



The (Great) War for White Australia

Romain Fathi

To cite this article: Romain Fathi (2019) The (Great) War for White Australia, History Australia, 16:1, 218-219, DOI: [10.1080/14490854.2019.1582444](https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2019.1582444)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2019.1582444>



Published online: 02 Apr 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 28



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The (Great) War for White Australia

Romain Fathi 

Flinders University, Australia

Best We Forget. The War for White Australia, 1914-1918, edited by Peter Cochrane, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2018, 272pp., \$A32.99 ISBN 9781925603750.

Peter Cochrane is not a scholar who accepts the platitudes and fabrications of a self-aggrandising Anzac legend. Cochrane has demonstrated several times that much historical understanding can be gained by scratching below the varnish of the legend in order to comprehend what was truly at stake in Australia's Great War. After his remarkable *Simpson and the Donkey: the Making of a Legend* (1992), Cochrane once again confronts the incoherence and omissions of one of Australia's most sacred cows. The main contention of his new book *Best We Forget* is simple: Australia went to war in 1914 to protect and defend White Australia.

White Australia and race politics are topics well covered in Australian historiography. What is less charted though is the role they played in Australia's decision to commit to the First World War. Through that contribution alone, Cochrane's work is a new landmark in Australian First World War historiography.

Cochrane opens his book with a study of the racial epic that the Anzac legend is: a celebration of the physical and moral perfection of White Australia. This first chapter sets the scene for a deeper exploration as to why such a racial epic was constructed and the underlying fears behind its creation. Naturally, Cochrane goes back in time to survey pre-war Australia in the following chapter. He pays particular attention to the panic generated by Britain and Japan's *rapprochement* in the decades preceding the First World War. Cochrane then reviews Australia's foreign policy and geopolitical situation before and after Federation, which saw a growing distrust of Britain, and the will to seal off the new Commonwealth from non-white peoples. At the time, the anguish prompted by Australia's isolation and Japan's colonial ambitions framed the debate over the new nation's social, economic, military and racial policies.

The book then turns to how Britain secured Australia's commitment to raise a contingent that could be deployed overseas to defend Britain, previously a significant point of contention between the two countries. In doing so, Cochrane reveals Australia's increasing drift away from Britain on geopolitical matters, as it attempted to defend its own interests rather than acting as an outpost of the empire. But paradoxically, the only way for Australia to overcome this divergence was to commit to the defence of Britain and the empire. At its simplest level, Australia's commitment to the First World War is depicted

by Cochrane as a means for Australia to show that it would defend Britain and the empire to receive, in return and in the fullness of time, their protection against what was then perceived as hordes of potential invaders from Asia. Put simply, the Great War was Australia's insurance policy; and no matter what the size of the premium was, it ought to be paid to sustain White Australia in the long run.

Cochrane paints a political class committed to a level of ingrained racism which will, perhaps, be confronting for today's readers; leaders obsessed with racial purity fuelled by "abandonment anxiety" and the apprehension that Australia could be seized by an Asian people, just as the Anglo-Saxon-Celtic race they represented had dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their lands in the past. *Best We Forget* masterfully complicates our understanding of Australia's motivations to join the war. Australia was not just a mere follower helping the mother country by sheer generosity and kindness. On the contrary, Australia was motivated by its own interests: it was desperate to retain the White Australia policy, promote its own colonial agenda in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific, and ensure the future of the vital economic umbilical cord that tied it to Britain.

Peter Cochrane then takes the reader to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and Hughes's reckless and restless fight to secure the future of White Australia. Hughes rejected any clause of racial equality to be included in the Treaty of Versailles, an attitude that ultimately fuelled anti-colonialism, self-determination movements and Japan's humiliation, all of which would have dire consequences in the following decades. While it is not Hughes and little Australia which precluded this clause from being adopted – this was the deed of the United States and large European colonial powers – Cochrane's analysis proves once more that the ideologies underpinning White Australia and racial superiority were absolutely central to Australia's engagement in the First World War.

The book closes on a chapter pertaining to Australia's popular memory of the First World War and why the main reason behind Australia's commitment to the war (namely, the defence of White Australia and the country's obsession with racial purity) remains, to this day, absent from Australia's popular understanding of the First World War. Cochrane points to Bean's obfuscation enterprise and its consequences, and calls for Australians to wake up to the historical reality that racist motives underpinned Australia's commitment to the First World War. In that light, a major exhibition on race as a prime catalyst for Australia's contribution to the Great War could do much to correct popular memory.

Best We Forget is rooted in political, diplomatic and "top-down" history. Statesmen such as Andrew Fisher, Alfred Deakin, William Morris Hughes, George Pearce, Joseph Cook and Edmund Barton are the main actors of this play. The book thus calls for further research which would take up the opposing approach: "bottom-up". While Cochrane's case is compelling and skilfully illustrated – yes, the elites saw the Great War as a way to fight for and preserve the future of White Australia – how did the average digger make sense of his own commitment to the war? Further research is needed to establish if fighting for White Australia was a key element which motivated the Anzacs, thus restoring their agency in committing to the war effort.

Best We Forget is a remarkable piece of scholarship which brings much to the existing historiography. It is one of the best books on Australia's First World War to have been published during the centenary, and a highly readable one at that. It is a work of pedagogy which I hope will find its place in classrooms and libraries across the country.

ORCID

Romain Fathi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5123-0004>