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# **HISTORY OF FORGETTING**

#### **Dennis Glover** wonders what is to celebrate in war

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning We will remember them.

ost Australians would know these words, which are repeated at hundreds of Anzac and Remembrance Day

ceremonies across Australia every year. But how many Australians know where the words come from? We assume they are "anti-war", so perhaps they're from one of the great anti-war poems of World War I? Or maybe they refer to the more than 8000 Australians who died in the Gallipoli campaign?

It comes as a surprise to learn that these lines are from Lawrence Binyon's "For the Fallen" - one of the many recruitment-aiding elegies written in September 1914, before the trench lines were dug and the Great War took the deadly, static form that led Winston Churchill to turn his mind towards forcing the Dardanelles. Drenched in patriotic sentiment, such poems were dedicated to the idea that war was a glorious adventure and death for one's country a noble sacrifice. Which gives us something to ponder: the sentiments that underpin Anzac Day were generated before the discontent with the Great War set in,

before its literature became anti-war literature. Is the persistence of these sentiments still leading young men and women to enlist naively for wars today?

On the hill at Anzac Cove known as Baby 700, lies the grave of one of the most celebrated men to die on the first day of the Gallipoli campaign -Joseph Peter Lalor, commander of G Company of the 12th Battalion; the grandson of Peter Lalor, one of the leaders of the Eureka rebellion. After landing in the first wave at Ari Burnu that morning, Lalor - carrying his family sword - along with a handful of surviving troops, worked his way up the slopes and by mid-afternoon had dug in at the Nek. While attempting to move up to reinforce a group from the 2nd Battalion, cut off on Baby 700 (which was to be the furthest advance of the entire illconceived campaign), Lalor foolishly exposed himself to Turkish fire and was shot through the head. On his head stone are the following words: Dulce et decorum est

#### Pro patria mori

The quotation — "it is sweet and proper to die for one's country" — is from the Roman poet Horace, but most would know of it from its antiwar meaning in Wilfred Owen's celebrated poem about a soldier drowning in his own blood after a mustard gas attack:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory.

The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.

It's doubtful those responsible for the inscription were using it as Owen did — as a caustic comment about the reality of death. More likely they were using it to express a sentiment held by Lalor and the others who rushed to join up with him — a sentiment which led them to their doom.

The industrialisation of warfare evident as far back as the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War of the 1860s and 1870s - had turned Joseph Lalor's noble swordwielding gesture into ineffectual, suicidal folly. We know this now because historians like Carlyon and the writers of the Great War have had such an impact on the generations born since 1918. But the boys and men who flocked to sign up in 1914 would not have known - although their mothers may have suspected - that this war was going to be totally different from the one they imagined. Peter Wier's film Gallipoli shows what was perhaps a typical scene in Australian households at the time: alone in his room at night, the Archy Hamilton character furtively re-reads Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett's infamous hero-worshipping front page account







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of the Anzac Cove landings, and dreams of glory and adventure. As Carlyon (himself a journalist) demonstrates, these early accounts were penned by correspondents who knew they were expected to write propaganda and that the people back home would accept nothing less. In reality Gallipoli may have been closer to a bloody failure than a romantic success, but thanks to dishonest reporting "in Australia this was an adventure written by Kipling. There was still time to be part of it."

In his famous diaries, the Australian correspondent CEW Bean admits that while the Australians at Gallipoli were a tough and brave lot, they weren't nearly as heroic as the Australian people believed. But he added, sadly, that if he reported "the true side of war"... "the tender Australian public, which only tolerates flattery and that in its cheapest form, would howl me out of existence". The diaries of the troops contained more truthful and less comforting stories, but these were unable to inform a wider public until decades later.

