

# FRIENDS OF THE NOEL BUTLIN ARCHIVES CENTRE INC.

# NEWSLETTER

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## Waterside Workers' Federation archives digitised

This year marks a very special anniversary for the Maritime Union of Australia, with 2022 marking 150 years since the formation of the first trade unions representing waterside workers in Port Adelaide, Sydney and Port Melbourne (Sandridge) in 1872.

To mark the 150th anniversary, the ANU Library Digital Scholarship team have digitised thousands of photographs from the Waterside Workers' Federation and Maritime Union of Australia archives. Later this year the Archives will be using some of these records in an exhibition to mark the anniversary.

You can browse digitised [Maritime Union](#) and [Waterside Workers Federation](#) photographs on the ANU Open Research website.

## NBAC Annual Lecture 2022 Save the Date

Marian Quartly will deliver the 2022 NBAC Annual Lecture,

*Friendly society or force for nationalism? The Australian Natives Association, 1871-1901*

on Thursday 3 November 2022, 5.30-7.00pm in the  
RSSS Auditorium, ANU.

Marian Quartly is Professor Emerita in the Monash School of Philosophical, Historical and International Studies. With John Lack she is writing a history of the Australian Natives Association, an organisation central to the making of Australian federation, which will speak to the current state of Australian political life.

Professor Quartly's most cited works are *Creating a Nation* (2006), and *Australians 1838* (1987). More recently she has published a history of the National Council of Women of Australia, *Respectable Radicals* (2015), and a history of Australian adoption, *The Market in Babies* (2013). She is currently completing a history of her own family that will contribute to the disciplines of both family history and South Australian history.

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The following article is a somewhat abridged version of the 2021 NBAC Annual Lecture by Anthea Hyslop, a great friend of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre. The audio-visual recording of Dr Hyslop's lecture is accessible at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1QPIUTgPNM> or from the Archives website <https://archives.anu.edu.au/>.

## Records and Recollections The Pneumonic Influenza Pandemic in Australia, 1918-1919

*Anthea Hyslop*

It is generally accepted that the great influenza pandemic first appeared in the United States, in the northern spring of 1918. It seemed fairly typical in that first wave, despite some rather unusual features. From there, it was carried aboard American troopships to a Europe still in the throes of the Great War, and it also spread to other parts of the world, as 'flu' epidemics invariably do. By August 1918, in Western Europe the disease had undergone a radical change, becoming much more deadly, with swift onset and marked pneumonic symptoms. Unlike other influenza strains, this one was most fatal among men and women in the prime of life. In severe cases, victims' lungs were filled with a bloody froth, and lack of oxygen caused a 'heliotrope' (or purplish) cyanosis that darkened the skin of the dying.

This second wave, and a third one that followed it, took many thousands, ultimately many millions, of lives.<sup>1</sup>

As the lethal second wave began raging in the northern hemisphere, more distant countries like Australia were still undergoing the milder first wave, which seemed much like the usual seasonal ‘flu’. But by October 1918, the second wave had spread around the world, and was wreaking havoc in countries like South Africa and New Zealand, both of which sent dire warnings to Australia. Here, the federal authorities instituted rigorous measures of maritime quarantine, and as a result Australia was able to keep the disease in check for nearly three months.<sup>2</sup> This interval allowed time for preparations to be made: notable among them, the development of a ‘mixed’ bacterial vaccine – bacterial, because at this stage viruses were virtually unknown to science, and certain bacteria were known to accompany this mysterious new influenza. The vaccine could not prevent influenza, a viral disease; but it seems to have afforded some protection against serious secondary infections. Made chiefly by the new Commonwealth Serum Laboratories in Melbourne, it was much in demand, especially once influenza had escaped from quarantine.<sup>3</sup>

