



EDITION 24

NUMBER 1

JUNE 2023

## Editorial

## Articles

*City of London v. Strangers: The Fall of the Hanse in England, and the Rise of State-Sponsored Trade*

**Aidan Lilienfeld**

*Soldiers' Use of Metaphor in Letters to Their Families in the First World War*

**Harrison Croft**

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## Table of Contents

Edition 24 Number 1

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Editorial	i
City of London v. Strangers: The Fall of the Hanse in England, and the Rise of State-Sponsored Trade <i>Aidan Lilienfeld</i>	1–31
Soldiers' Use of Metaphor in Letters to Their Families in the First World War <i>Harrison Croft</i>	32–56

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## Editorial

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Our last edition was published shortly after Melbourne came out of our last lockdown. In the time since then, we have all (in Melbourne and across the world) had to adapt to this new pandemic world, as we try resume our lives that the pandemic disrupted while the pandemic continues. Archive visit and travel have resumed, classes have returned to being in person, and many conferences have moved to a hybrid format. Yet the world continues to be challenging and for reasons beyond the pandemic; across the world we face a cost-of-living crisis. The board here at *Eras*, and likely many of you, have had a challenging and disrupted year, as consequence of these difficulties and others that we face as academics and as people. Saying so feels somewhat of a broken record, considering the state of the world these last few years. Yet time moves on, and we adapt to this new world as best as we can while continuing to work to our goals. The publication of this edition of *Eras* has been delayed, but I would like to focus here not on its delay but on its existence. As individuals and as a society, life throws us many curveballs. It is a difficult skill to learn to recognise that things are not going to plan, for reasons inside and outside of your control, and then to adapt, regroup, work out a new plan-of-action, and continue on. Sometimes this process of re-grouping happens more than once. So, while I introduce you to this edition of *Eras* several months late, it is my pleasure to introduce it: we got there. I hope that whatever difficulties you are all experiencing have fruitful ends.

We would like to thank the authors for their articles, as well as thanking the senior scholars who gave their time and expertise to peer-review; this system of academia would not function without the generosity of others giving their time to this process for the publication of their peers. This edition features two wonderful articles. The first article, *City of London v. Strangers: The fall of the Hanse in England, and the rise of state-sponsored trade* by Aidan Lilienfeld examines the revolution in commerce and political economy in late sixteen century Europe through the case study of how Anglo-Hanseatic relations decayed. The second article, *Soldier's Use of Metaphor to their Families in the First World War* by Harrison Croft builds on scholarship of understanding the epistolary tradition within the Australian Imperial Force by analysing the letters by an Australian soldier in France from 1916-1917.

Since our last edition, several members of our board have finished their time at *Eras*, who we would like to thank and recognise their contributions to the journal. Rachel Lansell, our last editor-in-chief, especially deserves a momentous thank you. Rachel led our last edition and the start of this one and was a wonderful editor-in-chief. Also in need of thanks are Joshua Hatherley, Xiao Yang, Craig Stanbury, Simon Coxe, and Jason Telles, who have all been of great assistance. We wish them all the best in their future endeavours.

Until next time,

*The Editorial Board*

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## City of London v. Strangers: The Fall of the Hanse in England, and the Rise of State-Sponsored Trade

Aidan Lilienfeld

(Columbia University)

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**Abstract:** *This article analyses the decay of Anglo-Hanseatic relations in the late sixteenth century as a case study for the larger revolution in commerce and political economy happening in Europe at the time. Previous historiography—which will be introduced later—has primarily treated Anglo-Hanseatic tensions as an issue of commercial practicality, as though London merchants merely wanted to monopolise English markets long dominated by the Hanse. However, the story was far more complex, in the moral and philosophical arguments made by each side, and the implications of these arguments on the changing economic landscape across the continent. By examining the language of debate over Hanseatic rights in London in the second half of the sixteenth century and particularly the 1580s and 1590s, this article will argue that the gradual decay of the Steelyard merchants’ commercial power in London was primarily a result of the emergent early modern commercial philosophy of mercantilism, and along with it, state-sponsored trade. As many Englishmen argued, though the Steelyard merchants were permanent residents of London, they were neither Londoners nor Englishmen. English law determined that the Steelyard merchants’ foreignness warranted inferior treatment compared to new, powerful trading companies sponsored financially—and legally—by the crown.*

**Keywords:** *Anglo-Hanseatic relations, mercantilism, state-sponsored trade, European commercial revolution, London Steelyard*

“We learn that whereas the Hanse Towns have long enjoyed certain privileges in respect of the export of cloth from England... nevertheless certain malicious and envious citizens of London calling themselves *adventurers* have gone about to alter the ancient trade of the Hanse Towns, and have so contrived that the English councillors have cut off the privileges of the towns.”

- Rudolf II von Habsburg to the Count of Friesland, 1579.

“Their wealth is grown such by beggaring of us that it is no charity to have this pity on them to our own undoing. It is to be noted in the stranger they will not commerce with us. They marry not into our nation. They will not buy anything of our country men.”

- Fuller, Councilman for the City of London in *City of London v. Strangers*, 1593.

### **Introduction**

In 1598, Queen Elizabeth I banned all Hanse merchants from their London headquarters, the Steelyard, ending nearly a half-century of tensions between the Crown and the Hanseatic merchants of the German Holy Roman Empire. The Hanse had been the only trading organisation of substance in Northern Europe prior to the 1500s, responsible for most maritime trade in the waters between London and Novgorod. By the late sixteenth century, however, England was the last foreign market in which Hanse merchants still retained a major presence.

This article will analyse the decay of Anglo-Hanseatic relations in the late sixteenth century as a case study for the larger revolution in commerce and political economy happening in Europe at the time. Previous historiography—which will be introduced later—has primarily treated Anglo-Hanseatic tensions as an issue of commercial practicality, as though London merchants merely wanted to monopolise English markets long dominated by the Hanse. However, the story was far

more complex, in the moral and philosophical arguments made by each side, and the implications of these arguments on the changing economic landscape across the continent. By examining the language of debate over Hanseatic rights in London in the second half of the sixteenth century and particularly the 1580s and 1590s, this article will argue that the gradual decay of the Steelyard merchants' commercial power in London was primarily a result of the emergent early modern commercial philosophy of mercantilism, and the state-sponsored trade practices that went with it. The rise of state involvement in trade went hand in hand with the practice of "Othering" foreign-born merchants, with new language and ferocity in this critical period of English political-economic development. As many Englishmen (and at their behest, the English courts) argued, though the Steelyard merchants were permanent residents of London, they were neither Londoners nor Englishmen. The Hanse merchant's changing status in London both informed and responded to larger changes taking place in the history of English and European political economies at the time.

In the last few decades of the sixteenth century Anglo-Hanseatic tensions reached a fevered pitch. Beginning in the 1550s, the Hanse's role as the main exporters of English products (particularly cloth) to Germany and other central European lands came under threat (or perceived threat) from the expansion of the Merchant Adventurers, an English trading company which sought to divert trading power in the North Sea into their own hands. In response Hanse merchants in London demanded a return of their historic trading privileges from the English government. Finally, in 1598, Queen Elizabeth I's office expelled all Hanse merchants from England. By the time they were allowed back decades later, Hanse commercial power was but a vague memory in the northern European economy.

In this article, London serves as the premier example of the decay of Hanseatic power – and as a microcosm of the changing world-economy of the North Sea. We know that English-Hanseatic

relations were heated at a macrocosmic level; this article shows how the London scene not only fit this paradigm, but contained within it the seeds of early modern European commercial-imperial explosion.

### **Background: Anglo-Hanseatic Relations, and the London Steelyard**

This paper will illustrate the decline in the Hanse's commercial dominance over England in the late sixteenth century, and the accompanying rise in English state-sponsored merchant and trading companies during that period, through a case study of Hanse merchants' fraught existence in London. As the English crown consolidated its power immensely in the sixteenth century, English merchants in this period gained a distinct advantage over their old German competitors: state funding and legal support. The Hanse, a complex institution which will be introduced below, lacked both funding and legal backing from its nominal overlord, the German Holy Roman Empire, and could not keep up with this new trend.

The Hanseatic League was a community of German merchants and trading cities in northern Europe in the late Middle Ages. The name "Hanse" comes from a German word referring to small groups of merchants; these groups began coming together in the twelfth century and eventually assumed the name Hanseatic League.<sup>1</sup> The Hanse made their de facto headquarters in Lübeck on the southwest Baltic coast, and by the thirteenth century, their trade networks had spread as far as England in the west and Novgorod in the east. The Hanse were rivalled only by Italian city-state commercial empires such as Genoa and Venice in medieval Europe.

The Steelyard institution in London can itself be dated to the early thirteenth century. However, as T.H. Lloyd illustrates, "the earliest clear reference to a united Hanse" in London "is found in

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<sup>1</sup> T. H. Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse, 1157-1611: A Study of Their Trade and Commercial Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

1281, and it is possible that then, or shortly before, the German merchants decided to form a common front against Englishmen, particularly Londoners, who were seeking to curtail their privileges.”<sup>2</sup> By the 1300s, the Hanse had grown in London and across northern Europe, and gained something of a monopoly over English exports, becoming “a great power in northern Europe” by the late fourteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

The Steelyard lay in what is now the Dowgate ward (twenty-first-century London’s main financial district). The complex abutted the Thames for easy shipping access, and operated like its own village, with a church and a number of businesses serving residents (Figure 1).

The English crown had originally granted trade privileges to the Hanse to allow English merchants to sell their goods (mostly cloth) on the European continent, out of the reach of English trade routes. However, economic and political relations had long been fraught between the English and the Hanse, and even in periods of peak Hanseatic power in London, the Anglo-Hanseatic relationship had always remained fragile.

By 1500, the Hanseatic merchants had lost their commercial monopoly in England, as organised commercial competition began emerging from the Low Countries and from London itself. By mid-century, Hanseatic fortunes began to decline steadily, notably in England where the Merchant Adventurers guild began competing in English markets.

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<sup>2</sup> Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse, 1157-1611: A Study of Their Trade and Commercial Diplomacy*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Philippe Dollinger, *The German Hansa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), 62.

