

# JOHN DENIS FRYER:

## *A Life Remembered*

AS FRYER LIBRARY TURNS 80, LAURIE MCNEICE, SENIOR LIBRARIAN, PAUSES TO REFLECT ON THE LIFE OF THE MAN FOR WHOM IT IS NAMED.

The Fryer Library at The University of Queensland is named for John Denis (Jack) Fryer, a graduate of the University who served overseas in World War I and died in 1923 as a result of injuries received during his war service. His father, Charles George Fryer, was born in County Wexford, Ireland, in 1854, the son of a country doctor. He emigrated to Australia in 1880, aged 26, and settled near Springsure in Central Queensland, taking a job as a station hand at Orion Downs, a sheep station owned by a Mr Wilson. Mr Wilson had four step-children with the surname Laurie, one of whom was Annie. In 1881, when Annie Laurie was 15, a local girl of 16, Rosina Richards, arrived on the station to help with the children. Rosina and Annie Laurie soon became good friends. Rosina married Charles George Fryer in 1883, at the age of 18, and they had seven children: Elizabeth (the only daughter, born in 1884), William Thomas (1887), Charles George (1889), Henry Hardy (1892), John Denis (1895), Richard Alexander James (1899) and Walter Ponsonby (1906).

Charles George Fryer had been educated to follow his father into the medical profession, but he disliked the idea. His daughter Elizabeth later recalled:

*My father never made use of his excellent education to get a good position, but worked as an ordinary labourer at whatever was offering, station hand, boundary rider, mailman, etc.... As our family grew it will be seen that there was very little money to spare, and no chance of a secondary education for the elder ones. In 1895, my father and mother obtained a job as married couple (designated Wardsman*

*and Matron) at the local hospital... It was here that my fourth brother was born, and christened John Denis.<sup>1</sup>*

In a town as small as Springsure, Rosina Fryer is likely to have kept in touch with Annie Laurie, who for a time attended Springsure State School, before being sent to finish her education at a Rockhampton convent school. In 1896, Annie Laurie married Henry Gaudiano Wheeler of Cooroorah Station, near Blackwater. They had one daughter, Portia, before his early death in 1903. Annie Laurie then returned to Rockhampton to live before taking Portia to England in March 1913 to complete her education.<sup>2</sup>

In Springsure, the young Jack Fryer enjoyed a carefree childhood. His sister remembered him making friends with all the patients in the local hospital where his parents worked, a setting that seems to have encouraged a natural trend to sociability. In 1899, he started at Springsure State School and did sufficiently well that by his senior year, his sister Elizabeth, then an assistant teacher, decided to coach him for a District Scholarship, which he won. This took him to the Boys Grammar School in Rockhampton in 1909, and in 1914 he matriculated, gaining the necessary marks for a University scholarship. He entered The University of Queensland at the beginning of the 1915 academic year, aged 19. His sister describes him at that time:

*He was a tall, well-built lad, nearly six*

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Stuart Gilmour (née Fryer), "An Account of the Early Life of John Denis Fryer", (1966), Fryer Library, John D Fryer Collection, UQFL23, Box 1, 2.

<sup>2</sup> M D O'Hagan, "Wheeler, Annie Margaret (1867-1950)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 12, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990), 453-454.



feet in height, brown haired, with large grey eyes, good features, sound teeth, and a ready smile. For the most part, he was very even-tempered, but occasionally he could get “hopping mad.”... His self control increased as he grew older, and he displayed a quality of reasonableness and understanding of his fellow men, always striving to see the “other fellow’s” point of view, and making allowances, even if he did not agree with it – a quality which stood him in good stead later on in dealing with men, especially during World War I.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of his first term, knowing that his elder brother William had enlisted for overseas service, Jack wrote to his sister:

