‘The Anzac Legend Didn’t Mention Mud: Australian Novels of the Western Front’

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Mud was not the least of ironies of war on the Western Front. Nor was it the least of ironies that trenches had been dug ‘where the water-table was the highest and the annual rainfall most copious,’ Paul Fussell observed in his classic study of British literary responses, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (47). Beyond irony, mud was a ‘gruesome fact no one had planned for.’ It claimed the lives of countless thousands ‘drowned’ nowhere ‘near the sea,’ Adam Hochschild observed in *To End All Wars* (211). Mud defined the main theatres of operation and was code for the Western Front even when the conditions were dry. Passchendaele was known as the ‘Battle of Mud’ while Ypres was called ‘Wipers’ partly on account of the atrocious conditions. Australian photographer Frank Hurley’s iconic images at Chateau Wood reveal something of the extent of the quagmire (employing compositional methods that brought him into frequent dispute with the creator of the Anzac myth, C. E. W. Bean) while bombs and rain poured down on the Somme and turned the earth into a ‘dark glutinous sea,’ as Leonard Mann called it in his 1932 novel *Flesh in Armour*. Vance Palmer’s ‘mud and misty figures’ of battle fatigued diggers emerge from the ‘foul morass’ and persist into nightmares ‘endlessly coming,’ even when the war is over in the 1920 poem ‘The Farmer Remembers the Somme’ (Holloway 110). Soldier-novelist Edward Lynch wrote simply in *Somme Mud*: ‘We live in it, work in it, fight in it, wade in it, and many of us die in it. We see it, feel it, eat it and curse it, but we cannot escape it, not even by dying’ (108).

Also beyond irony, John Schumann’s line ‘the Anzac legend didn’t mention mud’ from the 1983 song ‘I was Only Nineteen’ plays dirt music to Australia literature. Among exceptions that prove this general rule and principle is Mann’s *Flesh in Armour.* Originally published privately in a print run of a thousand copies after failing to secure a commercial imprint, the novel was mired in controversy for blaspheming Australia’s foundation myth and secular religion of Anzac. An irate contributor to the book trade magazine *All About Books* complained ‘surely higher instincts cannot condone the unsavoury contents’ (50). This was nothing short of warning off publishers from any consideration of a commercial imprint and retail outlets against any thoughts of stocking copies. The commentary centred on Mann’s characterisation of soldiers’ morals and manners—‘[He] does not hesitate to give his readers the unpleasant and lurid details of this tragedy’—that disrespects the Anzac legend—‘disgusted with the view Mr Mann presents of our Australian Infantry’ (50). More recent analysis suggests that *Flesh in Armour* survived controversial beginnings to be incorporated, with time, as a ‘portable monument’ and indicative text of the war experience (Spittel 189).

Between these contrasting views, *Flesh in Armour* may be read as an expressive novel of Australian soldiers’ experiences on the Western Front and also an exception across the range of interwar Australian literary responses, in a similar fashion to British trench poetry which is held in some quarters to be indicative of the experience of the trenches (Sherry 7) while being criticised in others as marginal to and unrepresentative of the greater volume of British poetry written about the war (Bond 31). I suggest here that Mann’s depictions of the muddy conditions of the Western Front contrast with the sacralised soils of Gallipoli. Further, I observe that mud has been a much neglected topic partially at least on account of the persistence of the Anzac

legend. By drawing a distinction between the diggers on the Western Front and the Anzacs at Gallipoli, I anticipate being chided for questioning Australia's most durable martial legend and 'myth to live by,' as historian Alistair Thomson calls the Anzac story. My arguments follow on from a 2019 intervention, 'Desert Worlds,' focusing on the dust and desert sands of Egypt where Australian troops had been based in preparation for Gallipoli.

