



Wars End

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In 1918, Australia played a larger role in world events than it ever had before and, perhaps, ever will.' This is the bold conclusion of first-time author Adam Wakeling in his stimulating account of Australia's role in the concluding months of the First World War.

His reference to 'the last fifty miles' in the title refers to the distance from the most forward point of the German Spring Offensive in March 1918 to the position of the front in October 1918 after six months of Allied advances.

Wakeling argues that these events have not been sufficiently recognised in the Australian historical consciousness, being overshadowed, not just by Gallipoli, but also by some of the earlier action on the Western Front.



**The Last Fifty Miles:
Australia and the End
of the Great War**

By Adam Wakeling
Viking Penguin, 2016, 316 pages

A key reason why Australian significance was at its height in 1918 was General John Monash's role as an Allied leader. Monash was instrumental in the development of new battle tactics that not only reduced the pointless slaughter of infantry, but also increased the opportunities to break through enemy lines. Instead of hours of artillery bombardment, followed by a pause and then a well-flagged infantry attack, Monash's new strategy saw an ongoing bombardment targeting enemy positions just forward of the advancing Allied infantry. This reduced the opportunity for the enemy to resurface from bunkers to mow down advancing troops. Moreover, the infantry were provided with aerial support and were assisted by tanks, which were becoming far more effective than the first prototypes earlier in the war. Wakeling argues that Monash's efforts were 'critical to the Allied success'.

Another important Australian figure in 1918 was Prime Minister Billy Hughes, who kept himself at the centre of debate on the war and the ensuing discussion about conditions to demand of Germany when peace came. Along the way, in equal measure, he managed to upset United States President Woodrow Wilson and delight French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau.

The fact that the war had made Australia more independent of Britain was evidenced by Hughes' 1918 stance that Australia would not feel itself bound to an armistice signed by Britain if it did not properly protect Australian interests, a position which 'would have been unthinkable in 1914'. Yet, it is hard to feel any national pride in an Australian Prime Minister who took the strongest stand of any Allied leader against a post war Japanese proposal for equal treatment of the races. As Wakeling comments, a watered-down version of this proposal satisfied 'the pro-segregationist Wilson, and even the protoapartheid government of South Africa, but not Hughes'.

As well as the importance of Monash and Hughes, Australian troops played significant roles in many of the crucial battles of 1918. There was some exaggeration about the fighting qualities of Australian troops, well-illustrated by the words of Henry Gullett, the official Australian war correspondent for the Palestine campaign, who described the Light Horseman as 'the flower of their race', men of 'pure British stock' refined by the Australian elements to produce 'the most

restless, adventurous, and virile individuals of that stock'. While recognising the Australians were generally an effective force, Wakeling argues that troops from other dominions, and from parts of Britain itself, particularly Londoners, were often of similar quality.

One of the features of Wakeling's book is that it is much more than a military history. He constantly places 1918's battlefields of the Western Front into the broader context of the war and events on the home fronts of the participants. The reader learns not only about key Australian events, such as the conscription referendums, but also about developments in other countries, and how the war triggered long-lasting changes in the roles of women and the size of government. The quality of Wakeling's work is also enhanced by his ability to include quirky anecdotes, such as his description of author Arthur Conan Doyle and former Australian Prime Minister Joseph Cook watching a battle from the top of a derelict tank.

War is always a sad affair and there is something particularly poignant about deaths when the fighting is almost over. In one of the most terrible examples in the First World War, 2738 men lost their lives on the final morning of the war when US General John Pershing insisted on continuing to fight for ground that the Allies would receive anyway when the Armistice took effect at 11am. In Australia's case, Wakeling personalises this loss in the form of young men, introduced to his readers earlier in the narrative, who lost their lives on the last day of Australia's fighting on the Western Front, Saturday 5 October 1918. On that day, Australian troops helped capture Montbrehain, but men who had survived many battles over the previous three years, from the Somme onwards, 'now died at a small village whose name is not remembered except by a few history enthusiasts'.

Overall, Australian involvement in securing the fifty miles of French soil cost the nation 5500 lives, with injuries to 18,500. Wakeling never lets his readers forget the tragedy of war, while at the same time recognising how much was at stake in this conflict, for the world and for Australia. In doing this so skillfully, Wakeling must surely have written one of the best debut histories for a considerable time.