

Lads or Lackeys?: Australian Soldiers in the Service of the British Empire 1899-1920*

Introduction

In “Storm Troopers of empire?”, an article published in 2011 in *History Australia*, John Docker contends:

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Australian soldiers actively cooperated with a worldwide British imperial order that vigorously and violently denied the rights of small nations to be independent”.¹

In supporting this contention the article refers to the activities of Australian soldiers in three separate situations: mounted troops in South Africa during the Boer War; the Light Horse in Palestine and Egypt during the First World War; and Australian soldiers in Dublin during Easter week 1916. On the basis of those activities Docker concluded that despite white Australia’s self-image as independent, irreverent and fiercely egalitarian, the actions of its soldiers in the service of the British empire were the result of “an impulse to be craven towards power, to serve regnant imperial interests”.² By way of contrast, he evokes what he describes as “the ethical challenge to such service to empire presented by the Irish nationalist rebel Countess Markievicz and Mahatma Gandhi”.³

This paper critically examines Docker’s article and, with particular reference to the role of the Anzacs in the Easter Rising, argues that, whatever might be the validity of the general contention quoted above, the evidence presented in the article suggests a contrary conclusion.

Docker’s Argument

In dealing with South Africa, Docker contrasts the popular and sympathetic historical and filmic representations of Harry “Breaker” Morant and his colleague Peter Handcock with the fact that their unit, the Bushveldt Carbineers, often engaged in “looting, drinking, cattle rustling and killing the defenceless”, including Boer prisoners. In Docker’s opinion, Bruce Beresford’s 1980 film *Breaker Morant* “obscures the extent to which Australian soldiers were enforcing the British empire’s colonial rule in southern Africa”,⁴ pointing out that “the key characters reveal no interest in the Boers’ desire to maintain an independent state” and that the African natives “are a marginalised presence in [the] film”.⁵

Shifting his focus to the Middle East, Docker states that the “marginalising of indigenous perspectives witnessed in Beresford’s *Breaker Morant* is also evident in accounts of Australian participation in imperial campaigns in the Middle East during and immediately after World War I”. He observes that just as the “heroic narrative of Australian participation in the South African War is threatened by the murder of unarmed prisoners, the heroic narrative of the Australian Light Horse is shadowed by massacre, extreme violence and racism”.⁶ He details a number of such events, including the massacre and burning of Surafend, a Bedouin village in Palestine, in 1918 and the Australian Light Horse’s role in suppressing a revolt for national independence in Egypt in 1919.

¹ John Docker, “Storm Troopers of empire? Historical representation in *Breaker Morant*, Naguib Mahfouz’s *Palace Walk* and other war histories”, *History Australia*, Vol 8 No 1, April 2011, pp. 67-88, p. 67.

² Docker, “Storm Troopers of Empire?”, p. 87.

³ Docker, “Storm Troopers of Empire?”, p. 67.

⁴ Docker, “Storm Troopers of Empire?”, p. 73.

⁵ Docker, “Storm Troopers of Empire?”, pp. 71, 72.

⁶ Docker, “Storm Troopers of Empire?”, p. 74.

* A paper given by Dr Jeff Kildea, adjunct professor in Irish Studies at the University of New South Wales, at the conference “Easter Rising and Cultures of Anti-Imperialism” held at the University of New South Wales, 16 June 2016

Then he compares benign Australian accounts of the Light Horse with Naguib Mahfouz's 1956 novel, *Palace Walk*, which deals with a middle class Egyptian family during "the gathering movement for Egyptian independence and its crushing by British imperial forces ... with its narrative glances at the Australian military presence in Egypt".⁷ Docker describes how one of the characters in the novel curses the Australians who had "spread through the city like locusts, destroying the land [and] openly plundered people of their possessions and took pleasure in abusing and insulting them without restraint". Docker says: "Throughout *Palace Walk* the Australians are referred to as an occupying force that arrogantly interfered in Egyptian lives, disturbing public order, a barbarous horde".⁸

Docker calls in aid Suzanne Brugger's *Australians and Egypt 1914–1919*, a detailed historical work published in 1980 which examines relations between Australian troops and Egyptian civilians during the period when Egyptian nationalism was emerging to challenge British hegemony in Egypt.⁹ Docker says that Brugger's work shows that Australian soldiers "were routinely offensive towards [the Egyptian people], their actions ranging 'in seriousness from the vulgar accosting of women, to arson, looting, and rape'. Nothing was beyond the Australians in terms of physical violence or outraging Egyptian sensibilities".¹⁰

