

# THE LAST BATTLE

## Soldier settlement in Australia, 1916–1939

When Australian soldiers returned from World War I they were offered the chance to settle on 'land fit for heroes'. Promotional material painted a picture of prosperous farms and contented families, appealing to returned servicepeople and their families hoping for a fresh start. Yet just 20 years after the inception of these soldier settlement schemes, fewer than half of the settlers remained on their properties.

In this timely book, based on recently uncovered archives, Bruce Scates and Melanie Oppenheimer map out a deeply personal history of the soldiers' struggle to transition from Anzac to farmer and provider. At its foundation lie thousands of individual life stories shaped by imperfect repatriation policies. This book examines the environmental challenges, the difficulties presented by the physical and psychological damage many soldiers had sustained during the war, and the vital roles of women and children.

Richly illustrated with archival photographs and sketches, *The Last Battle* covers new ground in its social approach to the history of Australian soldier settlement and is an important contribution to the emerging field of repatriation studies.

**Bruce Scates** is Chair of History and Australian Studies and Director at the National Centre for Australian Studies at Monash University, Victoria.

**Melanie Oppenheimer** is Chair of History and Chair, School Research Committee, in the School of History and International Relations at Flinders University, South Australia.



**Image 0.1** 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

# THE LAST BATTLE

Soldier settlement in Australia, 1916–1939

BRUCE SCATES AND  
MELANIE OPPENHEIMER

With research assistance by Will Frances, Catherine Tiernan and Selena Williams;  
Steph Green, Laura James, Jo Kildea, Margrette Kleinig, Alice McConnell and  
Rebecca Wheatley



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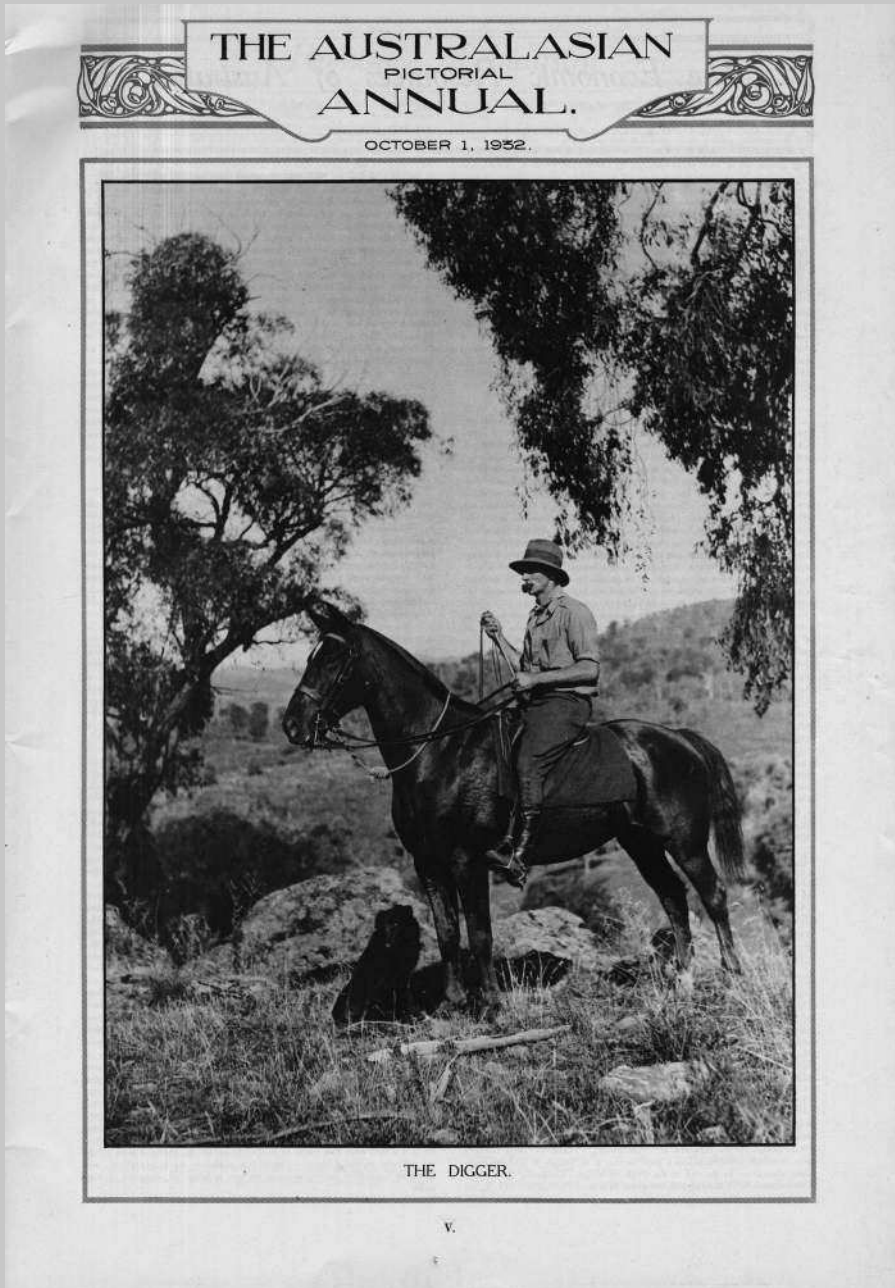
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*To Kitty, who loves the land and who cared for the  
‘Broken Men’ (BS)*

