

INTRODUCTION

**‘A LAND FIT FOR
HEROES’: IMPLEMENTING
SOLDIER SETTLEMENT
IN AUSTRALIA**

'If worry and trouble be the price of our lands, Lord God, we have paid it in full.'¹

Sunday 21 May 1916. Adelaide was abuzz. Vice-regal dignitaries and politicians from across the country had converged on South Australia's capital to attend a Premiers' Conference. Run simultaneously with the Third Interstate Conference on Forestry and described as the 'most representative' gathering of State Premiers ever seen, these distinguished guests made their way from Melbourne (then the seat of the Federal Parliament) by special train. Ministers and advisors, Attorneys General, Treasurers and Ministers for Lands, accompanied all the State Premiers, and the vice-regal couple – Sir Ronald and Lady Helen Munro Ferguson – led the dignitaries to nearby Government House. Sir Ronald, who undertook wood chopping as a form of exercise, would open the forestry conference with unusually athletic zeal. His highly capable wife, Lady Helen, President of the Australian Branch of the British Red Cross Society and many other worthy organisations, would use her time in Adelaide tending to women's patriotic work. Their week would be peppered with official receptions and dinners, celebrations for Empire Day, and the unveiling of a statue of former Premier Charles Kingston. Under grey autumnal skies and despite the threat of rain, South Australia's proverbial hospitality came to the fore.

The Premiers' Conference opened with all the trappings of officialdom. A military guard of honour was formed in front of Parliament, accompanied by a military brass band and His Excellency Sir Henry Galway opened proceedings in the State's resplendent House of Assembly. The public gallery was filled to capacity. Politicians, their wives and scores of interested observers jostled for space. With the official imperatives dispensed with, and behind closed doors, they got down to business. It was then the atmosphere changed. As portly politicians settled into green leather benches, the Hon. William Holman, Premier of New South Wales, rose to address the assembly. The leader of Australia's largest State, he had just been appointed President of the conference. And his message was an urgent one. This was a country at war.

The 1916 Premiers' Conference was held a year after Australia had been 'blooded' in the disastrous Gallipoli campaign. Families across the nation were still counting the cost. As the conference began, the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), relocated to France, was preparing its troops near the Belgian border. Two years of mechanised murder in the trenches of the Somme and Flanders would follow. In May 1916 it seemed the very survival of the Empire was at stake. But already there was the question of how Australia would cope with war's aftermath. Men, mostly disabled, were returning in their hundreds. Soon it would be tens of thousands. With no

specific Federal structures yet in place for repatriation, State governments were concerned about ‘settling a large disbanded army’ when the war finally finished. Of particular concern was how to ‘open up avenues of employment and adjust dislocated industrial conditions’.² Already, idle men had been seen congregating on the streets of Australia’s towns and cities, begging for assistance, flouting their injuries and drinking to excess.

Sending returned soldiers to ‘settle the country’ was seen by many as the solution. The previous year, the former Labor Prime Minister John Watson had devised a plan to support returned servicemen through land settlement. It was received with enthusiasm by both sides of the House and the wider public as well. Like Britain, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States, soldier settlement in Australia became a key scheme in a raft of repatriation policies enacted during and after World War I. The Australian scheme was to be a shared responsibility, a collaboration between the States and the Federal government. The States found the land while the Federal government offered loans to manage the scheme.

ANATOMY OF A SCHEME

Soldier settlement varied in each State. Some schemes to settle returned soldiers on the land operated under existing/amended Land Acts and Closer Settlement Acts (as in Victoria); through Crown leases only (as in South Australia); or under specific legislation, such as the *Returned Soldier Settlement Act 1916* (New South Wales) and the *Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act 1917* (Queensland) and *1918* (Western Australia). Only in Queensland were private estates not purchased. Around Australia, Crown lands were generally on the margins of settlement. It was rough, virgin country with limited or no facilities.³ Soldier settlers eligible to take up land also included a small cohort of nurses and a larger contingent of veterans from Britain. In time, the widows of these men were also permitted to take up a holding. Most were placed on small blocks that could sustain poultry, vegetables, pigs, viticulture or even a small dairy herd.⁴

