

“War is not a Christian Mission”:
Racial Invasion and Religious
Crusade in H. S. Gullett’s
*Official History of the Australian Imperial
Force in Sinai and Palestine*

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The reverse colonisation narrative emerged in the late nineteenth century as a predominately English form that expressed fears over the declining vigour of the British race and the pressing need for renewed attention to national defence and a rejuvenated martial spirit (Meaney 230). Cosmopolitan civility and urban decadence were construed as enervating the adventurous masculine spirit responsible for Britain’s Empire. This left Britain vulnerable to an invading host of Others who were seen as more virile and adventurous because they were the products of a more vital and competitive natural environment. Australia developed its own inflections of these invasion narratives because of (post)colonial anxieties over being a small British settlement in a large continent precariously perched beneath a populous Asia. Britain was often in league with the enemy in this literature because its treaties with China and Japan compromised a national determination to develop and maintain a white Australia policy (Meaney 261). The escalating arms race between the European powers in the lead-up to the First World War stimulated the populist form and prefigured some of the ways in which that conflict would be rendered within official as well as popular culture (Clarke xv; Dixon 135, 143, 146, 150). In this essay I want to explore H. S. Gullett’s *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine*, Volume VII of the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* as a stimulating example of the engagement of Australia’s *Official History* with the concerns and conventions of the reverse colonisation narrative. Gullett’s account of Australian soldiers in the Middle East reaffirms the genetic destiny of Australia and insists on the significance of its frontier society to the rejuvenation of the Empire. After reading Gullett no Briton need doubt that a white Australia was imperative to the strategic interests of Britain.

The Australian reverse colonisation narrative was a form of scaremongering designed to rally support for an independent defence policy and a white Australia. Britain's treaties with China and Japan, its ambivalence towards the white Australia policy, and associations with an effete aristocracy meant that it was sometimes imagined to be at odds with Australian interests. The Australian form sets the vigorous rural Australian against the effete English new chum and his urban Australian counterparts (Dixon 137). The view presented by Francis Adams that the distinctive Australian type was to be found on the rural frontiers of colonial Australia became extremely influential in shaping accounts of the national Literature. Vance Palmer made a point of it in 1905 when he claimed that "[t]he only really national work that we have produced [. . .] will be found to be inspired by the bush. This is natural [. . .] we are a bush people—that is to say that our national life finds most perfect expression in the different types of the west" (Palmer 372). An heroic vision of the exemplary Australian bushman is a noted convention of the Australian invasion narrative and the early mythopoetic work in journalism and history of C. E. W. Bean, as well as the official account of the Australian Light Horse which is my primary interest here (see Bean, *On the Wool Track, The Dreadnought of the Darling* and *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* Vols I and II; Dixon 146).

The disagreement with Britain over Pacific defence policy gave significant impetus to cooperative new Liberal-Labor moves to develop an independent Australian navy and establish a system of military training prior to the First World War (Birrell 214). Alfred Deakin, Liberal Prime Minister from 1903-1908, was a major force behind this defence policy and he worked closely with A. W. Jose, the Australian correspondent for the *Times* (and later the author of the volume on the Navy in the *Official History*), and Frank Fox, the editor of the *Lone Hand* (Bean, Vol I 9). The later, Sydney-based magazine was founded with the help of public monies, diverted by Deakin, and it serialised invasion stories alongside of articles about Australian insecurity and the need for a strong and independent national defence. According to Robert Dixon:

The invasion scare material appearing in the *Lone Hand* is typical in its conflation of the codes of romance with those of journalistic realism. [. . .] This [. . .] is enhanced by the intertextual relationship between the adventure stories and the factual articles, whose rhetoric and imagery tend to reinforce each other, creating the magazine's own regime of truth, and inscribing the reader in its call to action. (140)

Fox serialised his own invasion narrative, *The Australian Crisis*, in the *Lone Hand* in 1908 under the pen name of C. H. Kirmess, and the novel was

published the following year by George Robertson in Melbourne. Kirmess's tale consolidated a set of conventions established in the late nineteenth century by William Lane's *White or Yellow: The Story of the Race War of A.D. 1908*, which was serialised in the *Boomerang* in 1888, and Kenneth Mackay's *The Yellow Wave*, which was published by Bentley in London in 1895. These narratives imagined the inundation of the continent by industrious Asian hordes bent on seizing a predominantly unoccupied continent often with the help of a European Imperial power. An increasingly decadent society softened by the effeminate leisure and civility of urban life renders the colonies vulnerable, and the situation is exacerbated by the impotence and corruption of a ruling political class besotted by self-aggrandising Imperial connections and material self-interest. Resistance, virility and true Australian community are attributed to cooperative bands of mounted bushmen, who display a level of independence, self reliance, courage and durability derived from their selfless commitment to an ideal of masculine community and a willing struggle with the harsh and demanding Australian environment.

