WARRIORS OF EMPIRE: POPULAR IMPERIALISM AND THE VICTORIAN SCOTTISH REGIMENT, 1898-1938

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Abstract

Through a case study of the Victorian Scottish Regiment, this article investigates the way in which imperial experiences influenced cultural identities, and explores Scotland’s military traditions and their relationship with Scottish culture in Australia. As organisations that operated under the auspices of the government, Scottish regiments competed with emerging Australian nationalism and, therefore, offer us the chance to place Scottish identities in their early-twentieth century Australian cultural context. While many celebrations of Scottish culture were harmless and sensible in relation to Australian politics, culture, and society, the regiment’s maintenance of Scottish identity was often far more assertive. Instances where the state was involved with Scottish cultural maintenance, therefore, complicate and nuance our understanding of how identity and culture was constructed and maintained among Scots in the diaspora.

Introduction

ON THE CENTRAL SHRINE of the Scottish National War Memorial, opened at Edinburgh Castle in 1927, are the words ‘The Outposts of Empire’ and the crests of each British dominion are displayed. On one pillar, a plaque states that the memorial is dedicated to ‘Scotsmen of All Ranks who Fell while Serving with Units of the British Dominions and Colonies, 1914–1918’. The memorial reflects a moment in
the history of Scottish identity when the relationship between Scotland and the Empire was still strong enough for a claim to be laid for recognition of Scotland’s contributions to Britain’s imperial project.¹

In the same year that the Edinburgh memorial was unveiled, trustees of Scots Church in Melbourne granted space in the church’s grounds for the erection of a memorial dedicated to soldiers of the Victorian Scottish Regiment (VSR) who had died in service to the British Empire within the Australian Imperial Forces during the First World War. Over the next year, £1,000 was raised among the Scottish community in Melbourne and Victoria, and the monument was unveiled at a special service at Scots Church on Armistice Day in 1928.² What these two memorials draw our attention to is how, within the British world, the four nations of the British Isles had their own unique relationships to the imperial project, and how the intricate connections between Scotland and the Empire were not only reflected and reinforced at home, but also abroad in the colonies and dominions of Britain. Australia was a stage on which the relationship between Scotland and the British Empire was acted out through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century.

Military prowess formed a central pillar of Scottish national identity in the nineteenth century. Although Scottish Highland regiments had been prominent in the British military forces from the early eighteenth century, their fame and public profile increased in the Victorian era, and they became even more celebrated as Scotland’s national icons.³ As a core ideological focus for British imperial identity, militarism took on distinctive national characteristics in Scotland during the nineteenth century. The regiments attracted huge publicity in British imperial artworks, advertising, and in the press; they were the most celebrated of imperial soldiers. The growing ‘Victorian cult of the Highlander’ in the nineteenth century was also a result of the royal patronage and Scotophilia of Queen Victoria, who took a special interest in the Scottish Highlands and ‘her’ Highland regiments.⁴ Scottish military activity became increasingly ‘Highlandised’, and, in 1881, even Lowland regiments were outfitted with Highland dress—although some had adopted pipe bands and Highland regalia in previous decades.⁵

The cult of the Highlander spread with the global Scottish diaspora towards the end of the nineteenth century. Scottish units in the Commonwealth nations, argues Wendy Ugolini, aligned themselves and drew upon a tradition of Highlandism and a ‘global politics of military Scottishness’ that was well-established by the nineteenth century.⁶
Numerous Scottish regiments formed part of voluntary and part-time defence forces in Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and Australia from the 1860s. The last British forces withdrew from Australia in 1870 and, in their place, the colonies raised their own armies and militia. Numerous Scottish units were established, including the Scottish Company of the Adelaide Regiment of Volunteer Rifles (1866), the Duke of Edinburgh’s Highlanders in Sydney (1868), and the Sydney Reserve Corps of Scottish Rifles (1885). The Scottish Volunteer Rifle Corps of Queensland emerged in 1896, and the South Australian Scottish Company in 1899, while there were Scottish detachments of militia units in Western Australia throughout the 1890s. The subject of this article, the VSR, was established in 1898 and existed until well after the Second World War.

Popular imperialism formed a central part of Scottish cultural identity at home and abroad in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through a case study of the Victorian Scottish Regiment, this article investigates the way in which imperial experiences influenced cultural identities, and explores Scotland’s military traditions and their relationship with Scottish cultural activity in Australia. Additionally, as organisations that operated under the auspices of the government, Scottish regiments competed with emerging Australian nationalism and, therefore, offer the chance for us to place manifestations of Scottish identities in their early-twentieth century Australian cultural context.

