“I Intend to Get Justice”: The Moral Economy of Soldier Settlement

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Soldier settlement was a key scheme in a suite of repatriation policies enacted in the aftermath of World War I. Across Australia thousands of returned men, including over 9,000 in New South Wales, took up the challenge and tried their luck on the land. Thousands failed. Through the voices of individual soldier settlers and using extensive and only recently released Department of Lands loan files, this article focuses on one aspect of the soldier settlement experience: their sense of moral economy. It argues that many soldier settlers drew on the labour movement’s expectations of their rights and entitlements in an effort to deal with government bureaucracy within a context of failing markets, poor land and rising costs.

John Carter was one of some 9,000 returned soldiers who took up land under the New South Wales (NSW) soldier settlement scheme. Carter served 916 days abroad, until “stress and strain” got the better of him. Returning to Australia he took up a dairy farm at Dartmore near Scone and in six years on the land, he experienced just one good season. By 1927, Carter’s property was a “furnace”: there was “only one tree” on his land and the place “was a burning hot paddock.” Carter was in no position to meet the demands of the NSW Lands Department for a lien on his produce and he flatly told them so:

I was asked on several occasions by the … Inspector to sign certain orders on my cream cheques and I declined to do so … I maintain that my returns did not allow of any reduction. My returns were not giving me anything like the basic wage. As a worker in NSW I consider I am entitled to a living.1

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1. J. Carter, Sworn Statement, 8 June 1927, J. Carter, 12/6955, no. 3713, Lands Department, NRS 8058, Returned Soldiers loan files, State Records NSW. Hereafter simply the name of the settler and loan file number will be given. See also John Carter, B2455, Australian Imperial Force (AIF) Personnel Service Dossiers, National Archives of Australia (NAA).
Carter went on to give evidence before Commissioner Pike citing much the same lexicon of trade unionism. Pike’s well-known inquiry into soldier settlement across Australia undertaken through 1928 and 1929 estimated that total financial losses sustained by the government of NSW exceeded £7,000,000 out of a national figure of around £23,500,000.²

Five years earlier, and some 200 kilometres to the north of Scone, George Wain used the same language of entitlement. Like Carter’s dairy holding, Wain’s wheat harvest was a “failure,” “of the 80 acres I stripped I only took off 40 bags,” and his pathetic attempt at dairying was “only just keeping us (in) tucker.” By mid 1922, the cows were “nearly all dry” and his last crop of corn was withering in the ground. Yet he faced continuous demands from the Department to pay: “I am sure if you were here in my place the dry weather would be enough worry without being worried by the Department … I can assure you it is no fault of mine that I cannot pay.” George Wain had left a job worth £7 a week in Sydney to take up his holding at Inverell on the western slopes of the Northern Tablelands. “I thought I was going to better myself,” he wrote with some bitterness to the Under Secretary. But with a wife and children to support, life was one of relentless labour, “working from daylight to dark.” The holding was soon abandoned. The Department auctioned off Wain’s property and sent the police to investigate a missing cow.³

The third case can be taken from Waterview, an orchard settlement established in Young. By any measure Irvine Hill was not a particularly successful farmer. His block was hardly a paying proposition and much of his work was of a dubious quality. Called to square up the account, the District Officer refused to “allow anything” for the pigsties, fowl yard and cow yards Hill had erected as “an incoming settler might consider them a disfigurement and not an improvement.” Hill thought otherwise. He first wrote to the Department in April 1922, “demanding the money … which your books state you owe me.” Having received no reply he wrote again in May. “Now come on wake up as I must live and as I am not able to work at present I require some money to buy food.” By September, Hill had done his own reckoning with the books, lodged counter claims for the value of his block and added to that the cost of his labour. He also refused to repay any money advanced for sustenance: “I demand fairness,” he wrote to the authorities. Hill gave the Director “seven days (only) to pay,” adopting the parenthesis so often employed by imperious clerks in the Department. He wrote again

³. G. Wain to Director, 11 February 1922; G. Wain to Under Secretary, 31 January 1923; G. Wain, 12/6978, no. 4020.
a week later. “Unless my claim is correctly adjusted ... I will further claim one pound £1-0-0 per day for every day you [delay].” And two weeks after that, Hill added a further £500 penalty “for you enforcing slavery.” Inspectors claimed that Hill was an eccentric man, inclined “to go off on wild statements about anything.” That may well have been the case. But what is also apparent is his deep sense of being wronged. “I gave you a fair deal,” Hill protested, “Remember I want nothing more than what I am entitled to.”

These three cases tell us a great deal about the nature and administration of soldier settlement in New South Wales after World War I. From as early as 1916, commonwealth and state governments, working with a range of returned service organisations, established schemes to enable returned soldiers (and a select band of nurses) to settle on the land. Studies of soldier settlement have been well served in some states: Marilyn Lake’s on Victoria is the best known example. The scheme’s

4. Memorandum 16 August 1922; I. R. Hill to Director, 16 May, 22 September, 3 October, 16 October, 23 October, 21 November 1922; C. M. Donald to Director 20 April, 21 December 1920; I. R. Hill, 12/6393, no. 3459.

operation has also been considered in general histories of repatriation and in some outstanding social and environmental histories authored by Richard Waterhouse, Michael McKernan, and John McQuilton. Yet despite a number of local studies, and Selena Williams’ recent work on returned nurses, there has not been a detailed analysis of the largest scheme, that of NSW. Contrary to popular perception, soldier settlement was not just confined to the back blocks: holdings were established the length and breadth of the state and included substantial blocks on Sydney’s urban fringe. These holdings were devoted to a variety of agricultural purposes – viticulture, raising pigs and chickens as well as wheat and sheep farming, and dairying. Nor was the land simply “given” to prospective settlers – another popular misconception. Rather, an elaborate interest-bearing loans scheme enabled returned men to purchase blocks or improve existing holdings.

