

# SO MUCH MORE THAN A HUMBLE HALL: WORLD WAR ONE MEMORIALS IN NSW SCHOOLS OF ARTS & MECHANICS' INSTITUTES

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*ABSTRACT:* This paper outlines the important role that School of Arts and Mechanics' Institutes played in the story of Australian adult education and highlights their significance in acknowledging those members of their local communities who had served in World War One, in honoring who had fallen, and in stressing the great cost of war to the community.

*Keywords:* history of adult education, mechanics' institutes, community war memorials

Last year the world marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War (WW I) in August 1914. This year marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps [the ANZACS] on April 25<sup>th</sup> 1915. By the end of the First World War there were very few people in the countries that took part, who remained unaffected. The war reached out and touched almost everyone's life in some way or other. Children grew up in the shadow of battle, their fathers absent or lost. Women were mobilized in unprecedented numbers. The vast majority of these women were drafted into the civilian work force to replace absent men or to work in greatly expanded munitions factories. Thousands more served in the military mostly in support roles but some saw action as nurses. The destruction unleashed by the first really modern war resulted in previously unimagined losses. Over 9 million soldiers died as a result of the fighting. Food shortages, sometimes inflicted by blockades and sometimes resulting from failed harvests, weakened the people who remained on the home fronts. Nearly 6 million civilians died from disease or starvation. Almost one million more were killed as a direct result of military operations. In all, the estimate of dead directly resulting from the war stands at over 16 million.

## Australia and the War

Though those at home in Australia were spared much of the more brutal collateral damage suffered by those on whose lands the war was actually fought, the Australian war casualties were really quite horrendous. Remember that the Australian population at that time was approximately 4.9 million people. Around 420,000 Australians volunteered for service in the war, representing almost 40 per cent of the male population aged between 18 and 44. Of that number, 335,000 embarked for active service, 60,284 died and 155,133 were wounded in action. At 65 per cent, the **Australian casualty rate**

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<sup>1</sup>Association of Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of Arts [AMISA] website: <http://amisa.org.au>  
contact: <http://amisa.org.au/contact-us>

(proportionate to total embarkations) was among the highest of any nation, which took part in the war.

### **Landmarks in Adult Education**

In their book, *Landmarks in International Adult Education: A Comparative Analysis*, the Editors, Charters and Hilton, present accounts of landmark initiatives in adult education in eight countries. All of these “landmarks” share the following characteristics, which also constituted the criteria for their selection:

- each addressed successfully a significant learning/social issue
- each demonstrated a particular appropriateness to its own specific context
- each served a population of significant numbers
- each has been judged as having been successful in meeting the needs of their communities and learners
- each embodied a fairly simple idea, which had self-evident credibility

The initiatives chosen on the basis of the above criteria and their national homes were as follows:

- Study circles Sweden
- Folk High Schools Denmark
- Workers’ Universities Yugoslavia
- The Workers’ Educational Association United Kingdom
- Frontier College Canada
- Cooperative Extension United States of America
- People and Culture France
- Volkshochschule Germany

In many ways, the Landmarks described are the product of the societies and cultures in which they operate and they all deliver similar adult learning outcomes for their participants. While all nations, to a lesser or greater extent, have implemented adult educational provisions for their inhabitants and that while, in each nation, a range of models and approaches have been used, it appears that in each nation there can be identified one prototypical approach that has become synonymous with that nation. It is this paper’s contention that if *Landmarks in International Adult Education: A Comparative Analysis* had included another chapter, an Australian chapter, then the Australian landmark in adult education would have been the School of Arts or the Mechanics’ Institute movement.

