

Shirkers and Sinn Feiners: the Australian Irish and the First World War*

by Jeff Kildea

In the edition of *The Watchman* published two days before the first conscription referendum in October 1916 the Grand Master and the Grand Secretary of the Loyal Orange Institution of Queensland warned their members and “Protestants generally”:

[A] large proportion of the Roman Catholics within the Empire (and more especially within the Irish section of that Church), are holding back from participating in the War, and the extremists amongst them are doing all in their power to prevent the War being carried to a successful termination. ... The venomous anti-English hate which has been for generations instilled into the Irish Catholic by his priesthood is bearing its fruit.¹

Seven weeks after the referendum the Melbourne weekly newspaper *The Leader* opined:

In Australia ... we are ... entitled to doubt whether Irish sympathy can be counted on in the vigorous prosecution of the war. Nobody supposes in the case of Irishmen that it is personal fear which is the restraining motive. Their attitude is dictated by racial animosities and political differences which a wiser judgment would have put aside under the critical conditions in which the whole nation is involved.²

But it was not only the militant Protestant press and elements of the mainstream press that had their doubts as to the commitment of the Australia’s Irish Catholics to the war effort. In March 1917 the Australian prime minister William Morris Hughes wrote to British prime minister David Lloyd George that “the non-Irish population are going out of Australia to fight ... [the] Irish remain behind”.³ In August he elaborated:

As I have told you by cable: the Irish question is at the bottom of all our difficulties in Australia. They—the Irish—have captured the political machinery of the Labor organisations The Church is secretly against recruiting. Its influence killed conscription. One of their archbishops—Mannix—is a Sinn Feiner—And I am trying to make up my mind whether I should prosecute him for statements hindering recruiting or deport him.⁴

Even before the war, militant Protestants, had questioned Irish Catholic loyalty. In 1913 the NSW member of parliament Thomas Henley MLA told a Grand Protestant Demonstration in Sydney, “The disloyalists of Australia are mostly Irish-Roman Catholics”. He put it down to the Catholic schools, which he described as “seed-plots of

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¹ *The Watchman* 26 October 1916, p. 5. *The Watchman* was an outspoken Protestant weekly published in Sydney that circulated nationally.

² *The Leader* 16 December 1916, p. 29. *The Leader* was a weekly newspaper published by Melbourne’s daily broadsheet *The Age*.

³ Quoted in Fitzhardinge, *William Morris Hughes: The Little Digger, 1914-1952*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1979, p. 261.

⁴ Quoted in LF Fitzhardinge, *William Morris Hughes: The Little Digger*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1979, p. 276.

disloyalty” where they taught the children “to be disloyal to the Empire and to the Union Jack—the great Flag under whose protection they were growing up!”⁵

While Australia’s Irish Catholics were proud to be members of a great empire on whose strength they depended for security as denizens of a European outpost in what many of them perceived as a hostile Asian region, they did not have the same emotional attachment to the empire as their British Protestant compatriots. With their love of Ireland, which most had never seen, and their distinctive religion they formed a sub-culture in Australian society for whom Australian “nationalism was more likely than imperialism to evoke a patriotic response”.⁶ Archbishop Mannix’s mantra “Australia first and the empire second” captured their mood, but it was precisely that attitude which so enraged empire loyalists for whom the empire was one and indivisible; it made no sense to speak of Australian nationality as distinct from British nationality.

Although the Irish in Australia wished to be accepted as part of the broader Australian community, they were not prepared to do so on any terms and certainly not terms that denigrated their Irishness or their catholicity. In the words of Patrick O’Farrell, the Irish demanded “a definition of Australia and of being Australian which was broad and flexible enough to include them as they were”.⁷

In the years immediately preceding the First World War sectarian tensions in Australia escalated following the introduction into the Westminster parliament of the third home rule bill in April 1912 and the stepping up of Catholic demands for the restoration of state funding of denominational schools. Such funding had been a feature of colonial policy from the mid-1830s, but it had been abolished in the 1870s and 1880s upon the establishment of free, secular and compulsory education systems administered by each of the colonial governments.

