8. The General: Brudenell White (I)

Silver-haired, lean, and erect, shielded from the chill air by a Service greatcoat, the figure striding across to the waiting aircraft was Australia’s most distinguished living soldier. Garlanded with military decorations and imperial honours — DSO, CB, CMG, KCMG, KCVO, KCB, as well as a quiver of foreign awards — General Sir Cyril Brudenell Bingham White’s reputation was made as the nation’s most senior and accomplished wartime staff officer. So valuable had he been to the Allied cause as a tactician and organiser that he was denied the commands that would have tested his capacity for operational leadership at the very highest level. His praise as the genius of the evacuation from Gallipoli had been sung in official histories, biographies, and memoirs. After the war he had served in Australia as the Chief of the General Staff and then, applying his gifts to civilian administration, as chairman of the Commonwealth Public Service Board.

Although his military and administrative background qualified him uniquely for further public service posts, Brudenell White had been a businessman and grazier for more than a decade before war broke out in 1939. Declining the offer of a second term as the chairman of the Public Service Board, he had settled in 1928 on a 2000-acre property, ‘Woodnaggerak’ near Buangor, 20 kilometres west of Beaufort, on the edge of the Western District and the Wimmera. Staying with the Board would have meant working in the nascent national capital in Canberra. Nurturing fine wool merinos far from the clatter and clamour of politics held more appeal. Thus, when still in his early 50s, White had opted for the life of a company director and pastoralist not far from the country he had known as a child. As he gradually improved his financial position, he added another 500 acres to his holding and bought a second farm nearby. As supervisor for Australia and chairman of the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Agency Co. Ltd, and vice-chairman of the National Mutual Life Association of Australasia Ltd, and of the Trustees, Executors, and Agency Co. Ltd, he was closely connected to some of the nation’s leading businessmen. He was selective in responding to invitations to other appointments. With commitments to the Alfred Hospital, the AIF Trust, the Rhodes Trust, several other trusts, as well as the committee of the Australian War Memorial, he had a full diary; he declined the stockbroker Staniforth Ricketson’s offer of a seat on the board of the reconstructed Argus and Australasian company. Believing himself to be out of touch with contemporary military affairs, he had not sought a return to active service in 1939. But in March 1940 the death of Lieutenant General E. K. Squires, the British officer who had been made Chief of the General Staff in September 1939, brought an invitation he could not refuse. He was to take up once again the post he had held immediately after the First World War.
Born in September 1876 in St Arnaud, a gold mining town 132 kilometres northwest of Ballarat, White had moved to Queensland at the age of five with his Anglo-Irish emigrant parents and six siblings. His father having failed as a pastoralist, his business interests in a parlous state, Brudenell (the name by which he was always known) left school at 15. He worked as a clerk in the Australian Joint Stock Bank in Brisbane, Gympie, Gladstone, and Charters Towers. His ambition was to follow his paternal grandfather into the law but after several years of private study and saving he turned in a different direction. His friend Thomas ‘Bill’ Glasgow was soldiering with the Queensland Mounted Infantry. His older brother Dudley had been serving in the Queensland Land Forces since 1889. Brudenell was provisionally commissioned in the 2nd Queensland Regiment in 1896 and joined the Queensland Permanent Artillery in 1899. It seemed clear from very early days that he was an outstanding young officer. Diligent and disciplined, his rise in the military was rapid. After an unhappy posting to Thursday Island, he served briefly with the Commonwealth Horse in the South African War and in 1904 was appointed aide-de-camp to Major General Sir Edward Hutton, the head of the Australian Military Forces. He was the first Australian officer to go to the Staff College at Camberley in England, in 1906. By the outbreak of war in 1914 only six Australians had attended the College, among them Tom Blamey and John Lavarack whose careers would march forward a few steps behind his own.

Late in 1905 at the age of 29, shortly before travelling to take up his Staff College course, White married Ethel Davidson, the eldest of nine children of W. H. Davidson of the historic Coliban Park, a 5000-acre sheep station at Elphinstone in north-eastern Victoria. He had first delicately extricated himself from an engagement to the daughter of a senior officer. Ethel, tall, slender, and elegant, belonged, her daughter Rosemary would say, ‘to a world of wide acres and prosperity which Brudenell’s father had always sought and always lost’. It was a powerful love match. Three children followed at four-year intervals: Margaret Clamina, James Edward, and Patrick Fitzmaurice. After his return to Australia from the European war came a fourth, Rosemary Joan. All of them carried forward Brudenell as their third forename. By all accounts, the deeply religious Anglican White was a devoted family man. He knew about the loneliness of separation. Never happier than when in the company of his wife and children, he was especially fond of the youngest, Rosemary. On the verge of womanhood, Rosemary White shared her father’s love of riding, and was a cheerful distraction from business preoccupations and in due course the sombre news of another world war.