As time went on, holdings allocated to returned soldiers became as diverse as the men themselves. In New South Wales the scheme included substantial land areas on the urban fringe of Sydney.⁵ They varied from 5-acre blocks suitable for poultry on the city outskirts to 25,550 acres in the Wilcannia Land District in western New South Wales allocated to 29-year-old former butcher Thomas Larkin in 1921.⁶ Among the first settlers were labourers and professional men, former farmers and urban tradesmen, weather beaten jackaroos and others, like the genteel entrepreneur Garnet Adcock who dreamed of a perfume industry for Australia.⁷

Across the country, soldier settlement was hailed as a scheme with a distinctly ‘Australian character’. In the early 20th century, the masculine ideal of the bushman had morphed into the soldier, the Anzac. His next transformation was to ‘settle’ him (and his post-war family) on the land. The open spaces of Australia were thought vast enough to accommodate such a project, Australia’s sparsely populated eastern seaboard, the *Sydney Sun* declared, offered a land ‘fit for heroes’.⁸ At the southernmost reaches of the continent, the *Hobart Mercury* believed a ‘wave of popular enthusiasm for soldier settlement on the land ... swept everyone away’.⁹ Promotional literature extolling the virtues of life on the land was to be seen everywhere. It painted a positive picture of prosperous farms and contented families fuelling the development of regional Australia. With hard work and application, returned men were told they could make something of themselves and their holdings, ‘rendering yet another service to the State by increasing its production, and thus adding to the strength of the Empire’.¹⁰ It was a service to Empire, but also to themselves. Soldier settlement promised to restore men, many of whom had been damaged physically and psychologically by war, to their ‘natural’ status as breadwinners and providers.¹¹ As we will see, this intensely gendered discourse pervaded almost every aspect of the scheme.

Of course, working the land was not the only option for returned soldiers. It was part of a suite of repatriation policies greeting them on their arrival home. Veterans were offered financial assistance to retrain or to set up new small businesses in the cities or larger regional towns. Survivors of the Somme invested in fruit and greengroceries, milk rounds, bootmaking and motor garages; lighthorsemen who had galloped across the deserts of Palestine settled down to careers as businessmen and bankers. But for many, the lure of soldier settlement proved irresistible: to own some land of one’s own, generally out of reach of the ordinary Australian worker, seemed too great an opportunity to pass by. To take up a holding offered each man a ‘fresh start’, a chance to be his own master and have a ‘stake in the country’ as well. Many returned men were said to be ‘unsettled’, unable to ‘go back’ to their former occupations. ‘They seem to want to be on their own – bosses of themselves’ observed one local repatriation committee, ‘few are going back to the grind of routine work for a daily wage. They all seem to want to take the chance and see if they can make a living without leaning on a boss’.¹² With State governments providing ‘land on easy terms’, the Commonwealth Government providing advances of £500 (later increased to £625) for ‘working capital’, ‘requisite training ... free of cost’ to those ‘who lack the necessary experience’, it appeared to be the perfect antidote for those battered and bruised by their war experiences. It promised independence to the rough and capable men who had returned to Australia’s shores.¹³

