

1996

Anna Rutherford asked the following writers the question, 'What did ANZAC mean to you as a child and why did you choose to write about the subject?' What follows is their answers.

Les A. Murray

David Malouf

Geoff Page

Roger McDonald

John Romeril

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Murray, Les A.; Malouf, David; Page, Geoff; McDonald, Roger; Romeril, John; Salmon, Philip; and Nowra, Louis, Anna Rutherford asked the following writers the question, 'What did ANZAC mean to you as a child and why did you choose to write about the subject?' What follows is their answers., *Kunapipi*, 18(2), 1996. Available at:<https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol18/iss2/34>

Anna Rutherford asked the following writers the question, 'What did ANZAC mean to you as a child and why did you choose to write about the subject?' What follows is their answers.

Abstract

Les A. Murray, David Malouf, Geoff Page, Roger McDonald, John Romeril, Philip Salmon, Louis Nowra

Authors

Les A. Murray, David Malouf, Geoff Page, Roger McDonald, John Romeril, Philip Salmon, and Louis Nowra

Anna Rutherford asked the following writers the question, 'What did ANZAC mean to you as a child and why did you choose to write about the subject?' What follows is their answers.

LES A. MURRAY

Why I write about war is all inherent in the poem *The Ballad of the Barbed Wire Ocean* which accompanies this statement. I'm a child of the borderlands of war, and of the military age which preceded the paramilitary and police age of Marxism. My father was spared from World War II because he was a food producer and because of an ill-knit leg broken when he was a bullock driver in the forests near home. In 1942, before I had my fourth birthday, I remember him planning to take his shotgun and meet the Japanese soldiers as they came down our ridge, which would have ensured his instant death and maybe ours as well. It was courage in the face of extremity, though, and it was the fate of myriad simple men in countries where the invasions did happen. I remember the plans to burn our homes and farm buildings and drive our cows over the Dividing Range to deny them to the enemy, and I saw the same thing actually done, at Nabiac Pictures in Chauvel's film *The Overlanders*. Not long after that, my mother and I saw fresh shell holes and smelt their fumes on my first visit to her native Newcastle. That's in a poem titled *The Smell of Coal Smoke*, one of several poems of mine in which I go back to inarticulate childhood equipped with a vocabulary to capture the apprehensions I'd had there.

There are two statistics which hold me in a grip of horror. One is that in the twentieth century a hundred million men have been killed while serving as soldiers. The other is that in the same period a hundred million people have been killed by police. This figure includes all those killed in peacetime or away from war zones by soldiers being used as police. I don't know a figure for civilians killed as it were by the overspill of warfare, in aerial bombing of cities and the like, but the first two of these statistics surely suffice to make war a subject worth probing with literature's instruments. Why do we enterprise it, how do we bear it,

what might replace it? It's a royal road to the dimension of poignancy, and a challenge to the imaginative powers of a non-veteran, a challenge which the young Stephen Crane met so well in *The Red Badge of Courage*. What is the *secret* of war, which many veterans guard so jealously, and why do they guard it, often till it eats them alive? My attempts on the subject began before Vietnam and the Marxist ascendancy, and haven't followed the post-Sixties ground rules, so this side of my writing has been largely misrepresented and used against me, not least by apple-polishing colleagues. An early lead was given to Australian criticism of my work in 1961 by the late Vincent Buckley, then poetry editor of the *Bulletin*. I sold him two poems on warlike subjects and then chatted with him about the SS and its fearful dynamics, trying as always to get my head around the fact that humans really will do the very worst. As soon as my back was turned, Buckley went around Melbourne saying 'this young poet Murray, you know: very promising, but a terrible Nazi'. After a moment, I felt proud that I had provoked such a panic of rivalry, and I nicknamed him first Vin Blank, then Vin Ordinaire.

I was born into the sex traditionally dedicated to war and the use of human sacrifice to establish the importance of institutions. I was born into the class of the rural poor, of labourers with the temerity to own land without being squatter-genteel. This class has always provided a disproportionately high quota of fighting men, and my generation of boys often thought of itself as the probable Third AIF. We toughened ourselves and others accordingly, and while we didn't precisely envision hideous death and maiming for ourselves at the end of adolescence, we also didn't talk much about normal adult life and growing old in the work force. For us, somewhere up ahead, before the age of twenty or so, there was a formless glare on the horizon, by no means always nuclear, but terrible and alluring, and little real sense of a self continuing beyond that. For some of us, that glare turned out to be Vietnam, for most it proved to be little more than the odd high-speed scare on the highway, for a few it mutated into going to university. When Roger McDonald's fine novel *1915* came out, and I launched it for him in Canberra, I said to him privately at the launch 'The book's really about going to university, isn't it, Rog?' His answer was lost in the larrikin joy of seeing the Bungendore Polo Club, invited for the occasion and wearing their Light Horse khakis, ride their beautiful horses up the steps of the old Parliament House and into King's Hall.