In the same period, from the late-nineteenth century to the early-twentieth century, Scottish associational culture flourished in Australia. In Victoria alone between 1902 and 1910, 31 new Scottish organisations were established. Malcolm Prentis has suggested that this surge in Scottish cultural activity can be attributed to a combination of periods of increased immigration and responses to the emergence of Australian nationalism, thus providing impetus to the formation of specialised cultural preservation organisations. Whatever the underlying causes of an upsurge of Scottish cultural activity, from the late nineteenth century in Australia, Scottish associations proclaimed a hybridisation of Scottish and British loyalties. Like Scottish regiments, these societies and organisations belonged to a broader movement of British and imperial culture throughout the Empire, although it is worth noting that Scottish groups also emerged in non-imperial areas of settlement. In any case, Scottish associational culture has received much attention from historians in recent years, and studies
of Scottish ethnic organisations are at the forefront of much research on
the Scottish diaspora.\textsuperscript{12}

This article extends these understandings of Scottish ethnic associations.
Examined within the same category as St Andrew’s associations, Caledonian
societies, Burns clubs, and so on, it is clear that Scottish regiments in
Australia drew their culture and identity from a distinctly imperial tradition.
While they organised Burns suppers, ran pipe bands, took part in Highland
games, and partook in various other Scottish cultural and sporting activities,
at the core of Scottish regiments was a romanticised martial tradition that
emerged from, and was sustained by, the British Empire.

The unit considered in this article, the VSR, was outwardly Scottish,
but it was also explicitly, and functionally, imperial and British. As Devine
noted, Scottish regiments ‘were imperial units but their soldiers, strikingly
distinctive in dress and appearance, were recognisably and unambiguously
Scottish, champions of the nation’.\textsuperscript{13} Additionally, as Hew Strachan has
observed, the modern tourist icon and shorthand symbol for Scotland—the
kilted, feather-bonneted piper—is also a military symbol. He observes that
it is a cultural artefact and a ‘Victorian reinvention of a Highland way of
life’ that was preserved largely due to its incorporation into the British
military forces.\textsuperscript{14} Strachan also argues that much of Scotland’s national
identity was derived from ‘victory—and defeat—on the battlefield rather
than through the vigour of its political institutions’.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, during the
First World War, he notes, ‘perceptions mattered’, and, in joining up to the
British Army’s Scottish regiments, young men ‘confirmed their Unionism,
and even more their identification with the empire’.\textsuperscript{16}

Scottish regiments were, therefore, both Scottish and British,
manifestations of both national and imperial identity. Malcolm Prentis
wrote that the military traditions of Scotland ‘were cultivated for the
benefit of the British Empire and the Scots’. He further notes that ‘émigré
communities of Scots continued these traditions wherever they settled’.\textsuperscript{17}
Of such regiments in South Africa, John MacKenzie and Nigel Dalziel
have demonstrated the role Highland regiments had in shaping southern
African society in ways distinct from the influences of other settler groups
from Britain.\textsuperscript{18} Jonathan Hyslop has explored the way that the relationship
between Scotland and Empire was discernible in the British armed forces
while stationed in South Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries.\textsuperscript{19} His study demonstrates that Scottish traditions, including
immediately identifiable ‘Highland’ cultural expressions, as well as Scottish
militarism and martial culture in a broader sense, within the British military were a patent manifestation of the Scots-Empire relationship during Britain’s presence in the colony. He notes that, ‘as the military prowess of the diasporic Scots was part of Scotland’s claim to recognition within the British polity, an assertion of Scottishness in the military sphere could be used by colonists in southern Africa to reinforce their own claim to be recognised by the imperial centre as an important part of the Empire’. Elizabeth Buettner covered similar territory in her study of private and public celebrations of Scottishness in late-imperial India. She argued that ‘the Scots had expressed satisfaction that their patriotisms, for Scotland and for Empire, were compatible and mutually beneficial’. This article adds an Australian example to these studies, and extends the discussion by focusing on the regiment’s role in the wider milieu of Scottish cultural and social activities.

The Australian Scottish regiments provide a useful comparator with units in other imperial destinations. Canada’s military, for instance, has always had a high number of distinctively Scottish units. Australia has never had any ethnic units in its wartime defence forces; the VSR and other Scottish regiments were peacetime militia units. Furthermore, setting them apart from other Scottish cultural associations, Scottish regiments operated under the auspices of the Australian government. The VSR had to compete directly with emerging Australian patriotism reflected in the government’s own increasing tendency towards promoting an ‘Australian’ identity at Federation and especially during the flowering of nationalism in the aftermath of the First World War. Many celebrations of Scottish culture were innocuous and pragmatic in relation to Australian politics, culture, and society. The regiment’s maintenance of Scottish and imperial identities was both supportive of, and oppositional to, Australia’s own burgeoning imperial culture.

