Warwick is situated on the southern Darling Downs 250 kilometres by rail from Brisbane. It was one of the centres that produced the ‘Darling Downs bunch’ in Queensland politics. This was a group of liberals, associated with Samuel Griffith, who later were to be part of the lib-lab coalition formed in 1903 between Sir Arthur Morgan and William Browne, leader of the Labor Party. In the more fluid political environment before World War I, Warwick had numbered among its parliamentary representatives T. J. Byrnes, a Premier and Attorney-General and Thomas O’Sullivan also an Attorney-General. It was a place of some local importance in southern Queensland, with a higher percentage of Irish Catholics among its surrounding farmers, and in its townspeople, than the state average and was one of the major stations on the Brisbane to Sydney railway line via Wallangarra. Here the steam engines stopped to take on water while the passengers refreshed themselves at the bar or tea rooms or simply got out to stretch their legs.

On Thursday, 29 November 1917, the mail train to Sydney steamed into to Warwick at 2.59 p.m. It was scheduled to leave at 3.09 p.m. There was a large crowd waiting at the station since the train contained the Australian Prime Minister and leader of the Nationalist Party, William Morris Hughes. He was returning to Sydney for the final days of the second conscription referendum campaign and his supporters at Warwick had erected a dais on the edge of the platform so that he could address the crowd on conscription, while the engine was taking on water. When the train pulled out at 3.12 p.m., three minutes late, Warwick had become the town of national consequence. To the supporters of conscription it had shown itself to be a centre of subversion, a hot bed of Sinn Fein and a lawless town where the Police condoned physical attacks on the Prime Minister and were undoubtedly acting on the instruction of that rebellious Queensland Labor Premier Thomas Joseph Ryan, leader of the anti-conscriptionists and known to be a friend of the anti-British Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix.

Warwick deserved none of this blame. To appreciate how it acquired these thirteen minutes of national glory one must go back to Australia’s participation in the First World War and the two referenda on conscription that divided Australia during the War and for a generation after. Australia had entered the first World War filled with patriotism for the British Empire. There was also a strong feeling that Australia’s own protection depended on continued loyalty to Britain and the Empire and on the provision of troops to ensure that Britain would remain under some debt should war occur in the south Pacific. The long casualty lists resulting from the campaigns at Gallipoli and on the Western Front, combined with the realisation that the war could drag on for years, despite the theories of the generals, continued to sour the enthusiasm of August 1914. This was to be exacerbated in April 1916, when the centuries-old feeling of repression in Ireland boiled over once again as the Sinn Feiners in Dublin rose in rebellion. For the following two and a half years of the war the problems of Ireland and England were to bedevil Australian social and political life.

After the defeat of the first conscription referendum in 1916, Hughes had written to the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, asking him to settle the Irish problem quickly as this was essential to any improvement in recruiting in Australia. Throughout 1917, Hughes and the Governor General, Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson, who adopted a very partisan and pro-conscription stand during the War, seemed to develop an obsession about political opponents of Irish stock. Munro-Ferguson wrote to the British Colonial Secretary, Bonar Law, in March 1917:

The Irish Roman Catholics are particularly strong in New South Wales and Queensland, the government of the latter state being in their hands.

Munro-Ferguson and Hughes collaborated more closely than possibly any other Governor General and Prime Minister. From Munro-Ferguson’s correspondence to Hughes, to the British government and to the King, it is clear that he regarded Irish Catholics as being not only disloyal to the Empire, but also subversive to Australia’s support for the War. Even an Edwardian man of property, like Bishop James Duhig, who supported conscription, was linked by Munro-Ferguson with the arch-fiend Mannix and with T. J. Ryan, who had been the only Premier to oppose conscription in 1916. In May 1917, before the federal election, Munro-Ferguson wrote that Duhig was ‘undoubtedly on the same mission’ as Mannix and both ‘have allies in the Queensland Government especially in the person of the Premier Mr. Ryan.’

