



# Arthur Wilfred WHEATLEY

9th Battalion  
27.7.15. K.I.A.

An Archival Portrait

by College Archivist Dr Ana Stevenson

When war broke out in July 1914, Arthur Wheatley was a young tutor at King's College. At only 25 years of age, he was little older than many of the students he instructed at the recently established Kangaroo Point residence.

A Methodist, Wheatley's personal views likely complemented the King's College constitution. Its precepts included the provision of "tutorial assistance" relating to "university lectures and examination" and "systematic religious instruction in accordance with the principles of the Methodist Church of Australasia". Wheatley the educator shared his knowledge with his young charges, and then he answered the call to serve in the Great War.

The story of Arthur Wilfred Wheatley is in many ways similar to that of other young men who enlisted for military service during World War I. Following his untimely death, it also encompassed his family in distinctive and heartrending circumstances.

Wheatley left behind the life of King's College in 1915. The events of World War I shaped his young life. On February 13, 1915, his photograph was featured as one of the "Reinforcements for Queensland Contingent" in the Queensland Pictorial, an excerpt from *The Queenslander* (above). After enlisting on July 27, 1915 in Brisbane, Wheatley became one of many young men of the Australian Imperial Force.

Some personal details can be comprehended from Wheatley's Attestation Paper of Persons Enlisted for Service Abroad. Like many of his peers, Wheatley had no previous military experience. He was routinely vaccinated as part of his medical examination. Again, like many others, he conceptualised of himself as a "Natural born British subject" rather than an Australian. Although Anzac Day has subsequently been viewed as a turning point for Australia as a nation, for individuals such as Arthur Wheatley, military service was an expression of allegiance to the British empire.

## References:

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OLD COLLEGIANS  
WHO FELL IN WORLD WAR I  
Francis  
J. G. Gounter  
A. W. Wheatley

During World War I, Wheatley was a driver with the 3rd Field Ambulance. On August 3, 1917 he became a Lieutenant in the 9th Infantry Battalion. His records reveal that, after disembarking in Alexandria, Egypt, he travelled repeatedly between France, Belgium, and England with his regiment. In November 1917, Wheatley was wounded in action, with a “gunshot wound left arm, mild,” but he soon returned to active duty in December that same year.

Tragically, on April 25, 1918—a date already then being understood in Australia as Anzac Day—Wheatley was killed in action in France. One official document reported: “Lieut. Wheatley was shot in the head by a machine gun while out on patrol on night of 25.4.18. He died almost at once.” His grave resides in France’s Meteren Military Cemetery, Plot 3, Row J. An agonising end for this promising young man.

It is difficult to comprehend Wheatley’s perceptions of war or understand his feelings across these years, or during his last days, as the archives do not yield any personal diaries or correspondence. As we shall see, this is not merely the fault of the archive, but of the larger imperial machinations of World War I.

Wheatley’s war records do, however, hold numerous official communications with his widowed mother, Mrs Fanny Coote. From her son’s earliest injury, the information Mrs Coote received from the AIF’s Base Records Office at the Victoria Barracks, Melbourne was delayed by months due to the nature of long distance communications.

The letters Mrs Coote received were impersonal. Administrators were required to send an overwhelming number of similar communications, so much correspondence remained detached and bureaucratic. These letters cannot fully convey the grief she felt toward the loss of her son or the repeated challenges that followed, but some insight into the family consequences that proceeded from Wheatley’s death can be gleaned through the cracks.

In the wake of World War I, Mrs Coote received notification that her son’s “personal effects” would be sent to her forthwith. In 1919 she received a package containing “4 Photos, 1 Devotional Book.” Yet in March 1920, two years after her son’s death, Mrs Coote wrote a letter to express how “anxious” she was to find out whether the remainder of her son’s items would soon arrive. Mrs Coote was only to receive a letter to inform her that Wheatley’s “Letters, Photos” and other paraphernalia had unfortunately been transported to Australia in the S.S. Barunga, a vessel already lost at sea.

Later that year, Mrs Coote’s status as Wheatley’s next of kin—and mother—was questioned by the Base Records Office. Having remarried in 1907, she had a different surname to her son; this led to the validity of their relationship being challenged.

In an effort to comply with the Deceased Soldiers Act of 1918, the Base Records Office sent Mrs Coote a letter asking whether “there are any nearer blood relations than yourself,” perhaps a father or mother, to whom Wheatley’s war medals could be sent. This was in spite of previous communications wherein his mother had used the phrase “our son” to describe Wheatley. “I wish to draw your attention to the fact that the deceased soldier was my eldest son,” Mrs Coote tersely replied.

It is pertinent to ask: was this a mistake, an oversight, or a miscommunication? Certainly, it speaks to the additional

social scrutiny experienced by single mothers - even though Mrs Coote was neither single nor unwed when her son was born. Had Arthur and Fanny shared a surname, such a mistake would have likely not occurred. On some level it was perhaps even an understandable mistake owing to the thousands upon thousands of similar communications sent by the Base Records Office. Yet it demonstrates the very personal consequences of dispassionate official correspondence.

However, the hierarchy for the distribution of war medals - widow, eldest son, eldest daughter, father, mother, etc. - meant Mrs Coote’s status as Wheatley’s mother was not enough. Another letter from the Base Records Office did not apologise for the previous mistake; it instead simply asked whether Wheatley’s father was alive and why their surnames were different. A number of letters were subsequently exchanged between Mrs Coote, her husband, and the authorities to verify her status as Wheatley’s mother and the rightful heir to her son’s legacy.

Neither was this the end of the heartache for the Wheatley-Coote family. In 1921, Mrs Coote additionally wrote to ask whether it would be possible to obtain a photograph of her son’s grave. To receive a response saying a photograph had “not yet come to hand” must have been heartbreaking. The suggestion that she write to the Australian Graves Services in London implied another long wait for further information.

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Nonetheless, Mrs Coote and her husband must have experienced some solace in 1923, when she received a Victory Medal and Memorial Plaque in recognition of her son’s war service.

In this year of the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli landing, there has been a great effort to remember the soldiers, nurses, and all those in active service during World War I. Arthur Wheatley died tragically in 1918, and embodied the sacrifice of these individuals. But this was merely the beginning of years of effort for his family to reclaim his memory. King’s College rightly commemorates Wheatley’s sacrifice, yet his mother’s experiences remain buried in the layers of impersonal correspondence with various AIF administrators.

When we think about the vital role teachers play in the education of young people, we can recall that this was something Wheatley himself achieved as a civilian before the Great War took his young life. With sincere hope, the young men and women of today will not have to face the same fate as King’s College tutor Arthur Wheatley. Still, it is equally important to remember the ongoing contribution of families as children go off into the world.