

THE ANZAC BILLY

TEACHER NOTES

CLAIRE SAXBY · MARK JACKSON & HEATHER POTTER

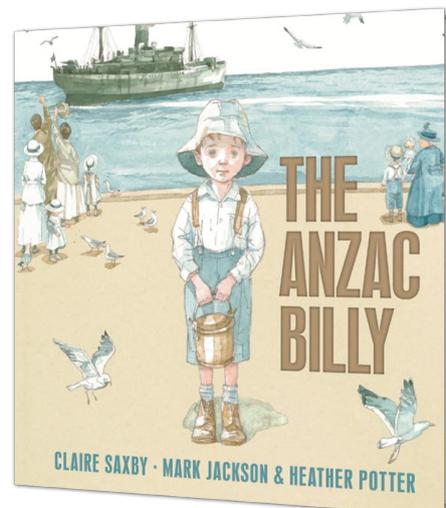


THE ANZAC BILLY

A tender, moving story of a child waiting at home for the return of his father from serving in WWI.

During World War I, Australian and New Zealand soldiers on the front were sent Christmas care packages in a tin billy.

The Anzac Billy is the story of a little boy packing a billy with all his father's favourite things – added to by mum and grandma – even though he realises there is no way that the billy can actually go to a particular soldier.



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CLAIRE SAXBY

Claire Saxby was born in Melbourne and grew up in Newcastle. She's lived in more houses than she can remember, and attended many schools. Claire is the author of many books including *There Was an Old Sailor*, illustrated by Cassandra Allen, which won the Crystal Kite Member Choice Award, Australia and New Zealand Division, Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, 2011.



MARK JACKSON & HEATHER POTTER

Heather Potter and Mark Jackson are award-winning illustrators based in Melbourne. They have both illustrated many books separately and they have co-illustrated several books together. Their work has been featured in exhibitions. For more information and samples of their artwork, please visit www.jackpot-art.com.



Q & A WITH CLAIRE SAXBY

What drew you to write a story about the Christmas billies sent to the diggers in 1915?

I found a reference to Christmas billies in a tiny regional Victorian newspaper when I was researching another project. It was about two lines and said very little, but I was intrigued. I noted the name of the newspaper and the date and when the other project was finished, I went back and started looking. I'd known nothing about care packages sent to the soldiers.

What research was involved in the preparation for writing this book?

I spent a lot of time buried in Trove, a digitised collection of Australian newspapers (and other things). I also researched information and images held at the War Memorial in Canberra. Then, when the text was nearly done, I was asked if these billies were also sent from New Zealand. I was able to access a NZ data base of old newspapers and to establish that yes, NZ had also sent billies to their soldiers for Christmas in 1915.

With this book being set over 100 years ago, the home life depicted may be completely foreign to young readers. Do you think it is important for young people to have an understanding of our history?

The past influences our present and our future in ways that are sometimes obvious and sometimes less so. With regard to war, I think it is essential to understand past conflicts and their fallout, if we are to do things differently in the future.

Our world is changing at an ever-increasing rate. I think it's fascinating to discover that things were not always as they now are. It is a pathway to understanding that change is part of our world. So much of the world of 1915 is unfamiliar to young readers, but there are also many similarities. We still like chocolate. We still send gifts to loved ones. We still miss absent family members.

Several of your books deal with unpleasant aspects of our history, absent fathers during wartime (*The Anzac Billy*), child convicts (*My Name is Lizzie Flynn*) and convict transportation (*Bird to Bird*). How do you approach writing about these issues for children?

History is often recorded in facts and figures and these can be difficult for young readers to comprehend or empathise with. Technologies mean we can now easily access first person accounts from different times and I read them alongside the facts and figures. When I have filled my head with as much information as it can hold, I then try to imagine how it would have felt to be there, how it would have felt to live then as a young person, how their lives would have been altered by world events. There are as many similarities between historic and contemporary worlds as there are differences. I try to tell my story by harnessing those universalities to connect with the differences.

HASS – HISTORY

Why is the dad not at home in *The Anzac Billy*? Where might he be? Use clues in the text and illustrations to help you find the answer, for example, the photograph of dad in his military uniform, the boy's letter stating his dad is "in winter when it's full summer here", the use of the word "Anzac" and Mum refers to dad as a "warfield soldier".

When is this book set? What clues are there in the text and illustrations to show the reader date and location of the setting?

Examine several spreads to compare and contrast the home and lifestyles of the characters in *The Anzac Billy* with students' home life. Some spreads and things to consider:

Spread 1 "I'm filling a billy full of Christmas."

- Mum and Nanna's hair styles
- The clothing style of the boy, baby, Mum and Nanna
- Nanna living in the house
- The kitchen – cast iron kettle, tea towels drying above the hearth, tins stored on shelves
- The oil lamp

Spread 4 "On Thursday I put in a bar of chocolate."

- The clothing – how is it different from the clothes the character wore at home? Do you and your family get dressed up to go shopping?
- The style of the store – this shop would be the equivalent of a modern day grocery store
- Advertising, such as the signs for Roy's Cocoa, Freeman's Pickles, etc.
- The scales
- Prices/currency, such as the small signs on several items – "d" in currency represents pence

Spread 5 "On Saturday it was Mum's turn"

- The newsagency shop front
- Transport
- The road, footpath and gutter

The following letter acknowledges receipt of a Christmas billy sent by Mrs. F. Wood of "Evington," Mt. Alexander road, North Essendon:—

I was the very lucky chap who received your Christmas billy. It made Christmas Day a very happy one, and I appreciated the contents. It is the first gift and the first letter that I have received from Australia, because I am not a native born. My home is in London, but I spent seven years in Australia, mostly in Queensland and New South Wales. It was in Sydney that I enlisted. Although I have three brothers serving in the British forces in France, I take pride in the fact that I belong to the Kangaroo contingent.
PRIVATE D. CHISHOLM.

