

The Island of Lemnos and Australian History

There is so much we do not know or understand about the past. Recently I was lucky enough to attend a lecture on the history of Lemnos and the Gallipoli campaign. Lemnos is an island in the NE Aegean Sea just off the Turkish mainland and close to the Dardanelles. It is a large island with deep sheltered harbours, which made it an ideal staging post and recovery centre for the Gallipoli landings. Most Australians would know about Gallipoli but not so much about the relationship of that tragic conflict and Lemnos. As it happens, my grandmother was from Lemnos which makes me ¼ Lemniot, so I was particularly interested in the lecture about the war-time role of the island.

Greece was in a continual state of war with the Ottoman Empire since its war of independence in 1821, the one involving the poet Byron, who died helping the Greeks gain their freedom after 400 years under the Ottomans. The war of liberation involved the whole Balkan area as Greeks and other peoples fought for liberation and tried to regain their national boundaries. Greece had offered Lemnos to the allies in 1915 for their use in the war and soon there were many Australians, New Zealanders, British and other Commonwealth soldiers camped in Lemnos, practicing their various drills, especially amphibian landing techniques. There were also numerous nurses in the hospitals set up on the island to look after the soldiers who would return from the battlefield grievously wounded. The actions of the nurses and doctors saved countless injured soldiers who were lucky to survive long enough to be evacuated to Lemnos. The locals welcomed the Anzacs and other troops with whatever hospitality they could muster and apparently the soldiers and nurses found the island a welcome relief, almost a blessing, after their experiences in Egypt and other battlefields. The donkey was the major source of transportation for the people of the island and the allies acquired many donkeys for use in Gallipoli on Lemnos. The famous VC winner Simpson used a Lemnos bred donkey to help move wounded soldiers from the field.

There were many fascinating characters thrown up by the history of that time in the Balkans and yet they are so little known today. For instance the charismatic can-do George Treloar from Ballarat bank clerk, actor, soldier and finally a Commissioner for refugees who is immortalised for his humanitarian work.

To quote: “In his role as the League of Nations' Commissioner for Refugees in north-eastern Greece between 1922 and 1926 Colonel Treloar saved about 108,000 destitute survivors of the Hellenic, Armenian and Assyrian Genocides from starvation and disease”

https://bih.federation.edu.au/index.php/George_Treloar . A village in NE Greece is named after him and he was awarded the Order of the Saviour (Gold Cross) for his humanitarian work. Have a look at the Australian Dictionary of Biography for more information about Treloar and other famous and sadly forgotten Australians of note <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/treloar-george-devine-8845> .

There are a lot of local connections to Lemnos. Many returned diggers wanted to honour their fallen comrades who were buried in the allied cemeteries on the island so they named streets

and places 'Lemnos' or 'Mudros' (after Mudros Bay where the troops embarked for battle).
For instance, the small town near Shepparton

Have a look at the Lemnos Gallipoli Commemorative facebook page
<https://www.facebook.com/LemnosGallipoliCommemorativeCommittee/> and also
<http://lemnosgallipolice.blogspot.com.au/> for aspects of Australian history little known by
today's generation.