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SCOTTISH IDENTITY IN AUSTRALIA: THE CASE OF
OLD SYDNEIANS IN THE BOER WAR, 1899–1902
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Introduction

THIRTEEN Old Sydneians lost their lives fighting in South Africa (the Boer War), 1899–1902. Eleven of them are honoured on a memorial board at Sydney Grammar School. The best known of them was Keith Kinnaird Mackellar, killed in 1900. His letters to his sister, Dorothea (the famous poet), are a reminder of the youthful enthusiasm that drove so many young men into the conflict. Another old boy of the School was the famous bush poet, Andrew ‘Banjo’ Paterson, who went to South Africa as a war correspondent. Both men had Scots ancestry and they were among a large contingent of Old Sydneians for whom some form of Scottish identity was meaningful. Altogether, over 150 Old Sydneians fought in South Africa—an unusually high number of volunteers from one school. This paper explores the meaning of Scottish identity for the Grammar old boys who fought and died in South Africa.

Background

The first Australian troops arrived in South Africa in December 1899. Fortunately for them, it was too late to participate in the serious British defeats of ‘black week’ (10–17 December). Among their leaders were a handful of Old Sydneians, including Colonel J. A. K. Mackay, originator and commander of the First Australian Horse in 1897 and in 1900 sent to South Africa in command of the Imperial

Bushmen;¹ Lieutenant-Colonel James Macarthur Onslow;² Major Hubert Murray—the best swordsman in the Commonwealth³—and Major John Macquarie Antill: their careers were followed in the regular ‘School Notes’ column of the *Sydneian*, the official journal of School activities.⁴



A. B. ‘Banjo’ Paterson.⁵



Col. J. A. Kenneth Mackay.⁶

As the names suggest, many of the participants who had been boys at Grammar, possessed Scottish names. Marcus Logan (O. S. 1891),⁷ was a career soldier who fought in South Africa among many other military appointments—so many and so far from home that he saw himself as a ‘forgotten man’ in the eyes of his old School. In 1960 he

¹ *Australian Town and Country Journal* (13 November 1907), p. 35.

² *Camperdown Chronicle* (9 April 1936), p. 15.

³ *Sydneian*, no. 179 (September 1904), p. 24.

⁴ E.g. *Sydneian*, no. 160 (June 1901), p. 15.

⁵ R. S. Watsford (ed.), *Sydney Grammar School From its Earliest Days* (Sydney: W. T. Baker and Co., 1924), p. 58.

⁶ *Evening News* (3 April 1900), p. 5.

⁷ O. S. stands for ‘Old Sydneian’ followed by the date of exit from the School.

wrote a long biographical letter to L. F. Dawkins, the secretary of the Old Sydneians' Union. He claimed to be 'the first Grammar School boy to go'.⁸ As a School cadet he had helped Headmaster Weigall send off the Sudan contingent as it marched down College St. Logan went on to join the 1st Contingent in South Africa, beginning a life in uniform that took him all over Australia, to India and even into the U.S. Army in the Second World War. More on Logan presently.

The conflict in South Africa is generally divided into three phases. The first phase was characterised by frustration and failures against the Boers under the command of Lord Methuen. The third and longest phase, running through 1900 to 1902, most concerns Sydney Grammar School. The arrival of Lord Roberts in mid-January 1900 brought about innovations in British strategy and tactical efficacy. This is the phases in when the majority of Old Sydneians lost their lives, in part due to the guerrilla nature of the fighting adopted by the Boer irregulars. Conditions were harsh for both soldiers and horses. Many personnel did not have time to acclimatise to a severe environment. Enteric fever and dysentery claimed victims among Old Sydneians throughout the conflict.

