

Beyond telling: Narrating trauma in the wartime writings of Great War AIF Chaplain William McKenzie

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Abstract

In a centenary period of Anzac celebration that is often given to the valorising of soldiers' heroic experiences of the First World War, this article introduces teachers to a case study of William McKenzie. Once a house-hold name, the legendary Salvation Army Chaplain of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) McKenzie documented his responses to the trauma of war in his prolific letters and diaries. Drawing heavily on primary sources, this article suggests that McKenzie's story recaptures the essence of what it means to be Christian educators: being engaged in the midst of suffering, disarray and confusion. In the variety of human experiences encountered in the classroom and the playground, the presence of Christian educators must leave a legacy and provide a model for being salt and light.

How does one make sense of that which is unimaginable or put words upon that which is unspeakable? How does a soldier, who is stripped of so many things that we cherish as human when he enters battle, begin to construct his humanity?

(Saks, 2007, p. 591)

Introduction

Legendary Salvation Army Chaplain William

McKenzie of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) of 1914-1918 was of robust constitution and resilient character, with enormous vitality and earnest conviction, and a strong sense of purpose and connection to family, church, nation, Empire and God. Despite these apparent advantages for emotional wellbeing, he was invalidated home in early 1918 suffering from war trauma (Reynaud 2015, pp. 166-167, 177-178). As writing is considered to be a key therapeutic way of dealing with trauma, this article explores what McKenzie's writings reveal about how he processed the traumas that he experienced in the Great War between 1915 and 1917. His literary output varied from letters to family members of soldiers, to Salvation Army Commissioner for Australia James Hay, to his wife Annie and to his children, and his Gallipoli diary. Despite the fact that he labelled his experiences as "beyond telling," (McKenzie, Diary, August 6, 1915, Australian War Memorial (AWM) PR 84/150) McKenzie consistently, even compulsively, reverted to words to convey them. Both implicitly and overtly, he demonstrated that the act of recording was somehow vital in making sense of these experiences.

As a Chaplain, McKenzie confronted the traumas of war in a way that was perhaps more concentrated than that of the regular combat soldier, having to deal far more frequently and consistently with the mutilation and death of thousands of men. He had to identify dismembered corpses, and bury them, often under shell fire. He also had a voluminous

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correspondence with the distressed relatives. But as chaplains of the time were ill trained and prepared for the traumas that they experienced (Wilkinson, 1978, p. 244), it is hardly surprising that the accumulation of such experiences eventually undermined his health and degraded his capacity to serve. However, while his faith could not shield him from the effects of trauma, it offered help in recovery and remained a powerful witness to Christ in the memories of the men, many of whom were irreligious, who witnessed him in action. His story is a model of how Christian leaders can engage with communities of mixed beliefs and influence them positively even through traumatic circumstances.

Trauma: studies and definitions

While trauma has been associated with war since ancient times (Davoine & Gaudillière, 2004, p. 105) the study of how to treat war trauma had its origins in the Great War, as the stress of war caused an epidemic of emotional injuries which incapacitated vast numbers of soldiers who bore no physical injuries (Herman, 1992, p. 20; Davoine & Gaudillière, 2004, pp. 106-108). Old categories of cowardice or 'lack of moral fibre' had to be abandoned in the face of the present reality, and a new field of psychological research opened up. There is now a large body of scholarly writing to underpin and inform a study of the war writings of McKenzie in relationship to the very evident trauma that he suffered. War is now well recognised as emotionally distressing through exposure to shocking injuries, disfigurements and deaths, as well as the stresses of sustained combat (Briere & Scott, 2006, p. 9). Literature on the topic of trauma and the Great War includes creative writing (notably the war poets Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Wilfred Owen, and novelist Erich Maria Remarque), as well as the work of historians and psychologists.