The scheme’s origins are complex. At one level, soldier settlement was an expedient government measure to provide employment for returned soldiers. It was driven by anxiety over what this potentially dangerous body of men would do if they were concentrated long in urban areas. As Senator Millen, Australia’s first Minister for Repatriation, suggested, it was “inadvisable to congregate soldiers” as it “will only tend to develop a ‘class consciousness’ which may subsequently express
itself in troublesome forms.” As we shall see, returned soldiers continued to prove “troublesome” for the government.9

Settling men on the land has been a recurrent dream in Australian history. Soldier settlement clung to obsolete notions of the viability of the yeoman farmer, built on earlier selection acts and closer settlement schemes, aimed at reintegrating returned men into civilian life through land ownership and cultivation. Advocates of soldier settlement believed that life on the land was nobler and healthier than city life. This agrarian ideology or “cultural artefact” has been addressed by scholars such as Bruce Scates and Stephen Garton, and formed the basis of Lake’s study.10 Having returned from the trenches, former soldiers were expected to provide for themselves and their families, often on marginal blocks of land, and many with little prior agricultural experience. Soldier settlers received a £500 advance, later raised to £625, to purchase required stock, farming equipment and seed. They were also to use a portion of the monies to build a house and stockyards, fence their blocks, cut down swathes of trees, eradicate pests such as rabbits, and provide water on “dry” blocks.

This article forms part of a larger research project tracing the origins and outcomes of NSW soldier settlement, from 1916 to the outbreak of World War II.11 Using extensive records of the Lands Department and returned soldiers loan files, we are exploring the aspirations, attitudes and belief structures of settlers as well as the physical conditions of the land they farmed. The Lands Department holdings are a vast and largely untapped archive of immense richness and scope. These files have been cross-referenced with service dossiers and (where available) repatriation records to recover the voices of these soldiers turned farmers and retrace their life stories. For most returned men, the fighting was far from over. Having survived the carnage of war, soldier settlers spoke of their private battles, against the land, against the Department, and (in a sense) against themselves – many were hindered by physical and psychological injury.

The purpose of this article is, however, more specific. What is interesting about the accounts of Carter, Wain and Hill with which this article began is their strong sense of “moral economy.” They believed,

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11. Along with our industry partners (and with the help of our principal research assistant Selena Williams) we created the website “A Land Fit for Heroes,” launched in 2010, http://soldiersettlement.records.nsw.gov.au/.
Harold Cazneaux’s heroic image of the self reliant man on the land contrasts dramatically with a photograph of Bertram Byrnes, a failed wheat farmer out at Wagga (over page).
Byrne’s face was torn apart by a shell at Mont Quentin towards the end of the war. Forced to live off “slop food” he was assessed at 30 per cent incapacitated by the Department and his pension set accordingly. Like many war damaged men, Byrnes eventually abandoned his block. He also took to drink, a “moral failing” criticised by visiting inspectors.
as soldier settler Daniel Ebrill wrote, that they were “entitled to a small piece of the Empire.” Men like Ebrill drew on a well-established vocabulary of workers’ rights: as returned soldiers, they “were entitled to a living”; demanded “a fair deal,” and the failure they faced was “no fault of their own.” We argue here that the language of trade unionism pervaded soldier settler grievances, articulating, as Nathan Wise has observed in another context, “the past identity” of soldiers as workers.12 This sense of entitlement and assertion of self-worth was often driven by a profound anti-urbanism, itself a volatile ingredient of labour radicalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.13

The concept of moral economy is one familiar to labour historians. In E. P. Thompson’s classic formulation, it is based on traditional and community norms of what is “fair” and “just” rather than “moral” in a judgemental sense.14 “Moral economy” has proved particularly useful in explaining resistance in what has been termed preindustrial societies; Alan Atkinson has used the term to great effect in his influential study of convict Australia.15 Atkinson defined “protest” as “any confrontation with authority involving, or implying, some assertion of general principle,” and he identified four distinctive types: “attack,” “malingering,” “appealing to authority” and “compensatory

12. Daniel Ebrill to the Minister for Lands, 11 May 1931; D. J. N. Ebrill, 12/7154 no. 6234. We thank Catherine Tiernan for her diligence in reminding us of Ebrill’s outburst. Nathan Wise, “The Lost Labour Force: Working Class Approaches towards Military Service during the Great War,” Labour History, no. 93 (November 2007): 161–76; Nathan Wise, “Fighting a Different Enemy: Social Protest against Authority in the Australian Imperial Force during the First World War,” Humour and Social Protest: International Review of Social History, Supplement 13 (December 2007): 225–41; and Nathan Wise, “In Military Parlance I Suppose We were Mutineers’: Industrial Relations in the AIF during the Great War,” Labour History, no. 101 (November 2011): 161–76. Of course, not every settler cited in this article had been active in the union movement before his enlistment but all were acculturated in a language of “just entitlement” at the core of trade unionism.


The last two forms of protest are evident in the moral economy practised by NSW soldier settlers. Men often claimed they had suffered an “invasion of their rights” and frequently condemned the government for “some specific act of injustice.” They wrote tirelessly to government departments, to politicians, to anyone who would listen, arguing over their entitlements, discussing in detail their situation, fighting for their rights (as both returned men and as settlers), and pleading for understanding. Arguably, the ultimate form of protest was walking off their blocks – a common occurrence. In short, these men believed they were entitled to what they had been promised: “a land fit for heroes.”

Not every failed or recalcitrant settler can be counted as a case study of social protest. Many files defy any simple categorisation by historians. Thomas Porter, a wheat farmer at Gunnedah, did “very little work” on his holding and was “constantly tripping off too Sydney or to a Jazz (sic).” Porter might have harboured a deep sense of moral economy. He might have believed that all those years in the trenches merited better reward than a shack on a drought-ridden property. Perhaps he longed to escape from the traumatic memory of war service. But Porter left no explanation of his actions, let alone a statement of “general principle.” He might just have been (as a censorious Inspector thought) an “indifferent” and “unreliable” farmer fond of music. We have not counted him as an advocate of “moral economy,” and in that we have possibly done him – and many others – an injustice.17