*Do you think that Mum would consent to my volunteering for active service? Really, Liz, I think it is about time we all went, for this war is by no means over, and it is well known that a Conscription Bill is being brought before the Federal Government. ... Before that Bill is passed, probably all the men at the University will have gone. They are drizzling out now by twos and threes, and I don't want to be one of the last.*<sup>4</sup>

In the end, four of the Fryer brothers would serve overseas – William, Charles, Henry and Jack. William and Jack sailed on *HMAT Warilda* from Brisbane with the 10th Reinforcements of the 9th Battalion on 5 October 1915, landing in Egypt on 8 November. They joined veterans of the

Gallipoli landing, training and drilling for the next seven months in the Egyptian desert. In February 1916, the Reinforcements were divided up between the 9th Battalion and the 49th, with the two Fryer brothers joining the 49th. They were mobilised to France, where they were joined by their brother Charles just in time for the launching of the Somme offensive on 1 July. An attempt on the part of the Allied High Command to break the two-year stalemate on the Western Front, the Somme offensive was the greatest military disaster in recorded history. When it ended on 19 November, the Allied line had advanced seven miles at a cost of over 600,000 lives.<sup>5</sup> Will Fryer was wounded seriously in the thigh, hand and shoulder in August – for him, the war was over. The casualty rate among officers, in particular, meant that new ones needed to be trained urgently, and Jack Fryer was chosen to go to Oxford with other Australians to study for his commission. He received his commission as 2nd lieutenant on 25 January 1917 and soon after returned to the trenches, joining the 52nd Battalion. His brother Charles was still with the 49th Battalion and his brother Henry had arrived to join the 47th. On 7 April 1917, Charles was killed in action. About 3 June, Jack was injured by poison gas and returned to England, but was back in the trenches again by 18 June. His brother Henry had received a bullet in his arm and a slight head wound while Jack was in England and was sent to an English military

Above: Lieutenant Jack Fryer welcoming Mrs Annie Laurie Wheeler to Springsure for the unveiling of the Memorial Fountain at the Springsure State School in 1920. Springsure Railway Station and members of the Springsure R S L in the background. Mr Charles George Fryer (Jack Fryer's father) on the right (with grey beard). Fryer Library, John D Fryer Collection, UQFL23, Box 3, Photo 20-22.

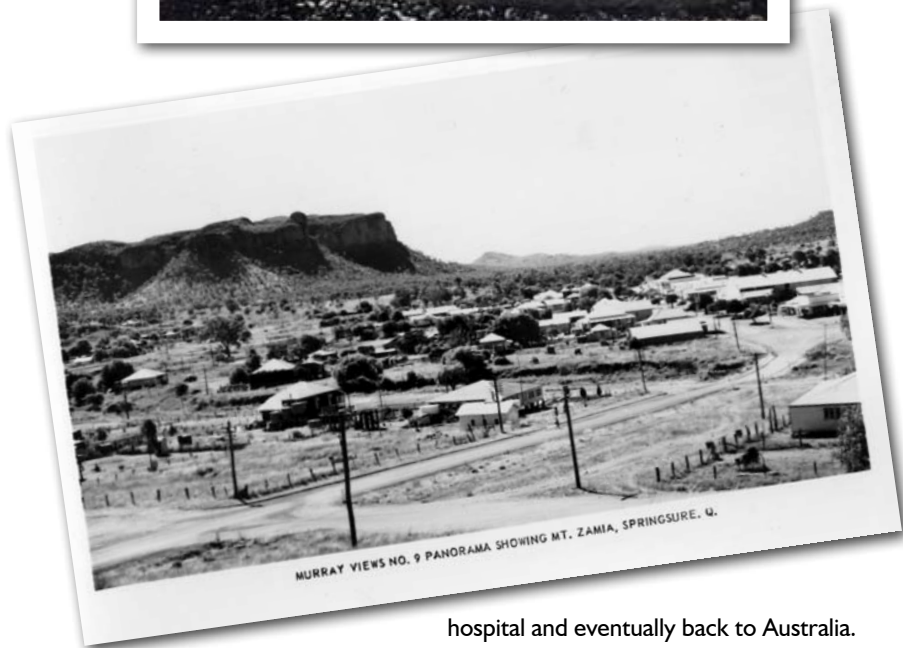


Above: Elizabeth Stuart Fryer, Jack Fryer's only sister, in 1913 at the age of 29. Fryer Library, John D Fryer Collection, UQFL23, Box 3, Photo 37.