Trauma is defined as a reaction to a life-threatening event; this reaction is mediated by interpersonal and intrapsychic coping mechanisms, and the duration and intensity of the trauma. What distinguishes trauma from other life experiences is the tendency for somatic and psychological systems to intrude in various ways and thus becomes part of the present experience, though not all who suffer trauma will develop the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), 2013, pp. 271-272). McKenzie, through his prolific writings, gives witness to symptoms of PTSD, including depression and a degrading of coherent meaning; 'nerves' (a catch-all term of the era for manifestations of as-yet clinically undefined psychophysiological injuries); uncontrollable trembling; persistent nightmares; and

chronic memory loss. In addition he also suffered neuritis, which left him in physical agony and barely able to crawl on all fours, recurring fevers, vomiting, and 'di-o-rea' (as he loved to write it).

War trauma can be studied from various perspectives; this article takes a historian's approach rather than a clinical one, and so seeks to understand how McKenzie's writing both reflected his trauma and helped him cope. Historians have noted the complex relationships that processing war trauma takes through interactions of writing and audience (including the self, the military censors, and various family members and friends at home) (Damousi, 1999; Fussell, 1977; Larrison, 2006; Roper, 2010; Shepherd, 2000).

Voicing the wound

The wartime writing of McKenzie may serve as literary exemplars of the concept of voicing the wound, where trauma "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth 1996, p. 4). Scholars identify the central part played by writing in allowing soldiers to come "to terms with their harrowing loss," noting that "they fumbled to find a voice to convey the meaning of such extraordinary experiences," using writing as "they attempted to order, contain and control the chaos which surrounded them" (Damousi, 1999, pp. 9-11), despite the universal sentiment that language could not convey the experience of the war (Fussell, 1977, p. 170).

McKenzie's compulsion to write, wrestling with the complexity of attempting both to reveal and conceal experiences shaped by trauma, represents the contention of trauma specialists that there remained an intrinsic need to record linguistically the disaster of war and disclose its traces rather than try to erase its impact through complete silence (Wilson & Lindy, 2013, p. 35). This need to assert language in order to speak of (and protest) traumatic effect/affect is powerfully referenced in McKenzie's first-hand accounts of the impact of the war. "War is indeed 'Hell,'" he wrote of his first traumatic experiences at Gallipoli, "and no adequate description can picture it" (Diary, May 24, 1915, AWM PR 84/150).

The use of therapy through verbalisation goes back to physician Josef Breuer and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, then developed by French psychologist Pierre Janet, Ira Progoff and James Pennebaker, to become a leading therapy in the present era. Researchers now easily point to the growing consensus from clinicians and theorists that expressive writing can be a tactical response to traumatic situations.

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Despite McKenzie's suggestion of language's flawed capacity to retrieve accurately and adequately describe traumatic knowledge, there is persistent evidence of his recourse to language to represent traumatic experience, which in turn could still perform aspects of therapeutic exercise. McKenzie's writings embody one scholar's observation that victims of trauma simultaneously felt that "I must write. I must tell about this" and "there is no way to tell. It is beyond description—unspeakable" (Chandler, 1989, p. 4).

For McKenzie, bearing witness to his war trauma through his writing helped retain his perception of coherence, cohesiveness and connection in relation to traumatic experiences. In the process of 'voicing' his experiences of the war, McKenzie used written activities involving self-disclosure as an opportunity to counter a sense of fragmentation through authoring patterned, coherent and manageable texts. So instead of the trauma and chaos of war being completely exiled from broader social consciousness, McKenzie reclaimed, re-visited, re-visited and re-versioned events, especially in the light of his faith and mission. The production of diaries and letters for intended audiences functioned as an important means of re-orientation and re-anchoring McKenzie in the social order, and thus his storying, can be viewed as an essential component in compassing the radical dislocation caused by the nihilistic context of the front line.

McKenzie's narratives as 'Writing Performance'

Two key types of McKenzie's writings can be classified as 'writing performance' for their tendency to come from his formal roles as Chaplain in the AIF and Officer of The Salvation Army: his letters to individuals about the fate of their loved ones, and his letters to his civilian employer James Hay. These roles required him to write about his war experiences, but the governing frame of reference was always his official positions rather than his personal reactions.