Across a generation of scholarship, beginning with Robin Gerster's 1989 *Big Noting* through to Clare Rhoden's 2015 *The Purpose of Futility*, major studies have argued persuasively that Australian war writing highlights the heroic figure of the Anzac. My lesser and somewhat contrary contributions over a similar timeframe have focused on the problematic hero and a dissenting tradition of repatriation literature by interwar novelists such as Katharine Susannah Prichard, Vance Palmer, Kylie Tennant, Martin Boyd and Eleanor Dark, among others. More recently, Ffion Murphy and I have attempted to demonstrate that the Anzac legend shaped wounded storytelling in Albert Facey's massively popular memoir *A Fortunate Life* while masking the extent of the returned soldier's war trauma. Taking our cue from the Medical Humanities and History of Emotions literature and research, we have also attempted to assess official efforts to contain grief by the regulation of social convention and punitive application of the 1914–1915 War Precautions Act. One of the authors we cite, Eleanor Dark, hints at widespread repression in her 1934 novel *Prelude to Christopher*:

> How otherwise could they have lived, those countless thousands of parents and wives, how otherwise have they preserved their own sanity? They did not want to see them otherwise—as man-power wasted, as genius flung away, as potential fatherhood most tragically sacrificed. They did not want to probe too deeply into causes, and still less into ultimate effects. Leave them their coverings. (63)

I argue here that a small though significant cluster of war writings by Australian-born novelists shifts the Australian gaze from the beach and rocky outcrops of Anzac to the saturated lowlands and reclaimed marshes of the Western Front. These novels deal with abjection and profanity whose most persistent metaphor is mud.

My topic, then, is mud and the mud of war, which is a messy subject by contrast to the more finely grained work of Christina Spittel, Carolyn Holbrook, and Clare Rhoden who have been among the first to challenge and successfully overturn decades-old assumptions that Australian produced little war literature of any distinction. My readings of *Flesh in Armour* alongside *Somme Mud* and Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* might suggest agreement with Rhoden that Europe had been wrecked by the war—'Millions lost their lives, millions more suffered devastating injuries, towns disappeared wholesale into the mud'—though I am more cautious around the proposition that 'Australia leapt from the debris, led by Anzacs silhouetted against the rising sun' (23). Except, insofar as the narrative of Anzac served to shape and divert literary attention away from the dirty business of that war, what Mann bitterly referred to as 'the dung for the new flowering and fruit of the future' (347). The pungency of his mudscapes is suggestive of an alternative digger narrative by contrast to the more prevalent Anzac legend and its central heroic figure.

Mud and Blood and Fear

Responding to an upsurge in war writing in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties, a notice in the Melbourne *Argus* referred to *Flesh in Armour* rather disparagingly as being 'influenced' by the 'Remarque school of war writing' ('New Novels'). Mann distanced himself from the

comparison and claimed that he had not read *All Quiet on the Western Front* which was published around the same time as he began writing *Flesh in Armour*. Such an emphatic declaration may appear surprising though it is consistent with an Australian novelist's desire to have his Australian war novel accepted as possessing an authentic Australian character. Almost certainly, Mann was aware of negative responses to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which was outlawed for a time as an obscene publication (Moore 76). However, Mann's public distancing did not produce the desired result. The 'controversy' over the publication of *Flesh in Armour* 'resembled that which had dogged *All Quiet on the Western Front*,' observed Holbrook (81).

It seems reasonable to speculate that Mann had in fact read Remarque's novel—he was certainly aware of its negative Australian reception—and another focusing on the British experience, *Her Privates We*, which also appeared in 1929. Written by the expatriate Australian Frederic Manning, who had, like Martin Boyd, fought with British forces on the Western Front, *Her Privates We* is an expurgated version of Manning's original *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929). In common with *Flesh in Armour*, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* had been initially printed privately in a limited edition, though in London. The subsequent bowdlerised version quickly sold out its 15,000 copies, published by Peter Davies. Yet, unlike Mann, who harboured hopes that *Flesh in Armour* might be scooped up as a commercial imprint by the Australian publisher Angus & Robertson—after it had been awarded the 1933 Gold Medal for Australian Literature—Manning's novel was a commercial as well as critical success among its mainly British readership. It is probable that Mann was aware that the pseudonymous author of *Her Privates We*, 'Private 19022' (Manning's enlistment number), was a 'Native of Sydney,' as Australian newspapers reported in 1930 (*Age* 9).