From his earliest days in the Army, Brudenell White’s progress was tracked by the Australian press. When still a lieutenant in 1901 his departure for Melbourne with his brother, Police Inspector J. Warren White, was recorded
in The Queenslander’s ‘Personal Notes’. The Brisbane Courier reported on his social engagements in Ireland in 1906. In April 1908 he was shown in the Adelaide Observer acting as ‘classification officer’ at the Nairne encampment where the local field artillery were undergoing training and assessment of their proficiency. A cable message from London told of his passing of the Staff College examination. He had impressed Brigadier General Henry Wilson, the commandant, who noted not only his ability but his popularity. Though ‘modest and unassuming’ his opinions carried weight with the other students. He is reported in 1909 lecturing in Ireland on ‘The Military Forces of the Dominions’. These and many other references testify to a family’s shrewd appreciation of the social and professional value of publicity.¹

After two years at Camberley, White returned to Australia to an intelligence staff appointment at Army headquarters working under Colonel W. T. Bridges. Like Bridges, and unlike other senior officers whose cast of mind was local and national, he was a proponent of closer co-operation with an Imperial General Staff. At the request of the War Office, late in 1908 he was posted to London, where he served until 1912.² Serving in Henry Wilson’s Directorate of Military Operations he was involved in the development of the new Territorial Force. Sitting alongside Britain’s war planners provided incidental strategic and administrative insights on a daily basis. The young Australian saw and was seen. He worked hard but also found time for other activities. The local Buckinghamshire newspaper reported in July 1910 that Captain White was among the leading citizens organising the establishment of a Boy Scout brigade in Beaconsfield. He was to have a lifelong commitment to scouting, carrying with him in later years a presentation swastika in a silver matchbox.³

Perhaps the most important element of White’s War Office assignment was the perceptions he gleaned of the attitudes, prejudices, and personal relations of the Empire’s most senior military officers, and of the interplay between the Service and departmental officials and ministers. He attended the 1911 Imperial Conference as military secretary to the Commonwealth Minister for Defence, George Pearce; and at meetings with the Chief of the General Staff, Sir William Nicholson, became privy to the most secret planning for an expected war against Germany. Back in Australia as Director of Military Operations at Army

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³ The swastika symbol was abandoned by the Boy Scout movement in 1940.
Headquarters from the beginning of 1912 Major White, as he had become the previous year, was entrusted with the task of planning to raise and organise an expeditionary force of volunteers ready to embark within six weeks. Ostensibly the role of such a force would be to co-operate with New Zealand if Australia’s neighbour should be invaded. But the real purpose of the plan, agreed to secretly by Pearce at the Imperial Conference, was to ensure that Australia was able to respond promptly if Britain were involved in a European war. Such an objective, at odds with the limitations placed by the Defence Act on the employment of Australian troops overseas, would have to be undertaken quietly if it were not to arouse nationalist opposition. White had nailed his colours to the mast of imperial military consolidation.4

When not engaged in the desk work at which he was recognised as the most competent of Australia’s staff officers, Major White of the Royal Australian Garrison Artillery attended the final day of the annual camps of most battalions. It was at the camp of the 73rd Battalion, Victorian Rangers, at Burrumbeet in the summer of 1913 that he first met Richard Williams, the future head of the RAAF. Then the battalion adjutant and assistant brigade major of the 18th Brigade, Williams was to become little more than a year later one of the first four officers, the only member of the permanent forces, to begin flying instruction at Point Cook.5 In the meantime White, as Director of Military Operations, had been one of the small inspection party which had travelled to George Chirnside’s Werribee Park Estate in July 1913 and there decided to purchase a sub-division of 734 acres on which to establish a central flying school.

Although he was still a major, White’s time in England had given him unique knowledge and authority on current military thinking. He was acting Chief of the General Staff when war was declared in 1914. By then his work in preparing Australia’s defence plans, including the secret scheme for a mixed Australian/New Zealand expeditionary force, was well in hand. Within six weeks of the outbreak of war, the nation was in a position to send a substantial contingent overseas.6 Defying the British preference for smaller units that could be absorbed

5 Williams’ fellow trainees were Lt David Manwell of the Light Horse, Capt. Tommy White of the 60th (Princes Hill) Battalion, and Lt George Merz, a medical graduate and brother officer of Robert Gordon Menzies in the Melbourne University Rifles, who in 1915 was the first Australian military pilot killed in action, by hostile Bedouin after a forced landing near Basra (T. L. Smart, ‘Remembering Lieutenant Merz: Australia’s military aviation medical officer pioneer’, *Journal of the Australasian Society of Aerospace Medicine*, 2 [1], 2005, pp.9–15).  
into larger British formations, the Australian Imperial Force would comprise an infantry division and a light horse brigade. White was appointed Chief of Staff to the commander of the AIF, Major General William Bridges. With Bridges he selected the senior officers for the division and was, with Bridges, one of the first of those to leave with Australian forces for the developing European conflict. When the ANZAC contingent was diverted to Egypt, in due course to attack the Dardanelles, White would be among those who landed at Gallipoli early on the first day of the campaign. Wherever Australian troops were to be found over the next four years he was to be one of the most significant guiding hands. Less well known at home during the war than his celebrated contemporary John Monash, he was nonetheless one of the nation's most admired soldiers, and was to emerge to even greater prominence soon afterwards.