Henry Somer Gullett was intimately involved with the issues which concerned the reverse colonisation narrative in the lead up to the First World War. He started as a journalist with the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1900 before moving to London eight years later, where he wrote freelance for Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* and *Sun* newspapers. During this time he was especially interested in immigration and its significance to national defence, and he wrote some pamphlets on the subject, cooperating closely with the work in this area of Australia House in London. In 1915 he was appointed the official Australian correspondent with the British and French armies but after returning to Australia for a lecture tour in 1916 he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force. On his return to Britain he was seconded to work in the Australian War Records Section by C. E. W. Bean, Australia's official war correspondent, later the general editor and major author of the *Official History*, and the founder of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra. In November 1917 he was sent to Egypt to collect the records of the Middle Eastern campaigns as a preliminary to writing the official history of that part of the War. Once there Gullett was quickly engaged as an official war correspondent for the Light Horse, who were piqued at the lack of publicity they were receiving in comparison with the Australians fighting on the western front. He served as the highly influential press advisor to the Australian Prime Minister, W. M. Hughes, during the Versailles peace talks, then as the inaugural Director of the AWM for a short time, and following that, Director of the fledgling Immigration Bureau in Melbourne. After being elected to Federal

Parliament as a Nationalist in 1925 he held several ministerial portfolios including Foreign Affairs and Trade and Customs before his death in a plane crash in 1940 (Hill 138-39). Gullett's various careers represent a potent combination of journalism, history and politics and like the reverse colonisation narrative he was passionately invested in imagining, marking, and protecting the boundaries of the Australian nation.

The outbreak of the Great War gave Australians the opportunity of demonstrating their value to the mother country in ways that speak to the particular anxieties and potentialities of the reverse colonisation narrative. Gullett's official history reverses the narrative trends of the populist form with an account of a triumphal march into the Holy Land which reclaimed that sacred territory for a white Christian civilisation. The Australians and New Zealanders who help make this possible represent the vanguard of a rejuvenated British type hardened by frontier experience and ennobled by Christian tradition.

From the opening chapters Gullett is quick to identify the Australian Light Horse with the national purpose articulated in Bean's own first volume on the early part of the Gallipoli campaign:

By their work at Anzac would the world know them, and not only them, but the two new nations [Australia and New Zealand] which had sent them forth into ordeal of battle among the old warring Powers. By their work would the standard of valour be set for all time in lands destined some day to breed many-millioned nations. Conscious of the prestige they enjoyed as the descendants of a race whose victories were world-wide on a thousand fields, these children of spacious young countries were impelled by the vision of their assured and splendid future. They strove to do honour to the ashes of their fathers in a land that was old, and to set the stamp of glory on their children in a land new and hitherto untried. (18-19)

The racial, colonialist and social Darwinist ideas organising this statement were in wide circulation within the popular media from the last quarter of the nineteenth century and represent a particularly prominent if much less triumphant and optimistic feature of the Australian invasion narrative. Gullett's Light Horsemen are motivated by a sense that they represent the highest racial development of the best of British stock and the high moral purpose of their campaign is to establish a racial destiny for their countrymen. The confident assertion of genetic prosperity inverts the racial anxieties of the invasion narrative, though of course the need for such a statement in the first place is an indication that there is a record that needs to be corrected.

