Chapter Twelve

Heroes All

> …a year of war has taught me what these victories mean…At first it is all splendour and glory and advance and capture and wonderful achievements. And then gradually come admissions of hardly-earned triumphs being won back by the enemy, stories of horror which the papers dare not print on their principal pages, and long, long casualty lists in which each name means a home rendered desolate.
>
> Vera Brittain,
>
> The trouble is that in any war, however just the cause, every force of evil, of murderous hatred and lies, is released and can't easily be controlled again. And the peace is dictated not by the men who might first have been prompted by the cause of justice, but by the adventurous politicians who have superceded them, and who express the revengeful passions of the people…
>
> Martin Boyd, *The Picnic*, p.248.

After Bert was reported as missing in action, his family was duly informed by an official telegram, contained in a pink envelope and borne to the home by the local minister. Although fearing the worst, they would have hoped that he was still alive and had become lost, or was lying wounded somewhere, or even, had been captured by the Germans. Sam, too, clearly hoped that his brother had somehow survived although his own experience would have warned him not to expect too much. This was clear from a postcard he sent from Renescure on 28 October. After reassuring his mother he was 'back in comfortable quarters again and doing fairly well', he added:

> Now mind what ever you do don't worry about Bert. He is only one of the noble thousands doing their bit and if God in his mercy spares me to come back, your lot will not be so bad, some have lost all you know.

A week later Sam wrote he had still 'not heard anything of Bert…so my fears are pretty well confirmed'. Hoping that he may yet be mistaken, the family wrote to the Australian Red Cross requesting its Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau in London to

look into the matter. This yielded a letter from a Private G. L. Dennan who confirmed that Bert had been 'wounded with a machine gun bullet', but little else that was not already known. 'He was left behind as we advanced', Dennan added, but 'nothing was heard of him afterwards…all kinds of enquiries were held but with no result'. The strain of not knowing exactly what had happened to Bert would have been compounded by the receipt, on 11 February 1918, of a form letter from an officer in the AIF Base Records in Melbourne. This stated that 'no further official news has yet been received' about Bert, and asked if the family had had 'any news of the soldier from any other source'. If so, the letter asked, could they forward details plus any letters and post cards received from 'the soldier' since he was posted missing. While entitled to be angry and upset by the impersonal nature of the letter (and its implications), Samuel replied simply and honestly as follows:

> I have received no further news than officially reported missing. I am forwarding one of Pte A. E. Free's letters and one of his brother's letters. His brother was in the same company as he so you may get some information about the soldier that was with him when missing. I hope you will do your best.

This prompted the authorities to cable France for further information. A reply was received on 25 February stating there was 'nothing to prevent finding deceased'. This appears, however, not to have been passed on, and the family was not officially informed of Bert's death until a Court of Inquiry, conducted after the war on 18 November 1918, ruled he had been killed in action on the day of the attack on Passchendaele. Even then Samuel had to write to Melbourne requesting formal notification of Bert's death in order that he could finally settle his long-deceased son's affairs. As it did for the family of W. K. Hancock – whose eldest son and brother was reported missing after the battle of Pozieres - the failure or reluctance of the authorities officially to confirm Bert's death is likely to have prolonged and compounded the Free family's grief (Hancock, 1954: 65). Not knowing exactly what had happened, it is possible that some among them would also have, like the English poet Anna Gordon Keown, clung to the belief that their son and brother had in fact not been killed.

> Scornful I hear the flat things they have said
> And all their piteous platitudes of pain,
> I laugh! I laugh! – For you will come again –
> This heart would never beat if you were dead.
>
> Keown, 'Reported Missing', 1919

The anxieties and fears of the family now settled on Sam. They would not have been helped by news that Herbert Adler, who had enlisted with Sam and Bert and sailed with them from Australia on the Port Lincoln, had been killed in action near Passchendaele on 17 October. By then 10 MG Coy was back in the now relatively quiet Messines sector and, following a brief stint in hospital, Sam was preparing for a week of leave in Paris. As he and his 'Melbourne mates' were viewing the Eiffel tower and other Parisian landmarks, Haig and his generals sat in their chateaux preparing the next allied offensive. Their plans were interrupted, however, by a major German assault which aimed to knock England out of the war before the Americans arrived in Europe. Code-named Operation Michael, the German offensive was made possible by the release of hundreds of thousands of troops from the Eastern Front following the collapse of the Czarist regime in Russia. It began on 20 March 1918 and fell on the British troops located in the Somme valley in France. In light of the initial German successes, Monash's 3rd Division was ordered to move from Belgium to Arras in France where it was to join its sister divisions in helping stem the enemy advance. Sam and his colleagues in 10 MG Coy were part of Monash's advance party which was initially deployed by train to Mondicourt on 27 March 1918. There, as Charles Bean's official history relates,

> …the unloading Australians found themselves unexpectedly plunged into an atmosphere of panic…French civilians and British troops – largely of labour corps and railway companies, mixed with stragglers and wounded men – streamed continuously rearwards along the road from Pas, two miles away, which they said was now threatened by the German advance.

