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Second Division soldiers coming out of Pozieres, August 1916.

The Broken Years

A study of the diaries and letters of Australian
soldiers in the Great War, 1914-18

Bill Gammage

Volume 1

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This thesis was submitted to the
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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

This is my own work

W. Gammage

Bill Gammage

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his love or respect for humanity, and he kept faith in its progress despite all the dark circumstances which confronted his time. It is to him, and to the thousands of great hearted men who were his comrades during the war, that I dedicate this thesis.

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Abbreviations

a) Units

A.A.M.C.	Australian Army Medical Corps
A.A.N.S.	Australian Army Nursing Service
A.A.O.C.	Australian Army Ordnance Corps
A.A.S.C.	Australian Army Service Corps
A.F.C.	Australian Flying Corps
A.I.F.	Australian Imperial Force
Amb.	Ambulance
A.M.D.T.	Anzac Mounted Divisional Train
A.M.T.S.	Australian Mechanical Transport Service
Anz.	Anzac
Anzac	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
Arty.	Artillery
Bde.	Brigade
Bn.	Battalion
Bty.	Battery
Coy.	Company
Div.	Division
Eng.	Engineers
F.A.B.	Field Artillery Brigade
Fld.	Field
H.A.G.	Heavy Artillery Group
H.Q.	Headquarters
I.C.C.	Imperial Camel Corps
L.H.	Light Horse
L.R. Op.	Light Railway Operating
L.T.M.	Light Trench Mortar
M.G.	Machine Gun
Mtd.	Mounted

M.T.M.	Medium Trench Mortar
Regt.	Regiment
R.F.C.	Royal Flying Corps
Sig.	Signalling
Squad.	Squadron
Trp.	Troop
Tunn.	Tunnelling

b) Rank

Bdr.	Bombardier
Brig.	Brigadier
Capt.	Captain
C.O.	Commanding Officer
Col.	Colonel
Cpl.	Corporal
C.Q.M.S.	Company Quartermaster Sergeant
C.S.M.	Company Sergeant Major
Dvr.	Driver
Gen.	General
Gnr.	Gunner
L/Cpl.	Lance Corporal
Lt.	Lieutenant
Maj.	Major
N.C.O.	Non-commissioned Officer
Pte.	Private
R.Q.M.S.	Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant
2/Lt.	Second Lieutenant
Sgr.	Signaller
Sgt.	Sergeant
S.M.	Sergeant Major
Spr.	Sapper

S/Sgt.	Staff Sergeant
Tpr.	Trooper

c) Cause of termination of service, etc.

When only the year of birth is given (e.g., b.1885), the soldier concerned returned to Australia or was discharged in England after the Armistice.

A.W.L.	Absent without leave
D.	Died
D.O.D.	Died of Disease
D.O.I.	Died of Injury
D.O.W.	Died of Wounds
K.I.A.	Killed in Action
P.O.W.	Prisoner of War
Rep.T.A.	Repatriated to Australia
re-enl.	re-enlisted
S.I.W.	Self inflicted wound
trans.	transferred

d) Decorations

C. ...	Commander...; Companion...
C.B.	Companion of the Bath
C.I.E.	Companion of the Indian Empire
D.C.M.	Distinguished Conduct Medal
D.S.O.	Distinguished Service Order
G.C. ...	Knight Grand Cross...; Knight Grand Commander...
K.C. ...	Knight Commander...

M.B.E.	Member of the British Empire
M.C.	Military Cross
...M.G.	... of St Michael & St George
M.M.	Military Medal
...S.I.	... of the Star of India
O.B.E.	Order of the British Empire
V.C.	Victoria Cross
V.D.	Volunteer Decoration
...V.O.	... of the Victorian Order

- e) In footnotes, (D) denotes diary or the abbreviated copy of a diary, (L) denotes letter or the abbreviated copy of a letter

Sources and Conventions

Despite the supporting use of other sources, this thesis is a study of the records of 999 Australians who fought with the A.I.F. during the Great War. They left 1062 records, mostly diaries or letters or extracts therefrom, but occasionally notes or narratives written some time after the events they describe, and once or twice collections of miscellaneous material. In research and in writing I have emphasized the contemporary records of front line men.

