

Irish and Catholic opposition to conscription for World War I

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1. Range of Australian Irish and Catholic responses

In 1916-17, the Australian Irish were often stereotyped, somewhat like Australian Muslims today, but were diverse. Of Australia's population of five million, only three or four per cent were born in Ireland, but over a million had Irish ancestry. About one in eight of Irish Australians were Protestant, the rest were Catholics. But not all Australian Catholics were of Irish background, some were of English, Italian and other ancestry but 90 per cent of them had Irish ancestry.

Irish Australians and Catholic Australians enlisted in the war at about their percentage in the population. (And we need to remember that despite all the historians talking about enthusiasm for the war, about 35 per cent of the eligible males enlisted, 65 per cent did not.) Irish and Catholic Australians had their share of casualties and won their share of medals, but were under-represented in the officer ranks by a big margin.

Some pockets of Australia, however, stood out from the national trend. A famous example is the Irish Australian district of Koroit which had the lowest enlistments of any locality. The booth of Killarney in that shire returned 195 No votes on conscription and zero Yes votes. Similar stories come from other Irish Australian enclaves, for example, Terowie in South Australia and Kilmore in Victoria.

On conscription Irish Australians divided on both class and religious lines, which did not coincide. Dublin-born Canon Alexander Leeper of the Anglican Trinity College and Derry-born Rev J L Rentoul of the Presbyterian Ormond College who actively encouraged enlistment, campaigned for conscription, and spoke of opponents as traitors. However, many Protestant rank-and-file trade unionists were active in the campaign against conscription, as will be discussed later.

Some leading Catholic Irish Australians supported the Empire. Archbishops Michael Kelly in Sydney and Patrick Clune of Perth spoke for a Yes vote in the referendums, although Kelly changed. Middle-class Catholics in Melbourne such as lawyers Vincent Nolan and Frank Gavan Duffy and the Jesuit rector of Xavier College Father James O'Dwyer advocated conscription. As you know, the vast majority of Irish Australian Catholics came to oppose conscription.

2. Irish Australians active in wider groups

Here are some examples of Irish Australians who were active in anti-conscription groups. In the labour movement, John Curtin, Creswick-born son of Irish immigrants, was a full-time organiser for the national trade union anti-conscription committee, going to jail for defying the call-up; Tom Ryan, Queensland Labor premier; Jim Scullin, editor of the Ballarat *Evening Echo*; Mick Considine, key organiser of the Broken Hill miners and MHR; and Frank Brennan, MHR for Batman. The number of rank-and-file activists was legion.

Among the Wobblies, Galway-born Tom Glynn was editor of their paper, *Direct Action*, and suffered four years in jail for his beliefs. Lesbia Keogh Harford, poet and Wobbly activist, was described by Guido Barrachi as “very Irish-Australian, you know,

very warm and romantic” – not sure what to make of that. Guido’s mother, of course, was Irish Australian.

In the Women’s Peace Army, two Irish Australians were outstanding: Bella Guerin and Vida Goldstein. Guerin, born at Williamstown of Irish migrant parents, educated at Loreto Convent, Ballarat, first woman graduate of Melbourne University, a school principal in Brunswick, was jailed in Pentridge for her activism. Goldstein, founder of *The Woman Voter*, was the daughter of Jacob, a migrant from Cork.

Bernard O’Dowd, Beaufort-born of Irish parents, poet and activist, a Catholic by birth, joined Frederick Sinclair and others in the Free Religious Fellowship, a group that brought together Victoria’s Christians who opposed the war. Probably other Irish Australians were active in the anti-war Australian Church, which was led by dissident Presbyterian minister, Charles Strong.

The point here is that Irish Australians were well represented among labour and radical activists before Daniel Mannix came to the fore.

3. Irish factor as a catalyst

For 100 years commentators have discussed the effect on the conscription referenda of the Easter Rising in Ireland in April 1916 and the British reprisals. I put it to you that Irish and Catholic factors were important in the referenda on conscription, as catalysts.

The word “catalyst” is important. Most Irish Australians were going to vote No anyway. The total number of No votes was about twice as big as the number of Irish Australians. After the Rising the rate of enlistment of Irish Australians stayed about the same as before. Irish factors did not generate the No vote. Alan Gilbert’s

1969 study was correct in concluding that the Irish Rising “secured a minority” of No votes.

If the Rising is a catalyst, what chemical reaction was taking place which the Rising accelerated? Key ingredients were the horrific losses in the war and, as John Lack and Judith Smart have recently recalled, the bitterness caused by lower wages and rising food prices, provoking food riots in Melbourne and making 1917 probably the most bitter year in white Australia’s history.