Patrick Brantlinger in his study of *British Literature and Imperialism between 1830 and 1914* argues that “much late Victorian and Edwardian writing, perhaps especially when it is most aggressively imperialist, has an elegiac quality about it, mourning the loss of adventure, heroism, true nobility” (42). British fears of degeneration and loss of Empire targeted the domestication of British culture which they associated with democratic reforms and the decline of aristocratic values (36). Domesticity, trade and modernity were markers of a world that no longer provided epic opportunities for British nobility. Henry Lawson’s famous lament that “The mighty Bush with iron rails is tethered to the world” and his welcome predictions of a looming military test for working-class Australian manhood had their ruling class counterpart in Britain earlier in the century when Tennyson lamented the “Peace of sloth or of avarice born” and called for “the ‘noble blood’ of Britain to awake and ‘arm, arm, arm!’” (Lawson, “Roaring Days” 57; Lord Alfred Tennyson, qtd in Brantlinger 37). According to Winston Churchill, however, when the “Great War” did come it was “completely spoilt” by “Democracy and Science”:

Instead of a small number of well-trained professionals championing their country’s cause with ancient weapons and a beautiful intricacy of archaic manoeuvre [. . .] we now have entire populations, including even women and children, pitted against one another in brutish mutual extermination, and only a set of blear-eyed clerks left to add up the butcher’s bill. From the moment Democracy was admitted to, or rather forced itself upon the battlefield, War ceased to be a Gentleman’s game. To Hell with it! (qtd in Brantlinger 43)

Bean’s English public school and imperial loyalties are perhaps responsible for his own sympathies with the chivalric values of Churchill but his democratic and Australian sympathies discarded their class associations. Bean uses the notion of a moral crusade to describe the motivations of those countries that opposed Germany in the War, though as Peter Pierce has pointed out he avoids the term chivalry (116). “[T]o the Allies, and to our own country among them, the war was of the nature of a crusade”, Bean wrote. “Not merely was their independence threatened or invaded; a new creed was being thrust upon the world, a creed utterly repugnant to the humanity of Christian civilisation” (Bean, Vol I xlvi). Gullett did not share Bean’s and Churchill’s university education, however, and he made a point of rejecting his general editor’s call to “stamp the early chapters with some high moral purpose and peculiar psychology”. Gullett “failed to discern such things in the *Light Horseman*”. “As I saw it”, he wrote,

their campaign was to a remarkable extent one with a casual sporting purpose to which they bent all their high intelligence and endeavour.

If I had a definite aim, apart from a clear honest narrative, it was to tell a story which would achieve the dual purpose of being a military text book and at the same time a book for the average reader. (Letter to Bean, 29 March 1921)

Gullett remained acutely sensitive to the classical, medieval and Christian associations of the Middle East, however, and he used them to confer historical gravitas on the Australians' actions and to embed them in a deeper European history. This rhetorical strategy has a logic of its own which the journalist-historian cannot resist when comparing contemporary British triumphs with the failures of the Crusaders. The official historian's Australian and New Zealand Lighthorsemen are the centrepieces of a British campaign which reclaims the Holy Land from the infidel. And so when the British forces marched on Jerusalem "even those who were not animated by religious fervour were stirred by the sight of what was to every man the deeply significant goal of his endeavour" (493). And when the Turkish shelling caused heavy losses

[t]he moral ascendancy of the British soldier was so pronounced [. . .] that the 75th Division was almost insensible to its very severe casualties. Nebi Samwil, the Mizpah of the Old Testament, the Montjoye of the Crusaders, marked the limit of King Richard's forlorn advance in January, 1192. Although the soldier is usually careless of the associations of the country over which he is fighting, these troops took a remarkably close and intelligent interest in the battlegrounds of the Old Testament and of the Crusaders. All or nearly all the Christian troops had during the long campaign diligently read their Bible as they had never read it before, and were arrested by the amazing fidelity of its atmosphere and colour. Guide-books of the Holy Land were studied in detail and read aloud round every camp-fire; and there were few among the soldiers who were not moved by the tragedy of the Lion Heart's failure, or who did not make a sporting resolution to carry, after the lapse of 700 years, Richard's mission to a triumphant conclusion. (493-94)

The religious rhetoric swells with the description of the entry of the war weary 10th Australian Light Horse into the holy city of Jerusalem a few weeks later:

[b]ut if these spent, chilled, and hungry campaigners thought at the time of their bodily comfort, that was secondary to the spiritual influences which moved them. In all that great army it is doubtful if a single man of European origin entered Jerusalem for the first time untouched by the influence of the Saviour. Christ met each man on the threshold of the city; each man, as he entered, was purified and exalted. The influence was, perhaps, not lasting. War is not a Christian

mission. But for a brief spell at least the soldier’s mind was purged of grossness, and he knew again the pure and trusting faith of his early childhood. (519)