They wrote for varying purposes. Some were writing home, others deliberately recording the climax of their lives.¹ Some hardly mentioned the war, others rarely ignored it. Some minimized their discomforts, a few exaggerated them. Many, when it came to the point, described just what they saw and felt, because the tumult of the hour denied them an alternative, because they wanted an exact account for themselves if they lived or for their relatives if they died, or sometimes because they realized that the thoughts they confessed might be their last on earth.²

None was obliged to be accurate, and these pages report statements no doubt genuinely believed when written,

1

For example, 69. Argyle, (105,4), (D), Preface; 263. Coe, (76,3), (D), Preface.

2

For example, 670. Ranford, (107,2), (D), 25/12/15.

but not true, and hearsay evidence and 'tall stories' cloaked as truth by soldiers. I hope I have identified most such statements, and I have omitted errors apparently peculiar to individuals. But this thesis attempts to show what some Australian soldiers thought and felt during the war, and therefore must include instances in which they erred. For the same reason my comments often describe what soldiers thought rather than what I think: for example, I use words like 'patriot', 'Hun', and 'native' with their contemporary colourings, not with my own. Readers should not assume the literal accuracy of statements made or quoted here, nor believe that these necessarily represent my own opinion.

Most of the manuscripts were collected following various appeals to the general public, or after requests made in the 1920s and 30s by the Australian War Memorial to specific veterans or their relatives. Unless some sections of the community responded to these requests more willingly than others (which may be), there was no bias in the collection of the sources; but I have appended statistics about their writers which attempt to indicate possible bias' in what they recorded, and the figures show apparent discrepancies.¹ These may have led me to exaggerate 'positive' factors in the early chapters: for example, the importance of Empire or nationalist sentiment, rather than the desire to be 'in it' or to act in concert with mates, as causes for enlistment. But I doubt that any significant bias exists in the chapters

¹

See pp.475-7.

describing the fighting and its consequences, because in that situation differences in attitude seem to have cut across civilian backgrounds, which retained their influence in expression rather than sentiment.¹ Since censors were concerned merely with place names and troop movements, I could find no other significant bias in the records.

But, as though to mock the attachments of gentler times, there are three particular omissions: religion, politics, and sex. Of these the most important is religion, and these pages instance men who enlisted to defend their God, who remained devout Christians through every travail, and who, if they became fatalists, became so by trusting God entirely. Yet apparently the average Australian was not religious.² He was not a keen churchman: he avoided church parades, or if he could not avoid them he tended to show sudden enthusiasm for whichever denomination worshipped within easiest marching distance. He distrusted chaplains, and sometimes detested them, because he was an Australian, and because they were

1

But it was not my experience that one group write more observantly or effectively about the war than another, nor was lack of education a handicap in this respect. For example, see pp.306-7, 439-40.

2

At least 2 chaplains have attested to this. See Henderson, K.T.: Khaki and Cassock, pp.2, 73-5, 143-4, 151; in Rule, E.J.: Jacka's Mob, p.144. See also Mann, L.: Flesh in Armour, pp.41-2.

officers, enjoying the privileges of leaders but not the concomitant risks and responsibilities of battle.¹

There were exceptional chaplains, men who ignored minor blasphemies to confront major evils, who showed themselves brave under fire, and who ranked the needs and welfare of soldiers above the patriot religion of the wartime pulpit. These men taught by practice and example, and were among the most respected in the A.I.F. But, though it was not their intent, they tended to demonstrate that the rewards of virtue were on earth rather than in Heaven, and to be admired as men rather than chaplains. Probably they advanced the piety of their flock only incidentally.²

Most Australians found little in war to prompt consideration of a higher divinity. Some turned to God in moments of stress, but the majority kept their minds squarely upon the world around them, displaying a practical concern for the exigencies of battle, and a

