



News

Fighting the fatherland: the unacknowledged Anzacs

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By Fiona Carruthers

When World War I broke out in 1914, Germans comprised Australia's fourth largest migrant group behind English, Scots and Irish. But with the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, thousands of German Australians found themselves labelled 'enemy aliens' and their fellow citizens were encouraged to belittle them. Hoping to prove strong ties to their new homeland, many families encouraged their sons to join up.

The stories of some of the estimated 18,000 German Australian soldiers who fought with the 1st Australian Imperial Force (AIF) against their ancestral homeland have been collected in a book, *Anzacs and the First World War*, published by UNSW Press.



For Dr John F. Williams, honorary research associate in the Department of Germanic Studies, the urge to breathe life into their stories was part professional, part personal. The idea for the book came in 1993 when Dr Williams was researching German archives on the battle of 19-20 July 1916 near Fromelles, a battle that was disastrous for the AIF. In his memoir, a high-ranking German officer, Captain Adolf Meyer - later to become a staunch Nazi and close friend of Hitler - wrote of his surprise at how many Australian prisoners captured at Fromelles spoke German.

"One of these, a wounded man, left a lasting impression," Dr Williams writes. "Not only did this man share with him the surname Meyer, but he answered all questions in, as Meyer put it, 'splendid' (glänzend) German."

To his surprise, while writing the book Dr Williams discovered a German branch to his own family. "I found that my mother and her brother - Lieutenant Cyril McDonnell of the Australian 56th Battalion - were either ignorant of the fact or had decided not to tell me that their grandmother, who had emigrated to Australia from Manchester, was born in Hamburg of German parentage."

In unearthing the stories of German Australian Anzacs, Dr Williams first faced the problem of accurately identifying German Australian soldiers. Many had Anglicised or even changed their names on arrival in Australia. Some changed their names purely to get into the armed forces. Others had German heritage in their maternal line, which was not obvious from their surname.

"Despite the fact that Australia and the motherland were at war with Germany, it was the exception rather than the rule if you were tossed out of the AIF for being German," Dr Williams says. "I don't think the authorities liked them, but they just let them in." In the book, Dr Williams includes only soldiers whose German ancestry could be confirmed. He details the experiences of 100 German Australian Anzacs, including some who were among the first to land at Gallipoli.

"All the men considered in the book knew of their ancestry, but were still prepared to fight for their adopted homeland even if that meant killing kith and kin," Dr Williams writes.

Even the most famous Australian soldier of WWI, Sir John Monash, was the son of bourgeois German-Jewish parents who arrived in Australia from Prussian Silesia, now part of Poland, in the early 1860s, a few years before the birth of their son. As was common practice, they dropped the 'c' from their name, Monasch, but Sir John Monash retained his parents' native tongue and spoke excellent German.

He rose to become one of Australia's most highly decorated soldiers and was knighted after the war. Yet Dr Williams points out that his German ancestry is frequently glossed over. "While the contributions played by Irish Australians and by Australia's indigenous diggers have gradually come to be recognised, that of German Australians goes mostly unacknowledged," Dr Williams writes. "There was no place ... for anything less than an idealised vision of the Austral-Briton Anzac."

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