In November 1918, while ‘flu’ cases multiplied at coastal quarantine stations, federal and state health officials met in Melbourne to arrange practical measures for controlling and treating the disease when it should enter the community. Chief among these was the decision that an infected state should promptly notify its plight to the federal authorities, and that other states

would then close their borders against it, until they too became infected. The federal director of quarantine, Dr JHL (Howard) Cumpston, placed little faith in land quarantine, but the state governments were determined to attempt it. When, in early January 1919, maritime quarantine was breached – probably via an asymptomatic carrier – it was in Melbourne, where the federal government was then based, that influenza first spread into the community.<sup>4</sup> But there, a delay in identifying it as the dreaded lethal strain meant that the ‘flu’ was able to travel further afield, and to reach Sydney in late January, before Victoria had declared itself infected. An indignant New South Wales wasted no time in closing its border with Victoria, though both were now infected, and roundly condemned the failures of federal and Victorian authorities in Melbourne.<sup>5</sup>

What followed, amid rancorous debate, was a general closing of other states’ borders and ensuing chaos for travellers and for freight movements. Like New South Wales, South Australia caught the ‘flu’ very quickly; but Queensland was spared until the end of April, while Western Australia held out until early June, and Tasmania, with its own island isolation, until mid-August. Meanwhile, Dr Cumpston, still doubtful as to the disease’s identity, had kept the national maritime quarantine barrier firmly in place until late April. The combined effect of maritime quarantine and state border closures was to slow the pace of the pandemic, which diminished somewhat in virulence as time went on. Those states infected last fared best, and the country as a whole, while suffering great loss, was spared the worst of the pandemic’s impact.<sup>6</sup> By the end of 1919, the pandemic was all but over. Australia’s death toll, at first said to be around 12,000, is now thought to have been nearer 15,000, in a population of about five million.

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<sup>1</sup> For accounts of the pandemic’s global impact, see: AW Crosby, *America’s Forgotten Pandemic. The Influenza of 1918*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989; GW Rice, *Black November. The 1918 influenza pandemic in New Zealand*, Canterbury University Press, Christchurch NZ 2005 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.); H. Phillips, *‘Black October’: the Impact of the Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918 on South Africa*, Government Printer, Pretoria 1990; N. Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic. A dark epilogue*, Routledge, Abingdon UK 2006).

<sup>2</sup> For texts of cables, see JHL Cumpston, *The Health of the People. A study in federalism* (Roebuck Society, Canberra 1978), pp. 34-35. For full details of maritime quarantine, see JHL Cumpston, *Influenza and Maritime Quarantine in Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia Quarantine Service Publication no. 18, Government Printer, Melbourne 1919.

<sup>3</sup> AH Brogan, *Committed to Saving Lives. A History of the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories*, Hyland House, Melbourne 1990, pp. 1-18; WJ Penfold, ‘Influenza Vaccine and Inoculation’, ch. VII, and TM Cherry, ‘The Value of Inoculation – A Statistical Inquiry’, ch. VIII, in Cumpston, *Influenza and Maritime Quarantine*, pp. 73-119.

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<sup>4</sup> FM Burnet and Ellen Clark, *Influenza. A survey of the last 50 years in the light of modern work on the virus of epidemic influenza*, Walter & Eliza Hall Institute Monograph no.4, Macmillan, Melbourne 1942, p. 101. Chapters VI and VII of this work present a detailed analysis of the 1918-19 pandemic.

<sup>5</sup> For details of late 1918-early 1919 developments in Melbourne, see A. Hyslop, ‘A Question of Identity: JHL Cumpston and Spanish Influenza, 1918-1919’, in D. Walker and M. Bennet (eds), *Intellect and Emotion: Essays in Honour of Michael Roe*, *Australian Cultural History* No 16, 1997/98, pp. 60-76.

<sup>6</sup> For the states’ responses, see A. Hyslop, ‘Insidious Immigrant: Spanish Influenza and Border Quarantine in Australia 1919’, in S. Parry (ed.), *From Migration to Mining. Medicine and Health in Australian History*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin 1998, pp. 201-215.