1

For this and the two preceding sentences, for example, 356. Cpl. W.I. Everard, 2 M.G. Bn., Farmer, of Marshfield, S.A. K.I.A. 4/7/18, aged 27. (L), 17/9/17
980. Rev. W.F. Shannon, O.B.E., A.I.F. H.Q., Minister, of Waylands, W.A. b.1872. (D), 19/11/15
21. Aitken, (101,2), (L), 2/7/16; 41. Allen, (77,2), (L), 10/8/16; 262. Cleary, (220,2), (D), 29/10/16; 477. Jackson, (154,2), (L), 17/9/17; 991. Hicks, (255,3), (D), 5/12/15
Harney, W.: 'Harney's War', Overland, No.13, Oct. 1958, p.8.

2

For this paragraph thus far,
14. Adcock, (100,4), (L), 4/12/17; 607. Mitchell, (79,2), (D), 14/1/16
Bean, C.E.W.: Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18, Vol.II, p.735n.; III, p.437; Henderson, op. cit., p.144.

preoccupation with questions of food and rest, dead mates, leave, and the next fight. Not often during that blind struggle did they consider the Almighty Being who directed their existence.

Politics interested them even less. They debated conscription, and a few reviled strikers in Australia, but these were issues of war, not politics. "Discussion on Politics Is Not In the Fashion Here", a soldier in France told his brother, a Sydney M.L.A., "we Have a lot more Serious Subjects to Juggle with Its mostly old Fritz & so on."¹ Faction and preference, socialism and capitalism, were civilian luxuries, far too remote to move men embroiled in the deadly business of war.

Although one or two soldiers discussed their love affairs, most never wrote about sex, so that in this thesis consideration of the subject is not possible. To judge from venereal disease statistics, some applied taboos about sex to words but not actions, and I am told that many men took advantage of whatever 'horizontal refreshment' chanced to offer. Yet apparently sex did not loom large among them. To men on Gallipoli, in Sinai, or in the line in France, relations with women were not possible; to men keyed by battle, perpetually half exhausted, and conscious that they fought in part to defend the rights and chastity of women, sexual relations were not, at least in imagination, attractive. In talk they discussed and joked about sex, but less frequently than about the incidents

1

975. Molesworth, (281,2), (L), 7/3/18
See also Harding, E.W., et al: The 7th F.A.B. Yandoo (unit paper), p.70 (1/9/17).

of war,¹ and in practice, probably, most honoured the honourable, and availed themselves of the available.

As well as these omissions, there were Australians who wrote little about the war. These men may have passed through great events without comment, and perhaps some of them were not much affected by the struggle. The narratives of more expressive writers make that seem scarcely credible, but if there were such soldiers, it is noteworthy, because they would qualify this record, whereas of necessity they have only passingly influenced it.

Many men cited in the chapters which bring the narrative to the A.I.F.'s embarkation from Australia were from the British Isles, because, being separated from their relatives, these men were obliged to write what others spoke. Perhaps their predominance has slightly exaggerated the spirit of Empire, and underrated the adventurous eagerness of untravelled Australians; but British born men were among the most ardent Australian nationalists, and Englishmen returning home among the keenest travellers.

Relatively few light horsemen wrote on the campaign in Sinai and Palestine, with results evident in that part of the thesis; possible causes for this are suggested on page 235, in footnote 1.

Because this is an account of how soldiers felt rather than of what they did, and claims to represent only those diaries and letters actually read, this is not a military history of the A.I.F. Sometimes for want of

1

Bean, op. cit., VI, p.18n.

space, sometimes because too few diaries or letters described them, there is no reference to A.I.F. actions in Mesopotamia or against the Senussi, nor to one or two battles, most notably the defensive action Australian infantry fought at Lagnicourt, France, on 15 April 1917. Yet I make no claims about the uniqueness of the men I describe, or of any Australian soldier: much of what is written here might apply to Canadians or New Zealanders, and no doubt some of it would be true of soldiers in every army.

