of the war on the Empire that Connor focuses on – the book's title draws attention to those fighting 'someone else's war.' The chapter '1915: The Three Battles of Aubers Ridge, France' relates to this aspect, focusing on the contributions of Indian Sikh troops in France. Those not interested in the intricacies involved with military history may find themselves getting bogged down in the unit descriptions, though Connor's expertise does help to make these chapters informative. Other event chapters, on the battles of

Messines and Amiens, also highlight the diverse origins of British Empire troops on the Western Front. For snapshots of a war beyond Gallipoli and Monash's battles in France, there is much to appreciate in these chapters.

The discussion of the importance of artillery at Aubers Ridge leads directly into the following chapter, 'Making Munitions.' Connor describes, in fascinating detail, the development of artillery ammunition production within the Empire. He manages to include everything from the increasing importance of women employed arms manufacture, to intercolonial knowledge-sharing, the largest explosion in the war (an accident) and a New Zealander receiving fifty pounds for not actually making shells. The strength of Connor's work is in interweaving what could be mere anecdotes into lucid overviews.

The best of the event chapters is '1916: The East African Campaign,' detailing an oft-neglected theatre of the war. Much of the East African campaign revolved around the German attempt to divert allied troops from the Western Front to East Africa. There is an emphasis on 'sub-imperial' agendas of British colonies to expand their own territorial interests. The South African designs on ports in Mozambique providing a curious element of motivation for engagement in the war with increasingly 'Africanised' armies, which gets right to the heart of the notion of 'someone else's war.' The follow-up chapter, 'Dissent,' is another crucial and revelatory chapter that encompasses the 'many shades' of opposition to the war within the British Empire.

The 'Volunteers and Conscripts' chapter offers useful comparisons

between Australia's experience with enlistment and conscription and those of the other parts of the Empire. New Zealand is an intriguing case, reflecting domestic and racial politics in its poor treatment of conscientious objectors and its reluctance, in the lingering shadow of the New Zealand Wars, to allow pro-British Maori enlistment. Canada presents another interesting example, with its cultural and linguistic divide in conscription debates, and wartime measures that essentially rigged the 1917 Canadian election and even having their own 'Hughes' for good measure. Combined with the case studies of other colonies, these useful comparative summaries make for what is easily one of the highlights of this book.

While by no means as cohesive a whole as one may wish, *Someone Else's War* allows us to draw on World War I's wider ramifications within the British Empire. It is a war that touched on the lives of soldiers, farmers, munitions workers, men, women and children across the Empire in all manner of ways. Connor's concise and well-researched slices of history, although fragmentary at times, still offer accessible and engaging starting points for exploring the perspectives and shared experiences of colonial subjects in the British Empire. *Someone Else's War* provides extended dimensions to exploring World War I and Australia's part in it.