



Archbishop Mannix led by fourteen Victoria Cross recipients in the 1920 St. Patrick's Day parade.

Source: National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-143782348>

An Illusion of Unity: Irish Australia, the Great War and the 1920 St Patrick's Day Parade

The participation of fourteen Victoria Cross recipients, a controversial archbishop and a notorious entrepreneur in the 1920 St Patrick's Day parade in Melbourne provides context to the bitter political and sectarian divisions of the conscription debates at the time.

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On 20 March 1920, fourteen Victoria Cross recipients mounted on white horses provided an escort for Daniel Mannix, Archbishop of Melbourne, who was leading the St Patrick's Day parade in Melbourne in an open car. John Wren, a 'colourful' self-made Catholic entrepreneur, had orchestrated the parade to honour Mannix and to demonstrate the loyalty of Irish Australians, which had been questioned during the conscription debates in 1916 and 1917.¹ Having an honour guard of decorated veterans of the Great War was intended to associate Mannix and Australians of Irish and Catholic heritage with the war effort and its ultimate victory.

Journalist Paul Daley described Wren as:

a man whose contradictions (shunned by the establishment while a puppeteer of politicians; illegal bookmaker-cum-millionaire who never lost touch with his Collingwood slum roots; a supporter

of the church who only formally worshipped late in life, and a staunch Irish republican who unequivocally supported the Empire's war from the outset) put him at odds with easy definition.²

Wren made his fortune as a bookmaker in Collingwood, a predominantly Catholic working-class inner-city suburb of Melbourne. He thrived in the industrial, political and religious tribalism that was Melbourne in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Wren took on the establishment, which frowned on his activities, especially in relation to horseracing and racetrack management, boxing promotion, grazing properties, newspaper publishing (he founded Brisbane's *Courier Mail*) and gold mining in Australia and Fiji.

Wren had enlisted in World War I (aged 44) before being discharged in November 1915 as medically unfit. He

» Tim Sullivan, 'An Illusion of Unity: Irish Australia, the Great War and the 1920 St Patrick's Day Parade,' *Agora* 55:1 (2020), 24–31 «

supported conscription but spoke for Irish independence, which added another reason for conservatives to be concerned about his relationship with Mannix.

Wren's motivations in organising the parade are an insight into the bitter political and sectarian divisions of the conscription debates in 1916 and 1917, and the resentments that lingered after the war. He had invited each of the VC recipients, covered their expenses to participate, and gave each a photo montage inscribed as a gift from the Archbishop and 'the Irish citizens of Victoria'. The parade was recorded in a film by Bert Cross called *Ireland Will Be Free*, which left no doubt about its intent in associating Mannix and Irish and Catholic Australians with victory in the Great War and aspirations for an independent Ireland.

Archbishop Mannix arrived in Australia in 1913 to take up his position as Coadjutor Archbishop of Melbourne, and became one of the most polarising public figures in Australia during and after World War I.

Daniel Mannix was many things and he spoke with many voices. He was the mystic who saw in the face of the Irish peasant the image of Christ. He was the Irish patriot nursing a grudge against those guilty of that ancient wrong against the Irish people ... he spoke about things that mattered, and things that moved the human heart. A man out of sympathy with the temper of his age.³

As Mannix was to show through his long public life, he was prepared to speak out as a civic leader on issues of social justice, such as the treatment of Jews in Europe as early as 1933, reparations for injustices to Indigenous Australians in 1938, and the threat of Communism in the 1950s.⁴

Mannix had risen to prominence in the Catholic Church in his native Ireland at a time when Irish nationalism was expressing itself in a spectrum of tempers. He was deeply aware of the agenda of the radical nationalist republicans seeking complete independence from the United Kingdom, and a large part of the population

in the north-east who were Protestant and determinedly loyal to remaining a part of the United Kingdom.