Moral economy also has a gendered dimension. In this article we explore a deep sense of grievance amongst returned men but their families often shared a similar sense of entitlement. There are innumerable instances of wives, mothers and even children pleading the case of individual settlers, noting the way they could no longer provide for families on the land and often claiming they had been cheated. Sometimes that sense of a moral entitlement continued long after men had left their holdings. Louisa was the widow of Angus Campbell, a man who suffered so much (war related) “heart and lung trouble” that running a farm proved beyond him. Her husband died in 1935, his body “cut in two” when he “fell” from a railway carriage in Sydney. Campbell’s death might have been accidental. Perhaps he opened that door because he was desperate for air. Or perhaps, as the Coroner report implies, Campbell chose a quicker death than the one in store him. Whatever the case, Louisa believed her husband’s death was directly attributable to war service: “my husband gave his life for

17. Inspector’s Report, 3 October 1922, 15 February 1927; T. Porter, 12/7183, no. 6642.
his county [as surely as if he had died in battle] ... we ‘did our bit.’” She believed her husband (and herself) had been denied a fair chance to make a living. There was simply “something wrong with the country” they had settled on.18 The gendered dimension of moral economy is a fascinating area – but one beyond the scope of this article.

While returned soldiers (and their families) asserted their rights, the state drew a clear distinction between “deserving and undeserving settlers.” An army of Inspectors examined not just the land but also the men sent to work it, praising the “good ones,” and the “triers” and criticising “doubtful,” “indifferent” or “unsatisfactory” cases. Every purchase or sale of stock required their approval, as did every improvement. Settlers resented this constant and untrusting surveillance. They had been told they fought in the war for freedom and to prove their manhood. The Department, they complained, treated them no better than children and imprisoned them in a regime of rules, red tape and regulation.19

A Land Fit for Heroes: The Great Lie of the Great War

A “land fit for heroes” was the unqualified promise of the NSW soldier settlement scheme. Promotional literature extolling the virtues of life on the land painted a positive picture of prosperous farms and contented families fuelling the development of regional Australia.20 Under the Returned Soldiers’ Settlement Act 1916, and amended Acts of 1917 and 1919, Crown lands were “opened up.”21 With hard work and application, returned men were told they could make something of themselves and their holdings, “rendering yet another service to the State by increasing

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18. Repatriation file for Angus B. Campbell, C138 2001/02079360, NAA. Campbell described Uralla in northern New South Wales as “a death trap for sheep.” In the drought of 1927, 900 out of his 1600 sheep perished; A. B. Campbell to Chairman, 12 April 1928, 25 October 1932, 21 May 1933; Inspectors Report, 11 June 1934; A. B Campbell, 12/7416, no. 1264. These repatriation files have been consulted under special access conditions for this project. They have yet to be examined for wider public usage.


its production, and thus adding to the strength of the Empire."\textsuperscript{22} The reality was very different. In many cases, the land was unfit for farming and the blocks far too small to be viable. The onset of drought in the early 1920s, decline of rural markets and high interest rates meant many properties were hopelessly overvalued and the loan repayments demanded of settlers well beyond them. A vast gap emerged between the seductive rhetoric of a productive yeomanry and the reality of working the land.

Wentworth Northcott’s case typified many settlers’ complaints. Northcott believed he had done his best on a dairy holding at Dorrigo, east of Armidale in northern NSW. But the land was over valued and the cost of butter falling. In the dry times of the twenties he was unable to make up what he termed “unreasonable” installments. Following up on public statements in the newspapers and parliament “that no soldier who was a trier and who was making an effort to meet his responsibilities has any need to fear any action on the part of the government,” he wrote:

Now do you think in the face of such a statement that you are giving me a fair deal?\textsuperscript{22} You distinctly said … that any soldier … increasing the value of his property would not be forced to make his payments for five years … Well now I have in the last five years spent £1,500 in improvements.

Northcott had a clear sense of his entitlement and drew the same conclusions as many others: the government had reneged on its promise and he had been cheated.

At the present time I am working 98 hours a week and getting nothing only accumulated debts and in the whole of the six years I have not had a holiday of any sort so I have come to the conclusion that I would have been better off working on the roads than as a dairyman.

Northcott forfeited his holding in 1936, leaving him with a total liability of just under £1,000. The state wrote it off as irrecoverable. In 1939, at the age of 55, he volunteered to fight in World War II. Who owed more to whom is a problematic question.\textsuperscript{23}

William Yeo’s case was similar. In his early 20s, Yeo took up 818 acres at Kennedy outside of Forbes in 1921. He managed, 12 years later, barely £300 in repayments, and (despite a £500 write-down of his debt)

\textsuperscript{22} Land for Soldiers (April 1920), 3.

\textsuperscript{23} W. B. Northcott to Under Secretary, 23 February 1922, 24 August 1924; Memorandum, 23 June 1926, Application; W. B. Northcott, 12/6849, no. 1099. See also AIF Personnel Service Dossiers, B2455, NAA.
owed over £2,000. In the estimation of Department of Lands’ Inspector Frederick Truelove, the land “should grow a good crop in a normal season.” The problem was normal seasons were few and far between. 1924 was described by Truelove as a “dry winter,” 1926 “fairly wet,” and 1929 “on the dry side.” It was the wet weather that posed the greatest challenges to wheat farming. From 1921 to 1929, Yeo reckoned his average yield was barely five bushels and it was “practically impossible to make a living out of ‘cultivation.’” He tried sheep but the district had carrying capacity of one sheep to two acres. Suffering heavy losses in a bushfire in December 1925, on top of bad seasons, Yeo was crippled financially.

