

# Ruins or Foundations: Great War literature in the Australian curriculum

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Australian prose literature about the Great War is different. It diverges from its international counterparts chiefly, but not solely, because most Australian accounts use a classical heroic tradition that others abandoned for a disillusioned style of narration. In the highly regarded, canonical overseas texts, soldiers are sacrificed for negligible gains because the war's futility delivers nothing but ruination. Australian works, by contrast, tend to position the Great War as a foundational event in the nation's history. In 1993, at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, Prime Minister Paul Keating gave the eulogy at the burial of the Unknown Soldier, the only Australian casualty of the Great War to be repatriated. Keating said that his tomb signified 'what we have *gained*' (emphasis added). This statement typically positions the Great War as a benefit rather than a loss to the nation of Australia (Luckins 2004).

Differing from current mainstream views that the Great War was an unmitigated catastrophe, this view aligns with an alternative historiographic reading of the Great War that contends that, for most of its contemporaries, it was justifiable and worthwhile, part of a continuous and honourable historical tradition, with victory delivering clear benefits. Australian authors consistently propose that the Great War was worthwhile on a number of levels, most importantly because Australia became recognised as an independent country in a way not achieved by Federation. The international profile of Gallipoli demonstrated the nation's birth. While European authors increasingly regarded the Great War as the destroyer of civilisation, Australians built their civil life from the ruins:

Perhaps they would be going home soon to mingle again with their own people in their own land. Some effect that return must have. They were a people. The war had shown that. The AIF—was it not the first sign that they were [a people], the first manifestation that a spirit had begun to work in the material mass? How long would it be before there was some other sign, some manifestations of a small creative ferment ... Only by science, letters, art, can a people become great ... It seemed, now he was leaving the war and the old familiar landscape of death, that his life and the life of this generation was finished. They were the dung for the new flowering and fruit of the future. (Mann 347)

It is interesting here that Leonard Mann recognises both the foundational legacy of the conflict and also that it is 'only by science, letters, art' that a society so created can become great. By this reasoning, even the literature of the conflict becomes a '[manifestation]' of 'creative ferment'. Figuring the horrific experiences and the lives lost as 'dung' to promote 'flowering and fruit of the future', Mann (writing in the early 1930s) encapsulates the idea that war, revolting and deadly as it is, can be seen as necessary for future life, growth and peace.

Stanley Fish (1980) proposed that texts become 'the product of the contexts or interpretive communities in which they are read' (Bellis *et al.* 171), rather than in those in which they are

written. In relation to teaching texts in schools, Lyn Yates says that ‘the curriculum is where a particular story of the world is set up’ (2011). This paper ponders the question of ‘whose language and culture [will be] privileged’ (Doecke *et al.* 3) in the forthcoming Australian curriculum where, traditionally, British perspectives of the Great War have been foregrounded.

The current proposal for the English subjects suggests that curricula should include ‘features of present-day Australia that matter to all Australians ... [including] a view of our nation as culturally and linguistically diverse, democratic, evolving, with a history of accomplishments, and struggles’ (ACARA 4). Texts will be selected with the understanding that ‘while the nature of literary texts is dynamic and evolving, they [have] personal, social, cultural and aesthetic value and potential for enriching students’ lives and scope of experience’ (ACARA 5). Literary texts ‘will engage students partly because of what they might learn about human experience and what they might learn about how language has been used ... to create particular emotional, intellectual, or philosophical effects’ and to ‘develop critical understandings about the social, historical and cultural context of texts’ (ACARA 8). Add these notions to the intention that ‘the presence of Australian literary texts and an increasingly informed appreciation of the place of Australian literature among other literary traditions will be part of the national English curriculum’ (ACARA 8), and there appears to be a sound case for considering Australian prose perspectives of the Great War.