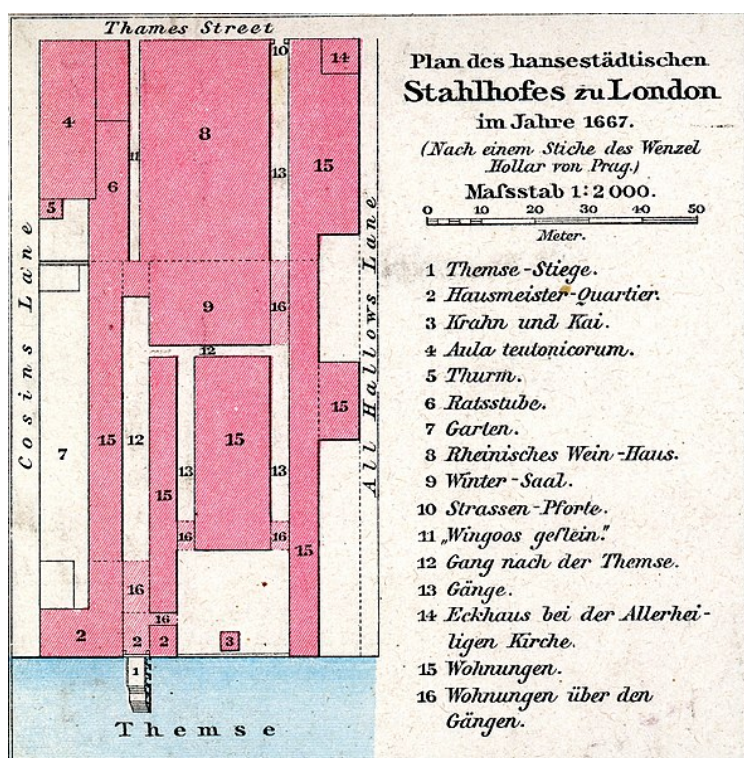


Figure 1: Johann Gustav Droysen's, "Plan des hansestädtischen Stahlhofes zu London in Jahre 1667." <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Droysens-28a.jpg>, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

In 1552, English King Edward VI's court banned Hanse merchants from the Steelyard grounds and removed their old trading privileges. Lloyd explains, "the franchises were suspended until such time as the merchants could produce proof they ought to enjoy them; until then they were to trade on the same footing as all other aliens."<sup>4</sup> While the Steelyard merchants regained their rights one year later, the 1552 banishment set a legal and written precedent with which the English would later argue for permanent removal of Hanse franchises in their country.

The historiography of the changing English, and European, political economy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is rich. World systems theorist and historian Fernand Braudel, in his monumental series *Civilization and Capitalism, 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century*, repeatedly illustrates the "commercial

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse*, 294.

revolution” of the sixteenth century as the preeminent turning point of global commerce and empire—he focuses on changing commercial and financial instruments, imperial expansion, and political-economic consolidation that placed new and unprecedented powers in the hands of burgeoning European absolutist states.<sup>5</sup> Braudel’s successor, Immanuel Wallerstein, continued by analysing the socially constructed groups (at imperial, national, and city levels) who gained or were excluded from commercial expansion and new wealth.<sup>6</sup> Braudel and Wallerstein both informed the entry point for this article, but if there is one work that this article is specifically responding to (seeking to expand upon), it would be Robert Brenner’s *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London’s Overseas Traders, 1550-1653*.<sup>7</sup> Brenner’s book paints a picture of a macrocosm of England’s rise (and does not give much time to the Hanse), where this article seeks to illustrate how these changes looked on a local level in the age-old relationship of the Hanse and London—which in turn can shed new light on the sweeping “commercial change” that Brenner describes across Europe. No work exists that specifically analyses the fall of the Hanse in relation to the rise of England and the changing commerce of northern Europe in this period. And certainly, very little has been written generally on the “micro-historical” experience of these German merchants in London, as their old world was falling apart around them.

Recent historiography of the Hanse has been exceedingly rare. The two “great books” covering Anglo-Hanseatic relations in detail—Dollinger’s *The German Hansa* and Lloyd’s *England and the German Hanse*—were published in 1970 and 1991, respectively. Some valuable literature has emerged in the last decade or so, such as the collection of essays in *The Hanse in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2016)<sup>8</sup>, and Ulf Christian Ewert and Stephan Selzer’s *Institutions of Hanseatic Trade:*

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<sup>5</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, Trans. Siân Reynolds (London: William Collins Sons, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London’s Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (London: Verso, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz and Stuart Jenks, eds., *The Hanse in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016).

*Studies on the Political Economy of a Medieval Network Organization* (2016).<sup>9</sup> However, across old or new historiography, no satisfactory synthesis has ever been provided on Anglo-Hanseatic relations that expands beyond the old, rigid economic history approach of Dollinger and Lloyd—an approach centred on great powers and rational actors. This article will intervene, and bring in the social and cultural relations between England and the Hanse to give a more holistic and grounded understanding of the decay of this relationship—one of the most impactful political and economic relationships medieval Europe.

### **The Steelyard as “Other” to the Londoners**

The cultural practices and commercial dominance of the Hanse merchants were inextricably linked during the height of the League’s power in the late Middle Ages. Although trade had always been transregional, few such transregional institutions or organisations existed in the period, and certainly none—other than the most prominent Italian networks—at the scale of the Hanseatic League. Additionally, outside of refugeism and related mass migration, travel and far-flung commercial ventures were relatively constrained in this period for all but the wealthy (nobles and successful merchants) and the desperate (migrants and refugees) given prohibitive logistical and financial challenges.

Hanse merchants in foreign lands like England chose to isolate themselves in walled compounds called *Kontor*—the Steelyard was one such compound. Their choice to do so reveals the threat that they felt intrinsically: as foreigners in England (or in Norway, the Low Countries, and Novgorod, where the other *Kontor* lay), they had very little guarantee of security or legal protection either from their home government or the local one. No international legal framework guaranteed them extraterritoriality or most favoured nation status, and the merchants on the ground in these *Kontor*

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<sup>9</sup> Ulf Christian Ewert and Stephan Selzer, *Institutions of Hanseatic Trade: Studies on the Political Economy of a Medieval Network Organization* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang AG, 2016)., <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv3znwj4.1>.

were essentially entirely responsible for protecting their own trade and their lives, should things go awry.

However, as this article will show below, by the late 1500s, the Hanse's culture and social organisation—of intentionally walling themselves off from local communities in foreign lands in order to protect themselves—became a weakness that rivals like English merchants could exploit. This paradigm is made abundantly clear in the Steelyard.

English relations with the Steelyard merchants have gone largely unstudied in the historiography. However, primary sources reveal the tensions: in 1593, for example, English Parliament held a hearing over a proposed law to ban merchandise retailing in London by foreign merchants. The title and description of this hearing, “Debate in Parliament over aliens retailing, 1593,” does not name the offending parties; however, the only group of foreign retailers named *anywhere* in the document are the Steelyard merchants.<sup>10</sup> As such, the Steelyard merchants clearly figured prominently among the groups of foreigners that this bill sought to control.

It is important to note that retailing, as opposed to goods trade between merchants, refers specifically to the sale of goods from a merchant or goods-transporter to the general public as final sale. As Fernand Braudel illustrates, the concept of fixed retailing operations in European cities was relatively new in the sixteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Goods were primarily marketed in temporary trade fairs throughout the Middle Ages, which were gradually replaced by brick-and-mortar retailing operations in city centres in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This Parliamentary hearing fell in a period of great flux for retailing laws and practices across England and Europe more broadly—connecting the experiences of the Hanse merchants in London to broader European trends.

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<sup>10</sup> “Debate in Parliament over aliens retailing,” in *English Historical Documents 1558–1603*, eds. Ian W. Archer and F. Douglas Price (London: Routledge, 2011) 215.

<sup>11</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century, Vol. II*, 62-64.

The 1593 debate occurred between two parties: “the counsel for the City of London” and “the strangers’ counsel”; the former having proposed a law to ban foreign retailing and “denizenship” in London. This debate reveals a great deal about perceptions of foreigners and the tenets of anti-foreignism that dominated Elizabeth’s government and much of London’s merchant community. The strangers’ counsel argued that to strip foreigners of their retailing rights was to strip them of any means of survival—and that such removal of rights would go against the principles of “the privilege of St. Martin,” referring to the provision of sanctuary to foreigners.<sup>12</sup> The anti-foreign contingent argued that the strangers’ commercial activities parasitised the economy of London and England as a whole. Francis Moore de Medio Templo, the primary counsel and speaker for the anti-foreign group in this debate, led most of the hearing against the strangers’ counsel; however, a man named only as “Fuller” also joined Moore to argue that the wealth of foreign merchants “Is grown such by beggaring of us that it is no charity to have this pity on them to our own undoing.” That is, London and its merchant community lose profits because of the foreign merchant activity in the city.

Fuller continues, “It is to be noted ...The retailing stranger buys nothing of our country commodities, but all the money he takes he vents over beyond sea.”<sup>13</sup> This statement is most remarkable for the zero-sum nature of the commerce that it defines. Two overlapping points can be taken from it: first, if Fuller’s argument is correct, the Hanse merchants made a concerted business practice to only retail goods for currency and then send the money back to the German market, rather than re-entering it into the English economy by doing wholesale trading with London merchants. Second, Fuller believes that this practice damaged Londoners and their

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<sup>12</sup> “Debate in Parliament over aliens retailing,” in *English Historical Documents 1558–1603*, eds. Archer and Price, 215.

<sup>13</sup> “Debate in Parliament over aliens retailing,” 215.

economy, and that this policy only served to drive up Hanse profits in the English market and bankrupt Englishmen.

Notably, this debate occurred at the approximate inception-point of mercantilism as a philosophy in the political economies of England and other western European states. Henry Turner defines mercantilism as “a set of ideas and policies for economic regulation undertaken by governments to secure treasure and a favorable balance of trade in the context of an international sphere populated by other nation-states.”<sup>14</sup> Although it is impossible to mark a specific point or location in which the practice of mercantilism first took hold, Turner argues “it becomes possible to identify the sixteenth century, rather than the seventeenth or eighteenth, as a crucial moment of transformation in the way that ‘economic’ and ‘political’ ideas came to be redefined in relation to one another”; and notably, when the foreign merchants sent money back to their home countries after retailing to the English, they deprived the English community of “the collective benefits of profit making over narrow individual interest.”<sup>15</sup>

Fuller argued that the foreign merchants’ economic gain came at the price of English merchants’ loss in order to influence English government policy. Throughout the speeches of Fuller and Francis Moore de Medio Templo, both speakers envision the issue of foreign merchants in London as a problem of societal ethics: Fuller complains, for example, that “They marry not into our nation,” while Moore argues that the privileges of the foreign merchants in London are “Not to be allowed above the privilege of birth,” and laments that “our own natives are not allowed both to merchandise and retail as they do.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Henry S. Turner, “Humanism and Elizabethan Political Economy,” in *Mercantilism Reimagined: Political Economy in Early Modern Britain and Its Empire*, eds. Philip J. Stern and Carl Wennerlind (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 153.

<sup>15</sup> Turner, “Humanism and Elizabethan Political Economy,” 154-155.

<sup>16</sup> “Debate in Parliament over aliens retailing,” 215.