While Protestant denominations accepted the education settlement, Catholics defied it, retaining and expanding their own network of schools funded by the Catholic people and made viable by the dedication of unpaid teaching brothers and nuns. At the same time, the Catholic church agitated for a return to the old system, much to the annoyance of Protestants and secularists who, objecting to the exclusivist tendency of Catholic education and social life, were not about to give succour to what Henley and others regarded as seed-plots of disloyalty.

With the election of Labor governments in the Australian states from 1910, the Catholic church upped the tempo of its campaign. Unlike the non-Labor parties which were antithetical to Catholic interests, Labor was seen as a non-sectarian party open to persuasion on the justice of Catholic demands. Although the Labor government in NSW was prepared to assist by legislating to allow Catholic students to take state bursaries in Catholic schools, Catholic hopes for the restoration of full funding would be dashed. After all, Labor needed the votes of the majority Protestant population to remain in power.

In the meantime, the ratcheting up of Catholic demands led to a Protestant backlash that exacerbated sectarian tensions. Coming at the same time as the prolonged debate over Irish home rule, the two issues became entwined. For instance, at a meeting held at the

⁵ *The Watchman* 6 February 1913, pp. 1-2. Henley’s “seed-plots of disloyalty” was an allusion to the Catholic criticism of state-run schools as “seed-plots of future immorality, infidelity, and lawlessness” contained in a Joint Pastoral Letter issued by the Catholic bishops in 1879.

⁶ Gilbert, *Protestants*, p. 16.

⁷ O’Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, page 9.

Sydney Town Hall on 14 March 1912 to protest against the British government's announcement of the home rule bill, a banner on the platform proclaimed, "Mark the men who support bursaries to Roman Catholic schools". In his speech opposing home rule, William Robson MLC criticised the Bursary Endowment Bill, alleging that the state government was giving in to the unreasonable demands of the Catholic church.⁸

Just as in the United Kingdom the outbreak of war in August 1914 was a circuit breaker for the intractable problem of Irish home rule, so too was it the case in Australia with regard to escalating sectarian tensions. Catholic Australians joined with Protestant Australians to support the war effort. On 6 August 1914 the Catholic weekly newspaper *The Freeman's Journal* opined:

Few facts are susceptible of clearer demonstration than that vital issues as to the future of this country are at stake. Should England be beaten in a duel with Germany, Australia, too, would have her turn. Colonies is one of the Kaiser's dreams. Where could that dream be better realised than in this country? Adieu, then to that Australian independence of which we are all proud."⁹

On 9 August 1914 Michael Kelly, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, told his congregation, "We must forget all personal considerations and stand together as a nation. In Australia our little differences must be set aside, and as fellow-citizens we must stand shoulder to shoulder." However, his idea of setting aside differences had a distinctly Catholic flavour: "If this war pleased God, the people of the various religions would have such esteem for one another that there would be no more disabilities put upon their schools, and the question would not be asked in connection with their public work whether a person was a Catholic or not."¹⁰

Thus, although the Catholic church joined with the Protestant churches in supporting Australia's participation in the war, its commitment unlike theirs was based not on theological considerations of godless Prussianism, which featured in Protestant justifications for the war,¹¹ but rather on a pragmatic, even utilitarian, view of the war, seeing the opportunities which it offered the Australian Catholic community. Historian Michael McKernan has written:

This difference was so subtle as to be missed by most observers at the time, who emphasised the united voice of the churches, but it was to become very obvious in domestic conflicts later. The Protestant belief that the war would produce spiritual gains committed its adherents to unequivocal support for the war, almost regardless of the sacrifices required. The pragmatic Catholic view required a much less intense commitment.¹²

⁸ *The Freeman's Journal* (Sydney) 21 March 1912, pp. 31, 36; *The Sydney Morning Herald* 15 March 1912, p. 9.

⁹ FJ 6 August 1914, page 26.

¹⁰ FJ 13 August 1914, page 21.

¹¹ See, for example, John A. Moses, "Australian Anglican Leaders and the Great War, 1914-1918: The 'Prussian Menace', Conscription and National Solidarity", *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 25 No. 3 (Oct 2001), pp 306-323; See also Robert D. Linder, *The Long Tragedy: Australian Evangelical Christians and the Great War, 1914-1918*, Openbook Publishers, Adelaide, 2000.

¹² McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, page 30.

