

Our stories, your stories, war stories

As the First World War drew to its end, the then Public Library of NSW began collecting the personal accounts of those who enlisted – farmers, doctors, nurses, journalists and artists – to document the war as they had experienced it. This extraordinary collection – including some 1100 volumes written by around 550 servicemen and women – is supported by newspapers, photographs, artworks, maps and ephemera. The Library's collection is one of the richest and, until now, rarely seen records of the Australian experience of World War I.

Byrne, NSW State Librarian & Chief Executive
Foreword, Life interrupted: personal diaries from World War I

The power of the First World War collection at the State Library of NSW is in the personal details it reveals, in the raw glimpses into lives that were forever altered by the events that took place during *the war to end all wars*. With support from the NSW Government and News Ltd, nearly all of these collection items have

Diaries of the
First World War.
Digitisation and
Imaging Services,
State Library
of NSW



Photo by Ben Herman



In 2014, Gillian Gratton was an Education Officer, Learning Services at the State Library of NSW. Gillian outlines the amazing range of First World War resources, programs and events that are available for students and teachers at the State Library of NSW.

All images used courtesy of State Library of NSW.

been digitised, providing an invaluable free resource for students and teachers that will be accessible online, on-site and on tour around NSW, over the next four years and beyond.

Online resources

Digitised Collections

At 15 years of age, Keith Harris is the youngest diarist represented in the Library's First World War diary collection. Having enlisted in 1917, Harris was captured and interned at a Prisoner of War camp in Germany until being repatriated to England in December 1918. Harris wrote of his experiences:

That night at 7 p.m. we arrived at a little place named Fremersberg. Here we left the train and had to stand out in the cold wind – waiting for orders, and then to cap things it started to snow, until I couldn't see a yard in front of me. At last we got marching orders. We crossed the railway line and headed for some lights about two miles away. My word I shall never forget that night. That long march through eighteen inches of snow, snowing all the time, and a freezing gale blowing, besides carrying our bags.

Harris narrative of the capture of S.S. Matunga and experiences as a prisoner of war (p.14), ca. 1918 / Keith Harris, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

This is just one example from an extensive collection that reveals what life was really like for men and women on the front line. Through the personal accounts found in diaries and letters, maps that document the progress of the war, newspapers, photographs, artworks and ephemera reflecting what was happening on the home front, and life captured through the photographer's lens, the Library's [First World War website](#) allows students to experience the impact of World War I. These primary sources can also be viewed in [timeline format](#), which situates them in the context of the war. [Newly commissioned articles](#) by researchers, historians and curators provide further insights into Australia's experience of the Great War.



The homepage of the World War 1 website of the State Library of NSW



Image by Gillian Gratton



Image by Gillian Gratton

Students from the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools viewing the NSW State Library exhibition *Life Interrupted: Personal Diaries from World War I*

Student consultation

In August 2014 the Library consulted twenty-two students from schools associated with the *Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools* (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2011) to gather their thoughts, insights and experiences when engaging with the State Library's World War 1 collection, through viewing the 2014 exhibition [Life interrupted: personal diaries from World War I](#) and by accessing these materials through the Library's World War 1 website. The most significant outcome of the consultation was in the aesthetic and emotional range of responses. As students commented:

Today I loved reading the journal entries of the soldiers at World War One. They gave me an insight on what daily life was like, events that happened and their feelings towards them. The abundance of the journals shocked me and they were all so different but they all interrelated. It was extremely interesting and fascinating and I am eager to learn more about the topic.

Student 1

It brought home to me that these people once actually lived, had families and friends. They were not just some person in a history text book.

Student 2

Having the opportunity to view these diaries and related ephemera, and to read the diary transcripts, helped to personalise the First World War experience for students. The feedback provided by these students indicates that incorporating these sources in the Stage 5 *Australians at war core study* would assist the teaching of the historical concept of [Empathetic understanding](#). This concept, which runs through the [NSW syllabus for the Australian curriculum History K-10](#), asks Stage 5 students to *interpret history through the actions, values, attitudes and motives of people in the context of the past*.

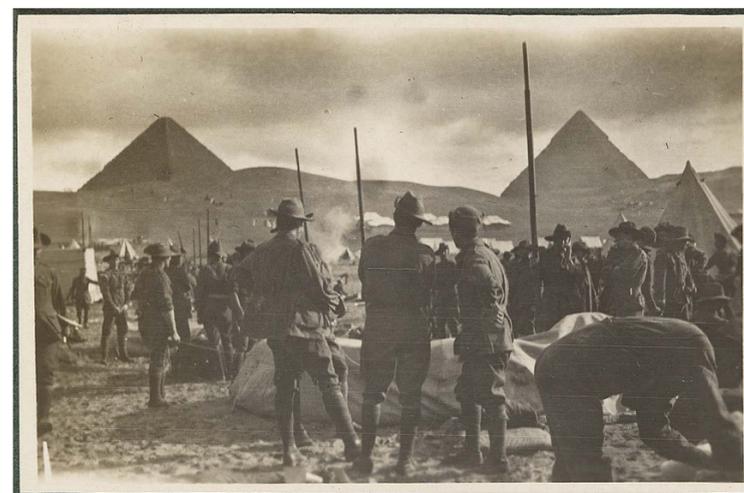
As a further result of this student consultation, the Library has redeveloped its original First World War website to better meet the needs of students and teachers, providing a more intuitive design and better access to these materials. Student feedback will also be used to inform future exhibition design, ensuring that the Library provides services that reflect the needs and desires of young people.