Turner explains this melding of the economic and political as an important piece of early-modern ‘mercantilist’ thinking that stemmed from Aristotle, who believed that the economy was a subset of societal ethics: “For medieval and early modern thinkers alike, the *Nicomachean Ethics* was a long-standing authority on economic and not simply moral problems—and he understood [the economy] as part of the household, through which it became necessary by extension to the larger political community of virtue.”<sup>17</sup> Fuller’s and Moore’s statements can be understood in this context as well: the Hanse merchants expressed no interest in joining the English ‘family’ (through marriage), and Hanseatic privileges *should* still place them lower on the political hierarchy than natural-born Englishmen.

If one considered the population of London a ‘family,’ then the Steelyard merchants almost unilaterally refused to join it. This can be seen in the physical structure of the Steelyard, which resembled a veritable fortress in the middle of the city; as Mike Burkhardt notes, the *Kontor* was “barricaded with strong palisades because public opinion could change quickly and if things became hostile, the Hanseatic merchants stood alone.”<sup>18</sup> This would have had a substantial impact on Londoners’ perceptions as geographically the Steelyard merchants showed no particular desire to assimilate.

Only individuals from German lands could take up residence in the Steelyard, meaning that it was unlikely anyone outside this cultish community understood or regularly witnessed the social practices of the *Kontor*’s residents. This exclusion came by design—not only from the German residents themselves, but from the English crown. Here, an overlap between the social and economic spheres of Steelyard life comes into view. The Crown had long assigned Hanseatic privileges in the English market to residents of the Steelyard. In the Steelyard’s early years, the

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<sup>17</sup> Turner, “Humanism and Elizabethan Political Economy,” 155.

<sup>18</sup> Mike Burkhardt, “*Kontors* and Outposts,” in *A Companion to the Hanseatic League*, ed. Donald J. Harreld, (Leiden: Brill, 2015) 150.

English government evidently felt that no more regulation was required; however, in Stuart Jenks shows that the Crown became more concerned with regulation in the middle of the fifteenth century. In 1463, the heads of the Steelyard issued a list of the *Kontor*'s residents, certifying their status as “merchants of the said realm of Almain of the said Guildhall of the Teutons”—that is, members of the Hanse in London.<sup>19</sup> Jenks argues that “in issuing this certification, the Steelyard was reacting to growing English concerns that non-Hansards were claiming the Hanse’s privileges. Indeed...the English government appears to have come to the conclusion that the enjoyment of the Hanse’s privileges had to be restricted.”<sup>20</sup>

The Crown perceived the exclusivity of the Steelyard as necessary for English benefit. As Jenks argues in a footnote, the English had a timeless fear of non-Hansards claiming Steelyard benefits: “English suspicion that the hordes of merchants claiming the protection of the Hanse’s privileges in England were not, in fact, genuinely Hanseatic” reached “back to the early fourteenth century.”<sup>21</sup> Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz illustrates that the Hanse continued to make inclusion in *Kontor* stricter: “in 1560, not only burghership in a Hanseatic town but also birth in a Hanseatic town became the prerequisite for admission in the *Kontor*.”<sup>22</sup> *Kontor* residents could not marry locals, and women were entirely excluded from the *Kontor* (though merchants still brought in prostitutes covertly).<sup>23</sup>

Although the *Kontor*'s strict rules would have occasionally been broken, Londoners nevertheless would have perceived the Steelyard merchants as an exceptionally self-Othering community. Beyond the practicalities of business, Steelyard residents could not dare stray outside the social community of the *Kontor*—hefty penalties awaited them which included loss of “Hanseatic

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<sup>19</sup> “Steelyard Certificates” in Stuart Jenks, “The London Steelyard’s Certifications of Membership 1463-1474 and the European Distribution Revolution,” in *The Hanse in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Wubs-Mrozewicz and Jenks, 61.

<sup>20</sup> Jenks, “The London Steelyard’s Certifications,” 61.

<sup>21</sup> Jenks, “The London Steelyard’s Certifications,” 61.

<sup>22</sup> Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz, “Hansards and the ‘Other’. Perceptions and Strategies in Late Medieval Bergen,” in *The Hanse in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Wubs-Mrozewicz and Jenks, 157.

<sup>23</sup> Wubs-Mrozewicz, “Hansards and the ‘Other,’” 159; Burkhardt, “*Kontors* and Outposts,” 146.

rights.”<sup>24</sup> The very premise of the Steelyard, that strong Hanseatic social ties strengthened commercial power in London, began weakening the *Kontor* as London merchants grew more powerful in trade and government. As the arguments of the anti-foreign contingent in the 1593 debate illustrate, the Steelyard’s English competitors could use the Steelyard’s intentional segregation from the London community as a basis from which to argue against the *Kontor*’s privileges. Presumably, if the anti-foreign contingent used this justification in a public forum, they were building on public perception of the Steelyard merchants as a sinister “Other,” who expressed no communal bond with English Londoners. This falls in line with the general trends of Elizabethan socioeconomic expansion, which often displaced foreigners to advance English interests. Popular perception of the Steelyard put pressure on London and the Crown to solve the issue in favor of the English. Steelyard merchants often ran afoul of the English government because of the *Kontor*’s perceived exclusivity and increasingly anathema status as a privileged foreign community.

This complicates the analysis of older Hanseatic historiography from scholars such as Lloyd or R.B. Wernham, which viewed Elizabethan anti-foreignism as a rational economic choice to remove commercial monopoly out of Hanseatic hands and put it in the hands of the Crown.<sup>25</sup> This policy was deeply rooted in moral philosophy and social perception.

The practice of Othering would soon define the English mercantilist political economy. The economy of the English ‘family’ (read: state) needed protection against foreign intrusion, since gains for foreign merchants meant losses for the English. Fuller’s solution to this issue was simple: of the foreign merchants, “there ought none to be sworn a denizen but he that should first swear

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<sup>24</sup> Wubs-Mrozewicz, “Hansards and the ‘Other,’” 158.

<sup>25</sup> R.B. Wernham, *Before the Armada: The Emergence of the English Nation, 1485-1588* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966).

he is not worth above £5.”<sup>26</sup> Perhaps foreigners could be allowed to stay—but they had to live cheaply so Londoners could live better.

### **State-Sponsored Challenges to the Old Hanse Order**

This debate built upon a half-century of public argument by London merchants, who had long claimed the Steelyard merchants deserved to have their privileges—and thus, their trade power—revoked because of their foreign status. In these arguments, English xenophobia and rhetoric of economic sovereignty became tangled, and it can be difficult to tell if the English merchants used distrust of foreigners as a façade for their commercial expansionism, or vice versa.

From the record of the 1593 debate, the affiliation of each party remains unclear. Who did the anti-foreign contingent represent, and were they members of a specific group of merchants? Although these questions are unanswered, records reveal that one company—the English Merchant Adventurers—was perhaps the strongest opponent to the Steelyard merchants in the development of English commercial law in the late 1500s. The Merchant Adventurers were a Crown-sponsored trade company dealing in imports and exports across the North and Baltic Seas, making the Hanse their natural competitor. Although the Adventurers were the most prominent merchant organisation in England by the 1500s, in the broader northern European market they remained in the shadow of the Hanse—and increasingly, to Dutch traders as well—through the middle of the century. However, in 1551 the Adventurers exploited a small scandal involving a Steelyard merchant in order to bring the issue of Steelyard privileges to the high court. T.H. Lloyd illustrates that in December 1551, the Merchant Adventurers mounted a “wholesale attack,” which brought the Steelyard merchants to the court of the king’s Privy Council under various charges. These charges would come to define English perception of Steelyard business practices

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<sup>26</sup> The UK National Archives’ historical inflation converter calculates £5 in the 1590 as equaling £858.24 in 2017. “Currency converter: 1270–2017,” The National Archives, The UK National Archives, November 28 2018, Accessed March 15 2022, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result>.

through their banishment in 1598, and look familiar to perceptions discussed earlier in this article. The following is a list of the charges (in *italics*) found in Lloyd's book, with my own brief commentary:

- 1) All privileges claimed by the Steelyard were invalid in English law, since the merchants did not possess a sufficient corporation to exercise them.<sup>27</sup>

This claim addresses the fact that the Hanse was an ill-defined group of merchants and had no legal/governmental incorporation in the way that the Merchant Adventurers would have had in England.

- 2) none of their charters named particular individuals or towns so that there was no way of knowing who ought to enjoy the pretended privileges;<sup>28</sup>

Similar to fears discussed in the 1463 Steelyard Certificate context, concern over the nebulous Hanseatic membership practices and claims of German merchants in London made the Steelyard highly suspicious to Londoners.

- 3) as a result the Steelyard admitted whomsoever it pleased, at a cost to the king's revenue of 17,000 pounds a year;<sup>29</sup>

This addresses specific financial losses based on the commercial privileges and discounts that merchants claimed based on suspicious membership to the Hanse.

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<sup>27</sup> Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse*, 293-294.

<sup>28</sup> Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse*, 294.

<sup>29</sup> Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse*, 294.

- 4) even were the privileges valid the beneficiaries ought not to colour strangers' goods, as they allegedly did;<sup>30</sup>

This references the scandal which launched the Merchant Adventurer's attack. Steelyard merchants had been processing (colouring) non-Hanseatic goods for sale, which was illegal and against their charter in London because it infringed on other native non-merchant industries.

- 5) for 100 years after the grant of the pretended privileges the Hansards had been content to trade between their own ports and England, but now, despite recognizance made in the reign of Henry VII, they meddled with the trade of the Low Countries;<sup>31</sup>

The Merchant Adventurers primarily operated in the Low Countries, in Antwerp and other commercial hubs which were outside of the Hanse's main network. The Adventurers saw the opportunity here to argue that the Hanse operated in the Low Countries in poor faith based on their agreement with the English Crown. This is a curious claim because the Hanse had always taken some part in the Low Countries trade.

- 6) the Hanse charters had been forfeited in the reign of Edward IV and renewed only upon condition that Englishmen should enjoy reciprocal rights, which were still denied.<sup>32</sup>

The case of the forfeiture of the Hanse charters under Edward IV (r. 1461-1470, 1471-1483) falls out of the purview of this article, but another point in this claim stands out: that of reciprocal rights. Further detail is unfortunately not provided, but these reciprocal rights likely referred either to the desired rights of English merchants to the same privileges enjoyed by the Steelyard

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<sup>30</sup> Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse*, 294.

<sup>31</sup> Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse*, 294.

<sup>32</sup> Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse*, 294.

merchants in London, or the Merchant Adventurers' desire to gain privileges in German markets that equalled the Hanse privileges at the Steelyard. The former, rights within England, foreshadow claims made by the anti-foreign contingent in the 1593 hearing, in which Fuller and Moore argued that Steelyard merchants held more economic privileges and rights in London than Londoners themselves. The latter, meanwhile, is corroborated by tensions in diplomatic documents between England and the Holy Roman Empire, which show the Merchant Adventurers often ran into difficulties when trying to establish themselves in markets under the jurisdiction of the Holy Roman Empire—difficulties which were, according to the adventurers, quite unfair given the extensive privileges that the English Crown granted the Hanse merchants in the Steelyard.

