

Exploring World War I History in Your Local Cemetery

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Syllabus content

Stage 5 – World War 1, Elective History and Stage 6 – Preliminary Modern History

Duration

One or two periods or as a module, depending on how much in-depth research is required of the students; could be adapted as lessons around Anzac or Remembrance Days.

Rationale

Having occurred over one hundred years ago, World War I (WWI) can now seem a very distant and unrelatable conflict for many students. One of our tasks as educators is to create a point of access that breaks down students' own preconstructed barriers to the past. To do this, we need to do three things. First, create a way that students can personally connect and engage with the past. This can be through a connection with their local, personal, cultural or school history. Second, to enhance this connection, students need to experience their own unique 'discovery' of the history, as represented in primary sources. This gives the students an 'ownership of the history'. Third, the history that is discovered becomes a 'living history' that becomes part of the students' own and the local community's history.

It is likely that there are sites in our local area that can be used for excursion-based learning. Adjacent to St Patrick's College for Girls, where I teach, there is a small unassuming Congregational Cemetery, which has been disused since the 1950s. Though many of the inscriptions are in poor condition (making some of them difficult for students to decipher), the cemetery serves as a fascinating excursion destination for my History students studying WWI. The suggested excursion plan below provides an outline of the activities we undertook – pre-, during and post-excursion.

This cemetery excursion would complement learning in the WWI unit in Stage 5 History, particularly Depth Study 3, Australians at War, experiences of war, impact of war, commemorations, and the nature of Anzac or as a site study. Similarly, it could be useful as a school developed course in Stage 5 Elective History. In Stage 6 this activity is ideal for the WWI option from the 'Shaping of the Modern World' module. The other way this activity can be used is in any History course where source skills and research skills are being developed, for example, Stage 4 'What is History?'.

Learning outcomes

In the case of my students, researching and learning the stories of the soldiers named on the gravestones and memorials provided students with an understanding of the consequences of WWI. For example, even though some servicemen survived the war and returned to Australia, they died young due to their war injuries. Students also discovered memorials to soldiers who were killed on the Western Front and whose bodies are not in the cemetery. Often, their names appear on family tombstones as memorial inscriptions, demonstrating the families' desire to have a physical place to express their mourning.



Figures 1 and 2. Students from St Patrick's College for Girls, Campbelltown, NSW, laying wreaths and rosemary on the memorials at the Congregational Cemetery, Campbelltown, 2018. Photos: Fran Musico Rullo.

Excursion outline

Step 1: Pre-excursion briefing

A background history to the conflict is essential before the visit. In the case of my students, it was important for them to understand that Campbelltown was a small rural town severely impacted by WWI, with 250 men and women enlisting, out of a population of 2000. Similarly, students needed to be informed that the Australian government's official policy during WWI was that service people's bodies were not returned to Australia (repatriation to Australia did not occur until the Vietnam War, in 1966).¹ In addition, the bodies of one third of those killed in action were never recovered, and therefore, not all soldiers have a grave.

This preliminary briefing should include a class discussion addressing any cultural concerns or other sensitivities students may have about visiting a cemetery.

Step 2: Visiting the cemetery

Prepare a worksheet to provide to students or ask them to bring a notebook on the excursion. Students then visit the graves and memorials, take photographs and/or sketch them (encouraging them to be more meticulous about their content), then complete the following for each memorial:

1. Name on the gravestone or memorial
2. Photograph or sketch
3. Information provided on the inscription

Step 3: Post-excursion research

Using the information recorded during the cemetery visit, ask students to investigate the history of the individuals named on the gravestone or memorials, using primary sources. Students may discover that there may be less information about some soldiers than others. Also, ask them to be aware that there may be misspellings of names or the added problem of several soldiers having the same name.

