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## My Father's Son

Ric Throssell

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## My Father's Son

### Abstract

The Cross is heavy in my hand. Dull bronze gun metal moulded from the captured Russian guns of the Crimean War, it bears the weight of time past. There is the memory of victory and defeat in its cold form. The tangled purple ribbon, modest among the bright campaign medals of the Hrst World War, called the Great War, 'the war to end wars', speaks of my father's courage, and his defeat by life. Turn it over. His name is carved into the steel. 2nd Lieut. H.V.H. THROSSELL A.J.F. 1915.



*Captain Hugo Throssell, V.C.*

RIC THROSSELL

## My Father's Son

The Cross is heavy in my hand. Dull bronze gun metal moulded from the captured Russian guns of the Crimean War, it bears the weight of time past. There is the memory of victory and defeat in its cold form. The tangled purple ribbon, modest among the bright campaign medals of the First World War, called the Great War, 'the war to end wars', speaks of my father's courage, and his defeat by life. Turn it over. His name is carved into the steel. 2nd Lieut. H.V.H. THROSSELL A.I.F. 1915.

Symbol of those desperate hours of his life when he led men in the fury of battle, the Victoria Cross came to represent his whole life; but a brief battle for a few yards of soil scratched out of Gallipoli's stony ground is not a man's life; could not explain courage, or his decision to die. His honour lay in the event, not the recognition of it by a grateful nation. Seeing it from the perspectives of today, I could believe that the greater honour was his surrender of the esteem of the conventional society of his own time and the sacrifice that he made in his choice of what the safe self-righteous call the coward's way to die, giving up not only the life that he had once found so good, but also his hero's reputation, so that we, my mother and I, might have a livelihood. Seventy years later, I could give the Victoria Cross to the peace movement knowing that he would have made that sacrifice too. My memories of him remained.

Nowhere is there any trace now of how my father felt about the V.C. No private letters. No memories amongst those old enough to know. He never spoke of the war. Rarely wore the medal; only when once or twice he led the Anzac Day March in Perth, with a young son holding his hand wondering what it was all about, vaguely disappointed that he only had the dull bronze cross with its purple ribbon pinned to his ordinary, navy blue, office-going coat, instead of the carefully preserved khaki uniforms and clinking rows of shining brass stars and silver medallions on rainbow striped campaign ribbons that all the other men wore so proudly.

By the time Victory Day came round in July 1919, Jim Throssell had made up his mind. He had been asked to lead the Victory Parade in Northam and to speak at the official celebrations. He was a natural speaker, easy and relaxed before a crowd. He had a knack of winning people, treating them all as friends – and they would be in Northam, of

course. There wouldn't be too many who'd agree with him, he knew that. But there wouldn't be a man-jack there who didn't know Jim Throssell. All the same it was going to be hard for him to say what he had to. All of the family would be there; including Jimmy Mitchell, the Premier, a Northam man, and an old friend. They would have the soul ease shocked out of them.

When the day arrived, Jim Throssell rode at the head of the Victory Parade in full Light Horse uniform. It was as much his personal triumph as a victory celebration. The crowds lining Northam's streets saw it as the welcome home of the local hero and the men who had gone to the war with him. He looked splendid sitting on a big bay with all the natural grace of a born horseman. The crowds cheered and cheered as he rode by, bands playing, flags flying.

The young Throssells, Jim's nieces and nephews, his brothers' and sisters' kids, knew that Uncle Jim would be speaking. They idolized him. He was their own special hero. They revelled in his reflected glory among school mates and friends. Gerry Throssell, Lionel's eldest, was about sixteen then. He remembered how Aunt Katharine had told them all to be sure to clap like anything and give Uncle Jim a big cheer when he finished his speech. They got into Fitzgerald Street early and made sure of finding a place close to the platform. There was the usual boring stuff from the Mayor and Jimmy Mitchell. Everyone knew what they were going to say off by heart. And then it was Uncle Jim's turn. It was alright at first. Everyone clapped like mad. Then he started talking about the war and the grown-ups went sort of still. Of course all of the kids cheered for all they were worth when he finished speaking, but somehow their parents were looking kind of stiff and upset.

'You could have heard a pin drop when Jim told them that the war had made him a socialist ... he had seen enough of the horrors of war and wanted peace', Katharine wrote to her friend Nettie Palmer. 'Jim himself was ghastly, his face all torn with emotion. It was terrible - but magnificent'.<sup>1</sup>

She had not realized just what that public declaration of his change of heart would cost Jim. He knew that to all of his father's followers, the farmers and shop keepers of Northam, it would be like treachery.

From an unlisted official address in Perth a secret report went out to Military Intelligence in Melbourne, disclosing that the latest recruit to the 'social democrats' was Captain Hugo Throssell V.C. 'Many attribute his leaning towards socialism to his wife's influence, but he states he saw the need for such principles whilst on service and on his return to Australia. However, he was struck on the head at Gallipoli and further he was a victim of cerebro-spinal meningitis, his mind having perhaps been affected', the agents of the law reported.

The tiger of socialism was already a real fear among the good conservatives and loyal patriots of Western Australia.

## NOTES

1. The *Northam Advertiser* reported Hugo Throssell's speech. This is quoted in Ric Throssell's *My Father's Son* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1989), p. 74.

Captain Throssell VC, who received an enthusiastic reception, in thanking the people for the warm welcome, said it was good to be back in old Northam again and receive dozens of warm-hearted hand shakes. He made humorous references to his exploits on the football ground and in the arena of the ring and, then becoming intensely earnest, said during the past five years he had seen much of the world. They had known him as a sort of irresponsible lad, but he claimed now to be a man. Nearly five years ago he had ridden through the streets of Northam in charge of eighteen men, who were amongst the first to enlist. With him were the late Harry Eaton and the speaker's brother Eric. Of that eighteen, seven were lying either in Gallipoli, Palestine or France. His hearers would realise the feeling within him when greeted by happy faces on his welcome home. War had made him a Socialist ... He had seen enough of the horrors of war and wanted peace.

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## Judith Rodriguez

### ZOUAVE MARCHING TEAM, ROLLINS COLLEGE, 1913-1914

'Quick and spirited drill' they repeat, no doubt,  
weekly on campus. And try their costumes out,  
wrong in detail, but always look to the spirit.  
War is turning this way – prepare, prepare!  
They have looked for their rig to the Civil War  
and the young, would-be grandfathers it did for.

Look at the shy, lit faces having fun;  
only this might pass as the least bit Algerian.  
Busty for jackets, put off by puttees,  
Injun headbands for caps, a gipsy wheeze  
the cross-tied pumps, and of course skirts,  
quite short. Like the recollection that war hurts.

In Perth, the Boer Wars past, my aunt was twelve,  
in Assembly with teachers and scores boys who fell –  
the State's best these, the first scholarship school.  
Husbands never to wed. And War was announced, and the girls  
leapt to their feet and gloriously sang  
'Rule Britannia' – this was before Anzac.

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