Mannix was one of many Irish people with a conservative and pragmatic nationalism, believing that Ireland's best hope of achieving independence peacefully was through Home Rule from within the British Empire. After decades of political struggle, an Irish Home Rule Bill was eventually passed by the British Parliament in 1914, but its implementation faced significant opposition in Ulster and had to be postponed because of the outbreak of World War I.

Mannix did not oppose Australia's voluntary participation in the war, but he opposed conscription in the plebiscites of 1916 and 1917. In doing so he earned the intense enmity of the Prime Minister, William Morris Hughes, who led the 'Yes' campaigns for conscription.

Mannix and Conscription

The conscription debates were bitterly divisive and exposed polarising views on the justification for the war, Imperial and Australian interests, the meaning of patriotism and loyalty, religious and moral values, equality of sacrifice, and the threat to working conditions and wages.

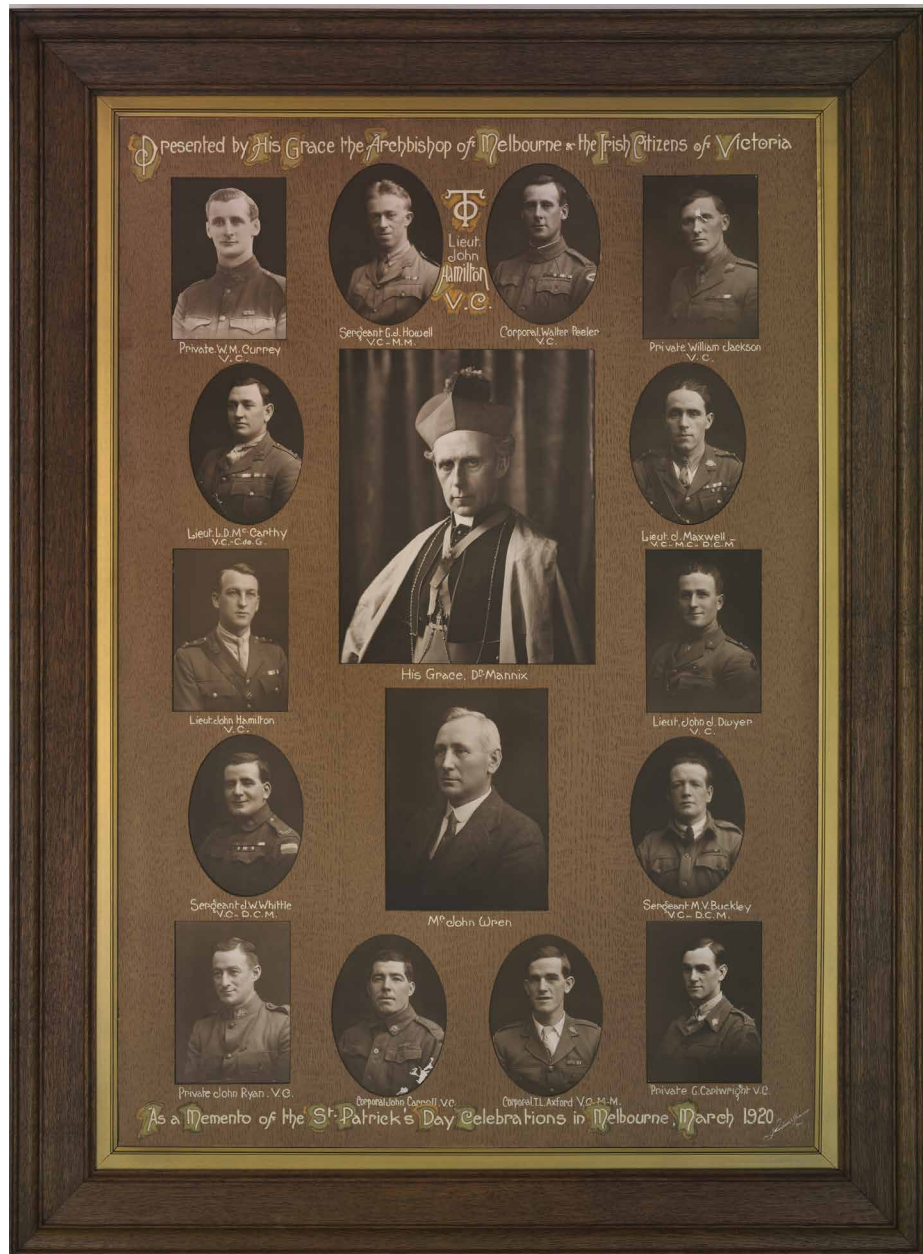
Hughes had designed the 1916 plebiscite to produce popular pressure on the Australian Labor Party (ALP) to drop its steadfast opposition to any form of compulsory overseas military service. In proposing that all Australian men between 20 and 44 years of age should be compelled to register their availability for military service overseas, Hughes argued that Australia could not maintain its army in the field or replace its losses without conscription. He spoke passionately about how Australia's patriotic duty to support the Empire was in Australia's national interest. In contributing to victory, Australia's sacrifice for the Empire would ensure its favoured position in the Imperial security and trade network, and regional