Staff, 1st Australian Division, Mena House, Egypt, February 1915
(The Australasian, 3 April 1915, from Ethel White's scrapbook, courtesy of Mark Derham)

Reputation

When the first volume of Charles Bean’s official history of Australia in the war of 1914–1918 appeared in 1921, White's reputation soared. Bean could find no fault in the Chief of Staff to Lieutenant General William Birdwood, the

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7 In 1936 the Professor of History at Melbourne University, Ernest Scott, would embellish the portrait of ‘one of the most brilliant officers in the British forces…Beneath a gentle mien and imperturbable politeness…maintained a soldier's keenness and firmness; the sword in the velvet scabbard…gifted with a swift and comprehensive intelligence…’ (Australia During the War, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1936, p.200).
commander of the ANZACs from September 1915 to the end of the war. As one newspaper reviewer wrote: ‘The great staff-officer appears throughout a far more lovable character than Birdwood. The impression is that Birdwood was self-consciously pleasant while White was kind; that Birdwood had personal ambitions whereas White’s whole effort was centred on the army with which he was serving.’ Whatever the justice of this observation, Birdwood’s high esteem for White was evidenced by his recommendation to Sir Douglas Haig that White should be his Chief of Staff and his own appointment of White as Major General, General Staff of the 5th Army. Personally, Birdwood was to write: ‘He was the most delightful of companions — always so cheery, so full of life and of real human sympathy…He was not only a great man, but a God-fearing man: indeed he was great because he trusted in God.’

Charles Bean’s admiration for White can be traced in his private diaries long before the official volumes on the war were to inscribe his hero’s name indelibly in Australia’s history. While still waiting in Egypt, seeking permission to travel with the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, Bean noted that White ‘has more genuine sense in his little finger than many War Officials have in their small minds’. White’s advocacy on Bean’s behalf prevailed over War Office obscurantism. Bean was not a mere newspaper correspondent but the accredited representative of the Australian government. He would be attached to General Bridges’ 1st Division staff, liaising with Major Tom Blamey of intelligence. On 10 April 1915 Bean recorded a ‘yarn with Colonel White’:

He tells me he thinks it is an extraordinary compliment the Australian troops being chosen to make the present attempt on the Dardanelles. They have got the very best British regular troops they could — the 29th Division…and here are the first Australian Division and the New Zealand and Australian Division chosen to start the ball. ‘They wouldn’t send us unless they thought we were competent,’ he said.

To Bean we owe a glimpse of White as he was about to embark on April 23 ‘with his pistol in its case on his belt, his haversack packed, and a little blue enamelled pannikin tied onto the end of his swag’. A few days after the landing Bean was there when White was hit ‘by a shrapnel pellet pretty hard and laughed as he was hit’. The Age correspondent Phil Schuler noticed White at this time ‘indefatigable, never perturbed, always ready to remedy a defect’. But the most revealing of conversations came with Bean on 2 November 1915 as the Gallipoli campaign was drawing to a close:

Had a yarn with White last night over matters in general. He was charming as usual. We both notice that the Australians here can be picked out on the instant by their faces — a little hard, but the strong, lined, individual faces which men get who stand and think by themselves. The Australian discipline is for orderliness — to get an operation through in an organised manner. The British discipline has a different reason — to make men go forward because they are told to do so. Our men we have to send forward trusting to quite a different principle — we rely on the strong, independent willed men carrying on the weak ones...

White evidently wanted to give me the benefit of an idea which had been strongly impressed on him. ‘What I had seen since Suvla,’ I had said, ‘is making me a Socialist.’

‘It’s not making me that,’ he said, ‘but I’ll tell what I should like to tell the people of Australia — what, if I get the chance, I shall tell them some day — and that is that they are right in the main thing: they may be wrong in the details — I’m no politician as you know, but I’m sure they’re right in this — in giving every man a chance, a good, equal chance.’

White’s character was shown not only in his willingness to speak truth to his chiefs but in his readiness to listen attentively and deal sympathetically with those he commanded. In Cairo early in 1915 John Treloar, his confidential clerk, had confided to his diary that Colonel White ‘looks after us boys like a father’. On Gallipoli he was to write that ‘one could never serve a more gentlemanly and considerate officer’. A junior officer who was with White at 5.00 a.m. on 25 April 1915 as they approached land just north of Gaba Tepe recorded a conversation with him a month later:

I asked Colonel White today what wd happen to me if (& when) the new General (if he came) brought an ADC with him & whether I wd be allowed to go as O. O. to the 7th Bgd with General Walker. He was kind enough to say that if I moved he had a better job for me than that, & that the G had been good enough to say that he thought I had a pretty good grip of things here.11

Thus did Lieutenant Richard G. Casey also learn to appreciate the wisdom and sympathy of an extraordinary commander in embryo. White allowed Casey to photograph him sitting in his shirt sleeves at his collapsible table at the front

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10 J. L. Treloar diary, 8 Jan. 1915, J. L. Treloar, An ANZAC Diary, Armidale, 1993, pp.72, 142; for an appreciation in the memoirs of a young field-ambulance unit private of ‘one of our few favourites among the top brass’, see Roy Ramsay, Hell, Hope and Heroes, Rosenberg, Dural, 2005, p.109.
of his dugout. Files were stacked on adjacent sandbags. With tie in place, boots brilliantly shined, jacket neatly folded at his feet, White was calmly going about his business, his pipe held slackly between his lips.12 Casey, always attracted to, and at times in awe of, older men of influence, would often recall White’s lines: ‘After this war a lot of old maids will die wondering’ and ‘Eating veal is like kissing one’s sister — insipid.’13