The guns of 10 MG Coy were hastily deployed to defend the town until the rest of the brigade arrived, and soldiers were sent forward on bicycles to try and ascertain exactly where the enemy's leading troops were. No sooner had the leading battalions detrained, then they were ordered to move to a position some two hours march away from where they embussed at around 3am and were driven further southwards. Two hours later, in the cool dawn of France in early Spring, 'they found themselves bumping into the dusty village of Franvillers on the Amiens-Albert road, high on the edge of the Somme country which was so familiar to the four other Australian divisions, but in which theirs, the youngest, though experienced in great battles in Flanders, had never yet served' (Official History, p. 154). Once again Sam and his by now

exhausted colleagues were confronted by scenes of panic and pandemonium:

> As far as the eye could see, especially along the road from the south-east, came carts lurching with towering loads, precious mattresses, bedsteads, washstands, picture frames, piled together with chairs, brooms, sauce-pans, buckets, the aged driver perched in front upon a pile of hay for the old horse; the family cow – and sometimes calves, or goat – towed behind by a rope or driven by an old woman or small boys or girls on foot (p. 174).

Intermingled with this retreating stream were withdrawing British artillery and transport units some of whose soldiers warned the Australians that they would soon become 'Jerry's souvenirs'. Undeterred, the soldiers of 10 Brigade dug in across the Bray-Corbie road and, along with a number of other Australian and British formations to their north and south, waited for the German onslaught.

Back home the family would still have been engaged in the process of coming to terms with Bert's probable death while simultaneously coping with now-sharpened fears for the continuing safety and survival of his older brother. It is likely they would have received messages of condolence and support from friends, relatives and even strangers who had seen Bert's name in the casualty lists published in the newspapers. These would have expressed shock and sadness at the news, appreciated the anxious times the family was going through, and prayed that God would bring their son and brother back to them. It is likely, too, that the local minister would have returned on various occasions to offer spiritual support and comfort. While such visits would no doubt have been appreciated by some in the church-going family, others may have reflected with some bitterness on the role their religious leaders had played in pressing their loved ones to enlist and so place them in harms way. For by this time the Wimmera and many communities and families within it were bitterly divided over the war and its consequences.

This was reflected in the passions and vitriol generated by the government's second attempt, in December 1917, to introduce conscription (or as it was marketed by Hughes and his ministers, a referendum on the reinforcement of Australia's front-line soldiers). Unlike the earlier referendum, most towns in the region hosted anti- as well as pro-conscription meetings with the experience of Donald not untypical. There the meetings opposed to conscription were all well-attended and their speakers were 'frequently' and

'heartily applauded'. Gatherings in support of conscription, by contrast, contained in their audiences a 'sprinkling of antis' who this time were determined 'to make their presence felt' (*Donald Times*, 4 and 14 December 1917). In this heated environment speakers often resorted to name-calling and mud-slinging and occasionally overstepped the mark. Many locals, including the editor of the *Donald Times*, were outraged for example, when recruiting Sergeant Skill stated 'in effect that girls who go with "I won'ts" will eventually find themselves in [the brothels of] Little Bourke Street'. Seeking clarification or otherwise of the remarks at the meeting's end, the paper's editor was then abused by Skill who forgot, possibly, that he was not on the parade ground. Under pressure no doubt from his superiors, Skill subsequently wrote to the *Donald Times* stating that the paper's report had come 'as a great shock' to him, and expressing regret that his remarks had been so misconstrued. While accepting the recruiting sergeant's apology, the paper added caustically 'had we published his remarks…[made in the subsequent] interview, not only Sergeant Skill but the public would have got a great shock' (*Donald Times*, 20 and 23 November 1917).

While less colourfully expressed, no less offensive was the patronising assertion, made at another pro-conscription meeting by the Reverend Wyndham Heathcote, that it 'was impossible to get a reasonable judgement from the people' on the issue because the women among them were driven by emotion, or sentiment, rather than by reason (*Donald Times*, 14 December 1917). This and other arguments advanced by the likes of Skill and Heathcote may have been responsible for the 'rowdy' scenes that occurred at a final meeting on conscription held at St George's Hall a few days before the referendum. It had been called to urge a 'Yes' vote and was 'one of the liveliest yet held in Donald, the opposition being very pronounced'. Speakers were

> subjected to numerous interjections, and in some instances, 'counted out'. Eggs…were brought into play as people were going into the hall. Mr J. P. Morgan having the misfortune to be in the line of fire and 'stop one'. After the meeting arguments were rife, and several men were parted and advised to go home. A fight between two young fellows was in progress, but was stopped by the police. Abuse was hurled at the chairman as he left the meeting, but apart from that no damage was done (*Donald Times*, 21 December 1917).

These and similar scenes across the country certainly damaged the government's latest call for conscription which was defeated by a larger margin than in 1916. Victoria also switched from 'Yes' to

'No' leaving only Tasmania, Western Australia and the Territories in favour. Although the majority of voters in the Wimmera again supported conscription, the number voting 'Yes' was much reduced. Almost three quarters of the soldiers at the front were believed to have voted against the proposal in part because they were not prepared to compel others to go through what they themselves were enduring, and in part because 'they did not want the freemasonry of volunteers to be polluted' (Inglis, 2001; 116).

