LUCY BRACEY

Personal records of World War I: State Library Victoria collection highlights

While working on State Library Victoria exhibitions to commemorate the centenary of World War I, I had the privilege of studying scores of World War I letters, diaries, photographs and artefacts in the Library's collections.

The following snapshot of items gives a sense of the breadth and depth of the Library's holdings related to World War I, and shows the personal stories that can be told through these collections.



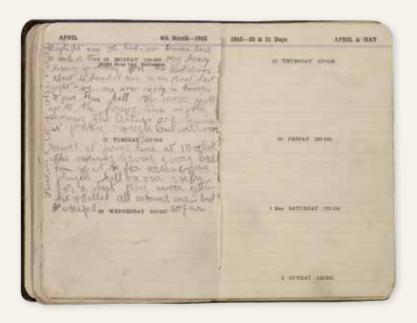
Field glasses, c. 1914 Belonging to Leo Gwyther (1892–1949) Gwyther Family Papers, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 11300/4372/1

These field glasses, along with a collection of war diaries, postcards and photographs, belonged to Leo Tennyson Gwyther, an early Australian Imperial Force (AIF) volunteer in the Great War. Born in Leongatha, Victoria, he was one of five boys, all of whom enlisted. Leo signed up just three days after the declaration of war. He saw action in Gallipoli, France and Belgium and quickly rose through the ranks from corporal to captain. While he survived the war, he suffered several near misses. On one occasion he was saved only when a bullet ricocheted off his field glasses: the damage to the glasses is evident.

Like many of the men who served on the Western Front, Leo was gassed several times and sustained permanent lung damage. In a letter he wrote home to his mother that was published in the local newspaper in 1916, he described these attacks:

The chlorine they are using here is strong enough to kill you in five seconds ... everyone has his helmet for protection against gas.¹

Leo won a Military Cross in 1916 after saving ammunition from a fire and he had a bar added to his medal in 1917 for 'conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty' after extinguishing another threatening fire.²



A soldier's diary, 1914-15 Alfred Love (1886-1915) Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 9603

The last entry in Alfred Love's diary was written on the day he was killed at Gallipoli:

Arrived at firing line at 10 o'clock this morning having a very bad time of it so far. Machine gun played hell on our men for a start they were getting hit & killed all around me but I escaped so far.

Alfred Herbert Love was 27 years old when he enlisted in the AIF in November 1914. Married and with a baby daughter, he was also the sole supporter of his widowed mother when he embarked with the 14th Battalion bound for Egypt. Alfred kept a diary of his war experiences, describing his journey on board the troopship *Berrima*, training in Egypt, time spent on the Greek island of Lemnos, and the landing at Gallipoli. Alfred's diary is also littered with expressions of love and affection for his wife, Glenora, and daughter, Essie.

Unlike his diary, Alfred's service record is tellingly blank, with just three entries in his statement of service: enlistment, deployment and death. After recounting the chaos of the Gallipoli landing on 25–26 April 1915, Alfred was killed in action on 27 April. He was buried at Quinn's Post Gemetery. In the margin near his last entry he wrote, 'Thinking a lot of wife and child'.



Patriotic badges and pins, c. 1914-20 Edward Solomon collection, Pictures Collection H90.101/1-2609, LTCM 93

Badges such as these, supporting Australian troops ('Royal Australian Navy Day' and 'Our Boys at the Dardenelles') and the Allies ('Brave Belgium' and 'France's Day'), were issued throughout Australia and New Zealand.

These badges are from a collection of more than 2000 that was given in 1930 to the then Melbourne Public Library by Edward Solomon, a Melbourne philanthropist and collector who played an active part in raising patriotic funds during both world wars. Solomon's collection also included autographed theatre programs and 40 war medals, and was shown in the Library's 1990 exhibition *By Jingo, Buy Buttons*.

Fundraising was a critical home front activity during World War I. Mainly the domain of women and children, fundraising events were organised and hosted in towns and suburbs throughout Australia. From galas and dances to fetes and doorknocking, Australians rallied to support the troops and the nation's allies with unfailing enthusiasm. The sale of small patriotic badges by volunteers on 'button days' was a popular way of raising money.³



Embroidered postcard from Europe, c. 1916 Sent home by Thomas O'Halloran Pictures Collection H41578

This postcard was sent home to Australia by Corporal Thomas Patrick O'Halloran, a miner from Castlemaine, Victoria, who enlisted in the AIF in December 1915. Thomas was a sapper in the 2nd Australian Tunnelling Company. He sent dozens of these embroidered postcards to his father, wife and three young children during his service overseas. Thomas survived the war and returned home in May 1919.