Colonel C. B. B. White at Gallipoli May 1915
(Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial PO4340.001)

It had not taken long for White to impress the senior commanders. As his chief General Bridges lay dying, after once too often exposing himself to enemy snipers, General Birdwood had taken comfort in the fact that he had in White, senior General Staff Officer of the Division, ‘a man who is worth anything, and one of the best and most capable soldiers I have met for a long time...full of common sense and has much detailed knowledge and sound judgment’.14 It was not so much the fighting at Gallipoli that made White’s reputation — in the larger force there his influence was reduced at least until July 1915 — but the detailed planning of the evacuation in December 1915. The logistics and

13 W. J. Hudson, ‘A Foreign Minister’s Qualifications’, seminar paper, Dept of International Relations, Research School of Pacific Studies, ANU, 29 March [1984?].
timetables, and the concealment of the thinning of the Australian forces from the Turks, were devised with imagination and precision. This was staff work of the highest order. The story of the ‘silent ruse’ was to be told and retold wherever ANZACs foregathered in the years to come. When the second volume of Charles Bean’s war history was published late in 1924 White was disappointed at being given only ‘subdued credit for the evacuation’. Truth to tell, however, Bean’s version of White’s role diminished the responsibility of Birdwood and of the acting GOC ANZAC, Alexander Godley, who commended ‘the thoroughness and excellence of his Staff work, which resulted in the success of the operation’. If the operation had not been successful it was their reputations more than White’s that were in jeopardy. But they were big men who were happy to give credit to a remarkably able subordinate. In retrospect it should also be observed that White had recognised that being a confidant of a well-connected and influential publicist was a vital element in shaping perceptions at the highest levels. It was all the more valuable for someone who was believed to eschew publicity.

John Monash, himself understanding the value of ‘advertisement’, was appreciative of White’s ability. He wrote to his wife in April 1916: ‘He is far and away the ablest soldier Australia has ever turned out…He is also a charming good fellow.’ In the innermost thoughts that he shared with his own wife, White had said after three weeks at Gallipoli ‘I am obviously not a soldier — that is to say a war soldier. I confess to any quantity of obsolete notions of peacetime soldiering of which I am no longer proud or boastful!’ At root the trouble was, he said, that he just did not like war, at any rate ‘modern war’. There was no escaping the fact, however, that notwithstanding illness, bouts of depression, and occasional tension with his superiors, he was exceptionally good at it. As an anonymous newspaper correspondent wrote in April 1916:

…saw General Brudenell White, of the Australian army, looking as young and boyish as ever. He is regarded as the man of the war, as far as this part of the world is concerned. They say that if he had been in supreme command the Suvla Bay tragedy would never have happened.

If the extraordinary success of the Dardanelles withdrawal had not made his name, his next remarkable achievement — the organisation and transfer to France of an Australian force twice its former size — demonstrated his unmatched administrative capacity. As modern military historians, no less than

16 F. M. Cutlack, War Letters of General Monash, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1934, pp.xii, 112.
18 The West Australian, 24 April 1916.
Bean, have shown, it is impossible to write the story of Australia’s role in the European theatre without White’s role being at its heart. His offensive planning was not faultless. He could be chastised by his superiors for being too optimistic about the prospects of success for certain operations. His own chief Birdwood would express irritation that subordinates would take matters to White that should have come to him. But White’s reputation with the high command continued to rise. After the failure of the Australian attack at Pozières, Sir Douglas Haig visited the Australian Corps HQ at Contay on 29 July 1916 where he saw Birdwood and White. White remembered the occasion in an interview 24 years later:

This failure drew upon the Anzac Corps Staff an informal but emphatic reprimand from Haig who thought it due to over-confidence engendered by success at Gallipoli [sic].

‘You are not fighting Bashi-Bazouks now,’ he said to Birdwood and me in our office at Contay. ‘This is serious scientific war, and you are up against the most scientific and military nation in Europe.’ And pointing to a map on the wall he explained a number of alleged omissions in artillery and other arrangements and said that he would have no such rough-and-ready methods in France.

But as a matter of fact, any errors that were made were not of the crude nature indicated by Haig, who had made many mis-statements. I felt myself getting hot all over until at last I could stand it no longer. In spite of Birdie’s protest I dragged Haig back to the map and said: ‘Look here, Sir, I may be a damned interfering colonial, but you were wrong!’ And I took him back over his accusations and showed him that it was not all Birdie’s fault at all. I was in such a state I really didn’t care, but Haig was splendid. He just looked at me with kindly blue eyes and said: ‘Perhaps you’re right, young fellow.’

The eruption did White no harm. ‘The latter seems a very sound capable fellow,’ Haig noted that day in his diary of Birdwood’s Chief of Staff, ‘and assured me that they had learned a lesson, and would be more thorough in future.’ Charles Bean reflected privately in November 1916: ‘This chronicle seems to contain a great deal more of White than of anyone else. But really he is the AIF & has been since Bridges died & even before.’