There is textual evidence in *Flesh in Armour* to suggest influences from both Remarque and Manning that deserves fuller exploration than is possible here. Suffice it to say for the moment that *Flesh in Armour* was generally avoided by readers who considered it to be an 'Australian *All Quiet on the Western Front*,' as the novelist and critic John Ewers put it in 1933 (5). *Flesh in* Armour*, The Middle Parts of Fortune* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* all focus on ordinary soldiers. Each depicts central characters who are psychologically traumatised by the mud and blood and fear of war and who are killed in the final scenes. Mann's Frank Jeffreys and Remarque's Paul Baumer die on otherwise quiet days, while Manning's Bourne is fatally wounded just as the danger to his life seems to have abated. His 'face' is 'plastered with mud, and blood drying thickly about his mouth and chin' while surviving men sit 'silently: each man keeping his own secret' (301).

The third novel I consider here, *Somme Mud*, remained unpublished in its own time and falls within a category of being 'birth strangled' as the interwar critic Nettie Palmer violently referred to unpublished manuscripts. E. P. F. (Edward) Lynch had hand-written a first draft into twenty notebooks around the same time as Mann had completed the writing of *Flesh in Armour*. The 'scars and pain of the Great War' in the interwar years 'were too new and too deep for the public to want to be reminded of it,' according to the novel's twenty first century editor Will Davies (xii). The manuscript was revised and typed by Lynch while he was serving in New Guinea in the 1940s, having re-enlisted for the Second World War. Upon its belated publication in 2006, historian Bill Gammage likened *Somme Mud* to *All Quiet on the Western Front*: 'in the trenches, enduring the mud and the cold . . . suffering death's randomness' (vii), noting that both works are written in the present tense. Unlike *Flesh in Armour* and *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, Lynch's protagonist, Nulla, survives the war and in the final scenes, on the long sea voyage home, engages in self-reflection and animated debate with other returning diggers. There are

heated exchanges about the reasons for enlisting and the course of the war on the Western Front (332).

Thematic similarities with *Flesh in Armour* may be coincidental—for example there are almost identical scenes inside rail carriages marked '*40 hommes ou 8 chevaux* (40 men or 8 horses)' (*Somme* 19, *Flesh* 29) and both novels feature action at Pozieres and Mouquet Farm—borne of the fact that the novels are fictionalised accounts of their authors' experiences as soldiers on the Western Front. In a like manner, it may be little more than coincidence that Lynch's Nulla and Manning's Bourne possess French as a second language. Lynch may have read *Flesh in Armour*—I think that is likely—in the 1930s or in the 1940s around the same time that Robertson and Mullens produced a pocket edition that was distributed in a print run of 25,000 copies as part of a series of Australian classics with financial assistance from the recently reformed Commonwealth Literary Fund.[1] More speculatively, Lynch may have read Manning's *Her Privates We*. An analysis of his hand-written drafts produced in the immediate post-war period against the 1940s typescript might reveal valuable evidence of the novel's provenance and development, as well as influences over the intervening decades.

Flesh in Armour, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* and *Somme Mud* have similar plot lines, opening with journeying towards battle, detailing life in the trenches, followed by relief behind the lines or on leave, and return to the trenches. Jeffreys, Bourne and Nulla have officer potential though they remain within the ranks,[2] the life of which is the focus of the novels. Mud is the prime element in each. In his editor's preface to *Somme Mud*, Davies notes that Lynch had arrived at the Western Front but would not have 'known that when winter set in in late November 1916, the war would become one of survival against the elements rather than simply the Germans' (xi). That is also the experience of Nulla who observes on his first day: 'absolutely unbelievable conditions . . . a solid sea of slimy mud' (22).