Captain John Macquarie Antill was an Old Sydneian keen to gain in South Africa a good reputation for soldiering. His military pedigree was impressive, by Australian standards, as he was a grandson of Major H. G. Antill, A.D.C., of the 73rd regiment (Gordon Highlanders). Named in honour of Lachlan Macquarie (with whom his grandfather had served in India with some distinction), his mother was a Campbell.⁹ Another Old Sydneian present in South Africa, but not in uniform, was Andrew 'Banjo' Paterson, eldest son of Andrew Bogle Paterson, a Scottish immigrant from Lanarkshire. He went to the Boer War as war correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Age*. Attached to

⁸ M. Logan to L. F. Dawkins, 19 December 1960: Sydney Grammar School Archives, 'War Service Lists', MIWT/1 Box 1.

⁹ F. Wilkinson, *Australia at the Front: A Colonial View of the Boer War* (London: John Long, 1901), pp. 57–60; M. Field, *The Forgotten War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press), p. 87.

General French's column he gave graphic accounts of the high points of British campaign, including the relief of Kimberley, the surrender of Bloemfontein (where he was the first correspondent to ride in), and the capture of Pretoria. Paterson also wrote twelve ballads based on his war experiences: among them 'Johnny Boer' and 'With French to Kimberley'. Paterson's contribution ended in September 1900 when he returned to Australia, but he quickly travelled as war correspondent to witness the fighting in the Spanish-American War and the Boxer Rebellion.¹⁰

Some study has been done focussed specifically on Australians of Scots background and their participation in the Boer War. For example, soon after the conflict Gerald R. Campbell wrote *Twenty-one Years' Volunteering in New South Wales 1885-1906: the Story of the N.S.W. Scottish Rifles* (privately published in Sydney c.1907); and more recently John E. Price wrote a book entitled *Southern Cross Scots: The Australian and New Zealand participation in the Marquis of Tullibardine's Scottish Horse during the South African War of 1899-1902* (1992). These highly focussed works are more a celebration of units rather than individuals and so are limited in their coverage of issues such as I am canvassing in this article.

War Ardour

The enthusiasm for the war shown by Paterson is a fine indicator of the general level of interest in the war among the Australian public. At Grammar, among boys too young to serve, the desire to participate grew exponentially.

¹⁰ Clement Semmler, 'Paterson, Andrew Barton (Banjo) (1864-1941)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 11 (Melbourne: MUP, 1988); *Canberra Times* (6 February 1941), p. 4; P. L. Murray, *Australia's Participation in the 2nd Boer War, 1899-1902* (Melbourne: Dep't of Defence, 1911), p. 273.

(below) Keith Mackellar in the uniform of the Gordon Highlanders (Private Collection).



Keith Kinnaird McKellar

(left) In Gordon Highlanders uniform;

(above) face detail from memorial window, St James' Macquarie St

(right) MacKellar arms in window at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital

Grammar's first great loss in 1900 was Lieutenant Walter Rupert Harriott, formerly of the N.S.W. Army Service Corps. A young man of real ability, in April 1900 he was offered an appointment 'under the most flattering circumstances'. Lord Roberts had requested a 'smart young officer', to be attached to Robert's personal staff as galloper in the field. Lieutenant-Colonel Knight, Officer Commanding 2nd Contingent, chose Lieutenant Harriott. Lord Roberts praised the 'work, diligence, and bearing of the young colonial' and promoted him into a prestigious cavalry regiment.¹¹ In fighting near the Diamond Hills in June 1900, Harriott was wounded

¹¹ *Evening News* (27 April 1900), p. 7.

by an explosive bullet.¹² That battle at Diamond Hills in mid-1900 was among the most important engagements of the whole war in the opinion of many Australians.¹³

Just before the outbreak of the Boer War Keith Kinnaird Mackellar volunteered for service in India with the Gordon Highlanders, taking with him his own horses and a servant. He was well-aware of his Scottish roots and the military traditions of his family; his grandfather was Lieutenant John MacKellar, 7th Highland Light Infantry, from Argyllshire, Scotland, who later emigrated to Australia.¹⁴ Keith Mackellar joined the regiment at Capetown, where it had been deployed to fight against the Boers. There he was hospitalized with enteric fever, but determined to fight on he joined the 7th Dragoon Guards against doctor's orders, receiving a commission as 2nd Lieutenant, on 26 May 1900. Mackellar's sole account sent to the School concerning his fighting is his letter 'Blomfontein at last' published in the *Sydneian*, the School magazine, and is full of the spirit of boys' own adventure:

Bloemfontein at last ... we landed without much welcome, Cape Town being too much used to arriving soldier by now; we camped at Maitland then railed through the desolate Karoo; at Modder river station we watched a swarm of kaffirs and zulus carry railway items, one man wearing a necklace of spent 303 cases; our squadron was ordered to escort a hundred wagons en route to join Roberts' army, a dismal job but better than doing nothing; we crossed the Modder battlefield, still dozens of unburied bodies; at Jacobsdal we saw churches, houses, even wagons filled with wounded waiting to be railed to hospital in Cape Town; at Klips Drift one of our troops,

¹² *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* (29 August 1900), p. 2.

¹³ *Daily Telegraph* (2 June 1902), p. 5.

¹⁴ The family had even received a grant of arms from the Lord Lyon King of Arms in Scotland in 1888: Arms—Argent a lion passant azure between two barrulets gules in chief three crescents sable and in base as many mullets of the third. Crest—An arm embowed in armour holding in the hand a scymitar all proper. Motto—Per sever ando: 'MacKellar of Dunara', in A. P. Burke (ed.), Sir Bernard Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Colonial Gentry*, vol. 1 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1891), p. 258.

commanded by an Old Sydneian [Captain Antill, N.S.W. Mounted Rifles],¹⁵ was sent ... to rescue some irregular horse but it was a wasted mission as the irregulars extracted themselves; we prayed for some Boers to shoot at us.¹⁶

In July 1900, Mackellar was attached to the 1st Australian Horse when he fought in an action near Derdepoort. He was badly wounded and was carried away from the fighting on the back of his brother officer, Harry See, a Newcastle N.S.W. native and son of pioneer graziers of the Maclean district (and a nephew of Sir John See, Premier of N.S.W.).¹⁷ Mackellar's Commanding Officer and fellow Old Sydneian, Colonel Macarthur Onslow described in detail to Dr Mackellar the manner of his son's last action.¹⁸ Mackellar died of his wounds on 11 July 1900.¹⁹ The premier of N.S.W. received the news direct from Field-Marshal Lord Roberts, Commander-in-Chief in South Africa.²⁰ Another prominent family friend and Grammar community attachment, Sir Normand MacLaurin, said: 'He was indeed a noble lad; brave, gentle and upright...and he had the faculty of inspiring esteem and affection in every one who knew him'.²¹

¹⁵ 'The New South Wales Mounted Rifles forming this advance guard were under Captain Antill and numbered only 96': *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* (17 September 1900), p. 2.

¹⁶ *Sydneian*, No. 154 (May 1900), pp. 2-4.

¹⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald* (17 October 1933), p. 12.

¹⁸ F. A. M. Onslow to Dr Mackellar, 7DG Deerdepoort, 14 July 1900: Mitchell Library [hereafter ML] MSS 1959.

¹⁹ Adrienne Howley, *My Heart My Country: The Story of Dorothea Mackellar* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1989), pp. 52, 58-63, 204.

²⁰ *Zeehan and Dundas Herald* (17 July 1900), p. 2.

²¹ Sir Normand MacLaurin to Charles Mackellar, Sydney, 16 July 1900: ML MSS 1959.