Comparing that with New Zealand's toll of over 8,000 dead in a population of little more than one million, it is clear that Australia had much to be thankful for.<sup>7</sup>



HYDE PARK INOCULATION DEPOT, SYDNEY

*Sydney Mail*, 5 February 1919

If the pneumonic influenza pandemic of 1918-19 has been given scant attention in general histories of Australia, it is not for lack of written sources. Such was the pandemic's global impact that it was closely observed in Australia, well before reaching here. Then, from its first appearance, in quarantine stations late in 1918, until its final demise, over a year later, the disease generated massive press coverage, intense discussion in medical journals, a vast correspondence between federal and state authorities, and lively parliamentary debate. Its progress was reported in detail by medical officers and health departments, and measured in government statistics. At the personal level, though – among those who experienced the pandemic and survived it – this extraordinary episode became a private recollection: an ordeal recorded, sometimes in family letters, more often in family legend, and surviving best in the memories of those who had either suffered the disease themselves or witnessed at first hand the sufferings of others.

So matters stood until 1972, when an English author, Richard Collier, advertised around the world for recollections of the pandemic, to furnish material for his book, *The Plague of the Spanish Lady* (published in 1974).<sup>8</sup> From Australia alone, his enquiry, often followed by a questionnaire, elicited about 150 responses, sent from around the country by people who had either lived through the pandemic themselves or

knew the stories of family members who had done so. With a global canvas to cover, and some 1,700 letters from all over the world, Collier made only moderate use of his Australian material; but the letters themselves are a goldmine for the historian. Collier's study covered only the latter months of 1918, whereas nearly all of his Australian anecdotes came from 1919; but, by weaving these in with similar stories from other countries, he achieved at least dramatic unity, if not temporal accuracy, in what remains an absorbing book.

By the mid-1970s, a handful of historians around the world were also studying the flu pandemic: notably Alfred Crosby in the United States, and here in Australia Humphrey McQueen.<sup>9</sup> But it was not until the mid-1980s that Sydney historians would come across it when interviewing numbers of elderly people about their lives: first, for a study of people's reading, next, for a project to mark the nation's bicentenary year, 1988: the NSW Bicentennial Oral History Project. Together, these two undertakings contributed further personal accounts – generally briefer than those sent to Collier, but revealing similar recollections of the great pandemic.

The potential hazards of oral history are well known, as also are the shortcomings of long-term memory and long-remembered hearsay. However, with pneumonic influenza, through its relative lack of exposure to scholarly scrutiny, there was perhaps less risk than with, say, the Great Depression, of first-hand accounts being inflated over time by repetition or by a sense of the episode's historical significance. Moreover, the pandemic's Australian manifestation affords some reassurance to oral historians by means of an intriguing paradox: an instance in which what at first seemed a serious failure of memory proved instead to be an accurate reflection of ideas that prevailed at the time – ideas as to the identity of pneumonic influenza, closely linked with other ideas concerning its origins.

In 1986, working with Professor Martin Lyons on their study of people's reading,<sup>10</sup> historian Dr Lucy Taksa at first thought that a female interviewee in Sydney was confusing two epidemics, when she cited bubonic plague as one of several 'disruptive events' following World War I. Sydney had in fact had an

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-1919 Influenza Pandemic*, p.81; Rice, *Black November*, pp.18, 203.

<sup>8</sup> R. Collier, *The Plague of the Spanish Lady: The Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919*, Macmillan, London 1974. The letters sent to Collier are preserved with his papers in the Imperial War Museum, London.

<sup>9</sup> Crosby, *The Forgotten Pandemic*; H. McQueen, 'The "Spanish" Influenza Pandemic in Australia, 1918-19', in J. Roe (ed.), *Social Policy in Australia: Some Perspectives 1901-1975*, Cassell Australia, Sydney 1976, pp.131-147.