**Australian Nationalism and the VSR, 1898–1919**

The VSR was established in August 1898 following calls from the Scottish community and various societies—including the Scottish Thistle Clubs of Victoria, Footscray, and Williamstown, and the Caledonian Society of Melbourne—for the raising of a Scottish military unit in the colony. The VSR became a militia unit in Victoria’s colonial volunteer military forces. Immediately after Federation, when there was still little appetite for a standing army and reluctance to allocate funding to national defence,
the regiment became part of the volunteer Citizens Military Forces (CMF) from 1903. Its first formal commanding officer for six years was Sir Malcolm McEacharn, then the mayor of Melbourne. From the outset, the VSR met opposition from some government and military officials concerned with the national unity and identity of Australia’s armed forces. In 1897, the Caledonian Society of Melbourne had unsuccessfully called on the military commandant of the Victorian colony, Major General Sir Charles Holled-Smith, to establish a Scottish regiment, but he would not sanction its formation. The Minister of Defence, William McCulloch, told the Scottish Thistle Club of Victoria: ‘he was not sure that it was desirable to create national distinctions in this colony where we are properly one nation.’ Nonetheless, McCulloch eventually agreed to the formation of a Scottish corps. This was despite the Council of Defence’s disapproval on the grounds of the regiment becoming a financial burden, but McCulloch argued: ‘it was sentiment and not a question of trifling pay … which actuated [Scottish men] in becoming members of the corps.’ Holled-Smith wrote to McCulloch in July 1898 asking the Minister to reconsider his approval of the regiment, and asked, ‘if a Scottish Regiment were formed, why should there not be an English, an Irish, and an Australian corps?’

Opposition to the proposal from the government continued up until the regiment’s establishment in 1898. Debating the matter in the Legislative Assembly, one member said he ‘could not see the wisdom of forming a Scottish regiment in Australia. Scotsmen, Irishmen, and Englishmen were all Australians here’. On another occasion, one objector was concerned that ‘the Scottish regiment would introduce sectional differences, and there would soon be a movement for an Irish regiment, and there would be something of the Orange and Green trouble over again’. The military commandant, Holled-Smith, continued to oppose the creation of the regiment, and his response to the proposal reflects emerging desires to construct a cohesive Australian identity and contribution in the British Empire. Federation and the federal movement was not ‘the mature expression or consummation of pre-existing Australian nationalism’. Rather, as Ken Inglis notes, Federation did little to heighten understandings of what being Australian meant, but politicians hoped it would generate a ‘quasi-religious sense of common purpose’ among the people of Australia. Holled-Smith’s letter to the Department of Defence argued:
Englishmen, Irishmen, Scotchmen, and Australians can fight well enough shoulder to shoulder ... I hope soon to see these colonies federated, and then if required the troops of whatever nationality will fight as Australian soldiers for the defence of Australia and the preservation of the empire.33

Nevertheless, on 29 August, the Minister of Defence officially approved the formation of ‘a corps of Volunteers to be designated the Victorian Scottish Regiment’.34 In September 1898, the constitutions and regulations of the regiment were reproduced in the Victorian Government Gazette, featuring this requirement: ‘No person was to be engaged unless he was born in Scotland or of Scottish descent and between the ages of 18 and 35.’35 One member of the regiment, who enlisted in 1899, remembered that a certain lieutenant ‘did not care whether men were long or short, but they had to be fully Scottish or of parents who were both Scottish’.36 In 1901 and 1904, when the federal government transferred the volunteer system of unpaid colonial military forces to a system of partially paid militia, the VSR became part of the Commonwealth Military Forces under the framework of the Defence Act 1903.37 The regulations and constitution of the regiment, however, remained intact.38

The membership base of the VSR in the first years of its existence was diverse. The president of the Caledonian Society of Melbourne, Malcolm McEacharn, was the regiment’s first commander and was also a prominent businessman and Melbourne’s lord mayor between 1897 and 1900, and again from 1903. Donald Percy, the son of a Dundee construction worker, joined the regiment in 1910. After the First World War, he worked as a baker for the Victorian Railways until he retired in 1957. James Stewart made a career of soldiering and joined the VSR as soon as it was established— he was a ‘king and country man with a passion for soldiering’, and was commander of various units until, during the Second World War, the defence forces would no longer allow him to enlist due to his age.39

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the regiment became a part of the broader Scottish cultural landscape in Victoria. It participated in sports meetings and hosted concerts, and the regimental pipe band performed at various social events. One of its first major engagements was a march at Flemington racecourse in May 1901, on the occasion of the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York’s visit to the newly federated colonies.40 In 1909, the VSR asserted its Scottish identity in relation to other non-ethnic CMF units and replaced the standard Victorian militia motto, Aut pace aut bello (‘In peace and in war’), with the motto of the famous Highland
Black Watch Regiment (Royal Highlanders), *Nemo me impune lacessit*.\(^{41}\) Loosely translated, the motto means ‘No one attacks me with impunity’.

In 1911, because of a growing sense of the need for a larger, more credible military force, the Australian government introduced a compulsory training scheme for all able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 21.\(^{42}\) Subsequently, in 1911, the VSR was re-designated the 52nd (Hobson’s Bay) Infantry. Unlike other colonial units, such as the New South Wales Lancers, that ‘resented losing their identities’ in the reorganisations of the early twentieth century, the VSR retained its unique identity and continued to wear the Scottish dress for which they had become known. By 1913, they were still called upon to provide entertainment and spectacle at Highland Gatherings and other Scottish cultural events around Victoria.\(^{43}\) From the beginning, therefore, the regiment had undertaken dual roles as a government military unit and a Scottish cultural organisation.