Mann had suffered a breakdown after being buried in the mud, a key autobiographical detail fictionally rendered in *Flesh in Armour*. His protagonist Jeffreys, like Manning's Bourne had survived squalid conditions in the trenches, though the burial leaves him rattled and unhinged. Importantly, the mud of *Flesh in Armour*, *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, and *Somme Mud*, contrasts with Australian literary preferences for the sand, shale and limestone of Gallipoli and, by war's end, the desert sands of Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. For Ted Marshall in *Flesh in Amour*, Gallipoli 'seemed centuries ago' (201) while somewhere in the middle of the Indian Ocean Nulla and other returning diggers are treated to lectures about the exploits of the heroic Light Horse at Palestine and Sinai. By less than a few degrees of separation another Australian former serviceman Arthur Wheen had translated *All Quiet on the Western Front* and given Remarque his distinctive English-language title from the original *Im Westen night Neues* (*Nothing New on the Western Front*). Such networks and potential influences are becoming better known to the extent that it is now possible to assert that Australian writers (and, in the case of the translator, who produced a few lesser known stories) contributed to an international literature of mud on the Western Front.

The entire front 'exuded mud' and soldiers 'became almost indistinguishable' from it, observed Manning in *The Middle Parts of Fortune*. Like Henri Barbusse's 1916 French novel *Under Fire*, Manning's mud 'threatened, if neglected for a moment, to become tidal' and overwhelm everyone and everything, 'life was now one of unresting struggle against the encroaching mud which threatened to engulf roads and trenches in liquid ruin' (222). Bearing striking similarities to descriptions by trench poet Wilfred Owen, an exhausted Bourne falls into a fitful sleep full of nightmares as battles rage around him: 'he felt the mud sucking him down, he could not

extricate his feet from it . . . and then terrible hands, terrible dead hands came out of that living mud, and men with exultant bestial faces rushed at him, and he fought, fought desperately' (273). Both figuratively and literally, the mud of the Western Front contains the dead and the undead ever-ready to claim the living.

For Mann, the war is conducted across burial sites containing putrescent human remains, redistributed under bombardment and made indistinguishable from the churn, apart from the foul smell which is omnipresent. Mud soils every uniform, dirties all exposed areas and finds its way beneath coverings and into every crease of skin. 'Frank Jeffreys, like the others, when he fell down into the thick stinking ooze, was afraid that he would fall one time or another into one of the black putrid pools . . . Another shell spurted only a dozen yards away, bespattering their filthiness with more filth. They went on and on, dripping with the rotten wet' (75–76). Four out of five Australian casualties were inflicted in the heavier and frequently inundated loams and clays of the Western Front. Yet, if 'we told 'em back in Australia that we stood up knee-deep in the mud of a front-line trench in the freezin' cold,' Nulla, observes, 'without sleep, except what we could get standing up, for six days and seven nights at a stretch, s'pose they'd reckon we were tellin' flamin' lies?' (47).

Buried Alive

The Western Front was not only contaminated with the remains of the dead and the waste of the living, it assaulted all the five senses of sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch, held together in a fragile union of abjection and moral fear as the qualities that distinguished the sentient from the slain. Allied big guns fired more than four million shells in a barrage creating a relentless soundscape lasting two weeks before the infantry was given the order to advance across the mud of Passchendaele in 1917. Taking up position along the Menin Road, Jeffreys's platoon gains its first sight of the destruction in *Flesh in Armour*. 'This new landscape,' they observe had been 'blasted into awful desolation,' leaving it 'rank with straggling grasses and muddy stagnant pools' as further 'heavy' clouds gather across the 'leaden sky' bringing 'more rain' (46–47). The entire area is transformed into an oozing morass of barely separated soaks. At the Somme, Nulla's platoon similarly prepares to 'advance over a thick, muddy, shell torn stretch of country that is unknown to them, against a foe whose strength or whereabouts they have but a very hazy idea and to take a position which is merely a map position' (184); what Mann simply refers to as 'terra incognita' (46).