<sup>10</sup> M. Lyons and L. Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember. An oral history of reading 1890-1930*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1992.

outbreak of bubonic plague in 1900, after which the disease had lingered in both New South Wales and Queensland for a decade – and now it seemed as if the woman’s memory had merged the two epidemics into one. But then, when a second interviewee recalled ‘the Bubonic Plague, people dying in hundreds around us that was come back from the First World War’, Taksa resolved to investigate further.<sup>11</sup> She found that interviewees for the bicentennial project were encountering the same apparent error, and some had unconsciously corrected it. So, in subsequent interviews, she and they sought to engage with this seeming mistake, and soon discovered that what they termed the ‘multiple naming’ of the 1918-1919 ‘flu’ was a common phenomenon.<sup>12</sup>

In their 1992 book, *Australian Readers Remember*, Lyons and Taksa suggested that memory was not so much telescoping two diseases into one as, rather, ‘encapsulating the experience of the Influenza Epidemic in metaphoric language – the metaphor of the plague’. They also felt that they had encountered a ‘genuine Sydney folk memory’.<sup>13</sup> In a later essay, entitled ‘The Masked Disease’, Taksa herself explored the matter more fully, with a sensitive discourse on the use of metaphor and the experience of disease, the influence of innumerable press evocations of ‘plague’ in 1919, practical similarities between the two epidemics, and the need to take oral testimony at face value on occasion – in the first instance, at any rate.<sup>14</sup> Taksa’s analysis is persuasive, and the oral evidence clearly ruled out any merging of two epidemics into one. Yet the letters to Richard Collier also seem to suggest that the two diseases themselves, plague and influenza, had become entangled in many minds during the ‘flu’ pandemic itself, rather than in later recollection.

Several points make such contemporary confusion appear likely. Firstly, in Australia the post-war pandemic was officially designated ‘pneumonic influenza’ and frequently so called. To persons unused to medical terms but familiar with bubonic plague, ‘pneumonic’ and ‘bubonic’ must have sounded very similar, and any confusion between the two might have

been enhanced by the fact that plague itself has both pneumonic and bubonic forms. Next, the dusky purplish cyanosis in severe cases of this ‘flu’, together with the rapid darkening of corpses, gave people good reason to speak of the pandemic as the ‘Black Plague’ or the ‘Black Death’, whether metaphorically or otherwise. Further evidence of contemporary confusion appears in the assertions by several interviewees that this influenza was carried by rats. The role of the rat flea as vector in the transmission of plague was probably not common knowledge in 1900; but, with thousands of rats being killed and incinerated as a sanitary measure during Sydney’s plague outbreak, few people would have been ignorant of the broader association of rats with plague. The linking of influenza with rats might well betoken a confusion of two diseases; but for some, it also served to explain the ‘flu’ pandemic as a sinister product of the rat-infested trenches of the Great War’s Western Front.

One question that Collier asked his respondents was: what name had they given the ‘flu’? And, in the Australian letters, instances of the ‘multiple naming’ noted by Taksa are plentiful. One rural New South Welshman had recorded in his diary in September-October 1918 the prevalence of ‘influenzal colds’.... ‘The Drs. call it Spanish Influenza & very few people are escaping it’. That was the pandemic’s milder first wave, which reached Australia in the southern spring of 1918. By contrast, in early February 1919, the same diarist wrote: ‘The Pneumonic Plague is in Sydney. It came from Melbourne’. Two days later he reported that the local agricultural show had been ‘abandoned because of the bad season & the Influenza plague.’<sup>15</sup> Another country-dweller, aged six in 1919, told Collier in 1972 that her parents had always spoken of ‘the Bubonic Influenza epidemic, not Spanish.’<sup>16</sup> But such references to plague were not confined to Sydney, nor to New South Wales. A Brisbane woman, aged 20 in 1919, told Collier: ‘You call it the Spanish Flu. We knew it as the Bubonic Plague, or the Pneumonic Flue.’<sup>17</sup> Another Queenslander, who at 17 had contracted influenza in June 1919, wrote of ‘Bubonic or black plague’, adding: ‘This complaint when it caused death changed the bodies to a dark colour....’<sup>18</sup> A woman from Perth, Western Australia, reported that her sister had been stricken with ‘the “Bubonic plague” or Spanish

<sup>11</sup> L. Taksa, ‘The Masked Disease: Oral History, Memory and the Influenza Pandemic 1918-19’, in K. Darian-Smith and P. Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1994, p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Taksa, ‘The Masked Disease’, pp. 79-80.