Silk-embroidered souvenir postcards became popular at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900, and then increasingly so during World War I⁴, when women of France and Belgium made them to sell to soldiers. Card designs included European scenery, forget-me-not flowers, patriotic messages and military symbols such as flags, badges and crests. Cards were sent home carrying cheerful greetings, often sparing loved ones the horrors of war.

State Library Victoria holds hundreds of letters and postcards sent from the frontlines during World War I. There is even a note written, with sharp humour, on an army-issue hard tack biscuit that was sent home by a recent enlistment to show his family the quality of the rations he was receiving (see page 149).⁵



Gallipoli draughts pieces, 1915 Brought back by Thomas P Bennett Pictures Collection H39267

This set of draughts pieces was made from improvised materials by men stationed at Quinn's Post, Gallipoli, in 1915, and is a poignant reminder of their ingenuity. It belonged to Captain Chaplain Thomas Pearse Bennett, given to him by the men he worked with there. The limited supplies of materials stimulated the creativity of the troops and things such as periscopes, bombs, games, cooking utensils and even stationery were improvised from any materials they could find, such as jam tins, shrapnel, wood or newspapers.

Thomas Bennett was a 36-year-old priest from Warrnambool, Victoria, when he enlisted in the AIF. He left Australia in May 1915 and served at Gallipoli, documenting his experiences in photographs, letters and a diary. In September 1915 he wrote:

Saw the trenches for the first time – & understood what the Australians did – 'the impossible' wonderful fighters they are, spirits of men wonderful.⁶

The draughts pieces were donated to State Library Victoria along with a large collection of glass lantern slides that includes World War I photographs taken by Thomas. His diary and letters, as well as an improvised wooden draughts board found at Quinn's Post, are in the collection of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.



Gallipoli letter (detail), 1915 Martin Blundell (1891–1918) Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 10485

Martin Petrie Blundell, from Melbourne, was 24 years old when he enlisted in the AIF in January 1915. Assigned to the 4th Light Horse Regiment, Martin quickly found himself amongst the much-needed reinforcements sent to the Gallipoli peninsula a month after the April landing. Unimpressed by the campaign, which was proving to be disastrous for the Allies, Martin penned his frustrations in this letter to his family:

I think there is no doubt that the English on two or three occasions at the Peninsula showed the White feather and ran away. From all accounts they were very raw troops and should never have been sent ... The war is in a very bad way for the Allies, could not be worse in fact and it is hard to foresee the finish and result when one comes here and to the front and sees the blunders that are made, and the terrible lack of organisation and the utter ineptitude of the officers.

All correspondence that was sent from the frontlines was first reviewed by the field censor, who would erase any references that might compromise military success, including locations, place names and military units. Criticism of military leadership, decisions or campaigns was strictly forbidden. This letter, however, evaded military censorship when it was carried back to Australia by a friend. Martin took part in campaigns on the Western Front before he was killed in action in April 1918. The Library also holds his diary and another letter.







Photographs from the frontlines, 1914-18 Kathleen Gawler (1888-1967) Pictures Collection H2011.36/57, H2011.36/59, H2011.37/145

Kathleen Blanche Gawler's World War I photographs are particularly interesting for the insight they provide into the experience of women on the frontlines. While women could not enlist in the armed services, they could, as did Kathleen, serve as nurses and voluntary aids.

Born in Black Rock, Victoria, in 1888, Kathleen enlisted in Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service in May 1915. One month later she was in Egypt, where she took hundreds of photographs of the landscapes, buildings, people and local culture that she encountered. These images are a fascinating glimpse into the life of a nurse in World War I.

While the *War Precautions Act* officially banned cameras on the frontline, thousands found a way there in the possession of soldiers and other service people. So many, in fact, that Kodak began marketing specifically to soldiers: 'A vest pocket Kodak for the soldier friend', read one newspaper advertisement in December 1916.⁷

However, as the war progressed camera film became harder to obtain on the frontlines and, as a result, the photographic record of the earlier years of the war – including Australia's engagements in Egypt, Palestine and at Gallipoli – is much richer than that of the later years.



Christmas billy gifts from home to Gallipoli, c. 1915 Pictures Collection H39269

Messages from home were a welcome treat for those on the frontlines in World War I, especially when they were inside a billy can that was filled with gifts. This billy can was brought back to Australia by Captain Chaplain Thomas Bennett, who collected souvenirs from Gallipoli and Egypt.