Contrasting the heroic if ultimately futile maritime invasion of Gallipoli (the only seaborne attack of the war, across the Aegean azure of the Mediterranean), the order to advance through the mud of the Western Front represented an entirely different type of amphibious assault. The sound and fury of artillery momentarily suspends into onomatopoeic '*Slush, slush, slush*' of the 'men of the first wave' attempting to traverse the viscous terrain in Lynch's novel. A second wave attempts to secure a more 'distant point' as zombie-like walking wounded begin to return: 'staggering, lurching, limping back. Men with blood stained bandages and men with none. Men carrying smashed arms, others limping on shattered legs. Laughing men and shivering men . . . blood-shot eyes above strangely lined pain-racked and tortured faces' (185). Pulled from the contamination following his live burial, Mann's Jeffreys succumbs to nervous debility. In the final scene of *Flesh in Armour*, the war affected soldier commits his mortal remains to the mud—just as the war is about to come to an end. His mates bury the body with the regular incantation of earth to earth though, given the conditions, their well-rehearsed lines might have been more fittingly a service for burial at sea, his body returned 'to the deep to be turned into corruption, looking for the resurrection of the body when the sea shall give up her dead' (Navy).

Along with the persistent wet, disturbed graves and the stench of death provided the Western Front with much of its distinctive character—which the Anzac legend also tended to avoid. 'Mile after mile the earth stretched out black, foul, putrescent, like a sea of excrement,' observed British surgeon Robert Briffault (cited in Liddle 430). It emitted not the 'usual pure smell of earth' but pungency from being 'saturated with dead bodies—dead that had been dead a long, long time,' Vera Brittain noted after being overwhelmed by the stench emanating from the returned personal effects of her deceased fiancé Roland Leighton who had been killed in December 1916 (*Letters*). The war zone in *All Quiet on the Western Front* comprises a 'common grave' (283), while for a deracinated Wilfred Owen in a letter home to his mother in 1917 the 'ground was not mud, not sloppy mud, but an octopus of sucking clay, three, four and five feet deep, relieved only by craters filled with water. Men have been known to drown in them' (116). It was an incessant mudscape according to Siegfried Sassoon in a frequently cited line from *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*: 'the War was mainly a matter of holes and ditches' (228). The 'heavy stink' of no man's land makes the men 'draw away' in *Flesh in Armour* (163).

Like Mann, Owen had teetered on the brink of nervous collapse. He survived an urge for self-annihilation, survived the mud and almost the entire war when, just seven days before the signing of the Armistice, sustained a gunshot wound and was killed (Silken 201). Jeffreys suicides after his earlier premature interment in an explosion. Mann's own experiences of live burial affected him long after the war was ended. Deploying somatic wounding—'the injury'—a strategy frequently used by traumatised soldiers to offset suggestions of psychological breakdown—he explained that, even decades later, the experience of losing consciousness in the mud lurked 'beneath to come out when I am over strained or disturbed' (cited in Spittel 190). It is possible to date Jeffreys's fictional death to early October 1918 during Australia's last battle on the Western Front. In real time—two weeks on—having become debilitated with 'sickness' and transferred to clerical duties with the engineers, Mann handed in his sergeant's stripes. 'In view of the fact that it lies beyond my powers at present to fulfil the requirements of my position,' he wrote on 15 October 1918, 'and as I feel that my services in this capacity have for some time not given satisfaction, I ask that I may be allowed to revert to the rank of sapper [private]' (NAA).

The evidence would appear to indicate that Jeffreys completes what the author himself might have considered doing. Also surviving being buried alive—an experience that turns Bourne 'queer' in *The Middle Parts of Fortune*—Frederic Manning sought a transfer from the front and spent the post war years as a virtual recluse. Jeffreys is retrieved as he begins to submit to the mud and 'drown in the spew' (73). Re-joining the living though detached and unable to shake off the experience, he determines to commit permanently to the battalions of disfigured dead. Standing 'stiff, as if on inspection,' he draws the pin from his grenade and holds the 'serrated bomb with both hands at his heart.' Upon hearing the explosion, his comrades rush to find the 'mutilated' corpse of their former comrade in arms, whose 'chest was torn away and the head half off.' They bury what remains and in a 'casual seeming movement' one of the detachment covers the incriminating pin and '[grinds] it into the mud.' They record his death: 'Killed in Action' (250).

