

Diamonds of the Dustheap

DIARIES FROM THE FIRST WORLD WAR

» PETER COCHRANE

If I stopped and took thought it would never be written at all; and the advantage of the method is that it sweeps up accidentally several stray matters which I should exclude if I hesitated but which are the diamonds of the dustheap.

{ VIRGINIA WOOLF, 20 JANUARY 1919¹ }

The comparison may be unlikely, but Virginia Woolf's insight into her diary keeping is a pointer to what defines almost all the soldiers' diaries that I have examined in the remarkable collection held by the Mitchell Library in the State Library of New South Wales.² They are not carefully planned, they are raw and unpolished, they are a more-or-less spontaneous record or narrative of the day or the week, and they are rich with 'diamonds'. Their pre-eminent quality is an unpretentious authenticity and immediacy, a realism matched by no other literary form in the records of wartime experience.

Being authentic in this way, the diaries have no panoramic grasp or God's-eye view, nor are they marked by the modifying reassessments of hindsight. They provide a uniquely *inside* perspective, plain and unvarnished, caught in the swirl of daily life, regardless of whether the diarist is travelling, training or fighting; happy in a billet behind the lines, or miserable in a mud-soaked dugout in the midst of an artillery barrage on the Somme.

These diaries are intensely 'in the moment', perhaps all the more so when written in the trenches where death is near. Their diurnal

form means that the rendering of some events will be spasmodic and episodic but, as Robert Latham has pointed out, 'this is the way in which many events — even processes — happen.'³ The soldier's diary is a narrative unfolding in a tremulous present, a still fluid context with all its uncertainties, whether in Egypt, Gallipoli, Palestine or on the Western Front.

We do not know how many Australian soldiers took a diary to the Great War, nor how many took to keeping a diary once there. Certainly not a majority, for most of the 330,000 soldiers who went abroad preferred to write letters or postcards, if they wrote at all. The thousands of diaries that were kept, however, are not introspective or confessional; rather, they are spectator diaries: records of travel and war, of tourism and duty done, something to be sent home to be read by family and friends, or perhaps, to be consulted later, to settle an argument or fuel a reminiscence.

The psychological importance of a serial conversation with home can hardly be overstated. The diaries are, therefore, much more than records of war, or reminiscences to be filed under 'military'. They are, first and

(above)

First World War Diaries, Mitchell Library.

COURTESY JOY LAI, DIGITISATION & IMAGING SERVICES, STATE LIBRARY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

foremost, 'literary' — they are part of the history of writing and, in this case, they are a distinct branch of the genre we call travel writing. They are also 'cultural' in the sense of being about travel, family, love, big-noting (in some cases), devotion, despair, homesickness and consolation in trying times.

THE VISION

As the First World War drew to a close, the then Public Library of New South Wales began collecting the personal records of the men and women who enlisted in order to document the war as they had experienced it.

Planning began as events at Gallipoli seized the nation's imagination. In response, the principal librarian, William Ifould, hastily formulated an acquisition policy. Ifould was determined to collect firsthand accounts of battle written by both the frontline men of the rank and file and the officer class. In entrepreneurial mode and conscious that the Commonwealth would move into this sphere, he was keen to act pre-emptively. With the approval of his Trustees, Ifould placed advertisements in newspapers around Australia, offering to buy diaries and letters in original form. The Library's Letter Books for 1918–1922 reveal that many diaries subsequently offered to Ifould were rejected as insubstantial or in some way rewritten or

might not have been in a position to obtain information of any value to historians from strategic or tactical points of view, yet the daily and intimate records of individual men, their hopes and fears and feelings generally, their expressions of opinions concerning their officers, their mention of other men by name — especially those coming from particular districts who refer to the doings of men of their own districts; all these things must be taken into consideration in estimating value.⁴

By 1919 the collection was already a large and valuable one. By 1921 the total number of war diarists in the collection had reached 247, complemented by collections of letters and, in some cases, photo albums. The current collection stands at 550 diarists and over 1100 volumes.⁵

The diaries take many forms. Some were written on odd sheets of paper or in notebooks or signal message books. Others were cloth or leather bound. Occasionally the narrative begins in a hefty gilt-edged volume but, inevitably, continues in any kind of notebook that comes to hand. Most diaries were pocket sized and fit for purpose. The variety of bindings complements the range of writing styles. Some are terse and random: 'Getting warmer. Glassy sea but strong under currents ... Dance tonight for Officers and Nurses only! Have commenced growing a