As early as the 1550s, the Merchant Adventurers had successfully capitalised on English perception that the Steelyard community negatively impacted English commerce and society. The claims against the *Kontor* merchants laid out above were well received in the English Privy Council, and the decline of Hanseatic trade in London began in earnest.

Robert Brenner makes a crucial intervention in the historiography of English commerce that pertains to the Steelyard. Economic historiography has long told a story of decline and economic depression in England in the sixteenth century based on total numbers and data. However, as Brenner illustrates only the foreign merchant communities bore the brunt of sixteenth century English economic depressions. In other words, total numbers may have declined in the sixteenth century, but this occurred primarily because the English began limiting the commercial rights of foreigners—that is, Hanse members—in England.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653*, 7.

Brenner shows that Hanse merchants' cloth exports decreased "from 43,584 and 44,302 in 1549 and 1550, to 39,854 and a remarkable 13,829 in 1551 and 1552, the greater part of which resulted directly from the government's cancelling of the Hanse merchants trading privileges early in 1552."<sup>34</sup> The Steelyard merchants could build a wall around their community to guard against the physical incursion of Londoners on their space, but they could not defend against the reassignment of their relative position in London commerce by the English government. This moment symbolises an important fact of the newly developing mercantilist philosophy in England at the time: public perception, national-state authority, and the state economy were slowly but surely becoming coterminous. As a result, deeply entrenched centuries-old institutions like the Steelyard crumbled to make way for English state-sponsored commercial endeavours.

Whether or not the public (or even the state) benefited from such a transfer of commercial power, the Merchant Adventurers certainly gained, even in times of difficulty. Brenner argues that in times of economic trouble, London merchants

could, and did, more effectively exploit the existing market... Above all, foreign competitors, who had controlled a major part of the cloth export commerce, were deprived of their privileges and ultimately largely excluded from the trade.<sup>35</sup>

This era may have led to a period of early modern economic expansion that would end in a British Empire on which 'the sun never set,' but in the 1500s, the home market remained the most important one for English merchants to control. The first step was to push foreign competitors out, in this case by exploiting age-old distrust toward the Steelyard community. Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer illustrate that the English government was crucial to the evolution of commerce

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<sup>34</sup> Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 8.

in this period, arguing that “the field of economic regulation in which the Tudor governments were most successful was probably that of foreign trade.”<sup>36</sup> This point reveals the importance of Anglo-Hanseatic affairs in this period, as the true fulcrum point of economic change in the late sixteenth century. The Tudor government made foreign business their business, and the Steelyard merchants paid the price.

The decline in Hanse trade power in the mid-century was drastic, but it cannot be viewed as inevitably leading to the final death knell in 1598 without a deeper understanding. T.H. Lloyd shows that in the 1560s, many English merchants petitioned Elizabeth to fully banish the Hanse from London, but she merely forced the Steelyard merchants to sign a less favourable treaty. Lloyd argues that “Elizabeth could not afford to adopt a more severe line at this time, since she was still dependent upon Hanse ports for the supply of munitions. They were continually pressing for assurances that she would not send weapons to Muscovy for use in its war against Livonia and would have needed little provocation to cut off the supply entirely.”<sup>37</sup> Even as late as the 1560s, the Hanse remained a major trade network across northern Europe (from England all the way to Muscovy), and if the German merchants threatened to cut off a supply, it had still had serious impacts on government policy. The Steelyard remained the nodal access point between the Hanse and England, and Elizabeth thus still had to walk somewhat softly around the *Kontor* community.

But the Steelyard lost a great deal of its commercial monopoly by the late sixteenth century. The Merchant Adventurers, who came to completely dominate English commerce by the last decades of the century, had successfully argued that the Steelyard community was not English and had no place in English commercial affairs. Meanwhile, English merchants were refining their sense of identity as representatives of the English state, and merchants and elites were unsettling the long-

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<sup>36</sup> Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 66.

<sup>37</sup> Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse*, 306.

established status quo of the state's political economy, based not only on commercial practicalities, but on moral and political philosophy. It should of course be a truism that political economics cannot be separated from the more humanist aspects of the human experience, but until recently, the historiography of the Hanse has largely ignored these complexities of the changing world of the sixteenth century. The historian can view this moment as an inception point of a pseudo-national English political philosophy that may have led to a newly developing English political-economic identity and prosperity in the seventeenth century.

### **England, and Europe, leave the Hanse behind**

The Hanse Commission in Lübeck did issue a formal response to the crown's restrictions on Hanseatic trade, as illustrated below. Their case is interesting, and worthy of highlight—but as this article will conclude, their response was too little and too late. Individual laws and tariffs were changing, which the Hanse could at least try to resist—but so too was the system changing, of monarchic power consolidation and growing state involvement commerce and the political economy. The Hanse could not resist these changes without a fundamental overhaul of their own system, and that overhaul never came.

In 1585, the board of Hanse Commissioners in Lübeck issued a statement to Queen Elizabeth's Council decrying the heavier customs taxes recently imposed on the imports and exports of the Steelyard merchants. The Commissioners argued that, because the Hanse towns treated English merchants fairly vis-à-vis tariffs, the Hanse had a right to "petition that excessive burdens be not imposed on their citizens in England," because "since no merchant will trade without profit, all burdensome charges will fall in the long run on those who consume wares, so that those heavy charges of yours will press on the multitude."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "Addenda: Miscellaneous 1585," in *Calendar of State Papers Foreign: Elizabeth, Volume 19, August 1584-August 1585*, ed. Sophie Crawford Lomas (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1916), 693-699. *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/foreign/vol19/pp693-699>.

Additionally, the Hanse Commission noted in this statement that the English merchant community acted quite hypocritically. Under the current state of high taxes on Hanse exports, the Commission argued that “the advantage is all on the side of the English, and if the Hanse towns raised their rates on the innumerable articles that must be bought from them, there would very soon be complaint from the people of England.”<sup>39</sup> And indeed, English merchants and particularly the Merchant Adventurers could often be found complaining about difficulties and unfair treatment in Hanse towns and other lands of the Holy Roman Empire. However, the English merchants did complain with good reason. R.B. Wernham illustrates that Hanse merchants had a history of betraying their promises to English merchants, stating that “by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1474 [the Hanse] had promised, in return for the restoration of their former privileges in England and their headquarters, the Steelyard, in London, to give the English reciprocal freedom in their territories. But they had shown no inclination to perform that promise,” and the English continued to remain “virtually excluded from direct trade with Scandinavia and the Baltic.”<sup>40</sup>

The Commission’s statement *does* address a philosophical disparity between the Hanse and the English political economy, to claim unjust treatment at the hands of the English policymakers. The Commission states that, “as a method of raising money, the Hanse Towns do not consider high customs *just, or in accordance with nature*. So, while leaving the exercise of commerce free, they exact their necessary contributions, not from their friends and allies, but from the richer of their citizens and subjects.”<sup>41</sup> From the standpoint of changing philosophy around commerce and political economy in the late sixteenth century, this statement reveals the fundamental incompatibility between the English political economy and Hanseatic commercial practices. The merchants of the Hanse thrived on their ability to avoid state regulation and interference in

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<sup>39</sup> "Addenda: Miscellaneous 1585," ed. Lomas.

<sup>40</sup> Wernham, *Before the Armada: The Emergence of the English Nation, 1485-1588*, 64.

<sup>41</sup> "Addenda: Miscellaneous 1585," ed. Lomas.

Hanseatic commerce; Hanseatic elites strived and for centuries were successful in keeping their affairs “as distant as possible from the princely geopolitics of the European continent.”<sup>42</sup> They not only kept their trade free of regulations within the Holy Roman Empire, they also made it their business model to gain privileges from other states—such as the privileges for the Steelyard merchants in England—that would allow them to bypass foreign regulation as well. Here, then, the Commission reaffirms the Hanse’s age-old business philosophy of minimal customs, tariffs, and other regulations.

But this very practice of Hanse merchants doing commerce on their own terms without state sponsorship at home weakened the Hanse by the sixteenth century. The world was becoming too vast, and opportunities for speculation and exploration too many, for a commercial organisation to subsist on its own. As Turner illustrates, the economic tides of the era were shifting away from the haphazard economies of the Middle Ages toward a “political *economy*, a set of ideas and policies for economic regulation undertaken by governments to secure treasure and a favorable balance of trade in the context of an international sphere populated by nation-states.”<sup>43</sup> As the Merchant Adventurers and their successor companies discovered, working *with* the state created opportunities for funding, expansion, and speculation of which the Hanse could not conceive and with which it certainly could not compete. Beginning in the Tudor period, English merchants began launching various state-sponsored expeditions to the Levant and the East Indies, both of which would soon become explosive markets for English trade and which would completely eclipse the profits even of the Merchant Adventurers in northern Europe themselves.<sup>44</sup> In the Tudor period, English merchants performed a two-pronged attack on the status quo of late-medieval European commerce, which can be seen in London with the Steelyard: English

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<sup>42</sup> Aidan Lilienfeld, “Baltic Frontiers” *Columbia Journal of History Online* 1 (2022), <https://columbiahistoryjournal.com/baltic-frontiers>.

<sup>43</sup> Turner, “Humanism and Elizabethan Political Economy,” 153.

<sup>44</sup> Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 3.

merchants worked with the state to deprive their old rivals (the Hanse) of trading power, and worked with the state to launch their own expansionary missions out into the world.

But could this be said to have been inevitable, looking from the ground in Tudor London? Many pro-English voices in this period labelled certain groups of English merchants as the greatest threat to English economic growth. This formed one of the main counter-arguments in the 1593 hearing against Fuller, Moore, and the anti-foreign contingent. In that debate, Sir Edward Hymock argues that “the beggary of our home retailers groweth not by the strangers’ retailing but by our home engrossers. So as if our retailers might be at the first hand they might sell as good cheap as the strangers can do.” That is, the London retailers are made poor by the actions of avaricious English merchants, whose policy is to accumulate money for personal wealth. Hymock continues his accusation that “this bill is thrust into the House by the home engrossers of policy that their begging of our retailers might be imputed to strangers’ retailing.”<sup>45</sup> According to Hymock, the anti-foreign contingent scapegoated the Steelyard merchants to divert attention from the economically destructive acts of the anti-foreign contingent themselves.