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- 1 *Argus*, January 19, 1957, 13.
- 2 Paul Daley, 'Divided Melbourne: When the Archbishop Turned St Patrick's Day into Propaganda,' *The Guardian*, 22 April 2016.
- 3 Manning Clark, *Manning Clark's History of Australia*, abridged by Michael Cathcart, 529.
- 4 Brenda Niall, 'Daniel Mannix and Billy Hughes: The Odd couple', *The Australian*, March 21, 2015.

This framed montage was presented to Lieutenant John Hamilton VC by Archbishop Mannix on the occasion of the 1920 Saint Patrick's Day parade in Melbourne.

Source: Australian War Memorial, P01383.017



security from threats in Asia through the peace settlement.

The plebiscite campaign split the ALP, and its defeat forced Hughes to leave the ALP before he was expelled. He formed a Nationalist government comprising those who left with him along with other advocates for conscription in the Parliament. He was determined to have another plebiscite in December 1917 as leader of the 'Win the

War' party after the traumatic number of casualties in the battles around Ypres in Belgium between August and October 1917.⁵

Coming so soon after the bitterness of the Great Strike of 1917 in NSW and industrial action by unions in Queensland and Victoria, the atmosphere for a second plebiscite was electric. The labour movement saw it as another attack on labour conditions and employment. Enforcing military service

5 Bart Ziino, 'Great War, Total War,' in *Making Australian History: Perspectives on the Past Since 1788*, ed., Deborah Gare and David Ritter (Melbourne: Thomson Learning Australia, 2008), 338-43.

could be the beginning of industrial conscription, forced relocations, a lowering of wages and the opening of competition in heavily unionised industries. The physical and spiritual weariness caused by the war and its sacrifice of life and the livelihoods of so many had become endemic and increasingly class-based.⁶

Mannix was one of the few civic and religious leaders prepared to speak out against conscription. He became the focus of the animus of pro-conscription campaigners. Michael McKernan has written that although Mannix made only two speeches about conscription before the 1916 vote:

There was a very simple reason for his notoriety ... Mannix was virtually the only Australian leader, in politics, religion, business or the community generally, to encourage a vote against conscription. Just about every other Australian in a position of prominence and leadership was in favour of conscription and was prepared to say so publicly.⁷

Mannix believed that compulsory service would bleed the country's future dry, and that Australia had done, and was still doing, enough with its voluntary recruitment scheme. He argued that the burden of fighting the war had fallen unevenly across the country and particularly on the working class – a large proportion of whom were Catholic and of Irish heritage – and conscripting men to fight would deepen that sacrifice, create more widows and orphans and families needing support, make labour conditions vulnerable, and spread disadvantage. He was deeply troubled by the moral dilemma at the heart of conscription in compelling people to fight and kill others.

