

Remembering Gallipoli: Interviews With New Zealand Gallipoli Veterans

Edited by Christopher Pugsley and Charles Ferrall

Victoria University Press (2015)

ISBN 978 0 864 739919

Reviewed by Megan Hutching

Before I began my series of books about the Second World War, based on interviews that I and others did with veterans of that conflict, the project was discussed at an advisory body meeting of the History Group (as it then was) of the Ministry for Culture & Heritage. One of the people present wondered how it would be possible to tell the story of the war through interviews as most of the people who knew what had happened – he meant officers – were dead. In *Remembering Gallipoli*, Chris Pugsley and Charles Ferrall have shown that everyone who experiences war knows what happens. They may not have an overview of tactics and plans, but my word, do they understand what it was like to be there. What richness the testimonies in this book add to our understanding of war.

The interviews on which *Remembering Gallipoli* is based were recorded in the 1980s as a result of the confluence of Christopher Pugsley, Maurice Shadbolt, Allan Martin (then Director-General of TV2), the Returned Services Association and women from the media company, Bluestockings. One hundred and seventy four Gallipoli veterans were interviewed by the Bluestockings team, and of those, 21 were filmed for a television documentary, *Gallipoli: The New Zealand Story*. The filmed interviews are now part of the TVNZ archives, and the audio interviews are part of the TVNZ Gallipoli Archive at the National Army Museum in Waiouru.

Remembering Gallipoli is arranged thematically which has its advantages and disadvantages. To begin is an overview of the Gallipoli campaign, then chapters arranged around various themes, such as ‘The New Zealanders go Ashore at Anzac’ (Chapter Three) and ‘Lice, Flies, Dysentery, Corned Beef and Biscuits’ (Chapter Five) and ‘Hospitals and Nurses’ (Chapter Ten). At the beginning of each chapter is an excerpt from an official document such as the New Zealand Expeditionary Force War Diary, special orders or other personal diaries, followed by extracts from the interviews. I would have preferred more of a narrative to set the scene for the men’s stories which follow, but the comparison between the objective point of view of the initial piece and the interview extracts is striking and effective.

The advantage of a thematic approach is that the story of the campaign can be told chronologically (Chapters Three, Six, Seven and Twelve), and the men’s reactions to life on Gallipoli can be illustrated in different chapters, for example, Chapter Nine is ‘Fear, Wounding and Death’. The longer extracts work well by allowing the story and the memories to develop, but it is mostly short extracts, from a number of different interviews, that make up the bulk of each chapter. The brevity is unsatisfying and sometimes has the effect of making the men’s comments sound banal: ‘The Engineers put mines into the tunnels they dug. A fatigue would carry earth out in sacks. It was a good place. It was that flaming hot outside that when you got in one of these tunnels and lay there it was nice and cool and away from the flies’ (Private William Roigard, p. 110). History is a dialogue between an historian and her sources and nowhere is this more obviously so than in an interview where you can actually and actively question the source. As historians, we attempt to understand the past, and as oral historians we are able to make explicit the deeper processes and structures which are at work in the lives of individuals through their active process of remembering. The effect of a series of these shorter extracts is that the opportunity to understand the lives of these men is very constrained. While the short extracts work to produce a mosaic of the men’s experiences, the transition from one extract to the next is often abrupt and does not provide a narrative of the action, or of the interviewee’s involvement in those events. This is particularly noticeable in the chapters which

deal with actions in the campaign. It could be argued that the brevity of the extracts and the suddenness of the change of voice reflects the experience of being at Gallipoli – the disorganisation and danger, the lack of knowledge of what was supposed to be happening, experiencing only the details and not knowing what was the overall plan. Perhaps this was done on purpose, or is it just lucky happenstance?

Someone has done their work very well in choosing the images which are from a range of different archives and collection, but their good work has been undermined by the dreadful reproduction of so many of them. Another quibble I have is the use of capital letters for each interviewee's name and unit. They are an optical snag and detract from the visual clarity of the page.

The strong impression one gains from the book is of the unpleasantness and danger of Gallipoli – the smell of rotting corpses, the flies, the men's thirst, the awful and meagre food. Pugsley and Ferrall note in their introduction that the veterans rarely talked about the battles in their entirety, 'instead remembering their particular, localised experience' (p. 22). Oral historians know that interviewees tell their stories through their own personal lens, and their accounts are combined with the tentativeness of remembering. Private Thomas McCone had obviously been asked if he was frightened. Read how he works his way through answering that: 'No, I wasn't scared. I thought, well it's the finish, we were at the war and you've got no show of getting to live through that. It wouldn't take much to scare me now, but then, you know, youth is very hard to scare. Good job, too. I suppose I was scared to a certain extent but I wasn't really frightened, you know' (p. 220).

In his introduction to *Voices of Gallipoli*, Maurice Shadbolt's older 'companion' publication, he writes about how the men told their stories: 'these old men, near death, had been waiting for decades to tell their story. No one had ever come near them: it seemed no one was really interested. Suddenly there was too much to tell. And there was always too little time. ... Within two or three months the first of our informants was dead; within two or three years most were.'¹ In *Remembering Gallipoli* Liz Greenslade of Bluestockings recalls the interview process: 'Some told us things they had not really thought about for years, and possibly had not told anyone before. Many cried. Grief and sorrow poured out now that they had the opportunity. Many veterans said that no one had wanted to listen before. So we often sat in silence and just listened, our question lines ignored' (p. 304).

This book is an example of how the experiences of individuals, their reactions and emotions and reflections can add to our understanding of an event which many would argue has been written about and considered so often that it runs the risk of becoming hackneyed – Gallipoli fatigue, if you will. Reading the extracts in this book, alongside the twelve longer pieces in Shadbolt's *Voices of Gallipoli* quickly disabuses the reader of that notion.²

Recently I came across the words of Sir Alfred Mond, the founding Chairman of the Imperial War Museum in London, written for the opening of that museum: 'It is hoped to make it so complete that every individual, man or woman, soldier, sailor, airman or civilian who contributed, however obscurely, to the final result may be able to find in these galleries, an example or illustration of the sacrifice he [sic] made or the work he did, and in the archives some record of it.'³ The words reminded me yet again, that history is made up of people and that one of the advantages of interviewing people is that the individual is restored to history.

As Lyn Macdonald wrote in the introduction to her book on the Somme, 'Soon all that will be left to tell us something of what it was like in 1914 will be their sepia images in old photographs, grinning in self-conscious khaki, as the mouthless crowds cheer and the silent bands play and the flags fly frozen in the air. When the last of them has gone, a great silence will fall.'⁴

We should never forget the awfulness of war, and books such as this will help make sure that that great silence does not fall.

¹ Maurice Shadbolt, *Voices of Gallipoli*, Auckland, Hodder and Stoughton, 1988:11.

² Maurice Shadbolt, *Voices of Gallipoli*, Auckland, Hodder and Stoughton, 1988.

³ Quoted in Dan Philips, "What Lies Beneath the History of Conflict?: Using personal testimony for learning," *Oral History*, 38: 1 (2010): 114.

⁴ Lyn Macdonald, *Somme*, London, Papermac, 1984: xiv.