Learning resources

[Curriculum linked learning resource](#) for the [NSW syllabuses for the Australian curriculum](#) based around the State Library's First World War collection have been developed and are freely

accessible online. Currently available for the Stage 5 [Core Study-Depth Study 3: Australians at War: World Wars I and II \(1914-1918, 1939-1945\)](#) and Stage 3 English K-10, these classroom ready resources are designed to engage students through key inquiry questions. Additional resources are being developed and will be added to the site as they become available.

A primary cross-curricular unit of work around Gallipoli and the commemoration of the centenary of Anzac will be available in early 2015. This curriculum-linked unit is designed to provide primary schools with a selection of activities that can be implemented with individual classes, or utilised as part of a school wide commemoration.



**Pitching tents in sight of pyramids,
8 December 1914, Henry Charles Marshall
PXA 1861**

The [World War I and Australia](#) research guide has been developed to assist students and teachers to navigate the First World War collection. Covering topics from the first Australian naval fight of the war (the battle between HMAS Sydney and SMS Emden) to Aboriginal Australian soldiers and women at war, this guide provides a comprehensive overview of the collection and is ideal as a starting point for students researching all aspects of Australia's involvement in the war.

Curators, historians and World War 1 descendants discuss the stories behind the collection on the [Library's Vimeo channel](#), including the subjects of war artists, teenage soldiers and stretcher bearers.



**[Youth in war](#): State Library of New South
Wales Vimeo channel**

The Library's extensive collection of original [First World War recruitment posters](#) are generally out of copyright and have been aggregated on a [Pinterest](#) board. These posters are a valuable classroom resource for teaching the concept of persuasive language.



***Come on boys follow the flag*, ca. 1916,
James Northfield**

On-site resources

A comprehensive program of exhibitions, events and workshops

over the next four years will provide opportunities for teachers and students to visit the State Library of NSW and interact with the First World War collection to enhance curriculum studies of this historical event.

A town named War Boy

Inspired by the First World War collection and written by award winning playwright Ross Mueller, *A town named War Boy* will be performed live by The Australian Theatre for Young People (ATYP) at the State Library of NSW from 29 April to 10 May 2015. Opportunities exist for students to attend matinee performances and pre/post visit drama workshops led by the ATYP.

Letters from home

The Library's powerful and personal collection of First World War letters and diaries showcases the authentic voices of those who served. Their letters provide insight into the experiences of a generation of men and women who lived in the shadow of a world in turmoil. This correspondence reveals how much they looked forward to hearing from home; however, the collection does not include the letters sent in return. *Letters from home* is a NSW State Library initiative encouraging members of the community, including students,

to write a creative response to one of these letters, and has strong links to the NSW syllabus for the [Australian curriculum: English K-10](#) for Stages 4 and 5. This year-long project will be launched in the week beginning 18 May 2015. The correspondence produced will be published on the Letters from home blog, with the project culminating in a curated body of work showcased in an online exhibition.

Exhibitions

The State Library of NSW provides exhibitions that educate, inspire and challenge visitors of all ages. A particular strength of the Library's First World War collection is in their power to elicit an empathetic response. A student involved in the Library's consultation with the *Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools* (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2011) was asked what the most valuable part of her visit to the [Life interrupted: personal diaries from World War I](#) exhibition was, and she answered:

The detail of the exhibition, as well as the accessibility of primary sources within the exhibition. Unlike other exhibitions that regurgitate facts, this exhibition has taken me on an emotional and personal journey, creating empathy - something I believe is necessary when studying history.

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In her paper evaluating this experience, Groundwater-Smith (2014) echoes the student above when she states that *empathy is not to be seen as a pretext for describing a person or event, but rather for seeking a deeper explanation of that moment in history - a moment that goes beyond the facts* (pp.5-6).

During 2015, the Library will host two on-site exhibitions relating to the centenary of the First World War, *Lemnos 1915: then and now* and *War cartoons: Hal Eyre*. These exhibitions will provide an opportunity for students and teachers to engage with the Library's First World War collection. Further exhibitions will follow in 2016-2018. Details will become available from the Library's website as events draw closer.

On Tour

The State Library provides a range of resources including touring exhibitions, teacher professional development workshops and video conferences to

ensure that students in regional NSW have access to the Library's unique collections.