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19 The Mercury, 26 March 1940.
With 1st ANZAC in September 1917 was another Australian war correspondent, the Sydney journalist Harry Gullett. After the ‘great show’ on September 20, Gullett wrote to his wife Penelope about the work behind the scenes:

"The genius of the Australian Army is a man of our own — Major General White a Queenslander — once a bank clerk who took to soldiering before the war as a profession, did brilliantly in the military colleges in England, & left Australia for Gallipoli at the outset as a staff captain. His fame is all thro France: many count him as possibly the master of them all. His work goes far beyond our force. Certainly he has not nearly finished. He is now Chief of our Staff. Isn’t it good to have produced him? And he is the most modest & charming man alive: a delightful easy manner, & he radiates light & intelligence. He is one of those rare big personalities that always have a lot in hand. He always has a minute to spare for everybody. In the midst of the show today he greeted me with a cordiality that was a revelation of his size. I believe he comes from a good old squatting family which lost its cash & he is practically self-educated. He has very fine kindly blue eyes & a long fair face runs to a huge strong Roman nose. He rides a horse in a curious way with a hump in his back & at the Haig review he sat away behind the smaller fry — an aloof, shy & intensely interesting figure. I enthuse about him because if he is not the man we think he is sent from heaven."21

Not every Australian in France thought White sent from heaven. As the historian Ross Mallett points out, Brigadiers Harold ‘Pompey’ Elliott and John Gellibrand ignored his tactical caution in the advance to the Hindenburg Line. His misgivings about the first Bullecourt attack were not heeded; and his scheme for the second Bullecourt battle was flawed. His planning was generally more successful.22 But that did nothing to mollify the particularly aggrieved brigade commander, ‘Pompey’ Elliott. Revered by the troops, who knew him as a fearless leader whose tactical decisions were informed by frontline observation, Elliott was frequently at odds with headquarters. Overruled by White on the appointment of his own battalion commanders, he was even more chagrined at being passed over for promotion when Thomas Glasgow and John Gellibrand were given divisions in May 1918. Foreshadowing an appeal to the Australian Minister of Defence about being unjustifiably overlooked, Elliott provoked a masterly response from White:

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21 Gullett to Penelope Gullett, 20 Sept. 1917, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/5/13. Decades later, Gullett’s son would write that his father admired White — was ‘in some awe of him’ — but did not much like him (J. Gullett, notes for Lord Casey, 7 Oct. 1972, NAA: M1129 WHITE/C B).
Do you think anyone doubts your courage? No one in the AIF, I assure you. Or yr ability? It is well known; but — you mar it by not keeping your judgment under complete control...Finally you actually threaten me with political influence. You have obviously written hurriedly and I am therefore not going to regard yr letter as written. But let me say this: if the decision rested with me I should send you off to Australia without the least hesitation if calmly and deliberately you repeated yr assertion to seek political aid — and if you managed to raise a dozen ‘politico-military’ enquiries I wd fight you to a standstill on them!

‘Traveller’, the horse White rode ‘in a curious way’ throughout the war, sold for 86 guineas, May 1919

(Ethel White's scrapbook, courtesy of Mark Derham)

What Elliott’s biographer describes as an ‘astute blend of intimidation and inducement’ — a hint that he was next in line for a divisional command — subdued the unbalanced brigadier. When it was known that White was to follow Birdwood from the Australian Corps to the Fifth Army, Elliott’s judgment was that White:

...is undoubtedly a very able man but he is now completely under General Birdwood’s thumb, as he sees his future being made by sticking close to him and this is natural under the circumstances. But I cannot help thinking that it has more than once led to the betrayal of Australian interests.23

In France, White was indeed at Birdwood’s right hand throughout. Some scholars were later to suggest that he was in fact doing much of the work more properly done by his chief. Certainly, as his own daily diary shows, he was organisational architect, planner, trouble shooter, adviser, and emissary. If Bean exaggerated his role and achievements, diminishing those of Sir John Monash and others like Robert McCheyne Anderson, the Sydney businessman sent to England to manage the AIF’s supplies and finances, White was undoubtedly one of the outstanding successes of the war. Whether some of the spectacular victories attributed to Monash in 1918 would have been his if he had been given the command of the Australian Corps in succession to Birdwood or to Monash can never be known. Bean and Keith Murdoch conspired unsuccessfully to thwart and then overturn the Monash appointment; but White himself, though never an uncritical admirer of Monash, had doubts that he was himself the right man for the post.  

The war provided White with unrivalled experience, not simply of the thinking and performance of the Australian and imperial high command, but of the labyrinthine intrigues of generals and politicians. He was privy to, and

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unimpressed by, much of the ambition for promotion and honours that animated many of his peers. However, he was not above manoeuvring to influence the organisational and command choices of his superiors. His hand had been evident in the undermining of Major General J. G. Legge’s appointment to lead the AIF in 1915 and the transfer of the GOC’s powers to Birdwood. In subsequent years he had developed considerable distaste for the propensity of government leaders to subordinate military priorities to political interests. Decisions about the deployment of the Australian third division in late 1916, for example, were, he thought, contrived to influence the soldiers’ vote in the conscription campaign. Though he deprecated this he was unabashed in urging Bean to persuade Birdwood to come out publicly in favour of conscription. Whispering campaigns for and against candidates for corps and divisional commands swirled around him. Rumours of negotiated peace and of rifts between the high command and the War Cabinet were an intermittent distraction. When news came late in 1918 that Germany had accepted President Wilson’s peace terms, his profound scepticism about all things political found expression: ‘Great discussions on Peace. Army a little mistrustful.’