So it turns out that the patriotic attitudes which predated the disillusionment and disgust with the Great War and encouraged so many to enlist, were carried forward by the chronicler of the Anzac adventure, Bean, and turned into a national legend — the idea of the noble warrior nation, whose sons are eternally willing to sacrifice themselves in search of heroism. This idea — that we

must always be proud of our heroic sons — has been turned into perhaps Australia's most powerful and consistent national sentiment. The historian and sociologist John Carroll has labelled the Anzac story our foundation myth "the Australian Iliad".4 The heroic picture Bean, Ashmead-Bartlett and others like them painted has to be seen in its historical context of course, but it still represents a colossal failure of nerve. Their unwillingness to stand up to the people that counted - the censors, their editors and their readers - has had an enormous effect on the evolution of our national psyche and its pain is still felt today by bereaved widows, mothers and children.

Here's how Bean envisaged the last thoughts of the many Australian soldiers caught under frightening bombardment in the Great War (from a passage historians identify as the conception of the ideas underlying Bean's history and the creation of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra):

Many a man lying out there at Pozières or in the low scrub at Gallipoli, with his poor tired senses barely working through the fever of his brain, has thought in his last moments: "Well — well — it's over; but in Australia they will be proud of this."

Bean set out to make them proud, but if the literature of the Great War is any guide, his account of the final thoughts of men dying in that war is

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wrong. The feelings of most would have been blind, trembling, regretful fear and resentment of the fools who had sent them to fight. That literature has much to tell us still.

In recent years there has been a counter-attack of sorts against the anti-war poems, novels and motion pictures of World War I. The leading exponent of this school, the Oxford historian Niall Ferguson, has reminded us that most of the contemporary literature of the Great War was enthusiastically patriotic and that many of the men who fought were attracted to death and the chance to kill Germans. Wielding such force was intoxicating - as it is still - to young men today. But Ferguson goes too far when he tries to discredit the central truths expressed by the great anti-war writers. In a way that will be familiar to followers of debates about the Iraq War, Ferguson pits the quiet commitment to nation, duty and comradeship of the common citizensoldiers against the romantic disillusionment of effete, Oxbridgeeducated anti-war poets and writers ("elites" some might say) of the 1920s and '30s.6 There was certainly a huge gulf in understanding between the writing and working classes of that time, but this attempt to somehow make the Great War seem more justifiable by resorting to some flawed historical opinion poll misses the point. The artistic protest against the Great War was not driven by ideology; it was driven by experience one shared between the officers and the men. In fact, the most renowned of the anti-war poets and writers had joined up in 1914, ardent for the same desperate glory as Archy Hamilton and Joseph Lalor. Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen both won the Military Cross, which Vera Brittain tells us was more sought after by these literary-minded young men than the Nobel Prize.7 It was their heroism, they hoped, which would add force to their literary protests by proving that they weren't using their

anti-war beliefs as a dodge.

The first of these brave anti-war writers to come to prominence was Henri Barbusse, a French infantryman and stretcher bearer who had enlisted enthusiastically in 1914 and was twice cited for bravery. After being invalided out of the fighting and given an office job, Barbusse set to work on his novel, Le Feu, which, like Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front published a decade later, told the story of the destruction of a company of soldiers in the first two years of the war. Le Feu caused a sensation, winning the Prix Goncourt and becoming an immediate best seller. There's a simple explanation for its success: its frankness and explicit depiction of the war as it really was a filthy, blood spattered, mechanised killing machine - spoke to a growing disillusionment with the war. In trying to control the images reaching the

(voting) public, the most graphic pictures of death in the Iraq War have been largely kept out of our newspapers and off our TV screens. Sometimes this is the result of editorial policy and at other times it's the result of successful media control by the military. It was this sanitised version of war - which made keeping the fighting going thinkable - that Barbusse objected to, and he never held back from telling the public what was really happening to men under fire. Here's a typical scene, which Barbusse's autobiographical character observes entering a German trench after an attack:

atter an attack:
The Feldwebel (sergeant) is sitting, leaning against the shattered planks that used to form a sentry's post, where we are now stepping. He has a little hole under his eye: a bayonet thrust pinned him to the planks by his face. In front of him, also seated with his elbows on his knees and his fists on his neck, is a man with the whole top of his head taken off like the shell of a boiled egg. Beside them a ghastly watchman — or rather half a man — is standing, a man sliced in two from the top of his skull to his hips, leaning, upright, against the earth wall. You can't tell where the other half

of this human post has gone; his eye is hanging out and his bluish entrails are wound around his leg.