While almost nothing remains of his thousands of letters to families of soldiers in Australia, each communication channel acted as a means of describing and codifying the "fragmentations or dissociations, defilements and humiliations, helplessness, and other overwhelming grief anxieties.... [which] destabilize or disintegrate basic beliefs" (Kauffman, 2010, p. 8). His intended audience also helped shape the way in which he constructed his war narrative; there was an interplay between writer, genre and audience in the process of sharing his experiences, for the nature of a soldier's audience was a powerful

factor in shaping what he wrote about and how he expressed it (Roper, 2010, p. 25). By McKenzie's judicious selection of narrative incident and voice, he attempted to address the question: "Can language be found for this experience that will not be obscured or deformed? Will a listener emerge to hear it?" (Gilmore, 2001, p. 132). He was a privileged communicator, in that his own letters were not censored, allowing him to speak with a frankness that many other soldiers did not enjoy.

McKenzie's letters to individual members of the public stemmed from several motivations. Many were written on his initiative to the families of soldiers who were wounded or killed. Others were responses to enquiries from members of the public, often prompted by excerpts from his letters published in The Salvation Army press and reprinted in country newspapers. His correspondence in this field was enormous, numbering tens of thousands of letters during the war. The few that survive show that the construction of war experiences in these letters was very careful, designed in a pastoral manner, rather than dealing with his own trauma. This did not prevent them from containing frank descriptions at times, but they were always framed in a way that constructed a positive contribution from the subject soldier.

His letters to James Hay (Australian War Memorial, n.d.a), his Salvation Army superior, also indicated wider audience awareness. More frank than the letters to families, McKenzie was fully aware that their contents would be published in the Salvation Army newspaper *The War Cry*, and consequently he tailored his writing to that readership of his broader church constituency, and the members of the public who would buy it. Occasionally, he wrote details which he instructed Hay not to publish. In other letters, a pencil has been drawn through particular incidents, probably by Hay or an editor at *The War Cry*, ensuring that only acceptable details were printed. For his Salvation Army audience, McKenzie emphasised the evangelistic successes of his work, and diminished the traumatic war experiences.

In letters to individuals of the general public and to Hay/The Salvation Army/*The War Cry* readership, McKenzie's writing elided over some of the realities of war in favour of an upbeat context of spiritual salvation, national pride or personal honour. A rare surviving letter (Snelling, 1995) to the family of a Victoria Cross-winning soldier after the Battle of Lone Pine in August 1915 demonstrates this capacity. He wrote of the terrible suffering and casualties that Willie Dustan's unit experienced, and noted that Willie was severely wounded, hastily adding:

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but not at all dangerously. He will suffer considerable pain for a couple of weeks, or even four, but will probably be as right as possible again in six or seven weeks' time. He proved himself a capable, intelligent, intrepid young warrior in his first fight. It was one of the most desperate and stubborn nature. There is no need whatsoever to worry about him. He is doing all right. There is every reason to feel proud of such a son.

(p. 186)

To Hay he gave an extended account of a young Scotsman who found assurance in Christ the night before Lone Pine, being killed the next day. McKenzie's narrative allowed the tragedy to have the promise of eternal salvation as its defining frame. *The War Cry* published his account of the Battle of Lone Pine, which was a rather sanitised heroic narrative compared to his diary and letters to his wife, though he permitted himself some strong language regarding war itself. He concluded that, "War may be magnificent, but I think it the most damnable insensate folly of which mankind could be guilty" (*War Cry*, October 23, 1915, p. 10).

Ironically, as conditions grew worse in France and McKenzie's own state deteriorated, his public letters assumed a more flamboyant and humorous style when describing his situation. In one letter to *The War Cry* (January 13, 1917), he made light of the conditions at the front.

At present we are waging a woeful war in waders with slobbery, watering whirls wearily whisking round one's waist in some of the trenches, and withering wintry winds whistling round your withers. Ugh! It is calculated to cool the combustible characteristics of the fiercest fire-eater, and make him sigh for a little bit o' 'eaven 'ere, and 'ome, sweet 'ome, be it ever so 'umble.