Although as the war progressed he was largely detached from the trench and training worlds, White had thought deeply about problems of command in the field, and the difference between British and Australian forces: ‘the moment you get inexperienced British commanding officers administering Australian troops you find the differences’. He was a strong supporter of promoting officers from the ranks and ensuring that they remained close to the regiment or at least the brigade in which they had served. As he told Bean: ‘You want them with the CO who knew them and often with the men they knew. That is a concrete difference that the British don’t realise.’

That the war took its toll on White, as for all of his contemporaries, scarcely needs to be acknowledged. Perhaps only Bean, in whom he regularly confided, sensed how fragile was his temperament. ‘An ounce of enmity worries him more than a ton of work.’ Sent to spend time in the London General Hospital late in 1917 he was enjoined by his good friend Neville Howse, Director of Medical Services, to keep his bed and sitting rooms well ventilated. ‘Walking or riding exercise every day (weather is no bar to a healthy man), five minutes exercise before first meal, preferably in the open air.’ It was a sensible regimen if not a cure-all. In a letter of commiseration to the then troubled brigade commander John Gellibrand in

25 Bean diary, 15 Oct. 1916, Bean MSS, AWM: 38, 3DRL606/61/1; White diary, 12, 13 Oct. 1918, White MSS, NLA MS 5172/7.
26 Bean diary, 2 March 1916, Bean MSS, AWM: 38, 3DRL606/40/1, quoted in Faraday, ‘Half the battle…’, pp.156–7.
27 Bean diary, 17 Feb. 1917, Bean MSS, AWM: 38, 3DRL606/70/1.
June 1917, White had spoken of demands that were ‘wearing & for how long it is possible is a doubtful business...We both suffer from a certain lack of those Apollo like qualities which make hard physical work, & privation & discomfort of small account.’ More serious was the emotional and psychological strain — ‘a certain amount of rest and freedom from responsibility’ would be necessary before it was possible to ‘see the world in correct perspective again’.29

One thing White did see in a particular perspective that even his greatest advocate did not appreciate was the need for the hard-pressed British Army to take credit for some successes in the autumn of 1918. He had previously been unenthusiastic about an idea of Bean’s ‘to write something wh. wd force the British to treat Australia as a separate distinct (tho’ kindred) nation’. With the British Commander in Chief failing to acknowledge the role of Australian and Canadian troops, White told Bean that in Haig’s position he would have done the same. The value to British morale of the victory that freed Amiens would have been lost if it had been attributed to Dominion forces. To Bean, this was to miss the larger strategic picture: that one day Australia’s future might depend on the perception of the Americans of ‘how far we had put the civilised world under an obligation to us in this war. Our existence may depend on it.’30 But then and later White remained an admirer of Haig. It was to Haig more than any other commander, he affirmed on the Field Marshal’s death in 1928, that victory was owed. It was Haig’s character, ‘a character without a flaw’, that saved the British Army in March 1918: ‘The belief that the men had in him undoubtedly kept them from rout.’31

White had ended the war as a Lieutenant General, Chief of Staff of the Australian Imperial Force and Chief of Staff of the British Fifth Army. When the shooting stopped he was tasked with establishing a repatriation and demobilisation branch of the AIF in London. Four days after the Armistice, White saw Billy Hughes in London. Realising that he lacked sufficient knowledge of education and industrial employment he recommended that John Monash should be given the industrial responsibility or, almost certainly his less-preferred option, put in charge of the whole organisation. The Prime Minister, he discovered, ‘evidently wants Monash for Demob job’. Within days Monash had taken over. White it seemed had been out-maneuved. To White’s astonishment, when he offered his services to Monash he was turned down. Emerging from a private

meeting with Monash, he stunned Bean with an uncharacteristic expletive. On Monday, December 16 the now-unemployed general recorded: ‘Drove a car for a couple of hours for practice.’

While he spoke warmly of Monash publicly, White for the most part kept his own counsel about his real feelings. But a private letter in 1937 revealed his lukewarm appreciation of a man whom he said had ‘an easier war on the whole than many of the other higher Commanders’. The unpopular J. W. McCay, he said, was an abler soldier. Monash ‘like so many of his race was quick to grasp and quick to learn; even if the knowledge was without depth’. White professed to be quite certain that if Monash, like Birdwood, had ‘been subject to the test of a 4 years command he would have failed’. ‘Brudenell did not discuss the war with his family,’ his daughter wrote, ‘and it is doubtful if he ever mentioned his feelings about it to them…It had been a time of such agony for him and for Ethel that they tried to forget it.’