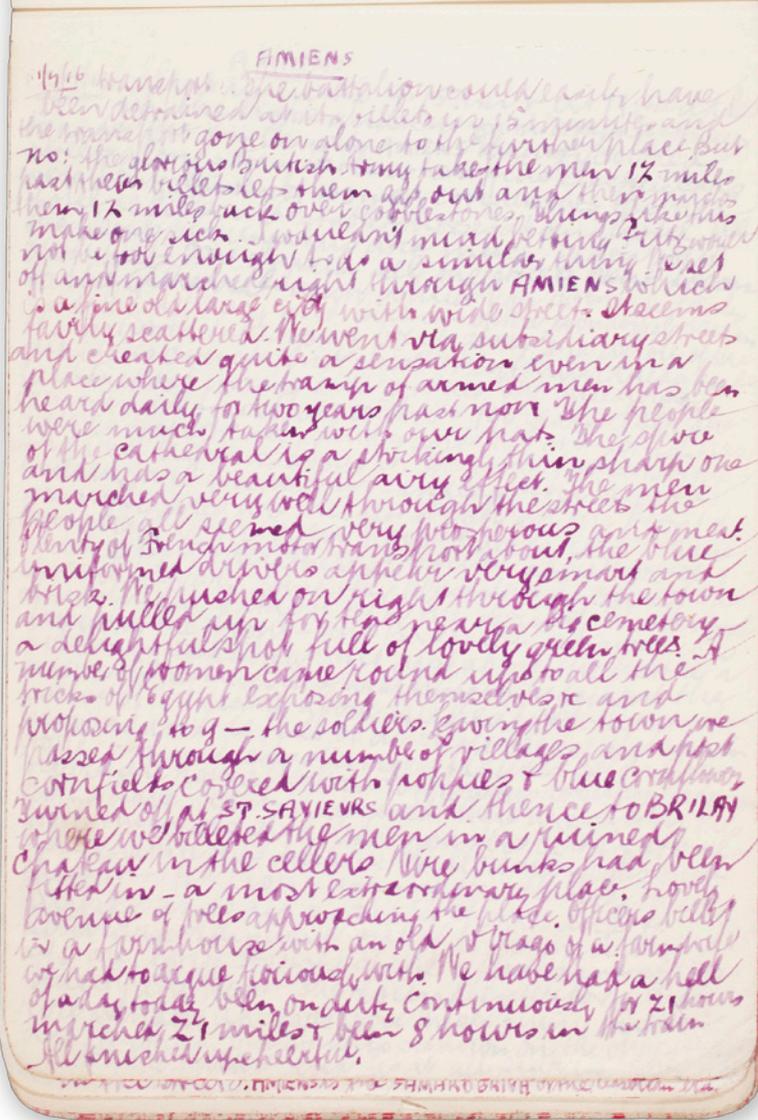
'OH GOD WHAT A FIGHT, THE SKY IS A BLAZE OF FIRE &
THE EARTH TREMORS, AS IF IN AGONY.'

overwritten later. Substance and authenticity were at a premium, and the library was prepared to pay for it, as Ifould indicated in a letter to the Library's agent in London in 1919:

By original diaries we mean diaries actually written up from day to day and not the copies of those diaries. The value of such diaries must be judged from the extent of the period covered, the opportunities of the diarist to procure and record information, the fullness of the entries, the value of the entries to future historians ... The record from a psychological view is of some importance as is also the record from a sentimental point of view ... whilst a diarist

moustache today.'⁶ Some are prolix and strain for literary effect: 'The sun as it arose threw a golden glory over the distant horizon and finally appeared in a great white disc in all its glittering heat.'⁷ Some don't strain at all, having an economy (or lyricism) that is effortless and a delight to read: 'Oh God what a fight, the sky is a blaze of fire & the earth tremors, as if in agony.'⁸

A small number of diaries were acquired from the families of men who were killed abroad, but the vast majority in this collection were purchased from men who made it home, survivors, many of whom were diarists over two, three or four years. These are, for the most part, substantial memoirs.



(above)

A day entry for 11 July 1916 by the prodigious diarist Captain Aubrey Wiltshire. MLMSS 3058/Box 1/6.

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WHY?

The men who took to keeping a diary did so, in the first instance, because they could. Many soldiers had only the most elementary education. Their grammar and spelling was mostly poor to average, but they were uninhibited about writing, about putting their story down. Most white Australians in 1914 were sufficiently numerate to know when they had been short changed over the counter and sufficiently schooled to pen a letter to a pal or a loved one. More than that, they were immersed in a print culture, typified by the *Bulletin*, which reached out to the wretched and the poor and told them, to paraphrase the editor J. F. Archibald: ‘Everyone has a story to tell, even if it’s only one.’ Writing, rather than literature, was a widely diffused social practice as Sylvia Lawson’s *The Archibald Paradox* (2006) makes clear. Entitlement to write, to record, was a given — from there the not-uncommon phenomenon of the Australian soldier–diarist was inevitable.