Dr W. H. R. Rivers treated the trench poets Graves, Sassoon and Owen among others at Craiglockhart Hospital where he trialled a talking cure as an antidote for repressed trauma. His case notes published in the British Medical Association's *Lancet* in 1918 focused on men who, like Mann, had been buried. One young British officer remained unresponsive to all treatments,

having been propelled by an explosion face-first into the distended abdomen of a decayed German corpse which ruptured on impact. 'Before he lost consciousness,' Rivers observed, 'the patient clearly realised his situation and knew that the substance which filled his mouth and produced the most horrible sensations of taste and smell was derived from the decomposed entrails of an enemy' (174). On account of contamination, every live burial brought soldiers into direct contact with the already dead. In this context, *Flesh in Armour*, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* and *Somme Mud* might be read as narratives of abjection.

More work needs to be done in this area, though it might be tentatively conjectured that Rivers' talking cure had a correspondence in writing therapy in the case of Mann, Manning and Lynch that would be explored for generations in novels as diverse as Vance Palmer's *Daybreak* and Eleanor Dark's *Prelude to Christopher* in the 1930s, George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* in the 1960s, David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* in the 1980s, and Brenda Walker's *The Wing of Night* in 2007, among many others. Pat Barker's 1996 post-memory British war novel *The Regeneration Trilogy* links textually to Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, most obviously through the naming of her character Charles Manning. Yet it is the complex relation to working class origins in the figure of Barker's Billy Prior and the working-class men of *The Middle Parts of Fortune* that more precisely establishes the link: 'to touch the heart with a finger of ice . . . stumbling on a defective duck-board, uttered under his breath a monosyllabic curse . . . "Fuck . . ."' (192), and where *Flesh in Armour* and *Somme Mud* also make their most valuable contribution.

While British literature traditionally focused on the tragedy of subalterns, the grim emphasis of Australian writing was diggers in the ranks. Critic Bruce Clunies Ross was the first to draw attention to this peculiarly Australian inflection in Manning's novel in his 1979 paper 'Frederic Manning and the Tragedy of War.' Following his experience in the mud, Mann's Jeffreys—'His nerves, his nerves, his nerves, they were all in pieces' (112) recalling Kurtz's horror in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—is unable to recover composure and becomes alienated from himself and from the diggers of his company in what may be read as a sustained and negative critique of the limitations of mateship in the ranks. 'Frank pitched under the blankets, his muscles in a state of uncontrollable tremor' (113), as all former associations and bonds between the men can no longer sustain him: 'A soldier; yes, he was a soldier. Alone, quite alone, so far away . . . Gentle Jesus pity me. He was alone' (174).

Sanitation and the Sacred

'To the bulk of Australians, Gallipoli is the signifier of the entire World War I experience,' notes Rhoden (37). Given the sanctification of Anzac in literature, art and history, the underworld conditions of the diggers on the Western Front more readily turns on abjection and profanity. Across no-man's land, corpses could be seen half buried in unconsecrated mud, as the customary practice of body retrieval gave way to more pressing tasks such as repairing collapsed sections of the trench and the breached thickets of barbwire. 'Out to the wire between the trenches we see our first dead man and several half buried,' observes Nulla on his first day in the trenches (21). Body retrieval and attending to survivors had been a priority at Gallipoli but the effort now involved bringing in the dead and wounded became increasingly difficult, leading to further repeated acts of ungodly passing. 'From the sunken road the stretchers go back by relays and it's quite common for a stretcher case to take twelve hours to get from the sunken road to the dressing station three miles away,' continues Nulla, 'Nine or ten relays of bearers handle the stretcher in that short distance' (33–34).