Finally, Docker refers to my work on Australian soldiers in Dublin during the Easter Rising, linking their actions with those of Australian mounted troops in South Africa and the Middle East and noting my conclusion that "they would have seen it as their duty 'as loyal soldiers of the Empire to answer the calls to arms' against [the king's] enemies".¹¹

After completing his exposition of the part played by Australian soldiers in these three theatres of conflict, Docker then compares the "strangely automatic nature of Australian soldiers' subservience to empire" to the challenges to British imperialism by Constance Markievicz and Mahatma Gandhi, whose critique of empire extended beyond the oppression of their own peoples. After detailing their record of opposition he concludes:

Their critique remains as a permanent ethical challenge to the cravenness of soul evident in Australians' enthusiastic participation in British ... imperial wars, a profound challenge to Australian historical consciousness, past, present, and future.¹²

Contesting Docker's Argument

By highlighting Australian war-time atrocities often overlooked in popular literature and film as well as works of history, Docker makes a strong case to challenge the "heroic narrative" of Australian participation in South Africa and the Middle East. And for the purposes of this paper I do not take issue with the case he makes in this regard. But, in making that case, Docker undermines the very foundations of his thesis that such participation demonstrated an impulse among the white Australian settler community "to be craven towards power, to serve regnant imperial interests". As Docker acknowledges, so outrageous was the conduct of some of these soldiers that they in fact compromised imperial interests. Three quotes from the article will suffice:

⁷ Docker, "Storm Troopers of Empire?", p. 77. The first book of Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* published in 1956-57, *Palace Walk* was translated into English in 1990.

⁸ Docker, "Storm Troopers of Empire?", pp. 77-78.

⁹ Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1980.

¹⁰ Docker, "Storm Troopers of Empire?", p. 80.

¹¹ Docker, "Storm Troopers of Empire?", p. 84.

¹² Docker, "Storm Troopers of Empire?", p. 87. In the quoted passage Docker refers also to Australian participation in American imperial wars, adding in the next paragraph brief reference to Australia's more recent service to "the American *imperium*". This seems to be an unnecessary digression unless the article is intended as a contemporary political critique rather than an historical analysis of late 19th- and early 20th-century collaboration in advancing British imperial interests.

Brugger argues that the Australians placed their convictions of racial superiority, which they felt must be defended in every circumstance by violence, over any wider considerations, even to the detriment of the empire they saw themselves as so loyally serving.¹³

Incidents involving the Light Horse also became internationally infamous, again to the detriment of British imperial interests and prestige.¹⁴

Brugger concludes that while the Australians were militarily successful in Egypt in 1919, politically their actions were disastrous, stirring such dislike that Britain's position in Egypt ultimately became untenable.¹⁵

Instead of being craven instruments of British imperial policy, as Docker would have us believe, the Australians he describes were self-interested loose cannons, whose actions threatened to undermine rather than serve British interests. It is no wonder that the British commander in the Middle East General Edmund Allenby publicly reproved the Australian and New Zealand light horsemen who participated in the massacre at Surafend.

If the activities of murderous Bushveldt carbineers and of light horsemen behaving badly served to undermine rather than advance the interests of Empire, what do we say of the deeds of the diggers in Dublin. Compared with the space which the article devotes to the mounted troops, they enjoy only passing reference, but ironically it is their actions which provide Docker's thesis with its most cogent support. For theirs is not a story of scandalous atrocities inflicted on the local population contrary to military discipline. Rather, it is one of tradesman-like service in support of the Crown's suppression of the Easter rising. Yet, as we will see, even in their case, an examination of their actions and motivations fails to square the circle.

Diggers in Dublin

Unlike in South Africa and the Middle East, no Australian unit was in Ireland during Easter week or at any time thereafter. Those involved in suppressing the rising were individuals, mostly veterans of Gallipoli who had been evacuated sick or wounded to England and had decided to spend their Easter leave in Ireland.¹⁶ In addition, individual Australians serving in Irish and British regiments were in Dublin when the rising broke out or belonged to units, such as the King Edward's Horse (also known as the King's Overseas Dominions Regiment), sent as reinforcements to Dublin from the Curragh late in the afternoon of Easter Monday.¹⁷

While, in the overall context of the rising, the role played by Australians is not significant, they and their dominion comrades did make an important contribution to the Crown cause during the first 48 hours before reinforcements arrived from England, harassing the rebels and confining them to their initial positions. This was especially so at Trinity College, where six

¹³ Docker, "Storm Troopers of Empire?", p. 81.

