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Bereavement and Mourning (Australia)

By Bruce Scates

This article considers patterns of bereavement and mourning in Australia both during and immediately after the Great War. It argues that the conditions of modern warfare and sheer distance from the battlefields contributed to a sense of unreconciled loss amongst the civilian population and identifies the new memorial cultures and supportive circles of mourning that emerged in the face of mass death. It also considers the complex relationship soldiers had with the loss of their comrades through a close reading of personal testimony which challenges the widely accepted model of patriotic duty and Spartan emotional repression amongst soldier and civilian alike.

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Introduction

The Great War cast a shadow across Australia. Of some 330,000 Australians who served overseas, over 60,000 died. Around one in four families suffered the loss of a husband or son. Those who have been called the "secondary bereaved", those who mourned a cousin, uncle or friend, widened the ambit of grief even further. In Ken Inglis' estimate every second Australian family suffered a loss from the war.[1]

It is not surprising that grief and mourning has been a vigorous field of historical enquiry in Australia. The first of these studies tended to place private bereavement in the public context of commemoration: Ken Inglis' magisterial study of war memorials across the Australian landscape; Michael McKernan's detailed interrogation of Australia's national memorial; and Stephen Garton's pioneering work on repatriation.[2] Since the late 1990s, historians have attempted to historicize grief at the level of the individual. Influenced by the work of cultural historians, particularly Jay Winter, Bruce Scates and Joy Damousi created an intimate register of loss through the study of personal correspondence, bereavement columns and the "emotional labour" that bound "communities of mourners" together.[3] Tanja Luckins examined the way loss was embodied in place and objects; subsequent studies by Scates and Bart Ziino retraced pilgrimages to cemeteries and other sites of memory.[4] Jacqueline Manuel and Christina Spittel considered literary expressions of grief and mourning; Jen Hawksley examined the psychological trauma occasioned by loss, Marina Larsson the "disenfranchised loss" of physically disabled men.[5]

Australian historians have also engaged with a global conversation about the complex issues that revolve around wartime

bereavement. Patricia Jalland, for example, applied her earlier work on Britain to note the way women adopted male models of stoic restraint in the face of overbearing loss.[6] Conversely, some of the most revealing work has been conducted at a local level: John McQuilton's studies of the personal impact of war on small country towns; Peter Stanley's micro-history of particular soldier cohorts; Michael McKernan's work on army chaplains; and the pursuit of life stories and biography by Al Thomson, Ross McMullin and Scates, Wheatley and James.[7]

The question of how mourning was expressed through public ceremony and commemoration (particularly the making of memorials and the observance of Anzac Day) and how the bereaved mobilized politically continues to intrigue historians.[8] To date Australian scholarship has charted different ways of grieving across diverse communities of mourners, considered the way gender shapes the nature of bereavement and how "memory agents" drive the politics and practise of commemoration.[9] This article will sharpen that focus. It will chart the contours of bereavement and grief on and off the battlefield; consider the "unresolved loss" occasioned by wartime bereavement and "glimpse", as French scholars have put it, at elusive and "intimate levels of grief."[10]

An Unresolved Grieving: The Plight of the Missing

In Australia, as in Europe, the Great War changed the nature of grief and mourning. For almost a century there had been a virtually continuous decline in mortality and increased life expectancy. The mass death of the Great War effectively reversed that trend. Parents who had expected their children to outlive them were now faced with their loss. In the past, families had found some solace in time-honored rituals that revolved around the bodies of the dead. But the bodies of the war dead were lost on battlefields on the other side of the world, making the viewing of the body and its preparation for burial and funerals no longer possible.[11]

This had two major implications for the bereaved. On the one hand, the public protocols that once marked a Christian death were often abandoned and new rituals of memorialization (considered below) substituted in their place. "Paradoxically," as Inglis first observed, "the war which created such unprecedented levels of bereavement may actually have tended to reduce its public expression", and ornate displays of grief were actively discouraged.[12] Equally importantly, grief was internalized and took on a more tortured and unresolved character than ever before. Unable to attend the body of the dead or stand beside a grave, reconstructing the final private moments of a loved one's life seemed a necessity to the bereaved. Great stress was placed on visualizing a death in battle or in a hospital, an attempt, psychologists tell us, to lend finality to loss. But actual details of these deaths were often difficult to come by. Months would pass before any official confirmation and even then (with conflicting reports of battle and correspondence from soldiers often reaching families long after they had been killed) these deaths seemed inconclusive.[13]