He was inevitable for another reason. The diaries had an imagined audience — the

folk at home. They were meant to be read by others. Some diarists gave their diaries titles, as if imagining the work as a publication in the tradition of the empire’s ‘Boy’s Own’ literature: ‘My Experiences & Adventures During my Sojourn in France.’⁹ References to an ‘Adventure’ or ‘Great Adventure’ are not uncommon.

For the prolific practitioners, their diary work might complement letters, postcards and, in some instances, photographs. The psychological importance of a serial conversation with home can hardly be overstated. Diaries thickened the conversation. As one soldier–diarist declared at the head of his first volume:

This diary, begun on the day of my departure for the front from Sydney, is being written chiefly for the benefit of my loved ones at home as it will be nearly impossible to tell all in letters and this will be sent home from time to time as opportunity offers and my efforts will be concentrated in keeping it up to date.¹⁰

Diarists talked to their imagined readers: ‘I am simply longing to see you all,’ wrote one. ‘I suppose you wonder where I am,’ wrote another, ‘I’m in a good safe place but it may be otherwise next week.’¹¹

The leisurely sea voyage from Australia — a month or more on the ocean — allowed the would-be diarists to ease into the unlikely business of writing about travel and war. Going to war offered a rare chance to ‘see the world’, to see England, to visit the relations at Home, to tour exotic places (such as Egypt), to earn a quid, or to test their manhood in more ways than one. The term ‘six-bob-a-day tourists’ was coined for the well-paid Australians and they adopted it, often without irony. Patriotic motives did not get in the way of touristic ambitions. Indeed, many of the soldiers saw ‘sightseeing’ as a quid pro quo. The chance of death or mutilation was there to contemplate. ‘We are here on the Great adventure,’ wrote a Light Horseman-cum-diarist in Palestine in 1916, ‘and we are simply taking the fat with the lean and doing our duty unflinchingly and cheerfully for our King and Country.’¹²

‘The fat with the lean’ is an instructive phrase. Sightseeing had its own rituals, a kind of ceremonial agenda that was eagerly anticipated



(left)

The serial conversation with home. Writing home from Egypt. From H.C. Marshall photographs, ML PXA1861/item 112.

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by the soldiers. There were places, monuments and exhibits one simply had to see and the diarists slipped effortlessly into this grand tradition. One of the rewards that the soldiers expected, almost as a right, was the opportunity to do what tourists do — to climb the pyramids in Egypt, to tour the English countryside, to walk the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, to visit Madame Tussauds in London, to gaze upon a chateau in France, or to photograph the ruins of the Cloth Hall at Ypres.

A handful of soldier-diarists went into this wider world with great reverence for what they might see — places, plants and seasons corresponding to familiar art and poetry, a sense of having entered into the literature of Europe, scripture in the 'Holy Lands', or the classics in the Mediterranean. Travel in these unusual cases carried imagination to its deep origins if not its source. The prolific diarist Aubrey Wiltshire was alert to both history and mythology in the landscapes and the seascape about him:

1/9/15 Up at 6. on boat deck very fresh and cool. Sea at its best and delightful ... Land probably not far off. The route we are on is that ploughed by the earliest sailors in the world; the Phoenician galley. Probably the transports, the dark ribbed ships of the Iliad en route for Troy went past here. We shall pass through the Archipelago

soon all the islands between Greece and Turkey towards Lemnos the base of our A.I.F. the island whence Homer's galley returned 'freighted with wine'.¹³

But most soldier tourism was a less informed exercise in sightseeing. Just wandering around or seeing people or seeing another way of life was, by its modesty of ambition, an intellectually satisfying pursuit. These were mostly unsophisticated tourists, men who were disappointed by a weatherworn Sphinx or who marvelled at how well the French spoke French. Their reporting was matter of fact, sometimes wondrous or humorous, and often irreverent. A sailor on the troopship *Bulla* recorded a moment of sightseeing puzzlement a few weeks before the landing at Gallipoli: 'Entered the Red sea today & blow me if it isn't as green as that bit of ocean at Bondi. I made enquiries as to why I had been misled.'¹⁴

These are diaries of praise and complaint and comparison with the norm, which was home. Travel was mostly an affirmation of the great south land: 'Beautiful day [wrote a soldier-diarist in Cairo]. The people here don't observe the Sabbath — it is just the same as week days ... This afternoon went through the Native quarter and Native markets. Some queer sights, a bloke deserves the V.C. to tackle the food they prepare.'¹⁵



(above)

See the writer in his tent. From Dr Herschel Harris photographs, ML PXA403/item 65.