Hymock argues against Fuller’s and Moore’s claims that the Steelyard merchants were responsible for money flowing out of the English market. Fuller and Moore had claimed that the *Kontor* community sold their goods at a high profit and then took English coin back to Germany, thereby drawing currency out of England and relatively weakening the English position in the developing school of mercantilist thought. But, Hymock states,

The strangers are not they that transport our coin but it is our own merchant: for it is to be seen in all the Low Countries where her Majesty utters much treasure, there is not so much English coin

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<sup>45</sup> “Debate in Parliament over aliens retailing.”

to be had as in the Hanse towns where the merchants trade. . . . it is the merchant English and not the stranger that vents our coin.<sup>46</sup>

Brenner illustrates that it became common practice in the second half of the sixteenth century for English merchants to transfer money to the Hanse or take their money abroad, as Hymock decries here. Under Elizabeth, English merchants became obsessed with *imports*—that is, the merchants learned to go “directly to the sources of supply.”<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, Germany was becoming a supply market of secondary interest compared to goods markets across Asia. The English merchants who wanted to see the Hanse out of the Steelyard held two rather irreconcilable views. Firstly, these merchants claimed that the Steelyard merchants sucked currency out of the English home market and thus weakened the bullion supply of the English people and ‘beggared’ the English ‘multitudes.’ Secondly, they became obsessed with expansion into new supply markets, from which they imported huge quantities of rare and luxury goods and hemorrhaged the very bullion they argued was necessary to maintain quality of life for the ‘multitudes.’

The 1585 Hanseatic Commission concluded its statement with the following claim:

Without doubt your lordships realise how important it is to England, in the matter of customs and otherwise . . . that wool should be distributed at a reasonable price. Now since your exorbitant exactions have been made, throughout the whole of Germany and in many of the Hanse Towns, where years ago cloth used to be made of English wool, many of the citizens have made trial of the wools of Pomerania, Prussia, Mecklenburg and Hesse, and have found that from them cloths of no less value than the cloths commonly called “sorting cloths” can be made. They can sell a yard

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<sup>46</sup> “Debate in Parliament over aliens retailing.”

<sup>47</sup> Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 11.

of this cloth, finished in the English method in length and breadth, for three thalers; thus the English cloths, being burdened with these intolerable duties, are beginning to be thought less of.<sup>48</sup>

The Commission claimed that higher tariffs on Hanse imports would simply result in Germans pursuing their own supply of goods that the Hanse had historically brought from England. This argument may strike the reader as quite weighty, given the unrivalled importance of cloth exports to the late-medieval English economy. Indeed, the Steelyard existed primarily to facilitate the export of English cloth, and the English government had long granted the *Kontor* community commercial privileges in order to maximise that export. However, as Brenner shows, cloth began to decline in importance in the final years of the sixteenth century—not because these exports declined (Brenner argues that they are actually “notable for their constancy”) but rather because in this period, other markets began to grow.<sup>49</sup> By the end of the Elizabethan era Persian and Chinese silks and South/Southeast Asian spices had taken over the consciousness of the English commercial class.

Thus, when in the late 1590s disputes once again broke out between the Hanse (this time backed by the Holy Roman Emperor) and the Merchant Adventurers over mutually unfair treatment, Queen Elizabeth determined that the Hanse merchants in England no longer provided enough service to the English political economy to warrant their presence. In 1598, the Queen issued a statement to the Lord Mayor and the sheriffs of London, putting an end to the issue once and for all:

We... have thought fit to command all in our realm appertaining to the said Hanse Towns and especially such as reside in London either in the house called the Stillyard or any other place do

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<sup>48</sup> "Addenda: Miscellaneous 1585."

<sup>49</sup> Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 8.

forbear to use any manner of traffic et. The Mayor and Sheriffs to repair to Stillyard to give knowledge of this command, and to take possession of the same on the 28th instant, it to remain in our custody until we understand of any of the favourable course taken by the Emperor for restitution of our subjects to their lawful trade, etc.<sup>50</sup>

England had moved on—Europe had moved on—from the anachronistic organisation that was the Hanse. A diplomatic feud with the Holy Roman Emperor was the perfect *casus belli* for this commercial war that saw the Steelyard finally removed as the doorway between the Hanse and the English political economy. After the Steelyard banishment of 1598, the Hanseatic League began a rapid decline in prominence; it is no coincidence that historiography of the Hanse never extends into the seventeenth century, because little of economic or political import occurred in Hanseatic history after 1598. In Philippe Dollinger’s words, the “outrage” of the 1598 banishment “caused a great stir in Germany, but in reality, as in the case of the *Peterhof* [the Novgorod *Kontor*] a century before, the closing of the Steelyard only confirmed officially the irreparable decline of Hanseatic trade in England. It was simply a form of reprisal, and in 1606 the Steelyard was returned to its owners. But it was too late to save the *Kontor*.”<sup>51</sup> Although some individual Hansa towns maintained commercial prosperity through the seventeenth century, the final death knell for the Hanse as an organisation had already been rung.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

At the beginning of the 1500s, it can be argued that the Hanseatic League was still northern Europe’s premier—though declining—commercial organisation. And beyond its loosely organised structure of towns and *Kontor*, Hanse trade routes also made up the predominant trade *system* of

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<sup>50</sup> “1597-8: The Queen to the Lord Mayor and sheriffs of London,” *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Elizabeth, 1598-1601*, ed. Mary Anne Everett Green (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1869), 38-45. *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/domestic/edw-eliz/1598-1601/pp38-45>.

<sup>51</sup> Dollinger, *The German Hansa*, 343.

<sup>52</sup> Dollinger, *The German Hanse*, 353.

northern Europe in the late-medieval era. Hanseatic merchants had their hands on every market across the North and Baltic Seas. The institution of the Hanse is a good distillation of late medieval European commerce in general: insular yet transregional, decentralised yet highly self-reliant, with very little state regulation, intervention, or protection. The fall of the Hanse and the rise of state-sponsored commerce, as seen in the microcosm of London in the late sixteenth century, then paints a picture of the systemic, transregional revolution in the commerce of England and Europe more broadly at the time.

Despite the League's broad penetration across European markets, Hanse merchants stayed *by their own design* in a liminal geopolitical space, choosing to assimilate neither into the political structure of their homeland nor into the societies of their foreign trade centers—their *Kontor*, like the Steelyard. This deprived them of security in a twofold manner: they could not trust their foreign masters—in the Steelyard case, the English monarch—to guarantee their privileges; and they could not rely on their German master—the emperor—to fund or defend them.

And by the dawn of the seventeenth century, new state-sponsored trade companies had emerged in England and the Low Countries which solved this security issue—these companies would evolve into the Dutch and East India Companies that later ruled the global commercial world.

When the Steelyard merchants lost their time-honoured trade privileges in the English cloth market in the 1550s, they lost competitive advantage in one of the oldest and most foundational Hanse businesses. Beginning in the 1550s, English merchants such as members of the Merchant Adventurers influenced and directed English state trade policy away from the status quo of the Steelyard trade and toward state-sponsored merchant companies that, by the seventeenth century, would completely control English transregional commerce. New ideas were emerging in London

about the philosophy and practicalities of commerce, and these were mutually constitutive with English anti-foreignism directed toward the Hanse.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, English elites began conceiving more intentionally of commerce as a pseudo-national interest of the English state, and calling for a concerted political economy in which state and merchant interests became more coterminous. In this new environment, many argued that foreigners like the Hanse did not deserve privileges in English home markets, because this countered English interests—and Hanse merchants certainly did not deserve *greater* privileges in the English market than London merchants themselves, who argued that they could not compete with the Steelyard community.

The Merchant Adventurers gained a new competitive advantage: that of collaboration with the state. Members of the Adventurers gained roles in local and state government in the Tudor dynasty, and thus decreased state regulations of their affairs while also securing state sponsorship and legal support for their efforts to disenfranchise the Hanse in London and to enfranchise themselves in overseas markets. The Hanseatic outsiders simply could not compete, as they had little legal power as a matter of organisational philosophy: the Hanse had long kept their affairs removed from the legal jurisdiction of their homeland, the Holy Roman Empire.

Though the Hanse desperately tried to hang on to their markets in England and across northern Europe, at this point, analysis shows that it was likely too late. The world was changing quickly, toward political economies and state-sponsored expansion that would soon leave the old Hanseatic network of the North and Baltic Seas a mere backwater to the global commerce empires of the English and Dutch East India Companies.

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## Soldiers' Use of Metaphor in Letters to Their Families in the First World War

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**Abstract:** *Soldiers' letters to their families in the First World War have long been analysed by military historians eager to understand their subjects. Recent scholarship has also been attuned to the figures of speech employed by the letter writers. Drawing on existing methodologies proposed by historians of emotions, masculinity, and the military, I use a body of letters from an Australian soldier in France in 1916-1917 as a case study for uncovering the subtexts of the epistolary works. As such, this study contributes to our understanding of the epistolary tradition within the Australian Imperial Force.*

**Keywords:** *First World War, Australia, letters, metaphor, emotion, masculinity*

On Saturday 17 July 1915, an unassuming eighteen-year-old named Ernest Oswald Collett successfully enlisted into the 29th Battery, attached to the 8th Field Artillery Brigade, of the Australian Imperial Force.<sup>1</sup> One year and one day later, he disembarked from the transport ship, HMAT *Medic A7*, at Plymouth, and began to write letters to his family back home.<sup>2</sup> “Ern” grew up in a house called Hokitika (Ern shortened this to “Hoka” in his writings), on Ferncroft Avenue, in Malvern, Victoria, and his family included his father, Ernest Augustus; mother, Lucy Alice (née Batten); brother, George Augustus; and sisters Florence Agnes (“Flo”) and Linda Alice.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Australian War Memorial (AWM), “Bombardier Ernest Oswald Collett”, *AWM*, 2021.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P11013201>; Certificate of Attesting Officer, 17 Jul. 1917, Collett E O Service Records, B2455, National Archives of Australia, Canberra (NAA).

<sup>2</sup> “A Mammoth Steamship”, *North Queensland Register*, 2 Oct. 1899, 25; Certificate of Attesting Officer, 17 Jul. 1917, B2455, NAA.

<sup>3</sup> *Sands and McDougall's Directory of Victoria for 1920* (Melbourne: Sands & McDougall Pty Ltd, 1920), 481; University of New South Wales, “George Augustus Collett, 19606,” *The AIF Project*, 2022. <https://www.aif.adfa.edu.au/showPerson?pid=58028>.

collection of Ern's writings to his family is held by the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra, ACT, and is comprised of six letters written between 1916 and 1917. At the time of writing, all six letters in the collection are available as a digital download from the AWM website. This article examines Collett's employment of metaphors in his letters to his family and asks what functions these non-literal linguistic devices serve.

This study is centred on Collett's six letters and is supplemented by the writings of other Australian soldiers from the period to draw a comparison. Collett's letters remain the focus as they are remarkable in containing references to seemingly every trope for which the diggers have become immortalised. Collett personifies a masculinist larrikinism; he shows stoicism in the face of existential danger; he speaks of the risks of gas poisoning; he insists that the War will be over in six months; and he is contemptuous of his (British) superior officers.<sup>4</sup> If any one individual could be said to embody the median Australian soldier in the First World War, it may well be Collett. To be clear, despite the apparent genericness or representativeness of this body of letters, it is not my intention to extrapolate a broader meaning from these about the AIF in its entirety. I do not endeavour to let the part speak for the whole here, however the Collett letters reveal how the Australian soldiers of the First World War approached their masculinities and their emotions.