The Department found it easier to blame the settler. Despite earlier assessments that Yeo was capable and “energetic,” a report towards the end of his tenure claimed he was a “rough and indifferent” farmer, with only the most “remote” chance of success. Yeo saw things very differently. In 1932, he challenged the assessment. He “had served over four years at war and given ‘the best years of [his] life’” to his country. Far from a land fit for heroes, his reward was a holding untenable from the outset – “swampy low-lying land” unsuitable for wheat or grazing and well short of a home maintenance area.24 “A heavy indebtedness is piled up against me,” he protested, “the only one I can turn to for relief, is that to whom I consider I gave the best part of my life, and which handicapped me in the contest, when the war was over – my country.” As late as 1934, he was continuing to struggle against a lien placed on his crops and his mounting debt.25

While every case is different, a common lament unites them all. The scheme did not work as settlers had envisaged, nor as the government had hoped. It was not fair on individual farmers and it failed to take account of the economic and environmental factors that determined success. The Department itself was an inefficient administrator and the files brim full with long suffering settlers attempting to find a way through the bureaucratic maze in far-away Sydney. The years and dusty, yellowed files do not disguise settlers’ frustrations, or their desperate attempts to remedy impossible situations. Arthur Miller was annoyed that the Department took so long to respond to what he saw as perfectly reasonable requests. It was not always that way. “When a man enlisted, it didn’t take the authorities long to ‘imshi’ him to the other side. I am

24. In his report, Pike defined this as “such an area as, when worked by an industrious settler, will, under average seasons and circumstances, return him sufficient to meet his commitments to the State and to maintain himself and family in reasonable comfort”; Pike, Report on Losses, 14.
25. Sworn statements, Frederick Truelove; William Yeo, 6 June 1933; Surveyor’s Report, 11 November 1927; Memorandum, 23 July 1933; W. Yeo, 12/7228 no. 7222.
not asking to be spoon fed, I am only asking for what I am entitled to,” he wrote in frustration.26

Settlers employed the language of “reasonableness” in their applications to the Department, evoking the same language of traditional, societal norms evident in cases of convict protest. They often articulated in their letters what the Department could *reasonably* expect and what constituted a *reasonable* return from their property. Norman Carr had served three and a half years overseas, the last six months as a prisoner of war in Turkey. He felt sure there must be “some mistake” when the Department demanded as much from his farm in bad seasons as good. When prices were high, “I was asked by the lands department for a 3rd of the returns from my [crop], which I thought was reasonable.” But demanding the same again in a depressed market and insisting on an equally sizable share of the wool clip was surely asking too much, “and I am sure you must agree with me that it would be impossible.” Carr asked the Department to “arrive at what you think a reasonable share from the earnings from the farm itself.” He was “prepared to do [his] very best and trust your department will be able to realise same.”

It was not. The state’s continued demand for regular installments, and its determination to press its claim on both wool clip and wheat crop, prompted Carr again to explain his situation and to assert a sense of entitlement commonplace amongst settlers:

I am working against odds. My farm cost me just over 5 shillings per acre to run before I start to live ... to carry on with the high cost of production and present values, I am at a loss to know how we’re going to live. I am a returned soldier with wife and 4 children ... I stood for my country when it was in need and I certainly say that is now our country’s duty to assist us now.

The Department made no concessions, suspecting Carr might have exaggerated his “financial difficulties.”27

Alfred Lawrence proved equally troublesome. 16 years of age when he went off to war, he believed he was entitled to the full advance of £625 to establish a diary farm at Kangaroo Creek. The Department almost halved the advance noting, philosophically, that the success of the undertaking “depended very largely on the quality of cattle purchased.” Lawrence was well aware of that. “I only got £362.6.6,” he protested, “and had to get everything out of that.” His advance secured barely 20 beasts; two years later several of these “lovely cows” were still not

26. A. C. Miller to Under Secretary, 19 November 1921; A. C. Miller 12/7241, no. 7866.
27. N. Carr to Minister, 18 October 1931, 5 March, 3 September 1932; Memorandum 5 October 1928; N. Carr, 12/6897, no. 2980.
calving. “I’ve not had a fair go at all,” the boy soldier protested, “When you wanted men for the war it was all honey then but [now] you leave [us] like dogs.”

Whilst soldier settlers pressed their claims on the state, often with little success, many were also highly critical of what they saw as red tape, government incompetence and heavy-handed bureaucracy. John McInnes was married with a baby son when settled on a sheep and cattle farm near Condobolin in 1921. On demobilisation he drifted from job to job until the prospect of a block came up. McInnes’ problems began almost immediately when he moved his young family out onto the holding (settlers were directed to live on the land whether or not there was adequate housing). He started work immediately on clearing and fencing the block including hiring another man on the promise of wages once his £625 loan arrived. But his application for the loan went missing within the Department, leaving McInnes with no money to pay his local creditors. He was also livid that the Department was “double dipping” by asserting that the sulky, horse and harness he bought with his war gratuity (paid to all soldiers “in recognition of honourable services during the war”) should be deducted from the £625 due to him.

McInnes believed he had given his best years to Australia. He saw action on Gallipoli and the western front, was wounded, concussed and also lost pay on at least three occasions for insubordination in the field and going absent without leave. He was clearly a man who stood up for himself and keenly felt injustices, both on and off the battlefield. He wrote to James Watson, the Director of Soldiers Settlement Branch in Sydney and to his local politician, railing against departmental “mismanagement” and claiming he was being “starved off the land.” McInnes threatened to write to the press to “let the public know the way the Digger is treated, good enough for the wage slave, fight for the master; work for him or starve and be damned”:

I am hard pressed by creditors, the sustenance money is insufficient to keep me & the family, and now I am obliged to see my son/infant slowly dying for the want of proper nourishment

28. Application, 12 May 1922; A. Lawrence to Under Secretary, 26 October 1924; Inspector’s Report, 18 January 1923; A. Lawrence, 12/7334, no. 8823.
29. Director of Soldiers’ Settlements, Office Memorandum, John McInnes, 10 November 1921; J. McInnes, 12/7274, no. 7914.
30. Letter from J. McInnes to J. A. Watson, 10 October 1921; J. McInnes, 12/7274, no. 7914. The war gratuity paid a flat rate of one shilling and sixpence a day from the date of embarkation to the signing of the Versailles Treaty on 21 June 1919. Legislated through the War Gratuity Bill, 1920, it was to be a gift from the people of Australia to the ex-servicemen and women who served during the war.
31. John McInnes, B2125, barcode 1946203, WWI service dossiers, NAA.
not to mention a wife who is not blessed with the best of health. Was this what I fought for and endured the Horror of Hell.