(p. 4)

In another whitewash statement, when he was in fact suffering quite intensely, he described himself as having "a brave heart, a chastened spirit, a cool head, a firm step, a strong fist, a dauntless soul, a gripping faith, a clear vision, a fighting fervour, a love of good things, a hatred of the devil, a hope of heaven, a vision of the glory. So I guess I ought to be happy" (*War Cry*, January 13, 1919, p. 3; March 3, 1917, pp. 1, 3). The rhetoric was quite misleading, and perhaps its intended audience was as much himself as others.

Characteristically, these kinds of writings lacked the close detail and harrowing personal consequences of his other accounts of the same events. While they allowed McKenzie to recompose

the war traumas as a patterned, coherent narrative with clear spiritual and national closure which reflected his own personal convictions, the absence of naming the trauma and the lack of immediacy marked them out as textual performance rather than therapy. The narratives stemmed from functionality and role; they were disassociated and abstracted, and their report-like nature placed them in the realm of concealing rather than revealing trauma. They were good propaganda for domestic consumption, placing the Australian soldiers, and McKenzie's role as an ambassador of The Salvation Army, in the best possible light. In effect, these writings were simultaneously an act of revealing and an act of concealing. The language he found for these experiences was in fact obscuring and deforming, but he found many willing listeners to hear it.

McKenzie's narratives as 'Writing Therapeutic'

But another category of McKenzie's writing demonstrated a much greater engagement with the capacity for telling the untellable, as it was personally rather than professionally motivated. Firstly, McKenzie's Gallipoli diary, written in his bold, impatient hand, recorded his war experiences. But while it is frank, there is an abstraction in its tone, as if writing to an ideal self or future audience. The entries still demonstrated a number of therapeutic qualities. As is characteristic of Great War trench writing (Shephard, 2000, pp. 260-261), they were often distorted, raw and unprocessed, capturing the fragmentation characteristic of traumatic experiences, but they named the trauma graphically, ensuring that the memory did not become repressed. The compelling need to record is evident in the recording of very specific details, such as numbers of men killed and wounded, or of conversions at his religious meetings, and his writing displayed an evident sense of both empathy and community, and often constructed his experiences into a larger, spiritual world-view.

For example, his entry concerning the massive Turkish counterattack at Gallipoli juxtaposed both glee ("*our men and machine guns did great execution... Many reckoning it the best sport they ever had. It put them in great heart, and they long for such another go*") and mourning ("*I had a very trying duty the next day, burying our own dead. I thought so much of the many sad hearts in Australia, when they know of our losses*") (Diary, May 18, 1915, AWM PR 84/150). His sense of community was expressed in speaking of 'our boys' and his empathetic connection to their grieving families is transparent. On the other hand, it is evident that at times of greatest trauma, writing up diary entries took place some days or even weeks after the event, when he had the time to

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catch up the entries. At these points, it can lose its immediacy and become like a report.

Letters to his children, addressed to them individually, were notable for their almost complete absence of war information, save for the occasional promise of battle souvenirs for the boys. Otherwise, they adopted a tone suited to the age and interests of each child and, while not directly concerned with the war, offered McKenzie a haven of imaginative engagement in his children's lives, a kind of positive disassociation, that he later claimed helped keep him sane (Reynaud, 2015, p. 146). The refuge of confining himself solely to their world both acted as a temporary escape from the stress of war, and reinforced his sense of belonging to community that helped sustain him. Indeed at one stage he revealed to his wife that the thought of "your welfare with that of the children" was all that prevented him from a desperate, suicidal charge at the enemy, so low had his spirits become (Letter to Annie McKenzie, October 28, 1916, AWM PR 84/150).