Mannix's arguments against conscription reflected those of many others opposed to it. In a speech on 18 September 1916, Mannix said:

There will be differences among Catholics, for Catholics do not think or vote in platoons, and on most questions there is room for divergence of opinion. But for myself it will take a good deal to convince me that conscription in Australia would

not cause more evil than it would avert. I honestly believe that Australia has done her full share and more, and that she cannot reasonably be expected to bear the financial strain and drain upon her manhood that conscription would involve ... I have read most of the appeals that have been made for conscription in Australia. But in spite of these eloquent and impassioned appeals my common sense will not allow me to believe that the addition of 100,000 or 200,000 conscript Australians to the 15,000,000 of fighting men that the Allies have at their disposal could be a deciding factor or even a substantial factor in the issue of the war.⁸

Hughes provoked deep anger and resentment among Australians who were Catholic and of Irish heritage by his efforts to demonise Mannix and those who followed him by accusing them of being disloyal and undermining Australia's and the Empire's war effort. In doing so, he re-energised the sectarian and cultural differences between Catholic and Protestant Australia despite the evidence of non-sectarian support for the war. It became easy for the Melbourne *Argus* of 7 November 1917 to accuse Mannix of being 'an arrogant Irish ecclesiastic, openly vaunting his disloyalty in the most loyal Dominion'.⁹

Yet Mannix did not preach about the war or his opposition to conscription from the pulpit as others had done: 'Instead when I talk of the war it will be outside the church where I, as a citizen like every other Australian citizen, have the right to an independent view'.¹⁰

Mannix, Home Rule for Ireland and the Easter Rising

Hughes said to British Prime Minister David Lloyd George:

Ireland – there is your plague spore – or one of them ... And the effects are felt over here... The Irish Question is at the bottom of all our difficulties in Australia. They – the Irish – have captured the political machinery of the labour organisations – assisted by the Syndicalists and IWW people. The

6 Ziino, 'Great War,' 338–9.

7 Michael McKernan, 'Independence Day,' in *Making Australian History: Perspectives on the Past Since 1788*, ed., Deborah Gare and David Ritter (Melbourne: Thomson Learning Australia, 2008), 347.

8 *Argus*, September 18, 1916.

9 Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2013), 381.

10 McKernan, 347.

Church is secretly against recruiting. Its influence killed conscription. One of their bishops – Mannix – is a Sinn Feiner.¹¹

The reference to Sinn Fein would have resonated because of the Easter Rising in Dublin in April 1916 when Irish republicans, many of them members of the political party Sinn Fein formed by Arthur Griffith in 1905, attacked key institutions of the British Government in Dublin, declaring Irish independence and hoping to inspire a popular uprising.

The brutal suppression of the uprising sharpened Mannix's advocacy for Irish independence from Britain and its Empire. His public views from that time more closely echoed those of Sinn Fein. His establishment of a relief appeal for victims of the Easter Rising was provocative, and for some it was evidence of his affinity with the aspirations of anti-Imperialism and radical Irish nationalism.

Mannix believed that Britain would always act in its own interests and that Australia should do the same. 'Australia first' became a part of his mantra in advocating against conscription.

The War, Conscription and Irish and Catholic Australians

There is little compelling evidence to support the views of Hughes and his supporters that Irish nationalism or Catholicism were driving the opposition to conscription in Australia.

The consequences of two years of war with such catastrophic casualties and no end in sight were already well-known to Australians voting to decide on whether conscription was in the national interest.

Patrick O'Farrell, the great historian of Irish Australia, did not think there was a nationalist or even an Irish agenda in Australia at odds with Imperial interests or affiliation with the Empire's success in the war. He believed that Irish Australians were involved in the political, economic and

social issues of the war to the same extent as other groups. They enlisted in similar numbers proportional to population as other Australians. The issues they cared about were neither Irish nor Catholic – they were the same issues that engaged a population fighting a war.