Doubts almost always attended the case of the missing. Like the brutality of modern warfare itself, "missing" was beyond the comprehension of much of the civilian population. As one historian has observed, it implied that a body had somehow been "misplaced".[14]

A wounded and missing enquiry bureau was established by the Red Cross at the very beginning of the war. It was a monumental effort, one made all the more remarkable by the entirely voluntary nature of the society. This was an instance of what Jay Winter has called "a fictive kinship" between the bereaved and other communities of mourners.[15]

In conveying death reports, Red Cross workers had to reconcile two potentially conflicting duties. On the one hand, families were made to confront loss and there was often a startling lack of euphemism in the way death was described. Men were "killed"; they seldom "fell in battle"; grieving families were told their loved ones were shot, gassed, bayoneted or shelled. Indeed, the more factual the imagery, the more conclusive these deaths would seem. Even so, the language of war, recorded verbatim in interviews with soldiers, was often gently amended. Men "shot through the privates" were wounded in the abdomen; those "cut up" by machine-gun fire and blown to pieces were "killed instantly" and without pain. At times one senses the disparity between the consolation Red Cross workers offered and the frankness of the men they interviewed. Private Patterson was asked if he was able to bury a comrade killed by shellfire at Bullecourt: "there was nothing left of him to bury," came the terse reply.[16]

Historians have noted the "insistently polite" tone of much of this correspondence between the bereaved and these "fictive kin", emphasing the gratitude expressed by grieving families and the stoic acceptance of loss.[17] But in such complex archives one also finds more disruptive elements; scepticism, a willingness to take issue with what were often contradictory accounts by the men themselves and to contest the findings of Military Inquiries. Mary Elliot was not so much thankful as resentful:

> It is an awful thing to leave a mother in dought [sic] I have heard things here and there that made me dought he was killed, [and] the suspense is awful … I can't make anything of the war but that it is wrong, wrong, wrong, from beginning to end.[18]

With her eldest "taken" at Fromelles, another "maimed by this wretched slaughter", Mrs. Elliot's case reminds us that grief could also turn to anger: "I was a fool [to send] all my bread winners of the family [to the war]," she told the authorities. "When it is all over King George of England and the Kaiser will be kissin' one another and wondering what it was all about."[19] One suspects she was one amongst many bereft in the face of loss, her private pain never "rewritten" as patriotic "pride" or noble, Christian "sacrifice".[20]

What is beyond dispute is that the trite word "closure" fails to do justice to the complex patterns of grieving evident in the files; rather it suggests again the unresolved nature of wartime bereavement. Many remained conspicuously silent when they were informed an inquiry had been closed. Silence should not be read as acceptance. In fact, in many cases, families refused to accept the loss of a loved one even long after the war had ended. Years after military courts had pronounced a man dead, distraught mothers continued to search for them, recognizing "their boy" in photographs from the front, convinced he had lost his memory and would be found somewhere in the hospital, adamant that without the proof of a burial there was still cause for hope. This persistent, argumentative denial transcended class and regional differences. The Campbell family, wealthy pastoralists from New South Wales, demanded the exhumation of grave purported to contain the remains of their son. Though Lt. Campbell had been shot down in flames over the Cambria, they remain convinced he might have survived.[21] Similarly, three years after her son's name appeared on a German death list, Alice Irving (a pensioner living in the outskirts of Adelaide) insisted her son would "someday" come home to her: "I saw in a paper that a thousand mental cases was returning," she told the Red Cross. "I thought my boy may be amongst them."[22] As late as 1928, one such "mental case" was claimed by his mother from an asylum in Sydney, rekindling the hope of thousands like Mrs Irving. That – like the rise of spiritualism in Australia, a decline in church attendance, and the continued attempt to commune with the dead – says much of the unresolved grieving left in the wake of war.[23]