For the purpose of this study, I turn to the Aristotelean tradition of metaphor, which understands metaphor as a means of comparing two terms.<sup>5</sup> This is echoed in I. A. Richards's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, where he explains: "fundamentally it is a borrowing between intercourse and *thoughts*, a transaction between contexts".<sup>6</sup> Importantly, I understand and refer to metaphor in this broad sense, encapsulating both simile and metaphor, with non-literal devices transferring meaning. In

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<sup>4</sup> Matt McDonald, "Remembering Gallipoli: Anzac, the Great War and Australian Memory Politics," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 63, no. 3 (2017), 411.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (tr. W. Rhys Roberts, New York: Dover Publications, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis in original; I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 94.

the context of this study, metaphors explain the unexplainable - the unnameable violence of the War.<sup>7</sup> Functionally, metaphors:

are necessary as a communicative device because they allow the transfer of coherent chunks of characteristics - perceptual, cognitive, emotional and experiential - from a vehicle which is known to a topic which is less so ... and [are therefore] consequently more vivid and memorable.<sup>8</sup>

It is within this linguistic paradigm that the analysis of Collett's epistolary works is situated. Broadly, there are several functions which Collett's non-literal writings serve. In many cases, the metaphors can take known traits from one subject and apply them to another, unfamiliar, subject: they can explain the unexplainable. This is a popular choice for Collett, who is operating in an environment unfamiliar to his addressees, and endeavouring to speak in a language that they can understand.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, Collett uses metaphors to downplay his experiences of the fighting. In Collett's accounts, life-threatening events are no more than "stunts", lethal explosive shells become the quaint "whiz-bangs", and so on.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Collett speaks very indirectly about his emotions. When relaying what he sees and does, he is quite articulate and makes an effort to be very precise but prefers to talk about how he feels in abstractions and vagaries. It is also critical to consider that much of Collett's writing was produced under the spectre of the military censor. In some cases, the scrupulous censor has redacted sensitive information from Collett's letters, while in others, Collett has engaged in the act of self-censorship, redacting his emotions and downplaying his experiences.<sup>11</sup> The following section locates the letters historiographically.

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 78.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Ortony, "Why Metaphors are Necessary and Not Just Nice," *Educational Theory*, 25, no. 1 (1975), 53.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Brousse, "The Effects of Figurative Language on Perceptions of War: A Case Study of Euphemisms and Dysphemisms" (M.S. thesis, University of Louisiana, 2020), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Beaumont, "Unitedly We Have Fought," 409.

<sup>11</sup> Brousse, "Effects of Figurative Language on Perceptions of War," 2.

## Reading Letters

In the preface to her influential *ANZACS*, Patsy Adam-Smith spoke of the discrepancies between the imagined war games played out by generals far removed from the frontlines, and the realities of their strategising as experienced by the soldiers under their command.<sup>12</sup> There is no better place to go to learn about the bleakness of trench warfare than the letters and diaries of those soldiers who lived it. Adam-Smith (alongside her contemporary, Bill Gammage), reinvigorated the scholarship in the 1970s by producing narratives that were simultaneously sentimental and cynical: impressed by their subjects' strength in inhuman conditions, but overall scornful of the War and disapproving of its legacy. Adam-Smith and Gammage's position is effectively supported by the letters, diaries, and interviews with soldiers. Recently, military historians have been attuned to the varying ways in which soldiers have expressed or concealed their emotions, including in their letters and diaries.<sup>13</sup> This article draws on the theoretical groundwork laid by Michael Roper, Alistair Thomson, and others, to demonstrate the uses of metaphor in soldiers' epistolary works in which soldiers wrote about and concealed their emotions.<sup>14</sup>

Michael Roper has written extensively about soldiers' emotions in this period, and while many of his findings are concerned with the British experience, the same may well be said of the Australians, too. Roper's exploration of manliness and fear as expressed in the writings of the veterans during the inter-war decades demonstrates the immobilising impact of shell shock on soldiers raised on Edwardian notions of masculinity. Furthermore, how "young subaltern officers, socialized through their public-school education in the stoic ideal, broke down under the repeated necessity to repress fear."<sup>15</sup> Roper articulates how suddenly these formerly unchallenged and claustrophobic

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<sup>12</sup> Patsy Adam-Smith, *The ANZACS* (Sydney: Penguin, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2009); Alistair Thomson, "Anzac Stories: Using Personal Testimony in War History", *War & Society*, 25, no. 2 (2006); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> Roper, *Secret Battle*; Thomson, "Anzac Stories"; Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Roper, "Between Manliness and Masculinity: The 'War Generation' and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914-1950", *Journal of British Studies*, 44, no. 2 (2005), 343-344.

notions of manhood broke down in the fetid and inhuman trenches of the Western Front. While Roper's focus here is on the experiences of British soldiers, the same might well be said of the Australian ordeal. During the conflict, says Joan Beaumont, "national pride was subsumed into the imperial imagining which remained, in public discourse at least, the dominant value."<sup>16</sup> Even though conscription was twice defeated and supposedly "Australia was born on the shores of Gallipoli",<sup>17</sup> the umbilical cord remained.

In "Maternal Relations", Roper investigates middle-class masculinities as they played out in the First World War. He suggests that "the maternal relation was characterised by distance and intimacy in equal measure"<sup>18</sup> among these combatants, and we can see that contradiction playing out in Collett's letters. Roper expands on these themes in *The Secret Battle*, concluding that "most had felt anxiety which was beyond the capacity of another to calm",<sup>19</sup> and paraphrasing his veteran grandfather, "fear '... is the most painful + horrible malady a human being can suffer from'".<sup>20</sup> The silences in Collett's writings would certainly tend to support this sobering assessment.

Whereas the above studies cast doubt on the legacy of the war, one must search elsewhere for relevant literature on the intricacies of the soldiers' epistolary traditions. Hämmerle is helpful in her reminder that "fiction and reality merge"<sup>21</sup> when interpreting the soldiers' letters, and the gaps in the official record. In this collection, for example, we hear only Collett's voice, and not that of

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<sup>16</sup> Joan Beaumont, "Unitedly We Have Fought: Imperial Loyalty and the Australian War Effort", *International Affairs*, 90, no. 2 (2014), 399.

<sup>17</sup> Billy Hughes (n.d.), Australian war-time prime minister. This sentiment is inscribed in the Australian War Memorial.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Roper, "Maternal Relations: Moral Manliness and Emotional Survival in Letters Home During the First World War," in Dudink, Stefan, Hagemann, Karen, and Tosh, John (eds.), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004), 298.

<sup>19</sup> Roper, *Secret Battle*, 321.

<sup>20</sup> R. H. Roper, "Memoir of Gallipoli" [unpublished personal memoir], 17, in Roper, *Secret Battle*, 321.

<sup>21</sup> Christa Hämmerle, "You Let a Weeping Woman Call You Home?: Private Correspondences During the First World War in Austria and Germany", in Earle, Rebecca (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1999), 152; See also, Anita Runge and Lieselotte Steinbrügge, "Einleitung", in Runge, Anita, and Steinbrügge, Lieselotte (eds.), *Die Frau im Dialog: Studien zur Theorie und Geschichte des Briefs* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1991), 9-10.

his recipients; and we hear only the voice he advances, leaving us to guess at the subtext. Additionally, Catherine Brousse provides an invaluable M.S. thesis on the topic of figurative language and shows that “euphemisms ... [are used] to minimize threat to others and to minimize threat to oneself”.<sup>22</sup> In the pages to follow, I will demonstrate how Collett’s writings were as much about self-preservation as they were about divulging information to curious relatives.

Alistair Thomson’s “Anzac Stories” explores the complex and evolving relationship between soldiers’ personal testimony as it was written in the moment, subsequent edits having been made some time later, and remembering both individual and collective. Thomson’s case study, J. E. McPhee, was a rural Victorian bank clerk who was at Gallipoli, and whom Adam-Smith had interviewed in 1976.<sup>23</sup> Thomson’s findings support the call for military historians to search beyond an event *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, and give greater weight to how their subjects made sense of their experience, at the time and over time, as they dealt with the psychological scars of battle and reconciled their personal stories with the public narratives of Anzac”.<sup>24</sup>

Paul Fussell and Joanna Bourke have also made significant contributions to our understanding of emotion and memory in war. Fussell’s *Great War and Modern Memory* is a British study, but his careful appraisal of literary traditions and their intersections with trench warfare are, like Roper’s, highly valuable in the Australian context, too.<sup>25</sup> Bourke’s work on “emotionology”, perhaps most famously expounded in her 2003 article with *History Workshop Journal* and the book that shortly followed, shine a light on fear and anxiety, and are important additions to the source list as they

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<sup>22</sup> Brousse, “Effects of Figurative Language on Perceptions of War,” 10.

<sup>23</sup> Thomson, “Anzac Stories,” 59, 70-71.

<sup>24</sup> Thomson, “Anzac Stories,” 20. For more on remembering, see, for example: Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Jay Winter, “The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the ‘Memory Boom’ in Contemporary Historical Studies,” *Canadian Military History*, 10, no. 3 (2001), 57-66.

<sup>25</sup> Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*.

develop templates for interrogating emotions in the historical record.<sup>26</sup> In all, the field has recently made some important headway in taking seriously the emotions of the War's combatants, and has made good use of the letters and diaries, as well as the oral testimonies, of those who lived it. This article seeks to carry on in that vein, providing a close analysis of Collett's letters to his family and the metaphors utilised therein.

### Reading Between the Lines

The 8th Field Artillery Brigade (3rd Division Artillery) was formed in Victoria in April 1916, and Collett was on the first shipment departing Melbourne on 20 May. Over the course of the next eight months, eight shiploads of reinforcements disembarked Melbourne, before the unit eventually became an Army Brigade on 20 January 1917.<sup>27</sup> Collett was in convalescence at Larkhill preparing to ship out when he wrote his first four letters to his family in the lead up to the Christmas of 1916. From then there was a gap of six months before letter number five, dated "France 24/5/17", and letter number six, dated "France 16/9/17".<sup>28</sup> The letters are long, for instance the final letter spans eight pages. It is obvious by the changes in ink and writing that they were crafted over an extended period, whenever gaps in the day could be found.

