

WORKERS FOR GREAT BRITAIN, 1917

Munitions worker Number 44 – William Eynon

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WORKERS FOR GREAT BRITAIN

Further Applications Invited.

The Minister for Defence (Senator Pearce) said yesterday that there was still a demand for munition workers. Carpenters and joiners, navvies, and labourers were also required. Several contingents of workers of the classes mentioned had already been sent to Great Britain, but more were needed to make up the quota which the Commonwealth Government had promised to send forward. Men who desire to be engaged for war work in England should apply to the Munitions Committee in the state in which they live.¹

The Allied forces had seen two of the most grinding battles of attrition in 1916 – at Verdun and the Somme - and British authorities had been obliged to release men from protected industries to reinforce the army. At the beginning of 1917 the shortage of workers in the British munitions industry led Australian politicians make appeals, like the one above, for volunteers amongst skilled workers and navvies to go to Britain to assist. Free travel and special wages and allowances were offered, although the appeals were made against the backdrop of serious accidents in munitions works. In January 1917 alone *The Argus* reported explosions in munitions works in Dresden, New Jersey and London.²

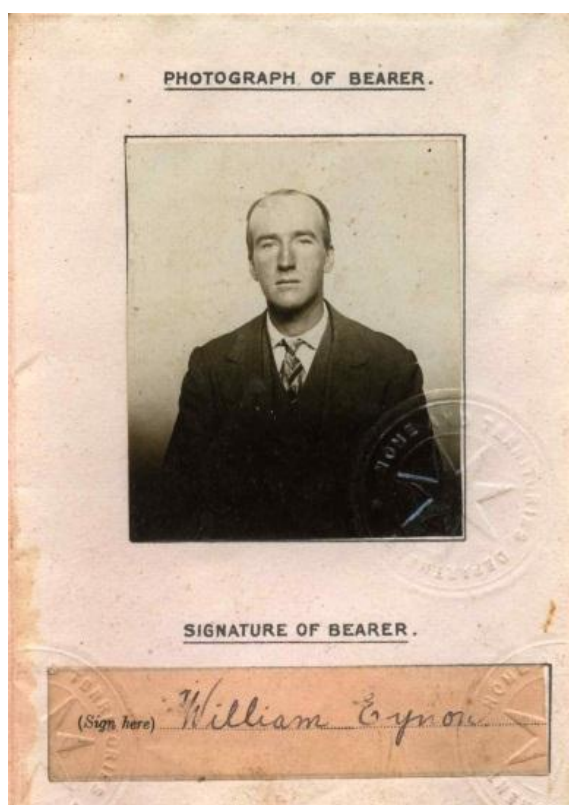


Figure 1 A detail from William Eynon's passport, 1917.

One of those who submitted his name to a Munitions Committee was my grandfather's brother, William (Billy) Eynon of Brunswick. The local 'patriotic' community made life difficult for men like Billy. He was aged 33, single, and apparently healthy – the sort of man that the majority at the time considered contemptible shirkers if they did not enlist and 'do their bit'. They were likely to be accosted in the street and have white feathers offered to them, or receive them in the post. Every newspaper carried letters from citizens accusing them of moral turpitude. Boy scouts thrust enlistment leaflets in their hands at railway stations.

But Billy had already tried to enlist and been rejected – this fact was contained in his munitions papers. He stated that he had been rejected because of a stiff finger. This defect possibly meant that he was not able to fire a gun. As a manual worker, he may have cut a tendon in his hand to cause the stiff finger.

¹ WORKERS FOR GREAT BRITAIN. (1917, May 31). *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1956), p. 8. Retrieved July 14, 2012, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article1621876>

² 1 Jan 1917 p 5; 15 Jan 1917 p 5; and 22 Jan 1917 p 7.



From 1915 “Volunteered for Active Service medically unfit” lapel badges were issued to men like Billy to try and protect them from vilification in the street – Billy was probably issued with one like this.

Billy volunteered to be a navy in the munitions works and departed on the *Suffolk* on 22 April 1917, arriving in Plymouth, England three months later on 27 July 1917.

Figure 2 Volunteered for Active Service, Medically Unfit lapel badge.

William Joseph Eynon was born in Fitzroy and registered in 1893, despite his birthday being recorded in his passport as 17 November 1894. He was the third of eight children of William James Eynon and Mary Jane Griffith, and the eldest boy.

I was pleased to discover recently that the GSV online index GIN (Genealogical Index of Names), included baptisms from St Marks Church of England in Fitzroy, and that transcripts of the registers were in the GSV library. I learnt from these that William was born on 17 November 1883 and baptised on 6 December 1883. His father was a bootmaker at that time, and the family was residing in Fitzroy St, Fitzroy.

When Billy’s father left his wife and family in later years, Billy became the man of the house and always lived with his mother, apart from periods away from home working. He never married.

The fact that Billy had gone to England in the Great War and worked in munitions was a well-known piece of family lore. I noticed a few years ago that the Australian Archives had added munitions workers’ files (MT1139/1) to their online catalogue,³ but I didn’t follow this up until recently, after a cousin handed me Billy’s passport after settling a family member’s estate.