Finding a new role

Sir Cyril Brudenell White KCMG, as he had been since the beginning of 1919, returned home in HMAS Australia at the end of May 1919. He was elated at seeing the Southern Cross for the first time in five years. Acclaimed as a hero, he was given a civic reception at Melbourne Town Hall and fêted wherever he went in the next few weeks. In a warm pen-portrait in The Argus, the acting Minister of Defence was quoted as saying that White was considered ‘the greatest and most capable soldier that Australia has produced’. Before setting sail he had represented Australia on a War Office Reorganisation Committee considering the future of cavalry. His return to Australia saw him immediately engaged in defence planning as a member of a committee chaired by George Swinburne. The committee reported in August 1919 in favour of the creation of an air force and of maintaining a citizen army with the capability of putting 180 000 men into the field if war were to come. Early the next year he participated with

32 Clem Lloyd and Jacqui Rees, The Last Shilling: A History of Repatriation in Australia, MUP, 1994, p.115. C. E. W. Bean evidently did not know that the job had first been offered to White (Two Men I Knew, William Bridges and Brudenell White Founders of the A.I.F., Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1957, p.181). The announced demobilisation and repatriation arrangements entailed the creation of a mixed civilian and military board and a department headed by a minister, initially Hughes and then Senator Pearce; Monash would be director-general and White would sit ex-officio as the connecting link with General Birdwood (The Argus, 25 Nov., 24 Dec. 1918; The Herald, 26 Dec. 1918 for objections to demobilisation delays and to sending Pearce to London).
33 White diary, 14–20 Nov., 16 Dec. 1918, White MSS, NLA MS 5172/7.
34 White to J. Black RSSILA (Vic), 7 April 1937, AWM: 38 DRL606, item 276 (1), in Williams, Anzacs, The Media and The Great War, p.235.
35 Derham, The Silence Ruse, p. 213.
36 The Argus, 5 June 1919.
Generals Monash, McCay, and Hobbs in a Senior Officers’ conference chaired by Sir Harry Chauvel. In a two-volume *Report on the Military Defence of Australia*, the nation’s military elite concluded that the safety of Australia depended on her ability to thwart an invading enemy long enough for help to arrive from other parts of the British Empire. The only enemy in mind, then and in the next two decades, was Japan.37

A gathering of generals to meet Lord Birdwood

(Photograph by T. Humphrey, *The Australasian*, 21 Jan. 1920, from Ethel White’s scrapbook, courtesy of Mark Derham)

Appointed Chief of the General Staff in April 1920 in succession to Major General J. G. Legge, White took responsibility for developing the structure, recruitment, and training of the Militia. It was a task for which his meticulous mind was well suited. And his fervent belief in the value of a citizen army had only been confirmed by his wartime experience. Speaking at a farewell dinner as his period as CGS ended, White averred that he had refused to act as a propagandist. The Army realised that its strength was a matter for ‘statesmen’ after careful review by a foreign office and a military department. He was to note then and again that the absence of a foreign office was ‘somewhat of a handicap to Australia’.38 White’s great admirer, Bean, was to write of him that ‘the war swung him to a belief in democracy which, though at first almost reluctant, became firmer as his experience of it increased’. He was no natural democrat. But he believed it to be ‘right in principle’. And when it seemed that Australia’s democracy was

threatened by Bolshevism he would not be a mere spectator. Democrat though he was, White was also a monarchist and, after successfully organising the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1920, he was made KCVO — Knight of the Royal Victorian Order — an honour in the gift of the sovereign. It was no secret that in 1921 he was elected a member of the general council of the League of Nations Union of which J. G. Latham was president. Eighteen months later, while still CGS, he revealed his political sympathies by appearing on the platform with other ‘representative men’ when Prime Minister Hughes delivered his policy speech at Chatswood Town Hall. Patriotism and Christianity were inseparable, White would tell an audience at St Paul’s Cathedral in 1925, as long as patriotism was subordinate.39

In May 1923, Stanley Bruce prevailed upon White to become Chairman of the newly established Board of Commonwealth Public Service Commissioners. He had not been an applicant. He was still considering an offer to become secretary of the Victoria Racing Club, where his brother Jack (John Warren White) had been appointed chairman of the stipendiary stewards in 1920. Nor it seems, notwithstanding a substantial salary of £2500 a year, did he find the Public Service Board a particularly congenial task. He had necessarily resigned his appointment in the Permanent Force and was transferred to the unattached list of the Citizen Forces. He would retain his seat on the Council of Defence but in an honorary capacity.

Many officers who had not long since been urged by White to show loyalty to the Army while it went through the difficulties of retrenchment were unimpressed by his departure: ‘there was a common phrase about Victoria Barracks that “the penny was mightier than the sword”’. There were comparisons with General Chauvel’s steadfastness, much to White’s disadvantage, Sir Sydney Rowell would remember.40 If there was a loss of esteem among old colleagues and subordinates, a growing intimacy with the Prime Minister was some compensation — he was consulted on ‘probable new Govr Genls (??Allenby; recommd Plumer)’ in 1925.41 But the Public Service Board proved a wearying chore. The public service was practised and purposeful in resisting change. And nothing in his military life had prepared the general for dealing with recalcitrant staff associations, arbitrated