The political gulf between Ryan and Hughes that had formed after the 1916 conscription referendum and the consequent split in the Labor Party widened through 1917. Whether the issue was sugar, meat, strikes or coastal shipping, the calm Ryan was well able to match the wily Hughes. It was becoming evident towards the end of 1917 that Ryan was emerging as a political figure of national significance and perhaps as the only politician capable of standing up to the authoritarian Hughes. However, though he had emerged as one of Australia’s most skilled constitutional barristers, and, was one of the most fervent supporters of Australia’s prosecution of the war in 1917, Ryan’s political opponents painted him as a Sinn Feiner, bent on destroying the Australian system of government and reducing Australia’s capacity to supply reinforcements for the A.I.F. 13

On 7 November 1917, after a lengthy cabinet meeting, Hughes announced that there would be a second referendum on conscription. In the opinion of both Ryan and Donald McKinnon, a Nationalist member of the Victorian parliament who was then the Director General of Recruiting, a second referendum with its consequent splitting of the nation was likely to reduce still further the level of recruiting. Hughes was determined that on this occasion the referendum would succeed. Electoral rolls were closed on 10 November and naturalised British subjects, who had been born in an enemy country, or persons whose father had been born in an enemy country, were disqualified from voting. 20,000 voters were disfranchised in Queensland. In addition a partisan draconian system of newspaper censorship was introduced which was so bad as to be criticised by the heavily pro-conscription Brisbane Courier and was to prevent the Labor evening paper in Brisbane, The Daily Standard, from reprinting material that had already appeared in its rival The Telegraph.

The anti-conscription campaign opened in Brisbane on 19 November with Ryan as the principal speaker. However when the report of his speech appeared in the Brisbane Courier and Daily Mail on the following morning and in the Daily Standard and the Telegraph on the following afternoon, the Censors had cut from the speech Ryan’s analysis of the recruitment figures to make it appear as though he was supporting conscription. On learning

* Lecturer in History, University of Queensland.
of the Censor’s action, Ryan issued a press statement indicating that his speech had been censored in the interests of the conscientious objectors. The Censors refused to allow this statement to be published in the press. In order to have the uncensored analysis of recruiting figures published, the Parliamentary Labor Party decided that Ryan should repeat his speech in Parliament where it would be published in Hansard. However, the first batch was confiscated at the Brisbane General Post Office and a special conference of Ryan, the Speaker W. McCormack, the Deputy Premier, E. G. Theodore, and the Government Printer was hastily convened to consider the problem.

At this stage Hughes was leaving Sydney for Brisbane where he was to address a conscription meeting on 26 November. He was informed of the special Hansard by the Queensland Censor. Despite the order to cease printing the Hansard, the Government Printer, under Ryan’s authority, went ahead. After addressing his conscription meeting, Hughes, with the local military commandant, the Censor and a number of armed soldiers, raided the Government Printing Office and seized 3,300 copies of the Hansard. But despite this being the most dramatic story of the referendum, newspapers were forbidden to publish any report of the raid.

The twelve months’ battle between Ryan and Hughes was now reaching a peak of intensity. 50,000 copies of a four page Government Gazette Extraordinary were published setting out Ryan’s case against Hughes’ censorship. No newspaper censorship could prevent such a story being published. Telegraph wires ran hot as the news was flashed to all the capital city papers. Hughes carefully prepared his defence and at the conclusion of his rally on 27 November Hughes issued a threat which the Courier reported as: ‘I am inviting Mr. Ryan to repeat outside the House what he said in “Hansard” and if he does so within forty-eight hours I will have him.’ Tension in Brisbane was reaching breaking point. It was apparent that Hughes was losing his grip on the political situation. Ryan’s political associates suggested, seriously, that Ryan should have Hughes arrested on suspicion of being an unsound mind and held for specialist medical examination. Others in the Nationalist Party thought that the Queensland Government was preparing to secede from the Commonwealth and establish a republic. Neither point of view carried any weight with Ryan.