For the next twenty months talk of Irish Catholic disloyalty subsided, at least in public,¹³ as Catholics and Protestants lined up together at the recruiting offices to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force and to help the British Empire defeat Germany. But the fragile truce in the sectarian conflict was broken following the Easter rising in April 1916.

When news of the outbreak of violence in Dublin during Easter week began to reach Australia, Irish-Australian Catholics at first deplored the rising as misguided and a threat to the promised implementation of home rule. However, following the execution of the leaders and the imposition of martial law, Irish Catholics became critical of British rule in Ireland, provoking a Protestant backlash. Sectarianism, which had lain dormant since the outbreak of war, flared up and intensified as criticism of Britain was regarded by many Protestants as disloyal to the British Crown, already under threat from without but now also from within.¹⁴ It was in this highly-charged atmosphere that the first conscription referendum was held.

When in August 1916 Prime Minister Hughes returned from a visit to London, having been persuaded by the Army Council of the necessity for increased Australian reinforcements, he was determined to introduce conscription for overseas service—despite the difficulty he knew he faced in gaining the support of the labour movement.¹⁵ Because he did not have the numbers in the Senate to pass the necessary legislation, Hughes decided to take the issue to the people in a plebiscite, hoping thereby “to coerce the hostile Senate if the vote turned out to be in favour of conscription”.¹⁶

Whether the anti-conscription senators would have backed down as the prime minister hoped will never be known, for the vote went against conscription. As we have seen, the reason Hughes gave to Lloyd George was the influence of the Catholic church. But this claim is simply without foundation. There was nothing in Church teaching that prohibited compulsory military service and during the referendum campaign the Vatican’s representative in Australia, Archbishop Bonaventura Cerretti, issued a statement making it clear that conscription was not an issue of faith or morals upon which the Church could direct its members.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Catholics held differing personal views on the government’s proposal, including individual bishops, of whom only two expressed their views publicly in 1916. Archbishop Patrick Clune of Perth was reported in newspapers across Australia as saying, “Whoever believes in the righteousness and justice of the war we are engaged in ought not to hesitate to vote for compulsory military service in Australia”,¹⁷ while

¹³ The absence of public attacks on the Irish Catholic community in the first 20 months of the war may also have had something to do with the government’s instructions to the censor on ways of ‘minimizing harmful agitation and resentment among our people of Irish descent’ (Fitzhardinge, pp. 60–61).

¹⁴ FJ, 4 May 1916, p. 25; *Catholic Press*, 11 May 1916, p. 21. Even Archbishop Mannix initially described the rising as deplorable and its leaders as misguided (*Advocate* 6 May 1916, p.25). See Kildea, *Tearing the fabric*, pp. 134–136; Peter Overlack, “Easter 1916” in Dublin and the Australian press: background and response’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 54/55, 1997, pp. 188–193; RP Davis, ‘Tasmania and the Irish revolution, 1916–22’, *Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Papers and Proceedings*, vol. 21 no. 2, 1974, pp. 69–88.

¹⁵ Fitzhardinge, pp. 171–172; Turner, *Industrial labour and politics*, pp. 98–104.

¹⁶ HV Evatt, ‘Australia on the home front 1914–1918’, *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 9, 1937, pp. 69–75 at 69–70.

¹⁷ This was in a cable to the Defence Minister, Senator GF Pearce of Western Australia, which was reported in the newspapers, including those in the eastern states (Bobbie Oliver, *War and peace in Western Australia: the social and political impact of the Great War 1914–1926*, University of Western Australia

Daniel Mannix, coadjutor Archbishop of Melbourne, spoke against conscription at two public functions. At the time Mannix was little known outside Victoria; certainly he was not the national figure he would become during the 1917 campaign. Among the Catholic laity there were also differences of opinion that found their way into the press, while Catholic newspapers adopted divergent viewpoints.¹⁸