THE BALLAD OF THE BARBED WIRE OCEAN

No more rice pudding. Pink coupons for Plume. Smokes under the
lap for aunts.

Four running black boots beside a red sun. Flash wireless words
like Advarnce.

When the ocean was wrapped in barbed wire, terror radiant up
the night sky,
exhilaration raced flat out in squadrons; Mum's friends took off
sun-hats to cry.

Starting south of the then world with new showground rifles being
screamed at and shown

for a giggle-suit three feeds a day and no more plans of your own,
it went with some swagger till God bless you, Tom! and Daddy
come back! at the train

or a hoot up the gangways for all the girls and soon the coast
fading in rain,

but then it was flared screams from blood-bundles whipped rolling
as iron bombs keened down

and the insect-eyed bombers burned their crews alive in off-
register henna and brown.

In steep ruins of rainforest pre-affluent thousands ape-scuttling
mixed sewage with blood

and fear and the poem played vodka to morals, fear jolting to the
mouth like cud.

It was sleep atop supplies, it was pickhandle, it was coming against
the wall in tears,

sometimes it was factory banter, stoking jerked breechblocks and
filing souvenirs,

or miles-wide humming cattleyards of humans, or oiled ship-fires
slanting in ice,

rag-wearers burst as by huge War Bonds coins, girls' mouths full
of living rice.

No one came home from it. Phantoms smoked two hundred daily.

Ghosts held civilians at bay,
since war turns beyond strut and adventure to keeping what
you've learned, and shown,

what you've approved, and what you've done, from ever reaching
your own.

This is died for. And nihil and nonsense feed on it day after day.

DAVID MALOUF

Like most young people of my generation I grew up surrounded by men, some of them uncles, who had been to the War. It was the greatest historical event of the immediate past and those who had experienced it were endowed, in fact, and by legend, with a particular power and mystery: they had been there; they had touched History. The stories they had to tell, in a time when a good deal of history was still orally transmitted, were exciting to a young mind, but I was impressed as well by their reticence. I think I had grasped, even then, that the real things were not being told. Some of this, I thought, might have to do with the fact that I was a child; but I knew as well that some things were simply too deep, or too difficult or painful for expression. We are on the whole a reticent people. Children learn that early. The real things are not told. They have to be picked up out of silence. So it was with the War. What was most essential to the experience remained largely unexpressed.

I should add that I also recognized, and very early, that this was not entirely the men's experience - it had also been critical for the large number of women who, in my childhood, had 'lost their fiancé at the war' and remained faithful either to the man or the memory. They were a feature of our society, those women. So were the huge houses, half-ruined by then, that had once been the homes of a patrician class in Brisbane that the War had finally done for. The sons (all Public School boys because there were no state high schools, and all officers) had been killed. Their names were on our school honour boards. Or they had come home crippled and were in War Service Hospitals. The houses were inhabited by their sisters, odd women, mostly unmarried, stand-offish, curtly superior to the new classes that had taken over; late survivors of a colonial aristocracy whose style, in my day, lingered on in Brisbane and is still perceptible, a product of High Church Anglicanism and 'elocution' that Beatrice Webb has characterized as 'shadily genteel'.

So there was this personal side to ANZAC: the experience as it went down into actual lives. There was also, as I came up against it, the institutionalized exploitation of it and the rhetoric. These I disliked in all their forms, but especially in the tub-stumping addresses I got at school, where ANZAC Day was used as an occasion for insisting on all those received notions of Imperial jingoism, Christian virtue and good clean middle class male superiority that I found myself at war with. Its language was the same empty rhetoric that had been used to bully schoolboys and young workers into the War in the first place, and was presented, often, by the same awful old men. This official version of what it had all meant was embodied, in the society I came from, in the RSL. It expressed in those days all the forces of intolerant repression, Anglo-Celtic xenophobia, militarism and red-necked philistinism of Queensland in the grip of the Cold War. The RSL was a pressure-group that as a

young student I regarded as the enemy (both politically and spiritually) of everything I most hoped for in the Australia I was growing up into. What I resented most was the claim that it alone spoke for the real Australian values, and the use it made of the dead in order to shame the rest of us into silence.

My attitude to ANZAC was, and remains, divided: between a humbling respect for the experience itself and those who endured it, a continuing preoccupation with what it deeply means to us, and on the other hand an impatience, sometimes rising to anger, at the institutionalized version and its shoddy rhetorics.