John Lack has documented how Tom Purcell, a 63-year-old railway worker of Yarraville, son of Kilkenny parents, father of two sons at the war, shifted from sympathy for the war to attending meetings to hear Adela Pankhurst because of the economic hardships, and the strikes.

Robert Bollard has argued that at Burramine on the Murray prosperous Irish Australian farmers who had voted Liberal by three to one in 1914 turned to anti-conscription Labor in 1917 by 73 votes to 2. These farmers were part of some 200 people at Dookie, who attacked a pro-conscription rally with stones and eggs.

It is likely that the referendum vote was indeed a vote not just against conscription but a vote against the war.

When Hughes failed to win the two referenda on conscription for the Great War, he blamed especially the Irish Catholic factor for his defeat. Frank Anstey had a similar view:

... if there had been no Easter Week in Ireland in 1916 and no murder of poor Jim Connolly and his associate leaders there would have been no hope of defeating conscription in Australia. Before that date the Irish were as War mad as the English but Easter Week stirred the Paddy.

Hughes and Anstey exaggerated the role of the Rising. The Irish factor was not the most influential: it was a catalyst with a multiplier effect. This was symbolised by the way that Mary McGowan was arrested at Melbourne Town Hall for singing 'God Save Ireland' outside a pro-conscription meeting.

4. Alliance of Archbishop Daniel Mannix with radicals

Now, to the role of Daniel Mannix. Firstly, he was not explicitly against war or killing. My talk draws on Cyril Bryan's 1918 *Archbishop Mannix: Champion of Australian Democracy*. Bryan, an active trade unionist and a captain in an artillery unit of the AIF, came home from the war and wrote the first book on Archbishop Daniel Mannix, arguing that Mannix was a democrat and a spokesperson for workers' rights. Four years as parish priest in the working-class suburb of West Melbourne from 1913 to 1917 had changed Mannix. I wrote a chapter about that in the Labour and Anzac book.

Imagine the local ALP members, women's peace activists and Wobblies picking up the morning paper in September 1916 to read that the Catholic archbishop of Melbourne had spoken against conscription at Clifton Hill. Someone from the top end of town had come out in support of them. The dailies reported him, *Labour Call* and Vida Goldstein welcomed him.

A few months later he declared the war to be a trade war, at the opening of a new Christian Brothers' school over the road. He spoke, not as an Irish patriot – although he was that – but he spoke on behalf of working-class and humanist values, recommending putting Australia first and the Empire second. As regards the evidence for this view, I leave you to read the quotes on the sheet. I

agree with Michael McKernan that in this instance the overwhelmingly working-class flock influenced their shepherds.

Brenda Niall wrote that “Dr Mannix’s speeches were remembered, not only for their anti-imperial spirit but also for sounding something like Bolshevism.” These words sound strange to those who remember Mannix in his old age as the supporter of B A Santamaria and the Democratic Labor Party.

In 1917 Mannix was not just an Irish Australian hero but a working-class hero. As Mannix himself said, some three-quarters of the huge crowds at his speeches on conscription were not Catholics. This alliance between a Catholic archbishop and labour radicals noticeably strengthened the anti-conscription forces. Tom Barker, the Wobbly activist jailed for a brilliant mock- recruiting poster, said: “We might not have followed him to heaven but we certainly weren’t going to deny him his right as partner in the battle.”

No wonder that, a few years later, Percy Brookfield, agnostic leader of the labour radicals of Broken Hill, told one of his colleagues, “If it was not for Mannix, you and I would have been shot long ago.”

Neglected peace efforts of the Pope

Extra weight was given to Mannix’s speeches against conscription by the policies of Pope Benedict XV, who was neutral on the war which he called “the suicide of civilised Europe”, naming military conscription as an evil. The British and Australian governments placed restrictions on news coverage of the Pope’s views. The Anglican archbishop of Melbourne Henry Clarke, and Baptist minister Thomas Ruth, both publicly condemned the Pope.

5. An exceptional moment

In summary: the views of Irish Australians were diverse. Most Irish Australians and most Australian Catholics were working class and they opposed conscription, often in union and other citizens' groups. The Easter Rising in Ireland strengthened but did not dominate the No vote. One of the factors in the defeat of the two referenda was the unusual alliance of an Irish-born Catholic archbishop, Daniel Mannix, with the wider coalition: a case of the flock leading the shepherd.

The Australian votes against conscription are unique in world history. They saved thousands of Australian and German lives which would have been lost if prime minister Hughes had introduced conscription. The Irish and Catholic working-class factor was an important catalyst.

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