Although the Catholic Church's official silence was in stark contrast to the almost monolithic support of conscription by leaders of the Protestant churches,¹⁹ Hughes' claim—that the Catholic Church was secretly against recruiting and that its influence killed conscription—cannot be sustained. In fact, shortly after the 1916 campaign, he acknowledged as much when he wrote to Conservative Party leader Andrew Bonar Law, "What an unholy alliance this is between men who have no religion [the revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World], who openly scoff at anything that savours of religion and the great Catholic Church. Of course it is not the Church AS SUCH but the Irish who see in England's peril Ireland's opportunity".²⁰ Two weeks before the vote Hughes repeated his allegation against the Australian Irish when he told the commander of the Australian Imperial Force, Lt Gen William Birdwood, "The overwhelming majority of the Irish votes in Australia which represents nearly 25 per cent of the total votes has been swung over by the Sinn Feiners and are going to vote No in order to strike a severe blow at Great Britain."²¹

In the end, the voters rejected conscription by a narrow margin²²; they would do so again in December 1917, but by an increased margin.²³ After the result of the first plebiscite was announced, it was not long before the finger was being pointed at the Irish Catholic community for being behind its defeat. Conscriptionists had no doubt as to the reasons why the vote was lost. After the second referendum the Governor General, Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson, in his report to the colonial secretary wrote, "The organised opposition was composed of the Labour Party and the Roman Catholics. This body, organised and capably led by Archbishop Mannix comprises the Irish element which would be hostile to any proposals of the Government".²⁴

Press, Nedlands, 1995, p. 117). The SMH in fact published the text of Archbishop Clune's cable twice (21 October 1916, p. 16; 27 October 1916, p. 6).

¹⁸ For a description of these divergent views see Kildea, *Tearing the fabric*, pp. 138–142.

¹⁹ It was not absolute, however. For example, a group of nine ministers from various Protestant denominations signed a 'Manifesto from Protestant ministers—'Conscription and Christianity'—opposing conscription. A copy is in the Riley Collection in the La Trobe Library, Melbourne. For a description of some of the activities of Protestant pacifists and anti-conscriptionists see Bobbie Oliver, *Peacemongers: conscientious objectors to military service in Australia 1911–1945*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1997, pp. 40–43.

²⁰ House of Lords Record Office, Bonar Law Papers BL/53/4/15, quoted in Jill Kitson, *Patriots three: Billy Hughes, Lloyd George and Keith Murdoch during World War I*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2005, p. 75.

²¹ Cable 14 October 1916, Hughes to Birdwood, quoted from *Smith's Weekly* 24 October 1936 in HV Evatt, *Australian labour leader: the story of WA Holman and the labour movement*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 2nd edn, 1942, p. 415.

²² The 'No' majority was only 72 476 out of a total of 2 247 590 formal votes. Three states recorded 'Yes' majorities (Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania) and three 'No' (New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia) (Scott, Ernest, *Australia during the war*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, vol. XI of *The official history of Australia in the war of 1914–18*, 1936, p. 352).

²³ The 'No' majority was 166 588 out of a total of 2 196 906 votes cast. This time Victoria joined the 'No' majority while Tasmania's 'Yes' majority was only 379 out of a total of 77 383 votes cast. (Scott, *Australia during the war*, p. 427).

²⁴ Quoted in DJ Murphy, "Religion, Race and Conscription in World War I", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Volume 30, 1974, pages 155–163, page 160.

It soon became the orthodox view, among contemporaries and many historians, that the Easter rising and the British government's response to it was a major factor influencing Irish-Australian voters to oppose conscription. Subsequent research has cast doubt on this view.²⁵ Although Irish Catholics strongly opposed conscription, the research suggests that they were influenced more by their working-class background than by events in Ireland or their religious adherence. While working-class Irish Catholics tended to vote against conscription, many who had attained high social status were fervent supporters. In 1917, however, the government's failure to exempt teaching brothers and seminarians became an issue that may have influenced some pro-conscription Catholics to vote "No".²⁶

Historian Alan Gilbert has written:

Most Irish-Catholics would have opposed conscription even if there had been no rising in Ireland during the War; some voted YES despite the Rising. Commitment to Labour politics, belief in the primacy of national over imperial interests, and concern about the possible conscription of Catholic teaching brothers were more important than Irish affairs in prompting many Catholics to vote NO.²⁷

Nevertheless, he concluded:

Irish affairs had a profound effect on the mood of Irish-Catholics in Australia, and secured for anti-conscription some of that fairly small minority of Irish-Catholic votes which would otherwise have endorsed the Government's proposals.²⁸