Provisions of the *Defence Act 1903* precluded the conscripted men of the CMF from overseas service when the First World War broke out in 1914. However, pre-war attempts to raise an expeditionary force included proposals to impose certain criteria on men who had enlisted in the existing ‘national regiments’ of the militia. St George’s English Rifle Regiment, the New South Wales Irish Rifle Regiment, the New South Wales Scottish Rifles, and the VSR were all considered such ‘national’ units. The Inspector General of the Military Forces of Australia, Major-General George Kirkpatrick, proposed in 1911, and again in 1912 and 1913, that these regiments should be able to retain their ‘racial character’, including their distinct uniforms, and should ‘be allowed to enrol their nationals from all areas within reach of battalion headquarters’. One condition of serving with these units, however, was that recruits would have to ‘agree to serve outside the limits of the Commonwealth’.\(^{44}\)

Edward Millen, who became Minister for Defence in 1913, was broadly sympathetic to the idea of Scottish regiments and believed in their retaining their uniforms. John Stewart, the secretary of the Highland Society of New South Wales, wrote Millen a letter in 1913 explaining that the distinctive uniform of Scottish regiments ‘was symbolic of the loyalty and patriotism towards the Empire of Scotsmen and their descendants throughout the world’. Millen was ‘entirely sympathetic’ and was ‘anxious to see the kilt retained’.\(^{45}\) Later in 1913, the Australian parliament passed a resolution that ‘it is undesirable that the distinctive national uniform of certain regiments should be abolished in connection with the military forces of Australia’.\(^{46}\)
However, Millen’s eventual successor as defence minister in 1914, George Pearce, was opposed to the idea of ethnic units and believed that the military forces should embody a uniquely Australian identity. Indeed, the president of the Victorian Scottish Union said in June 1913 that he ‘fears that Senator Pearce does not intend to carry out the terms of this resolution’. In September 1913, at a meeting of the Victorian Scottish Union in Colac, members commended Millen’s sympathy for their cause and ‘condemned the action of [Pearce] in taking upon himself such a responsibility regarding a matter which was so dear to all hearts of Scotsmen’. Pearce later argued in December of 1913 that one ‘advantage of the present system is … that we have practically the same uniform for all arms’. He told the Senate that it was their job to ‘create a national feeling’ and that Millen’s sympathy to the Scottish regiments was ‘going to break that down’ by promoting separate ethnic identities. Pearce said that to support and retain ethnic units such as the VSR would ‘make men look upon themselves as Scotchmen, Irishmen, Englishmen, or Welshmen, instead of being, as we want them to realize, what they are—Australians, and proud of the fact’. Indeed, echoing the concerns of those opposed to the original formation of a Scottish regiment in 1897, Pearce said:

What does an army fight on? It fights on the sentiment that animates the individuals who compose it. If our men are going to fight for this country, we want them to fight for it because it is a country which they love and are proud of. We want them to be proud because they are Australians, not because their fathers and mothers were Scotch, Irish, English, or Welsh. I am the son of an Englishman, but I am proud to be an Australian, and I never want to be called anything else.

Ultimately, Pearce became Minister for Defence in 1914, and his sentiments were more broadly reflected in the rationalisation of Australia’s armed forces at this time and the disappearance of many ethnic units. His stance against the distinct uniforms of Scottish regiments had been evident during his earlier tenures as Minister for Defence from 1908 to 1909 and again from 1910 to 1913. For example, Scottish societies in South Australia and New South Wales tried to resist the abolition of the kilt in their regiments under Pearce. The Caledonian Society of South Australia and the Highland Society of New South Wales attempted to avoid the eradication of kilts in the Scottish units that were destined to become absorbed into the Commonwealth forces. To the societies’ dismay, between 1910 and 1913, the G Company (Scottish) of the South Australian Infantry Regiment
disbanded and the New South Wales Scottish Rifles was merged and was absorbed into the CMF and no longer wore a Scottish uniform, ‘owing to the radical alterations in the military system’.51

With widespread support, the Victorian Scottish Union and its associated societies and organisations across the state protested in favour of retaining the VSR and its uniform. Indeed, even the Caledonian society from the small rural town of Charlton in north-west Victoria filed a written protest with the Department of Defence, arguing against the abolition of kilted regiments.52 The VSR managed to retain its distinct Scottish identity relative to other CMF units, in spite of opposition from government figures in the defence ministry such as Pearce, and was unique in this regard in the 1910s and 1920s.53

In accordance with the provisions of the 1903 Act, instead of calling up the militia units as they already existed, the voluntary Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was raised at the outbreak of the First World War. While Scottish regiments did not serve per se, the 5th Battalion AIF was a common destination for members of the VSR; in order to maintain a degree of esprit de corps, men from certain militia units were often paired with specific AIF battalions.54 In the case of the VSR, along with its soldiers, it also transferred its traditions and uniform to the new battalion. The war diary of the 5th Battalion notes that it was recruited from the ‘Territorial Area of the 13th Brigade and from past members of the old Victorian Scottish Regiment and the Victorian Rifles’.55 Furthermore, the battalion’s headquarters were ‘fixed at the Sturt Street Drill Hall, South Melbourne’ where the VSR had also been headquartered.56