Why I felt moved to write about it should be clear.

GEOFF PAGE

Well, I can't remember any particular ANZAC Day ceremony before I went to boarding school at the age of eleven. That boarding school is The Armidale School and it had a fairly strong cadet tradition, a quasi-military tradition, and on ANZAC Day there would always be a Dawn Service, a fairly moving ceremony really, which the cadet corps would perform with drums and reverse arms and so on. It was always taken fairly seriously without being particularly blimpish. Later on in the morning there would be a march through the Armidale streets in which the cadet corps would participate along with veterans' organisations etc. and I remember the bands and so on from that. At the same school there was a huge honour roll in the main foyer which filled up the whole of one wall. When I look back I am impressed by just how big this was. This was a school which at that time only had about 250 students and earlier it had only about 150 and yet, somehow, there seemed to be thousands of names of people who had gone to the First and Second World Wars, these names all painted in gold with a little cross next to the ones who had been killed. That was something that was there everyday and the sheer size of it impressed me.

The Headmaster there was an interesting person. There's a poem of mine, in *Collected Lives* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1986), p.37, called 'Dry Run', which is about his peculiar attitude to war in general and in particular to Australia's participation. He was too young for the First War and too old for the Second, and he used to give these very strong, military, Christian sermons in chapel. The Chaplain would give his sermon and then the Headmaster would come on and give his, an incredible secularised version of how these people had died fighting for Christianity. I think my interest in war and that issue must go back at least to that point. I was about the age of eleven or twelve when I became aware of that link up which has both fascinated me and irritated me ever since.

I suppose the first poem it shows in is 'Christ at Gallipoli' and in some ways *Benton's Conviction* is a 170 page version of that poem. 'Christ at Gallipoli' is one of the very first World War I poems I wrote. I wrote it after having gone supposedly to demonstrate with some anti-Vietnam demonstrators at an ANZAC Dawn Service. None of the others turned up, I was very peripheral to it anyway and I was damned if I was going to do anything so I went to the Dawn Service instead. At this there was an incredibly fatuous, long-winded speech placing God on our side in all wars including World War I and I walked away from that service very irritated. That was the first time I really started to feel about the issue. It wasn't something that had been obsessing me before. It suddenly struck me 'what if Christ was literally there' and I wrote 'Christ at Gallipoli'. I wrote it fairly quickly, just two or three drafts, and I've been using it ever since. I read it recently at poetry readings all around America and it still goes well. I've since written a lot of other poems about World War I mainly deriving from particular documents, visual stimuli or small incidents. I've never tried to write to demonstrate a particular overall thesis.

Benton's Conviction again came from something specific. I read Michael McKernan's book, *Australian Churches at War*, where he deals with the clergymen who sought and were given the job of delivering the fatality telegrams in 1916-1917 and then came to wish they hadn't sought that job. I started with the idea for a short story with the clergyman walking up to the gate with the telegram foreshadowing what he was going to say and I thought, this is just a few pages of prose - somehow I knew it had to be in prose. Then I talked to Michael about that situation and he said, 'What about all the rest of it. In these congregations certain things would be happening'. The whole range of fairly predictable episodes suggested themselves, so I strung them out into a persuasive, chronological order, wrote about each one successively and the novel developed in that way.

CHRIST AT GALLIPOLI

This synod is convinced that the forces of the Allies are being used of God to vindicate the rights of the weak and to maintain the moral order of the world.

Anglican Synod, Melbourne, 1916

Bit weird at first,
 That starey look in the eyes,
 The hair down past his shoulders,
 But after a go with the ship's barber,
 A sea-water shower and the old slouch hat
 Across his ears, he started to look the part.
 Took him a while to get the way

A bayonet fits the old Lee-Enfield,
But going in on the boats
He looked calmer than any of us,
Just gazing in over the swell
Where the cliffs looked black against the sky.
When we hit he fairly raced in through the waves,
Then up the beach, swerving like a full-back at the end
When the Turks'd really got on to us.
Time we all caught up,
He was off like a flash, up the cliffs,
After his first machine gun.
He'd done for three Turks when we got there,
The fourth was a gibbering mess.
Seeing him wave that blood-red bayonet,
I reckoned we were glad
To have him on the side.

ROGER MCDONALD

As a child I remember thinking of the ANZAC story as something that happened in the dusty and remote past. (It had, in fact, occurred 26 years before my birth.) It was about as real to me as Bible stories - a costume drama in monochrome, involving the canonized heroics of a man on a donkey travelling down the same unfeatured road as the Good Samaritan. At school, pre-ANZAC Day ceremonies focused on an annual school broadcast: I can remember the metallic weave of the classroom's loudspeaker-covering with sharper emotion than I recall the speeches of governors and prime ministers. The only catch came with the bugle call, which, empty of real remembering, had a sentimental power.