O'Farrell observed that the 'Yes' vote won in Victoria, where Mannix was most vigorous in his campaign against it. The 'No' vote prevailed in NSW, where Archbishop Michael Kelly campaigned for conscription. In fact, only in Western Australia did the vote and the clerical position align.¹²

As opposed as Mannix was to conscription, Kelly supported it, believing it would help the fight for right versus might.¹³

Yet George Stewart, head of Australia's Special Intelligence Bureau, wrote in January 1918 after the second plebiscite was defeated:

I attribute the defeat almost entirely to the Roman Catholic element in this country; particularly do I attach the greatest blame to Dr Mannix ... It may be accepted that 90% of the Roman Catholics in this country voted 'No', and did all they could to induce others to do likewise... I am perfectly satisfied that the chief object before Dr Mannix is a cherished dream of the Roman Catholics to one day see this country under the rule of Rome.¹⁴

The interplay of so many variables across sectarian boundaries makes a purely statistical analysis of voting patterns unreliable. The high turnout of voters in a plebiscite that was not compulsory indicates the extraordinary level of interest and concern over the issue. The closeness of the results indicates that if people changed their minds from one vote to the next, it made little difference in the outcome, although Victoria voted 'Yes' in 1916 and 'No' in 1917.¹⁵ Could that be attributed to Mannix's more outspoken campaign against conscription in 1917? Or to the lower numbers of people voting in the state (and in all the states and territories) compared with the turnout in the first? Or to the greater focus on

11 Gavin Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo: The Initiation of Australia* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2000), 323.

12 Bartholomew Augustine Santamaria, *Daniel Mannix: The Quality of Leadership* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1984), 81.

13 Clark, 521.

14 Beaumont, 387.

15 Murray Goot, 'The results of the 1916 and 1917 conscription referendums re-examined,' in *The Conscription Conflict and the Great War*, ed., Robin Archer, Joy Damousi, Murray Goot and Sean Scalmer (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2016), 136–41.

The VC Recipients

It would be reasonable to assume that the fourteen Victoria Cross (VC) recipients took part in the St Patrick's Day parade because they were Catholics or of Irish descent, or had some affiliation with either Mannix or Wren. In fact, eight attested as Roman Catholic on their enlistment papers, three as Anglican, two as Presbyterian and one as Methodist.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the fourteen is how their lives after the war reflected the uncertainty of so many of their comrades who returned. Fortune was not always kind to them.

Thomas Leslie 'Jack' Axford worked with Sunshine Harvester and then for much of the remainder of his life as a clerk in the Department of Mines in Western Australia. He served in Australia during World War II, and returned to his job in the Department of Mines. A father of five children, he died aged 89 on a flight returning from a Victoria Cross and George Cross Association reunion in London in 1983.

Maurice Buckley was awarded the VC under the name Gerald Sexton, which was his assumed name upon his second enlistment in the Australian Imperial Force. Gerald was his deceased brother's name, and Sexton his mother's maiden name. A year after the parade he died from injuries received in an accident when falling from his horse attempting to jump the railway gates at Boolarra in north-eastern Victoria.

John Carroll was known as the 'wild Irishman.' He missed three dates for his VC investiture with the King, and was summonsed for the fourth. He lost his foot in an accident on the railways in Western Australia, where he was a labourer for most of his life.

George Cartwright worked as a motor mechanic in Sydney, maintained an involvement in the Citizen Military Force, including roles in training during World War II, and died aged 83.

William Currey and **John Dwyer** were elected to their state parliaments in NSW and Tasmania, respectively. After the war, Currey joined the NSW Railways, became active in the Returned and Services League and Civilian Military Forces, and served in a training role in World War II. He was elected to represent Kogarah as an ALP member in the NSW Parliament in 1941 but died suddenly during his second term in 1948 aged 52. Dwyer established an orchard on Bruny Island as a soldier settler and joined his father-in-law's timber milling business for more income. In 1931 he was elected to the Tasmanian Parliament as ALP member for Franklin, and over a political career of 30 years served as Speaker, a minister and Deputy Premier.