The passport looks not too dissimilar to a modern passport. Inside, however, was a piece of parchment folded like a map to fit inside the cover, with one section pasted to the cover. It included a passport photo, a copy of his signature and a description. The stamps and dates on the document suggested this was what he used to travel to England during the war.



Figure 3 Billy Eynon in the back yard with a cat, circa 1917.

³ NAA MT1139/1 First World War munition workers dossiers. There are 6351 dossiers in this series in the catalogue.

His passport description stated that he was aged 32, a labourer, born in Melbourne, Victoria on 17 November 1894 (sic), 5 feet 5 inches (165 cm) tall, high forehead, grey eyes, long nose, normal mouth, round chin, black hair, dark complexion and a long face.

The only other picture of Billy in the family collection is the above small snap which appears to date from about the same period as his passport.

The passport made me want to know more about Billy's World War 1 service, so I ordered the Munitions dossier at the Australian Archives and went to the North Melbourne reading room to have a look at it. I was surprised and pleased with the excellent information it contained.⁴

This document described him as aged 33, born in Melbourne, single, religion "English", unemployed, and showed his mother as a dependent.

He was asked to state specifically where he had been engaged, and the class of work done during the past three years. His list specified:

Bairnsdale to Orbost Railway, navvy
Briagolong to Moroka Valley Road works, navvy
Waranga Basin works, navvy
Melbourne to Coburg Electric Tram road, navvy

This list of employment put me in mind of a fragment of a photo in the family collection with no identifying information, but which appears to show a work camp in the bush. Billy can't be identified in the photo. Perhaps he may have been in the broken off portion, or it involves some other person, but the time frame seems about right to have involved Billy.

He was also asked for the names and addresses of two personal references as to character, and he provided the names John Camm, estate agent, Nicholson St, North Carlton, and D J Blay, printer, Johnston St, North Fitzroy. I'm not sure what his connection was to John Camm, but Douglas James Blay was his uncle, married to his aunt, Charlotte Griffith.

Billy's address was given as Sturrock Street, East Brunswick, and a stamp on the form pronounced him "Medically fit".

Thereafter follow closely typewritten pages listing correspondence relating to his appointment, sick leave while in England, and frequent references to unpaid entitlements. At the end, there were instructions about his return to Australia.



Figure 4 The photo fragment of a work camp in the bush, circa 1910.

⁴ NAA MT1139/1 Item 6914870 Eynon William – Munitions Worker Number 44.

Billy commenced work as a labourer on 24 August 1917 at Vickers Ltd in Sheffield, at their Don River factory, and remained there for the rest of the war. In June 1918 he decided to again apply for admittance to the AIF. The file records a request from Billy to the Officer in Command to provide him with the necessary papers for enlisting in the AIF. The lack of comment or action on this request suggests they ignored it, or perhaps drew his attention to his agreement. This may have required



Figure 5 The postcard from Brightside, June 1918.

him to reimburse the Commonwealth for his transport costs and allowances. The six page agreement is included in his file.

In the file his address while in England is reported to be “C Restaurant, Tyler St, Sheffield”. There is, however, in the family collection a postcard from Billy in July 1918 with his address given as “Brightside, Sheffield”. The postcard was a birthday greeting to his mother with a short message reading *‘Brightside, Sheffield July 21st 1918. Wishing you many happy returns of the day from ‘Billy’.*

I consulted an online database called “Picture Sheffield”, and was able to find images from this period of Vickers Ltd, Brightside, Tyler Street, munitions workers and so on.⁵ Tyler Street turned out to house a camp of barracks-style buildings on what was probably waste ground near the factories.

On 12 December 1918 the file records a memo instructing Billy to report to the Royal Albert Docks on the 23rd inst for embarkation on s.s. *Barambah*, on account of cessation of hostilities. A flurry of other instructions followed, but it wasn’t until 13 March 1919 that Billy finally embarked on the s.s. *Eastern*. During this period he sent another postcard to his mother from Birmingham.

⁵ <http://www.picturesheffield.com/database.html>



Figure 6 The postcard from Birmingham written on Christmas Eve, 1918.

Birmingham Dec 24th 1918. Dear Mum, Just a line to let you know I am here for a few days. A boat of War Workers left London yesterday for home but I was left. I am still at Vickers but have a fortnight's holiday start work again on 6th Jan, but I think I will be on the way home by then or shortly after. It's very cold here just at present. A merry Xmas 'Billy'.

The Argus reported without embellishment on the return of the war-workers by the *Eastern*.⁶ Billy disembarked on 8 May 1919 after a two year absence. His contract was completed on the day he landed. Later in the year he was recorded on the Victorian Electoral Roll at his mother's home, "Silver Creek" in Sturrock St, Brunswick East, as a labourer.

Billy developed lobar pneumonia in April 1924, and after an illness lasting 10 days died on 1 May 1924 at the Melbourne Hospital, aged 40. He was buried at Fawkner Cemetery two days later.⁷

⁶ WIRELESS TROOPS RETURNING. (1919, April 11). *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1956), p. 7. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article1456232>

⁷ Victorian Death Certificate, No 2038, 1924.