All personal correspondence was to be read by an intermediary censor who would redact any information that could jeopardise the war effort if it were to fall into enemy hands. The constant need to censor one's letters is vitally important to understanding why Collett seemed so out-of-touch with his emotions. Where the censor has made an edit, this usually appears as a thick, blacked-out line over the top of existing text. Mostly, this occurred when letters betrayed a location

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<sup>26</sup> On "emotionology", see: Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, "Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards," *American Historical Review*, 90, no. 4 (1985), 813-836; Joanna Bourke, "Fear and Anxiety: Writing About Emotion in Modern History," *History Workshop Journal*, 55, no. 1 (2003), 111-133; Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Virago, 2005), 200.

<sup>27</sup> Ross Mallett, "8th Field Artillery Brigade (Victoria) [3rd Division Artillery]," *First AIF Order of Battle*, 2022. <https://www.aif.adfa.edu.au/OrderOfBattle/Artillery.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Collett to his father, 24 May 1917, 1DRL/0205, AWM; Collett to his father, 16 September 1917, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

of strategic importance, or some other thing that would be damaging to the campaign.<sup>29</sup> The risk of letters being intercepted was a very real one, but Collett's emotions were not redacted by the military censor after the fact; they were never written down in the first place. Rather, Collett was censoring himself.<sup>30</sup>

Self-censorship dates back far beyond the outbreak of the First World War and is one of the central reasons why written correspondence cannot always be taken at face value. Historians must thus read between the lines and search for omissions - deliberate or otherwise - and determine why these gaps exist.<sup>31</sup> In this case, Collett's self-censorship can be divided into two categories: the cases where he was purposefully concealing some detail so as to not cause his family alarm; and the cases where he was not in possession of the right language to talk about his feelings in the first place. To be clear, much of this is necessarily speculation, and although it is based on established historiographical theories, our subject died more than a century ago, and what he really intended to convey and conceal is known only to him.<sup>32</sup>

The army's censor does not appear to have asserted their will on the letters very often, though Collett is occasionally wary of the need for discretion in his writings.<sup>33</sup> Right before shipping off to France, he penned a letter by candlelight to his mother: "This is the last uncensored letter you'll get for a few weeks, but even in an uncensored letter it's impossible to express words one's feeling at a time like this."<sup>34</sup> Later, in his very final letter, he signs off: "Well, old man, our evening 'strafe' is over so will shut this up and get it in for censoring before I forget". In both cases, Collett was

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<sup>29</sup> Cedric Larson, "Censorship of Army News During the World War, 1917-1918", *Journalism Quarterly*, 17, no. 4 (1940), 316.

<sup>30</sup> Roper, "Maternal Relations," 300; cf. Judith Butler, "Ruled Out: Vocabularies of the Censor," in Robert C. Post (ed.), *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1998), 247-260.

<sup>31</sup> Hämmerle, "You Let a Weeping Woman Call You Home?" 155.

<sup>32</sup> Hämmerle, "You Let a Weeping Woman Call You Home?" 155.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example: Collett to his mother, 30 Dec. 1916, 1DRL/0205, AWM; Collett to his father, 16 Sept. 1916, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

<sup>34</sup> Collett to his mother, 30 Dec. 1916, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

relating the minutiae of his new life to his family; detailing the behind-the-scenes habits of letter writing.<sup>35</sup>

Self-censorship is another matter, and one much harder to confidently locate. Firstly, it is clear that Collett was repressing his emotions by employing this language that overtly delegitimises the psychological severity of the conflict. By suggesting that “if the Fritz observer happened to see one of us moving about at all that he would immediately blow our position to ‘the four winds’”,<sup>36</sup> Collett is concealing the mortal peril, and downplaying it, describing it almost as if a game. Blowing their position to the four winds really meant massacring them all at once, but Collett’s emotional grappling of this stark reality is hidden behind his perky poetry. Altogether, the result of these two forms of censorship is to deny a genuine voice to Collett. Whether the voice is snubbed by the careful military censor, or silenced before it even reaches the page, the result on the history (and historiography) of the First World War is the same: we can either take what we read at face value or beware the omission and be attuned to the subliminal humanity in which war correspondence was often framed.

Consider the private diary of Alexander Sutherland Mackay. Mackay also belonged to the 8th Field Artillery Brigade, and while Collett was recording his goings on in letters, and Mackay in his private journal, one might infer a degree of stoicism consistent with Collett’s, even despite the different imagined audiences.<sup>37</sup> On 31 August 1917 (the height of the European summer), Mackay opens with: “still raining today, things far from pleasant”, and the next day, “still drizzling today + getting fairly chilly”.<sup>38</sup> Mackay offers no indication of his emotional response to the gloom, aside from the

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<sup>35</sup> Rebecca Earle, “Introduction: Letters, Writers and the Historian,” in Earle, Rebecca (ed.), *Epistolary Selves* (Abingdon: UK, Routledge, 1999), 8.

<sup>36</sup> Collett to his father, 16 Sept. 1917, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

<sup>37</sup> Eden Litt, “*Knock, Knock*. Who’s There? The Imagined Audience,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56, no. 3 (2012), 333.

<sup>38</sup> Diary of Alexander Sutherland Mackay, 31 Aug. 1917 and 1 Sept. 1917, 1DRL/0441, AWM.

understated, “far from pleasant”. We cannot know *how* far from pleasant his experience was, and it will be shown - in the sections to follow - that there are multiple subtextual understandings of the omission. In the days leading up to the Battle of Menin Road, Mackay confides that “it’s not safe to go outside [on account of German shelling] ... we are like a lot of rabbits in their holes”.<sup>39</sup> By all accounts the bombardments had been intense, and Mackay’s employment of the rabbit simile is not only an attempt at self-censorship, but also at explaining the unexplainable.

### Explaining the Unexplainable

Collet employed figurative language in his correspondences to explain to his family events that were otherwise unexplainable. This is one of the most fundamental functions of metaphors in the English language, and Collett’s writing is no exception.<sup>40</sup> Based in a part of the world so unfamiliar to his addressees, and fighting in a war so perverse and chaotic, Collett may well have struggled to articulate his observations without nonliteral devices. In this section, I highlight some examples where this appears to be the rationale, and suggest why he may have made this decision.

In a letter to his father from September 1917, Collett details the arrival of a Y.M.C.A representative, looking to set up a shelter nearby:

he was ... looking around to see where he could dump down a little ‘Wanderer’s rest’ ... he decided to cart up 200 sandbags to begin with. A bale of 250 bags is a load that only a very strong man can carry for any distance but the old ‘buck’ picked up his 200 bags like a ‘two-year-old’, and was quite offended when we offered to help him.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Mackay Diary, 17-19 Oct. 1917, 1DRL/0441, AWM.

<sup>40</sup> Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (2nd edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Collett to his father, 16 Sept. 1917, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

This excerpt is littered with idioms and hyperboles, but what function do they serve? The simile, “like a two-year-old”, contrasts with the evocation elsewhere of the “Y.M. Rep” as “old”. And that is precisely the point. By employing this simple contrast, Collett paints an evocative image for his family back home. An image of a hunchbacked, wizened, and stubborn man assuredly transporting sandbags as if immune to the oppressive forces of gravity. The image is impressive but familiar, and the need for familiarity was a constant one in a world so perpetually strange.<sup>42</sup>

Elsewhere, Collett describes how he observed the poisonous gas used by the Germans turn “gold on other metal ... and clothes go all colours of the rainbow”. A very simple portrayal that is easy for his audience to comprehend, and a reminder of some of the universalities of the human experience in a world so foreign. Importantly, Collett is not just writing to help his family understand, but to help himself, too.<sup>43</sup> In an environment so evil and overwhelming, Collett relied upon cheerful and simple imagery to remind himself of his own humanity.

In a letter to his mother, dated 16 December 1916, Collett described the “tear shells” that his enemies had lately been using: “they are a shell very like a shrapnel shell, having only a very small bursting charge, the remainder being filled with some chemical which makes your eyes run like rivers for hours afterwards”.<sup>44</sup> Collett articulates the form of the shell with precise and unsentimental detail. He then contrasts this with the colourful “makes your eyes run like rivers” description of the shell’s function. The constant need to repress fear offers an obvious explanation to this sudden contrast.<sup>45</sup> The bulk of Collett’s writing follows this basic pattern: his scene-setting, descriptions of events, and general observations are notable for their matter-of-factness.

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<sup>42</sup> Roper, *Secret Battle*, 49-50.

<sup>43</sup> Roper, *Secret Battle*, 49-50; Gammage, *Broken Years*, 65-67.

<sup>44</sup> Collett to his mother, 16 Dec. 1916, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

<sup>45</sup> Roper, “Maternal Relations,” 301.

Meanwhile, he turns to reliable vagaries whenever his writing encroaches on the emotional burdens of the fighting.

To give another example to better highlight this difference, see Collett's letter to his father, in which he describes being fired at by enemy howitzers: "there are two six inch howitzers firing just over our heads from about 45 yards away and so you can imagine how it stirs one up".<sup>46</sup> Again, Collett is precise in communicating what he sees: he specifies the size and type of the guns, and gives an indication of their proximity to his position. But he ends this quotation by reverting to a vague metaphor when conveying the situation's toll on his colleagues' and his emotions: "you can imagine how it stirs one up". In truth, it seems implausible that his father, back home at Malvern, could imagine how frightening this was.<sup>47</sup> But denying a voice to his own fright was how he was able to not totally break down, and by understating the danger, he could convince his family and himself that his life was not in imminent danger.

Collett also wrote of the AIF's response to the Germans' experimentation with chemical warfare. In the lengthy correspondence to his mother composed in the lead up to Christmas 1916, Collett paints a vivid scene:

On Monday we have to walk through a room wearing anti gas helmets in which the gas is thick enough to kill a man almost instantly with only one breath ... In this room there is a mixture of 1 part gas to 200 of air, and in actual practice you never get it more than 1/1000 so you see there is not much to be scared from as long as you are warned in time.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Collett to his mother, 16 Dec. 1916, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

<sup>47</sup> Brousse, "Effects of Figurative Language on Perceptions of War," 17-18.

<sup>48</sup> Collett to his mother, 16 Dec. 1916, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

The situation is the same here as elsewhere. Collett can point with precision to what he is seeing (the gas-to-air ratios) but does not point to what he is feeling. By suggesting that “you see there is not much to be scared from”, not only does Collett conceal his own feelings on the subject, but he also redirects the emotional burden to his mother (as in, “*you* see”), and asks her to react to the vision he has depicted.<sup>49</sup>

“When we moved up into the vicinity of — shortly after that place was taken by our boys, it was, of course, impossible to buy anything to supplement our rations (which at times badly needed supplementing).”<sup>50</sup> Here, Collett employs the overworked “taken” to understate the violence and death that would have come with capturing an enemy position. He also downplays the debilitating effects of extended rationing with the parenthetical “at times badly needed supplementing”. Collett’s modesty offers his readers no clues as to the extent of his intestinal discomfort, nor the broader consequences of constant hunger on his morale. In all, the net impact of this is to relay a sense of calm to his audience, and to calm his own memory. By writing negligibly and indifferently of the Germans’ weapons and their risks to his very survival, Collett exudes a confidence that aligns with his understanding of the masculinist ideal and creates his own evidence that everything will work out just fine.

