

# Starter Reading – The Life of John Simpson Kilpatrick

## Kirkpatrick, John Simpson (1892–1915)

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John Simpson Kirkpatrick (1892-1915), soldier, 'the man with the donkey', was born on 6 July 1892 at Shields, County Durham, England, son of Robert Kirkpatrick (d.1909), merchant seaman, and his wife Sarah Simpson. After attending the Barnes and Mortimer Roads schools he became a milk boy for four years and at 17, after a brief association with the local Territorial Army, joined the merchant navy.

In May 1910 Kirkpatrick deserted at Newcastle, New South Wales. After humping his bluey ('about the best life that a fellow could wish for') and briefly trying cane-cutting and station work in Queensland, he worked his passage from Cairns to Sydney and became a coalminer at Coledale, Corrimal and Mount Kembla in the Illawarra district. In 1911 he went briefly to the Yilgarn goldfield in Western Australia and for the next three and a half years worked as a steward, fireman and greaser on vessels around the Australian coast. Deeply attached to his mother and sister, he wrote regularly and sent a generous portion of his wages to his mother. On 25 August 1914 as John Simpson he joined the Australian Imperial Force at Blackboy Hill Camp, Perth, believing like many others that he would be going directly home to England. Allotted to the 3rd Field Ambulance, **Australian Army Medical Corps**, he embarked from Fremantle on 2 November for Egypt.

Private Simpson (Kirkpatrick) landed on Gallipoli with the covering force at dawn on 25 April 1915 and quickly befriended a donkey (called variously 'Abdul' or 'Murphy' but usually 'Duffy') **to carry leg wound casualties to the dressing station**. Day and night he worked cheerfully and unconcernedly amid fierce shrapnel and rifle-fire, carrying the wounded from the head of Monash valley down Shrapnel gully to the beach. So valued was his work that he

was allowed to operate separately, camping with his donkey at the Indian mule-camp. He was known to his fellow diggers as 'Murphy', 'Scotty', 'Simmie', or simply 'the bloke with the donk'. His name immediately became a byword for courage: the Indian troops called him Bahadur — 'bravest of the brave'. His inspirational work and good fortune, however, were to be short lived. On 19 May he was shot through the heart in Monash valley and buried on the beach at Hell Spit. He was mentioned in orders of the day and in dispatches and though recommended he received no bravery award.

John Simpson Kirkpatrick, perhaps the best-known and most famous Anzac of all, was 5'8" (173 cm) tall, stockily built and weighed 12 stone (76 kg); his complexion was fair with blue eyes and brown hair. He was a typical digger: independent, witty and warm-hearted, happy to be indolent at times and careless of dress. He loved all kinds of animals. Though others after him also used donkeys to bring in the wounded, **Simpson and his donkey became a legend** — the symbol of all that was pure, selfless and heroic on Gallipoli. 'The man with the donkey' is commemorated by Wallace Anderson's bronze statue at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne and by paintings by H. Moore-Jones in Canberra and Auckland, New Zealand. In 1965 the theme was depicted on three Australian postage stamps marking the golden jubilee of the landing at Anzac Cove.