Although most Australians continued to support the war, the majority also it seemed, were not going to be brow-beaten by Hughes and his government into sending those who did not wish to go to serve in France and Belgium's charnel-house trenches. It is tempting to think that this outcome represented a sea-change in the nation's popular consciousness, something akin to the shift in mood observed in England by Vera Brittain in the wake of the stupendous losses on the Somme. By then she felt the majority of her fellow countrymen and women 'have passed beyond our blatant, loud-voiced "patriotism", our want of realisation, our irresponsibility, our inappropriate indifference, and are quiet and resolute, weary but tenacious, confident of the issue and determined that come what may, it *shall* be' (cited in Bishop, 2000: 243 italics in the original). But would a civilisation based on displacement and denial, with its politicians divided and at war with each other, be capable of recognising let alone learning such a legacy of loss?

The German attack on the Australian positions on the Somme took place in early April 1918 to the south of 10 Brigade's positions and near the town of Villers Bretteneux. During the battle, which involved 9 Brigade as well as a number of British units, Sam and his colleagues in 10 MG Coy alternated between occupying positions on 10 Brigade's front line near Mericourt and, together with the other units of the 3rd Machine Battalion - 9, 11 and 23 machine gun companies - providing concentrated barrage support from the vicinity of Ribemont. This pattern was maintained until 10 May when 10 MG Coy, along with the rest of the 3rd Division, was withdrawn to Allonville for a period of rest and recuperation. According to the battalion's war diary, 10 MG Coy returned to the front line on 21 May. The unit was next mentioned four days later when it was noted that 10 MG Coy had sustained 'casualties from shell-fire [and] 5 ORs [other ranks] were wounded'. One of these was Sam. A few days later, an urgent telegram was despatched from Victoria Barracks in Melbourne to Lalbert's 'Methodist Clergyman' asking him to 'inform father S. Free' that '415 Pte S. J.

Free died 26/5/18 gunshot wounds abdomen at 47 Casualty Clearing Station'.

We can only imagine the effect on the family of the reappearance of the minister and the devastating news he conveyed. We do know that they again sought to deal with the shock by finding out exactly what had happened. They wrote to the Red Cross which wrote, in turn, to Sam's unit and the officer commanding the casualty clearing station. Before receiving replies to these requests, a letter arrived from Sam's former section commander and comrade-in-arms, Sergeant George Piggot Holmes. It had been written in France shortly after Sam's death and was posted from Scotland on Holmes' behalf by a Corporal H. Peart who was able to add some details that would otherwise have been removed by the censor. The letter contained a group photograph which included Sam – 'the last and latest photo of him…[which] I thought you would very much like to have…even though it will bring much sadness to you all'. Holmes began by apologising to Fanny for not earlier writing about 'poor Bert's death' (about which he felt 'Sam could tell you much better than I'). Now that Sam as well as Bert were gone he thought he 'should write…a few lines and tell you about both of your boys'. After praising their bravery, friendship and good humour, Holmes then related the circumstances of Bert's death:

> …then came Oct 12.17 over the top we went to take Passchendaele [sic]. It was in this battle poor Bert became separated from the team somehow and was not seen again as far as I know he certainly was not taken a prisoner for he never got up to us in the front but the German barrage was a particular "hell" and nothing could live beneath it. Bert was last seen to my knowledge on or very near the barrage line.

While Bert was thought to have been an inevitable casualty of the intense German bombardment at Passchendaele, Sam's death was said to be a matter of 'very hard luck':

> One evening he was on duty going out of the line with one of the Coy's limbers and while he was riding in this limber almost out of the shell area a shell from the enemy burst right underneath the vehicle and Sam received a piece of shrapnel in the abdomen. The dressing station was not more than 100 yards away and all haste was made thereto. The doctor done all possible for the boy and Sam was [illegible] with his wounds dressed in 1/4 of an hour after he was hit so you see medical aid had done all possible to save his life. He was shortly afterwards conveyed to the 47th Casualty Clearing Station where the sisters had charge of him and also medical attendance of the very best. He never rallied I am told but gradually sank and died at 2.15 pm the next day. I

> have not heard just where he is buried; but I am trying to find out and should I be successful I will do my best to have the photo taken of his grave and send it on.

We don't know whether Sam's former friend and railwayman from Geelong succeeded in this last task. For on 29 September 1918 he, too, died after being wounded at Peronne near Mont St. Quentin. His sister's response to the War Memorial's subsequent request for information for its Roll of Honour shows that Holme's own brother, Private Frederick John Holmes, had been killed in action at Pozieres on 16 August 1916, around the time George was involved in the assault on Messines. Three of his cousins also died in the war: Lieutenant Percy Earle died in England after being wounded at Bullecourt, and Privates Norman and Charles Layton were killed in action at Gallipoli and in France respectively.