The following letter was received by Mr. R. Rice, 635 Mt. Alexander road, Moonee Ponds:—

I take this opportunity of thanking you for the billy can, which I had the pleasure of receiving on Christmas Eve. It is nice for the boys over here to know that the people in Australia are doing their very utmost for us to spend as pleasurable a time as possible, and I can assure you that we all appreciate their efforts. The contents of the billy cans helped to brighten up our Christmas considerable.

E. DICKENS.

1916 'CHRISTMAS BILLIES', The Essendon Gazette and Keilor, Bulla and Broadmeadows Reporter (Moonee Ponds, Vic. : 1914 - 1918), 16 March, p. 4. (Morning.), viewed 06 Nov 2018, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article74592248>

Extract from a letter received by Mrs. Garder (Bendigo Vic) from Signaller W. Stewart, 25th Battalion, 7th Brigade: The billy was indeed a treat and was most welcome. It made Christmas appear as much like a good old Australian one as it would be possible to do under the circumstances. The marvel to me is how you got all the things in. I got them out easily, but couldn't get them back. Perhaps you would have preferred a Victorian to have received your billy, but I suppose it was one of the fortunes – or misfortunes – of war that it fell into a Queenslander's hand. It however, could not have been more appreciated no matter into whose hands it fell.

1916 'CHRISTMAS "BILLIES."', Bendigonian (Bendigo, Vic. : 1914 - 1918), 16 March, p. 31. , viewed 23 Nov 2018, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article91381248>

These letters are from soldiers overseas, thanking the senders of the billies. Why do you think the soldiers appreciated the billies so much? Imagine you are a soldier overseas and you haven't seen your family for some months, possibly a year or more; how do you think you would react to receiving the billy that is packed in this story? Write a thank you letter to show your appreciation.

At the time *The Anzac Billy* is set, the only way available for most families to contact their loved ones overseas was by hand-writing a letter and sending it overseas by sea. To reply, the receiver would also have to write a letter and send it by sea. This whole process could take months. How would you contact a loved one overseas today?

Although it wasn't possible to ensure that billies were sent to individual soldiers, they did try to send to soldiers from the same state. This didn't always happen. Discuss.

Australia had only been a nation for fifteen years. Nationhood and statehood were felt differently. Discuss these differences and why they might exist (climate, wealth, education, health beliefs and funding).

There are clues to the passage of time, particularly the final image. Though no dates are mentioned the final spread shows that some time has passed. How long do you think between first and last page?

Care packages are still sent to our soldiers at war, but 1916 was the only year that they were sent in billies. How are they sent now? Why has this changed? Are they only sent at Christmas?

Pencil and paper were included in the billy. Why? How would they sharpen pencils? Why not pens? Ink? Discuss changes in resources, technology, etc

ENGLISH

What information can you learn about the book from the front and back cover? What do you think this book is about? What information do you think will be covered in this book? What type of book is this and where would you expect to find it in your library?

Before reading this story, have a class discussion about the words "soldier" and "war". What do you think they mean? What words do you associate with them? Create a mind map using words from this discussion. Revisit this mind map after reading the book. How have your ideas changed? What have you learned about soldiers and war?

Choose several spreads and discuss how you think each character is feeling based on the text and their facial expression and body language in the illustration. For example, when the boy is putting the “yucky fish” in the billy; when dad is reading the letter; the family when dad arrives home (take note of the younger sister – why does she feel differently to the other family members?)

This story is historical fiction. What does that mean? How could the book be different if it was purely nonfiction or fiction?

What is a billy? What is it used for?

Find other books in your school library that deal with similar issues or themes, such as war, missing loved ones, sending messages to loved ones and Australian history. Compare these books and discuss what is similar about them and how the authors and illustrators have dealt with similar issues in different ways.

How does the boy feel when he realises his billy might not reach his father?

VISUAL ARTS

What research might Mark Jackson and Heather Potter have done in preparation for illustrating this book? Imagine you were an illustrator given the job of illustrating this book. Make a list of all the things you think you would do to complete your task.

Some spreads have full-bleed illustrations, while others are bordered with white space. How does this design help to draw your eye or highlight certain parts of the illustrations?

The illustrations not only interpret the text, but extend the story by giving the reader more information. Choose a spread and discuss what information is in the illustrations that is not in the text.

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

Imagine you were sending a Christmas billy to a loved one far away. What would you put in it and why? Use the worksheet at the end of these teacher notes for this activity.

As a class, fill a billy with items as if you were sending it to soldier. A billy would hold about 3 litres, find a tin or something similar in size to the billy and fill it with items that would have been available in 1915 that would be useful to a soldier.

Families and friends packed these billies as full as possible. Make a list of the items you would send, taking into account the lack of refrigeration, time to reach recipient, etc. Now see how many you can fit in the billy without squashing/damaging them. Not all the items will fit. If you could fit ten, which ten would you send?

Name _____ Class _____

In My Anzac Billy

In my Anzac billy, I will put

because

I will also include

because

The last thing I will put in the billy is

because