When I began writing the novel *1915*, I did not see myself as dealing with a theme. Themes are for critical essays, subjects are for writers. One day by chance I looked into C.E.W. Bean's *History of Australia in the Great War* and saw the ANZAC story as a possible subject for a novel, if ever I was to write one. This was at a time when the poetry I was writing had me trapped in a corner. I felt that if I was going to keep on as a writer I would have to move beyond a narrow range of emotion, incident, character and place. I felt a craving for direct speech and character interaction. At the same time I wanted to fit more of Australia into my work. The tragic compression of the story, on the steep gullies of a Turkish peninsula, held the wideness of Australia, which gave shape to my idea of how to go about the novel.

JOHN ROMERIL

To be honest, not much. I'm frankly of the opinion it is wasted on children as a propaganda exercise. Along with Remembrance Day. To wear a poppy or go to school with whatever medals your father had come by was a buzz perhaps. Had I been taken to the march there might have stirred in me those deep feelings I get at May Day or on demonstrations. But honouring the dead is not something children do well. They fit in at the edges, the more sensitized glimpsing that for the adults such ceremonies have a profound meaning. But by and large, as a child your geo-political sense seldom extends beyond your suburb. I was no exception. My father never said as much but I suspect, having served in the 2nd AIF in New Guinea, he wanted no more of the army. He didn't join the RSL. Yes we got a war service loan to buy our home. But from memory only once did he go to one of those 'get togethers'. And never to the Dawn Service. Or the march. I think he thought it was bullshit. A waste. And best forgotten. I suspect his example trickled down to me.

As an adult the story's somewhat different. By chance I happened across the ANZAC ceremony here in Castlemaine. Its a country town of 7,000 people – once a far grander place than it is today. There was a small knot of survivors, the odd widow, and passing by-standers like myself looking on. We were outside the red brick, red tiled RSL. And on the lawn, stuck in the ground like a child's cemetery, were (I counted) forty-six white crosses, each bearing the name of a dead soldier. A good portion of the names were family names I recognised – people whose heirs still live in the district. Others were names I'd not come across – families that had moved on – or perhaps come to the end of their line in 1915. I remember being struck by how many Swiss-Italian names there were, for much of this area was settled by Swiss-Italians. Of the living there were three or four older men whom I knew from my membership of the ALP, men for whom socialism and fellow feeling were important. I'd long admired them as human beings and from their seriousness, their gravity, came to a richer understanding of what ANZAC Day means to a good many Australians. These were our dead – not 'the dead'. Had the world been a saner place many would still be with us. If not, their bones would be in a more fit burial ground. They would not be toy white crosses. What struck me about the occasion was not that it celebrated bravery and courage, or militarism. Rather it was the infinite sadness that what could have been had not come to pass, and that what had come to pass meant many could no longer be. Its said (though it hardly accounts for envy) that you don't miss what you never had. Perhaps there's a truth to a kind of reverse of that: you prize the more what you have, knowing others have it not. Honouring the dead can, I think, make life seem more precious.

As a rider to all this I have visited ANZAC Cove. I have stood on those cliffs looking down to the sea. It was a first order military idiocy not to retreat the moment it was discovered those cliffs were defended. Not for nothing is there a category of beast called war criminal. On that trip an American who hadn't left the bus asked a compatriot who had: 'What's down there? 'Not much', came the reply, 'just a place where the Australians fought the New Zealanders.' And when, on another occasion, 'good Australians' like Ian Sinclair insisted that Australia should do all it could to make the Kiwis toe the American line, who knows?

Why write about war? I have often rehearsed the arguments pros and cons. It is the case for instance that much theoretically anti-war literature ends up in practice glorifying war, or at least ennobling those who prosecute it. Much as I admire Williamson I think that's what he and Weir ended up doing with *Gallipoli*, despite their no doubt laudable intentions. There's an awful 'we know not what we do' about writing. Patient self-analysis does thrust some light into the murk. It remains, however, the case that what we set out to do is not always what we achieve. For most of us the real drug is the setting out, the process, the journey. The end result we walk away from. The finished product is someone else's drug. The audience's. It becomes part of their process.

I'm something of a 'then' playwright. I spend a lot of time writing 'sort of' histories. In my blacker, less self-regarding moments I suspect I do the far less harder thing. By being a 'then' playwright one is excused from scribing 'the now'. As with diving, so with writing, there are degrees of difficulty. The present, especially the autobiographical now, has always been intensely problematic for me. It may well be an immature psychological condition, a fear of finding out who I really am, what I'm really like. The past is dead, finished, can be approached without too much danger, and research can cover a multitude of sins (what you don't know, what you can't feel).