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The ‘coloured races’ were rich fare for pranks and derision: ‘Great fun tonight [on the Nile]. Halted a Dhow after 6 o’clock & put a couple of shots — one into her & another across the bows. You should have seen the niggers duck & I’ll bet they prayed “Allah Allah” for hours after.’¹⁶

A year later the same diarist was on leave in country England. His thoughts went back to Egypt, as a comparison of sorts, which contrasts with his bucolic positioning of himself for the dear reader: ‘Rather nice here by the quiet backwater, with the green low lying hills in the foreground & the intermittent chirping of the birds. And what a change after the everlasting desert, the intolerable heat & the dirty niggers of Egypt.’¹⁷

VISCERAL REALITY

When the adventure shifted from travel to fighting, the horrors of trench warfare soon registered in the little pocket annals. The Australians had eagerly anticipated their ‘baptism of fire’. They lived up to their high standards at Gallipoli, in Palestine and on the Western Front. But their enthusiasm for battle was soon blunted by the realities of modern warfare. The diarist who, on 25 April 1915, saw not the shrapnel but ‘little white puffs of smoke’ and watched ‘men running down the beach

and up the hill with bayonets glistening in the morning sun’ would soon change his tune.¹⁸

Assumptions changed and with them language. The quaint imperial conviction that war was manly and glorious gave way to the grim certainty that it was ‘butchery’ or ‘murder’ in a vast slaughterhouse. For the Light Horse on the sands of Palestine, some small vestige of the mythology of martial grandeur might be retained, but illusions were butchered at Gallipoli and in France. Novices charging to glory became, if they survived, dour professionals sustained only by duty and the camaraderie of the trenches, sometimes called ‘mateship’ as if it was unique to Australia. Rivers of blood destroyed the romance of battle. All this figured in the form of a new realism in the soldier’s diaries, hurried onto the page, in some cases, by shock or adrenalin.¹⁹

If there is one month when this shift registered widely in the diaries, then it is July 1916 when the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) joined the slaughter on the Western Front. Some anticipated the worst and penned it in their daily jotting. One of these was Herbert Harris, a 42-year-old Sydney man serving with the 5th Division in the 55th Battalion:

Must pray to God that I come through all right. Have not been paid since last entry & amount owing to me now is £2.9.1 to

date with deferred pay £10.7.0 making £12.16.1 ... I hope the wife gets it if I Pass out. It promises to be worse than the other night was ... feel tired and hardly fit for what is in front of us but it's no use not being fit you just have to do it. Good bye Nelly and boys ... and all friends, hope it is only au revoir. A lot of the boys have promised to send this diary on if I get knocked. I'm sure you will get something out of it besides knowing that my thoughts have been with you and the boys in every situation I have found myself.²⁰

Harris was at Fromelles where, in the space of twenty-four hours, the 5th Division was wrecked. Nearly half of the division, 5553 men, were casualties. Some battalions almost disappeared. A week later the battle for Pozières began. Pozières exemplified the horrific nature of modern trench warfare — the unrivalled massing of numbers, the near suicidal charges, the murderous machine guns and the relentless artillery barrages — the ceaseless, merciless, murdering guns. In seven weeks of fighting the Australians lost more than 24,000 wounded and almost seven thousand were killed in the heat of battle. The numbers for the killed and wounded fell just short of the ten-month toll at Gallipoli.

A stretcher-bearer with the medical corps recalled the comfort of prayer in his daily diary:

All day the battle raged with furious intensity. Artillery on both sides shrieked and roared. High explosives and shrapnel. Not a yard of ground that was not torn and rent. Hair breadth escapes were our portion every hour. The words of that grand hymn 'Jesus lover of my Soul' were continually in my mind. 'Other refuge have I none, hangs my helpless soul on thee, Cover my defenceless head with the shadow of thy wing'. A merciful Providence protected me from all harm ... wonderful fortitude of our boys.²²

None coming out of Pozières expected the war to end swiftly; that dream was gone. The marathon diarists, those who saw it through to the end, would fill volume after volume for another two years or more.