Elsewhere there are descriptions of maggots going to work on bodies minced by high explosives and of the light coloured foam and buckets of blood produced when a man slowly dies after being shot through the neck. And he directly takes on the Ashmead-Bartlett and Bean glosses on the fighting:

.. this war is about appalling, superhuman exhaustion, about water up to your belly and about mud, dung and repulsive filth. It is about moulding faces and shredded flesh and corpses that do not even look like corpses anymore, floating on the greedy earth. It is this, this infinite monotony of miseries, interrupted by sharp, sudden dramas. This is what it is — not the bayonet glittering like silver of the bugle's call in the sunlight.

Some of the prose still has the power to make the reader squirm. You can read similar details in novels like Ernst Junger's Storm of Steel and Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front, both recently re-translated. Le Feu was soon translated into English as Under Fire, and had a "deeply stimulating effect" on Sassoon, convalescing at the Craiglockhart sanatorium for shell shock sufferers where he had been sent after publishing a letter in The Times protesting against the prolongation of the war. (It was safer to have him regarded as a mental case than to have his protest viewed as the reaction of a sane man to the continuation of the fighting.) "Someone was really revealing the truth about the front line," Sassoon later recorded, adding that Barbusse's novel generated in him a deep antipathy to anyone who was complacent about the war or who

congratulated themselves on their patriotism without experiencing the horrors endured by the troops. Sassoon then passed his copy to Owen, also at the hospital. The story "set him alight as no other war book had done". Barbusse's successes in telling the truth about the slaughter at





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the front inspired the two poets to produce some of the finest anti-war literature ever written, and it's possible that Under Fire inspired some of the most memorable lines of the Sassoon-Owen collaboration. Sheltering after being forced to advance over the scene of a recent attack - a freezing, waterlogged, sleep-deprived epidemic of terror - Barbusse's poilus recall a recent incident when a lady in a restaurant remarked to them how an infantry attack "must be a fine thing

to see". "A fine thing," one soldier spat out in disgust, "It's just as though an ox said, 'It must be a fine thing at the abattoirs in La Villette, to see all those hosts of oxen being driven forward!" Can we detect here a possible inspiration for the opening line of Owen's Anthem for Doomed Youth, set to music in Benjamin Brittain's War Requiem: What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

The horror of course did not end with the war. How could the experiences of men in those four years not stay with them throughout their lives? Owen's traumatic experiences in early 1917 (retold in the recent biography by Dominic Hibberd) set him against the war. In a preface to a planned volume of his anti-war poems, Owen wrote that "I am not concerned with poetry. My subject is War and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity. . . All a poet can do today is warn children. That is why the true War poet must be truthful."12

Sassoon had suffered too and wrote about the night thoughts that wouldn't let him forget (in "Sick Leave"): When I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm, -

They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead.

In his poem "Mental Cases", Owen described soldiers so affected as 'men whose minds the dead have ravished". As a boy in the 1970s I knew such a man - a Vietnam veteran who lived in our street who never recovered his equilibrium. Such men and their survivors became the subjects of some of the great literature of the 20th century.