On his return trip to Sydney, Hughes addressed meetings at Ipswich and Toowoomba. At both he was noticeably upset. His Ipswich speech bore all the signs of a man not fully in control of himself. He spoke of putting those who opposed his authority as Prime Minister against a white wall and being shot. By the time he reached Toowoomba, Ryan repeated to a crowd in Albert Square the censored parts of his earlier speech which had been published in Hansard.

It was against this background that the ‘Warwick egg incident’ must be seen. Between 2.59 p.m. and 3.12 p.m. on 29 November the small country town of Warwick achieved its national notoriety. But it was notoriety based on consciously biased reporting and on the Prime Minister’s seeing the tactical advantage he could gain from demonstrating that the leading anti-conscriptionist in Queensland was the head of a government that was in alliance with disloyal Sinn Feiners and revolutionaries.

The non-Labor newspapers in the capital cities printed the report of the Courier and the Melbourne Argus representing Hughes. As later statements of eyewitnesses showed (among them local Nationalists and conscientious objectors), and the report of the Nationalist-supporting Warwick Argus confirmed, this report was notoriously inaccurate and was written to present a picture of a generally lawless state where the Police were under the control of a government unable to maintain law and order and decidedly disloyal to the Empire. It is a weakness of Ernest Scott’s official history of Australia during the war that he accepted the report in the Melbourne Argus as being correct and followed it very closely in describing the incident. Using the Police records, sworn statements of those closest to the Prime Minister and the local newspaper descriptions, one can piece together a more accurate account of what occurred.

Following the tumult in Brisbane, Senior-Sergeant Kenny, in charge of the police at Warwick, had applied for extra police for Hughes’ short visit and had eight men including himself at the station when the Prime Minister arrived at 2.59 p.m. A large crowd, which included railwaymen working on the maintenance of the line and carrying hammers and spanners, normal working tools, had gathered about a small dais erected off the station platform, from which Hughes would speak. As he approached the dais two eggs were thrown from the crowd, one of which dislodged the Prime Minister’s hat. A Nationalist official, who happened also to be a returned soldier, jumped from the platform into the crowd and struck the assailant, Paddy Brosnan, about the face. The latter’s brother, Bart, joined in and the police broke up the fight and removed the two Brosnans. Bart Brosnan did not return to the meeting though Paddy was stooping to pick up his hat. Hughes was preparing to secede from the Commonwealth and establish a republic. Either point of view carried any weight with Ryan.
and federal Attorney-General. At Stanthorpe, further on from Warwick, he was reported as saying:

'A scene which I hope is unparalleled in the history of this country had just taken place at Warwick. I have been assaulted in a most cowardly fashion, and the police there, apparently acting under instructions from a Government which is entirely opposed to the principles on which Australia and the Empire stand, so far from assisting to preserve order actually connived at the assault upon me and lent their aid to it.'

His accounts of the assault and those of his followers in other parts of Australia became more lurid as he went through New South Wales. The 'Warwick egg incident', they claimed, further proved the depths to which the opponents of the Nationalists and the conscriptionists would go to bring about the downfall of the Empire. Quite co-incidentally the Courier was able to report three incidents of egg throwing by pro-conscriptionists and anti-conscriptionists throughout the state. As an old campaigner, the Prime Minister knew that if a charge was made often enough in politics, there was a good chance of some of it sticking. At Tamworth, in northern New South Wales, Hughes repeated his earlier accusation:

The forces arrayed behind the campaign against the Government's proposals could be divided into three sections, the Germans in Australia, the Sinn Fein and the IWW.