Witnesses to War: The Grief of Soldiers

Soldiers in the line were the first to mourn their comrades' loss. Witnesses to war, they nursed the bodies of the dying, heard their last messages and buried them if they could. In Australia, some historians have emphasised the "Spartan" control that sustained men on the battlefield. The chivalric language of Tennyson, Damousi notes, "obscured grief"; supressing emotion was essential to enduring the carnival of death erupting all around them and often "notions of duty replaced emotions of loss." This helps to explain the detached, formulaic pattern of letters written home to grieving families. In the mechanised murder of modern warfare, many simply became hardened to what they saw and did.[24]

But other testimony suggests a more complex reading revealing a shift (as Damousi puts it) from "warrior" to "nurturer".[25] Again in the Red Cross files one encounters a very different voice from those clichéd letters of condolence. Soldiers were usually interviewed in the hospital, when injury or illness had taken them from the line. In these rare reflective moments, men confided something of their vulnerability, venting the depth and intensity of their loss. One senses the intimacy that bound men together in Private Gedde's account of the death of a comrade. "We all loved and respected [Bill Bolton]," Geddes told a Red Cross visitor. "He was one of the finest and best-hearted chaps that ever breathed." Bolton had been shot in the neck on the Somme and drowned in his own blood in less than fifteen minutes. With compassion unbecoming a warrior, Geddes gathered up his "things, a prayer book [and] wristlet watch and forwarded them home to mother." Then they dragged that "big lump of a chap" over the parapet and buried him just behind the trenches.[26]

The truth of such accounts is immaterial. What matters is the tenderness with which they are spoken. Private diaries render just as sensitive a testimony. A veteran of three years fighting, Private Langford Colley-Priest MM attended a memorial service in the

closing months of the war. As his corporal spoke in honour of four fallen comrades neither he, nor anyone else in the audience "kept a stiff upper lip." "It was indeed an impressive service," the young private confided to his diary, and "one I shall never forget. I have never seen men breakdown as they did this night."[27]

As written works embody emotion, so too do gestures. The marking of the grave was often a comrade's final tribute and, in the bleakness of the battlefield, soldiers dignified and individualized death as best they could. At Gallipoli graves were decorated with stones, beaten jam tins, and biscuit boxes. In the deserts south of Gaza, scratching on a sheet of cardboard said all that was needed to be said.[28] And there are innumerable instances of men risking their lives to offer their comrades a decent burial. An artillery officer, William Knox took part in savage fighting in Gallipoli, in Flanders, and on the Somme. A product of the Melbourne elite, educated in the tradition of muscular Christianity, and all too accustomed to seeing men die in battle, Captain Knox seems a model of Edwardian masculinity. In short, a stern sense of duty blunted his capacity to grieve. But, like many officers who served in the Great War, Knox found the common hardships of service fostered an unexpected fellowship with his men. He described the loss of two of his "best fellows" on the Ypres salient in 1917. "They got blown up by a shell," he wrote to his wife. "I'm very sad about and a bit upset & nervy tonight. ...I couldn't get a Padre so I had to read the burial service myself. The most trying thing I have ever done and all the more so as we were under heavy shelling at the time-I was very fond of those two lads and wanted to do what I could do for them properly."[29]

One can read several things into such an account: the guilt of a survivor, an inward struggle for composure, the sense of responsibility a surrogate father felt for the men under his command. What is clear is that soldiers' relationship to loss in war is far more complex than the caricature of Spartan fortitude would have us believe. Psychiatrists have also noted that witnessing mass killing on so extreme and intense a scale can lead to "an imprint of death", a continuous reimagining of the death encounter, impairing mourning and marring any return to a normal civilian life.[30] Like civilians then, many soldiers faced an unresolved grief long after the fighting had ended. Hundreds were admitted to insane asylums on their return to Australia, caught up in a horrific recall of death in the trenches.[31]

Materialising Memory: Mourning Objects and the Embodiment of Grief

With no body to mourn or to bury, a soldier's personal effects became the focus of a family's loss. In some cases, families waited months, even years for these "poor sad little [things]" to reach them. "I value every article he possessed," one sorrowful mother wrote to Base Records in Melbourne, "and would like to have them to keep forever."[32] A soldier's bible or prayer book was a treasured possession, evidence of the salvation promised by faith. But even the most prosaic of objects, "an item of clothing which had touched a loved one's body'", a watch signifying time cut short, a handful of coins a husband or son had handled, continued, in material form, a relationship with the dead.