In Patrick O'Farrell's opinion, events in Ireland did not teach Australian Catholics anything they did not already know from their knowledge of Irish history and their own struggles over the past fifty years. Rather, it served to remind them "that the dominant forces in Australian society sought to exclude or demean Catholics of Irish origin."²⁹ Naomi Turner, in her two-volume history of Australian Catholicism, has written, "Realistically, [Australian Catholics] looked at the Australian situation with its direct effects on them, rather than that of the Irish."³⁰

Conscriptionists began to attribute disloyalty to those who had voted against the government's proposal. The pro-conscriptionist, anti-Catholic pamphleteer Critchley Parker had warned Protestant Australians before the 1916 referendum, "It has to be remembered that Roman Catholics are voting for Ireland, not Australia, on Saturday".³¹

In 1917 an Australian Protestant newspaper *The Methodist* proclaimed:

²⁵ Peter Bastian, 'The 1916 conscription referendum in New South Wales,' *Teaching History* vol. 5, 1971, pp. 25–36 and J Alcock, 'Reasons for the rejection of conscription—1916–1917,' *Agora* vol. 7 (1973), pp. 185–194 survey some of the literature on the issue while Turner, in *Industrial labour and politics*, pp. 113–116 canvasses a number of the hypotheses, concluding that it was the farmers, normally non-Labor, who were the decisive factor in the referendum's defeat. Also, Glenn Withers, 'The 1916–1917 conscription referenda: a cliometric re-appraisal,' *Historical Studies* 20 (1982), pp. 36–46 provides a statistical analysis of the voting figures in order to test some of the theories.

²⁶ See Jeff Kildea, 'Australian Catholics and conscription in the Great War', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 26, number 3, October 2002, pp. 298–313.

²⁷ Gilbert, *Conscription*, p. 54.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 71.

²⁹ Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1993, pp. 270–273.

³⁰ Naomi Turner, *Catholics in Australia: a social history*, Collins Dove, North Blackburn, 1992, vol. 1, p. 305.

³¹ Critchley Parker, *The Slippery Way*, Patriotic Pamphlet No. 16, Melbourne 1916, p. 14, quoted by Gilbert, *Conscription*, p. 54.

Romanism at heart is disloyal and desires the downfall and dismemberment of the Empire as a great Protestant power.... [T]he attitude of Romanists, as a whole, and of the great majority of their priests and bishops, is conclusive as to the utterly disloyal spirit of that communion.³²

The growing anti-Catholic animus was stirred up in January 1917, when Archbishop Mannix described the war as “an ordinary trade war”, reported in some papers as “a sordid trade war”.³³ This and other public utterances by Mannix, critical of the government’s war policy, elevated him to national status and earned him the role of bogey man in the minds of the government’s supporters. In May 1917 he succeeded Archbishop Thomas Carr as the Archbishop of Melbourne, raising his profile even more. He soon assumed the mantle of leader of the opposition, answering calls for a greater war effort in support of the Empire by pointing to Britain’s betrayal of Ireland and arguing that the duty of Australians was to Australia first. He soon became the accepted spokesman of most Irish Australians, while at the same time he became a lightning-rod attracting much of the rising anti-Catholic and anti-Irish bigotry.³⁴

Many of Australia’s Irish Catholics, particularly those who had climbed the social ladder, were embarrassed by the outspokenness of Mannix and others, including Sydney’s Father Maurice O’Reilly and Tighe Ryan, the Tipperary-born editor of *The Catholic Press*. Their embarrassment deepened when the militants began to exhort Australian Catholics to adopt “the Sinn Fein spirit”. At one level it could be said that this meant no more than “self reliance” expressed at the ballot box, however, to many Protestant Australians, particularly those already fearful of Roman domination, an evocation of “the Sinn Fein spirit” was a call to violence and revolution, a call to emulate those who were opposed to Britain and the Empire. At a rally in support of Irish independence held at Richmond racecourse on 6 November 1917 attended by over 100,000 people, Archbishop Mannix said:

You in Australia are Sinn Feiners, and more luck to you. To you Australia is first and the Empire second. There are a great many people who will tell you that that is sedition who will tell you that I am disloyal. I am very glad indeed that my type of loyalty is different from theirs. I am very glad that if I am loyal to the Empire, my loyalty, such as it is does not prevent me from being loyal to Australia, my adopted country, and Ireland, the land of my birth. And you Australians, being Sinn Feiners yourselves in the sense that I have explained can sympathise with those in Ireland who are determined to wrest from English hands the government of their own country, and set up in Ireland people who will govern Ireland with Irish ideals and with Irish interests.³⁵

³² *The Methodist* 8 December 1917, p. 7. See also, for example, an attack on the loyalty of the Australian Irish by Archdeacon Hindley in a sermon at St Paul’s Cathedral, Melbourne, as reported in *The Argus* 27 August 1917, p. 4.

³³ Reports of Mannix’s speech appearing the next day in the *Age*, and during the week in the *Advocate* and the *Tribune* used the word ‘ordinary’. However, in an early edition of the *Argus* the expression ‘a sordid trade war’ appeared. In later editions, however, the word ‘sordid’ is illegible as if the printing plate has been mutilated. In the 3 February 1917 edition of the *Australasian*, a weekly newspaper published by the *Argus*, the word ‘sordid’ has been omitted altogether (Cyril Bryan, *Archbishop Mannix: champion of democracy*, The Advocate Press, Melbourne, 1918, pp. 72; photographic copies of the articles are reproduced at pp. 232–235). Even the Governor-General in a despatch to London reported that Mannix had said ‘sordid trade war’ (Robson, *The First AIF*, p. 148).

³⁴ Fitzhardinge, p. 286.

³⁵ *Freeman’s Journal*, 8 November 1917, page 27.

One of the well-to-do Catholics embarrassed by Mannix's utterances was Dr Herbert Moran, who wrote in his memoirs:

We Catholics became like a substance held in suspension but never quite in solution. ... Under the commotion of the Great War, in the first year of danger from without, our whole population assumed for a while the appearance of a clear and elegant mixture. It was an Archbishop's mischief which threw us down again, as a cloudy precipitate.³⁶

But it was not only clerics who created that cloudy precipitate. On 17 June 1918 police in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane arrested seven Irish Australian supporters of Sinn Féin who were suspected of conspiring with Irish revolutionaries in America to assist the German war effort. Their arrests at first prompted an outcry from Irish Catholics who saw it as another example of Billy Hughes's anti-Irish intimidation. Protest meetings were held. However, the authorities did have reason to be concerned as to the activities of some of the internees and when evidence presented to a judicial inquiry disclosed the existence within the Irish National Association of an organised group which had been in contact with members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and which had been sending money to America to be forwarded to Germany to purchase arms for the Irish independence movement, there were no follow up protests.³⁷

If Billy Hughes had hoped to snare Mannix and his Sinn Féin mates in this fringe group's activities he was to be disappointed for Justice Harvey in his report carefully avoided widening the inquiry beyond the detainees.

Hughes had become obsessed with the Irish threat as evidenced by his cables to Lloyd George and from his reaction to an incident in which suffered the indignity of being struck by an egg thrown by an Irish-Australian, Bart Brosnan. The incident occurred on 29 November 1917 at Warwick in Queensland, whose government was led by Irish-Australian Thomas Joseph Ryan. To make matters worse, an Irish-Australian policeman, Sergeant Kenny, refused to arrest the egg-thrower, saying he took his orders from the Queensland government. As a result Hughes drew up a regulation to establish a Commonwealth police force. In a telegram to the Governor-General, he explained: "This will apply to Queensland where present position is one of latent rebellion. Police is honeycombed with Sinn Feiners and I.W.W. ... [T]here are towns in North Queensland where the Law ... is openly ignored and I.W.W. and Sinn Féin run the show."³⁸

It is no wonder then that militant Protestants felt justified in assigning the label "Sinn Feiners" to Australia's Irish Catholics, whether or not objectively it was fair to do so, but what about "shirkers". On 12 March 1917 Billy Hughes complained to Lloyd George through his confidant in London Keith Murdoch:

Australian recruiting is practically at a standstill. Irish National Executive here has carried resolution to effect that until Home Rule granted no Irish Catholics shall join forces. This is being acted on and in such a way that the non-Irish population

³⁶Herbert Moran, *Viewless Winds: Being the Recollections and Digressions of Australian Surgeon*, Peter Davies, London, 1939, p. 22.