The most effective therapeutic writing that McKenzie undertook was in letters to his wife Annie. It was evidently a very close relationship, but not without its complicating factors. Annie was distressed over his extended absence, was struggling as the sole parent of her troublesome teenage boys, feared internment because of her German background and worried over her impulsive, action-oriented husband's safety on the battlefields. McKenzie was sufficiently aware of her pain to restrict the frankness of his early letters, but as the war progressed, the writing became more and more confessional, naming his trauma, and giving voice to the unspeakable that he experienced. The compulsion to write is evident again, especially when he began letters by describing his own pleasure in writing to her. As with the children, it offered him an oasis, a refuge, in the war. His insistence that she carefully keep all his letters shows that his writing was important, not just for the present but also as a legacy allowing him in the future to construct his current traumatic work as meaningful (Letters to Annie, January 21, 1916; circa August 1916, AWM PR 84/150). Her role as a confidante and guardian of information not to be disclosed to others suggests that these letters played an active role in how he processed his trauma. Unlike his war diary, the audience is concrete and real, the relationship is connected, and she bears witness to his trauma.

These letters reveal most clearly McKenzie's own journey into fragmentation brought on by trauma, but also illustrate the healthy ways in which he processed his experiences. They have the greatest sense of immediacy of all his war writings, locating the narrative on the page both in the immediate time

and space. He described writing "by candlelight in my dugout or cave, the bullets are whizzing over my head through the air by the thousands" (Letter to Annie, May 20, 1915, AWM PR 84/150). Writing in such circumstances confirms the compelling need to record, despite the circumstances. Occasionally, he was more positive in his letters than in his diary (for example the account of the May 24, 1915 armistice burials in his diary and his letter to Annie on May 30, AWM PR 84/150), but the letters still demonstrate an honesty, reality and personal quality that could be absent from his diary. In one, he admitted that he had little news, but countered this self-censoring with the fact that "you get this [news] in the [news] papers with many lies added." He described his energy levels as so low that he had "to apply 'the whip' occasionally." He went on to comment about his heavy workload, but quietly bragged about the honour that this brought him from the men (Letter to Annie, September 5, 1915, AWM PR 84/150).

McKenzie was quite consistent in reconnecting to community through the letters to his wife. He emphasised the importance of Annie to his own emotional wellbeing. "I get very heart hungry at times and homesick too" he wrote. "I long to see you all and clasp you to my breast. You are a great joy and comfort to me and I'm so glad you are mine. I lay for three hours last night having such kind thoughts of you and it did me good." The letters bear witness to his service to those he felt called to serve, by God, church and country. He repeatedly spoke of fulfilling his divine mission of bringing soldiers to Christ, and bringing honour to The Salvation Army. At times he used humour to lighten descriptions of the arduous conditions under which he lived, once suggesting that post-war accommodation could be much cheaper by renting a well-appointed dugout (Letter to Annie, May 4, 1916, AWM PR 84/150).

The letters also demonstrate the safety he had in simply pouring out his unprocessed feelings onto a page, without the need to clean them up for consumption. One epistle juxtaposed dreadful details of horrendous casualties with upbeat predictions of a quick end to the war, followed by descriptions of the terrible effect of new weapons, blended with assurances of victory by God's grace (Letter to Annie McKenzie, August 6, 1916, AWM PR 84/150). This letter illustrates perfectly the fragmentary nature of war trauma sensations, but also the safety that he had in voicing these to Annie.

Most dramatically, McKenzie recorded in letters to Hay and to Annie many occasions when he responded to direct instructions via a 'Voice' which repeatedly saved his life. "I have learned to promptly obey and so come off all right," he wrote to Annie. "Sometimes it is 'go' others 'do not go' and again 'get

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away quickly,' 'lie down,' 'be careful,' 'go in there'. It is very striking and has deeply impressed me." He interpreted this as the voice of his guardian angel, giving him divine protection for as long as his work remained unfinished, imbuing him with fearless assurance on the battlefield (Letter to Annie, August 20, 1916, AWM PR 84/150; War Cry, October 14, 1916, p. 3).

