

World War One “an ordinary trade war”: Archbishop Daniel Mannix at Brunswick, 1917

Introduction by Val Noone to re-enactment
by Rod Quantock of a speech made
at St Ambrose School, Brunswick, 28 January 1917

*Commemoration on Sunday 28 January 2017
at St Ambrose Hall, 3 Dawson Street, Brunswick*

*Organised by Brunswick-Coburg Anti-Conscription
Commemoration Committee*

Local site of national importance

This afternoon we are celebrating an event in Brunswick which is of national importance. On 28 January 1917, a Sunday and a summer's day with temperatures like this, at the opening of the school next door, in the third year of World War One, when the casualty rate was horrendous, with a least twelve of the leading activists against the war in jail, food prices were high, wages were low, three months after a majority of Australians had voted No to conscription for the war, eight months after the Easter Rising in Ireland, the coadjutor Catholic archbishop of Melbourne, Cork-born Daniel Mannix, then 52 years old, and resident in the working class suburb of West Melbourne, six foot tall, with “strong searching eyes” and a pleasant public speaking voice, told a large crowd, most of them Catholics but including Protestants and humanists, that he regarded the war as an “ordinary trade war” The *Argus* reported that he called it “a sordid trade war”. Whether he said sordid or not, what was news and what upset Prime Minister Billy Hughes and the rest of the establishment was that he named it as “a trade war”.

Why Mannix was in the news

To say that the war was a trade war was not news to most of his hearers. They knew that already. Local activist John Curtin had been saying it all along and indeed for three or four years before the war started. Bella Guerin, Adela Pankhurst and Vida Goldstein had said it, the trade union newspaper *Labour Call* had said it, and, in their special way, the Industrial Workers of the World said it.

Remember that although Victoria voted Yes in the first referendum on military conscription for World War I, held on Saturday 28 October 1916, the working class northern suburbs of Melbourne voted overwhelmingly No. Brunswick was about two to one for No and so was nearby Northcote. Thousands of workers and their families were opposed to Prime Minister Billy Hughes, that renegade wharfie and labour rat.

And guess who else had said it? As Mannix's defenders were quick to point out Prime Minister Hughes had said it. Twelve months earlier Hughes said that "the struggle for commercial supremacy [was] one of the primary causes of the war".

Indeed, such political economic views had been the basis for attempts to prevent or end the war by the 1907 and 1912 International Socialist Congresses, and the April 1915 founding meeting of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom at Le Hague. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin said it.

No, to say it was a trade war was not news. What was news was that a Catholic archbishop said so and said so publicly and with wit to cheers from a large audience.

Multiplier effect in bitter 1917

The families of Brunswick had supplied their percentage of volunteers. Facing Mannix on 28 January were many mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, workmates and sweethearts of men at the war, or men lost or injured in the war. I have been studying Mannix's speeches and on every occasion he is respectful of the Australian soldiers and their families and friends. He was, indeed, chaplain-general to the Australian armed forces.

Many Australians supported the war as a defence of Belgium or as a fight for freedom against German aggression. However, as it became clear that the war would not be over quickly, and that the troops would not be home by Christmas, as the death toll mounted, as wounded men returned with some of them begging on the city streets, as prices rose and wages fell, as suspicion mounted that this was the same old story of empire versus empire without concern for the workers and farmers who supplied the troops, most changed and wanted the war to end.

We know that ahead of this audience is perhaps the most bitter year of class conflict in the history of the Australian working class. Many of them were already experiencing it and worse was to come in the food riots and strikes of 1917.

In this context Mannix saying that it was a trade war had a multiplier effect on top of the speeches, pamphlets, demonstrations and so on of the activists. In her recent prize-winning biography Brenda Niall wrote that "Dr Mannix's speeches were remembered, not only for their anti-imperial spirit but also for sounding something like Bolshevism." These words sound strange to those who remember Mannix in his old age as the supporter of B A Santamaria and the Democratic Labor Party.

However, at this time, Mannix was not just an Irish Australian hero but a working-class hero. You can imagine how pleased the activists could feel on Monday morning opening the daily papers and seeing the headline that Mannix had called it a trade war. Adela Pankhurst and the Victorian Socialist Party praised his remarks.

Cocksure in Brunswick

In Mannix's speech there are many points to notice and discuss and we will do so after Rod Quantock speaks. In addition to the extracts highlighted by Rod in which Mannix bounces off current unemployment, he made fun of the *Argus* newspaper, and had strong words about education, including an attack on Frank Tate, head of the department of education. Tate, as you probably know, had put all the resources of the schools behind outright enthusiasm for the war.

One important point of context is that this speech is part of a concerted effort around the country to head off Hughes' anticipated second referendum, which he was still denying he would attempt.

In regard to tone, there are signs that Mannix was being careful in regard to prosecution under the War Precautions Act. Hughes and the governor-general were hoping to get the Vatican to shift him, and they considered deporting him. However, commentators have noticed that Mannix sounds cocksure. This may reflect firstly that he and his audience were celebrating their win with the No vote in October, but secondly working-class Brunswick was something of a liberated zone where, like Curtin and others, Mannix felt at home.

BCACC leading the way

You have broken your weekend to attend this commemoration. We know that getting here involved an effort. Good on you.

Brunswick Coburg Anti-Conscription Commemoration Committee have done a great job in bringing us here today. In the five-year-long centenary of World War One, besides remembering the diggers and rightly so, a lot of public commemoration is lapsing into what we might call anzackery, Nancy Atkins and her Brunswick-Coburg committee are showing the way to remember one of the things that makes Australia famous, namely our two victories for the No vote on conscription. That rejection of conscription was a world first, a history to be proud of and tell our children and grandchildren about. The No vote saved tens of thousands of Australian, German and other lives.

Mannix's speech at St Ambrose played a small but important part. He spoke not as an Irish patriot – although he was and that influenced him also, he knew Patrick Pearse and Eamon de Valera, I don't think he knew James Connolly personally – but on this occasion he spoke on behalf of working-class and humanist values.

Let's listen to extracts from what Daniel Mannix said here in Brunswick one hundred years ago. We are honoured to have Rod Quantock, a brilliant comedian, a holy pagan and outstanding supporter of good causes, with us to recite the speech. Please welcome Rod.

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