There are several simplifying conventions, chiefly employed in footnotes:

The fullest information about any soldier is contained in the footnote which first cites him, and this footnote is referred to in subsequent relevant footnotes by its page number followed by its note number, in brackets after the writer's surname. As example of a first footnote is,

607. Capt. G.D. Mitchell, M.C., D.C.M., 48 Bn., Clerk, of Thebarton, S.A. b.1894. (D), 24/4/15

and of a subsequent footnote for the same man,

607. Mitchell, (79,2), (D), 1/6/15 where Mitchell is first mentioned on p.79, n.2.

Abbreviations are listed on pp.ix-xii; and ranks, decorations, and units are those which a writer terminated his A.I.F. service from any cause: when only the year of birth is given, the writer returned safely to Australia after the war or on '1914 leave' in October 1918.

Surnames are prefixed in footnotes by a number: this assists reference back to a first footnote and to the bibliography, which lists the record writers chronologically.

Unless it is otherwise indicated or apparent, see also in footnotes precedes evidence supporting the general point or subject under discussion, not merely the subject matter of the footnote to which it is attached; however, this will vary between sources, because no soldier was obliged to arrange his thoughts logically, or to confine them to a single subject. The alternative was a proliferation of footnotes difficult for the writer and distracting for the reader, and in avoiding this I hope I have retained accuracy and clarity.

Primary or secondary sources of slight relevance but referred to in the text are annotated in full in the appropriate footnote, the remaining sources referred to are fully annotated in the bibliography.

The text is liberally interspersed with imprecise indications of number - 'most', 'many', 'some', 'a few', etc. Though it is unlikely that I have always succeeded, I have attempted to give these indications some validity, and in doing so have been guided by the weight of internal evidence, by Dr Bean's work, by discussion with returned men, and by what seemed to me probable. Because all these produce uncertain results, and particularly because each assumes that what soldiers said is what they thought, readers should take these words to indicate only rough approximations.

Finally, to avoid frequent interruptions in the narrative, I have not normally used sic to indicate punctuation or spelling errors in quotations, and I hope all errors shown occur in the original.

Preface

There has never been a greater tragedy than World War One. Other events, by leading valorous men to contest trivial causes and by encouraging the perpetration of base and noble acts, have been as treacherous to humanity; no event has involved so many, nor so blighted the hopes of men. The Great War engulfed an age, and conditioned the times that followed. It wreaked havoc and disillusion among everything its contemporaries valued and thought secure, it contaminated every good ideal for which it was waged, it threw up waste and horror worse than all the evils it sought to avert, and it left legacies of staunchness and savagery equal to any which have bewildered men about their purpose on earth.

Among those who fought in the war were 330,000 Australians. They were civilians who volunteered for and were accepted into the Australian Imperial Force, soldiers who enlisted and sailed to defend King and Country, or for the novelty of it. Overseas a maelstrom caught them, and in four years swept most of their assumptions away. Although their spirits rarely were broken, they amended their outlooks to absorb the unexpected challenges they encountered, and returned to Australia the flotsam of old ways, but the harbingers of a new world, and a new century.

One thousand of these soldiers left the documents which inspired what follows, and the thesis considers none but them. Yet wider speculations readily assert

themselves, and not merely about the A.I.F. at large, or about kindred soldiers from Canada or New Zealand or Scotland, or about men at war. It may not be possible to discern the nature of man, because each guesses at that from his own standpoint, and in describing others makes a puppet of himself, and dances to his own invention. Yet if these men do not answer great questions, they might be seen to raise them, for they too had to ask whether their actions prospered mankind or corrupted it, whether mankind itself is great or depraved, and whether men serve events or master them.

Therefore I commend the chronicles they wrote to the reader. They are impressed with a tragic nobility beyond the ability of the following extracts to convey, and the spirit of an age moves through their pages far more perfectly than through mine.

Adieu, the years are a broken song,
And the right grows weak in the strike with wrong,
The lilies of love have a crimson stain,
And the old days never will come again.

From the diary of an Australian soldier, September 1917.