

Max Solling's 2012 Anzac Day address

How WWI changed Australians' attitudes

Of all the legacies of war none is as subtle and elusive, or as important, as the changes it brings about in people's attitudes. It is from this perspective that the First World War is remembered most clearly in Australia: for the profound private and public grief it caused; for the new sense of national consciousness it created among the Australian population; and most significantly, for the legend of Anzac which it generated.

A prominent figure in creation and promotion of the Anzac legend in the popular imagination was Charles Bean (1879-1968), particularly at public speaking occasions during the interwar years, and he was also the main inspiration behind building of the Australian War Memorial, completed in 1941, which was to be 'at once museum, archive and shrine'. Two other propagators of the Anzac Legend were Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and George Johnston. Historical writing about World War 1 is prolific; literary criticism less so.

Bean was born at Bathurst in 1879. His father, a headmaster, became ill, and took his family to England in 1889. Charles attended a school rich in Imperial tradition, and graduated in Arts & Law at Oxford University. He returned to Sydney in 1904, and resolved to live by writing rather than teaching or the law. He started as a reporter with the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1908, became official correspondent to the AIF in 1914 and went ashore at Anzac Cove on Gallipoli on 25 April 1915.

Early in the war Bean was encouraged by the Minister for Defence to consider writing a history of the conflict. He set about almost obsessively to this task, accumulating a vast amount of detail about every campaign (his diary and notes filled 283 notebooks) and living in the trenches with the men so that he could understand their experiences.'

Appointed official historian in 1919, Bean began the monumental task of writing and editing the multi-volumed work which took 23 years to complete. Bean himself wrote six volumes about the infantry divisions in *The Official History of Australia in the war of 1914-1918*, two on Gallipoli, and four on France. He edited eight more, and Bean and a colleague annotated the volume of photographs. The last of the fifteen volumes appeared in 1942 in a series containing nearly four million words.

In Australian historical writing nothing has ever been done on such a scale as this new genre, military history. The official war historians engaged (most of them with backgrounds in journalism) would enjoy freedom from censorship. During the war Bean was responsible for publication of *The Anzac Book*, a compilation of poems, anecdotes and writings by soldiers at Gallipoli which propagated an image of the Australian as tough, ironic, stoical, sardonically humorous, the archetypal bushman and committed to his mates. Bean's book had to compete with C.J. Dennis's *The Moods of Ginger Mick* (1916), where one of the Bloke's more disreputable mates who was sent off to fight, discovers that activities that would have seen him in gaol now bring him honour. Australians took passionately to this work.

After the war a concerted effort was made by the War Records Section of the AIF, Mitchell Library and other State libraries to collect diaries and letters of frontline soldiers, photographs, maps and other memorabilia. It had been the official policy of the AIF that each soldier be issued with a diary and camera. Writing letters and keeping diaries were a way for AIF soldiers from Glebe to manage and cope with the chaos that surrounded them at the front.

Some letters reflected a deepening weariness and sense of futility. *All my pals ... I came over with are gone, but seven out of the 150 remain, it's simply scientific murder, not war at all.* Erie Neaves, a 25 year old cashier from Glebe, told elder brother Harry: *I keep smiling but I tell you it takes some doing ... the premonition I had when leaving Sydney that I will never see home again still hangs about me ... one would be unnatural to go through uninjured. If I get out with a leg and an arm off I'd be perfectly satisfied ... so don't get married until after the war.* Harry, a 30 year old grocer, had been killed in action on 16 November 1916, three months before Erie wrote the letter. Erie was killed in action in France on 6 November 1917. Born in Glebe, the Neaves brothers attended Glebe school. On receipt of Harry's death certificate early in 1918, mother Emma Neaves sought advice about Erie's death, 'I understand he was one of seven who were in a dugout, five of whom were killed, two instantly and three died of wounds'. On receipt of a cemetery book in 1921 Emma enquired: *We can trace just possibly where the two boys fell - but do not know so far whether their bodies were recovered to cemeteries - it may not have been possible. Some day we may know certainly.*

Bert Hopkinson, Glebe rower and draper at Anthony Hordern's Manchester department wrote from the front to brother Ainslie: *A line to let you know I'm still on deck by a heap of luck ... Fritz's army is like the rest, pretty well worn and the quicker the people who are running this joint take a tumble to themselves, the better for humanity. Australians are worn threadbare through over work, they have a permanent job in the lines to strafe the Hun, and the quicker they take a tumble the better. Men are not machinery.* Bert's luck however ran out. He was killed at Hamel on 8 July 1918.

Grief remained with people as they attempted to rebuild a world without those to whom they had been so fundamentally attached. Nineteen year old Percy Gibbs, a process engraver, who lived with his parents at 16 Charles Street Forest Lodge, enlisted in the AIF in August 1914. His father wrote to the Defence Department in June 1915: *I am informed that my beloved son Gunner P.L. Gibbs (No 282) second Battery, 1st Division has been killed in action. Will you please tell me if the dreadful news is quite true? His mother and I cling to the hope that there may be a mistake and that our only child and only treasure in life is still alive. Please excuse this very unconventional note to a business department but I cannot write in a formal way just now. Yours truly, P. Gibbs.*

Similarly Ada Welling found it difficult coming to terms with the death in 1916 of son Ernest Welling, a warehouseman, who lived with her in Wigram Road. Two years after his death she sent this in memoriam to the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

*Oh the anguish of the mother
Oh the bitter tears she shed
When she heard her boy was missing
And she wondered 'Is he dead?'
Oh the weeks and months of torture
Oh the agony and pain
And she wept and prayed and wondered
Would he come to her again
'Killed in Action' came still later
Oh the awful truth is bare.*