The character Richard in Michael

Cunningham's The Hours, for instance, is a reworking of the shellshock victim, Septimus Smith, from Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway. The background of George Johnston's My Brother Jack is littered with the physical and mental casualties of the Great War: his father, the Gallipoli veteran who had been gassed at Vimy Ridge; his brother-in-law, Bert, who was "having the 19th additional slice taken from his amputated leg"; Bert's friend Gabby Dixon, who had a face disfigured by mustard gas burns and who sobbed himself to sleep at night; and his mother, the wartime nurse, forever bringing broken veterans through the house. "Jack and I must have spent a good part of our boyhood in the fixed belief that grown-up men who were complete were pretty rare things", the central character David Meredith tells us. The repatriation hospitals, the artificial limb factories, the legless men coughing their way through the early Anzac Day marches - these, not the war memorials or the neat rows of trees lining country highways like swords of honour at an officer's wedding, were the reminders of war for the generation now in its 80s and 90s. Letting young people know this is as good a reason as any for keeping Johnston on high school reading lists.

If the literature of the Great War has a common theme it's this: now that that war is over and the historians have made their judgement, only a madman would say it was worth it. At the end of Pat Barker's 1995 Booker Prize winning The Ghost Road, as night falls on one of the dying days of the war, the patients in a military hospital sing out in protest the garbled dying words of one of their fellow victims: shotvarfet - "It's not worth it". In my favourite Great War novel, JL Carr's A Month in Country, the stammering shell shock victim, Tom Birkin, invited to tea by some simple country folk, sees a picture on the piano top of their lad, "Perce", killed in France. On the way home he suddenly yells out to the gods: "Oh you bastards! You awful bloody bastards! You didn't need to have started it. And you could have stopped it before you did. God? Ha! There is no God."15

Such literature is seldom welcomed by governments and the selfappointed keepers of the flame who encourage us to remember only heroism. The corollary of the imposing monuments and fine speech making they encourage (chronicled by

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Australian historian Ken Inglis) is the suppression of the truth about the real horrors of the war. The long-serving director of the Australian War Memorial, John Treloar, wrote in 1933 that the role of war artist was to "idealise the men who served" and "counteract the debased outlook of many recent war books". He had in mind books like All Quiet on the Western Front and Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms which were actually banned from importation into Australia by the Lyons government in 1931.16 Attempts to ban photographs of military coffins, the refusal to count civilian casualties and the organised reaction against Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 are all examples of the same type of response at work that historians will one day write about.

This year between 20,000 and 30,000 people — many of them young backpackers - are expected to attend the Dawn Service at Anzac Cove. The number of people making the painless pilgrimage to Gallipoli has been rising steadily over the past decade and a half. Is this a good thing? Are these officially sanctioned grieving campaigns about commemorating or celebrating? Are the thousands of young people at Gallipoli - wrapped in Australian and New Zealand flags a sign of remembering or forgetting? Have they forgotten the real message of the Great War, passed down to us through its rich literature: that death in modern war may be pro patria but always non dulce non et decor?

Why do the young identify with the Anzac legend? Some repeat tired cliches about discovering our foundational story. Others will have had a relative who fought there. I suspect for many it's the latest place to tick off on the backpacker trail -"been to Gallipoli; next Pamplona" - which is to say that it's part of the



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same sort of naive adventure that attracted the young in 1915. Many justify getting drunk and partying at Gallipoli because that's what the original Anzacs did. What such responses miss is that the fighting at Gallipoli wasn't a party. The young diggers drank in Cairo, but they died at Gallipoli, many in horrible, excruciating pain, crying out for their

mothers and fathers as so many brave men do (and not hoping to be remembered as heroes as Bean tells us).<sup>17</sup> The adventure and the desire to see the world lured many them to their deaths. These backpackers are not remembering the right thing. It reeks of a celebration.