<sup>5</sup> John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1998), 299. To give an example of the scale of losses, the 1st Newfoundland Regiment consisting of 798 men was ordered into action at Beaumont-Hamel on 1 July and suffered 310 men killed and 374 wounded, a casualty rate of 86 per cent.

<sup>3</sup> “An Account of the Early Life of John Denis Fryer”, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



hospital and eventually back to Australia. In November, Jack was given leave and went to London. Here, he met up with his mother's old friend, Annie Wheeler.

Stranded in England by the outbreak of war, Annie Wheeler had looked around for some way to contribute to the war effort. She found it in making her London flat, near Victoria Station

and the Australian Army Headquarters, a home away from home for troops from Central Queensland. One soldier drew a picture of a kangaroo with a Digger's hat on the door and wrote the slogan: "Hop right in, Digger!" underneath.<sup>6</sup> She endeavoured to contact all soldiers from Central Queensland, whether they were wounded, imprisoned, or in the trenches. She kept a detailed card index on them, corresponded with servicemen on the battlefield, forwarded packages and mail, and supervised the care and comfort of those in hospital. She wrote monthly letters to *The Capricornian* (Rockhampton), giving details of all the men she had seen and spoken to that month. Her daughter Portia remembered the mail arriving by ship at Christmas 1917 and covering the entire floor of the flat three feet deep, with many letters addressed simply to "Mrs. Wheeler, London, England" or "Mrs. Wheeler, 'Mother of the Anzacs'."<sup>7</sup> Jack wrote to his sister Elizabeth:

*Went to see Mrs Wheeler this morning. She was jolly glad to see some of us Rockhampton boys. By jove! She is a great little woman. I think the name "Mother of Anzacs" suits her to a T.<sup>8</sup>*

After this brief spell of leave, Jack returned to the trenches and remained there until he was wounded by an exploding German stick bomb (grenade) in August 1918. Mrs. Wheeler's cable to his parents on 15 August preceded the official army telegram by six days. She wrote: "Jack writes hospital France wounds improving."<sup>9</sup> Her cable must have spared his parents and family considerable anguish, for the official army telegram said merely: "Now reported Lieut. John Fryer admitted 6 August Second British Red Cross Hospital, England. Multiple gunshot wounds. Severe."<sup>10</sup> The war was now over for Jack. His brothers Will and Henry had already returned home, and in May 1919, he too sailed for home, arriving just in time for his sister Elizabeth's wedding on 22 July. In November 1919, Annie

6 "Mrs. Wheeler's Work Recalled by Family", *The Capricornian*, 22 January 1975, newspaper clipping, Fryer Library, John D Fryer collection, UQFL23, Box 2.

7 "Devoted Service for Our Soldiers Abroad", undated and unsourced newspaper clipping, Fryer Library, Biographical information on Annie Margaret Wheeler, F1622.

8 "An Account of the Early Life of John Denis Fryer", 16.

9 Mrs. Wheeler to Mr. Fryer, cable of 15 August 1918, Fryer Library, John D Fryer collection, UQFL23, Box 1.

10 Army Base Records to Charles Fryer, cable of 21 August 1918, Fryer Library, John D Fryer collection, UQFL23, Box 1.

Wheeler and her daughter Portia also sailed for home, given free passage on a troop ship by the Australian Government. Rockhampton gave her a hero's welcome and the R S L presented her with a house in Emu Park, where she lived until shortly before her death in 1950. In early 1920, she visited Springsure to dedicate a memorial fountain at Springsure State School, and Jack Fryer led the members of the local R S L in forming a guard of honour for the occasion.