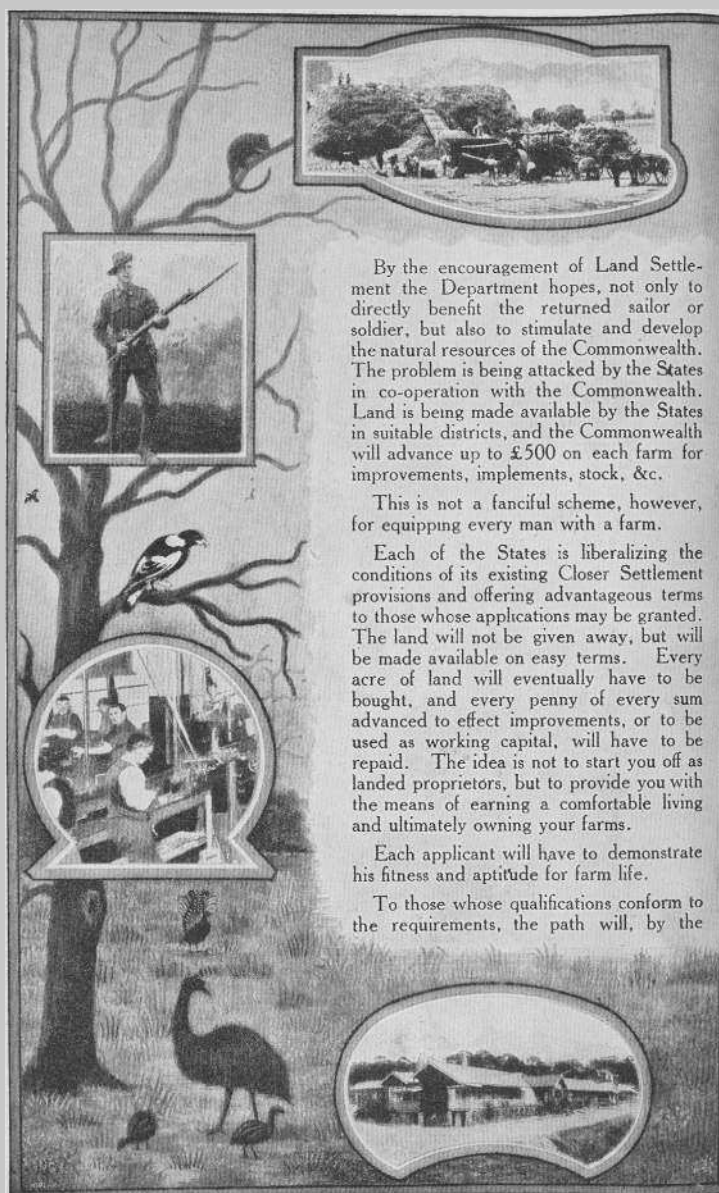


Image 0.3 'Part of a suite of repatriation policies': a repatriation handbook issued to all service men and women returning to Australia promises to 'equip every man with a farm'. The bush is transformed into settled fields and the soldier reinvented as a farmer.

ED Millen, *What Australia is Doing for her Returned Soldiers* (HJ Green, Acting Government Printer, 1918)

Source: State Library of Victoria, LTP 355.115 M61W

Contrary to popular misconceptions, the land was not simply ‘given’ to prospective settlers. Whether won through a ballot or allotted through other means, an elaborate scheme of interest-bearing loans enabled returned men with no capital of their own to purchase blocks and leases or improve existing holdings. These men went into considerable debt to attain their dream of owning land. As the New South Wales Minister for Lands, WG Ashford, cautioned, ‘Every acre of land will eventually have to be bought, and every penny advanced to effect improvements, or to be used as working capital, will have to be repaid’.¹⁴

The intention of the scheme was ‘to make it possible for a man, by intelligence and industry, to establish himself as a landholder, and make for himself and his family a good home and a good living’.¹⁵ It also promised to reduce the physical, social and economic disadvantages which so often had their roots in war service.¹⁶ In the case of New South Wales, (the largest and most diverse of all Australia’s soldier settlement schemes) there were five types of land tenure available: a homestead farm, crown lease, what they called a ‘returned soldiers’ special holding, suburban holdings and group purchase (mainly on estates purchased by the Crown or on Crown lands). Settlement on irrigation areas (specifically the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area) and blocks leased through the Western Division were also available. The advances were made repayable at a rate of 3.5 per cent increasing by 0.5 per cent to a maximum of 5 per cent. From the first day men took up a holding they faced a burden of debt, and right across Australia State governments would pursue men for repayment long after they had abandoned their blocks. A ‘Land Fit for Heroes’ would come at a cost.