By July 1922, McInnes’ wife had given birth to their second child, and he was being hounded by the local storekeeper for bills in arrears of £40. He left the block a couple of months later with a trail of debts and goods mortgaged to the local hotelier. His debt to the Lands Department of £419.15s.0d was eventually written off.32

The case for compensation was strongest amongst returned men still very obviously suffering from what they had experienced in the war. Charlie Brotherton was “pretty badly gassed during the war” and faced “a pretty tough battle to make ends met” on a holding outside Narrandera. Yet although he was clearly a sick man, the Lands Department refused to meet the cost of rolling the scrub and all his savings were sunk in clearing and improvements. “I have never received … one penny by way of Repatriation [he wrote in 1922]. The only thing I ever received from them was a calico hut and a pair of blankets and a stretcher.” For over a year, Brotherton and his family lived in “a bag hut” in the bush. They were “pretty well penniless” and “lived mostly on rabbits.” All he asked “was the chance of making a home … where I can at last support my wife and children decently.” By the mid 1920s, Brotherton’s “chest troubles” had helped to force him off the property. Unable to work, “husky in voice,” “sallow” and “short winded,” he appealed to the Department of Repatriation for a pension. It too was refused. Brotherton’s chronic cough, lack of energy and recurrent bronchitis were deemed unrelated to his war service.33

Alongside the language of entitlement lay a suspicion of big government and (especially amongst men originally from the land) a profound anti-urbanism. Settlers railed against a complex and arcane bureaucracy. They complained that the terms of their advance were “misleading” and at times, fines imposed on them were “grossly unfair.” Fred Gollasch, a wheat farmer near Albury, believed he had been wrongly fined £200 and employed a local solicitor to recoup the money. He was unsuccessful, but not before the bureaucrats were accused of “misleading and improper” practices.34 C. E. Brady complained he had

32. Letter from McInnes to Flannery, 30 September, 17 October, 21 October 1921; J. McInnes to Watson, 12 February 1922; A. B. Trotman, Inspector Forest Vale, 30 July 1923; J. McInnes, 12/7274, no. 7914. By the 1940s, McInnes was living in Maitland, possibly itinerant and not in contact with his family. See John McInnes, B2125, barcode 1946203, WWI service dossier, NAA.
33. C. E. Brotherton to Department , 29 March, 22 May 1922; C. E. Brotherton, 12/7314, no. 8566; C. E. Brotherton, Application and Claimant’s Evidence; Tribunal Finding, C138 C138/6, NAA.
34. Correspondence, F. J. Belbridge to Minister for Lands, 11 June 1928 and memorandum; F. Gollasch, 12/6988, no. 4123.
“not had a fair deal” by the Department. His block was too small, the loan too little and the dusty plains of Nyngan in western NSW beggared description. But that, Brady believed, was beyond the comprehension of comfortable office clerks in Sydney: “Perhaps if you were settled out here in this drought stricken part of the world, you may have some idea of the conditions and ways the returned soldiers have to battle along … is it any wonder that the returned soldier should kick up his heels.”

One might have expected this from men like Brady who had farmed all their lives, but this sense of resentment was widespread. John Muir, a failed farmer from Bellingen, was typical. Criticism for failure to clear his block prompted this extraordinary outburst, his own idiosyncratic capitalisation added for emphasis:

The people in the city cannot even imagine the Hard ships one has to go through on these new selections. I am City Born and Bred myself and if anyone had of told me I was going to swing an axe all day and all the rest of my life I would have called them something not fit to write on paper. Instead of coming home when the days work is done, have the tea already set, put your good suit on and dress up generally. Off to the Theatre. None of that. Here its come home all dark[,] turn round and cook your own tea, then Bake a damper for the Next Day, Take the Hurricane lamp and go out and Chop enough wood to last the next day and so it goes on from one day to next.

Kicking Up Their Heels: Modes of Resistance

Brady referred to the soldier settler who had “kick[ed] up his heels,” a telling colloquialism for rural resistance. What forms did that resistance take and how did it express a moral economy? As with Atkinson’s convicts, soldier settlers were all too ready to appeal to authority. Many memorised by heart every aspect of the legislation that might prove to their advantage. Most were tireless correspondents, negotiating with the Department to extend and improve their holdings and especially to reduce their crippling levels of debt. The Clifton brothers, Harold and William, worked a sheep farm near Gunnedah in north-western NSW. It was a bleak and isolated place and even the Department agreed that the blocks were too small to make a living. Three years after taking up their holdings, a neighbouring soldier settler abandoned his land and the Minister granted the brothers access to an additional 1,800 acres. But as Harold Clifton suggested:

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35. E. White to Director, 9 March 1920; C. E. Brady to Director, 18 March, 16 April, 15 October 1920; C. E. Brady, 12/6959, no. 1661.
36. J. Muir to Director, 11 May 1922; J. Muir, 12/6906, no. 3118.
the unpleasant part of the transaction was that we were burdened
with the back debts of CV Atwood [departing soldier settler]
amounting to over £450. Letters written since remain unanswered.
We are now attempting to pay this debt, but owing to the fact
that we both have wives and families, also an aged mother and an
invalid sister to support [their emphasis], to say nothing of adverse
wool prices.37

It was not just furious letter-writing and the occasional excursion to
Sydney that advocated a settlers’ case. As the Cliftons’ veiled threat
suggests, there were other means “at their disposal.” Soldier settlers
were mindful of the regulations that governed purchase. There were
a few “bush lawyers” in their ranks. Henry Cornwall, a failed cattle
farmer, disputed the value placed on back-breaking improvements to
his property. The Lands Department was no more successful in securing
payment once Cornwall quit the holding. Cornwall wrote to the Minister
for Lands and told him the Department’s demand for repayment of their
“supposed loan” was “quite illegal.” It was “not in accordance with the
regulations under which I took up the property and therefore I recognise
no indebtedness in the matter.” He went further:

My experience has been that if I take any notice of the Land
Dept suggestions and act on them I shall certainly starve …
[Your failure to take into] account the necessary improvements,
constitutes a breach of contract and has resulted in considerable
loss to me, which amount would be recoverable at law.