The advance on Damascus provides another opportunity for Christian sentimentality. En route the 3rd Light Horse Brigade pass along the old Roman road past the stony uplands of Hattin where Saladin massacred the Crusaders:

now, more than 700 years later, Christian soldiers were to ride again over the parched field of Hattin, a simple, wholesome young manhood, conscious perhaps of no high Christian purpose, but single-thoughted in their voluntary duty to their race and country. They bore no relics of the True Cross to inflame their courage; they rode with no mail to protect their splendid young bodies; occasional blasphemy and scepticism marked their vivid speech. But no sworn and fiery Crusader of old carried a more terrible sword against a foe, and none rode nearer to the Christian precept to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before his God than these seemingly careless young light horsemen. (735)

The presence of Gullett’s Light Horsemen in the richly associated geography of Palestine allows them to make an Australian contribution to the record of Western civilisation and this secures their place in a hierarchy of races and peoples. According to this history the actions of the Light Horsemen establish a racial destiny for a nation that is authentically Christian, white and British, and this allows Gullett to establish the value to the Empire of a white Australia.

The Christian emphasis exists a little uneasily with the recognition that the Light Horsemen themselves were perhaps more in the tradition of Russel Ward’s Australian legend, than King Richard’s romanticised Christian warriors. Ward, of course, famously described the “typical Australian” as

a practical man, rough and ready in his manners [. . .] a “hard case”, sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally. He believes that Jack is not only as good as his master but, at least in principle, probably a good deal better [. . .] He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority [. . .] yet he is very hospitable and above all will stick to his mates through thick and thin. (1-2)

This description is consistent with Gullett’s representations of the Light Horsemen and is probably one of the reasons for his initial refusal of the general editor Bean’s demand that he nominate a higher moral ideal for their campaign.

The Christian emphasis has a particular resonance, however, when it is compared to C. H. Kirmess's Australian invasion narrative, *The Commonwealth Crisis*, which was serialised in the *Lone Hand* from 1908 to 1909. Kirmess's guerrilla bushmen react to the death of one of their mates at the hands of invading Japanese by slaughtering his horse as a blood sacrifice to brotherhood and revenge. Dixon points out that it is an ambiguous response for a Christian civilisation:

This ritual of blood sacrifice is part of a cult of manliness bound up with the birth of the nation through battle. Although it becomes—both in Kirmess's novel and in fact—central to the iconography of Australian nationhood, the symbolism of blood sacrifice remains disturbingly ambiguous. Is the ritual killing of the horse 'Christian', like their bullets? Is it a ceremony fitting for a Christian nation? Or is it a reversion to paganism, an indication that lurking within the White Guardsmen are primitive impulses like those of niggers? (151)

Gullett's Christian focus insists that the Australian Light Horse were not prey to any similar lapses. The distress of the Light Horsemen who were asked to destroy or sell their horses prior to returning to Australia has become a convention of subsequent recollections. The foil for Gullett's spiritually ennobled Christian warriors is supplied by orientalist stereotypes of the cunning, stupid, lazy, sensual, dirty native. Gullett's account of the Turks and Arabs is heavily invested in these tropes and the history is introduced with a contemptuous account of the Turkish opposition.

The peoples of the East are motivated by a mixture of fanaticism and illicit desire that is incompatible with the rational and ethical virtues that distinguish a Christian civilisation. This moral opposition establishes the West as the just and proper administrator of the East and the British are singled out from the other European countries as preferred governor of lesser peoples because of their exemplary virtues. The metaphoric and logical use of filth in the narrative transcodes racial and ethical distinction (Stallybrass and White). The squalid uncleanness of the East establishes a British claim to civilisation, modernity, health, reason, organisation, administration, civic virtue, law, order, progress and justice. It is an associative logic that is enabled by orientalist stereotypes.

