The Ode

The Ode comes from ‘For the Fallen’, a poem by the English poet and writer Laurence Binyon and was published in London in the Winnowing Fan; Poems of the Great War in 1914. The verse, which became the League Ode was already used in association with commemoration services in Australia in 1921.

The Ode used is the fourth stanza of the poem ‘For the Fallen’ was written in the early days of the First World War. By mid September 1914, less than seven weeks after the outbreak of war, the British Expeditionary Force in France had already suffered severe casualties. Long lists of the dead and wounded appeared in British newspapers. It was against this background the Binyon wrote ‘For the Fallen’.

Each year after Anzac Day and Remembrance Day debate rises on the word ‘condemn’ or ‘contemn’. The poem was first published in The Times on 21 September 1914 using the word ‘condemn’. Some people have suggested that the use of ‘condemn’ in The Times was a typographical error. However, The Winnowing Fan, published a month or two later and for which Binyon would have had galley proofs on which to mark amendments, ‘condemn’ was again used.

Binyon was a highly educated man and very precise in his use of words. There is no doubt that had he intended ‘contemn’, then it would have been used.

Dr John Hatcher, who in 1955 published a biography of Binyon, does not refer to any doubt over condemn/contemn, despite devoting a solid chapter to ‘For the Fallen’.

The British Society of Authors, executors of the Binyon estate, says the word is definitely ‘condemn’, while the British Museum where Binyon worked, says its memorial stone also shows ‘condemn’. Both expressed surprise when told there had been some debate about the matter in Australia. The condemn/contemn issue seems to be a distinctly Australian phenomenon. Inquiries with the British, Canadian and American Legions revealed that none had heard of the debate.

‘Contemn’ is not used in Binyon’s published anthologies and the two volumes set Collected Poems, regarded as the definitive version of Binyon’s poems, uses ‘condemn’. The RSL handbook shows ‘condemn’ and a representative of the Australian War Memorial said it always used ‘condemn’ in its ceremonies.