¹⁴ Docker, "Storm Troopers of Empire?", p. 82.

¹⁵ Docker, "Storm Troopers of Empire?", p. 82.

¹⁶ Two New Zealanders, Sergeant Frederick Leslie Nevin of Christchurch and Corporal John Godwin Garland of Auckland, were on leave from the hospital ship *Marama* on which they were working as medical orderlies.

¹⁷ King Edward's Horse was a cavalry regiment originally formed in 1901 and made up of soldiers from throughout the Empire. When war broke out the regiment recruited men from the dominions and colonies who were stranded in England and unable to return to their home countries to enlist. Australians in England were not permitted to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force (*Age* 1 July 1916, p. 3). At the time of the rising two reserve squadrons of King Edward's Horse were stationed at the Curragh and Longford. Accounts of individual Australian members of the KEH involved in the rising appeared in the press, for example: Trooper FM Battye of Sydney (*Age* 23 September 1916, p. 20); Jack Crowley of West Wyalong (*Mirror* 30 September 1916, p. 7; *Wagga Wagga Express* 12 October 1916, p. 2). In addition, Australians in the Royal Army Medical Corps and Voluntary Aid Detachments assisted the wounded. For example: Dr Cecil G McAdam of Melbourne (*Argus* 15 June 1916, p. 6); Edward Oswald Marks, medical student, of Brisbane (<http://blogs.slq.qld.gov.au/ww1/2016/03/30/ted-marks-and-the-dublin-easter-rising-1916/>). Marks helped with the wounded at Mount Street Bridge.

Anzacs had taken refuge, along the Liffey quays near Kingsbridge (now Heuston) station and at Portobello (now Cathal Brugha) Barracks near Rathmines.

Trinity College

At Trinity the Anzacs were deployed not only to defend the college should it be attacked but also to keep the rebels pinned down by bringing fire to bear from positions on the roof and upper floors of the main building, which had good fields of fire along Grafton Street towards St Stephens Green, Dame Street towards the City Hall and Sackville (now O'Connell) Street towards the GPO.¹⁸

A number of contemporary Irish accounts mention the role of Anzac troops in Trinity College. Wells' and Marlowe's *History of the Irish Rebellion of 1916*, published a few months after the rising, states:

Stray soldiers were summoned from the adjacent streets and from the Central Soldiers' Club hard by the College to reinforce the garrison; these included some "Anzac" sharpshooters.¹⁹

In an article in *Blackwood's Magazine* John Joly, Professor of Geology at Trinity College, wrote of his experiences of the rising. Using the pseudonym 'One of the Garrison', Joly claimed, "There can be no doubt that the accurate fire maintained from the college was an important factor in the salvation of the City".²⁰ This was an opinion shared by Robert Tweedy, a member of Dublin University Officer Training Corps (OTC), who wrote to his mother:

A machine gun and a party of sharp-shooters on the roof did good execution down Sackville Street, and TCD may be said to have saved the banks and business premises of the most important thoroughfares of Dublin. Only one shop within range of our rifles was looted ... It is said that TCD saved the city, and I am proud to have been one of the garrison.²¹

Another OTC cadet Gerard Fitzgibbon wrote to a friend, "[T]he Anzacs were given all the eligible situations, which it must be allowed they deserved. They were an extraordinary gang. I have never seen their like".²²

As veterans of Gallipoli, it is little wonder that their service was highly valued as the garrison at Trinity in the initial period mostly comprised young officer cadets with no experience of battle.

The OTC were not alone in acknowledging the military skill of the Anzacs. In his memoirs of the rising Commandant WJ Brennan-Whitmore, one of the rebel leaders, related how the rebels had rigged up a flying-fox across Sackville Street in order to convey a tin can carrying messages from the GPO to the rebel position in North Earl Street. After being captured, Whitmore told one of his guards (described as an Australian but in all likelihood a New

¹⁸ As it turned out, the rebels made no attempt to capture Trinity College. Although it had been included in the original plans as one of the buildings to be occupied, it was ultimately decided not to do so because of insufficient numbers available to carry out the task (Witness Statement of Thomas Slater, BMH WS 263, pp. 14-15).

¹⁹ Maunsell & Co., Dublin, 1916, p. 154.

²⁰ The article was republished as 'Inside Trinity College' in Roger McHugh (ed.), *Dublin 1916*, Arlington Books, London, 1966, pp. 158-74.