The defence, the rationale is laudable enough. The best of my work examines not simply the past but how the past impacts on the present. It uses a 'then' to put our 'now' into a politically useful perspective. Since ours is a society much given to a kind of cultural amnesia my project in its small way has the utility of an antidote. The events of 1975¹ are a case in point. As a people we had been there, done that, and should have known better. But it wasn't the stuff of living memory. To expand living memory is, I suppose, the project. Not to mention make a buck and have people love you.

¹ '1975' is a reference to the dismissal of the Whitlam Labor Government by the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, a dismissal which took place on 11 November.

The Floating World began in a library, took shape on a ship, got finished (the writing) on the floor of the Pram Factory. It started in 1970. In the beginning it was an idiot play. I worked as a librarian at Monash University to support my family while I continued my studies part-time. I'd taken to reading about the Noh and Kabuki theatres. And was by then well versed in haiku. The Japanese struck me as a very civilized bunch. I toyed with the idea of depicting the war in New Guinea as a cultural clash: the haiku versus the bush ballad – them descending on Lae with the highly stylised and codified body language of the Noh – us dying like footballers. If the New Guineans – whose soil it was – were to appear no doubt it would have been as a chorus of Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels – or else a bunch of puppets designed by Jude Kuring, Tony Taylor or Alan Robertson. Like I say, an idiot play. I make no claim to being a deep thinker even now but in 1970 I was a moron. The fact is a lot of the world's literature is produced by morons so I've never let it worry me.

A germ or two stuck. Vietnam was still raging. Australia was fighting its third war in Asia, against Asians. And New Guinea? My father had fought in New Guinea. There were one or two (he was not a forthcoming man) stories he let slip which I might be able to use.

In the end I suppose my father is a kind of key to the piece. Our relationship I'd always found problematic. A strange, moody, deeply insecure man, neither good at giving, nor receiving, love to or from his children. Our last words, two years earlier, had been: 'What'll you do when they come here?' 'What', I replied, 'they'll be crawling through the hydrangea, will they?' The subject was the Viet Cong. Absurd (the family is seldom the seat of logic). And it hurt and niggled as family bust ups do. I tried, in my young adult fashion, to make sense of him. I couldn't be wrong! The depression that broke so many of his generation, the war where he'd missed death by a whisker, the 50s with all the rubbish that animal Menzies handed out, the grind of keeping a family on the road in a job that was none too secure. One more insane-makingly traumatic twentieth century Western individual. Nothing special there. A Willy Loman. But my own.

Trauma, not war, is the subject of *The Floating World*: trauma occasioned by war. It was my contention then – and is still – that to be alive in the twentieth century is to be traumatised. Ours is – I say it in the play – a century of disasters.² A century (now less than four years from being over) of wars (with civil populations their target), revolutions, holocaust, genocide, socio-economic upheaval, on a scale hitherto undreamt of, mass dislocation. Its literature is the literature of

* There is only one decade in this century when we have not sent our troops to fight on foreign soil.

the refugee, the exile: your Brechts, your Nabokovs, Joyces, Nerudas, Cellines; the literature of transmigratory souls, homeless, rootless: your Greenes, your Naipauls, your Rhys's. Whether we write or not – and if we can perhaps we are among the lucky ones – there is scarcely a citizen on the globe today who has not borne witness at some time, in some way to this inferno and as like as not been deeply scarred by that experience. It is a century you can't get out of the road of. Flee to the forest but the acid rain will find you. There is no out. Just pain. Was ever so much literature written in gaol? Was ever so much gaol, and so much torture, meted out to so many?

Les Harding is not my father. He is my Everyman. He saw his tiny bit of hell, tried to keep the show on the road, but couldn't. I suppose, when you write, having an Everyman eases the pain of having a father such as mine in time like ours. My old man died (its symptomatic of what I'm arguing here) another statistic in one more epidemic: that of stress related heart attacks amongst the middle-aged. May the earth rest his bones dead – it didn't rest them living.

For the record if the play's genesis had something to do with me pondering over where my father was at – and how come – the rest had a great deal to do with a boat trip I took from Singapore to Perth. There I observed the rituals and rhythms of shipboard life, getting them, as it were, down. It was also on board that ship that a fellow passenger let me in on the basic storyline. A neighbour of hers, an ex-POW, had taken a Cherry Blossom cruise but the closer the cruise ship got to Japan the more his memories of Changi and the Burma railroad began to haunt him. In short, I lucked onto the story. The rest was research, with bits taken from Russell Braddon, Ray Parkinson and others, quotes if you like, from the collective memory.