SURVIVING

How did they see it through to the end, these survivors? How did they keep going, given the ghastly horrors of trench warfare? As John Keegan pointed out in *The Face of Battle* (1976), such endurance needs to be explained.



... WE WERE NEARLY ALL IN A STATE OF SILLINESS AND HALF DAZED
BUT STILL THE AUSTRALIANS REFUSED TO GIVE GROUND.'

A remarkable diarist and soldier, Archie Barwick, was in the thick of it:

24 July. All day long the ground rocked & swayed backwards and forwards from the concussion ... [like] a well-built haystack ... swaying about ... men were driven stark staring mad & more than one of them rushed out of the trench over towards the Germans, any amount of them could be seen crying & sobbing like children their nerves completely gone ... we were nearly all in a state of silliness and half dazed but still the Australians refused to give ground. Men were buried by the dozen but were frantically dug out again some dead and some alive.²¹

One way that the Australians kept going was to persist with their tourism. Sightseeing probably mattered more when the troops were doing time in the trenches than ever before.

Being a spectator permitted a certain detachment, a step back or a step aside, the war at one remove for a few minutes, and sometimes more. Even in the trenches the soldiers took time out to be spectators at an artillery barrage or witness to the drama of a daring balloonist or a battle between 'flying machines'. On such occasions we find the diarists among them straining for the poetic with phrases like 'wonderful spectacle', 'magnificent but awful spectacle', 'startling fireworks', or 'awe inspiring sight'.

Monday 23.8.15

To all at home

I cannot let a chance like this go by of writing a lengthy letter home not that you shall be any wiser after I am finished but I suppose a letter composed of any rubbish will be welcome just at present; we have always had to be careful in ordinary letters to make them as brief as possible as our censors would not commence to read them if they were long ones & they would either be returned or destroyed, but the envelope this is enclosed in does away with the censorship, & if he has enough curiosity to scan these pages I guess the reading of them will be punishment enough for him, at any rate it is the only punishment we can inflict on him; I believe I told you a couple of months ago that I should have had a parcel of writing material from Edie Tomlins, well I turned up in good order & condition last Saturday, & I received quite a shock when I saw the size of it, she told me she had sent on a diary book a bottle of ink & two writing blocks but she did not mention the extras she had put in, so I was somewhat surprised to find 2 writing pads (200 sheets in each) two note books that suited us to a t. & a large bottle of ink besides chocolates & honey drops; We have had a chance of getting sweets since leaving Egypt & we soon made a hole in them, poor old Edie is a brick, she writes to me every week as regular as clockwork & often send along magazine's & novels which are always more than welcome as we have

(above)

The supply of writing materials was a common subject in soldiers' letters and diaries, as here. Fred Tomlins letters, MLMSS5975/Box 1/ item 9.

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Route marches provided another kind of distraction, suggesting sightseeing was both a refuge and a consolation. Late in 1916 Archie Barwick's battalion was on the move. His diary entry records how he revelled in the beauty of the countryside, the physical act of 'climbing a rise' corresponding, perhaps, to a kind of transcendence, out of the war, into art, a picture, to the scene he calls a 'masterpiece':

We marched through beautiful country for hours & hours, & 2 places in particular I will never forget, one of them was when we climbed a long ridge & saw through the great gap between the clad hills, one of the loveliest panoramic views of the country as ever one could wish to see, as far as ever the eye could follow right away to the horizon which must have reached nearly to the coast, there stretched endless miles of lovely green country covered with trees & big towns & villages all over it, they showed up splendidly for the sun was shining brightly which set their white stone walls & red tiled roofs off to perfection but the 'masterpiece' was to follow for we were gradually climbing a rise, & at last we reached the top & nearly everyone was startled into an exclamation; for the scene that laid in front of us beggared description.²³

WRITING, TURNING INWARD

If sightseeing was a vital break or an escape from the rigours of war, so too was diary keeping itself. For diarists with momentum, the daily or weekly jottings were compulsive. Unlike a sublime patch of country or the awesome spectacles that took the soldier outside himself, a quiet time with the diary took him within, to that place where he connected with home, with the crimson web of affinities in his heart. Unstated questions stirred him to pen his 'observations and experiences'. What shall I tell them? What shall they know of me and my doings? I can picture them, can they picture me? I will give them the setting, the pen portrait. I will get it down, this narrative between letters and postcards (and sometimes photos too).