Cornwall agreed that stock and plant could be sold to recover “the
supposed loan of £625” but only if he chose the time and place of sale,
only if he was present at the auction, and only if “the cause of the sale
[was] made public in the interests of soldier settlers who have [too]
often been adversely criticized.” Breach of any of these conditions
would see Cornwall “institute proceedings … through the law courts.”
But arranging a sale that suited the settler was no easy matter. Having
“accepted a position as manager of a bus company … in Melbourne … it
would not be convenient for me to leave here at short notice.” Described
as an “unpractical farmer,” too often absent from his holding, Cornwall’s
intransigence eventually paid off. Although police inquiries confirmed
he had a two-thirds interest in a bus company, earning £5 a week, the
Department wrote off the debt as “irrecoverable.” Cornwall concluded
his correspondence to the Minister with a lecture on the relative success

37. H. E. Clifton to Undersecretary, Department of Lands, 12 July 1929; H. E. Clifton,
12/6962, no. 3147.
of soldier settlement in Victoria compared with the failure of NSW. Of course, Cornwall’s case was very much the exception. The disputed size of the debt, his shift to another state and consistent assertion that “he was not fairly dealt with by the department” undermined the resolution of the most determined accountants. But the McInnes and Cornwall examples certainly support Lake’s view of the government’s relentless pursuit of its debtors. It also suggests settlers sometimes won small victories over the Department.

The effective denial of debt by settlers was certainly the most common form of resistance and it ranged across a political and linguistic spectrum – from reasonable, measured, even differential argument to blunt assertion of settlers’ real (and often imagined) rights. Phillip Rutledge from Mullumbimby was judged one of the best settlers engaged in banana growing, but his crop became infested with “Bunchy Top” and he walked away after five years. He challenged the Department’s credibility in the politest possible language. “I have the pleasure of receiving your circular;” he wrote to the Director, “[but] as far as my knowledge will permit me to ascertain I don’t owe you [a thing].” Others addressed their grievances in formalised political discourse, adding science to self-interest. Stranded on “a bad piece of land” at Walcha on the Northern Tablelands, Campbell Mackay argued the Crown was obliged to provide him with another. He marked his letter to the Minister Personal and tended six points for his consideration:

1. It is morally illegal and unsound political economy for the Crown to forfeit any “selection” which in the opinion of … orthodox authority is not a living area
2. It is commercially unsound and morally illegal to expect … any landlord to get rent from an area which is not a living area
3. [S]uch fault as there may have been has not been mine.

And so it continued. The legal tone of the Department’s language was turned back on itself as the settler sought to protect his own interests with the rhetoric of the public good.

A common refrain among soldier settlers was that they owed the state nothing at all, and many clearly believed that the state was

38. Report of the Under Secretary, 18 September 1922; W. H. Cornwall to Under Secretary, 23 October 1923, 24 November 1925; Report of the Under Secretary, 23 February 1928; H. W. Cornwall 12/7204, no. 6903.
39. Lake, Limits of Hope, especially chs 4 and 5.
40. Phillip Henry Rutledge to Director, 5 December 1921. Rutledge’s debt of £244.10s.11d was deemed irrecoverable in 1930. See Auditor General to the Under Secretary, Department of Lands, 30 June 1930; P. H. Rutledge, 12/6905, no. 3107.
41. C. I. Mackay to Minister, 24 June 1927; C. I. Mackay, 12/7271, no. 7874.
actually indebted to them. Arthur Caldwell, a sheep and cattle farmer at Balranald, reminded the Department that it was “pledged to give every man a square deal”:

My wife and myself put up with a lot of hardships and hard work on the property as well as lost money ... Before taking up his property I myself owed no man a shilling ... Today I’m practically insolvent, ashamed to walk down the street ... I am entitled to be compensated for all the loss and worry I have been put to. The amount of compensation [is] as follows.

Caldwell proceeded to tally the losses on sheep and cattle, the expenses of shifting, the rent paid, and emboldened by this exercise added a £100 allowance for “other worry and ill-health caused by the [Department].” By his reckoning the Department owed him £780. Caldwell was outraged by the Department’s unacceptably slow response to even acknowledge his correspondence. “I intend to get justice and satisfaction” he fumed, “public opinion will not stand to this kind of thing ... Mine is not an isolated case either ... I am in the right and I will see I get fair play.”

Caldwell’s strategy was direct confrontation and a challenge to the authority of the state, in particular its financial claim on individual settlers. Others like F. N. Smith, a dairy farmer at Cadgera Creek in the Tweed Valley in the north of the state, developed stalling and evasion to an art form. In truth, Smith was never likely to succeed. He “appears to be a hard worker,” an Inspector noted, but there was sickness in the family and “drought prevailing.” Smith appeared to ignore the Department’s early demands: “[I] didn’t quite understand your letter,” he wrote to directly to Watson, “[and] didn’t think it was very important.” But Smith knew enough of the law to recognise the necessity of transferring the lease to his name. “I wrote to my solicitors sometime back,” he explained, “and got no reply yet and I make it my business to go and see him personally on the subject.” Men like Smith negotiated the legal system as best they could, all the time stalling for time from the government.

42. Typed correspondence, A. V. Caldwell to Director; Arthur Rodgers to H. V. McKay, 25 August 1921; A. V. Caldwell, 12/7165. Caldwell enlisted in Bendigo, Victoria (SN 5307) and was discharged at the age of 26. Despite the efforts of leading men like McKay and the efforts of the Returned Soldiers League, there was no justice for Albert Caldwell.
43. Memo by G. I. Marland, 9 March 1923; F. N. Smith to A. A. Watson, 19 July 1921; F. N. Smith, 12/7005, no. 4304.
The Powers that Be: Political Formations

The complex power politics of soldier settlement was not just focused on small rural communities. It was also played out at both state and commonwealth level as Labor and Nationalist politicians vied for struggling soldier settlers’ votes. The scathing results of the 1921 Street Royal Commission into the Soldier Settlement branch of the Lands Department and suggestions that the commonwealth government’s Department of Repatriation take over the management of soldier settlement from the NSW Department of Lands were keenly felt. The Department was, suggested *Smith’s Weekly*, “the traditional home of incompetence, red-tape and muddle – [it] should never have been entrusted with this essentially Federal activity.” *Truth* described soldier settlement as a “policy of pauperism.”