*To the families of Bective Soldier Settlement, past and  
present (MO)*

All royalties from the sale of this book are donated  
to the Australian Red Cross.

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**Image 0.2** 'The Digger', *The Australasian Pictorial Annual*, 1 October 1932.

Source: Rare Books Collection, Monash University

## FOREWORD

The afterlife of war and of those who wage war is now a centrepiece of historical scholarship. We have many studies of demobilisation which show graphically how difficult was the road home for the millions of men who returned after the Peace Treaties were signed. What we have lacked, though, is disaggregation, a separation of the story of a return to rural life from that of a return to the urban world.

This book fills that gap in the literature. Its portraits of ex-soldiers are drawn from painstaking and original research, which leads to a new interpretation of the transition from war to peace. Taking soldiers' settlement as their focus, Scates and Oppenheimer show time and again how immensely difficult it was for soldiers turned farmers to create a new and viable life on the land in the interwar years. Intriguingly, they point to the way the mistakes of the post-1918 period were not repeated in Australia after 1945. This finding, while significant, provided scant solace to the post-Great War generation.

That so many men were defeated in making land settlement a road to stability and prosperity is a significant part of the Anzac story. But it is hardly limited to Australia. It echoes the hardships of soldiers who, all over the world, returned to the factories, the docks, and the mines just in time to face several interwar depressions. And this was before the world economic crisis of 1929–31 added bankers and investors to the list of those who had fallen off the economic tightrope of the post-war decades. Mass unemployment made the divide between winners and losers in the war fade rapidly, and policy responses on the part of leaders of the once-victorious Allies were not notably more successful than those of the former Central Powers, now divided into multiple successor states.

Hardship among veterans was everybody's history in the interwar years, but the story told by Scates and Oppenheimer has a particular rural taste to it. The difference is in the isolation of those working on the land. One of the achievements of this book is to show how deeply etched in the history of soldiers' settlement were isolation and despair, especially in the case of farmers who, disabled or not, lacked the solidarity of defeated miners or factory workers. Could it be that soldiers' settlement on the land was an inherently isolating strategy, preventing men with a cause or a grudge from joining together to get whatever they took to be justice? This may be too harsh an interpretation, but the walls of bureaucracy are rarely scaled by one man or one woman at a time. Throughout this book Scates and Oppenheimer probe what they term the 'moral economy' of ex-soldiers, their fierce sense of individual and collective entitlement to a decent and independent life.

The sociability of veterans was one of their greatest strengths. This is certainly true in many parts of Australia, but was it true on the land? Taking a very different case, I recall the intense sociability of French veterans like René Cassin, a disabled

soldier who ultimately reached the top of the French bureaucracy, the *Conseil d'Etat*. Even in his latter years, when visiting a town hall in the Chartreuse, very rural and very beautiful, he would stop and ask the mayor or his secretary if he was a veteran. The answer was almost always yes. Then he asked whether there were local projects or problems that were mired in bureaucratic red tape. There always were such problems. Then he asked if he might see if he could help, on his return to Paris. A few days later, the mayor was shocked to learn that the problem had vanished, because the kindly man who had stopped by was the head of the *Conseil d'Etat*, and could lift bureaucratic obstacles with a single phone call. Magic, no; old soldiers' solidarity, yes. Alone, the veteran had the world against him, especially if he was not quite right, either in body or in mind. Together with others, he had a chance. Maybe he would fail, but his failure would not be that of a man alone, and that is what I see and hear in this moving book.