## **Schools of Arts/Mechanics' Institutes**

At the time of WW I there were some 800 plus Schools or Institutes in the state of NSW and perhaps some 3000 Australia-wide. They operated under a variety of names:

- School of Arts
- Mechanics' Institute
- Literary Institute
- Workingmen's Institute
- Miners' Institute
- Railway Institute [and there was also a Tramways Institute]
- Postal Institute
- Athenaeum
- Lyceum
- Temperance hall
- Free Library
- Memorial Hall
- Public Hall
- Soldiers' Hall
- People's Institute

In this paper the general term “Schools and Institutes” will be used.

### **Their Origins**

Schools and Institutes were originally voluntary organizations, which had as their major objective the diffusion of scientific and technical knowledge, through the establishment of libraries, the organization of technical classes, the presentation of public lectures, the maintenance of collections of technological models and scientific materials, and the holding of industrial fairs and expositions. Schools and Institutes have long been recognized as having been among the very earliest providers of formal adult education. Within a decade or so of the formation in the early 1820s of the original Scottish institutes, there were Schools & Institutes in all parts of the English-speaking world.

### **The First Wave**

All these early Schools and Institutes [which may be described as the “first wave”] placed a heavy emphasis on intellectual and technological goals. They saw themselves as providing for the scientific/technological education of mechanics and the moral uplift of the working classes. However, almost everywhere, most of these “first wave” Schools & Institutes failed to thrive. Except for that handful that evolved into well-known universities, colleges and libraries. A NSW example is the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts [1833] which through its Working Men's College was the parent of the NSW Technical and Vocational Education system and the grandparent of two universities. As a result of this “failure to thrive” many observers of adult education have cast the Schools & Institutes movement, as a whole, in the role of glorious failure. This has been done

largely on the basis of the claim that they had failed to achieve their stated purposes, in that:

- They had not succeeded in promoting the mental and moral improvement of the working classes.
- They had not educated the mechanic in the scientific principles underlying his trade

## **The Second Wave**

However, an examination of the stories of the later Australian Schools & Institutes, which were built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, supports the long held view that there was indeed a distinct and quite different "second wave" of Schools and Institutes in Australia. These Schools or Institutes, despite their name, had little to do directly with the scientific/technological education of the artisan class as their aims were:

*The mental and moral improvement and the rational recreation of the members through the establishment of a library and reading room, and by the provision of lectures, the formation of classes, the maintenance of recreational facilities, and by such other means that seem desirable to the Committee. [New Lambton Mechanics' and Miners' Institute Constitution 1902]*

They did, however, have a lot to do with providing, a local home, no matter how modest, for reading, adult learning, culture, civic action, recreation, and entertainment. These Schools and Institutes provided crucial social infrastructure in numerous suburbs and towns: often predating the arrival of local government. They, in modern terms, built social capital in their local communities. Consult any local community history and you will more than likely find that: the first local church service; the first picture show, concert or play; the first public meeting; the first court sitting; and the first Council meeting all occurred in the local School or Institute Hall.

## **The Spread of the Second Wave**

As the nineteenth century ended and the twentieth century began, there was a shift of population from the rows of rented inner city terrace houses to the new owner occupied detached cottages of the suburbs spreading along the newly developed rail and tram lines. At the same time, as a result of the government's closer settlement policies in many rural areas and as new mining areas were opened up, a number of new towns and villages were established. In almost all of these new suburbs and towns, there was soon built a School or Institute. The records of many of these Schools and Institutes are far from complete. However, the one event, in their lives, that is very well documented, in almost all cases, is the ceremony at which the School was officially opened. From the detailed newspaper reports of these ceremonies it can be seen just how significant these events were in the lives of their communities. Senior, as well as local, politicians were in attendance, often the Premier, sometimes the Governor as well or instead of the Premier, usually the Minister for Education, local clergy, and the local Mayor and Aldermen.

## **How did Communities use their Schools or Institutes?**

The local School or Institute soon developed as a comprehensive provider of educational, social, cultural, and recreational services to its local community. Although the story of each is different and to some extent unique, it is possible to present a generalized list of the ways in which communities used their Schools and Institutes.

