

region's and globe's history shared human history and experience. I strongly recommend this book.

A. Asbjørn Jøn



Steel bed that prisoners were shackled to, and, ammunition box toilet. Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photograph taken by A. Asbjørn Jøn, September 2017.

The Conscription Conflict and the Great War, edited by Robin Archer, Joy Damousi, Murray Goot and Sean Scalmer (Clayton, Vic: Monash University Publishing, 2016). HC, ISBN 9789995060244. 110 pp., 9781925377224. 16 black and white plates, index. \$34.95.

The value of a centenary anniversary is that one is sufficiently distant in time to permit a sustained analysis—and such is the case with this scholarly and insightful work. Its core question might be posed as ‘When all other First World War combatant nations implemented conscription, why was it that Australia rejected it, and not once but twice?’ The received wisdom is surveyed—the role of pacifists, of unionized labour, of Catholics, and of women voters. Even the scholarship since the 1960s which has assumed that the anti-conscription rhetoric was merely a mask over ‘layers of economic interest and industrial motive’ is countered as missing ‘the intense intellectual and emotional attachment to freedom... which lent the campaigns much of their passion.’ (p. 91)

Several approaches to the topic herein are both new and sustained to effective conclusions in ways that were unlikely in anything other than a scholarly centenary book. Whatever one’s current beliefs or political commitments, everyone who has a serious interest in the Conscription referenda will find their assumptions challenged through this rigorous work.

First it takes a near global view of the then contemporary context. The Australian debate is placed within the traditions of individualism in British liberalism as opposed to the despotism of what became the European foe. This is

traced within Britain as well as in communication/awareness between Australians and Britons. When the US Senate debated its conscription bill, the speeches of nine US Senators referred to the referendum defeat in Australia (p. 160). The progress of the broader international ‘conscription conversation’ is traced throughout the War. Most notable was the accommodation between British Labour and government where conscription was a tool towards maintaining effective War industries. By contrast, Hughes had no similar industry and so thought of Australia’s contribution ‘primarily as cannon fodder’ (pp. 185-186).

A counter perspective is to look within Australia to interrogate received assumptions—that the ‘No’ case built over time, that the NSW 1916 vote was crucial, that the best vote predictor was the party of the sitting member, that voters recently from Britain voted ‘Yes’, that a German origin meant a ‘No’ vote, that Dr Mannix led the Catholic vote (pp. 112-113). Murray Goot tackles this through re-examining the referenda results, and finds ample evidence of the ‘ecological fallacy’ (pp. 124, 145)—that characteristics broadly across a group are mistakenly taken to describe individuals in that group. For each of these received assumptions, vague previous use of data is detailed and challenged (historians with big reputations are not spared). Also there are so many exceptions, e.g. why would the Tasmanian seat of Darwin, held by Labor’s King O’Malley, have one of the nation’s highest ‘Yes’ votes (71.8%)? The ultimate impression is of regional diversity, that in each electorate/region there was likely to be a distinctive mix of ethical, economic and social factors, with varying ‘intellectual and emotional attachment’ to each, and these acting together as a regional culture.

Other chapters look at organisations, and at the political activity of University of Melbourne academics, while the concluding chapter looks at the afterlife of the event—how anti-conscription became modified as an identifying ‘legend’ for the Labor party, and so able to maintain a sense of radical purity, even at the cost of decades out of Federal power (unlike UK Labour).

In its presentation, two awkwardnesses must be noted. The lack of a list of References means that one must search awkwardly through footnotes in order to find say the year of Glenn Withers’ work (treated in the text across pp. 123-125)—only in this case to find that the first footnote does not give the full details. Fortunately a later chapter refers to Withers and the full details are footnoted there. A second awkwardness is in the mis-spelling of *principle/principal*. One understands how a single slip can be made (p. 39), but not when the same word is mis-spelled three times in half a page (p. 61), and this from a university press.

Still, the work’s principal achievement is profound—to analyse this most divisive of our country’s political events in ways that help to understand it and so thereby also to question many of the too easy assumptions made about current events.

Robert James Smith

*

*

*