For simplicity's sake the other imperatives at work, (and to nail the question: why did I choose to write about the war) were: I was a playwright. I was part of a performance ensemble dedicated to producing plays for, by and about Australians. The tale of an all but unknown soldier, a POW, who some years after the war travels to Japan with untoward consequences for himself, his wife and those he encounters seemed fair game. When I said earlier the writing was finished on the floor of the Pram Factory it was. The body of it was there but in rehearsal it underwent some changes. Some of these were political. It was not, nor is it now, from a Japanese viewpoint, an even-handed work. No single play can say everything there is to be said about anything and, compendious though it may seem to some, *The Floating World* is no exception to that rule. Nevertheless we tried to blunt, better to say widen, the play's terms of reference lest it be seen solely and wholly as an anti-Japanese diatribe. Wilfred Last, who played McLeod, tabled material about American behaviour towards the Japanese in the last days of the Pacific War, in particular the tactic of

overkill, the ceaseless bombardment of the already cut off Japanese troops so the myth that they'd never surrender could not be put to the test, they were dead before they were asked, the artillery had made sure of that. Racism is not the prerogative of the Japanese. Indeed I know now (I didn't then) that western racism did much during the thirties to make Japan's entry into the war almost inevitable. Had the western powers been more sympathetic to Japan's plight in the circumstances of the trade war that obtained during the depression there may never have been a Changi. Or a Hiroshima. Or a Les Harding.

PHILIP SALOM

For many of my childhood years ANZAC Day and the ANZACs of Gallipoli and World War II seemed intertwined. Consciously, I knew where they separated or touched; I knew my father had fought in New Guinea, but also sometimes marched on ANZAC Day, presenting me with images of the men in suits, the effects of age, memory and emotion on their faces and the strange, anachronistic rows of medals glinting sharply on their chests. All this beside the build-up, the stories about Gallipoli. If I chose to join those two symbolically, the choice, of course, had been made long before I arrived at it. The biggest actual blur was that Gallipoli seemed to be the only place Australians had fought in during World War I. In a sense, then, Gallipoli was WWI. It was only years later that I discovered how many Australians had fought in France. That seemed a different war, as if because that was not Australia's war, whereas Gallipoli was.

If one side of the ritual myth or passing down of Gallipoli created for me (and many others, I know) the contradictory image of WWII returnees marching on ANZAC Day, the other side was oral, visual, literary. As school children we heard many stories, the most famous one being about Simpson and his donkey. This was not the classical or the romanticized hero at all. It was another contradiction: he was an individual, a loner, an eccentric surely, a simpleton perhaps, a saint – but whatever he was he was foreground, war was background. It was very interesting; it even sounded Biblical. The other stories had to do with the slaughter on the beach (but nothing exact about why), the lack of progress on the cliffs, the sun, the periscopic sights and the clever innovations used to keep the rifles firing during the successful evacuation at night. Australian inventiveness was, almost perversely, more stressed than was the war. At least it was a triumph.

Gallipoli also had a very colonial, Kiplingesque feel for me, whether due to a geographical or romantic (and typically ethnically confused) overlap with Kipling's stories, I couldn't say. And Gallipoli was always

about Australian men, their stoicism, cleverness and the old clichéd thing of mateship. And, despite the deaths, a kind of grand casualness.

As I grew older the heroic element became more complex. Simpson's actions had always been heroic but never in the rhetorical, glorious manner. My father became another kind of figure: a liaison officer during the Second World War, tramping along through the jungle and often shot at. He too seemed to me a different sort of hero. A modest and self-effacing man. This was not the individual breaking free and transcending the general ranks in brilliant and heroic acts (often dying as a result). Both my versions of the hero were men shot at rather than shooting. A great difference from the contemporary Rambo grotesquerie but somehow in keeping with the more idealized version of what an Australian was meant to be, and with the perhaps censored version of Australians as soldiers who were not great killers. I remember being shocked to hear of the various gratuitous tortures some Australians had performed on Japanese prisoners of war. Australians weren't like this, they were good guys ...

Still, enough of the profile of the hero was there – male, brave, committed to the larger cause. And possibly also the lack of questioning, or nothing made obvious. Perhaps that passive role was one expression of a dissent. The ordinariness made it somehow especially Australian, for when I was a child, in a country town of the 50s and early 60s it was always stressed that one should be ordinary and not depart from or push anything too far from the normal.