For many of the soldier-diarists, diary keeping became a cathartic ritual. The emotional dimension requires us to recast how we think about these treasured volumes. There is, undoubtedly, an element of bravado and big-noting in some of them. Look at me! But that element pales before a deeper purpose once the fighting was underway. The soldier diaries were more than military artefacts and more than mere travel journals. They were dutiful commitments to home. The words within them were threads across time and space; ties as strong as iron, as light as air. Soldiers took great care to evade the military censors, to put their diaries into the mail or the hands of a homeward bound convalescent. These diaries remind us of how love was magnified, exalted and enhanced by the perils of war, and how loved ones felt the heightened emotions of separation in such perilous times. The diaries sustained and consoled both the diarist and his imagined audience on the other side of the world. The author and his readership lived in hope.

WORDS AND PARCELS

Whatever the subject matter, war diaries are first and foremost about writing. The diaries in this collection, along with letters in some cases, contain a good deal of information about the writing itself — the ways and means of acquiring the materials, the difficulties of writing (fatigue, censorship), the necessity to write and, most importantly, the commitment to communicate with home.

In some instances this commitment is compulsive. In others it arises from the understanding that correspondence received requires a reply, an immediate reply in the form of a letter or a postcard, or the occasional diary mailed home, or both. The serial conversation is, ideally, circular. Thoughts of home, and of loved ones at home thinking of the soldier, are part of the imaginative life of these men at war. The practical detail of communicating with home is a prominent theme in the personal narratives of the Mitchell Library's First World War collection. The prolific diarist and letter writer Fred Tomlins wrote home from Palestine in 1915. The fragment quoted here is indicative of the way that many soldiers kept up a conversation on the subject of

writing materials received or otherwise acquired. Some kept detailed records of mail in and out. Tomlins writes of the importance and the pleasure of receiving a big parcel from 'old Edie':

I believe I told you a couple of months ago that I should have had a parcel of writing material from Edie Tomlins, well it turned up in good order and condition last Saturday and I received quite a shock when I saw the size of it, she told me she had sent on a diary book, a bottle of ink and two writing blocks but she did not mention the extras she had put in ... two note books that suited us to a T and a large bottle of ink besides chocolates, honey drops ... poor old Edie is a brick, she writes to me every week as regular as clockwork and often sends along magazines and novels which are always more than welcome ...²⁴

ANNE DONNELL

The Library's collection of First World War personal narratives contains the diary and letters of one nursing sister who served in Egypt, Lemnos and England, and on the front in France. Anne Donnell was thirty-nine-years old when, from Adelaide, she joined the AIF as a staff nurse in 1915.

In the course of her tour of duty she kept a private diary, a somewhat cryptic record for the

& medical matters to be of much value to us. They appear to be copied from entries in a diary ... £5?²⁵

Despite the unfavourable review, the acquisition was made and today we can recognise Donnell's papers as an intimate record of one woman's travels and work abroad and a valuable commentary on the way that travel, tourism and writing sustained her in the course of harrowing duties and testing times through years of war.

Donnell was, for the most part, careful to shield her readers at home from the worst of her nursing experiences. Her letters are primarily a chronicle of her indomitable will to see the world and a record of her travels in the intervals between her postings. But there is more than enough nursing experience here to provide a sense of her work with the sick and wounded. Donnell was both a devoted nursing sister and a tireless tourist. Her letters are rich with bright sketches of town and country, people and panoramas, historical sites and cultural institutions.

She was quietly egalitarian, proud of her nationality and of her 'Australian boys'; she was independent and brave and sometimes defiant, and she was determined to do her Christian duty right to the end of the war, at whatever cost to her health. That cost was clearly evident late in 1917 when it seems she was exhausted, sick, longing for home and perhaps suffering from shell shock.



'THE SUSPENSE WAS DREADFUL,' WROTE DONNELL DURING ONE BOMBARDMENT,
'BUT WHAT A QUIET COMFORT HUMAN SYMPATHY IS.'

most part, and also wrote long 'circular letters', sent home at intervals to be passed around family members and friends. The diary served as an aide-mémoire for her letters home and sometimes she copied text from the one to the other.

Only one volume of her diaries was made available to the Library, that for 1918, but an almost complete set of her letters was acquired. A staff note on the acquisition observes: 'Interesting letters but hardly enough of military

In this regard, the Library note was not very perceptive. Whoever wrote it was looking for stories about the wounded saved from the battlefield — presumably 'military and medical' stories about fighting men laid low in the service of their country or empire. The librarian failed to notice or to value the way that the letters evolve into a vivid (if unintended) record of Donnell's heroic service and the cost to her health long before that service came to an end.