41 White diary, 6 April 1925, White MSS, NLA MS 5172/10; Derham, *The Silence Ruse*, p.215 quotes an earlier diary entry which does not disclose White’s queries about Allenby and support for Plumer. Sir John Baird Bt, a former Conservative Cabinet minister, was appointed and created Lord Stonehaven.
wage settlements, formal appeals over promotions, calculated defiance that fell short of sanctionable transgression, or abusive character assessments under parliamentary privilege.\(^{42}\)

White understood well enough that the Prime Minister’s objectives of economy and efficiency could not be achieved simply by careful planning and command decisions. He sought co-operation and was willing to negotiate. Promotion purely by seniority having been abolished, his remit was to smooth the path for the new criteria of efficiency, merit, and good and diligent conduct. A revised position classification scheme was achieved after prolonged wrangling. Unhappily, there was a poor response to his attempts to engage departments in initiatives to identify and reward officers whose skill or inventive capacity brought savings or efficiencies.\(^{43}\) As his term came to an end there was nothing to attract him to continue in a job which would have entailed moving his family from the comfort of the grazing property near Beaufort they had bought in 1925, to the unappealing environment of the nascent national capital.

It was a frustrating time at the Public Service Board, interrupted by illness, confrontation with Prime Minister Bruce over economies that threatened the viability of the defence forces, and the long distraction in 1926–27 of arranging the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York and the opening of the new Parliament House. Unfulfilling as the five years as Commissioner had been, they had been preceded by a more consequential disappointment. White had failed to ensure the succession he wished in his place at the head of the Army. On stepping down as Chief of the General Staff in 1923 he was succeeded by Harry Gullett’s friend Sir Harry Chauvel, characterised that year in Gullett’s history of the exploits of the Light Horse in the Middle East as ‘a sound administrator and a wise and far-seeing commander’, and ‘a leader of broad Imperial sympathies and infinite tact’.\(^{44}\) White had hoped that Brigadier General Tom Blamey would be appointed; but the best he could achieve was a splitting of the CGS’s role into two, with Blamey designated to assume a new position as second CGS in charge of peace organisation, peace establishments, and training. A disappointed Blamey was enticed by Monash and encouraged by Chauvel to accept an offer from the Victorian government to become its Chief Commissioner of Police.\(^{45}\)

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\(^{42}\) The Bulletin, 29 Jan. 1925, quoting a Labor MP: ‘an old conservative, dust-laden, brainless idiot…a troglodyte whose principal characteristics are ignorance, arrogance and egotism…pitchforked into a high position by social influence and patronage’.


White was more successful in arranging the transition to his favoured successor at the Public Service Board. His term over in June 1928, White was ready to make home, family, and a limited portfolio of business and voluntary service interests his priorities. In 1925 he had turned down an offer from Sir John Grice of £2500 a year to become general manager of the Trustees Executors and Agency Company Ltd. Two years later he declined the Prime Minister’s proposal of a safe seat in the House of Representatives. Then, forewarned of an approach about the High Commissionership in London — widely canvassed in the press — he made sure that Stanley Bruce knew he was not interested. Now he accepted an offer from Grice of £3000–4000 a year to become chairman of the local board and superintendent of the Australian business of the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Agency Company Ltd. He sat on the boards of the Alfred Hospital and the Australian War Memorial, the Rhodes Scholarship selection committee, and the council of Trinity College at the University of Melbourne, where his ‘very long, very slow’ first meeting was an uninspiring introduction to the contrasting decision-making conventions of the university, military, and commercial worlds. But at various times he was brought into counsel by the federal government.

His generally laconic diary occasionally gives a glimpse of a man unafraid to speak his mind. A three-hour Council for Defence meeting in November 1929 was one such occasion ‘whereat I definitely stated some views’. The matters were rehashed at a lunch with newly promoted fellow Generals Chauvel and Monash; and followed the next day after further consultation with Monash by a telegram to the Prime Minister ‘demurring at terms of his press notification’. It was not coincidental that there were no further Council of Defence meetings for five years.

Military matters and echoes of the war were never far away. In early August 1927 he dined with Monash — ‘a jolly party’ — and found himself sitting next to Pompey Elliott. ‘We had a reconciliation — but not before I had told him what I thought of him.’ On 2 June 1930 there was an ‘extraordinary letter from Genl Elliott’. ‘Another strange letter’ from Elliott, a Nationalist Senator since 1919, arrived on June 10. Elliott’s resentment at his wartime ‘supersession’ by Generals Glasgow and Gellibrand had been re-ignited after the war when White was CGS. He had imprudently taken his personal grievances against White and Birdwood into public arenas. Never appeased in spite of being promoted Major

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47 For some of the Council of Defence meetings he attended and his sharp comments on secret documents, see White Papers, AWM: 3DRL1400, Series 5 Wallet 5.


50 White diary, 8 Aug. 1927, 2, 10, June 1930, White MSS, NLA MS 5172/11.
General and given a divisional command in 1928, and still seeking vindication even from White, Elliott fell ill a few months later, and took his own life in March 1931.

Since Elliott had ‘ventilated his supersession’ in the Senate in 1921 and ‘apparently condemned no one but himself’, he had been a nuisance.51 But for White, his own reputation secured in the imposing volumes of Charles Bean’s history of Australia in the war, there were more compelling contemporary concerns.

51 White diary, 22 April, 6 May 1921, White MSS, NLA MS 5172/9.
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