John Hamilton was one of seven Australians awarded the VC for actions at Lone Pine, Gallipoli, in August 1915. He worked as a labourer and shipping clerk in Sydney and served in Australia during World War II. He died in 1961 aged 65. His family donated the montage he received to the Australian War Memorial in 1991.

George Howell worked for newspaper publishers and served in the Second World War in a number of unsatisfying posts in Australia and so joined the US Army Transportation Service as a civilian crew member and saw action in the Philippines. He died in 1964 aged 71.

William Jackson was the first Australian to be awarded the VC on the Western Front, and the youngest at 19 years old. He was awarded the VC after losing his right arm when retrieving wounded comrades. He returned to Australia and worked as a licensee in Wollongong before taking up a soldier settler block at Merriwa in the Hunter Valley. After that he worked as a salesman, a real estate agent, a watchman, a doorman and a clerk. After serving with units in Australia in World War II, he moved to Melbourne where he died in 1959, aged 61.

Joe Maxwell was one of the most decorated Australian soldiers of World War I. He was awarded a VC, Military Cross and bar, and a Distinguished Conduct Medal. He died aged 71 in 1967.

Lawrence McCarthy moved from Perth to Melbourne in 1926, where he worked with Sunshine Harvester and then a firm of trustees. His only son was killed on Bougainville in World War II. McCarthy died aged 83 in 1975.

Walter Peeler also worked with Sunshine Harvester until he became custodian of the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne from 1934. He re-enlisted for World War II and distinguished himself in Syria, was captured by the Japanese in Java, and survived Changi and the Burma Railroad. He returned to discover that his son had been killed in Bougainville in December 1944. A second son died in an industrial accident soon after returning from overseas service in World War II. Peeler was awarded the British Empire Medal and died in Melbourne aged 80 in 1968.

John Ryan from Tumut in NSW never settled down and struggled with deteriorating health and the stress of regular unemployment. He walked from Balranald to Mildura during the Depression looking for work, ended up in an insurance office in Melbourne, but he was tramping the streets again looking for work at the time of his death from pneumonia aged 51 in 1941.

John Whittle worked as a storeman in Hobart before moving to Sydney. He struggled during the Depression and made a plea for a job in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1932: 'I have been trying to struggle on for some time, but the children are badly in need of boots and clothing for the winter and I cannot get any work.' Moved by his letter, the Western Assurance company gave him a position as an inspector. In February 1934 he saved a young boy from drowning in a pond in Victoria Park in Sydney, and slipped away before anyone could thank him. It soon became known that the mystery Samaritan was John Whittle VC DCM. One of Whittle's sons, Ivan, was killed in Papua New Guinea in September 1943 in one of the worst accidents of World War II when a B24 Liberator crashed on take-off into a convoy of troops in the 2/33rd Battalion. Whittle died at Glebe in 1946 aged 63.

industrial and class issues in that bitter year of 1917?

Despite the rejection of both plebiscites, Hughes won the 1917 Commonwealth election on a platform to win the war. Voting 'No' to conscription did not diminish the electorate's support for the government. However, the bitter arguments and recriminations lingered even after victory in the war had been achieved.

Perceptions of the Parade

There had not been a St Patrick's Day parade in 1919 because of concerns about anti-British rhetoric in the 1918 parade,¹⁶ along with fears of public meetings spreading the Spanish Influenza pandemic, which killed millions of people.¹⁷

The first large public gathering in Melbourne since the end of the war was the St Patrick's Day parade of 1920. John Wren was determined to make it memorable.

With the threat of the Spanish Influenza epidemic passed, of more concern to some citizens was the risk of sedition, disloyalty and anti-Britishness on the streets of Melbourne in the St Patrick's Day parade Wren had proposed. The Ulster and Loyal Irishmen's Association and the Women's National League were among those who petitioned the City Council to stop the Parade.

Wren and his Parade Committee promised that there would be no disloyal display or official recognition of Sinn Fein and assured the Council that the British flag would be at the head of the parade.