Many such settlers placed their personal grievances within a formal political context. Thomas Fulton Arthur believed he was being forced off a block at Tarcutta soldier settlement by a malevolent administration:

> I told the board I wanted £8 per acre for my property but they gave me to understand that it would be best for me to take what they thought fair as [I’d] get a great deal less … if the block was forfeited … I’d be put out with nothing except the [Returned Soldiers Settlement] advance debt hanging round my neck all my life. I really think they tried to intimidate me into going out quietly.

A man who was awarded the Military Medal in 1918 “for bravery in the field,” Tom Arthur, was not the sort of man to go quietly. He mobilised politicians, fellow settlers and local businessmen to write in his support. He also sought a revision of his debt, a right accorded to settlers when the Lang Labor government revised the Act. Perhaps for that reason Arthur believed only a change of administration could secure his property: “I won’t feel safe unless ‘Labour’ get into power today,” he wrote on election day 1930. “If labour get in power I’m sure I’ll get a fair deal … [but] I really can’t carry on much longer with the continual threat of forfeiture hanging over my head.” Labor politicians agreed that Arthur’s case was one of “deliberate victimization,” and that an innocent man was being “crucified” by the Lands Department, which was “starving Diggers off their holdings.” Thomas Arthur was fortunate. A Labor government was returned, a moratorium on foreclosures put in place.

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44. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 March 1921; *Smith’s Weekly*, 12 March 1921; *Truth*, 13 March 1921; *Daily Telegraph*, 12 March 1921.
and he remained on his holding. But he also remained in debt. By 1935 he had still paid less than £100 pounds off his property.\textsuperscript{45}

This appeal to labour principles was not just a matter of some abstract political preference. It was also deeply personal. Henry Haselden wrote to the Minister when an impatient Department seized cows in lieu of debt and made the first move towards forfeiture:

\begin{quote}
I am [appealing to] you as an ex comrade as I am a married man and have five children and a wife to keep … if the cattle are sold it means six of us joining the ranks of the unemployed and I am sure no labour government wants to turn a man and his family out to starve.
\end{quote}

Haselden signed himself “Ex 41\textsuperscript{st} Bat. AIF.” As if that were not persuasive enough, he reminded Labor of its promise “that they would stop ejecting men of [sic] the land if returned to power.”\textsuperscript{46}

Compelling as they are, these individual appeals did not exhaust the political vocabulary of disaffected settlers. Well beyond the bounds of personal association, settlers organised community networks, held meetings, forwarded one petition after another to politicians in Sydney, and mobilised both state and local media.\textsuperscript{47} The dread of every minister must have been a tour of districts settled by returned soldiers. In 1919, William Ashford, the Secretary for Lands, and later Minister for Agriculture in the Holman Nationalist government, left the comfort of Sydney for Coolah in the northwest of the state and a tour of the Oban soldier settlement. One of the first estates to be resumed by the state government for soldier settlement, it was divided into 40 farms from 120 to over 600 acres, with the majority fronting the Coolah-Burragundy River.\textsuperscript{48} His secretary was kept busy recording complaints, as the grievances of the men were “fully ventilated.” By morning’s end Ashford conceded that “the ballot system was unfair,” agreed to “extensions of time [to pay debts] until the seasons were better,” promised “to shake up the accounts branch” and vehemently “denied Departmental officials had asked settlers to report on one another.” The image that emerges is of a minister hopelessly out of his depth, fielding detailed complaints from 25 settlers in the unruly democracy of the bush.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{45.} T. F. Arthur to M. Attenbough, 30 July 1930, 25 October 1930; M. Attenbough to J. D. Fitzgerald MLA, 10 December 1930; J. D. Fitzgerald to Minister, 12 December 1930; Memorandum 11, 21 December 1930; T. F. Arthur, 12/7377, no. 9416.

\textsuperscript{46.} E. H. Haselden to Minister, 7, 29 November 1930; E. H. Haselden, 12/7090, no. 5369.

\textsuperscript{47.} George Mulley, 12/6963, no. 3822.

\textsuperscript{48.} Sydney Morning Herald, 28 April 1919.

\textsuperscript{49.} Coolah Advocate, 12 November 1919, clipping in file for H. Berman, 12/78497, no. 310. See also Sydney Morning Herald, 6 October 1920.
The populist character of settler politics swung both Left and Right on the political spectrum. Struggling with a failing wheat farm outside Hay in western NSW, J. C. Patten wrote to *The Land* newspaper, the quasi-official organ of the recently formed Country Party. The “officials down in Sydney,” he claimed “had no idea of [what] us farmers are going through”:

I have always voted against Labor, and when I voted for this present Government I thought I was voting for a sympathetic government, but I am quite sure now I have made a mistake. I have battled on the starvation block of mine for 6 years, lived in a hut with my wife and family only fit for animals, [drank] bore water only fit for stock … I had four years active service with the AIF as a Sergeant, and have a clean sheet and now I have to put up with ridiculous demands … I am fed up with the whole affair. They can have my block if they want it.  

**Fed Up with the Whole Affair: Walking Off the Property**

Patten was not alone in walking off the land. In our estimate, around 30 per cent of 9,000 settlers in NSW quit their holdings within ten years. For every farm that eventually succeeded, there was a trail of failure. A case study of the Bective soldier settlement between Tamworth and Gunnedah in northern NSW undertaken during our project has revealed that of the 51 farms opened in 1919, only 17 soldier settlers were still on their blocks in 1933 when an official appraisal was conducted by the state government. 34 settlers had left their blocks, either having died, forfeited or in some cases been forced off their blocks. Only 30 per cent remained. Pike’s 1929 Report outlined four major reasons for failure: a lack of capital; inability to secure a home maintenance area; the unsuitability of settlers due to no fault of their own, rather than the impact of war service and lack of training; and the drop in prices for commodities.  