- Education - Some Schools and Institutes provided basic education classes for illiterate adults, other Schools provided the local venue and organization for University Extension lectures, and of course, many class groups, both publicly and privately organized, used the halls and classrooms, and a few halls even served as temporary public schools or annexes to the local high school or technical and further education college.
- Libraries - Before Municipal Libraries, the Schools and Institutes were the only local public libraries. This was their most important function [many even renamed themselves as Literary Institutes]. Though they had basic reference sections and most took a broad selection of Australian and even some overseas newspapers and magazines for the reading room, the schools mainly catered for recreational reading. They were essentially libraries of popular fiction.
- Meetings - A full range of lodges, social clubs, political parties, women's organizations, and community groups used the Schools' and Institutes' facilities to conduct their affairs. Often one of the meeting rooms was specially equipped and reserved solely for Lodge Meetings.
- Working Class Political Life - Many suburban and some rural Schools and Institutes provided a significant local resource for the then infant working class movement. Labor Electoral Leagues and Women's Suffrage groups used the facilities of the Schools, as did the unions, as well as the benefit societies and the fraternal lodges. Further, their libraries, as well as stocking popular fiction, offered the standard works of contemporary Socialist thought while their Debating Clubs explored radical topics. Finally, their lecture programs helped to popularise the ideas of Marx, Darwin and Huxley and promoted a belief in the inevitability of progress.
- Theatrical - Amateur dramatics, professional performances and cinematic extravaganzas all took place in the School's or the Institute's main hall.
- Civil Society - Civic functions, public meetings, and sometimes, until a town hall was built, even the municipal council met in the School or Institute as did the local court, and often the local MP maintained his/her electoral office on the School's or Institute's premises.
- Religious - The Schools' or Institute's facilities were not only used by secular bodies, many churches held their services in the Schools'/Institutes' lecture halls while awaiting the completion of their own purpose built premises. However, this traffic was not all one way. Some Schools and Institutes operated from church halls until they had accumulated enough funds to build/buy their own premises.
- Emergencies - the Schools and Institutes were often local centers for relief during floods and bushfires. As late as 1950s, thousands of children were immunized against polio in the local Schools or Institutes halls.

- Billiards - played a major role, almost all Schools and Institutes had one table and some had more than six. Though some condemned billiards [and some Schools/institutes never had billiard tables], Sir Joseph Carruthers, Premier of NSW made a famous speech in support of the role of Billiards when he opened the Miranda School of Arts. In this speech, he stressed both the recreational and fund raising role of billiards in the life of the Schools and Institutes. It should also be remembered that the Schools'/Institutes' billiards halls [and other games and smoking rooms] were just about the only place that working men could meet and relax in an alcohol-free environment
- Social Functions - both public and private - were held in the School's or Institute's hall; there were concerts, recitals, balls, dances, fetes, bazaars, flower shows and art exhibits for a range of public purposes, and, of course, wedding receptions, engagement, twenty-first, golden weddings, retirement and other private parties were events that made the School's rafters ring.
- Companionship - We should not forget the value that the Schools & Institutes contributed in providing opportunities for companionship. As John Woolley, Professor of Classics and first Principal of the University of Sydney, said, at the opening of the Wollongong School of Arts in 1861, "*I am so firmly convinced that the habit of meeting is itself a priceless good that it would be worthwhile to come if only to shake hands and go home again.*"

## **The Project**

By the time of the First World War, the Schools/Institutes movement in NSW was at its peak both in terms of number of Schools/Institutes and the level of their activity. These Schools and Institutes had little to do with the scientific or technological education of the artisan class. They, however, had a lot to do with providing, in the then new suburbs and towns, a local home, no matter how modest, for reading, learning, culture, civic action, recreation, and entertainment. Further, these Schools and Institutes provided a real social focus to the lives of the inhabitants of these suburbs and towns; a focus sorely needed, given the almost complete absence of any other local social infrastructure.