²¹ Letter 7 May 1916 from Robert Tweedy to his Mother in *Letters of 1916* website: <http://letters1916.maynoothuniversity.ie/explore/letters/255>. The rebels made no attempt to take Trinity College. Although included in the original plans as one of the buildings to be occupied, it was ultimately decided not to do so because of insufficient numbers available to carry out the task (Witness Statement of Thomas Slater BMH WS 263, pp. 14-15).

²² Letter 10 May 1916 Gerard Fitzgibbon to William Hugh Blake (TCD Manuscripts: MS 11107/1).

Zealander, Sergeant Frederick Nevin of Christchurch): “By the way. You British had some pretty good snipers We had a cable across Sackville Street and one of your fellows hit the canister from Trinity”.²³

But it was not only tin cans that fell victim to the Anzac sharpshooters. Professor Joly, in his article, related how early on Tuesday morning the Anzacs on the roof of the college shot a rebel despatch-rider.²⁴ The victim of the Anzac marksmanship was Gerald Keogh, a 22-year old shop assistant from Ranelagh. It is not certain who fired the shot that killed Gerald. Corporal Finlay McLeod, a New Zealand-born soldier who had spent most of his life in Sydney but had enlisted in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, wrote in a letter to his parents, published in the press:

[A]t 3.30 a.m. three Sinn Feins, an advance party, came riding towards us, and we dropped them. Only another Australian and New Zealander were with me at the time. We were cheered by the OTC, and the officers were pleased with us.²⁵

New Zealand Corporal John Godwin Garland of Auckland claimed in a letter to his father, also published in the press, that he was one of four snipers who brought Keogh down.²⁶

In his letter Garland described other incidents in which the Anzacs were involved. He said that on the Wednesday “we got two more in Sackville Street [who] were armed with double-barrelled fowling pieces”. He also described how on the Friday “we six Anzacs” shot and killed two rebel snipers who had been firing on them from the spire of nearby St Andrews church.²⁷ He also wrote:

On Saturday morning we killed a woman who was sniping from an hotel window in Dame Street. When the RAMC brought her in we saw she was only a girl about 20, stylishly dressed and not at all bad-looking. She was armed with an automatic revolver and a Winchester repeater.

Garland then described how that afternoon “the colonials were given the honour of capturing Westland Row station”, in which action, he said, they killed five rebels. Garland went on to claim, “Altogether we Anzacs were responsible for 27 rebels (twenty-four men and three women)”. Corporal McLeod claimed an even higher body count. In a letter to his mother, published in the press, he wrote, “During [Tuesday] we killed six in one building, 26 in another, and snipers here and there”.²⁸

The veracity of these claims is highly dubious. In 2015 the Glasnevin Trust published the 1916 Necrology, a list of the names of 485 men, women and children killed during or as a direct result of the rising.²⁹ That list includes the names of 66 rebels, not counting the 16 leaders who were executed. If Garland’s claim is true, the Anzacs would have been responsible for more than 40 per cent of rebel fatalities, while McLeod’s claim puts the

²³ W. J. Brennan-Whitmore, *Dublin burning: the Easter Rising from behind the barricades*, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1996, pp.116-18. A version of the conversation is set out in Max Caulfield, *The Easter Rebellion*, 2nd edn Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1995, p. 250. See also Brennan-Whitmore’s account in *An tÓglach* 6 February 1926, p. 5 and P. de Rosa, *Rebels: the Irish Rising of 1916*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1992, p. 330. Seamus Daly, who was with Brennan-Whitmore at the Custom House, refers to a New Zealand sergeant in his witness statement to the Bureau of Military History (WS 360, pp. 50-52).

²⁴ “Inside Trinity College”, p. 161.

²⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald* 7 July 1916, p. 12; *Glen Innes Examiner* 10 July 1916, p. 3; *Farmer and Settler* 18 July 1916, p. 2; *Dominion* 12 July 1916, p. 4..

²⁶ *Auckland Star* 28 June 1916, p. 8. Garland also claimed that two of the despatch riders were killed, which is not corroborated by other sources.

²⁷ Sergeant Don also mentioned the duel with the rebels in the St Andrew’s spire (*Bendigo Advertiser* 9 August 1916, p. 3).

²⁸ *Dominion* 12 July 1916, p. 4.

²⁹ <http://www.glasnevintrust.ie/visit-glasnevin/news/1916-list/>.

proportion at over 50 per cent, both unlikely propositions given the extent of the fighting throughout the city.