Hughes was not deterred by the lack of truth in the accounts that he had been assaulted at Warwick. He was obviously in a highly excited state at Warwick and very likely imagined that when Sergeant Kenny grabbed his arm he was about to be physically assaulted. However by the time he reached Glen Innes, 100 kilometres inside New South Wales and 200 kilometres from Warwick, he had had six hours to go over the event and to plan his tactics. He sent to Ryan and to the Brisbane and national press a telegram claiming to have been assaulted at Warwick 'by a number of men'. Senior-Sergeant Kenny, he reported, had refused to arrest the two ring-leaders, had connived at the disgraceful proceedings and had refused to obey the Commonwealth law. Hughes requested Ryan to suspend Kenny and to prosecute him under Commonwealth law. The telegram, when substantiated by the newspaper reports published with it on the following morning, once more gave Hughes a tactical advantage over his most prominent adversary. Just how strong a tactical advantage the Prime Minister felt he had gained may be judged from a letter he wrote to Munro-Ferguson soon after the incident:

'The Warwick incident has done much good; everywhere I have had splendid meetings: there's going to be a great fight. (Hughes emphasis) Glory to God for that! I am trying to make Ryan, Fihelly and Co. realise that this is not Ireland as Sinn Fein would have it.'

Ryan was reticent about discussing Hughes' telegram with the press until he learnt that they also had received a copy. He had already initiated an enquiry which on first reports suggested that Hughes' account was exaggerated. He replied to Hughes in these terms and told him there was no conflict between State and Commonwealth law in the matter. Chief Inspector Short of Toowoomba was sent to Warwick to carry out a full investigation and to take sworn statements from police and reputable eye witnesses. These, taken from the local police magistrate, Nationalist officials and conscription supporters confirmed the exaggeration of the press reports. By then, other events had taken the headlines and these later statements never quite replaced the original press reports as the accepted account of the incident.

Slowly the result of the investigations at Warwick were confirming Ryan's earlier belief that Hughes and the non-Labor press had grossly and deliberately exaggerated the reports of the alleged assault on the Prime Minister. However Hughes kept to his story, rejecting any claims of political censorship and promising to start a Commonwealth police force which would station one of its officers at Warwick.

The second conscription referendum was defeated by a larger majority than the first. So far as many Nationalist leaders were concerned, Hughes' hysterical behaviour in Queensland was considered a factor in the defeat. Ryan became something of a national hero among the anti-conscriptionists. Warwick returned to being a Queensland country town untroubled by its thirteen minutes of national glory.

ENDNOTES

1. Samuel Walker Griffith (1845-1920), M.L.A. East Moreton 1872-73, Oxley 1873-78, Brisbane 1878-93, Attorney-General 1874-76, Attorney-General and Secretary for Public Instruction 1876-78, Secretary for Public Works 1878-79, Colonial Secretary 1883-86, Chief Secretary 1886-88, Chief Secretary and Attorney-General 1890-93; Chief Justice of Queensland 1893-1903; Chief Justice, High Court of Australia 1903-19; K.C.M.G. 1886, G.C.M.G. 1895.


9. Governor General to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 2 March 1917 (Novar Papers, MS 696/1788, National Library of Australia).


11. Governor General to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 8 May 1917 (Novar Papers, MS 696/1793, National Library of Australia).


17. *Brisbane Courier* 28 November 1917. Newspaper reports of what Hughes said vary. It would seem that he was more concerned with an anti-conscription pamphlet of Theodore and Fiheley. This had also been censored.


19. This view was held by E. H. Macartney, one of the leaders of the Nationalist Party, by the journalist M. H. Ellis, and even by Munro-Ferguson as late as July 1918. It was a view entertained only by the most conservative and reactionary supporters of the conscriptionists.


25. *Brisbane Courier*, 1 December 1917. Murwillumbah and Cairns reported egg throwing by anti-conscriptionists, Tooowoomba (the target being the wife of the Home Secretary) by pro-conscriptionists.

26. Prime Minister to Governor-General, 2 December 1917. (Novar Papers, MS 696/2683, National Library of Australia).