<sup>13</sup> Lyons and Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>14</sup> Taksa, ‘The Masked Disease’, pp. 81-89.

<sup>15</sup> J. Baxter to R. Collier, 1972 (excerpts from her father’s diaries).

<sup>16</sup> K. Hancock to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>17</sup> M. Kuskopf to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>18</sup> H. E. Berlin to R. Collier, 1972.

Influenza, as it was so called.<sup>19</sup> A returned soldier's reference to 'pneumatic flu'<sup>20</sup> betrays not so much poor spelling as rather an unfamiliarity with medical terms, as does the recollection of 'Spanish flue or Nemonic flu' – which 'turned to Nemonia' – by a woman, aged 18 in 1919, who told Collier: 'it was said the soldiers brought the Germ over here from Middle east [*sic*] to Australia.'<sup>21</sup>

To associate the 'flu' pandemic with the Great War was natural enough, since the lethal second wave had emerged in Europe several months before the war's end. To link its arrival on these shores with Australian soldiers returning home was likewise understandable, since tens of thousands of troops were being repatriated after the Armistice and serving a term of maritime quarantine before their release. Two of the first troopships to return had in fact been recalled by the Armistice *before* reaching Europe, and had encountered the 'flu' on their way home, in countries where the pandemic was raging: the *Boonah*, returning from Durban, South Africa, to Perth; the *Medic*, turning back mid-Pacific to Wellington, New Zealand, before reaching Sydney; both with many very sick men on board.<sup>22</sup> By then, civilian vessels also were doing time in quarantine, one such being the Union Line's passenger ship, *Niagara*, which is thought to have delivered the fatal 'flu' to New Zealand, before sailing on to Sydney. Yet the prevailing impression was one of crowded troopships, and, as a Melbourne woman told Collier, 'lots of people blamed the soldiers' for the pandemic.<sup>23</sup>

This was actually quite unfair. Several small breakouts of soldiers from maritime quarantine had been quickly controlled, with no spread of disease. There was a much larger breakout of *uninfected* troops from the ship *Argyllshire* at Sydney's North Head, but the men were marched in good order to a Manly ferry and then through city streets, all wearing masks, to continue their quarantine at the Sydney Cricket Ground.<sup>24</sup> That was in early February, 1919, by which time the 'flu' was

already abroad in the city. Indeed, insofar as soldiers spread influenza at all, it was through their being exposed to it in an already-infected community on their way home. A case in point is the returning soldier who in January had to transfer through Melbourne, where 'flu' was already spreading, contracted the disease from a sick civilian aboard the train that took him home to Sydney, and thereafter was admitted to Randwick Military Hospital, where cases rapidly multiplied, prompting NSW to declare itself an infected state.<sup>25</sup>

Not everyone 'blamed the soldiers'. A Perth man who had survived the disease told Collier: 'It was said that soldiers coming home from the war had brought the germs back, but this was probably only conjecture.'<sup>26</sup> By contrast, a woman who had nursed influenza victims in Sydney asserted that, although the soldiers brought the 'flu' back, 'they did not get it', being 'to[o] heavily inoculated against anything.'<sup>27</sup> But such linking of the pandemic with returned soldiers also served to explain more than just the means of its reaching Australia. Emerging as it had in war-ravaged Europe, this strangely lethal influenza was regarded by some as having its very origin in the trenches of the Western Front, probably carried by rats. A Sydney man, who had been a young mortuary attendant during the pandemic, explained to Collier how the soldiers had come by it, harking back to the 'big plague [*sic*] of London' and to mass burial of plague corpses in seventeenth-century France, with this conclusion: 'I think the big heavy shells blasted the remains of the corps[es] up and started plague [*sic*] off again.'<sup>28</sup> A Bicentennial interviewee had a simpler explanation: 'they called it the flu but it was the plague. You see they didn't have the hygienic over in the trenches they have today.... It was the rats you see....'<sup>29</sup>

Inevitably, the severity of the influenza, its mysterious character, and its wartime origins together gave rise to a conspiracy theory, proffered to Collier by a Queenslander who had been 'a lad of eighteen at the time':

<sup>19</sup> E. Hough to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>20</sup> S. Chapman to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>21</sup> E. Shearer to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>22</sup> Cumpston, *Influenza and Maritime Quarantine*, p. 23, ch. 4 (*passim*), pp. 139-141; J. Duncan Foley, *In Quarantine: A History of Sydney's Quarantine Station 1828-1984*, Kangaroo Press, Sydney 1995, pp. 110-112; I. Darroch, *The Boonah Tragedy*, Access Press, Bassendean WA 2004.