Furthermore, the 1916 Necrology does not include the names of any women rebels among the dead. It is possible that the authorities covered up the deaths of women rebels in order to avoid having to admit that the Crown forces had killed women. But that is also unlikely. In the one hundred years since the rising much research has been carried out on Easter week, including the role of women. If the rebel dead included women surely their names would have been discovered by now.³⁰

The most likely explanation is that Garland and McLeod exaggerated the death toll, or were mistaken due to “the fog of war”. If neither is the case then a troubling consequence is that the Anzacs might have been responsible for the deaths of some of the 260 civilian men and women whose names are listed in the 1916 Necrology – an echo, perhaps, of Docker’s lupine light-horsemen.

Royal Barracks

Dominion troops who had reported to the Royal (now Collins) Barracks joined with soldiers from the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in the fighting along the Liffey quays. There the rebels had seized buildings on either side of the river impeding the movement into the city of troops from Royal and Richmond barracks and reinforcements from the Curragh. Ballarat-born Private John Joseph Chapman, with the brevity that characterises his diary, wrote:

Given rifle and ammunition and had to fight enemy in the streets. Nearly got hit several times. Only a few casualties on our side.³¹

Corporal Fred Harvey from Burra in South Australia was more effusive in his descriptions of the fighting. In a letter to his parents, published in the press, he said that he, along with a Canadian, two South Africans and two Australians, were ordered to guard and patrol Ellis Street and the lanes running into it:

Well here the fun began, bullets were going in all directions All went well during the day, but as soon as the darkness approached things began to very get [sic] exciting but though we all had narrow escapes, I was the only one to get hit, but not with a bullet. As I was walking up one of the lanes somebody kindly knocked my hat off with a bottle, but to my disgust did not see which window it came from so, was unable to retaliate.

The next morning Harvey took part in a raid on the Mendicity Institution, held by the rebels under the command of Seán Heuston. He wrote:

A lieutenant took several men across the street and the bombing began. The lieutenant was a great hand at the game and I saw the best bit of bombing I have ever seen.

The raid was successful, resulting in the rebels surrendering this important position.

Harvey’s lengthy letter is a tale of derring-do, a ripping yarn of a jolly good time had by all. It concludes with the observation:

Though the affair was indeed very serious, it had, for one who had no relatives in Ireland, its funny parts.

He then gave a not particularly funny example.³²

³⁰ One woman who is sometimes claimed as a rebel woman fatality is Nurse Margaret Keogh, who was shot on the first day of the rising in or near the South Dublin Union while treating a wounded volunteer. The 1916 Necrology lists her as a civilian fatality under the name Margaret Kehoe. For a discussion of her status see <http://comeheretome.com/2016/01/12/a-hero-nonetheless-nurse-margaret-keogh-and-the-easter-rising/>.

³¹Diary of Lieutenant John Joseph Chapman of the 9th Battalion, AWM 1DRL/0197.

Portobello Barracks

Portobello Barracks was home to the 3rd Reserve Battalion Royal Irish Rifles. As elsewhere it welcomed an influx of sundry British and dominion soldiers. Among them was an Australian who wrote of his experiences in a letter to Richard Garland, chairman of the Dunlop Rubber Co., which letter was published in the *Melbourne Age*.³³ In it the soldier described a series of events in which members of the Crown forces committed atrocities against Irish civilians.

Although the letter as published did not contain an admission that the Australian himself had any personal part in the killing or wounding of civilians, its tone suggests, at the very least, indifference rather than outrage at the conduct he witnessed. As a result the letter provoked a strong reaction in Australia, particularly from Irish Catholics already incensed by the British Government's methods of suppressing the rising and the execution of its leaders.

Although the *Age* did not identify the officer, who remained nameless during the controversy that followed in the Australian press, he was in fact Richard Garland's eldest son Charles, who in April 1915 had enlisted as a trooper in the 2nd Regiment of King Edward's Horse and had served on the Western Front before being posted to the Curragh for officer training.³⁴ Richard Garland was a native of Dublin and when Charles was given leave over the Easter weekend, he visited the city and stayed with an uncle. After observing the outbreak of the rising and finding it impossible to return to the Curragh, Charles reported at Portobello Barracks on Tuesday morning.

Queensland's John Oxley Library holds a typescript of Charles' letter among the papers of Canon David John Garland, Richard's brother and the reputed founder of Anzac Day.³⁵ So far the handwritten original of the letter has not been located. The typescript version, initially dated Thursday 27 April but with postscripts that extend to Thursday 4 May, is longer than the version printed in the *Age* and there are also differences of wording, some of which are significant.