Remembering

Grammar experienced the sorrow of Old Sydneians killed or wounded in action amid a surge of patriotism for Queen and Empire during the war with the Boers in South Africa. In *The Sydneian* (August 1900), Headmaster Weigall solemnly announced that Harriott and Mackeller had ‘rendered good and loyal service to their country’ and had ‘given their lives for the Empire’ at the war.²² Of Keith Mackeller, Weigall said he had ‘a personality singularly attractive, strength of purpose, and power of will’.²³

Other Old Sydneians of Scots background who died in South Africa included David Cumming McLeod (AD 1888), killed in action, Sunnyside 1 January 1900; Private Thomas Cunningham Robertson (O.S. 1883), N.S.W. Mounted Infantry, killed in action 21 November 1901.²⁴ Walter Laishley Spier (O.S. 1892), died of enteric fever, 23 January 1901; William Bradshaw Galliard Smith (O.S. 1878), killed in action, Brakenlaagte, 30 October 1901; Cecil Graham Elliot (O.S. 1900), killed in action, 7 February 1902. Finally, James Mackery Gray, 3rd N.S.W. Mounted Infantry, who died of dysentery at Heilbron in February 1902.²⁵

²² *Sydneian*, No. 155 (August 1900), p. 4.

²³ *Sydneian*, No. 155 (August 1900), p. 3.

²⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald* (3 June 1902), p. 9.

²⁵ *Maitland Weekly Mercury* (8 February 1902), p. 2.



*Sergeant W. B. G. Smith.*²⁶



*Corporal W. L. Spier.*²⁷

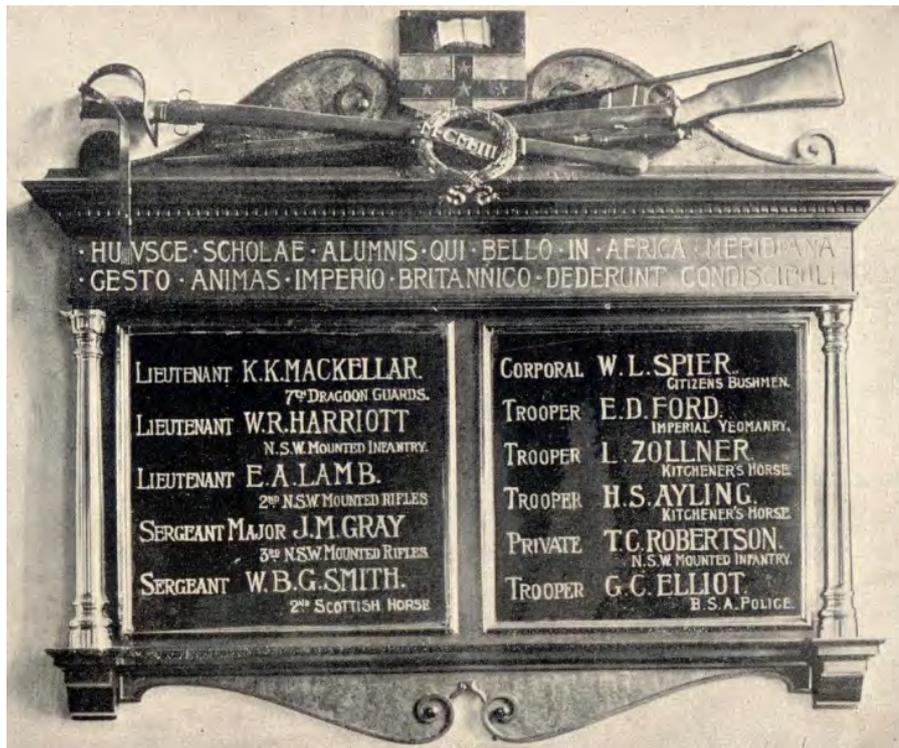
To honour the sacrifice made by Old Sydneians, Weigall announced his intention to erect a memorial tablet in the Big School-room. Keith Mackellar's death was marked both at Grammar and more broadly in the community. His father, Dr Charles Mackellar, MLC (later knighted 1912 and created K.C.M.G. 1916) was determined to remember his fallen son publically via the new Queen Victoria Memorial Pavilions at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.²⁸ Another third memorial to Keith Mackellar was constructed in the form of a stained glass window at St James's Anglican Church on Macquarie Street.²⁹

²⁶ 'Sergeant William Smith', http://www.bwm.org.au/site/William_Smith.asp, accessed 25 March 2015.