<sup>23</sup> M.M. Brealey to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>24</sup> *Argus*, 12 February 1919, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February 1919; Duncan Foley, *In Quarantine*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>25</sup> WG Armstrong, *Report on the Influenza Pandemic in New South Wales in 1919* (Section V of *Report of the Director-General of Public Health, New South Wales, for the year 1919, NSWPP 1920, Vol.1, Government Printer, Sydney*), Part I, 'Epidemiology and Administration', pp. 148-149.

<sup>26</sup> P. Brewer to R. Collier, 1972

<sup>27</sup> N.C. Nicholls to R. Collier, 1972

<sup>28</sup> B. Cullum to R. Collier, 1972

<sup>29</sup> Millie Weston, interviewed by Judy Wing for Bicentennial Oral History Project (BOHP), item no.131.

You would probably be aware of the fact that it was not influenza, Spanish or otherwise; in reality it was a deadly plague that spread from the battle fields of Europe; but because the various Governments through out the World did not want to create any more panic than necessary, they decided to give it a name with a less sinister meaning.<sup>30</sup>

A Sydney man who had been a schoolboy in 1919 later derided this theory, and also the tales of bodies turning black in death:

That information and a wink were enough. What we were up against was not influenza; it was nothing more or less than the Black Death, the appalling epidemic which we had read about in our school history books as having swept across Europe in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and destroyed at least a third of its population.<sup>31</sup>

Many of his contemporaries had met the same 'wild story', he told a Sydney historian in 1988. It was, he said, 'typical of the panicky state of mind that prevailed at that time.' That there was in fact 'widespread panic' was confirmed by one who had been a volunteer ambulance driver during the pandemic. He told Collier that the disease was said to resemble the 'Black Death', or the Great Plague of London: those stricken died within 24 hours, their bodies turned black, decomposition was rapid. Many believed these rumours, he added.<sup>32</sup> Yet even without any element of conspiracy, there was substance enough in such rumours to ensure that they would flourish. Pneumonic influenza's onset was indeed swift; in some cases, its first observable symptom was outright collapse; death often followed within a few days; and certainly, the cyanosis caused by de-oxygenated blood, 'common in fatal cases', was real enough.<sup>33</sup> Among the letters to Collier there are first-hand accounts of it that cannot be lightly dismissed. And, although ordinarily 'flu' was a familiar ailment, this 'flu' was like no other: it hardly seemed like influenza at all. It is scarcely surprising, then, that although the authorities had named the disease 'pneumonic influenza', that definition was by no means universally accepted.

From letters sent to Collier, we also learn about emergency influenza hospitals and how patients fared there. In Western Australia, a young resident medical officer from Perth Hospital told how he and a colleague were sent out of town to the Blackboy Hill military camp, where they treated 'countless pneumonic cases' with the aid of 'scores of retired nurses' recruited from domestic life. The army huts had no plumbing or electricity, and the doctor recalled finding his way from hut to hut through the mud with a hurricane lantern, armed with a hypodermic syringe and camphor-in-oil solutions. 'We were surrounded by dead and dying,' he wrote, 'and could do little about it'.<sup>34</sup> In Melbourne, a military 'rest home' at Wirth's Park became a 90-bed emergency hospital, with a young final-year medical student in charge. He told of primitive ward conditions and of how the nurses, despite wearing thick gauze masks, invariably caught the 'flu' and were taken to Melbourne Hospital, whence all but one subsequently returned to work, now armed with temporary immunity. Among the patients, he said, 'most deaths occurred within 24 hours after admission', often because ambulance services, 'grossly overworked', had been delayed. The hospital's mortality was 'much the same as elsewhere', but the student doctor (who himself caught the 'flu') wondered if 'transporting them at the height of the disease', often at night, might have 'played a part in the fatal outcome'.<sup>35</sup>

