

## **Report on historic field gun, late of Darling Gardens Clifton Hill.**

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Trophy guns such as the German howitzer once located in Darling Gardens were once very prominent in the landscape of urban and suburban Australia. They are certainly less prominent today, and City of Yarra has a unique opportunity to provide the public with an interpretation of this object that reflects its complex and multifaceted relationship to its community.

I would suggest that there is value to the community in approaching the gun with an understanding of the differing sentiments that have coalesced around this object since first installation nearly a century ago. In this way members of the public will have an opportunity to appreciate that the First World War and its sacrifices drew complex and difficult responses from the people of Collingwood. The location of the gun in either the Darling Gardens or Barkly Gardens, Richmond, is likely to impact on the kinds of interpretation available, given the different contexts in which it would be placed.

Interpreting an object such as a trophy weapon from the First World War requires that an attempt be made to explain the reasons for its original placement on public display, but also its history in the community, including its continuing meanings and functions today.

In 1921, a wide range of trophy weapons were allocated to local municipalities under a federal scheme, and thus became an index of communities' contribution to war. Thus large weapons like the one under consideration could be particularly valued by local communities as an affirmation of their sacrifices, while other smaller trophies were derided as an affront to community pride. This was why the Collingwood council unanimously accepted the howitzer, while numerous councillors expressed disgust at the presentation of a damaged machine gun only a year later.

There are multiple and conflicting stories to tell around Collingwood's field gun, which has a uniquely controversial history in the Darling Gardens. On one hand the gun is an acknowledgement by the federal government of what Collingwood contributed to the war, a measure of sacrifice on the part of both those who enlisted and the families who watched them depart. The gun is also an indicator of pride in what their soldiers achieved: victory in a war most believed was worth winning. In this sense the gun can be read as triumphal, and a marker of pride, but also as an acknowledgement of what communities endured in sending their loved ones away to that terrible war.

On the other hand, the gun has also been the locus for expression of anti-war sentiment in Collingwood. The striking examples are the several motions put by Councillor Laurie Marshall in 1933 with a view to removing the gun – and any others like it – from public view. Marshall, a Boer War veteran and pioneer aviator among other things, interpreted the gun as an instrument of

killing, ‘a relic of barbarism’ that might well have been responsible for the deaths of Australian soldiers. He even recommended returning it to Germany as a gesture of goodwill and amity, at a time when fears of future wars were beginning to rise again.

The conflicts that could inform interpretation of the gun were very much on show in multiple council meetings in 1933. The heated debates that occurred over the future of the gun made headlines around Australia. To Councillor Marshall the gun stood as a symbol of tragedy; to the Town Clerk Norman Graham – a returned soldier – it reflected the glory of the soldiers’ sacrifices and achievements. Councillor William Ruthven, a returned soldier and Victoria Cross recipient, declared that the gun commemorated the deeds of soldiers, but he was also prepared to see the gun as cautionary: a symbol of destruction around which children could be instructed in the horrors of war, while recognising the sacrifices of those who died.

Clearly there are multiple perspectives on this object historically, a reality that is surely reflected in the community today. In interpreting this object for the public, Council does not need to seek out or identify a single ‘proper’ meaning. It is likely that the public will be much more engaged if asked to consider the various meanings attributed to the object in the past, so that they might reflect on what the experience of war means to residents today.

## **Proposed locations**

### **1. Darling Gardens**

The gun has a long and sometimes contentious history, and that history is tied to its public display and use in the Darling Gardens. The gun was accepted into the trusteeship of the councillors of the then Loch Ward of the City of Collingwood. They and their successors chose to retain it even when directly challenged to remove it, and retained it still when many other municipalities were divesting themselves of such objects several decades after the war. The attached image shows the gun in the Darling Gardens.

The Burra Charter prefers that historical objects be retained in their original context as far as possible, and those principles could certainly be upheld in this instance. The stories to be told about the gun do relate specifically to its history of public display in those gardens.

### **2. Barkly Gardens**

Locating the field gun in the Barkly Gardens would place the gun in the context of the existing memorial (erected by the then City of Richmond) and the commemorative activities and ideals attached to that memorial. This would make the gun more frequently a part of public commemorative activities, and likely draw more members of the public to take the time to examine it. Whether its display in the context of the existing memorial would make it more

difficult to tell multiple stories about the gun's contentious history is an open question, but one worth considering. Certainly the memorial and the trophy gun would be in a dialogue with each other.

I would emphasise again that the artillery piece under consideration has a unique history, in which Collingwood residents have expressed multiple perspectives on the First World War and its sacrifices. This gives City of Yarra an opportunity not available elsewhere to engage the public in a way that asks them to think again about that war, what it meant to people in the past, and what it might mean today.

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**WAR WEAPON IN PEACEFUL SETTING:** The captured German gun in Darling Gardens, Collingwood, which has been the subject of heated discussion at meetings of the Collingwood Council. A move to have the gun returned to Germany was defeated.

Herald (Melbourne), Tuesday 16 May 1933, page 22