It was with this context firmly in mind that it was decided to collect, to collate and to publish on the AMISA (Association of Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of Arts - NSW) website, the details of WW I memorials which are in or co-located with a School or Institute in the state of New South Wales. The Schools and Institutes reported to have such memorials were contacted requesting details and pictures of such memorials. Robert Parkinson and Roger Morris were principally responsible for collating and compiling the useable replies that were received. Melanie Ryan was largely responsible for the preparation of the website. In the gathering of material for the website a variety of sources of information were used. These sources included (in addition to the responses received directly from the Schools) contemporary newspaper reports, local histories, local studies librarians, and local historical societies. In the interests of conciseness and readability, these sources have not been specifically footnoted. However, the work of all researchers and photographers is gratefully acknowledged.

## **Schools of Arts/Mechanics' Institutes and the First World War**

During the war, soldiers were fare welled and welcomed back home in the local School or Institute hall. Patriotic and fundraising events were held in the hall. Groups met in the local School or Institute to knit socks, to knot camouflage nets or to pack "comfort" packages for soldiers serving overseas and prisoners of war. Moreover, in many localities, the School or Institute was the only public building beside the local public school. Therefore, many of the local War Memorials or Rolls of Honor, at the end of the War, were located in and/or co-located with the local School or Institute. Finally, because of an outpouring of patriotic fervor and local pride some Schools or Institutes were renamed as the Soldiers' Hall and some new Schools of this period were built as Soldiers' Memorial Schools of Arts. The following are some examples of the ways in which local communities used their schools and institutes to remember/honor those who had served the nation in WW I.

The Bellingen Memorial Hall and Literary Institute was formally opened on ANZAC Day, April 25<sup>th</sup> 1929. The first plans to build such a fine building were mooted in 1918 but the struggle to raise the necessary funds was long and difficult. The fund raising efforts used included operating a regular open-air cinema, sale of the original School of Arts building, and pledges from local citizens. Today this useful building continues to serve its community as a venue for local concerts, touring performers, exhibitions, festivals, movies and regular adult education classes.

After WW I the citizens of Bingara decided to build a new Soldiers Memorial Hall attached to the existing School of Arts. This new building, which opened in 1922, provided, as well as the hall, a library, a reading room, a meeting room, and a card and billiards room. It housed for many years the local picture show. As time passed and other more specialized public buildings were erected, the use of the School of Arts and Soldiers' Memorial Hall declined. Eventually, the building was transferred to the local Municipality. The Soldiers Memorial Hall is now Municipal Head Office.

The Cowra School of Arts and the Soldiers Memorial Hall, erected in 1920, was demolished in the 1960s to provide the site for a new veterans' club house. The pair of Memorial Gates erected in 1920 to honor those who served in WW I are all that remains of the original buildings.

The Delegate School of Arts dates from the early 1900s. Today, the building features a Local History Museum, a Woodworking Room and an exceptionally fine hall. As well as the Honor Rolls, that flank the stage in the auditorium, there is co-located at the front of the building an impressive stone monument that commemorates the "Men from Snowy River March" when 12 men set out on 6 January 1916 to march the 220 miles to the nearest recruitment post gathering volunteers along the way to serve in the Great War.

Some 40 men from Gundy volunteered for and served in WW I; of these eight were killed. In July 1921 a meeting of returned servicemen was convened with the object of raising funds to finance the building of a Soldiers' Memorial Hall to remember the fallen.

Over the next two years fund raising activities, were vigorously pursued and the Hall opened in 1923.

The Moree Soldiers' Memorial Hall is an impressive and very useful community resource designed in the classic style in keeping with the dignity of its purpose. The Hall is entered through a spacious portico, in which are placed the Honor Rolls, with the names cut in granite. The names of those who made the supreme sacrifice are on a separate tablet from that which records those who served. Today, some 92 years later the Memorial Hall continues to serve its community.