The circumstances of abandoning a holding varied with every farm, every district, every settler and every inspector. In most cases, the decision to quit came after long and trying experience. In early 1920 George Matthews took out a loan of £623, purchased 500 ewes and settled on a block in Dubbo. A few months later most of the sheep were dead, much of the land was flooded and the rest required years of clearing and cultivation. Matthews made a careful assessment of his chances on the land: “I am ready to walk off at any time you can see your way clear to … take delivery of the sheep … if I was to stay here for years I

50. J. C. Patten to *The Land*, 21 March 1933; J. C. Patten, 12/7415, no. 10249.
would not be able to pay debts.” Predictably, the Department pursued Matthews for repayment of his advance. Just as predictably, he replied:

I had to walk off the place with nothing and now you require payments … I did have money when I went on the place but I stayed there until I had lost it all and now I am trying to scratch for a living [with] a wife and children to keep so if you can tell me how I am going to pay up well then you know more than I do.

“Hoping this letter meets your satisfaction,” Matthews ended sarcastically. It did not. As late as 1927, an inspector was sent to pursue Matthews to a tiny cottage in Campsie in suburban Sydney where the failed farmer ran a grocery. “The business does not look a very prosperous one,” he wrote back to head office. In some corner of the Department, an accountant wondered how any man could raise a family of four on less than £3 a week. The debt was written off as “irrecoverable.”

Walking away from a holding may well appear a supremely solitary protest or at best the decision of an individual family. In fact, this form of protest took on a strongly collective expression. When George Douglas, badly wounded during the war, was censured by Inspector Truelove for failure to maintain his fencing, a meeting of local residents formed the Forest Vale Sharefarmers Progress Association and condemned the government interference in their affairs. “There are three or four men in this area who have decided Bolshevik tendencies,” Truelove complained, “[and these] men are the cause of considerable friction with myself as the representative of the department.” The men on the other hand believed Douglas the victim of “injustice.” He was “in intense pain” as he laboured to complete the fencing and “any man would feel hurt … when he had spent the best part of his life at the war and come home wounded to think he had helped to win a victory and to be treated in such a way.” The Forest Vale Sharehold Area quickly became a battleground. Some settlers clamoured for a share of an indifferent harvest, Douglas’ sympathisers threatened violence to anyone who entered the property and “[said] they will see the crop rot in the paddock before they will let the department have anything out of it.” Douglas eventually quit the holding but not before cutting the wire netting dividing his property from one of his “Bolshie” allies, defending Forest Vale as their common ground.

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52. Memorandum, 10 January 1922; G. A. Matthews to Director, 16 December 1922; Inspector’s Report, 2 December 1927; G. A. Matthews, 12/6964, no. 3833.
53. J. Dillon to Minister, 22 December 1919; Memorandum, 23 September, 16 December 1919; G. H. Douglas, 12/7499, no. 692.
Collective action like that of Douglas and his “Bolshevik” comrades in Forest Vale is one expression of “moral economy”; compensatory retribution is another. In 1928 a troubled inspector at Campbelltown reported three failing settlers had sold off their poultry without permission.

Little notice is likely to be taken of any demands for proceeds made by the Department for the illicit disposal of secured stock. When questioned on the matter the settlers point out that other settlers vacating have disposed of their stock without sanction from the Department and kept the proceeds.

These men were all too aware that they had not been given a “land fit for heroes.” Proceeds from a failed chicken farm were seen as small enough compensation. Some soldier settlements like Weston, an estate near the mining town of Cessnock in the Hunter Valley, were difficult to manage from the outset. Many soldier settlers there continued to work part-time in the mines (hardly the intended model of the yeoman farmer). A stridently unionist community, they believed in the value of their labour. In August 1920, W. J. Hay wrote to the Under Secretary demanding compensation for 100 chickens abandoned on his property, half an acre of clearing, and “also a lot of vegetables … [for] which I got nothing.”

Inspector Tolley was outraged. It was not just that Hay was an indifferent settler, or that his service record was less than distinguished – Hay had contracted venereal disease in Egypt and succumbed to shell shock in France. He was also “one of a class of returned men who seemed to think they have a right to take possession of and convert to their own purposes any material or plant they can lay their hands on.” In his time at Weston, Hay had helped himself to corn, chaff and “other goods … the property of the department.” He persuaded fellow employees to pilfer from the store and “certain articles of furniture and fittings in [his] possession have been made from material belonging to this department and … taken … without authority.” Hay’s scrounging skills may have been overlooked during the war, but this kind of “deliberate theft” was intolerable to Tolley.

Men like Hay may well conform to the model of disrespectful digger explored by Peter Stanley. In some contexts, however, we prefer to see them as the advocates of a moral economy nurtured by the unionised culture of a class-conscious community.

55. Extract of letter from W. J. Hay 28 August 1920; J. Dixon, 9033.
56. W. Tolley to the Director, RSS Branch, 20 October 1920; J Dixon, 9033.
Conclusion

It is not the contention of this article that all soldier settlers ended in failure. There is a parallel story of success that will be told elsewhere. Nor did all soldier settlers rebel against authority. Alongside resistance there was compliance, acts of defiance are tempered by instances of cooperation, the assertive language of trade unionism is sometimes balanced by the deferential tone of the supplicant. Some soldiers accepted their situation, and some even accepted responsibility for their own failure. Even so, the moral economy that prevailed amongst men promised “land fit for heroes” was strong and enduring. Once again, a single file makes that case persuasively. Ces Ryan lasted three years on the land before “adverse seasons and a heavy slump in the cattle market” forced him to quit. In that time he spent his savings, his war gratuity, and his health. In the late 1920s the Department pursued him for a £234 debt. Ryan had lost everything but not his sense of self worth:

I cannot carry on through no fault of my own. The only thing I am sorry for is that I ever had any dealings with you at all. Anyone would think by the tone of your letters that because a man fails he is a waster. I say no man has battled more than I have to carry on the last three years and for proof you can write to any of my neighbors. In conclusion I say to … go ahead and do your worst as I have nothing more to lose and I am done with you and your red tape … Put yourself or any of your high salaried staff in my place and how long would any of you last. I have given the Department a straight go and have left the place in working order. It will be no use you writing me again as I am going away looking for work.58

Ryan signed himself 5753, his loan number.

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58. Memorandum, 13 October 1927; C. J. Ryan to Under Secretary, 2 May 1923, 16 June 1923; C. S. Ryan, 12/7118, no. 5753.