If Gallipoli wasn't a party, neither was it a game. On the way over to the

Ashes tour in 2001, the Australian cricket team stopped over in Gallipoli—to start what captain Steve Waugh hoped to be a new tradition. In what must be one of the most gauche media performances of recent times, the team put on slouch hats and stood in long-abandoned trenches. They

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recreated the famous photograph of the diggers playing cricket at Shell Green. Waugh told reporters the trip was good for team spirit and would help Australia regain the Ashes. What the Australians did during the campaign, he said, was "the ultimate example of team work". Anyone who doubts that stunts like this have no effect of the young, should read the thoughts of those scrambling to be part of the latest contingent of Australian troops to be sent to Iraq. Their commander, Roger Noble, told The Age "more of my soldiers want to go than are going. They are pushing at the doors." Here's how one of the soldiers put it:

Many people in the defence force consider themselves patriots — there's a strong patriotic element in the defence force today. When I joined in the early 1990s it wasn't so visible. But now there's a sense of pride in what we have achieved in East Timor and Iraq. And people want to be part of that. In sporting analogy it's being on the winning team.

Another repeated the sentiment that: "It's all about being proud to be on an Australian team." Says yet another: "It's like being a professional rugby player — you don't want to sit on the bench." There's an eerie similarity between these responses and the appeal to team spirit and sportsmanship that was so successful in drawing young men to the colours in 1914 (as told by the historian Paul Fussell in his ground breaking book The Great War and Modern Memory<sup>19</sup>).

By 2005, the commemorations at Anzac Cove had reached new levels of absurdity, with proposals seriously entertained that Jon Farnham and other rock stars be hired to give a concert. In preparation for the event, the very site of the Anzac landing itself has been bulldozed to make a tourist road and car park. The massive, destructive logistical operation has become a giant celebration of heroism

that forgets the real story.

In turning the original Anzacs into "heroes" like this, are we doing our contemporary service personnel any favours? It seems to me that in an age when young men and women are once again being sent abroad to fight, the more we emphasise their voluntary, heroic spirit, the easier it is for politicians to justify putting them in harm's way. If our schoolchildren are taught that it is "meet and proper" to die for their country, if patriotism is considered the highest virtue, then sending people to their deaths becomes less objectionable. The growth of the heroism industry in recent years certainly hasn't made us more deeply reflective or stopped us sending troops to fight in foreign wars.

Invoking "heroism" has one other big danger: it can be used as a shield to protect politicians from criticism. Think of our commitment of troops to Iraq in 2003. Many opposed the deployment - a majority if the polls are to be believed - but once they boarded the troopships, criticism subsided; Australians got behind their mission, thinking that opposition would be interpreted as criticism of the troops themselves - as a "stab in the back". When the then opposition leader, Simon Crean, stood on the gun deck of the HMAS Kanimbla and told the troops departing for the Gulf that, while he supported them, he opposed their mission, he was soon confronted with the question: how can

you support the troops while opposing their task? If anything, Crean was the one who had learned the real lessons of war and was acting according to the best motives. He cared about the young men and women enough to want to spare them the real horrors of battle. He explained how many of his friends who had been conscripted for Vietnam had, like the man who lived in my street and the people Owen and Sassoon wrote about, never recovered from the physical and psychological injuries they'd suffered. But no matter how courageously Crean outlined his

case, in the modern climate of heroworship of our armed forces, it's politically all but impossible to voice opposition to a military deployment. This is a disturbing and antidemocratic trend. If sending Australian soldiers to war becomes a universal antidote to public criticism and a sure-fire way for politicians to improve their polling figures (which was the case after the recent deployments to East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq), expect more young men and women to be sent to

more wars to pay a price for the reelection of governments.

It comes down to this: turning the Anzac story into a legend about heroism makes the sacrifice of service personnel seem voluntary; it isn't. The Prime Minister's stump speech at military ceremonies includes praise for "those who have made the supreme sacrifice". Speechwriters are always encouraged to write in the active voice, but in this case doing so twists the meaning. The Lighthorsemen shot down on their own parapets at the Nek did not make the supreme sacrifice; they were sacrificed by politicians and generals. And we kid ourselves if we believe that political considerations never intrude on decisions to send people into battle.

