

## IHSS Research Seminar Program 2024

# Negotiating Imperial Unity: Colonial Australian Contributions to British War, 1885–1902

**Dr Alex Little (ACU)**

Chairs: Assoc. Prof. Nell Musgrove (NSAH) & Dr. Sarah Bendall (IHSS)

**Tuesday 7 May, 12-1pm AEST**

To be held in room 460.3.01 and online via Teams

**Abstract:** Inspired by the death of General Gordon in January 1885, acting New South Wales Premier, William Dalley, took the unprecedented step of raising an independent colonial contingent to support the British position in Sudan. The ability for an Australian colony to actively defend British interests was perceived as a potential milestone within Britain's transforming empire. However, as it became apparent just how negligible this contribution would become, the idea that New South Wales was setting a new precedent, would not be as straightforward as it seemed.

This paper examines the Australian contribution to three British conflicts: the Sudan expedition of 1885, the Boxer Rebellion of 1900–1901 and the South African War from 1899–1902. Each represented a moment when the Australian colonies were motivated to provide colonial contributions to British wars. Historians have traditionally treated these conflicts as preludes to the more substantial Australian commitment to the First World War, or as individualised and novel experiences for Australia's developing military and navy. This paper, however, shifts this perception by situating these conflicts within the distinct period of 1870–1902, defined by the Age of High Imperialism and Britain's need to bring its empire into order in the face of increasing imperial competition. As such, it identifies these conflicts as not simply showing the linear progression towards greater Australian involvement in British wars, but rather as key windows into the negotiation of the Australian position on wider imperial affairs. What emerges are the contemporary debates surrounding Australian responsibility towards defending Britain's empire, and how this position was often defined by the Australian colonies' own emerging nationalist interests.



**Bio:** Alex Little is an Early Career Researcher, having recently completed his PhD at Australian Catholic University. His thesis examined the Australian contribution to British imperial wars of the late Victorian–early Edwardian era. He specialises in transnational histories of the British Empire, and Australian military history.