In the letter, Charles described how he participated in a patrol on the Tuesday night to raid a nearby shop suspected of harbouring rebels.³⁶ The officer leading the patrol was Captain John Bowen-Colthurst. On the way to the shop the patrol encountered three men in Rathmines Road. According to the letter as published in the *Age*:

The captain wanted to know their business, and one answered back, so the captain just knocked him insensible with the butt of his rifle. The other two ran, and one shouted something about "down with the military", and the captain just shot him dead.

The published letter then describes the raid and the taking of prisoners who were marched back to the barracks, adding, "Two were let go. The three others turned out to be head men of the gang and were shot". The three men, shot the next morning on the orders of Bowen-Colthurst, were not rebels but journalists, including well-known Dublin eccentric Francis Sheehy Skeffington.

³² *Burra Record* 12 July 1916, p. 4. For a description of the capture of the Mendicity Institution see Michael Foy and Brian Barton, *The Easter Rising*, Sutton Publishing, 1999 (paperback edition 2000), p. 180.

³³ *Age* 1 July 1916, p. 11.

³⁴ Although described as an Australian, Charles was born in Canada, where his father Richard Garland was general manager of Dunlop Rubber Co. When Charles was a small child the Garlands moved to Australia, where Richard set up a branch of the company (*Australasian* 29 November 1919, p. 22).

³⁵ Canon David John Garland Papers, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, OM71-51/13. See John A Moses and George F Davis, *Anzac Day Origins: Canon DJ Garland and Trans-Tasman Commemoration*, Barton Books, Canberra, 2013. I am grateful to Marg Powell of the John Oxley Library for bringing the typescript cop of the letter to my attention. Her article is at <http://blogs.slq.qld.gov.au/ww1/2016/03/28/charles-garland-easter-rising-1916/>.

³⁶ Both versions of the letter give the time of the patrol as 10.30 am, but it is clear from the activities preceding the raid that are described in the typescript version that the time should have read 10.30 pm.

After initial reluctance, the military authorities eventually court-martialled Colthurst for the murders. On 10 June 1916 he was found guilty, but the court also found him to be insane with the result that he was detained in Broadmoor asylum for the criminally insane at the king's pleasure.³⁷ After less than two years Colthurst was released and in 1921 he emigrated to Canada.³⁸ In addition to the court martial a royal commission was held under the chairmanship of Sir John Simon from 23-31 August 1916, during the course of which Timothy Healy, counsel for Hannah Sheehy Skeffington (Francis's widow), tendered the *Age* article that quoted the Australian officer's letter.³⁹

Garland's letter also described another patrol in which he and a Canadian soldier raided the home of "a Russian Countess, who was a keen rebel" – presumably Countess Markievicz, second in command of the rebel forces at St Stephen's Green.⁴⁰ He wrote, "In town we didn't see a single civilian— just as well for them, as they would have been shot—and the houses had to be in darkness too. One house had a light in the front window, but one of the officers put half a dozen shots into it, and it soon went out."

Following publication of the letter in the *Age*, Catholic newspapers published comments from readers highly critical of the Australian officer's account. HA Meagher wrote to the *Advocate*, "This reads like an account of rabbit battues that used to be held in the Western District till common humanity objected to them".⁴¹ A correspondent to the *Tribune* under the pseudonym "Innisfail" wrote:

As a specimen of cold-blooded atrocity I venture to say that the Hun in his worst alleged excesses has not equalled it. ... The letter of this 'Australian officer on leave', which is a disgrace to Australian manhood ... stirs up rebel instincts that I thought had perished.⁴²

Innisfail's hyperbole illustrates the passion which the letter aroused. It would have been even greater had the editor of the *Age* not sanitised it. According to the typescript, the letter actually said "the three others turned out to be head men of the gang and so we shot them", rather than "and were shot".⁴³

Sydney's *Catholic Press* joined the chorus of outrage, reproducing the *Age*'s article and Innisfail's response, richly sprinkled with sub-headings as if to give editorial endorsement to Innisfail's anger: "Specimen of Cold-Blooded Atrocity", "Smashing Brains out of Women and Children", "Talk of Prussian Militarism", etc.

But it was not only Catholic newspapers and their readers who were outraged. A few months after the rising the socialist activist D.P. Russell published a 95-page pamphlet entitled *Sinn Féin and the Irish Rebellion*. In the preface Russell wrote that his pamphlet was "an attempt to explain the Irish problem from the standpoint of the class struggle".⁴⁴ In it he reproduced

³⁷ For details of the court martial see *1916 Rebellion Handbook*, Mourne River Press, Dublin, 1998, pp. 108-114. It was originally published in 1916 by the *Weekly Irish Times* as the *Sinn Féin Rebellion Handbook: Easter 1916* (with an augmented edition appearing in 1917).