The New South Wales Scottish Regiment and the 30th Battalion AIF, and the South Australian Scottish Regiment and the 27th Battalion AIF were all examples of new expeditionary forces that similarly recruited from, and informally maintained, the traditions of militia units in this manner.57 The 5th Battalion was raised in the VSR drill hall, and both officers and other ranks of the original VSR brought their Scottish uniforms with them when they went to sign up for the new battalion.58 The 5th Battalion’s official historian, Frank W. Speed, wrote that ‘nearly the whole of the A Company and part of the B Company were old Scottish men, and the skirl of bagpipes was heard in their lines—much to the torment of neighbouring companies’.59

The 5th Battalion’s first commanding officer was Lieutenant Colonel David Sydney Wanliss of the original VSR, and under him the unit eventually served at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. Wanliss’s
biographer, Bill Gammage, wrote: ‘like his father he was proud of having been born in Scotland’. When he was appointed commanding officer of the 5th Battalion on 18 August 1914, he ‘tried to fill it with men of Scottish ancestry’. Wanliss was successful in recruiting approximately a quarter of the battalion from the VSR and from men with Scottish surnames. Speed wrote in the official unit history: ‘naturally, the non-Scottish majority were horrified at the thought of wearing the kilt.’ Nearly a quarter of the first AIF were born in Britain, and over one-tenth of the early recruits were Presbyterian, indicating a strong Scottish element among the overseas-born soldiers.

During the course of the war, the battalion amalgamated with others and formed the 57th Battalion of a newly expanded AIF. Despite the rationalisation of Australia’s defence forces, the VSR maintained its traditions; throughout their service, it was reported that former members of the VSR continued to wear their distinctive Glengarry caps. After the war, when the government disbanded the AIF in 1921, militia units were reorganised and re-designated according to the AIF units that had fought. Consequently, the VSR became the 5th Battalion and inherited that unit’s battle honours. Four years later in 1925, permission was granted for the 5th Battalion to adopt the traditional title of the unit—the ‘Victorian Scottish Regiment’. Thus, throughout its formation, peacetime activities, and active service, the VSR maintained its distinct Scottish traditions in relation to other, non-ethnic CMF units, in spite of the Australian identity promoted by military officials and members of parliament.

After the war, as before, the regiment faced an increasingly assertive Australian nationalism embodied in the country’s own armed forces. Popular media and war correspondents invoked the landing at Gallipoli—and later deeds in France and Palestine—and the qualities of Australia’s soldiers throughout the war to build a national identity. From the moment news reached Australia of the assault of the Dardanelles in 1915, says historian Ken Inglis, Australians ‘were told that their country had attained nationhood’. The involvement of the AIF in battle was a ‘baptism of fire’ for Australia and it was popularly believed that the nation had come of age in war. The perceived qualities and spirit of Australian soldiers in Europe became the ideal prototype for all Australians at home. Of course, the values embodied in the Anzac tradition are not unique to Australia. As Inglis writes, ‘it is easier for inhabitants of an island continent than for other human beings to imagine that their values are peculiar to themselves’, and
we find many features of the Anzac mythology in other national stories, such as those of Canada, Italy, Turkey, and the United States. 66

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Anzac legend was both imperial and national, thus providing competition for Scottish nationalism and notions of the Scots’ place within the empire. Although the legend celebrates egalitarianism and—by consequence of their being perceived to be the antithesis of this—a disdain towards upper-class English officers, the tradition was not commonly anti-British, at least until the after Second World War. 67 Allusions to Empire were ubiquitous. Australia’s expeditionary army was the Australian Imperial Force, and the title became a badge of honour when (some) survivors joined the Returned Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Imperial League of Australia. Others, so disillusioned by the experience of an imperial war and perceptive of the anti-authoritarian streak in the Anzac tradition, rallied the legend to campaign for the rights of workers and lament the oppression of the labouring classes. 68

Notions of identity in Australia were still linked strongly with ideas of Britishness during the interwar period. The Age said in 1926 that Australia arose ‘into full bloom of nationhood’ at Gallipoli. The Australian soldiers ‘had proved themselves worthy of the highest traditions of the British race’. 69 Additionally, the story went, while the Australian nation was born on 25 April, it was because Australians had secured their position in the history of the British Empire. Thus Peter Board, the NSW Director of Education, said that Australia ‘became an active partner in a worldwide Empire … On 25 April history and Australia’s history were fused, and fused at white heat. Never again can the history of this continent of ours stand detached from world history’. 70