Evolving societal attitudes common after the Great War, such as the bitterness of the Depression and the peace movements of the 1960s, set up a worldview of war based on what were received as texts of disillusionment, overlooking the fact that these texts describe a number of heroic actions. Indeed many of the Great War canon’s authors, including those most outspoken against the war—for example, Sassoon, Owen, Barbusse—had heroic war records themselves (Bond *Unquiet*, 31), and an attitude to war that could be called at least ‘ambivalent’ (Winter *Experience*, 226-9). In most cases their works were not categorised as belonging to the disillusioned school until the aftermath of the so-called war books controversy in the late 1930s. Winter describes the disillusioned ‘waste and pity’ style of Great War writing as ‘both untrue to the events of the war and a profoundly accurate account of the mentality of the trench soldiers’ (*Experience*, 227). Perhaps ‘the mentality of some of the trench soldiers, some of the time’ would be more accurate: Winter’s comment applies equally well to heroic accounts (like many Australian texts), because ‘the mentality of the trench soldiers’ was not constant, simple or universal. For many participants, neither the sordid nor the courageous dominated; the tedium of war is recounted in many personal documents. In summary, the disillusioned view is largely cultural, not historical, because ‘the war crippled Britain *psychologically*, and in no other way’ (Barnett 18, original emphasis). Demographic measures largely refute the notion of a ‘lost generation’ (Winter *Sites*) in Britain and allied countries.

However, most literary criticism of Great War texts since the 1930s is based on the cultural view which sees the war as meaningless and individuals as victims, rendering heroic Australian works largely dismissed or undervalued. More embittered texts, such as selected poetry of Wilfred Owen (largely unknown until the 1960s; see Bond *Unquiet* 28) and the extravagantly anti-heroic Canadian text *Generals Die in Bed* (Harrison 1928; see Vance 30-34 for a discussion of the book’s fallacious and libellous nature) have latterly represented the Great War on Australian curricula. The appropriateness and value of ambiguity in attitudes to war has been too little recognised (see Wohl 219; Rhoden 2010), with the result that the complexity present in most narratives of all nations has been ignored as critics label them

‘anti-war’ or (pejoratively) ‘heroic’. This complexity of perspectives, attitudes and experiences is especially under-recognised in Australian Great War literature.

Rosalie Triolo’s (2008) research into the Victorian Education Department during the Great War demonstrates the variety of attitudes to, and uses of, war literature in the Australian curriculum. Triolo studied the department’s school publications as well as official records and personal documents of the soldier-teachers, to demonstrate a wide range of patriotic, nationalistic, propagandist, idealistic, pacifist and elegiac texts used in schools during the war.

In the post-Cold War and post-Vietnam era, war texts relating war’s disruption of civilisation grew in critical and popular regard, and this has been reflected in the Australian curriculum. Our cultural values have evolved, bringing a consequent change in the valuation of war texts. From the 1960s, the emphasis shifted to exposing war in its guise of the antithesis of civilisation. War became no longer foundational but contradictory to civilisation, war being the ruination of society. Ignoring the fact that ‘aesthetics is integrally bound up with politics or ideology’ (Doecke and McClenaghan 41), the underlying assumption of both ‘foundational’ and ‘ruination’ propositions is that literature in the curriculum has solely didactic—not aesthetic or cultural or other—purposes. This runs counter to the current curriculum recommendation that students from as early as Years 3-6 should ‘develop ways to explore [both] aesthetic and ethical aspects of literary texts’ (ACARA 12). Australian Great War stories could provide material for the development of such explorations.

The argument in this paper, which proposes including Great War texts on the national curriculum and particularly the case for more Australian texts, rests on a number of more-or-less controversial premises, stated here explicitly. First, this topic arises from the reflection that Australian literature may deserve more representation on the Australian curriculum, in line with the 2009 recommendations. Second, the paper proposes that the Great War is an important event in Australian history, even while recognising many valid competitors. Third, this discussion proposes that war stories can be considered ‘literature’; that they, like romances and mysteries and family sagas, constitute a range of literary worth and registers fit for analysis and discussion. Finally, the paper maintains that Australian Great War stories in particular are worth considering for the national curriculum, for reasons outlined below.

A first step would be to interrogate the purposes and value of any Australian literature in the curriculum. We may broadly accept, for example, that Australian literature delivers ‘a sense of cultural heritage’ (Queensland Board of Secondary School Studies 1), and that it ‘has a unique relevance to students in this country’ (McLean Davies 47). Australian literature is here accepted as a feature of our cultural legacy specifically relevant to Australian students. This proposition rests on the mostly undefended inference that Australian literature is different from the literature of other nations. According to ACARA, which promotes the investigation of the place of Australian literature in a world context, the literature strand will support students in their tasks of ‘understanding, appreciating, responding to, analysing and creating literature’ and assist them to develop ‘an enjoyment in, and informed appreciation of, how English language can convey information and emotion, create imaginative worlds and aesthetic and other significant experiences’ (5).