Letters relayed to the family by the Red Cross underscored just how unlucky Sam was. It seems that he had bumped his head in the company billets in Villers Bretteneux and was ordered by the unit's medical officer to go back out of the line for a rest. That night he hitched a ride on a ration limber driven by a Corporal A. J. Goddard. According to Goddard, 'while coming out of Villers Bretteneux…a shell exploded alongside the limber and Free was struck by two pieces, one in the side and one in the chest. I was also wounded. We were both taken to the 47th Casualty Clearing Station at Crony and Free died the next morning at about 3 o'clock…I should reckon he was buried at the soldier's cemetery'. It seems likely from the other information obtained by the Red Cross that, just as Roland Leighton had in 1915, Sam 'went out of life without knowing it', and without leaving a message or a sign which would have helped sustain those who had loved him and would live only with his memory through 'the long dreary years ahead' (Vera Brittain cited in Bishop, 2000: 338). The family was now confronted with the awful and final reality that they would never again see or hear from their beloved sons and brothers. In the poignant words of Henry Bourne Higgins, who had earlier fought to prevent Australian soldiers from being sacrificed for imperial causes, and had lost his only son, Mervyn, at El Magdhaba in Egypt two days before Christmas 1916:

> No mail now brings his cheery lines to read;
> No message breaks the silence of that grave.
> (cited in Damousi, 1999: 9)

The Army did not officially advise the family of the circumstances of Sam's death until 16 October 1918. This letter, which referred to the 'regrettable loss of your son', also stated that 'the utmost care and attention is being devoted where possible to the graves of the soldiers', photographs are being 'taken as soon as possible, and these will be transmitted to next-of-kin when available'. No photographs arrived at Lalbert until March 1920. When they did arrive they showed the grave to be Bert's rather than Sam's. This was eventually rectified and a series of new photographs were finally sent to the family on 25 August 1921, more than three years after Sam's death.

In the interim, the family received, on 15 March 1919, a package containing the effects of 'the late No. 415B Private S. J. Free, 3rd MG Btn'. This contained a wallet, a safety razor, an electric torch, a metal cigarette case, a handkerchief and some photos and postcards. Among the former was a photo of a Private F. Kelly in France who described himself as an 'old cobber' of Sam. The cards included one sent from Lalbert in October 1917 by Agnes and Alice Hasty promising him a letter in the next mail. Another was a Christmas card sent from East St Kilda and containing a single first-class ticket to Australia on which the card's author, Molly, had written 'don't be long before you use this'. A third card appeared to have been sent from Great Britain possibly from someone he had befriended while training on the Salisbury Plain. Signed by Sam's 'loving little friend Curly' the card stated that 'Mother had a letter from you on Monday and in it was that card you sent me. You sent me one before but still it does not matter as mother would like to have one for herself. I am looking forward to you getting leave and coming to stay with us…We have had a lot of snow this week and last.'

In the years following the receipt of Sam's effects, the family received for each boy the British War Medal and the Victory Medal (April 1921), a pamphlet on 'Where Australians rest' (19 May 1921), a memorial plaque bearing the inscription 'he died for freedom and honour', and a memorial scroll (November and December 1921). The arrival of each item would have triggered afresh the memories of the two boys and the sense of loss their deaths in war engendered. These memories and the hurt felt would have been reawakened, too, by the news in November 1918 that the war had finally ended. This sparked enthusiastic celebrations and a sense of relief across the country with Lalbert being no exception. A school friend of the younger Frees, Frances Meehan, later recalled that upon receipt of the good tidings, the

children were given the rest of the day off from school and 'roamed around the township singing patriotic songs'. A bonfire, topped with an effigy of the Kaiser filled with fireworks, was built between the hotel and the Lalbert railway station. As night fell, Sam and Bert's younger sister Hilda was given the honour of setting the fire alight. As 'the flames reached the Kaiser it exploded in a shower of sparks [and] the crowd cheered wildly'. Did Samuel and Fanny, we can only wonder, take part in these triumphal celebrations, or did they like Vera Brittain in England 'listen to the merriment with a heart that breaks and ears that try to keep out the mirthful sounds' (Vera Brittain cited in Bishop, 2000: 209)?

We can only wonder, too, how after the war members of the family coped with their grief and sense of loss. It is possible that some may have been comforted by the message, repeated in pulpit orations, newspaper editorials and the polemics of their political leaders, that Bert and Sam had done their duty, served their King, and nobly sacrificed themselves for the sake of the nation and the empire. Some may have put their own loss into some kind of broader perspective by acknowledging to others and themselves that they were merely one of many, many families who lost loved ones (11 of the 47 residents of Lalbert and its surrounding district alone who had enlisted for active service in the Great War did not return). The women in the family may have sought to express their loss by dressing in mourning black and wearing mourning rings, ribbons or unit broaches to show they had lost loved ones in the war. They may also have ceased, for a time at least, participating in community activities and events – other than attending church – seeking comfort and consolation in the private routines of home and family life and the treasured memories these would have engendered (home was also a space where they could give vent to their true feelings, unencumbered by societal expectations).