Suburban emergency hospitals, in drill halls and state schools, provided less Spartan accommodation. A former nurse described the Armadale State School, in Melbourne's Prahran, as quite suitable for an emergency hospital, being large and able to house 70 to 80 patients. No visitors were allowed; the nurses wore masks, were careful with hand washing, and slept in tents in the school grounds. This nurse caught the disease, but quickly recovered. She recalled distressing cases: one, a pregnant woman, gave birth in the hospital but died of influenza; others would appear to be recovering, but then died suddenly overnight. She could never forget 'the heavy tread of orderlies carrying out the dead, and the heartbroken relatives'.<sup>36</sup>

Far away, in little Westonia, a Western Australian mining township some 300 kilometres east of Perth, another state school was doing duty as a hospital. With

<sup>30</sup> E.J. Byrne to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>31</sup> B. Cunningham to Robyn Arrowsmith, 9 February 1988, quoted in R. Arrowsmith, 'The "Spanish" Influenza Pandemic: its impact on society in New South Wales', BA Hons thesis, University of NSW, 1988, p.88.

<sup>32</sup> W.R. Weiley to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>33</sup> Arrowsmith, 'The "Spanish" Influenza Pandemic', p.89.

<sup>34</sup> Dr J.H. Stubbe to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>35</sup> Dr Keith D. Fairley to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>36</sup> Mrs Mary Donnelly (Strain), via daughter, to R. Collier, 1972.

no ambulance, patients were conveyed there in a furniture van. Here, too, a pregnant woman gave birth to her baby, but this time both mother and infant survived. The town's young doctor 'worked night and day', doing 'a wonderful job'; but the pandemic's impact was 'devastating'. Funerals were many, and accompanied by the town's brass band playing the melancholy 'Dead March' from Handel's oratorio, *Saul* – until its ranks were too depleted by illness, which came as a relief to some.<sup>37</sup>

Melbourne's handsome Exhibition Building became one of the largest emergency hospitals in the country. It had been expected to provide for convalescents from other hospitals, but its huge halls were very soon filled with seriously ill patients. A woman from Northcote told Collier how her father, a plain-clothes policeman, repatriated unfit after service in France, had caught the 'flu' when called to investigate a sick household in Carlton, whence nothing had been heard for several days. He was taken to the Exhibition Building, where she and her mother 'were sent for after only a few days & robed & masked were allowed to see my father who died a few hours later'. 'It was the worst experience I've ever had', she wrote: 'I'll never forget it'. She and her mother also had the 'flu', but recovered.<sup>38</sup>



Influenza victims at the Exhibition Building, Melbourne, 1919

*Sydney Mail*, 19 February 1919

Another young woman, herself a patient in the Exhibition Building, had been a waitress at the Victoria Coffee Palace in Collins Street: at that time a 'residential guest house', very central, and much patronised by returning servicemen *en route* to country destinations. Lying ill in the women's ward, she 'saw many stretchers carried in[,] some having mothers and children together, and many were the empty beds when we woke in the

morning, they were soon filled again and the staff worked on....' No visitors were allowed, 'except in emergency', wearing masks and gowns – 'enough to frighten any patient, but quite effective in trying to subdue the disease'. Her temperature was 103 degrees F. for several days, and she had 'the doubtful comfort of Linseed poultices' over her chest: 'the pain was pretty severe'. Partitions set up in the vast ward gave some privacy, but little more. She told Collier: 'I thought I would surely die there.' Fortunately, she was released after about three weeks.<sup>39</sup>