For these explicit purposes, Australian Great War literature is apposite, with almost a century of writing providing a rich heritage of Australian perspectives. In the literature strand at school level, these texts could support the exploration of a number of aesthetic and

ethical themes such as conscription and politics; women and war; love and mateship; killing and dying; racism and parochialism; nobility and obscenity; futility and purpose; and the place of the war in the 21st century. The body of Australian prose literature of the war is extensive enough to support exploration of literary features such as theme, genre, perspective, setting, voice, register, lexicon, imagery and so on.

A wide variety of Australian texts deal with the Great War and it is worth naming a few here. At early primary school level, suitable texts include illustrated texts such as Gary Crew and Shaun Tan's *Memorial* (1999), Norman Jorgensen and Brian Harrison's *In Flanders Fields* (2002), Catriona Hoy and Benjamin Johnson's *My Grandad Marches on Anzac Day* (2006), and Mark Greenwood and Frané Lessac's *Simpson and his Donkey* (2008). Some texts suitable for middle primary school are Ivan Southall's *Bread and Honey* (1971), Serpil Ural's *Candles at Dawn* (2000), and Sonya Hartnett's *Silver Donkey* (2004). At secondary level, many Australian texts offer both accessibility and sufficient complexity to make valuable contributions to the English curriculum: David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* (1982) is a perennial favourite (and has for some years been the sole representative of Australian perspectives of the Great War on Australian curricula), but there are others such as David Metzenthén's *Boys of Blood and Bone* (2003) and *Black Water* (2007); Jackie French's *A Rose for the Anzac Boys* (2008) and Peter Yeldham's *Barbed Wire and Roses* (2008).

One could mount a tertiary literature subject along the lines of 'The Great Adventure: 100 years of Australian & New Zealand Writing of the First World War', featuring narratives such as Chris Womersley's *Bereft* (2010); Alison Wong's *As the Earth Turns Silver* (2009); Graeme Hague's *And in the morning* (2002); Brenda Walker's *The Wing of Night* (2005); Stephen Daisley's *Traitor* (2010); Robin Hyde's *Passport to Hell* (1936); J.P. McKinney's *Crucible* (1935); G.D. Mitchell's *Backs to the Wall* (1937); Ion Idriess's *Desert Column* (1932); Leonard Mann's *Flesh in Armour* (1932); and Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929), described in 2010 as 'almost certainly the finest work of its kind to emerge from the war' (Hastings).

If we step back even further, we could ask whether war literature of any origin should be considered for inclusion in educational programs. What is it that we could expect war texts to bring to the table? From one perspective, war is a repellent aspect of human behaviour. Perhaps it should not be represented on any curriculum, or if it arises in set literary texts, then part of the process of education would be to nurture 'appropriate' emotional and moral responses to it. I suggest that, in recent years, war texts have been charged with just such a purpose: to promote anti-war sentiment. Many critics (eg *Winter Experience*) imply that the task of the writer of quality is to *not* glorify war; that is, the writer of quality's role is to be anti-war. There are underlying assumptions here that literature has didactic purposes, and that in the case of war literature, the 'correct' purpose is to teach an anti-war message.

This is a value judgement rather than a literary one (the interrelationship of cultural values and literature notwithstanding). It is a rational latter-day attitude which colours our responses to fiction as well as to history, imposing consequent limitations on our insight into past events and restricting our access to a range of diverse attitudes and perspectives about such culturally relevant topics as war, society, justice, and ethics. The attitude to war of civilised societies across time is not constant: consider the role of the war-writer in classical times. 'The mental outlook or moral code of thoughtful people in [a] very different ethos' (Bond *Unquiet*, 7) is difficult for us to recreate. It is also somewhat contradictory to post-

structuralist ideas to assume that literature must convey not only a message, but also a socially acceptable message, rather than existing in its own right, telling its own tale. Great War texts on recent Australian curricula, such as Owen's poetry, *Generals Die in Bed*, and Malouf's elegiac *Fly Away Peter*, are often interpreted as anti-war texts. However, this interpretation is not as constant, objective or simple as we might think at first sight.