She commented several times on the guilt she felt when on leave — the sense of deserting her post, abandoning her ‘boys’ — and yet she never hesitated to plunge into travel with enthusiasm. She readily accepted the quid pro quo of travel as a reward for duty done and her letters convey the sense of a woman abroad who is determined to maximise the cultural itinerary. When working she wants to be in a surgical ward for ‘one doesn’t like to be out of the excitement of things’, and otherwise she wants to be sightseeing: ‘Tis my afternoon off and 6 of us are felluccering on the Nile.’ She commits her every spare moment to travel and, periodically, to updating her long circular letters for the benefit of her readers at home.²⁶ And the readers wrote back. This is the dynamic that inspired and sustained her.

Donnell was an avid photographer, her ‘little camera’ always close to hand. She developed her own prints whenever possible and mailed them home so her readers might see something of the sites she had seen. In fact her camera work linked her nursing and tourism in a most intimate way. She liked to photograph her ‘boys’ and provide them with a print to send home to the family. She did this on Lemnos in time for the Christmas mail. ‘They were delighted,’ she wrote.²⁷

Finally, the ‘military and medical’ content of Donnell’s papers is equally consequential, particularly the letters (and diary) that cover her time in France. These jottings provide an intimate account of living on the edge. In the last quarter of 1917 Donnell was serving in hospitals and clearing stations that were continually imperilled by aerial bombardment and frequently shaken by artillery shells. And she was proud to be there. ‘To be at a CCS [Casualty Clearing Station],’ she writes in her diary, ‘I am envied by many. They say they get the real thing at a CCS. Yes, but one wants to be very strong to stand the strain — work has not ceased for me for two months — I do pray for strength.’²⁸

Nursing sisters stood by their charges as bombs shook the ground beneath their feet. They donned gas masks whenever gas threatened, slept under their beds and huddled in their freezing dugouts time and again waiting for the all clear. ‘The suspense was dreadful,’ wrote Donnell during one bombardment, ‘but what a quiet comfort human sympathy is.

We held each other’s hands and after a silence ... Mary said “Anne, say the 23rd Psalm, it’s so nice”.²⁹

Suffice to say, to précis Anne Donnell’s ordeal can never do justice to her strength or commitment, nor to the toll it took on her health, at least in the short term. In her diary, two days before she was put in an ambulance and shipped off for rest, Donnell wrote briefly of her most recent work at the CCS: ‘It has been two solid months of hard bending anxious work. Work to say nothing of the bombing and the shelling and then the sights of the poor battered men and the sick men that tear at your very heart strings. And the intense cold, hard, biting frost and snow.’³⁰

Donnell was repatriated to England for her recovery and once recovered she laboured on, mixing her nursing duties with remorseless travel and keeping up the record of her tours in her circular letters. She sailed for Australia on 19 January 1919. Somewhat revised, her letters were published by Angus and Robertson in 1920, entitled *Letters of an Australian Army Sister*.

CONCLUSION

In 1974 Bill Gammage’s classic *The Broken Years* was published, based on the diaries and letters of a thousand Australians who fought in the Great War that are now in the Australian War Memorial’s collection. Gammage rejected the label ‘military history’. He wrote the book, he said, ‘to show the horrors of war.’

His focus on suffering, in the discipline of Australian history at least, was way ahead of the curve. His study echoed a trend in British social history and anticipated much of what was to follow in its Australian counterpart — a social history practice that sought to recover the deeply personal experience of war, with an emphasis not only on the horrors of war itself but also the legacy of damage thereafter, to individuals, families and indeed entire societies.

Christina Twomey has argued in *History Australia* (December 2013) that we can see the influence of this perspective in the way we now talk about our military heritage — the replacement of words about heroism and valour and manhood with talk of suffering,

trauma in war and its enduring presence thereafter. Twomey sees these concerns coming out of a much wider shift that she calls ‘the rise to cultural prominence of the traumatised individual’, a rise that is not peculiar to Australia or even to the military sphere, but is evident throughout the western world.³¹ It is clearly evident in the history discipline in this country, with indicative titles such as *Living with the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia and Grief in Post-War Australia* (2001), *The Cost of War: Australians Return* (1996), and *Shattered Anzacs. Living with the Scars of War* (2009).³²

The diaries collection at the State Library of New South Wales contains much raw material that will lend itself to the further study of traumatic experience in war. But the collection also provides a substantial foundation for the study of survival mechanisms in war, not so much physical as psychological.