³⁸ For further information on Bowen-Colthurst see Bryan Bacon, *A Terrible Duty: The Madness of Captain Bowen-Colthurst*, Thena Press, 2015.

³⁹ *1916 Rebellion Handbook*, pp. 213-231.

⁴⁰ The typescript letter describes her as a "Prussian Countess".

⁴¹ *Advocate* 8 July 1916, p. 23.

⁴² *Tribune* 6 July 1916, p. 4. The letter was republished in the *Catholic Press* 13 July 1916, p. 17.

⁴³ The words "so we shot them" are ambiguous. They could mean that Garland was a member of the firing squad or that "we" (ie. the military) shot the journalists, not Garland personally. But it is unlikely that such a fine distinction would have been made by the letter's critics, particularly as that meaning might better have been conveyed by "so they shot them".

⁴⁴ Russell was a socialist who stood for election to the federal parliament as a candidate for the Labor Party in 1910 and 1913. In 1910 he lost to Prime Minister Alfred Deakin in the seat of Ballarat by only 400 votes out of 20 000 after gaining a 15% swing. He also unsuccessfully stood for election to the Victorian parliament in 1911

the *Age*'s version of the letter as well as the exaggerated claims of Corporal John Garland, who does not appear to be related to Charles Garland. Russell added the comment:

Did Australia's sons in Dublin add lustre to the deeds of the heroes who fought and died in Gallipoli for the "Rights of Small Nations"?⁴⁵

Some Australians were not as critical of the letter as the Catholic newspapers or DP Russell. AT Saunders wrote to Adelaide's *Register* expressing his anger at the "armed band of cowardly assassins [who] suddenly began a murderous attack on innocent and in most cases unarmed men [and] also killed innocent women and children". Saunders was not referring to Bowen-Colthurst or the British soldiers who ran amok in North King Street but to the rebel leaders, whom he described with bitter irony as "gentle dreamers", adding:

I am glad to say that some Anzacs had the honour of assisting to put down the "dreamers". The Anzacs were in Trinity College, and *Blackwood's Magazine* gives an excellent account of the defence of the college by the Anzacs, the troops, and civilians. One of the "gentle dreamers" was Mr Sheehy Skeffington, and he was one of [those] who were rightfully shot.⁴⁶

The controversy might have been even greater had it been known at the time that another Australian was involved in the journalists' murder, and in a much more direct way. Like Charles Garland, William Dobbin, a native of Maldon, Victoria, had enlisted in the British Army. He was commissioned into the 3rd Battalion Royal Irish Rifles in June 1915.⁴⁷ On the morning that Skeffington, Dickson and McIntyre were shot Dobbin was the officer in charge of the guard room. It was to him that Bowen-Colthurst went demanding that the prisoners be removed from their cells and shot. Although Dobbin acceded to that demand, he did not participate in the firing squad. However, on entering the yard where the men had been shot he noticed Skeffington's leg moving. He reported this to Bowen-Colthurst who ordered that they be shot again, whereupon Dobbin gave the order to fire.

Storm Troopers of Empire?

Are the actions of these Australian soldiers in Dublin evidence of the "strangely automatic nature of Australian soldiers' subservience to empire" and of their being "craven towards power, to serve regnant imperial interests" as Docker maintains? Dobbin's case certainly suggests subservience and a degree of cravenness. Questioned at the royal commission as to why he had not protected his prisoners, Dobbin conceded that he did not think that ordering the men to be shot was the right thing for Bowen-Colthurst to have done. His evidence, as a whole, indicates that this 19-year old newly-commissioned 2nd Lieutenant with no experience of battle had been overborne by his 35-year old battle-experienced senior officer. But his

and 1917. He was one of the six delegates from Victoria at the federal conference of the Labor Party in Hobart in 1912 (*Official Report of the Fifth Commonwealth Conference of the Australian Labor Party*, Worker Trade Union Printery, Sydney, 1912, p. 5). For an obituary see *Bendigo Advertiser* 4 December 1918, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Russell, *Sinn Féin and the Irish Rebellion*, pp. 69-71.

⁴⁶ *Register* 30 September 1916, p. 5. Neither Bowen-Colthurst's court martial nor the Royal Commission that later investigated the murders considered Sheehy Skeffington had been "rightfully shot", with both tribunals finding that the killings were unlawful and the journalists innocent of any involvement in the rising.