The soldier settlement scheme seemed plausible, at least on paper. In the beginning, almost every settler was optimistic. Irrespective of where their block was located, whether in the Mallee in Victoria or in the wheatbelt of Western Australia, would-be farmers were eager to establish themselves. They carefully itemised their needs to the Lands Department. With the government advance of £625, a former railway worker and Gallipoli veteran, 25-year-old Charles Penn, who drew Block 63 at Batlow soldier settlement near Tumut in southern New South Wales, estimated the following were required to ‘set him up’ on the land: ‘House – £250; outbuildings – £50; fencing – £50; horse – £25; harness and rug – £25; grass seed – £25; plough and harrow – £15; cow and fodder – £20; scarifier – £5; water supply – £15; seeds, potatoes, etc. – £30; tools, explosives – £15; cart – £30.’¹⁷ But as with all such ambitious schemes, particularly those that involve both Federal and State governments, there were problems from the outset. Repatriation became a Commonwealth responsibility, but in the case of soldier settlement, land was administered by State governments, and they guarded their control carefully. As will be clearly evident in this book, soldier settlers found themselves sandwiched in the middle. Both the men and the land they were apportioned often proved wanting.

Charles Penn had little idea of the challenges of rural life, or of the particular difficulties involved in working a block too small, too far from markets, through seasons mostly bad. Like thousands of others, he would fail.

THE DOUBTERS

Long before Charles Penn walked off his holding, the doubters could be heard. The same year the Premiers gathered in Adelaide, politicians and practical farmers openly questioned the viability of the scheme. Soldier settlement was to be based on earlier ‘closer settlement’ projects – and closer settlement had clearly failed in States like Victoria and South Australia – so how would returned soldiers fare? JW Billson, Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Victorian parliament, asked the House some difficult questions: ‘If men whose business it is to get a living off the land cannot take those blocks up and make a living on them, how can the Government expect returned soldiers to do so?’¹⁸

How indeed? At the Adelaide conference, politicians sounded warnings about the scale of the scheme and the type of men who might be eligible. Tellingly, William Holman suggested that in New South Wales at least, it would be ‘impossible to find room for more than 5000 on the land’ [around 9000 eventually tried their luck], and Reginald Blundell prophesied that ‘a lot of men will not be suitable for settlement on the land’.¹⁹ Up north in Queensland, the refrain was the same. A year later, in 1917, State Opposition Leader JG Appel pleaded with his colleagues that ‘many a returned soldier will break his heart on that wretched land’.²⁰

Henry Boulthwood, proprietor of *The Northern Courier and County of Raleigh Advocate* newspaper that covered the North Coast around Bellingen, Macksville, Coffs Harbour and Grafton was particularly vocal. This area saw many hundreds of soldier settlers take up largely virgin blocks as part of the opening up of the North Coast to agriculture and in particular dairying and banana farming. As a member of the local Repatriation Committee as well as a Land Agent, Boulthwood was closely connected with all aspects of the scheme at a local, grassroots level. ‘Something must be done, or our dreams of a contented Returned Soldier, settled on a farm of his own, must go by the Board’, he wrote to John Thomson, his local member of Federal Parliament. Within weeks of the scheme’s inception he warned soldier settlement could end in ‘debacle’: ‘These delays – and the way we are being treated – are enough to make “Bolsheviks” of us. Not that I know what a “Bolshevik” is; but he cannot be any worse than the present lot; [we must] make good among the Boys who have been promised so much.’²¹ Perhaps one of the most serious and prescient remarks made by Boulthwood referred to the ‘faddish idea that only just enough land must be provided to meet the bare requirements of the applicant’.

Some States stipulated that no soldier would exceed £2500 in costs for the holding, and from the earliest days the Board objected to a soldier having access to any land more than was the bare minimum to sustain him. ‘The young single soldier is to be provided with only what he can work himself; he is never to marry or there might be children to provide for’, warned Boultonwood.²² Years later, one of the findings of the Pike Report, initiated in response to the problems associated with the scheme, was that the small size of blocks was a reason for the overall failure of the scheme.