In the 1920s and 1930s, schools, churches, and governments perpetuated the stories and values embodied in the legend. The Anzacs were memorialised in public spaces and on honour rolls in every town and city in Australia, where Anzac Day services began within a year of the landing at Gallipoli. 71 Intertwined with the Britishness of early twentieth century Australia, the Anzac legend became the national birth story while simultaneously giving rise to Australia’s own warrior mythology and imperial military identity. 72 In such an environment, the Scottish regiment in Victoria pressed on, and, with some setbacks, continued to assert its martial and cultural traditions.
The VSR and Cultural Maintenance, 1919–1938

The years between the disbanding of the AIF and the outbreak of the Second World War were relatively austere for the VSR and the CMF in general. In addition to reduced government funding of the defence forces, the Scullin Labor government ended the compulsory training scheme that had provided the militia units with a constant flow of recruits, and the financial impact of the Great Depression led to fewer volunteers and fewer training opportunities. Nevertheless, the VSR and the 5th Battalion continued to operate and participate in public ceremonies and cultural activities.

The experience of the First World War added a further dimension to the regiment’s activities. In 1922, the VSR established an annual memorial service at Scots Church in Collins Street, Melbourne. In 1924, the service was preceded by a march from the corner of Queens and Collins Streets to the church, which was led by three pipe bands including that of the regiment and the Highland Society. *The Argus* reported: ‘the large representation of the ‘Fighting Fifth’ … proved that the opportunity to renew the associations formed during the war is welcomed by the survivors.’ The newspaper also observed that the origin of the 5th Battalion in the Scottish militia regiment ‘is a source of pride’. At the service, the senior chaplain, the Rev. D. Macrae Stewart, exemplified the multiple layers of identity coexisting in Australia at this time. He commended the ‘courage, and sacrifice, and heroism’ of the 5th Battalion and the VSR, and said:

> Australia through them had been lifted to a new honour … the members of the old Scottish Regiment, who enlisted in the Fifth Regiment … carried their Scottish patriotism into the struggle. They were good Australians because they were loyal to the traditions and ideals of independence and liberty which came to them in their Scottish blood.

Two years later at the 1926 annual service at Scots Church, the Rev. Dr Norman Maclean told the gathered members of the VSR and 5th Battalion that ‘to the dead we owed the existence of the British Empire’. Members of the VSR were at once patriotic Scots, loyal Britons, and ‘good Australians’. It was at this service that moves were first made to erect a monument to those soldiers of the VSR who had died at war.

In 1929 and 1930, the already lean militia decreased in size even further with the decision to amalgamate or disband many units, and, as a result, five infantry battalions and two light horse regiments ceased operation; nine more infantry battalions disbanded in 1931. The official Australian war
historian, Gavin Long, wrote that service in the militia during the interwar period ‘conferred little prestige … an Australian who made the militia a hobby was likely to be regarded by his acquaintances as a peculiar fellow with an eccentric taste for uniforms and the exercise of petty authority’.

Around 175 officers, non-commissioned officers, and private soldiers remained after 1929 to establish the new 5th Battalion (Victorian Scottish Regiment). The regiment became affiliated with the Gordon Highlanders in Scotland in 1930 and, asserting its Scottish identity once more, in 1933, it began to wear a rosette of Gordon tartan underneath the official ‘Rising Sun’ hat badge of the Australian defence forces. Soon after, the VSR restored the ‘Rampant Lion’ symbol as its official regimental badge. The regiment gained permission to wear the kilt once more, and Scottish societies clamoured to raise £1,200 to outfit trainees in the new uniform, which also included a scarlet jacket, hose, a sporran, and a Glengarry cap.

Soldiers of the Victorian Scottish Army Regiment. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria.)
Throughout the 1930s, the VSR extended its activities into various social and cultural pursuits. The VSR equalled Caledonian societies as an important institution for the maintenance and perpetuation of Scottish culture and heritage in Melbourne and around Victoria, including provincial towns such as Ararat and Ballarat. Indeed, twenty-six members of the VSR formed a guard of honour in full dress uniform at a wedding at Ararat in 1940. The groom, a member of the regiment, wore his Scottish uniform, as did his best man. With the assistance of the Royal Caledonian Society of Melbourne, the regiment would also frequently hold social functions at its South Melbourne drill hall, with the aim of raising funds for their expensive uniforms. The exclusive Melbourne Scots club sponsored a Highland ball in October 1938 with all proceeds going to the VSR with the aim of...
funding their pipe bands and uniforms. A Scottish dancing class formed by the regiment in the early 1930s provided Highland dancing classes and concerts, and music was performed at these functions by the regimental pipe band. Many of the features of Scottish associations were evident in the activities of the VSR, which arguably had a similar significance to the various Scottish organisations in Victoria for the maintenance of Scottish culture.