²⁷ '152 Corporal Walter Laishley SPIER', NSW Citizens Bushmans Contingent: <https://alh-research.tripod.com/NSWCBC/index.album/152-corporal-walter-laishley-spier?i=507>, accessed 29 March 2015.

²⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald* (19 April 1901), p. 4.

²⁹ *The World's News* (18 July 1903), p. 2; *St James' Church Monthly Church Messenger*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (August 1903): July 11.



*South African War memorial, Big School,
Sydney Grammar School, College St, Darlinghurst.*

In unveiling the memorial tablet at Grammar, Colonel Mackay said the names on it represented the ‘White Knights’ of the School, who, in company with hundreds, had died that the Empire might live.³⁰ The feeling was clearly that this had been a British imperial venture, in which Britons of all ethnicities had participated. Yet the origins of the men on the board are clear enough: of the eleven named, six had recognisably Scottish names—MacKellar, Harriott, Mackery Gray, Robertson, Spier and Elliot. A sixth man, W. B. G. Smith, belonged to the N.S.W. Scottish Horse and though the son of an Anglican minister would appear to have had Scottish roots.

³⁰ *Sydneian*, No. 176 (March 1904), pp. 2–3.

Scottish Identity

What constitutes identity? It is a rather postmodern concept to suggest we construct our identities by personal volition, or even inhabit various personae depending on need. However, in this case I would like to suggest that Scots descendants in colonial Australia reflect something of this trend. As we have seen, much was said at the time about British identity, the great imperialist venture of Empire subsuming Scottish particularism and allowing an outlet on a global scale for the creative energy and manpower from the north of Britain. At the turn of the century, all of these men I have mentioned were Britons first, Australian second and of Scots association as a rather distant third. Here at least I can support the words of Dr Craig Wilcox, speaking of Sergeant William Bradshaw Galliard Smith:

Just off Anzac Parade is St John's Anglican church, built in the 1840s and long pre-dating the Australian War Memorial, Anzac Parade, and our national military story. Inside the church is a plaque to the memory of William Bradshaw Galliard Smith, killed in action in 1901. Like some Australians from the world wars, Smith was a bushman of sorts, having worked in northern Australia and also New Guinea before enlistment. But he fought in a much smaller war ... in a regiment, the 2nd Scottish Horse, that had no Australian identity, and not much of a Scottish one for that matter. It fought for the British empire ... and that was enough for its recruits. Such was Smith's and his generation's ... allegiance to an Australian nation that barely existed at the time.³¹

However, I suggest this leaves us feeling unsatisfied. Was there truly no stronger tangible link to Scotland or meaning for the large number of Grammar old boys, educated, intelligent (mostly) and aware of their family backgrounds? I promised we would return to

³¹ Extract from Dr Craig Wilcox's speech, read by Cr Simon Menzies, Deputy Mayor of Mosman, Thursday 31 May 2012: *Monumentally Speaking*, no. 14 (July 2012), p. 7.

Marcus Logan and indeed his words provide hope. He articulated his feelings on ancestry with real feeling:

My grandfather was a Laird of Clan Logan of the Western Highlands ... My name by the way is Marcus ... commonly known as Mick in my School career. An Irish Christian name (my Grandmother was Irish) and a Scots surname.³²

Not only was he proud of (and well-informed about) his family background, Logan also offers us a way into understanding how many Old Sydneians related to their ethnic origins. Grammar was founded in the mid-1850s as a non-denominational school, reflecting the era's desire to seek a rapprochement between Catholic and Protestant. This in part accounts for the words of one Old Sydneian, Private Seymour Bathurst, N.S.W. Mounted Infantry, who wrote to a friend in Sydney, from Modder River, on 27 February 1900:

It is astonishing how well the Australian boys get on with every regiment they meet. A well marked line of natural difference may mark Highlanders from, say, Irish or English, but all 'clannishness' is thrown aside to welcome an Australian. We have no jealousies of past rival deeds to uphold, and to one and all are 'brothers in arms.' I must close shop now to catch a mail, and have tried to keep my promise to write about what strikes me as being worth writing on. In my next, all being well I shall try and honestly describe what being in battle feels like.³³

The non-denominational trend tended not to produce cultural hybrids (like Logan), but it did help smooth over more strident expressions of division. Not so the external organisations joined by many Grammar old boys. Here I refer explicitly to the colonial military units known as the Scottish Horse and the Irish Rifles. Because they were Sydney-based, each of these regiments contained numerous Old Sydneians at the outbreak of the South African War.

³² M. Logan to L. F. Dawkins, 19 December 1960: S.G.S. Archives, 'War Service Lists', MIWT/1 Box 1.

³³ *Evening News* (4 April 1900), p. 8; *National Advocate* (7 April 1900), p. 2.

On the cusp of war, the Scottish Horse included a number of Old Sydneians (both Presbyterians and Anglicans), among them George Hay Morphett Mair (O.S.1898), Arthur Lionel Carew Hunt (O.S.1892), and William Bradshaw Galliard Smith (O.S.1878). At the same time, the Irish Rifles was resolutely Roman Catholic in confession and contained John Hubert Plunkett Murray (O.S.1878), Heber Hugh MacMahon (O.S.1895), and Harris Dunmore Lang Woods (O.S.1879).



*Lieut. M. W. Logan.*³⁴



*Brig.-Gen. Sir Robert M. McC. Anderson,
K.C.M.G.*³⁵

For at least one Old Sydneian the religion of Presbyterianism and Scottish national identity were as one. Robert Murray McCheyne Anderson (O.S. 1881) was a lieutenant with the 6th Contingent (Queensland Imperial Battalion) in South Africa in 1900; but in 1917 he served as a Brigadier General at the Australian Imperial Force Staff Headquarters. What happened next is said best in the words of his obituary, published in *The Methodist* in 1941:

³⁴ *Evening News* (26 October 1899), p. 6.

³⁵ Portrait of Brigadier General Sir Robert Murray McCheyne Anderson, K.C.M.G. (c.1916): <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/H00019/>, accessed 20 March 2015.

Sir Robert was named after Murray McCheyne, the great Scottish Evangelist, and he was proud of it. With the blood kinship there must also have been some spiritual inheritance, for Sir Robert was always interested in spiritual things, and anxious to contribute to the religious welfare of others. He was the friend of the army chaplains, and sought opportunities to assist in their work. ... Being in Scotland once on duty, he discovered that there were some hundreds of A.I.F. officers and men either on leave or convalescent in the various military hospitals. He arranged a special service officer for them in St. Giles' Cathedral, citizens at the royal town were stirred by the sight of the famous Australians marching to church parade behind Scottish pipers.³⁶

Keith Kinnaird Mackellar joined the Scottish Rifles as soon as he left School in 1898 and was briefly thereafter a member of the Gordon Highlanders in whose uniform he was photographed for posterity.³⁷ Like young Mackellar, many old boys expressed their sense of identity by joining famous Scottish fighting units. For example, Lieutenant William Ulick Middleton Campbell (O.S. 1899), was commissioned into the 1st Battalion, Highland Light Infantry, in December 1900, and fought with this British unit in South Africa.³⁸ Marcus Logan was seconded to the Highland Brigade under General Methuen at Modder River in 1899 before obtaining his commission in the N.S.W. Mounted Infantry in May 1900.³⁹

Finally, it is illuminating to study the statements made in the public newspapers at the passing of several prominent old boy veterans of the South African war. Here can be found a regular pattern of Scottish, and invariably military, service given to explain the presence in the colony of well-known old boys. The Macarthur dynasty accounted for many such connections, but not all of them. Indeed, it has to be admitted the Windsor district was far more

³⁶ *The Methodist* (11 January 1941), p. 6.