We don't know whether Fanny, like so many other mothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts confronted by loss, fell ill, was haunted by hallucinations, premonitions and nightmares, talked or whispered aloud to herself, blamed herself for allowing her boys to enlist, or sought to contact them in seances or via spiritualists. We don't know whether she and Samuel attended the Anzac and Armistice day celebrations, were present at the unveiling of the memorials and honour rolls for those who had served, or visited places that held special memories: the Lalbert railway station where they last farewelled Bert and Sam, the recruiting depot in Swan Hill where they first enlisted, or the

wharves at Port Melbourne from where they left Australia. We do know that Fanny kept her sons' effects sent back from the front as well as the letters, photos and cards posted or returned from Belgium and France. After her death in Lalbert in 1927 these were passed on to her eldest daughter, Frances Hickmott, who stored them in an old tin trunk on her and William Hickmott's farm located on the northern outskirts of the Mallee township of Ouyen. Most of the letters and a number of photos and cards were destroyed by one of the plagues of mice that swept through the area during the depression. The few remaining items were collected by Frances' daughter, my mother Elsie Hickmott who, after her own mother died in …, passed them on to me.

It is likely Fanny and Samuel would have been helped in their grief by their strong religious convictions and by expressions of sadness and sympathy from relatives and such friends as Jack and Ruby Oliver who wrote to them from their back block at Day Trap North via Chinkapook expressing their sorrow over the boys deaths, and the hope they 'had not died in vain'. They were probably particularly comforted by contacts with, and messages of condolence and support from, the boys' former comrades-in-arms. As Joy Damousi (1999) describes, these were cast by the political and social contingencies of the war into the important role of being the principal nurturers and counsellors of the bereaved. As we have seen in the boys' case they sought to comfort the bereaved by sharing their private anguish with the families and providing them with details of their loved ones' deaths and final burial places, details the state was often unable or too busy to provide. It was a role they were ill-prepared for and uncomfortable with. As Pat Barker explores in her 'Regeneration' novels, the war forced them to experience feelings towards their comrades that did not sit well with either societal expectations at the time or the masculinist tenets of the new Australian nationalism. Struggling to understand and put into context their own feelings and experiences, they tended to fall back on the stylised arguments and oft-repeated clichés they themselves had responded to when they had enlisted. This can be seen in the final passages of George Piggot Holme's letter to Fanny (which was typical of many such letters sent by soldiers to the bereaved):

> Now Mrs Free …I ask you to bear up through this terrible trial and try to console yourself as much as possible by the fact that both of your boys were regarded as brave soldiers and were the friends of all in the camp. Their loss is mourned by all. I am especially sorry that one son could not return to you again; but we all came here of our own free wills, the only army of volunteers the whole world knows today and are regarded as

> the best fighters on the Western Front. I will do all in my power to send you any information which you might think fit to ask and ask you in return to look upon them proudly with a calm and steadfast eye for they were soldiers not afraid to die…for the land we call home, the best land in the universe 'AUSTRALIA'.

* * * *

Bert and Sam Free were two of almost 60,000 Australians who were killed or died while serving overseas in the Great War. Following the decision by the British government early in 1915 not to repatriate the bodies of those killed, the majority of Australia's war dead were buried in cemeteries on Gallipoli, in the Sinai and Palestine, and scattered among the battlefields of France and Belgium. The some ... souls who, like Bert, were obliterated by shell fire or whose bodies were never found or identified, had their names recorded on stone-carved memorials-to-the-missing erected at Menin and elsewhere. The graves of the dead, the normal sites for private mourning and remembrance, were therefore not accessible to the vast majority of Australian families who lost fathers, brothers and sons in the Great War. As a consequence the processes of individual and collective mourning and remembrance in Australia itself centred on the monuments and memorials that were built in large numbers across the Australian landscape.

As Ken Inglis (2002) details, some 4000 of these were eventually constructed in a profusion of forms and styles: pavilions, towers, columns, arches, pillars, obelisks, cenotaphs, crosses, urns, and stone diggers mounted on plinths and pedestals. Most can still be seen today in local parks, in town squares or on roadside corners or intersections, and in front of schools, shire offices and other public buildings. In a few cases the buildings or roads are themselves the monuments, reflecting a practice adopted in the United States. This utilitarian principle was congenial to councillors and planning authorities and some in the Returned Servicemens' Association (RSA, later RSSILA then RSL), but it was viewed with a degree of hesitancy within the wider community. These differences were on display in the protracted efforts to establish a suitable war memorial for the township of Donald and its surrounding district. While many in the community wanted a monument of some kind, others including the *Donald Times* were in favour of a memorial hall which would not only 'remind posterity of the gallant sons of Australia who laid down their lives for justice and liberty', but fulfil as well 'a long-felt want in the town' (*Donald Times*, 17 December 1918). A

hall with its associated ex-servicemens' clubrooms was also favoured by the local president of the Soldiers' League who told a meeting of the memorial committee that 'the feeling of the returned men throughout Australia was that they would have nothing to do with monuments' (*Donald Times*, 13 June 1919).