One individual who played an integral role in the cultural activities of the regiment was Pipe-Major Duncan McLennan, the head of pipers of the VSR and of the Victorian Police Pipe Band. The *Australian Women’s Weekly* told readers in 1958 that McLennan was ‘a big, brawny Scotsman’ and that his ‘eyes glow and his Scottish accent becomes broader whenever he is asked to talk about pipes and their music’. He joined the VSR in 1936, after spending five years as the Pipe-Major of the Hamilton Pipe Band from south-west Victoria. McLennan subsequently served with the 2/5 Battalion in World War II, was wounded in Greece and captured in Crete, where he spent four years in a POW camp. After the war, he moved to Ballarat and took up a position as cadet instructor and leader of the Ballarat Highland Pipe Band and the Ballarat Ladies Pipe Band. McLennan was proud of his Scottish blood—his grandchildren were made to wear tartan tracksuits when he visited—and he told the *Women’s Weekly* that his family had been piping since ‘we were made standard-bearers to the Scottish kings’. His involvement in the VSR and in its maintenance of Scottish military tradition is unsurprising.

By the late 1930s, the VSR had expanded well beyond its traditional functions as a militia unit and into the role of maintaining other, non-martial, Scottish traditions. The regiment also took on charitable and philanthropic roles. In 1937, the Victorian Scottish Regiment Welfare Association was established. The association’s aim was ‘Assisting the Commanding Officer in encouraging and developing social and sporting activities, and the welfare generally of the VSR; also to aid in recruiting and securing liaison between the Regiment and the community generally by co-operation of citizens and employers.’ The growth of the VSR’s cultural activities, however, would soon be overshadowed by preparations for combat.

From 1935 onwards, largely due to the looming threat of a new world war, the Australian government increased funding and attention to its armed forces. In 1938, it proposed to strengthen the militia through increased funding and recruitment drives, and by June 1939, the CMF had risen from
35,000 men in 1938 to 80,000 men by 1939. With a renewed emphasis on Australia’s military forces, the VSR ran recruitment campaigns and assessed potential members for their Scottish ancestry, thus continuing with a tradition that seemed to have begun with Wanliss’s selective recruitment of old VSR comrades and men with Scottish names into the 5th Battalion AIF. In 1936, *The Argus* reported of the VSR, ‘every man who enlists must satisfy the regiment sergeant-major that he is of Scots descent’.

The recruiting process seems to have been informal and often conducted in good humour. ‘So far the regimental sergeant-major has been most impressed by a young man who bears the name Fergus Buchanan Macadie’, said *The Argus* in 1936, noting ‘he will be made a cadet lance-corporal on the strength of it.’ Likewise, another applicant, when asked for evidence of his ancestry, said ‘with a burr, that his father spoke Gaelic, drank whisky, and played the bagpipes. He was accepted’. The regimental sergeant-major had a test for doubtful cases: ‘Lapsing into broad Doric, he talks of the fisher girls from Lewis and Harris singing Gaelic songs in the early evening. The Sassenach shows polite interest, but the real Scot, even though he be Australian-born, is unable to conceal a thrill.’ Throughout the 1930s, advertisements for new recruits to the regiment often contained a statement to the effect that potential enlistments must be of Scottish descent.

In response to the outbreak of the Second World War, the Australian government announced on 5 September 1938, that the militia would serve in Australia, and the 5th Battalion (VSR) was sent to Western Australia and then Darwin for garrison duties throughout the war. As was the case at the outbreak of the First World War, the *Defence Act 1903* precluded CMF members from compulsory service overseas. Instead, the government raised a second Australian Imperial Force from volunteers, and the VSR maintained its traditions, including the unit colour patch, through the AIF 2/5th Battalion. In the initial recruiting and training period, the VSR supplied the 2/5th Battalion with its pipes and drums; the music of the battalion was ‘the envy of neighbouring units’, and their performances and parades ‘always attracted a crowd of spectators’. In their final period of training in the Middle East, the battalion presented a memorial chair to St. Andrew’s Church (Scots Memorial) in Jerusalem, and dedicated it to the ‘memory of Victorian Scots who laid down their lives for the deliverance of the Holy Land’. The 2/5th served throughout the war at Bardia and Tobruk in North Africa, Greece, Syria, and finally in New Guinea. The battalion disbanded in early February 1946. While war seemed to have
obliterated ethnic distinctions and assertions of identity, elements of the VSR’s cultural background were retained in the 2/5th Battalion. Indeed, new and old members of the battalion alike tended to refer to it as the ‘Victorian Scottish’ more than they did as the ‘5th battalion’—such was the strength of its origins.96

The post-Second World War history of the VSR is beyond the scope of this article, but a brief outline illustrates a continuing engagement with Scottish cultural identity throughout the twentieth century. In 1948, the 5th Battalion (VSR) was re-raised once again as part of the CMF.97 During the 1950s, Scottish regiments in Australia re-affirmed their alliances with regiments in Scotland; the VSR with the Gordon Highlanders, and the South Australian Scottish Regiment with the Seaforth Highlanders.98 The 34th Battalion (The Illawarra Regiment) was partnered with the King’s Own Scottish Borderers.99