The collection, as I noted earlier, is skewed in favour of survivors. It is also, of course, skewed in favour of writers. It invites a doctoral study by a student as bold as Bill Gammage, but with a different objective — not trauma but survival, not ruin but transcendence. Yet that formulation can be no more than hypothesis, to be refuted or confirmed by a detailed study of the diaries and perhaps a collective biography, following through to the postwar lives, where possible, of these dedicated soldier scribes. ¶



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Peter Cochrane (eds), **Griffith Review 48 Enduring Legacies**, (Autumn 2015), pp. 13–24.

1. *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), p. 7.
2. I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Elise Edmonds, Robynne Hayward and Richard Neville of the State Library of New South Wales, and of Suzanne Rickard, in the preparation of this paper.

3. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed by Robert Latham (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p. cxvi.
4. William Ifould to H. H. Southwell, 26 March 1919, Mitchell Library Correspondence files.
5. Peter Cochrane, *Towards 2014. Showcasing the Treasures of the State Library of New South Wales. Report on the Personal Narratives of the World War One Collection* (unpublished report, State Library of New South Wales, 31 March 2011). This report prefigured a number of events that were held at the State Library to commemorate the centenary of the First World War. The first of these was the major exhibition, curated by Elise Edmonds, *Life Interrupted. Personal Diaries from World War I*.
6. W. E. Bendrey, Diary, 28 June 1915, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW) MLMSS 761.
7. Oscar Rhodes, Diary, 11 July 1915, MLMSS 1199.
8. John Thomas Hutton, Diary, 4 May 1917, MLMSS 1138.
9. Benjamin Arthur Cohen, Diary, 1917, MLMSS 1844.
10. Rudolph Cox, Diary, MLMSS 2759.
11. Donald P. Wells, Diary, 11 April 1917, MLMSS 2743; John Thomas Hutton, Diary, 25 August 1916, MLMSS 1138.
12. William Peterson, Diary, 4 June 1916, MLMSS 2942.
13. A. R. L. Wiltshire, Diary, 1 September 1915, MLMSS 3058.
14. Herbert W. Farrell, Diary, 4 March 1915, MLMSS 2761.
15. Thomas Ray Crooks, Diary, 18 April 1915, MLMSS 838.
16. Bendrey, 12 March 1916.
17. Bendrey, 21 June 1916.
18. Norman Thomas Gilroy, Diary, 25 April 1915, MLMSS 2247.
19. This transition to a new language of war was acutely observed and richly documented in Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975). Fussell's work focused on the new literary pantheon (poets, essayists and novelists) that came out of the Great War, but he did not fail to notice how the writings of ordinary British soldiers also changed — dramatically.
20. Herbert H. Harris, Diary, 17 July 1916, MLMSS 2772. It is of course possible to chart a similar shift in language on the Gallipoli peninsula in 1915, in the mid-year months of that winter and the fighting then and after.
21. Archie Barwick, Diary, 24 July 1916, MLMSS 1493.

22. Charles Vincent Monaghan, Diary, 22 July 1916, MLMSS 7478.
23. Barwick's extraordinary war diaries, sixteen volumes in all, were edited and published in an abridged edition as *In Great Spirits. The WWI Diary of Archie Barwick. From Gallipoli to the Western Front and Home Again* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2013). Barwick's eulogy to the French countryside can be found in the diary entry for 16 October 1916 (p. 183).
24. Fred Tomlins, letter to 'All at Home', 23 August 1915, MLMSS 5975.
25. An undated Mitchell Library note from 1919 relating to the proposed purchase of Anne Donnell's letters and diary. Library file: E14/693. The note acknowledges content in the letters including 'with hospitals in France', 'in tents' and 'air raids on hospitals'.
26. Anne Donnell, letter to 'Darlings', 4 August 1916, Donnell Papers, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 1022. The letters are available online at: <<http://www.acmssearch.sl.nsw.gov.au/search/itemDetailPaged.cgi?itemID=843922>>.
27. Donnell, to 'Dear Friends', 1 November 1915.
28. Anne Donnell, Diary, 15 January 1918, MLMSS 1022/Item 2. The diary is online at: <<http://www.acmssearch.sl.nsw.gov.au/search/itemDetailPaged.cgi?itemID=843924>>.
29. Donnell, to 'Dear', 5 September 1917.
30. Donnell, Diary, 16 January 1918.
31. Chistina Twomey, 'Trauma and the Reinvigoration of Anzac', *History Australia*, 10, 3 (December 1990), pp. 85–108 (p. 91).
32. Joy Damousi, *Living with the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia and Grief in Post-War Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996); Marina Larsson, *Shattered Anzacs. Living with the Scars of War* (Kensington, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 2009).