At the start of the 1920 academic year, Jack returned to The University of Queensland to resume his interrupted education. Just under half of the students were returned servicemen while the rest had been at school throughout the war, too young to enlist. Sir Robert Lowe Hall, a contemporary of Jack Fryer's at St John's College, recalled "how astonishingly well these two groups, with totally different experiences, merged into one":

*This was so much the case that at the time I was quite unconscious that it was a potentially difficult situation. ... Looking back now, I wonder how much charity the soldiers had to exercise towards the brash schoolboys.<sup>11</sup>*

He remembered Jack as a man intensely interested in his academic work and seizing every opportunity to participate in university life. His relations with others were characterised by a broad tolerance:

*It was not the tolerance of a philosopher who sees all foundations as equally shaky, still less that of indifference and disengagement. The feeling which he managed to convey to so many people was that he liked them and was interested in them, whatever they were and did – the tolerance of a capacious heart.<sup>12</sup>*

Near the end of his final year, working hard towards final examinations and occupying responsible positions in many university clubs, Jack Fryer fell ill. Tuberculosis germs picked up in the trenches became active again, and combined with the damage wrought on his lungs by poison gas in 1917, made his situation a very serious one. Alarmed, his

parents brought him home to Springsure in early January 1923. Rosina Fryer called in the local doctor whose verdict was blunt: "I'm sorry Mrs Fryer, I'm afraid there is no hope. I give him a month."<sup>13</sup> His sister Elizabeth recalled:

*The townspeople rallied around to see what they could do to help. One woman brought him regularly the tenderest vegetables and the ripest fruit from her garden. ... One man sent along his electric fan to see if it would temper the heat. ... The people who had known him from babyhood and loved him, grieved with my mother for the young life that was fading away so fast.<sup>14</sup>*

Jack Fryer died on 7 February 1923, just five months past his 27th birthday. Members of the University Dramatic Society (of which he had been Vice-President) presented the University with the sum of £10 in his memory and asked that some Australian literary works be purchased with it. Dr Frederick Walter Robinson of the University of Queensland English Department, himself a World War I veteran, made this gift the occasion for founding the Fryer Memorial Library of Australian Literature. For the next thirty years, he oversaw its slow growth. In 1954, it came under the supervision of the main University Library. In 1967, its collections were significantly augmented by the addition of the Hayes collection. Today, its resources are considerable. The AustLit database and its print companion *The Bibliography of Australian Literature* whose final volume will be published later this year by The University of Queensland Press, both draw extensively on Fryer Library holdings in their attempt to comprehensively map Australian literary history. A more recent initiative of the Queensland Government aims to include the library's historical resources in an online portal giving ready access to key sources in Queensland history. As the library celebrates its 80th anniversary, it would seem that what one admirer referred to in 1966 as a "small but robust baby"<sup>15</sup>, has finally come of age.

LAURIE MCNEICE is the Senior Librarian in the Fryer Library.

<sup>13</sup> "An Account of the Early Life of John Denis Fryer", 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Old Crab (John J. Concannon), "Browsing in the 'Fryer'", *Queensland Teachers' Journal*, September 1966, 257.



Above:  
John Denis Fryer's grave in Springsure, 1923.

Previous page:  
Top: Memorial Fountain at Springsure State School. The inscription reads: "Erected in honour of past scholars who enlisted in the Great War 1914-1919." The name of "Mrs Wheeler (Annie Laurie)" is at the top of the honour roll and the names of the four Fryer brothers below. Fryer Library, John D Fryer Collection, UQFL23, Box 3, Photo 23.  
Bottom: Springsure about the time Jack Fryer knew it. Fryer Library, John D Fryer Collection, UQFL23, Box 3, Photo 62.