

TOPIC 9: On Leave in England

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

For the men and women of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), writes historian Bill Gammage, 'the principal haven from the storm and stress of the flame-racked years was England'. Training for new recruits on their way to units on the Western Front often took place in Australian camps on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, England. Thousands of wounded Australians spent time in hospitals in Great Britain and Ireland, then proceeded to 'convalescent depots', and finally to training battalions to harden them up before going back to the front.

Most members of the AIF were able to take leave in Britain and Ireland. In general, AIF men got ten days leave there every ten months or so. A recruiting pamphlet put out in New South Wales in 1917 emphasised the fact that by joining the AIF, soldiers could also be tourists:

Free Tour to Great Britain and Europe The Chance of a Lifetime

On arrival in England the tourist is granted four days' leave, which may be spent in London or any other part of the Old Country ... The Abbey, the Tower Bridge, and the Tower itself, the Strand, where they say you can meet more Australians than in George Street [Sydney], these all appeal to a man who has seen nothing older than Macquarie's building in Chancery Square [the Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney].

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The majority of members of the AIF were the descendants of immigrants from Great Britain and Ireland, and a sizeable minority had actually been born there. Most, on leave, took the opportunity to visit family or places associated with their parents or ancestors. Relationships were formed, and after the war more than 15,000 wives, children and fiancées of Australian soldiers were taken out to Australia. However, while Australians undoubtedly retained an affection for what some called the 'old country' they also learnt during the war that it was a very different place from Australia and most were glad to return home.

How would these comparisons influence national identity?

AIMS

Students at Level 1/2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Know that soldiers and nurses took leave in England• Know some of the activities they undertook while on leave
Students at Level 2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand how war can shape identity

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Level 1/2/3	<p>The concept here is one of Australians coming into contact with people they had been taught to admire, and having to make their own judgements based on reality.</p> <p>Ask students to think about when they come into contact with another school. How do they compare themselves? What do they look for? How do they treat the other students? What judgements do they make?</p>
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Here are some photographs of soldiers on leave in England.

- 1) List some words to describe what their feelings and thoughts might have been.



AWM J02936

Four Australians on leave in England in front of Temple Arch in London.



AWM D00796

The AIF and War Chest Club and the Australian War Records Section building in Horseferry Road, London.



GO TO THE CD-ROM Visit the Image and Film Libraries and look at Topic 9 - ON LEAVE IN ENGLAND



Add information about VISITING ENGLAND to your assignment

Historian Bill Gammage, who studied letters and diaries of men in the AIF, wrote:

England was ... head and heart of the Empire, the source of everything great and secure, Australia's shield, and to many Australians, Home. Some had been born there, others were sons of Englishmen, almost all had learnt of England's glories at school. They were impatient to see the old country ... 'How often have I heard your glories blazed abroad throughout, Old England [one soldier enthused], and now, I view your coasts, thy shore line, your hills and valleys ... tears welled in my eyes at the sight of the Home Land ... there is no land so sweet, no spot so hallowed as the spot of land we call Britain.'

(Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1990, page 225)

- ▮ Why was there a strong connection between Australians and England?
- ▮ What happened to this connection during wartime?

Gammage also wrote:

Yet at some point during [their touring] Australians realised a truth. England was cold, wet and sunless, and mainly a repository for barren camps and bleak hospitals ... 'I will have a better idea of the country after we finish our leave ... but so far our chaps wonder why the Hell the English did not let [Kaiser] Bill have the blanky place & move out of it' [wrote one] ... Many in the AIF never loved their country better than after they had left it, and they longed to return to the sunlit land they had quit so readily ... [An] Australian soldiers' paper wrote,

*When God knocked off one night said He:
'This world's a rotten failure.'
Lor Lumme, though, He'd let'em see —
Next day He made Australia.*

(Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, pages 227-8)

- ▮ How did visits to England influence Australian attitudes towards English places, civilians and soldiers?
- ▮ How did visits to England influence Australian identity?