For anti-war discourse purposes, anti-heroic works have their own drawbacks. All authors writing about war have difficulty trying to 'commemorate those who die in war without glorifying war itself' (Winter *Experience*, 229), a question Tolstoy investigated and one that successive generations have probably not answered any better. A density of grisly detail, even if designed to engender a disgust of war and all its devices rather than to raise the level of pathos and suspense, eventually overwhelms the reader's sensibility and becomes a suspect literary device in its own right, sensationalizing and thereby amplifying the same outrages it seeks to criticise. 'The very horror of war is part of its enduring attraction' (Gerster 9), elevating it as an extreme human experience. An explicit evocation of war's horrors can increase the notional heroism of those fictional characters who encounter it, an outcome not to be desired by those wishing to use literature for pacifist ends. Furthermore, an exaggeratedly negative picture of war in effect exalts it as a great test of human endurance and spirit. Even Owen's poetry has been read as a subtle celebration of war, in that it invests war with a special quality that only veterans (that is, the privileged initiates) can truly understand (Bond *Anti-War*, 818). Some of the more sensationalist literature, while received as anti-war by mainstream critics, has also been criticised for 'pander[ing] to a lust for horror, brutality and filth' (Bond *Unquiet*, 33). At a more pragmatic level, 'graphically realistic accounts [of war] have the disadvantage that sadistic readers might enjoy them' (McLoughlin 16).

The ethical case for using war literature didactically for either nationalistic or pacifist purposes has been debated. Education specialists who conclude that such a use is inappropriate are Jeffcoate (1990), Kociumbas (1997) and Agnew and Fox (2001). In fact it is challenging to imagine how anti-war lessons might be taught in the English curriculum—if this is an appropriate way to teach such a message, and if we agree that such a didactic purpose is one function of post-war literature—without running the risk of either endorsing the ordeal or creating a genre akin to popular vampire stories, each more gruesome than the last. The protagonists for whom, in order to decry their awful fate, we must be made to feel sympathy, are likely to be romanticised. To some extent, this is what has occurred with the Anzac legend. But although current received wisdom is that the Great War was futile and horrific, the stature of the Anzac has only increased in public estimation. The Anzac soldier is a greater, more tragic, and more popular figure for having participated in a travesty of war, rather than being the conquering hero of the 1920s. Thus the current revival of interest in Anzac Day can to some extent be credited to the widespread uptake of the pacifist message since the 1960s.

A similar appeal to the reader's sympathies occurs in classical tragedy, where the hero battles his inevitable moira. Mediaeval romances also showed heroes 'who, for all their mighty acts, cannot control their destinies' because a 'sense of tragic destiny ennobles' the literature (Howard 29-30). Yet classical and medieval war literature is not attempting to instil in us disgust with the protagonist's fate in quite the same way as anti-heroic Great War literature tries to provoke our outrage at the victim-infantryman's submission to his war death (note Howard's word, 'ennobles'). Classical tragedies may attempt to teach us lessons; for example, that hubris will meet its nemesis and that not even the gods can defy their fate, but

they are not teaching us to hate war the way anti-war literature wants us to hate war. Clearly the anti-war writer has a hard task because anti-war literature may still promote war. No matter how bloody and horrible war stories are, they 'have no apparent restraining power over nations or peoples when the next war comes; [people] will go to war regardless' (Hynes 220). There is a degree of naivety in the point of view which proposes that telling the 'truth' of any horror will help to reduce its occurrence. While public sentiment has shifted to an underlying position that is anti-war, Australia as a whole demonstrates bipartisan support for armed deployments in circumstances it considers just. While such deployments are debated strongly (as was the case during Great War), mainstream sentiment regards the actions of current Diggers as heroic and largely worthwhile, at least in intent.

In western culture, war stories such as the *Iliad* have always formed part not only of historical but also of literary curricula. War forms the background to many revered literary texts, such as Shakespeare's *Henry V*. That in itself is insufficient reason to always include war texts, but we can reflect on what these texts contribute and ask whether such contributions are relevant and worthwhile in twenty-first century Australia. In previous eras, war texts performed a number of cultural purposes, such as showcasing heroic actions and desirable social virtues. Certainly during the Great War, such texts were used as a spur to enlistment or to influence children to support the war effort (see Audoin-Ruzeau, Kociumbas, and Paris). At other times, stories of war have been used simply as entertainment, as we can still observe in popular war (and fantasy war) films. War is often employed as a background to other socially fraught situations or conundrums, for example, as the setting for a murder mystery, a spy drama or a love story. In these instances, the peculiar limitations and freedoms co-existing in wartime help to complicate plot intricacies and/or to showcase the particular personal qualities of the protagonists. Many war texts encode arguably constructive social values such as courage, endurance, fidelity, ingenuity, persistence, and selflessness—values which can be considered foundational to civilised life—as well as less acceptable constructs such as aggression, hatred, violence and expedience.