The letters to Richard Collier are also a plentiful source on the treatments given to influenza cases. Some of these were administered in hospitals or by general practitioners, and were largely directed at relieving influenza's symptoms. Letters refer to large bottles of a white mixture, which might perhaps have been APC (aspirin, phenacetin and caffeine) or 'Am. and acid' (which was probably ammonium chloride and carbolic acid). Also mentioned are quinine, 'carbolic acid and glycerine', linseed poultices, castor oil and cod liver oil. At home there was much use of Wawn's Wonder Wool – the 'Magic Wrap' – a medicated poultice produced by a manufacturing chemist in Sydney, and sold everywhere. Among a plethora of patent products were: Wood's Great Peppermint Cure, Hearn's Bronchitis Cure, Nicholas's Aspro, and a mouthwash called Greathead's Mixture. But in addition, or even in place of these, there were also many home remedies: chopped raw onions, garlic, or camphor, gave forth 'virtuous vapours'; whisky and brandy were freely resorted to; one young man even dosed himself with kerosene on a chemist's advice, and swore it cured him.<sup>40</sup> Most important of all, whether in hospitals or at home, was good nursing – sponging, mouth cleaning, keeping patients clean, warm and comfortable, administering medicines and cooling drinks, and much more besides. The letters spoke favourably of nurses and doctors alike. People knew there was no 'wonder cure' – not just for this influenza, but for most infectious diseases then – and their expectations of medical science were more modest then than they are now.

One voice that is silent in the letters to Collier is that of indigenous Australians. Of the very few that mentioned them, one was from a South Australian country dweller, the road from whose farm to the nearest town ran through an Aboriginal mission settlement. She

<sup>37</sup> Mrs C. Lovelock (Nye) to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>38</sup> Mrs L. Pullyblank (Sharpe) to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>39</sup> Mrs Phyllis Todd (Parris) to R. Collier, 1972.

<sup>40</sup> H. Barlee to R. Collier, n.d. (1972).

wrote of seeing dead bodies lying here and there outside the small dwellings, as she and her husband drove by, and added that those in charge of the settlement were themselves laid low.<sup>41</sup> The pandemic's impact on this country's indigenous population was not well documented, but press coverage makes clear that it was disastrous. Their death rate was doubtless much higher than that of the rest of the community – perhaps even as high as that of Maori in New Zealand, which was some seven times higher than the non-indigenous death rate.<sup>42</sup>

That the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 was a grim ordeal emerges clearly from a wealth of printed sources. These not only record its impact but also reveal much about the prevailing social attitudes and practices of the time. Yet survivors' recollections illuminate the pandemic experience at a personal level, and bring it to life in ways that formal records are less able to do. Their letters and interviews reveal how ordinary people perceived the pandemic, dealt with its challenges, and endured the loss and grief it brought them. In so doing, such sources also demonstrate how and why the pandemic has been better remembered by individuals than by society as a whole.

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## FNBAC AGM, Tuesday, 29 November 2022

This year the FNBAC AGM will be held earlier than usual, on 29 November in the Graneek Room, Chifley Library, 5.00-7.00pm, and online.

Apart from the usual business of the AGM, Esther Carlin will show her film on women activists at the ANU, *Critical Mass: The Establishment of Women's Studies at the Australian National University*, and refreshments will be served to celebrate the year's passing.

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Dear Friends of the NBAC,

This is a gentle reminder to members who have not yet renewed your FNBAC membership for 2022-23 that the FNBAC's online membership renewal form is accessible at: Membership Application/Renewal Form.

Please also consider making a donation to the FNBAC Conservation Fund.

Best wishes and thank you for your continuing support.

Ewan Maidment,  
FNBAC Secretary

Please note that back issues of the *FNBAC Newsletter* are now accessible online in pdf searchable format via the NLA catalogue at: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2983228345> and via Trove.

Also, extracts from *ABLative*, Nos.1-9, 1985-89, the now defunct newsletter of the Archives of Business and Labour, are accessible from the ANU Archives website at:

<https://archives.anu.edu.au/collections/noel-butlin-archives-centre/finding-aids/ablative>.

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<sup>41</sup> Mrs M.E. Post to R. Collier, 1972. A letter from a Mr D. Morrison described a similar situation near Kyogle NSW.

<sup>42</sup> See Rice, *Black November*, ch. 7.