⁴⁷ His father William Wood Dobbin was a native of Belfast, who had emigrated to Australia. He managed Nambrok Station, Rosedale, for Dalgety & Co. and served as a magistrate in the local district before going to the Boer War as commander of the 3rd Bushmen's Rifles. After the war Major Dobbin returned to Ireland and appointed governor of Waterford Prison and later Clonmel Borstal. He was made a member of the Order of the British Empire in 1920. He had married Emily Josephine Cuzens at Christchurch pro-cathedral Ballarat on 18 March 1885. They had four children before Emily died on 25 January 1900 aged 34 years.

subservience and cravenness that day was towards a dominant individual rather than the empire.⁴⁸

Similarly with the others, one needs to examine their accounts individually to determine their motivations. Corporal Harvey perhaps comes closest to Docker's imperial lackey. In his letter home he wrote, "Next morning we all paraded and volunteers were asked for. I, of course, in common with all Colonial troops, volunteered and again took up arms to defend the King and country". But others, such as Privates George Davis and Sergeant Alexander Don, reported to the barracks for their own protection. Their accounts show that, out on the streets, soldiers in uniform were targets for rebel snipers.⁴⁹ Others, such as Private Chapman, were ordered to report for duty.

For Corporal Harvey the fighting was an adventure, while Corporal McLeod described it as "fun". But others were unhappy about what they had been ordered to do. Private Davis recorded in his diary:

We were in a very unenviable position, for we personally had no quarrel with the rioters. ... We are making the best of a bad job, but would prefer to be anywhere but in this unenviable city.

Nevertheless, as I concluded in *Anzacs and Ireland*,⁵⁰ like it or not, Davis and his compatriots saw it as their duty to obey the orders they were given to help put down the rising. But does that equate to "an impulse to be craven towards power, to serve regnant imperial interests"? While many today might argue that the rising embodied the aspirations of the Irish people to govern themselves, that is a retrospective assessment. In Easter week, before the executions began, few saw it in those terms. Most Irish nationalists in Ireland and Australia regarded the actions of the rebels as treacherous – a threat to the hard-fought campaign for home rule that had all but succeeded. To the Australian soldiers, who had sworn an oath to "cause His Majesty's peace to be kept and maintained", the rebels were a gang of rioters who threatened that peace.

Overall, the experience of the diggers in Dublin provides little support for Docker's thesis and the reaction to Charles Garland's letter indicates that many in Australia were less than enthusiastic that Australian soldiers might have been used as instruments of imperial oppression in Ireland.

Conclusion

Over the past half century numerous historians and political commentators have argued that Australia's participation in the First World War of itself evidences the subservience to empire for which Docker contends.⁵¹ In fact Docker says as much when he refers to "the cravenness of soul evident in Australians' enthusiastic participation in British ... imperial wars".⁵² Now is not the time nor the place to debate that broader issue, which in recent years has been a hot

⁴⁸ *The Times* 1 September 1916, p. 3. The testimony as reported in *The Times* differs somewhat from that set out in the *1916 Rebellion Handbook*. When the royal commission began Dobbin had been serving in France with the 2nd Royal Irish Rifles. He was brought back to give evidence to the commission. After giving his evidence Dobbin returned to the front where on 1 January 1918 he was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry. On 23 March 1918 he was killed during the German breakthrough that overran his battalion's position. Dobbin's service record is at TNA: WO 339/55777.

⁴⁹ Diary of Private George Edward Davis, AWM PR88/203; *Bendigo Advertiser* 9 August 1916, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Jeff Kildea, *Anzacs and Ireland*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2007, p. 78.

⁵¹ For a survey of this historiography see Anthony Cooper, "The Australian Historiography of the First World War: Who is Deluded?", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 40, pp. 16-35 (Apr 1994) and Frank Bongiorno and Grant Mansfield, "Whose War Was It Anyway? Some Australian Historians and the Great War", *History Compass*, Vol. 6 No. 1, (2008), pp. 62–90. See also Paul Keating's Remembrance Day commemorative address of 2013.

⁵² Docker, "Storm Troopers of Empire?", p. 87.

topic in the “history wars”.⁵³ But if it be true, as Docker contends, then it is superfluous to argue the case from specific instances and even counterproductive when the instances chosen point the other way, suggesting that the soldiers involved either acted as they did for a variety of motives, in the case of those caught up in the Easter rising, or, in the case of those who committed atrocities in South Africa and the Middle East, as lads and not lackeys.

⁵³ For example, see Mervyn F Bendle, “How Paul Keating Betrayed the Anzacs, and Why”, *Quadrant*, January-February 2014, pp. 6-12.