The late Eric Hobsbawm once said that people with property can go through the world alone, and not feel alone or impotent; they have their capital with them. Working people can't walk alone in the same way, but they can walk together with other working men and get to their destination. How true this was in the material business of clearing land, starting a farm, and making a living after war. All too often (as these chapters show) these men had only their families beside them. Despite the promise that soldier settlement would restore men to the roles of breadwinners and providers, the unpaid labour of women and children (and sometimes a little luck) secured that fragile tenure on land.

In chapters dealing with the physical and psychological casualties of war, the authors claim that combat 'brutalised men – and lives of violence unbalanced even the most disciplined of soldiers'. That is true of some, but not of others. I wonder if those not-brutalised men remained who they had been by finding a way to come together with other decent men struggling to survive the aftermath of an indecent war? I wonder if it is harder to brutalise a brotherhood than a single individual? Perhaps, but I believe that the answer varies with the social circumstances which greet those coming home from war. It was not for lack of courage or physical commitment that so many soldiers turned farmers lost their farms. It was built into the harsh period in which they lived. For bringing alive the moving struggles of these men and their families, we owe Scates and Oppenheimer a considerable debt. It is a story worth hearing in these unstable times.

**Jay Winter**

**Charles J. Stille Professor of History,  
Department of History, Yale University**



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## NOTE TO READERS

In 1917, nurses became eligible to take up land under the soldier acts across Australia, and women often assumed control of properties after the death of their husbands. We have used the term ‘Soldier’s Blocks’ as this was the phrase adopted by contemporaries. Wary of anachronisms, we have also retained imperial units of measurement, although metric measures have been used in any discussions of the late 20th century and beyond.

The writing of this book involved a close reading of three separate but related archives: Lands Department files, repatriation records and AIF personnel service records. The last have been available online through the National Archives since 2006 (NAA 2454), but special access was granted by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs to view repatriation files relevant to this study, and most remain undigitised. When an individual case is examined in this book, the individual’s testimony has been cross-referenced (wherever possible) against all three deposits. In keeping with convention, testimony has been faithfully transcribed, retaining idiosyncratic spelling. Very occasionally we have substituted ‘and’ for ‘+’ to enhance the readability of the text.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Soldier's Road. It's a sign you'll see right across Australia. A country lane, winding through prosperous farmlands, a suburban avenue skirting the city, a dusty track that leads to nowhere. All those signs remind us of a largely forgotten historical landscape, the story of thousands of men and women who worked the land in interwar Australia. Or tried to.

Our own journey down Soldier's Road began nearly a decade ago, with a grant by the Australian Research Council to recover the history of soldier settlement during the interwar period (LP0883705). Our industry partners, State Records New South Wales and the Department of Veterans' Affairs, provided financial and in-kind assistance, and we were privileged to work with our Partner Investigator, Christine Yeats. Since then, several cultural agencies have supported this project, including the National Archives of Australia (who facilitated access to repatriation files which were uncatalogued at the time), the National Library of Australia (who facilitated the gathering of oral history testimony), the Australian Red Cross, the University of New England, the University of New South Wales, and Monash and Flinders Universities. We warmly thank the librarians and archivists who generously assisted our work and the descendants of soldier settlers who shared their memories. We are particularly indebted to a team of dedicated research assistants. Particular thanks are due to Will Frances, Steph Green, Laura James, Jo Kildea, Margrette Kleinig, Alice McConnell, Catherine Tiernan, Rebecca Wheatley and especially Selena Williams, who helped to process over 7000 files that shape the core of this narrative. The first and last named produced dissertations that enlarge our knowledge of soldier settlement. Nor could we have succeeded without the support of family and friends, most notably Rae Frances, and Will and Alex Scates Frances; and Mark, Isabelle, Luci and Camille Guyot.

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**Bruce Scates and Melanie Oppenheimer**