According to Australia's official medical history of the war, it typically took field ambulances under 'average conditions' around 'six hours' and 'thirty-six bearers on relays for each stretcher case.' This dangerous work was made 'insuperable' in the 'mud which lay deep over the whole 6,000 yards of the carry.' Communications trenches, dug at right angles to the forward positions were frequently rendered impassable on account of inundations, 'in parts up to thigh high so that bearers perforce carried in the open' (85). The punishing schedule proved impossible to maintain. Treacherous enough for the wounded and their rescuers, attending to the dead was even more high risk and labour intensive as corpses and scattered remains were left to be absorbed into the abyss. 'Sticking out of the earth where the frames had been blown off was a forearm and a hand, an arm on which hung some dirty shreds, and the skeletal hand, thick, white bones stuck together by withered sinews and mud,' observes Jeffreys across no man's land (121).

Unsurprising, malaise and disorientation are commonly recorded features of the diggers' troglodyte war on the Western Front. Mann's Jeffreys 'never succeeded in getting his bearings' in Flanders: 'in the winter it rained enough and was cold enough on the Somme, but the north country was a darker country' (159). Living among and within the same underground confines as the dead, diggers in their trenches 'distrusted' any claims to the sacred, according to Bill Gammage in his classic study *The Broken Years* (xiii). In diaries and letters, they often blasphemously expressed bewilderment at the grave realities of their circumstances. Mann's Anglican padre fights to 'control his emotion' but becomes 'lost in a turmoil of thoughts.' He resolves in man the figure of Christ in an altogether unconvincing theology: 'if Christ should exist anywhere, He must exist in that flesh and soul within, be dwelling there in each confronting foeman within the armour, even at the moment of the shot, the bayonet thrust, the bursting of the bomb, the detonation of the gun' (43–44). Among the multiple ironies of trench warfare, it is as clear as mud that no amount of armour—specifically the Brodie helmet which rendered Australians indistinct from British and other Commonwealth troops—could afford any meaningful protection against the conditions of the Western Front.

Mann's chaplain defers to a radical spirituality: 'Christ must be in each; not in the nations and sects, parties and armies but in the breasts of the soldiers, in the flesh within the armour, making war, the general slaughter and the individual killing or shot and shell bayonet and bomb, immaterial.' Yet his congregations had gone to war precisely in the name 'God, King and Country' which sustained the sanctification of Gallipoli and the Anzacs but not the muddy predicaments of the diggers on the Western Front. Eventually the 'padre's soul' cries out in distress, 'I was wrong.' He gives up on sermonising and dedicates himself to ministering more practical assistance in the 'first-aid post,' working among the wounded and dying. This provides some solace but virtually no hope of redemption and so he prays not for others but himself: 'O Lord, please help me' (43–44). His place of prayer is a dirty, crowded and noisy purgatory of maiming and killing; an environment where, as the poet John Le Gay Brereton declared in 1919, 'God is dead' ('The Dead').

Conclusion

The low-lying terrain of the Western Front was more open than the steep inclines, rocky outcrops and gullies of the Dardanelles, suggesting a topography suitable for mobile warfare. Yet, like all military forces in the field, Australian diggers were immediately bogged down in the mud, by contrast to the much vaunted and fast-moving figures of sun-bronzed Anzacs who had charged with dash across a narrow stretch of beach in the early hours of 25 April 1915 to become heroic archetypes of this tragic but ultimately pointless war. Confined within trenches

and living in constant apprehension of extinguishment—in the mud and all it contains—diggers on the Western Front spend much of their war in pre-dug graves that keep them in close proximity to the already dead. Fatally, Frank Jeffreys sees a muddy ending as his only logical possibility. Abjectly and profanely, his digger status delivers him into an underworld of decay and corruption which he can never escape. He is unnerved by the war though it is the redistribution of the earth that is the source of his greater disturbance and results his terminal violation. Considered alongside *Somme Mud* and *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, Leonard Mann's *Flesh in Armour* suggests a need to read beneath the surface of Australian literary responses to the First World War by approaching less cleanly our shared national storyline that didn't mention mud.

NOTES

[1] The CLF was reformed in 1939. Board member and novelist Vance Palmer admired *Flesh in Armour* and was very likely a moving force behind its inclusion in the series.
[2] Differing from J.P. McKinney's *Crucible* (1935) also set on the Western Front whose protagonist is promoted.

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