Concerned about their hard-earned money being spent on a facility for Donald, the representatives from Corack and other outlying communities continued to press for a monument. At a public meeting called to discuss the issue Stanley Rowe, a Melbourne organiser for the RSSILA, informed the audience that a monument would be a waste of money and be 'only used by birds to rest on'. To the consternation of some of his listeners, Rowe added that the hall should be exclusively for the returned soldiers although he thought there would be no objection to it being used by 'members of the Father's Association, Rejected Volunteers or young men under the eligible age at the time of the war' (*Donald Times*, 1 July 1919). Responding to a written query from the memorial committee's Chair, the Victorian President of the RSSILA subsequently distanced himself from his organiser's uncompromising stance and the citizens of Donald went ahead with their memorial hall which was officially opened on ... by...

Many of the smaller communities in the district proceeded to erect separate monuments. In the case of Corack this comprised a simple granite column and base. More than two tonnes in weight it was transported from Watchem to the recreation reserve at Corack East in a wagon drawn by a five-horse team driven by Ray Madder. The journey, some fifteen miles in length, took four hours to complete. Relocated in November 1992 to the front of the Corack Hall (all that is left today of the once thriving village) the memorial bears the names of seventeen residents and former residents who 'made the supreme sacrifice in the Great War'. In addition to Bert and Sam Free, the list includes the two Perry brothers, Herbert and 'Wheeler', and three sons of John Clouston and Mary Louttit: Albert, who was killed at Gallipoli in 1915, and Roy and Henry who both died in France in 1917.

While incomprehensible to many of the citizens of far-off Donald, the RSSILA's apparently uncompromising stance could be understood when viewed against the social and political turmoil of post-war Australia. The supposed national unanimity for the war, always under strain, had collapsed in the wake of Hughes' bitterly contested conscription referenda and the accompaning industrial disputes over workers' wages and rights as they were

being affected by actions taken under the government's *War Precautions Act*. As Alistair Thomson (1994: 118-28) describes, the country became divided broadly along class lines. The 'spectre of disloyalty' among the working classes caused, in turn, 'an unparalleled mobilisation of conservative middle class Australia' which sought to destroy what was seen as 'a conspiracy network of enemy sympathisers, anti-war activists, strikers, shirkers...and Bolsheviks'. Members of the leftist International Workers of the World (the IWW or 'Wobblies') were jailed or deported, strikes were violently suppressed, unions deregistered, and citizens were spied on and harassed by special branch officers and members of military intelligence (see Macintyre, 1993: Chapter 8).

The cessation of hostilities in Europe and the demobilisation of the AIF served to intensify the existing social and political divisions, raising in some minds the alarming prospect of possible class warfare. In what Thomson labels 'the battle for the Anzac legend', both the conservatives and their opponents turned their energies to co-opting the returning diggers to their respective causes. The conservatives eventually won-out largely through the establishment of the RSSILA which, while nominally apolitical, was controlled by members of the officer class. These reached an agreement with Hughes and his Defence Minister, George Foster Pearce, that in return for official recognition and consultation on repatriation issues, the League would support the government in its struggles against the 'disloyalists' and other trouble makers (Kristianson, 1966 and Lake, 1988). The construction of ex-servicemens' clubrooms across the nation was one means by which the RSSILA would keep its side of the deal. As a member of the League's Donald Branch explained to his colleagues: such places would provide a space 'where the soldiers and the young men of the town could meet...under strict military discipline, the same as men would be on parade'. The purposes of such meetings, he continued, would be 'to uplift any soldier in need and to improve the standard of [Australia's] young manhood' (*Donald Times*, 13 June 1919).

As Thomson further notes the RSSILA not only acted to curtail the threatening behaviour of the returned soldiers. It also established itself as the official custodian of digger culture, in the process toning down the creed's more disreputable and iconoclastic elements and aligning it with the values of Australia's conservative elites and their view of the war (see also Seal, 2004). According to this the diggers were brave, patriotic and disciplined soldiers who readily answered the call to arms, supported each

other against the common foe, and willingly gave their lives for their nation and the empire. This more affirming view of diggerism, and the war itself, was assiduously advanced within the broader community by the League's spokesmen and others in government. Schools were provided with RSSILA-inspired propaganda on such purported role models as John Simpson Kirkpatrick (who in fact, as Peter Cochrane describes in his book *Simpson and the Donkey*, became inadvertently caught up in the Gallipoli campaign as he was trying to make his way home to England from Australia). The League also sought to exploit its growing control over the rituals and meaning of Anzac Day.

During the war and for some years afterwards, the anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli was an occasion on which the citizens of Australia gathered together to mourn those they had lost in the war. Dominated by crowds of women dressed in mourning black, Anzac Day was in Tanja Luckins words:

> ...more than just an occasion on which soldiers remembered their experiences of war; it was a day on which a collective sense of sublime mourning was present...grief and mourning were palpable...[and] a shared sense of loss was evident (Luckins, 2004: 105-6).