³⁷ *Northern Star* (12 January 1901), p. 8.

³⁸ *The Register* (19 March 1915), p. 5; *The Polo Monthly* (April 1915), p. 75.

³⁹ Murray, *Australia's Participation*, p. 38; M. Logan to L. F. Dawkins, 19 December 1960: S.G.S. Archives, 'War Service Lists', MIWT/1 Box 1.

influential than any one family in it, although the Macarthur kindred were represented by men such as James William Macarthur Onslow (O.S. 1887) and Philip Henry Macarthur Goldfinch (O.S. 1902).

Colonel James Alexander Kenneth Mackay (Ad. 1879), Officer Commanding the N.S.W. Imperial Bushmen, was the son of a Scots immigrant who arrived in Australia in 1830 to investigate the possibilities of tea growing on behalf of Sir James Matheson, of Scotland, with whom he had been associated in China. Instead his father purchased 50,000 acres in the Cootamundra district, establishing a family that has produced both soldiers and farmers for generations.⁴⁰

David Cumming MacLeod (Ad. 1888), the first Grammar casualty of the entire conflict (killed at Sunnyside, 1 January 1900) was both intimately military and Scots by background. His father was a Scots pioneer in Queensland and his mother was the daughter of an American Civil War veteran. His paternal grandfather was Captain J. Macleod, 78th Highlanders, and his maternal uncle was Captain J. R. Cumming, Alabama State Artillery.⁴¹ All of these facts drew comment in his obituary.

Conclusion

The war in South Africa exerted a profound impact upon Sydney Grammar School. The most immediate and obvious effect was the loss through combat or disease of eleven Old Sydneians. The honour board in Big School was the equally immediate response. On a broader level the war informed, and to some extent justified, the long-standing militarist spirit within the School. Fostered by Weigall, but discontinued in the few years prior to the Boer War, the School Cadet Corps trained many of the Old Sydneian participants in the war. For those too young to serve in South Africa the revival of the

⁴⁰ Murray, *Australia's Participation*, p. 90; *The Catholic Press* (17 December 1898), p. 17; *Australian Town and Country Journal* (13 November 1907), p. 35.

⁴¹ *Sydney Morning Herald* (5 April 1900), p. 8.

Corps offered vital impetus to the concept of military volunteerism which fed directly into Grammar's large Great War contribution (where, of course, many more old boys of Scots descent fought and many lost their lives). In this way the Boer War could be said to have inspired two generations of Sydneians in rapid succession to risk their lives for lofty ideals of Empire and monarch. Finally, the war affected the physical and spiritual life of the School. The erection of the memorial in Big School in 1903 transformed it from an assembly hall into a site for emotional reflection. This paved the way for the much larger Great War memorial unveiled in 1921 and the subsequent Second World War honour board, unveiled 19 June 1953.

But what does it tell us about Scottish identity? We can see the existence of both organizational and personal choices made on the basis of religion. It was a sectarian era, despite the non-denominational character of the School. Furthermore, religion was powerfully connected to ethnicity. Yet we should not run on too far with this idea as men with names like 'Dunmore Lang' belonged to the Irish Rifles, and the sons of Anglican clergymen could be found in the Scottish Horse. For all that, it is hard to ignore the evident passion with which many Old Sydneian sons of empire embraced their Scottish ancestry. It is no coincidence that young Keith MacKellar was photographed in the uniform of the Gordon Highlanders, nor that the Highland military forebears of a large number of Boer War veterans featured prominently in their obituaries. I suspect the seeming contradictions of some of this evidence point to the true complexity of the truth and that the multi-layered reality of being British, colonial, and of Scots descent produced hybrid identities for these men, many of whom were the sons or grandsons of foreign-born pioneers and the fathers of true post-Federation (and post-Anzac) Australians.

