

QUAKER PEACE AND LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

WATCHING BRIEF: ANZAC CONVERSATIONS (1)

*Note: The project **Anzac Conversations: Lessons Learned** was initiated by QPLC, and supported by a grant from the Department of Veterans' Affairs, in 2015. This is a report arising from the first event held as part of the project. Further reports will be prepared following each additional event.*

The Event

On Sunday 12 April 2015, at the Friends Meeting House, Turner, ACT, 40 people (Quakers and others) attended the first public event, which coincided with the opening in Canberra of the WW1 Exhibition put together by NSW Friends with financial support from QPLC. After the official opening, there were presentations by two speakers on the topic *Anzac Conversations: Forgotten Voices*. On behalf of QPLC, Lorraine Thomson from Canberra Friends Meeting chaired the event.

The exhibition, which is touring Australia this year, consists of ten panels which show graphically the work of Quakers and others for peace during and since WW1. Opening the exhibition, Dean Sahu Khan (president of the Canberra Interfaith Forum) quoted from stories by soldiers about the emotional impact of war on individuals and communities. He said that all faiths teach love, peace and forgiveness, and that the power of love must overcome the love of power.

The speakers

Peter Stanley (military historian from the University of NSW in Canberra) said that death and bereavement are not sufficiently emphasized in the WW1 story, with the focus tending to be on those who fought overseas. Women, trade unionists, children, German internees and pacifists were among those affected deeply in a society that was divided by the war. The war definitely changed those who lived through it. Nurses were the most visible women involved, but other women had active roles in supporting the war effort in factories and in associations that sent extra supplies to comfort the soldiers at the front. Other women were part of the anti-war and anti-conscription movements, or worked with trade unionists to maintain living standards.

As the war developed, the conscription campaigns exacerbated strong divisions among the population. Two-thirds of the men eligible to fight did NOT go to war, and even some with physical or other disabilities suffered accusations of disloyalty. Individuals who spoke out against the war often found themselves in danger of physical abuse and ostracism. The existence of military training for children prior to the war meant that, while many families responded by encouraging their children to join in such activities, others opposed this training and their children were prosecuted. While most churches supported the

preparations for war, Quakers took a consistent view that the military training, and participation in the war, were unjustified.

Peter Stanley spoke of the internment of people of German origin during the war, and of the discrimination many suffered as a result. Afghan cameleers were denied the opportunity to serve, because of their non-white origins. Many Aborigines did manage to serve, even though they did not fit the strict criteria for enlistment. He expressed the view that the story of Anzac is much more complex than often portrayed. Even the Australian War Memorial is run largely by people who take an exclusive view of Australia's military history, and who present a conservative and even militarist view of it. The mainstream view, as expressed in popular writings and official statements, sees the Anzac experience as a good thing for the nation at a formative time, and fails to question that or enquire further.

Chloe Mason (NSW Quaker responsible for encouraging the development of the WW1 Exhibition) outlined the way the exhibition had emerged from many conversations in Britain and Australia, and was inspired partly by the British Quakers who, in addition to the Quaker Service Memorial Trust exhibition, had published *Witnessing for Peace on the Centenary of War* to build understanding about peace action then and now. Friends in NSW decided on a visual acknowledgement of the peace witness of Quakers during WW1 and since. The History Council of NSW gave some financial support, and there was far more material available than could be included on the ten panels, so a resource guide and folders of press reports were prepared to go around with the exhibition.

In the UK, compulsory military training before WW1 was opposed by Quakers, and any man taking such a stand or who was imprisoned for refusing the training was offered support. Spies reported those with a conscientious objection, and her own family forebears suffered imprisonment as a result. In Australia conscription did not operate, but the training of children gave fertile ground for recruiting volunteers for the war. There is now greater awareness of the complexity of the experiences of those involved in WW1 and those who resisted. It is important to separate the warrior from the war, and not to forget those who were ridiculed or prosecuted for daring to fight for peace.

Chloe spoke of the importance of recognizing that many of those who opposed the war were seeking to build peacemaking institutions for the longer term prevention of war. She identified the Quaker United Nations Office as an important peacemaking initiative that has continued for many years. "We can take heart from the faith and commitment of people who voiced their dissent to war, to compulsory military training and combat, who spoke truth to power and were imprisoned or worse. And today, who work at ways to discontinue wars and prevent wars".

A period of conversation and discussion followed, during which the following points emerged:

- The engagement of Aboriginal soldiers followed their recruitment as native police in the colonial period.
- The gathering of women at The Hague in 1915 to stop the war helped build support for creating the League of Nations and the International Court of Justice.
- Anzac Day has become more popular in recent years, partly because of a greater sense of 'patriotism' and Australia's involvement in several wars over. The Department of Veterans' Affairs has also re-invented itself to run large events such as visits to Gallipoli and the Western front. Even the War Graves Commission has become a vehicle for promoting military views of history.
- There are a few more representations in recent years of the experiences of others in war – e.g. a Turkish film about Anzac.
- The peace movement has had some success in working for disarmament and improved processes to cease armed conflict, and has achieved a greater role for women in decision-making about war. However there remains an unwillingness by the Australian Government to seek authority from Parliament for becoming involved in wars.

In summarising the session, Lorraine Thomson noted the difficulties many experience in facing the facts of history and the need for us to support each other both to deal with the feelings aroused by the trauma of war and to strengthen the institutions of peace. She thanked all for their presence and contributions.

Further Information

Friends may like to explore the material included on the following website, prepared as part of the NSW RM Exhibition: www.quakers.org.au and click on the WW1 tab.

The next in the series will be **Anzac Conversation: Artistic Voices** and will be held on 21 June 2015.

Canberra
April 2015

Below: Photo of the session, with Peter Stanley speaking and Chloe Mason seated to his left, Lorraine Thomson to his right.