But the letters of 1916-1917 reveal a gradual whittling away of his confidence, morale and capacity to retain an integrated world view under the strain of the trauma. Several times he lashed out in anger at the Germans, wishing for blood-curdling retribution on them even at the cost of a million German civilian casualties (Letter to Annie, October 10, 1916, AWM PR 84/150). In other letters, he expressed weariness at bearing witness to death, and had "got almost to feel as if nothing now mattered, life is so cheap here." Yet even at this low point, he managed to construct meaning, saying that a last "desperate and furious charge" would offer him the chance of an honourable death for his country and "in the vindication of righteousness and the liberty of the subject [which] is supremely grand" (Letter to Annie, October 28, 1916, AWM PR 84/150). He gradually admitted that he was war weary and would "have hard work to avoid a collapse later on," and was perplexed at his puzzling loss of memory (Letter to Annie, June 17, 1917, AWM PR 84/150). Despite having 'real good' services, sports and concerts for the men, he said that he could no longer cope with writing sympathetic letters to the families of the dead (Letter to Annie, August 22, 1917, AWM PR 84/150). Within a couple of weeks he composed a fatalistic letter admitting in language strikingly uncharacteristic of his normal God-given certitude that the once-clear outcome of the war "is a mystery in the lap of the gods," leaving him "to wonder if there is really a God after all who loves justice." However, he immediately turned to talk of the children, delighting in reports of his young daughter's performances at concerts (Letter to Annie, September 2, 1917, AWM PR 84/150). Even at his worst, McKenzie reintegrated himself into community. Within weeks, his repatriation to Australia was formalised, though the process dragged out until January 1918.

Conclusion

McKenzie's war writings demonstrate a remarkably healthy engagement with the paradox of "put[ting] words upon that which is unspeakable." While much of his war writing was performance required by the nature of his role, his letters to family acted as a safety valve through which he could name the trauma, giving voice to the wound which cried out. The letters helped him retain a sense of location in his own past and future, constructing meaning and purpose into

his present wartime role. Out of the shame of dealing with horrific death and injury, he could reconstruct honour; out of the fragmentary experiences of trauma, he reconnected to his family, the 'boys' of his brigade, his church, nation and God. Through his war writing, McKenzie was able to recreate pattern, structure, closure, coherence and balance from his fragmentary, traumatic experiences. While engaging in rather effective practices, the trauma which McKenzie experienced proved too great and too sustained even for so resilient a personality as himself, and he was invalidated home.

The pattern of his post-war career followed this disjunction, for on his return, he reintegrated with his wife and family, resumed his high-profile evangelistic career in The Salvation Army, and became a magnetic Anzac celebrity in Australia for the next twenty years. Yet the trauma of the war never left him; he suffered from appalling nightmares for some time, and never fully recovered his memory. Twenty years later, the recurrence of the telling memory lapses that had been a catalyst for his repatriation from war triggered his retirement from The Salvation Army. As therapists and researchers recognise (Caruth, 1996, p. 4; Scaer, 2005, p. 253), even a healthy engagement with traumatic experiences does not 'unmake' the wound, which still cries out. Yet it was precisely these experiences which made his engagement with soldiers so powerful: their shared nature gave his Christian witness authenticity.

The lessons for Christian educators are profound; we are "wounded healers" (Nouwen, 1979), fellow pilgrims, a tiny piece of God in a world deeply scarred by trauma. It is in our woundedness that we form empathic connection, thus giving powerful witness to the message of Christ.

McKenzie's story is a compelling narrative that contains tragedy and heroism, faith and doubt, set in the historical context of a war central to Australian memory. It is, however, more than a story of hope and despair arising out of a man's struggle to integrate the worst and best of human nature. It is also a profoundly Christian story in which the metaphors of salt and light (Matt 5:13-16) so familiar to us from the Gospels are poignant indicators of the story's timeless relevance. McKenzie brought many soldiers to a knowledge of salvation; however, the reason he was revered was for his ability, in the most trying of circumstances, to make a difference in the lives of those whose journey he shared (Reynaud, 2015, pp. 233-243). He connected with and immersed himself in the lives of the soldiers. For Christian educators, this is not just an acknowledgement of history, but an example of the power of genuine engagement in the midst of suffering and brokenness. The incarnational model of ministry focuses not just

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on eternal destiny but on the present lived experience. The fact that, in Christian schools, many students will not become committed followers of Christ should not deter us from being the presence of God in the lives of those whose journey we share. The example and legacy of McKenzie becomes a model for how to make a difference, a model well worth sharing with our students. **TEACH**

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