The most important aspect of the failure was probably the kind of land that could be offered. Right across Australia, the best productive areas had already been settled, and in most States often only marginal land was left. Settler Charles Brotherton described his block, in rough virgin country outside of Narrandera, thus:

My block is unimproved Mallee land situated ten miles from the railway line. I have no neighbours; other soldiers who came and looked at the land declared they would rather be buried alive. The land is quite unimproved as regards water and roads. I have to cart from a private dam over a bush track which I cut myself.²³

Soldier settlers who took up holdings on this type of country, remote from markets and communities, did it tough. Often their dreams of land ownership ended after years of thankless struggle.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

That theme of struggle has been well mined in studies of post-World War I soldier settlement in Australia, and some States have been well served. Recognised early works include Marilyn Lake’s classic 1980s study of the Victorian scheme, geographer JM Powell’s study and Kent Fedorovich’s British Empire response.²⁴ Murray Johnson and Andrew Richardson have examined Queensland and Tasmania; Selena Williams and Glenys Allison researched returned nurses and group settlement in the Sydney region respectively. There has been an increased interest in the subject of soldier settlement in recent times, especially in the form of university theses that unfortunately remain largely unpublished. The scheme’s operation has also been considered in general histories of repatriation and in some outstanding social and environmental histories authored by Richard Waterhouse, Michael McKernan and John McQuilton.²⁵ Yet, despite a number of local studies, there has not been a detailed analysis of the largest scheme, that of New South Wales.²⁶

The origins of the scheme are complex. At one level, soldier settlement was an expedient measure by government to provide employment for a legion of returned

soldiers. It was driven by deep anxiety over what this potentially dangerous body of men would do if they were concentrated long in urban areas. As Senator Millen, Australia's first Minister for Repatriation, suggested, it was 'inadvisable to congregate soldiers', as it would 'only tend to develop a "class consciousness" which may subsequently express itself in troublesome forms'. A major theme of this book is that returned soldiers continued to prove 'troublesome' for the government.²⁷

Settling men on the land, however, has also been a recurrent dream in Australian history, and the post-World War I scheme needs to be seen in this context. Soldier settlement clung to obsolete notions of the viability of the yeoman farmer, built on earlier selection acts and closer settlement schemes, aimed at reintegrating returned men into civilian life through rural land ownership and cultivation. Advocates of the scheme believed that life on the land was nobler and healthier than city life. The yeoman model was already an anachronism, one ill-suited to the capital-intensive, science- and market-driven industry that Australian agriculture had become. It would never take root in the parched soil of Australia, as the hardest working settlers (and their families) would find to their cost.²⁸

As the post-war years progressed, the scandals surrounding soldier settlement mounted. Again, it was New South Wales that led the way. As early as August 1920, the Street Royal Commission was appointed to examine the bungled administration of the scheme by the Lands Department. Burdened by bureaucracy, soldier settlement had come to constitute 'a department within a department'.²⁹ The Royal Commission's investigation was wide ranging. Street was empowered to examine matters such as the acquisition and resumption of land, expenditure and advances, the systems in place in regard to the construction and labour of certain soldier settlements, and corrupt or incompetent conduct.³⁰ His findings were sensational and had implications well beyond New South Wales. A scathing report of almost 300 pages revealed that corruption and neglect were widespread.³¹ *Smith's Weekly*, a popular journal that championed the diggers' cause across Australia, was candid: 'The NSW Lands Department – the traditional home of incompetence, red-tape and muddle – should never have been entrusted with this essentially Federal activity. It is a repatriation activity and it should be controlled by the Repatriation Department ...'³² Addressing much the same readership, the *Truth*, drew a similar conclusion. 'Wherever it had been tried, soldier settlement had proved a "Policy of Pauperism"'. Perhaps the greatest injury of all was the blow this struck at a settler's sense of manhood. Returned men suffered, but so did the 'womenkind' they hoped to provide for. That involved 'the loss of that which is dear to every decent man's heart – his self-respect'. 'The soldier deserves better than this', cried the *Truth*.³³



Image 0.4 ‘A recurrent dream in Australian history’: Harold Cazneaux’s tribute to the yeoman farmer. The image is strong and masculine, conveying a sense of sturdy self-reliance. In fact, men like these were often dependent on the grudging charity of the state and the labour of their wives and children.

Harold Cazneaux, ‘A Son of the Soil’

Source: Harold Cazneaux Photograph Collection, National Library of Australia, 2383887.