### Metaphor and Emotion

Historians like Roper have made notable contributions to knowledge in this field, and Collett’s epistolary collection slides seamlessly into these already established frameworks. Put plainly, Collett never overtly articulates his emotions in the letters to his family. Roper shows us that it was the duty of the mother to prepare the son to become the head of the family, and emotional repression and stoicism were central to this masculine ideal at the turn of the century.<sup>51</sup> Though these notions

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<sup>49</sup> Roper, “Maternal Relations,” 298.

<sup>50</sup> The censor has redacted the location specified by Collett; Collett to his father, 16 Sept. 1917, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

<sup>51</sup> Roper, “Between Manliness and Masculinity,” 353.

of manhood were seriously questioned and often disintegrated in the chaos, Collett's writing provides few clues that this is the case; the subtext is where he conceals his thoughts.

In the closing paragraph of the letter to his mother written as he was departing Larkhill, bound for France, Collett expresses a conservative caution for what is to come:

everyone in the battery [recognises] what we are going into that it's dangerous, but we are trusting in God and looking forward to, that glorious return to our home folks and loved ones, after a victorious peace for the allied arms, which it will have been our privilege to help in bringing about [sic].<sup>52</sup>

Here we see Collett skipping over the dangers he expects to face and focusing instead on the delights of returning home to his family and domesticity. Jessica Meyer has elaborated on how “men may have returned from the war eager to resume the domesticity that they had dreamed of while away”.<sup>53</sup> This excerpt is also notable because Collett expresses a feeling of privilege at having brought about a glorious peace. Today, the supposed benefits of warfare are rightly subjected to scrutiny, but Collett here was positioning the war effort as positive, and in doing so, could convince himself of a light - to employ a handy metaphor - at the end of the tunnel.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout the collection, this theme continues. Indeed, the repression of emotion is tied into the other sections addressed in the entirety of this article. There are the instances where Collett heaps the emotional burden onto his family. “You can imagine”, insists he who has seen some horrible sights, to his family whose imaginings could scarcely come close. Again and again, he relies

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<sup>52</sup> Collett to his mother, 30 Dec. 1916, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

<sup>53</sup> Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*, (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 164.

<sup>54</sup> Les Carlyon, *Gallipoli* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2001), 107.

on figurative language to mediate what he is feeling and what he is writing. In working backwards and deciphering these vagaries, we can bear witness to a classic hyper-masculinist reluctance to express terror and fear, which coincides with Roper's thesis that soldiers expected to repress fear would eventually break down.<sup>55</sup> Although it is difficult to measure the extent of his mother's affection towards him (letters received by Collett are not included in the collection), his replies are patient if seldom emotional. He sends best wishes to the extended family through his mother as intermediary but prefers to internalise his own struggles.<sup>56</sup>

### Metaphor and Identity

The First World War saw people coming together from all corners of the globe. Even though Australia had achieved Federation in 1901, a strong distinction between metropole and colony remained. Operating within this imperial hierarchy, Collett may well have sought to assert his own unique antipodean style in his writing. By adopting a laissez-faire tone and other antipodean affectations, Collett could remind himself of his identity, and distance himself from the prudish pretensions of his British allies.

The question of Australian soldiers' insubordination and undermining of their British superior officers has long been argued. Les Carlyon and Charles E. W. Bean sit at one end of this argument, suggesting that "the Australians were free spirits and [Field Marshall] Haig liked conformity",<sup>57</sup> and that saluting "came more easily to English soldiers, the majority of whom had been brought up to consider themselves inferior ... to their officers",<sup>58</sup> whereas Australians felt that "officers ... had to earn respect, like the boss in the shearing shed".<sup>59</sup> These blunt renderings of the

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<sup>55</sup> Roper, *Secret Battle*, 321.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example: Liz Stanley, "The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences," *Auto/Biography*, 12, no. 3 (2004), 202-203; Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism* (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 54-55.

<sup>57</sup> Les Carlyon, *The Great War* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2006), 136.

<sup>58</sup> C. E. W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, vol. iii: "The Australian Imperial Force in France, 1916" (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1941), 58-59.

<sup>59</sup> Carlyon, *The Great War*, 30.

Commonwealth forces have already been scrutinised and it is not the purpose of this article to enter into the debate.<sup>60</sup> However, the link between this alleged insubordination (by which officers Birdwood and Haig were most offended) and the case of Collett's letters, is a need to assert one's identity and resist the conformity upon which military subordinations so centrally rested.<sup>61</sup>

Collett's letters include references to "Blighty", indicating that he was in contact with soldiers from throughout the colony, and embedding their dialect into his own. That is not to say that his own identity was being eroded by the adoption of originally Bengali diminutives.<sup>62</sup> On the contrary, I argue that it highlights his enthusiasm to take up nicknames, slang, and other informal devices so favoured by Australians.<sup>63</sup>

This embedding of foreign informal language is on display in his description of a wounded British soldier: "I came across a case the other day. A 'Tommy', he was ... at a dressing station with an injured hand. No doubt he has had a couple of 'Blighty' leaves ... you can easily imagine that a chap does get 'fed up'".<sup>64</sup> This entry is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, we can see the two sobriquets, "Tommy" (Englishman), and "Blighty" (England), on full display. As above, Collett's liberal usage of informal language asserts his Australian identity in his writing, to beat back the encroaching Edwardian ideals practiced by his superior officers.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example: Beaumont, "Unitedly We Have Fought"; Nathan Wise, "In Military Parlance I Suppose We Were Mutineers: Industrial Relations in the Australian Imperial Force during World War I", *Labour History*, 101 (2011), 161-176. Nathan Wise, "Fighting a Different Enemy: Social Protests Against Authority in the Australian Imperial Force during World War I", *International Review of Social History*, 52, no. s15 (2007), 225-241; Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake (eds.), *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>61</sup> See, for example: Carlyon, *The Great War*, 153; Sir Douglas Haig's view of the situation on the Western Front; Greece, 7 Jun. 1916, Cabinet papers, CAB 42/15/6, The National Archives, London.

<sup>62</sup> Kate Wild, "The English Expressions Coined in WWI," *BBC Magazine*, 22 Feb. 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26277732>.

<sup>63</sup> Beaumont, "Unitedly We Have Fought," 403.

<sup>64</sup> Emphasis in original; Collett to his father, 16 Sept. 1917, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

<sup>65</sup> Roper, "Between Manliness and Masculinity," 357 and 360.

But this quote is worth studying for another reason, for Collett is referring ambiguously to the crisis of self-harm. The Tommy's injured hand was almost certainly a self-inflicted wound, severe enough to warrant a spell away from the fetid trenches, but not intended to be permanently debilitating.<sup>66</sup> Collett avoids the subject by suggesting that his father (the recipient of this particular letter), can “easily imagine” the psychological burden of trench warfare, but does not divulge his own feelings on the subject. Generally, Collett seems to sympathise with the anonymous Tommy, indicating in an earlier paragraph that “we consider ourselves ‘old’ soldiers and quite entitled to a ‘fed up with war’ feeling”, but stops well short of discussing his experiences of fatigue or shellshock with any authenticity.<sup>67</sup>

It becomes apparent through this analytical approach that soldiers' emotions are seldom laid bare. They are frequently suppressed, erased, obscured, and censored. An unscrupulous historian risks missing the clues contained in their source materials unless they consider the emotions that are concealed by these figures of speech.

### Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the writers' subtexts are often as valuable to military historians as that which the writers state explicitly. The battler and larrikin tropes that pervaded and defined the Anzac mythology throughout the twentieth century are slowly becoming more nuanced as light is now being shone on other stories. Consider, for example, the long-concealed histories of women, or First Nations peoples in the First World War.<sup>68</sup> The more these histories are uncovered, the more whole a picture of Anzac we may be able to paint. The search for metaphor in soldiers' epistolary works should be included in this quest. Roper's work on emotions and masculinity, as

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<sup>66</sup> Gammage, *Broken Years*, 218-219.

<sup>67</sup> Collett to his father, 16 Sept. 1917, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example: The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, “Serving their Country”, *ALATSIS*, 2022. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/serving-their-country>.

well as Thomson's on memory and remembering, are all highly valuable contributions to the conversation, and this article builds on their, and others', works to provide a template that future military historians might consider when closely analysing the epistolary tradition during the First World War.

There are several references to the threat of chemical warfare in this brief collection, and there is little doubt that Collett and the AIF were aware of the grave risk posed by poisonous gas. Although Collett downplayed it in the letters to his family (even musing about how often it was blown back on enemy lines by a fortuitous wind), he and all of the AIF made efforts to counter the danger posed by chemical weapons.<sup>69</sup> How terribly ironic that two weeks after signing off his last letter on 24 September 1917, Collett was gassed, and hurried to the 11th Stationary Hospital, Rouen, France. For four days he lay there wounded until at 6pm on the 28th, he succumbed to his injuries.<sup>70</sup> He was twenty years old. His body lies in St Sever Cemetery Extension, Rouen, where the epitaph on his headstone reads, "he died as he lived".<sup>71</sup> None but Collett's family hold the key to deciphering this metaphorical inscription, yet it provides a concise coda to this history. Again, non-literal devices are carrying the weight of grief and trauma.

The examples above point to some broadly distinct functions in Collett's usage of figurative language and help us to appreciate the extent to which soldiers were or were not relaying their experiences with confidence and transparency. Ultimately, Collett relied upon metaphorical devices in letters to his family for a variety of reasons and relied upon his addressees to infer their meaning. Metaphors were useful for both expressing and concealing his own emotional responses

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<sup>69</sup> Collett to his father, 24 Jun. 1917, 1DRL/0205, AWM.

<sup>70</sup> Casualty Form - Active Service, 14 Feb. 1918, Collett E O Service Records, B2455, NAA.

<sup>71</sup> Commonwealth War Graves Commission, "Bombardier Ernest Oswald Collett", 2021. <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/26945/ernest-oswald-collett/>.

to the fighting, and they provide important insights for those who choose to look beyond the literal and decipher the encrypted expressions.

While an attempt has been made to compare Collett's writings with others - to ascertain the genericness (or otherwise) of his epistolary works - there is an abundance of room for future work in this area. In particular, it may be useful to consider how these letter writing traditions vary from, or are consistent with Collett's example, among soldiers from other nations. This article has focused closely on soldiers' usage of metaphor in their personal writings; however, this was not the only tool at their disposal. Metonymy was hinted at throughout, and historians moving forward may wish to examine the use of metonyms, as well as metaphors, in the context of class, nationhood, and masculinity in the First World War.

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