Shortly after the end of the First World War local residents of the tiny village of Pleasant Hills, to honor those who had served in the war, installed in their local Literary Institute a rather unique and very touching Honor Roll: a small hand painted map of Australia with names of those local men who had served painted onto it.

After World War I it was decided to erect in Scone a new building, the Soldiers' Memorial School of Arts, to replace the existing School of Arts. The new School and the Memorial Arch were unveiled in 1924. The Soldiers' Memorial Arch only contains the names of those who did not return from their war service. Later, at the local hospital, when a War Memorial Children's Ward was built, a memorial was erected there that contained the names of all who enlisted from Scone.

The Seaham School of Arts Hall contains three WW I memorials: a set of memorial gateposts, a community Honor Roll, and a Roll of Honor unique to a lodge that regularly met in the hall. Moreover, the walls of the 1902 hall are lined with photographs of 17 of the 20 locally enlisted soldiers. These photographs provide a unique visual memorial of faces frozen in time. These are not the faces of celebrity soldier/heroes, just ordinary men: farm hands, a butcher, dairy farmers and a horse-breaker. They gaze back over the years. Age has not wearied them. Six of these 20 volunteer soldiers died on war service

The West Wyalong School of Arts was built in the 1880s. It was demolished in 1923 in order to build a fine new community resource, the Sailors and Soldiers Memorial Literary Institute. At the opening of the new building, the Chairman stressed that the new building had not been built to glorify war but to remember those who had fallen, to honor those who had served, to remind people of what our "boys" had done and to emphasize the great cost of war. Today the building is still serving its community as the town's Community Health Centre.

The Woodville School of Arts has two WW I memorials. The original Memorial lists all those who volunteered for service in the war. The more recent Memorial lists those volunteers who paid the supreme sacrifice.

Like many schools of arts at that time, the Wyalong School of Arts was originally erected towards the rear of its lot, the long term plan being that when times were better a much more impressive front section could be added. In 1921, this happened when the new Soldiers' Memorial Hall was added at the front. Erected in memory of those who served



in World War One, the Memorial Hall featured two marble tablets: one tablet lists all those who had served and the other records those who had died in the service. The Soldiers' Memorial Hall continues to serve its community as the home of the local FM Community Radio station.

### **Glorious Failure or an Australian Success Story?**

While they may not have achieved their original goal of providing a comprehensive scientific/technological education for the artisan class, the Schools and Institutes were not glorious failures as many critics have claimed. They can only be regarded as failures if one agrees with the view of those who are focused on formal statements of goals and purposes and on the absolute imperative of reforming the moral depravity of the working classes. Then the Australian Schools' and Institutes' billiard tables, libraries of popular fiction, light entertainment, lowbrow lectures, useful classes, and regular social dances can be seen as blatant examples of this tragic failure.

One of the earliest and greatest supporters of the Schools and Institutes movement was Sir Henry Parkes, serial Premier of NSW and father of the Australian Federation, who liked to say that: Australians are "*a practical people and have little affection for the ideal or the imaginative; and we are rather proud of this deficit in our national character*". From this point of view the Schools and Institutes can be seen as being most successful in that they were able to meet the very real practical needs of their local communities. In so doing, they created some thousands of multipurpose community centers across the nation. In many rural towns and city suburbs, the Schools and Institutes have provided important educational, social, civic, and recreational services to their local communities. They were the proto-typical adult education provider for much of Australia and most Australians.

This is a much more accurate and positive assessment of the role of the Schools & Institutes in Australia's cultural and social life. As such, they were the real landmarks [in both a physical and a cultural sense] of Australian adult education – landmarks much loved by their users and remembered with great affection by so many older Australians.

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The authors' knowledge of and experience with the School of Arts movement.

As such it lacks the formal footnotes and references of more usual an academic paper. However, there are a number of papers, written by the principal author, which deal with the content and the issues raised in the paper. A listing of those most relevant to this paper follows:

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