The Young Turks who replaced the "luxurious and sensual" monarch Abdul Hamid, for example, engaged in war not because of religious fanaticism but because of "insensate personal ambition" (3). Their "ambitious, deliberate, and menacing" campaign sought systematically to eliminate "every individual who was not a Turk" (2):

[t]he race in future was to be a pure Turkish race, speaking and writing only the Turkish language, and worshipping only according to the Moslem faith. The alien millions of Greeks, Armenians, and Jews who represented most of the brains, the business capacity, and the industry of the country, were to be killed off or driven out. (2)

The ordinary Turkish soldier was easily won to this cause. According to Gullett, an inexperienced army “needs a high moral motive, like that which impelled the citizen armies of England between 1915 and 1919, or a sheer joy of life, such as might be expected in troops recruited in a generous young democratic country like Australia” (5). The Turks lacked these “stimulating influences” until the Gallipoli invasion “stirred those fires which on occasion never fail to move the Turk to passionate temper, fierce energy, and unselfish sacrifice” (5). At Gallipoli the “placid” and fatalistic Turkish peasant proved himself a “strong patriot and a religious fanatic” (5).

Orientalist accounts of the native typically distinguish a treacherous instability of character (Bhaba 66-84). The success of the young Turks, Talatt and Enver, in motivating their troops, could not be attributed to their “religious fanaticism or racial prejudices” but to the new despots’ understanding of the “baser desires and passions” of the Turk:

[t]he modern Turk is strangely complex. The Australians and the British found him throughout the war a clean and even a chivalrous fighter, and a docile, tractable, unresentful prisoner. But he has another and a sinister side to his character. He is still very primitive; he reverts swiftly to the qualities of his wild marauding forebears of a few centuries ago. Appeal to his baser side, and he will burn, ravish, and mutilate. (6)

The motive for the Turkish massacre of the Armenians can therefore be explained by “the Turk’s latent passion for lust and plunder” (6). This primitive sensuousness is of course a pointed opposition to the spiritually ennobled British and Australian forces that Gullett describes retracing the steps of the Crusaders and righteously entering Jerusalem and Damascus.

The Middle East required the government and administration of the West if it was to reverse the process of decline from the days when it was the cradle of civilisation. Unfortunately, however, the Turks had fallen in with the Germans who easily manipulated them by appealing to their “vanity and folly” (9). The effectiveness of the Turkish Army in the Middle East could be explained by German organisation; just as the invading Chinese in Mackay’s Australian invasion narrative, *The Yellow Wave*, depended upon Russian leadership and administration. The Germans ran the management

and technology and the Turks supplied the bodies in an arrangement that exemplified the racial hierarchies organising Gullett's narrative:

The German High Command appreciated fully that in this great war, in which all the scientific, industrial, and business talent and capacity of the world's leading Powers were ranked in two opposing forces, the quality of the combatants was of two distinct grades. In the first grade there were, at the end of 1915, the British, French, and Germans. In the second grade, and far inferior, were the troops of such relatively backward and primitive peoples as the Turks, Serbs, Bulgars, and Russians. (15)

Gullett's *History* reimagines his invasion narrative as an optimistic assertion of imperial progress in the light of British-Australian cooperation. An effete, class-conscious English aristocracy still leads to strategic errors but these are redeemed by the courage of working men from England, Australia and New Zealand who were toughened and emboldened by their struggle for existence. The merit-based egalitarian nature of the Australian contingent made them especially worthy heirs to the chivalrous values of the Crusaders and it was as central to their military effectiveness as their racial character. Gullett's official history, like the invasion narratives of Kenneth Mackay and C. H. Kirmess, establishes the Australian environment and the special form of social contract which it inspired amongst the legendary bushman, as exemplary sources for the rejuvenation of the racial character of the Empire. With Britain alongside, in regards to the oriental threat, Australians could put aside the degenerative anxieties of the invasion narrative and assert a grand and prosperous future; with Australian frontiersmen on their side Britons could do the same.

Neville Meaney's account of William Lane and Kenneth Mackay suggests that during and after the war the independent nationalist spirit expressed in their respective invasion narratives was quickly replaced by expressions of British solidarity. Bean had to caution Gullett over his criticisms of British leadership but religious and racial solidarity are significant emphases of his history. The War, at least according to Australia's official historians, had demonstrated the value of the emerging Australian racial character to the future of the Empire, and this helped to fill the pre-war breach in sympathy caused by British connections with China and Japan. The continuing presence of invasion narratives in Australian culture suggests, however, that this has not been sufficient in itself to settle the racial anxieties that continue to haunt the Australian imagination (Ross).

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