

Sydney the big department stores and the specialist shops were jammed with people so that it was almost impossible to move. Shoppers showed no sign of swinging from luxury goods to useful or economic gifts: 'the pleasant foolishnesses inseparable from the Christmas season have obstinately refused to be ousted'. Towards the climax of this orgy of spending, which easily surpassed recent Christmases, a reporter noted that the 'lightheartedness of the crowds was more noticeable than for many previous years'. Australia also experienced one of the greatest travel booms recorded with almost all holiday accommodation fully booked out from mid-December to late January. To explain this, as did one paper, by the unavailability of overseas travel seems far-fetched.⁵⁵

Either people were confident that war would guarantee jobs and increase employment or they were having a 'final fling' in anticipation of the hard times to come. The mood of the people favours the first explanation. The war seemed so unlike what they had feared that it was hard to take it seriously except that it would generate employment and good times. This Christmas spree arose from a sense of relief that war would not be, after all, too bad.

The sight of so many Australians at leisure might have pleased and alarmed, in varying proportions, those charged with responsibility for the direction of the war effort in Australia. Certainly there was no evidence of panic or depression. Concentration on keeping spirits up, on 'business as usual', had either been spectacularly successful or quite unnecessary. The prime minister, holidaying with his family in the Grampians, might have pondered a very disturbing question: having dismissed the war so casually, would Australians accept sacrifice and discipline when these became necessary? With what rhetoric and by what other means would it be possible to bring people to a sense of realities once this twilight war ended?

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