³⁷Kildea, TTF, pp. 189-191.

³⁸Fitzhardinge, pp. 291-295. It was quite a mêlée and, as might be expected, accounts are confused. Even Fitzhardinge seems to be unclear as to whether Brosnan was arrested or not and whether it was Bart or his brother Pat who threw the egg that hit Hughes.

are going out of Australia to fight or as railway workers, carpenters etc. The Irish remain behind and in any election their voting strength is greatly increased.³⁹

This was nonsense. Recruiting was not at a stand-still in March 1917, averaging just over 6000 per month in the last three months of 1916 and over 4800 per month in the first three months of 1917, with the decline occurring across the whole population and not just among Irish Catholics. Throughout the war Catholics served in the AIF roughly in proportion to their numbers in the population, a fact which was known at the time and which has been confirmed since.⁴⁰

In June 1917, the Defence Department released figures which showed that 18.57 per cent of those embarking for overseas service were Roman Catholics. According to the 1911 Census 20.14 per cent of the male population had given Roman Catholic as their religion.⁴¹ However, if one looks at the adult category of “20 or upwards” the figure is 19.62 per cent.⁴² The census tables do not dissect that cohort any further, so it is not possible to exclude those over 44 years, the maximum age for enlistment for overseas service. But the tables for place of birth do enable a picture to be formed of the age distribution of the Australian Irish and they indicate that the Irish-born were an aging population, with 74 per cent being 45 years and over compared to 19 per cent for the general population.⁴³ So, that the proportion of Catholic males available for war service may have been less than 19.62 per cent. But sticking with that figure there is a difference of only 1.05 per cent between it and department’s figure.

When reporting these embarkation statistics, *The Argus*, a Melbourne daily newspaper traditionally hostile to Irish Catholics, after quoting the figure of 18.57 per cent stated that Catholics were 22 per cent of the population. That figure, which includes females and children, was simply wrong – it should have been 21.22 per cent.⁴⁴ But no doubt the error and the newspaper’s methodology helped to reinforce its readers’ belief that the Catholics were shirking.

Half a century later, Lloyd Robson’s 1973 survey of 2291 enlistment papers provided further refutation of the allegation of shirking, with his figures indicating that 19.73 per cent of the AIF were Catholics, in line with the census figure for adult males referred to above.⁴⁵ My own research with regard to the Irish-born supports a similar conclusion.

To date I have identified 5743 Irish-born who enlisted in the AIF and who are included in the NAA series B2455 which comprises 371 395 items where a place of birth is identifiable from the Item Title.⁴⁶ The Irish-born therefore represents 1.55 per cent of

³⁹ Quoted in LF Fitzhardinge, *William Morris Hughes: A Political Biography Vol II The Little Digger 1914–1953*, Angus & Robertson, London, 1979, p. 261.

⁴⁰ LL Robson ‘The origin and character of the First AIF, 1914–18: some statistical evidence’, *Historical Studies*, vol. 15, no. 61, 1973, pp. 740–41. See also Jeff Kildea, *Anzacs and Ireland*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2007, ch. 3.

⁴¹ 1911 Census - Volume II - Part VI Religions, pp. 753, 757.

⁴² 1911 Census - Volume II - Part VI Religions, pp. 772.

⁴³ 1911 Census - Volume II - Part II Birthplaces, pp. 130-131.

⁴⁴ *The Catholic Press* 28 June 1917, p. 26-27; *The Argus* 23 June 1917, p. 18; 1911 Census - Volume I Statisticians Report, p.201.

⁴⁵ LL Robson ‘The Origin and Character of the First AIF, 1914–18: Some Statistical Evidence’, *Historical Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 61, 1973, pp. 737–48 at p. 748.

⁴⁶ The series contains 376 059 items, of which 4664 show the place of birth as “N/A”.

the total.⁴⁷ In 1911, the year of the last census before the First World War, Australia's population was just under 4.5 million of whom almost 140,000 were born in Ireland, ie. Irish-born Australians were 3.13 per cent of the general population.⁴⁸ At first sight, this suggests that the Irish-born, at 1.55% of AIF enlistments, did not support the war in proportion to their numbers in the population. However, as indicated above the Irish-born were an ageing population.