Maurice Buckley VC DCM was a member of the committee and made a remarkable gesture. Referring to his Victoria Cross he said: 'This cross is my most treasured possession, yet I will pledge it to you now that we will abide by your ruling loyally.' The Lord Mayor, Cr Aikman, replied: 'Your gesture satisfies me that loyal and true Australians will take part in the celebrations.'¹⁸

Perhaps what was more important to Buckley and his comrades was the knowledge that veterans of the war would be marching together for the first time since the end of the war. More than 10,000 veterans marched in the parade, watched by 120,000 cheering supporters lining the route. The *Advocate*, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Melbourne, reported gushingly on the significance of the parade for Irish Australians and Ireland:

It was more than a spectacular exhibition. It was animated by and expressive of the undying love of thousands and hundreds of thousands of Australians for the Emerald Isle of their forefathers.

First and foremost a solemn profession of love for Ireland, the procession was also a powerful protest against the hypocrisy of those who are striving to crush the Irish nation.¹⁹

It went on:

It was fitting indeed that the people's favourite, his Grace Dr Mannix, Archbishop of Melbourne, should... receive such an overwhelming public ovation...

What pen could do justice to that scene of wildest enthusiasm as, preceded by a posse of mounted troopers, the VC heroes, mounted on splendid grey chargers, rode into view.

Typical sons of our sunny southern land, whose brave deeds have graven the name of Australia in letters of gold on the imperishable scrolls of fame, these gallant heroes formed a guard of honour surrounding the car of his Grace the Archbishop, thus effectively flinging back an eloquent though silent answer to the charge of 'disloyalists' and 'shirkers' so frequently hurled at the Catholic body during these past five fateful years, now happily over.²⁰

The journal of the Adelaide Archdiocese, the *Southern Cross*, described the escorts as 'a noble band of 14 VC warriors, who had come from all parts of Australia to show that they were in sympathy with Ireland's claim for self-determination.'²¹

It clearly showed that the Catholics and Irishmen of Victoria are behind their beloved Archbishop

16 Daley, *ibid.*

17 Santamaria, 101.

18 *Argus*, January 19, 1957, 13.

19 *Advocate*, March 25, 1920, 19.

20 *Advocate*, *ibid.*

21 *Southern Cross*, March 26, 1920, 7.

in his fight for justice for Ireland... [and] that the Catholics are just as loyal as any other section of the community, and last, but not least, it showed that the Australians as a whole are liberty-loving people and are only too anxious to help other nations to gain that liberty which they themselves enjoy.²²

The Significance of the Montage

To really understand the meaning of an artefact like the montage we must consider each individual element, explore the stories that underpin each one and discover the nature of the relationship between them. What do they tell us about the past, both individually and together? What do they tell us about the lives of those portrayed and where and how their lives overlapped? What did they share that bound them forever within the montage's frame?

The relationship between Mannix and Wren was important for both of them. Mannix gave Wren the public status he craved, and Wren was a great support for Mannix.

The relationship between Mannix and Wren and the fourteen VC recipients enlisted to be a part of Wren's political drama was

opportunistic. That the soldiers participated may indicate that they had no issue with Mannix's views on the war and Irish nationalism, nor with Australia's Catholics or those of Irish heritage.

The bond between the fourteen VC recipients is the most compelling story in the montage. Their shared experience of war and their individual fates tell us much about the struggles of so many who returned to re-establish themselves in civilian life as the nation endured deep grieving and a painful recovery from World War I, a Great Depression and then a second World War.

The sectarianism evident in the controversy of the parade continued for decades afterwards. This was partly driven by Mannix's refusal to avoid political issues, his drive in expanding the Catholic education system, and his part in the long campaign for government aid for Catholic schools, which was achieved in 1962.

The montage is both an illusion of unity between Mannix, Wren and the fourteen soldiers, and evidence of the moment they shared in a deeply controversial moment in the history of Melbourne and the nation.

22 *Southern Cross*, *ibid.*

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