After hearing that the men on the frontlines needed billy cans, the women of Melbourne's Alexandra Club arranged a scheme, for Christmas 1915, to fill billy cans with treats, like a Christmas stocking. They aimed to send 20,000 billies to the men on the Gallipoli peninsula. The Club sold the billy cans for 6 pence each, and volunteers were encouraged to fill them with donated items such as cards, pocket mirrors, scissors, bootlaces, toothbrushes, razors, shaving sticks, watchstraps, postcards, pencils, soap, penknives, notepaper, diaries, candles, Vaseline, cake, biscuits, butter, chocolate, cocoa, sardines, tomato sauce, handkerchiefs, socks, belts and, of course, tobacco and cigarettes.⁸

For the men in the trenches, the billies were a warmly received surprise. J Ellis in Bendigo received a letter of thanks from Ralph Lacey of the 5th Brigade saying, 'Just a few lines to let you know that I was the lucky beggar to receive your most welcome "billy".9



Painted gum leaf, c. 1915 Pictures Collection H84.449/112

This painted gum leaf was purchased for the State Library in 1984. Its history is uncertain, but it is painted with the words 'Gaba Tepe', a promontory south of the main Australian position on the Gallipoli peninsula. On 4 May 1915, the 11th Battalion launched a failed attack on Gaba Tepe in the hope of obscuring the Turkish soldiers' vantage point over Anzac Cove. Perhaps this leaf was painted by a survivor to commemorate his fallen comrades. Or perhaps it was painted by a loved one back in Australia.

Painting on gum leaves was one way that amateur artists in Australia helped to raise funds for the war effort. Artist Lilla Reidy (1858–1933) headed a group of around 30 artists in Melbourne who painted small but unique artworks – some on gum leaves – to raise funds for the war. These artists raised almost £4000 for soldiers' charities as a result of their efforts.

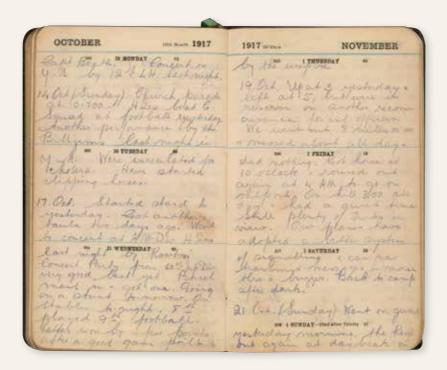


Soldier's kit items, c. 1917 Belonging to Clarence Fowler (1895–1972) Pictures Collection H2012.127/2, H2012.127/13

This knife and whistle with identity tags are amongst a set of kit items in the Library's collection that belonged to Clarence Griffiths Fowler, an engineer from Sydney who enlisted in the AIF in April 1917.

Clarence, at only 155 centimetres tall, was ineligible to enlist until April 1917 when the height requirement for Australian soldiers was relaxed for the second time. After the disastrous Gallipoli campaign, and the failed conscription referendum in October 1916, the AIF was desperate for recruits to help fight what seemed to be a never-ending war. The age range for recruits was extended from 38 to 45 years and previous physical fitness restrictions, including dental and optical standards, were relaxed. Clarence enlisted as soon as he was able and served as a sapper in the 1st and 2nd field troops until he was discharged in May 1920.

Along with their uniform, AIF soldiers received kit items such as a hairbrush, toothbrush, shaving brush, razor, knife, fork, spoon, tin-opener, identity discs, soap, towel and a 'housewife' – a sewing kit for repairing their uniform and equipment. Regular kit inspections were conducted to keep track of missing or damaged items and a properly maintained kit was regarded as critical to a functioning army and to surviving battle conditions.

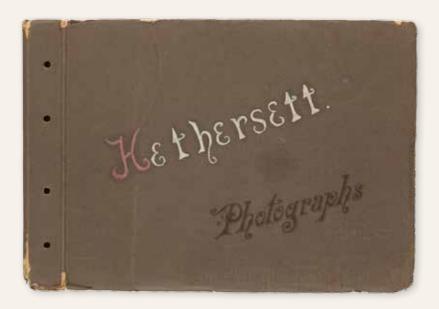


Diaries and photographs of a soldier's life George Auchterlonie (1887–1949) Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 13599

Unlike many of the World War I diaries in the Library's collection, George Auchterlonie's diaries rarely provide insight into his thoughts or feelings, recording the facts and daily routines of his life as a soldier, just as he saw them. Yet his photographs suggest a keen interest in and engagement with the world around him. The collection of diaries, photographs and other objects from his war service lay in a tin trunk on the Auchterlonie family farm in Driffield, Victoria, for over 70 years before they were rediscovered.

In July 1915, against his father's wishes, George, a 28-year-old farmer, left the family farm in Narracan, Gippsland, to join the AIF 8th Light Horse Regiment. George was one of six children but the only one to enlist. After several months of training at Seymour, north of Melbourne, where he attended the officers' instruction school, George left for Egypt on 10 November 1915.