The following sources may be helpful in researching the WWI servicemen named on the memorials:

- WWI service records, National Archives of Australia - <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/>
Individual records of each soldier, including personal details, any hospitalisations, passages and the places where they served. Handwriting in these records may be challenging for students and being able to enlarge the records online is helpful.
- Trove newspapers, National Library of Australia - <https://trove.nla.gov.au/>
Search for references to the soldiers in the city or local newspapers, before, during or after WWI.
- Local studies library historic photograph and document collections.
- Secondary source histories about WWI relating to your local area.
- Local connections and contacts with descendants of the individuals.

Step 4: Biography writing

Using the information students gathered online about the individuals named on the gravestones and memorials, ask them to write brief biographies of the individuals (one or two paragraphs).

Sample biography:

Herbert Kitching (known as Bert) was born in Campbelltown in 1895. Bert's nickname was 'Snowy', probably due to his very blond hair. In 1915 Kitching was a 'clerk' and enlisted on 23 August at Holsworthy. After training, he was posted as a Gunner in the 13th Reinforcements, 3rd Field Artillery Brigade and embarked on the *Berrima* on 17 December 1915. He spent some time in Egypt and there was allotted to the 21st Howitzer Brigade, 101st Battery. In March 1916 he was sent to the Western Front in France, where he provided artillery support for the infantry. Kitching was badly gassed during the Third Battle of Ypres in Belgium on 15 October 1917. While the Battery was being gassed, Kitching was trapped in a dugout and buried by shellfire. He was rescued by his fellow soldiers and taken to the 17th Casualty Clearing Station and the 53rd General Hospital. Bert's lungs were damaged as he had been unable to get his gas mask during the attack. He was sent to convalesce in England and spent a year recovering. An article from the Campbelltown Herald in June 1918 reveals Kitching had written to his parents, telling them that the former Congregational Minister for Campbelltown, Lionel B. Fletcher, had been lecturing to the troops in Salisbury Plains.

In 1919 Bert was sent home to Australia, though he continued to have health problems due to the gassing. He returned to Campbelltown to resume his life and take up work with Mayor C.N. Hannaford. Some articles from 1920 in the *Campbelltown News* show Kitching resuming normal life, with one reference mentioning that he attended the landing (and had a joy flight) of Captain Percival's aeroplane in Bradbury Park. He also played in the local cricket club, up until just one month before his death. It seems Kitching fell gravely ill because of his war wounds and died at 'Miramichi', Campbelltown on 27 November 1920. Kitching is buried next to his parents and four siblings. His gravestone reads 'He Obeyed The Call'. At his death, Kitching was just 25 years old.

Step 5: Create a post-excursion 'living history'

The physical expression of grief evident in the memorials can provide students with a segue into understanding the impact of war in your local area. Students may wish to take part in a small contemplative ceremony, as did ours from St Patrick's College for Girls, in which rosemary sprigs from the college gardens were laid on the memorials. This activity allows students to connect with the stories of the individuals who once walked their local streets and lived in the area.

You may like to retain the biographies the students researched for ongoing use in commemoration at your school, for example, through Anzac Day and Remembrance Day assemblies. Students might take wreaths from these assemblies to the local cemetery and place them on the graves or memorial.

Commemorating Campbelltown's WWI soldiers

After students from St Patrick's College for Girls commemorated the soldiers they researched in the local Congregational Cemetery, their interest has permeated into the local Campbelltown community, with the soldiers researched by the students being mentioned during the local Anzac Day commemoration. Our WWI graves and memorials research has attracted

visits from local Members of Parliament, veterans' groups and the local media. The College has also built strong relationships with the Campbelltown and Airds Historical Society and the Local Studies section of Campbelltown Library. We hope this connection with the students and community will help in our quest to preserve these memorial stones for posterity. ♦

¹ Interestingly, it was the media sensation surrounding the government's refusal to repatriate the body of a Campbelltown local, Kevin Wheatley VC, from Vietnam in 1965, which prompted a change in policy. His body was repatriated through private subscription.

TEACHING HISTORY

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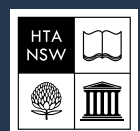
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