If I was moved by the hero, and at a more deeply mythological level, then so too was I moved by death. Uncertain of any Christian reassurances about life after death, death in itself was unjust, tragic, and death through war, of large numbers of ordinary people, struck both at my sense of injustice and of heroism. A potent mix. A huge sadness that shifts from elevation into anger, further emphasized by the presence of the survivors, say at ANZAC Day. The living were the flip-side, having achieved heroic survival as against heroic death – symbols of the dead and the rhetorical and emotional counterparts then, but also the coating for what amounted to the more brutal fact of death at war to serve Imperial and exploitative masters. The Turks had the added rhetoric, of course, of being religious heroes as well.

I ramble on about this because it was rather rambling to me as a child, given graphic detail and imagery by a variety of stories and sensory impressions. Also because I now see in the filmed and televised popularised versions of Gallipoli this pushing of the great idealized 'Aussie' virtues of mateship and heroism and nationalism. I am very suspicious of such simplistic sentiment, just as I am very suspicious of all the great attempts made to try to find a single moment in our history that made us a nation, Gallipoli being that moment. It is not only simplistic it is again manipulative. Perhaps it is perceived that,

like a younger friend or younger sibling, Australia will remain younger. This exacerbates the desired need to find an identity with strongly universal resonance and yet distinctly Australian character (hopelessly confined and that in itself being perhaps a condemning giveaway).

Writing about Gallipoli, especially in *Sky Poems* where all rational laws could be suspended if desired, gave me one go at presenting not the truth – I have no pretensions to being able to do that – but some personally perceived ironies and injustices and some historic resonances. I wanted to cut into the mythology a little. I wanted to do this to right, re-write the myths enough to allow a lessening of the taboos which kept so many of the soldier's mouths shut. To do this tenderly, if hopelessly, in the attempted resurrection of a soldier. An irony when considering the Turks and a further irony as this soldier proceeds to wake full of confusion and anger and disorientation – with reactions that include knowledge of the post-war era he might have lived through as a member of the status quo where he would be returned to ordinariness, or less. He wakes to the possibility of fighting for something that truly is worth fighting for – his own rights. Except he remains mechanical, trapped in the metaphors of war.

As in many of the *Sky Poems* the surreal or fantastic beginnings go awry, are deliberately undercut by more stark conclusions. Out of such tension I hoped to create a particular complex of style and emotion and social comment. Despite its cliché value, because of it, and because of my rather sceptical views on the manipulative rhetoric of nationalism, Gallipoli was a logical inclusion in the Sky.

I also identify emotionally with those who suffered without fighting anyone, those who lost others through war. Specifically lovers and parents. This parental and female element is rather obviously absent in the overall imagery of Australia's coming-of-age. And if a nation chooses an act of war for such distinction and such a plainly ambiguous one, giving off clear signs of exploitation, aggression, and self-destruction, what does this create symbolically – and in particular – for our future? Does it also indicate an anxiety about the great contemporary changes as the nation becomes more multi-cultural, more questioned by its intellectuals, by feminism, etc?

If Australian soldiers provided succeeding generations with the necessary male blood, more than enough it appears, perhaps the myth, the symbolic beginning founded there, also serves a strange duty to the national conscience.

The matter is just so complex. Despite all I have written above, I can still be profoundly moved by the tones of a bugle (now usually a trumpet) blowing the Last Post and by the sight of the old men standing in rows. Such emotion, such shared emotion, is inevitably simplistic and yet remains one way of touching, being touched by, the ageless history of human folly, tragedy and perseverance (See p. 163).

LOUIS NOWRA

Although ANZAC was a word with which I was familiar when I was young, I had no precise idea of its meaning. I vaguely knew of ANZAC Day but that was about all. I say 'vaguely' because I had no relatives who marched and because they didn't, it seemed an esoteric ceremony of which, because I was an outsider, I knew very little.

It is interesting that I use the word ceremony because in my puberty ANZAC was synonymous with the ANZAC Day march and to me it seemed as if the former soldiers were reconfirming something sacred just as I confirmed my Irish heritage by marching in the (to me then) more important St Patrick's Day March.

I associated Australians at war with Remembrance Day (11 November) because, like all school children, I was brought into the ritual. The ingredients of this ceremony always seemed the same; there was the headmaster standing at the crackling microphone, his inconsequential words dying away before reaching us, there were the aggressive flies jumping from face to face as we began to sweat in the hot spring morning and when we placed our hands over our hearts, while the Last Post sounded, there was nearly always a giggling boy or girl unable to stand the tension of one minute's silence. Even when young the ceremony had an extraordinary poignancy and the Last Post would evoke in my mind powerful but curiously opaque images, as if I could see images of men dying or the dead through a frosted window. Overall the sharpest, keenest feeling was a sense of loss and at the end of the sixty seconds I always felt profoundly and mysteriously moved. I never felt this when I heard the word ANZAC. It seemed a word lost in time, like some occult, indecipherable word carved in stone and excavated by non-comprehending archaeologists millennia later.