George meticulously documented his war experience in seven diaries and an extensive collection of photographs. He fought in the battle of Gaza in March 1917, the battle of Beersheba in October 1917 and the capture of Jerusalem in December 1917. He remained in service until 1919 and then took extended leave to see more of Europe before returning to Australia in 1920.¹¹



Album of photographs from 'Hethersett' Private Repatriation Hospital, Burwood 1915–17 Pictures Collection H2009.103/1-81

As the war progressed, the need for facilities to care for repatriated men quickly became apparent. In September 1915, Melbourne doctor Ramsay Mailer opened his home in suburban Burwood as a private repatriation hospital. 'Hethersett' fell under the Red Cross Society Home Hospitals Committee, but was financed by Mailer and his family. It was a comfortable home for up to 30 patients, with a piano, billiard table and reading room and surrounded by large, picturesque gardens where patients could play croquet, fish or take afternoon tea on the lawns. Staffed by volunteers, with the exception of the kitchen maid, laundress and gardeners, it received encouraging support from the local community, and locals supplied cars to transport patients to organised activities.

Hethersett specialised in treating soldiers with nervous disorders and more than 300 men received treatment there. *Table Talk* reported in November 1915 that at Hethersett:

The men are so comfortable and happy that they declare they are almost sorry they are recovering, as they will have to leave such an ideal spot.¹²

Operating for just two years Hethersett was closed as demand for surgical hospitals increased. The Burwood property was later to become the home of the Presbyterian Ladies College.



Diary of a medical orderly, 1915 Albert Ernest Coates (1895–1977) Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 10345

Albert Coates was 19 years of age when he enlisted in the AIF on 17 August 1914. Keen to study medicine, Albert became a medical orderly in the 7th Battalion and saw action at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. In 1917, he joined the intelligence staff of the Anzac Corps. Like many soldiers, Albert kept a diary of his wartime experiences. His entry for the day that the Australian troops landed at Gallipoli, recorded in Pitman's shorthand script, describes the calm seas contrasting with the hellfire bursting all around.

After the war he returned to Australia where he graduated from medicine at the University of Melbourne and spent a number of years working and teaching at the Royal Melbourne Hospital and the university. Albert enlisted again in World War II and was appointed lieutenant colonel and senior surgeon in the second AIF. He was captured by the Japanese and spent a number of years treating Australian and British prisoners of war on the Burma–Thailand Railway. Albert was awarded an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1946 and was knighted in 1955. 13

Albert's World War I and World War II diaries are in the State Library Victoria collection.



Military Cross, 1917 Belonging to Arthur Stephenson (1890–1967) Pictures Collection H2010.167/4

This Military Cross was awarded to Captain Arthur George Stephenson in December 1917. Arthur, an assistant architect from Box Hill, Melbourne, first joined the Australian Infantry Battalion in November 1915 as a lieutenant. He was promoted to captain in May 1916 and mentioned twice in dispatches. On 4 October 1917, Arthur was put in charge of maintaining the artillery roads and mule tracks in an allied-occupied area of West Flanders. His actions and courage under fire that won him the Military Cross were described in his service record:

... although shells burst about him, he kept to work setting a most worthy and excellent example to his men ... his coolness and bravery proved of incessant advantage to the success that eventually crowned the day's endeavour.¹⁴

Established during World War I, the Military Cross was an honour that could be awarded to junior officers. Designed by EC Collings, Herald Painter to King George V, the medal is a silver cross with an imperial crown on each point and the monarch's initials in the centre. We understand that Arthur's original medal was lost in 1923, but that he was able to acquire this replacement for a small fee. Farthur survived the war and left the army to pursue his career in architecture, establishing in 1921 what would become a successful practice. In 1964 he was made Knight Commander of the British Empire. Farthur survived the British Empire.



Diaries and medals of a World War I nurse Belonging to Alice Kitchen (1873–1950) Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 9627

Alice Kitchen wrote in her diary on 3 May 1915:

There will be grief and sorrow in many a home and I am afraid few of the 1st AIF will return except as cripples. It is all too dreadful and every day we hear of someone we knew being killed or wounded. 17

For her service in World War I, nurse Alice Elizabeth Barratt Kitchen was awarded the three medals that were awarded to any military personal who had served for the full duration of the war: the 1914–15 Star Medal, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. Alice's diaries and photographs, which are some of the most detailed accounts of a nurse's experience during World War I are also held in the State Library's collection.

Alice was born in Amherst near Ballarat, Victoria. A qualified nurse, she was one of the first to enlist with the Australian Army Nursing Service, and left Australia on the HMAT *Benalla* as part of the first convoy in October 1914. She did not return until August 1919.

Alice was working at the No. 1 Australian General Hospital in Cairo when the first casualties from Gallipoli returned. The nurses worked in challenging and dangerous conditions that caused great physical and emotional stress. Alice recorded many of her experiences in her diaries, filling four volumes documenting her life in war and peace time from 1914 until 1922.