And once they've returned or they're dead, how do we treat our heroes, their widows, their mothers?

Only two Australians have died in actual combat in what is known as the "war on terror": Sergeant Andrew Russell, who died in Afghanistan in 2002 when his four-wheel drive hit an anti-vehicle mine; and Flight Lieutenant Paul Pardoel, who died serving with the RAF when the C-130 Hercules he was navigating crashed — perhaps shot down — in Iraq. Both cases are instructive.

Andrew Russell's wife, Kelly Russell, received a \$37,000 lump sum payment and a miserly \$13,520 per annum widow's pension. A further \$55,000 was set aside to educate her







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daughter (whom Andrew Russell had never met). A strong-willed woman. Kelly Russell campaigned for better compensation arrangements for other widows. Her campaign was raised in parliament and led to critical front page stories in the press. One day while out shopping in Perth, Kelly Russell heard on the radio news that President George Bush had laid a wreath of honour for her husband at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. He was a hero, who had died for the cause of freedom, but it seemed too much for the government to include his widow and daughter in his official commemoration. Eight months later the Prime Minister was cheered when he awarded a unit citation for gallantry to the SAS Regiment to which Kylie Russell's husband had belonged. The headline in The West Australian: "Salute to

squadron of heroes".20

Like all deaths in war, that of Pardoel too was tragic. Once again a wife and three young children were left behind with insufficient compensation to support them. This

time there was an added — Greek — dimension: a vocal mother who described the war in Iraq as "cold blooded murder". In response, Mrs Pardoel received the following public reply from the Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer:

I want his family to know and his friends to know that he [Paul Pardoel] certainly did not die in vain, that this tragedy occurred on a day when 65 per cent of the people of Iraq went out and voted

And this from the Prime Minister: This is not the time to be talking about withdrawal, it is the time to be talking about encouragement and reassurance and saying to the people of Iraq we are with you in this great embrace of democracy.<sup>21</sup>

So here are the realities of war, that great destroyer of families and breaker of hearts: Australia suffers just two deaths in the "war on terror" but its government still can't compensate the dependents of the dead enough; it can't forgive a political slight from a widow; it can't refrain from basking in the reflected glory of her dead husband's regiment; nor can it refrain from issuing lecturing platitudes to a grieving mother. Imagine what they'd do if there were 60,000 dead, as in the Great War. Perhaps Kelly Russell and Margaret Pardoel have learned - in the hardest way of all — the big lesson about war that the poets, novelists and film makers of the Great War have told us and too many today have forgotten: calling their husbands and







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sons heroes won't bring them back to life. After the memorials have been erected, the historians have unpicked the reasons for the war, the election winners have retired and the young have forgotten, the people sacrificed by politicians will still be dead, no matter how glorious the words on their headstones

The last word should go to the men who responded to the patriotic poetry and newspaper stories of 1914 and 1915. Now, half way through the eleventh decade of their lives, we're counting down their numbers like the last leaves falling off a late autumn tree: then there were five, then there were four, then there were three At their state funerals they're feted as heroes. But that's not how they saw it. To a man they've denounced the Great War. Some refused to participate in Anzac Day ceremonies. Peter Casserly stayed away until 2004 when he was 106. Marcel Caux who it now seems had many other reasons for forgetting his past (as told in Lynette Ramsey Silver's new book Marcel Caux: A Life Unravelled) - did not participate until he was 102.22 The great myth-generating machine

created by the Great War cannot allow men to go quietly to their graves, refusing to join in. There can be no martyrs, only heroes to keep the eager youngsters walking into the recruiting offices. So who were the real Peter Casserlys and Marcel Cauxs? Were they the young men who, after falling victim to the jingoism of 1914, remembered the brutal realities of the Great War, called wars "useless" and disgusted - refused to participate in officially sanctioned celebrations? Or were they the ones who spent their last years as officially sanctioned heroes?

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