This trend was due largely to the fact that in the second half of the 19th century Irish immigration to Australia slowed both in absolute terms and as a relative contributor to population growth, so that the Irish-born proportion of the population decreased from 15.4 per cent in 1861 to only 3.13 per cent in 1911. Of those declaring a length of residence at the 1911 census almost 85% of the Irish-born said they had been in Australia for 20 years or more.⁴⁹

If one counts only males of military age (that is, between 18 and 44 years), the proportion of eligible Irish-born males to all eligible Australian males is not 3.13 per cent but 1.8 per cent.

But, furthermore, if you have regard to the fact that in 1911 it was those aged 15-41 who would be of enlistment age in 1914, the proportion for that cohort is 1.41%. Consequently, the enlistment rate of 1.55% for the Irish-born exceeded the proportion of eligible Irish-born in the population.

Moreover, when you compare the pattern of enlistment throughout the war, there is no significant difference between the Irish-born and the general population. Not even the Easter rising caused an uncoupling of the two.

The charge that Irish-Australian Catholics were shirkers and Sinn Feiners is therefore not sustainable. While their attitudes towards Britain may have hardened over its treatment of Ireland in the wake of the rising, throughout the war the Australian Irish tended to be home rulers and supporters of John Redmond rather than advocates of separation and an Irish republic. In any case, whatever their opinions regarding the Irish question, the evidence suggests they supported Australia's war effort in proportion to their numbers in the population and in line with the general population.

Nevertheless, their perspective on the war differed from that of the majority and they were not prepared to conform to the mode of patriotism which British Protestantism demanded of them. As Alan Gilbert has observed:

[Before the war] [i]ncipient [Australian] nationalism grew up alongside the imperial ideal, and tension between the two was only sporadically evident. But the events of World War I, and in particular the issue of conscription, seemed to many Australians to require a definite decision as to the whereabouts of their ultimate loyalty. Both the imperial and the national ideal received the legitimating endorsement of religion. There were important exceptions in every church, but in general Protestants, armed with "the authority of tradition", championed the idea of Australia as an integral part of the Empire; and Catholics, freed from that

⁴⁷ More records are to be found in series MT1486/1 holding 73 787 items. But only a small proportion is on line. Work is continuing on identifying the Irish-born in that series. For present purposes the discussion will be confined to series B2455.

⁴⁸ *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia for 1911*, Vol. 2, p. 135 shows a total population of 4,455,005 of whom 139,434 were born in Ireland.

⁴⁹ 1911 Census - Volume II - Part II Birthplaces, p. 188.

authority by their Irish origins and their working-class affiliations, looked to the future by placing "Australia first and the Empire second".⁵⁰

Conclusion

The dialectical process involved in resolving that difference contributed to the emergence from the war of a distinctly Australian national identity that in time was able to accommodate both sides: Catholics and Protestants, Irish and British. It just so happens that this was occurring at the same time as the Irish in Ireland were asserting their nationalism and the issue was much the same: was Australia a province of Greater Britain, or was it a nation unto itself. For some, including Billy Hughes, the Australian nation was born on the shores of Gallipoli,⁵¹ a view which former prime minister Paul Keating has described as "utter and complete nonsense".⁵² In Keating's view "There was nothing missing in our young nation or our idea of it that required the martial baptism of a European cataclysm to legitimise us".⁵³

Nevertheless, it was the European cataclysm that brought the issue to a head when the Irish Catholics pushed back against the British Protestant insistence that the Irish affirm their allegiance to "the Empire as a great Protestant power". In the words of Patrick O'Farrell, "The distinctive Australian identity was not born in the bush, nor at Anzac Cove: these were merely situations for its expression. No; it was born in Irishness protesting against the extremes of Englishness."⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Gilbert, "Protestants etc", pp. 24-25.

⁵¹ *The Mirror* (Sydney) 27 April 1919, p. 1.

⁵² *The Age* (Melbourne) 31 October 2008.

⁵³ *The Australian* 12 November 2013.

⁵⁴ O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, page 12.