I was more conscious of the word Gallipoli, but only as a battlefield, I had no sense of its other meanings. To me the First World War was as remote as Troy. My only understanding of it was through a story my relatives told me of my grandfather who had fought both at Gallipoli and in France and had been buried alive three times when nearby exploding bombs had buried him under tons of dirt and mud. The third time it took his mates so long to dig him out that he thought he had died. It was said that he never really recovered from this third premature burial and soon afterwards he had to be repatriated back to Australia, forever being afraid of sleeping because he then had nightmares of being entombed alive and suffocating to death. A few months later in 1917 he was on a train travelling back to his hometown of Seymour, Victoria, dressed in his new civvies, when a woman threw a white feather onto his lap, calling him a coward for not being in the army. My grandfather stood up 'to his full height' (all the storytellers agreed on this point) and said proudly, 'Madam, I fought overseas for

three years. I have done my duty.' When I heard this story I liked to think of the woman slinking off into another carriage, thoroughly humiliated and embarrassed.

I gradually accumulated details about the ANZACs as I grew older; Simpson on his donkey, the mateship, the beach landing and the horrifying deaths. I was, of course, aware of the 25 April booze-ups and marches, especially as the marches were now televised on our small black and white TV and I remember not so much the returned soldiers marching down Swanson Street, but the haunting sight of those serious faced boys wearing their deceased father's or grandfather's medals, medals which seemed as large as saucers on the small boys' chests. So intrigued was I by this sight that I enquired about my grandfather's medals but found that they had 'gone missing' and my uncle, who had fought in the Second World War, had so hated the idea of receiving medals for slaughtering his fellow human beings that he refused to accept his at the end of the war.

Questioning as to what ANZAC actually meant started with Alan Seymour's play *The One Day of the Year*. Because it was such a controversial play a television discussion program broadcast an excerpt from it. I think the piece centred on an argument between father and son over what ANZAC Day actually means. I remember thinking that the son was right. To me it seemed a protest play against the moribund and insidiously powerful but out-of-date mythology of ANZAC. Whether this was a correct interpretation of the play I do not know as I have never seen the play as a whole or even read it, but the extract seemed to crystallise my dislike of the older generation and, in a personal way, given the problem of drink in our family, it crystallised my anger at all those drunken men I saw in hotels who seemed oafish braggarts. The ANZAC myth had become twisted and personified in those men who drank themselves silly and who were indifferent or even callous towards their families and so, just as I hated venturing into those foul smelling hotels, so I by-passed what the ANZAC myth meant.

This attitude remained with me for some years and like many of my High School friends and, later, my university friends, ANZAC (or more correctly, its symbolic reinactment at ANZAC Day) became a bad joke. The returned soldiers were derided for living in the past and the drunken, stupefied men who were an essential part of ANZAC Day, symbolized the emptiness of their claims to importance as Australian heroes and worthy carriers of the Australian coming-of-age. At university I also dismissed the First World War as stupid – didn't these men know they had partaken in an obviously imperialistic war?

It wasn't until much later that I grew interested in these men and the ANZAC tradition. A few years ago I caught the tail end of a television documentary about Australians who had been prisoners of the

Japanese. Although the men's experiences on the Burma railway were horrifying the most unsettling feature was how the men brought the war home with them. Many still had nightmares about their experiences, some still tried to strangle their wives in their sleep believing they were Japanese soldiers and successful businessmen secretly collected bits of string or soap, still going through the habits of surviving POW camps. This glimpse of Australians mentally scarred by war intrigued me because it revealed a complex and distressing interior life which these Australian men had always denied they had.

In order to find out why Australians still carried the horror of their experiences with them I started to read all I could about Australians at war. I vividly remember coming across a passage in Gavin Souter's *Lion and Kangaroo*. It was an extract from a soldier's diary, written during the battle of Pozieres, 'Several of my friends are raving mad. I met three officers out in No Man's Land the other night, all ranting and mad'. The thing that startled me was this seemed hidden history. In talking about the ANZAC tradition Australians had never really talked about the true horrors of the war and the way it affected their interior lives.

Although *Inside the Island* was not set in the First World War battlefields, the play came out of my reading about the wars and what happened to the young boys who became ANZACs and at the end of the play the Captain says, 'What they saw ... the things that went on in their heads ... Can they ever see the world the same way they saw it before?'

It was also my question.