From the early 1920s the purpose and format of Anzac Day began to be changed. The early commemoration and church services were supplemented by public meetings at which dignatories and representatives from the League spoke about the soldiers who died and the national significance of the day itself. A dawn service and a march-past by returned men, and later women, grouped in their wartime units and marshalled by the RSSILA, were introduced, with the latter quickly becoming the centre-piece of the day's events. The League lobbied governments and businesses alike to make the day a public holiday in order that the occasion 'be properly observed by all Australians'. And in many places it refused to allow women to take part in the dawn services or directly to participate in the Anzac Day marches.

Thus the focus of Anzac Day shifted from a citizens' to a soldiers' day, and its purpose expanded from an occasion for mourning and commemoration to one also of public tribute and education. Largely as a result of RSSILA agitation, the day was increasingly an occasion for celebrating the exploits of Australia's courageous soldiers and the young country's coming of age at Gallipoli and on the fields of Flanders and the Somme. It became a time to remember the soldiers who gave their lives rather than the

families who had given up their sons and daughters. As a consequence, as Joy Damousi (1999: 34) notes, women in mourning black gradually disappeared from the official proceedings: 'in 1920, mothers occupied a central place in the country's memory but, by the eve of the next war, the remembrance of their sacrifice had been shifted to the periphery'. Some women were not prepared to endure their marginalisation in silence and organised their own grieving ceremonies at the 'gates of memory' at Wooloomooloo and elsewhere (Luckins, 2004). But most, like Fanny Free, accepted their down-graded status and mourned their losses from the sidelines or alone or within their family circles.

The monuments of the Great War came eventually to represent more than sites of assemblage or remembrance. They grew over time to be seen as revered or 'sacred places', the altars, temples and shrines of an emerging national, secular religion, one that focused on the positive and affirming aspects of the Anzac and digger traditions – mateship, bravery, noble sacrifice, and national and imperial duty – rather than on the loss of life incurred, or on the tragic consequences of militarism and military conflict for the individuals, families and communities affected, or on the less endearing characteristics of the diggers themselves. The basic text and the hymns of praise for this new secular religion would be Charles Bean's mammoth *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*. Over forty years in the making and eventually running to twelve volumes, the official history would set the pattern, tone and example to be followed, at least until the post-Vietnam era, by those in academe and elsewhere writing about Australians at war.

Its grand cathedral and source of both public inspiration and education would be the national war memorial which was opened in Canberra on Armistice Day in 1941 (some sixty years before an Australian National Museum). Another of Bean's projects, the Australian War Museum as it was initially called was to be 'a perfect, simple, solemn, exquisite building' holding 'for all time...the sacred memories of the AIF' (cited in Inglis, 2001: 82). Located at the foot of Mount Ainslie and looking down over the country's Houses of Parliament, it is approached along a wide and immaculately maintained avenue of honour along which have been erected a series of additional memorials - with ample space for still more – commemorating Australia's subsequent wars. The national memorial and its avenue of honour together cover every conflict the country's citizens have fought in except one: the frontier war that was waged in Australia itself and

against the Aboriginal tribes whose lands were forcefully occupied in the name of the British Empire by the parents and grandparents of the Anzacs (see...).

The concerns raised by some intellectuals and returned soldiers notwithstanding, the new religion gained widespread acceptance. As Graham Seal argues in his important book, *Inventing Anzac* (2004: 4), the invented traditions surrounding Anzac and the First World War diggers quickly took hold to operate 'hegemonically within Australian society', both informing and underpinning our national culture and our sense of who and what we are. As will be argued in the postscript to this book, these same traditions played a formative role in shaping Australia's post-war foreign and defence policies. Before looking at how that has been the case, and its implications, it is interesting and instructive to speculate briefly on why the invented traditions of Anzac were so rapidly and uncritically accepted by most Australians. The story is, as we will see, a not entirely unfamiliar one.

The successful spread of the new creed was due in part to the concerted efforts, alluded to above, of the RSSILA and other interested parties in conveying its key messages and meanings into schools and other elements of society (helped no doubt by the extensive resources provided for this purpose by the Hughes and subsequent national governments). A further important factor would have been the support given to the creed by the bulk of the nation's returned soldiers. While some among them were uncomfortable with its celebratory and militaristic overtones, most as Alistair Thomson argues, were appreciative of the Anzac tradition's generally positive (if sanitised) assessment of their role in the war. The reaffirmation on Anzac Days and other occasions of this basic message, Thomson continues, served to maintain the acquiesence of the diggers as well as facilitate 'a reconciliation with the past through which positive experiences were emphasised, while negative experiences were played down' (Thomson, 1994: 141).

The parallels between the national identity lauded by the Anzac tradition and that earlier espoused by the *Bulletin* school of Australian nationalism would have added to the former's appeal amongst ex-servicemen and the country's workers. Like its predecessors, Bean's digger-based identity celebrated the ideals of democracy, egalitarianism and anti-authoritarianism. It was male-oriented, anti-intellectual and racist (at least by later standards). It also remained stridently nationalistic, trumpeting the ways in

which Australians differed from a range of projected 'others'. These now included of course the 'shirker' and other perceived 'disloyalists' as well as Aborigines, Asians and women. The fact that the latest variant downplayed the earlier anti-British and anti-ruling class tendencies - by locating Australian nationalism within an overarching imperial framework and using the concept of mateship to gloss over class divisions within society – seems not to have been noticed (or objected to) by most Australians. The Anzac tradition's emphasis on national reconciliation and ressurrection would have been attractive to the evangelists within society. It's celebration of military masculinity and prowess would also have satisfied those largely middle class commentators who saw war as a necessary crucible for the development of both Australia's manhood and Australian nationhood.