Touring Exhibitions

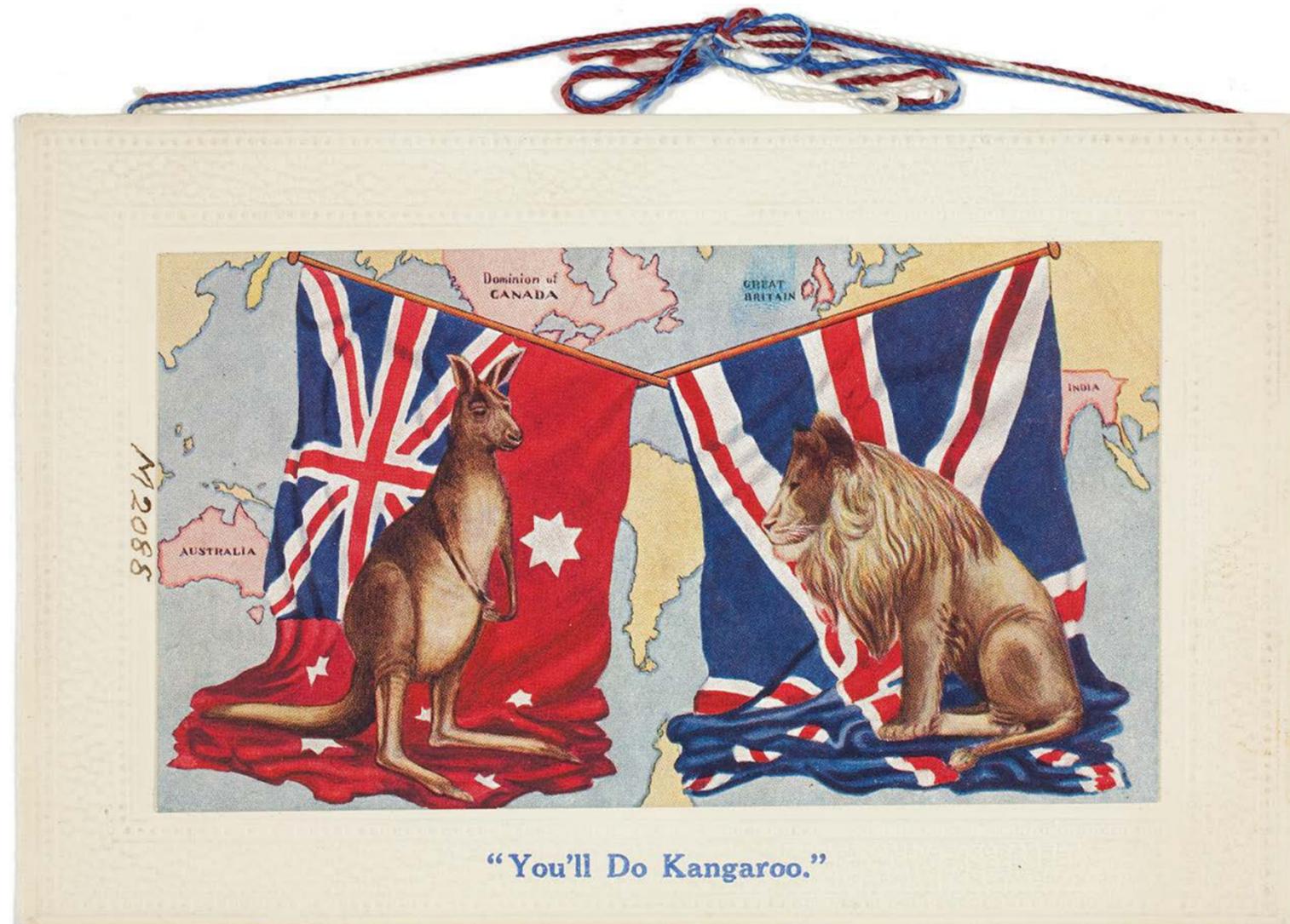
In 2015 public libraries and other cultural institutions around NSW will host State Library exhibitions including [Life interrupted: personal diaries from World War I](#) and [Portraits of war](#), allowing teachers, students and other members of the community to experience these exhibitions and view these primary sources firsthand.

Video conferences

Learning Services at the State Library will offer a number of free video conferences this year for students in Stages 2-5, particularly focusing on commemorating the centenary of Anzac. Students will have the opportunity to interact with curators, historians and other experts as they present original material from the First World War collection, including diaries, artworks, photographs, posters and ephemera.

Teacher professional development workshops

In partnership with regional public libraries, the State Library of NSW is offering teachers in these areas a unique



Greeting card: You'll do kangaroo, PXA 623/2

opportunity to participate in a free one hour interactive workshop highlighting the Library's First World War resources. These sessions are complemented by workshops and talks from other Library staff including conservators and curators.

The First World War was a defining moment in Australian history. The State Library's collections of personal stories from soldiers, their diaries, letters, photographs and drawings, are some of the richest records of the true Australian experience of the First World War.

I feel like the state library is an amazing place, and you never fully understand how amazing this building and program is until you come inside and experience it. I am hoping to come back, and be able to experience it all over again.

Student feedback from the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools consultation day

References and further reading

Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards 2015, [NSW syllabus for the Australian curriculum: English K-10](#), accessed 5 December, 2014.

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Mockler, N. and Groundwater-Smith, S 2011, 'Weaving a web of professional practice: The Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools', In B. Lingard, P. Thomson and T. Wrigley (Eds.) *Changing Schools: Alternative Models*. London: Routledge, pp. 294 - 322.