Most latter day novels convincingly represent the soldiers of the Great War as victims of mechanized slaughter, appallingly pragmatic or erroneous leadership, and invidious conditions. In Britain, Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) and Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* (1993) heralded dozens of literary novels set during the Great War. In some, the anti-heroic theme is stretched to grotesque proportions. These modern interpretations have been criticised by historians for increasing sympathy for the soldier-victim by misrepresenting the war, the army, and the attitudes of the time. For example, 'while [the harsh treatment of shellshocked soldiers] is an effective literary device, it does not represent reality' (Humphries and Kurchinski 110). The number of British servicemen executed for cowardice or neglect of duty in fiction, television, film and theatre now possibly exceeds the actual number executed, approximately 24 of the total of 306 executions (Corns and Hughes-Wilson 104), making such stories over-representational. Few literary critics question these representations, but revisionist historians contend that modern motifs of futility heavily over-state or distort historical acts which were seen at the time as necessary, honourable, and even praiseworthy. Capital punishment is regarded as one of the war's horrors and rarely placed in the context of the contemporary justice system, under which the remainder of executions was likely to have occurred (Corns and Hughes-Wilson 103).

All this still sidesteps the question of whether Australian Great War prose fiction has literary merit. Its efficacy as a persuasion to anti-war ideology is a question for political commentators rather than critics of literature. Australian authors decry the war but, by

contrast with the anti-heroic writers, they praise rather than pity their protagonists, ‘like the proverbial theatre critic who thought the play appalling but the acting superb’ (Gerster 12). This is not a unique stance: to criticize the theatre of war while commending those who act within it is an element of war writing from its earliest incarnation. Australian writers, however, seem unable to convey the horror of war *without* praising Australian actions; the two notions coexist. Hatred of war and admiration for the soldier cohabit many overseas texts—Sassoon and Graves provide excellent examples—but Australian authors tend to allow their esteem of the soldier to overshadow their disgust with the war. This may be reconceptualised as a question of balance and selection, and a reflection on the Australian writers’ denial of the war’s ultimate futility, rather than the embodiment of a literary weakness.

Rather than rejecting most Australian narratives of war, a more cogent understanding of their contribution to the expression of war as a human affair can be sought. In other words, by not recognising that attitudes to war are not only widely diverse but continually evolve, we deprive ourselves of the range of valid responses, indulging in a kind of ‘psychological anachronism’ (Todman xiv) and patronising the texts from a pacifist platform. ‘A [war] book may be bad and yet will tell you much’ (Montague 43). Some will match better today’s mainstream attitude to war and some will constitute an enduring literary legacy. Other works can provide valid insights such as cultural and commemorative perspectives, quite apart from their analysis as works of literature.

Hynes reminds us that ‘we must accept as fact that men on the whole are glad they went to war; their narratives tell us that’ (219). Dismissing all positive testimony deprives us of an important window into the soldier’s human experience. Additionally, a preference for British and European texts fails to account for the different experiences and attitudes of troops from the southern hemisphere, in a time when globalisation had not made such experiences increasingly uniform. In Australia, many historians and literary critics consider the Anzac story a solely political device employed to convey conservative values. Some deplore what they see as the ‘militarisation’ of our history (Lake *et al.* 2010). In this climate, the inclusion of Great War texts in the national curriculum might be considered political rather than cultural (if we can ever separate politics from culture). Some would prefer to demote Gallipoli below Federation as the crucial event in our journey to independent nation status. A healthier and historically more respectful path is to increase our knowledge of the Great War, Federation and other foundational events, such as post-World War 2 migration and the Referendum of 1967. Australian nationhood is not a case of Gallipoli *or* Federation, European invasion *or* continuous indigenous heritage, convict stain *or* multicultural migration. We should explore all these aspects of our identity, and the national curriculum is an attractive mechanism to begin that exploration.

In summary, this paper proposes that Australian Great War narratives form a distinct subgenre, one that deserves consideration in the national curriculum. Such texts can assist us to develop ‘a heightened awareness of the complex relationships between texts and contexts, of the way interpretive communities construct meaning by engaging with texts’ (Bellis *et al.* 165). A failure to engage at any level with Australian Great War texts leaves a sizeable gap in our ‘particular story of the world’.

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