The new and militarised discourse was readily embraced by conservative politicians and political parties who, as we have seen, used it to mobilise public opinion around their own values and interests and to paint their political opponents as disloyal while they, like the diggers in the trenches at Gallipoli, represented the true defenders of Australian nationalism. It provided role models and martyrs for the secret armies and other ultra-conservative organisations that emerged between the wars and stood ready to help the Hughes and subsequent federal governments defend the nation against the Bolsheviks and other perceived threats to the established order. The new creed served, as well, to be a convenient means for Hughes and Pearce and their supporters within the Australian establishment to justify their behaviour during (and in Pearce's case at least) in the lead-up to the war, to distance themselves from its tragic costs and consequences, and in some cases perhaps to absolve the guilt associated with their part in the virtual destruction of a generation of young Australians (including in many cases their own sons and grandsons through whom, as Joy Damousi argues with some insight, they sought vicariously to realise their own worth as men and members of the British Empire).

With the return of the soldiers from the front, the personal, communal and national costs of the war became more difficult to conceal. Not only were there the legions of the dead and missing, the country was also littered, in Norman Lindsay's words, with 'blind, mad, dumb and shattered cripples,' the victims of unimaginable mental as well as physical suffering (cited in Luckins, 2004: 155). Large numbers of Australians at home were

also suffering from the illnesses, trauma, breakdowns, alchol and drug abuse, and profound depression and melancholia that flowed from the war and its stupendous loss of life. The emphasis accorded in Bean's Anzac tradition to such esoteric values as duty, honour, sacrifice and glory served to diffuse the doubts and anger arising from this toll by masking the horror and tragedy of the war, or in the words of George Mosse (1990: 6-7), by making an inherently unpalatable past acceptable, important not just for the purpose of consolation but above all for the justification of the nation in whose name the war had been fought'.

The loss and the feelings of the bereaved were thus submerged by the gains constituted by the Anzac legend. Private loss was transformed into the more enobling public sacrifice – measured in the case of bereaved mothers by a government-issued brooch with a bar for each son lost – which was used in turn to reaffirm the value of national solidarity and to reinforce prevailing social and political structures and attitudes. While the sacrifices of the 'noble Anzacs' were both lauded and lamented, the losses endured by ordinary Australians, and their legacies, were written out of the country's experiences of the war. They became as Luckins and Damousi note an extension of the 'great Australian silence' or the 'cultural amnesia' that operated with respect to the voices and experiences of the country's Aboriginal inhabitants and of women in both black and white Australia. It also echoes how Australians (led on by its leaders and myth makers) sought to deal with the country's convict past which, as we saw in the earlier chapters of this book, was successfully expunged from the story of white Australians' experiences for over one hundred years.

What have been some of the consequences and legacies for Australia of the Great War, and the latest attempt to downplay or deny the more unpleasant or unwanted aspects of our wartime experience? While some are specific to the period, others represent a continuation or an extension of already established trends and practices. The war and its aftermath reinforced our existing racial and sexual prejudices and preconceptions as well as our tendency to identify and project our fears onto unwanted others, in this case enemy aliens, dissidents and 'shirkers'. It witnessed a similar callous indifference on the part of Australia's leaders and 'betters' towards the loss of life and trauma suffered by the country's working classes in particular as that shown by their colonial predecessors towards the Aborigines and the convicts and their progeny.... The war also revealed and reinforced the social and political divisions that had long existed

within Australian society as well as our preference for social exclusiveness rather than inclusiveness.

The Anzac tradition constructed around the experiences of the First World War diggers tended to reinforce these divisions and discordances. It even created new cleavages and areas of tension; between frontline soldiers, for example, and civilian war workers and those members of the AIF who served behind the lines. The new creed provided no space for alternative experiences, critical narratives of the war, or any questioning of the warrior culture being developed and lauded. While this may have suited the interests and 'occupational obligations' of the myth makers and their political masters, it represented yet another lost opportunity for Australia. As the work of Tanja Luckins, Joy Damousi and other scholars interested in the impact of the war on Australia's homefront demonstrates, the shared experience of loss provided an opportunity for articulating an alternative and more inclusive sense of nationhood. Unlike the culture centred around the digger fraternity, Australia's homefront experiences affected almost everyone in society, cut across all existing social and political boundaries, and involved a much broader and potentially more enriching range of kinships, social practices, understandings memories and meanings than Bean's sanitised digger culture. The central messages emerging from the wartime experiences of Australia's citizens may have also extended beyond the 'ensuring peace by preparing for war' which would serve as a model for Australia and Australians to follow when confronted by all manner of future threats and sources of insecurity.

(8,489 words)