In 1960, the national service scheme was suspended and, as a result, the militia was greatly reduced in size. The VSR disbanded in the reorganisation of Australia’s military forces, and its members were absorbed into the 1st Battalion of the newly raised Royal Victoria Regiment.100 Over the next two decades, Australia’s army and the CMF would be reorganised multiple times. In 1982, the 5th/6th Battalion, Royal Victoria Regiment (RVR) was raised in Melbourne and continued the traditions of the Scottish regiment established in 1898. On the centenary of the raising of the original VSR in 1998, the 5th Battalion’s colours were laid up in Scots Church, Melbourne, taking their place alongside the memorial that was dedicated in 1928 to soldiers of the VSR that had died at war.101 In November 2007, a second memorial was unveiled at the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital. The plaque commemorates soldiers of the VSR who died in conflict between 1898 and 1960, and reads ‘Disbanded But No’ Deid Yet’.102 Today, B Company, 5/6 RVR, and its Pipes and Drums, maintains the traditions and uniform of the original VSR.103

**Conclusion**

Despite strong promotion of Australian identity in the military forces, the Victorian Scottish Regiment preserved its martial and cultural traditions for a number of decades. It achieved this in peacetime through its broader engagement with Scottish cultural activity and relationships with other Scottish associations—such as the Royal Caledonian Society of Melbourne—in Melbourne and throughout Victoria. During wars,
battalions maintained a semblance of the regiment’s identity informally through recruitment procedures and by retaining some of the distinctive dress and traditions of Scottish militia units. Much like other Scottish associations, the regiment maintained cultures and traditions in the diaspora and reflected migrants’ own internal identifications with Scottish nationality and British loyalty.

Unlike other Scottish cultural activities and associations, however, the regiment operated under the auspices of the Australian government. It had to compete directly with emerging Australian patriotism reflected in the military’s own increasing tendency towards promoting an ‘Australian’ identity, both at Federation and during the burst of national self-identification in the aftermath of the First World War. While the celebrations of Scottish culture in Australia were often innocuous and pragmatic in relation to Australian politics, culture, and society, the regiment’s maintenance of Scottish identity was far more assertive, especially between 1898 and 1919. Instances where the state was involved with Scottish cultural maintenance, therefore, complicate and nuance our understanding of how identity and culture was constructed and maintained among Scots in the diaspora. The VSR provides an exemplar of how a Scottish ‘imperial’ identity was maintained through martial and cultural tradition in Australia.

NOTES


2 Argus, 14 November 1927; 12 November 1928.


7 Devine, p. 221.


9 Prentis, pp. 197–198.

10 Prentis, p. 201.


15 Strachan, p. 315.

16 Strachan, p. 328.

17 Prentis, p. 143.


20 Hyslop, p. 97.


22 Prentis, p. 146.


27 *Argus*, 20 July 1898.

28 *Argus*, 17 August 1898.

29 *Argus*, 10 August 1898.

30 *Argus*, 25 August 1898.


33 *Argus*, 17 August 1898.

34 Speed, *Esprit de Corps*, p. 3.

35 *Victorian Government Gazette no. 83*, September 9, 1898; Speed, *Esprit De Corps*, p. 3.

36 Speed, p. 6.

37 Grey, p. 69.

38 Speed, p. 10.


40 Victorian Scottish Regiment, ‘Royal review at Flemington May 1901’, photograph, NAA, MP488/8, 2.

41 Speed, pp. 6–12.

42 Grey, p. 80.


45 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 July 1913.
47 Freeman’s Journal, 5 June 1913, p. 33.
48 Colac Herald, 19 September 1913.
51 Advertiser (Adelaide), 17 August 1912.
52 Department of Defence, ‘Retaining of Scottish Regiment and Uniform—Charlton Caledonian Society—Protest and Reply’, NAA, MP84/1, 2011/1/356.
53 Argus, 1 August 1933.
54 Grey, pp. 81–85.
55 5th Infantry Battalion, First World War Diaries: August 1914–April 1915, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, AWM4, 23/22/1.
56 5th Infantry Battalion, First World War Diaries: August 1914–April 1915, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, AWM4, 23/22/1.
57 Prentis, p. 146.
58 Speed, p. 19.
59 Speed, p. 24.
61 Speed, p. 24.
64 Grey, p. 125.
67 Ken Inglis, p. 72; ‘Anzac Legend’, in The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History.
69 Cited in ‘Anzac Legend’.
70 Cited in ‘Anzac Legend’.
73 Grey, p. 138.
Argus, 17 November 1924.

Argus, 17 November 1914.

Argus, 15 November 1926.

Argus, 17 November 1914.

Argus, 15 November 1926.


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Argus, 9 April 1940.

Argus, July 1930; 16 November 1932; 6 August 1934; 18 October 1934.

Argus, 4 October 1938.


Speed, p. 142.

Grey, pp. 140–142.

Argus, 16 January 1936.

Argus, 16 January 1936.

Argus, 11 January 1935; 21 January 1936; 22 October 1938.


Argus, 30 September 1940.


Grey, pp. 239–251.


Governor-General’s office, ‘Armed Forces Alliances—The 34th Infantry Battalion (The Illawarra Regiment) and The King’s Own Scottish Borderers’, NAA, A2880, 11/12/16.
100 Grey, pp. 239–251.