Across Australia the photograph of a soldier "made shrines of side boards"; some sealed images of their "boys" in lockets or family bibles, others composed elaborate scrapbooks as memorials to the dead.[33] Gary Roberts tended what he called "Frank's memorial books" on an almost daily basis, a careful emotional labor that sustained him in his loss. Robert's transcribed his son's letters, compiled accounts by his comrades, retraced his journey on maps of the battlefields, nurturing – even replenishing – his grief.[34]

Alongside these private mementoes were symbols of sacrifice manufactured en masse. Bereaved families received a letter of condolence from a "grateful" sovereign, grieving mothers were entitled to commemorative broaches (a golden star for every son offered up "for Australia"), and families across the empire were issued memorial medallions. Dubbed the "Dead Man's Penny", these were sometimes incorporated into private memorials, an elaborate reworking of state-sanctioned symbols of grief. For example, all three of the Carmen boys were killed in France. When their father died a decade after the Armistice, his son's memorial medallions were set on the marble pillar marking his grave. The opening lines of Binyon's *Ode* were carved on its base: "They shall grow not old ..."[35]

Acts of Pilgrimage: Journeys Real and Imagined

The Carmen grave underscores one of the cruellest realities of wartime bereavement. Few Australian families would ever visit the grave of their loved ones. The cost alone was prohibitive. The first organized pilgrimage to Gallipoli cost over a year's wages

for a skilled white male worker and while the cemeteries of the Western Front were more accessible they were still beyond the reach of all but the elite. Australian historians have noted the way that distance compounded the sense of loss amongst the bereaved but it is important not to overstate that argument. A working class widow from Manchester also lacked the social and financial means to make her way to Egypt or the Somme.[36]

In the absence of an actual journey, families created an imaginary connection with the graves of a dead. For a price, next-of-kin could compose an epitaph for a tombstone; photographs were arranged by charitable agencies; sketchbooks were published rendering distant graveyards visible; obituaries proclaimed a link with "that corner of a foreign field" forever their own. There was a near continuous traffic of what were dubbed "sacred" relics from one continent to another. Pilgrims to war graves gathered the seeds of wildflowers, soil from the battlefields was entombed in state memorials, "and a bundle of foliage [was] picked from the environs of Anzac Cove" and shipped all the way to Sydney. In the opposite direction, wattle was frozen in blocks of ice and despatched to Whitehall, messages from grieving mothers laid on graves across the Somme, and a 1929 pilgrimage to all the major Anzac Battlefields played the part of surrogate mourners.[37] Each participant carried a sprig of artificial wattle to place beside a grave or memorial, bearing the words of a family back home.

In the post-war period, a forest of memorials was also raised to commemorate the dead. Their form and purpose differed enormously, a physical expression of how different communities sought to commemorate their loss. However, all provided a cenotaph, literally an empty gave, and a platform around which collective and individual acts of mourning might be expressed. Almost all of these memorials carry the names of the "fallen", making, as one scholar put it, "the absent present again".[38] Often memorials provide another imaginary bridge to the battlefields. The Women's Memorial Gardens in Adelaide mirrored the design of the Imperial War Graves Commissions cemetery, raising a replica of Blomfield's Cross of sacrifice around rows of symbolic graves. Others record the names of the places that claimed a generation: Gallipoli and Palestine, Flanders and the Somme.[39]

Conclusion

The Great War changed the nature and practice of mourning and bereavement in Australia. This was not only due to the scale of death or the sudden shift in demographic patterns. The nature of modern warfare, with artillery barrages concentrated on a narrow front across Europe, meant that bodies were often obliterated, removing the focus of vital rituals of mourning. Bereavement was painfully unresolved, both for civilians who often faced sudden changes in funerary practice and for soldiers, whose chivalric notion of valor clashed with the industrialized carnage of battle. While patriotism sustained many in their grief, others came to question the sense of such sacrifice. Almost all tried to materialise their loss, creating new memorial forms that individualized the dead and personalized (and sometimes contested) state-sanctioned narratives of sacrifice. The haunting absence of a body to mourn fostered the creation of a host of civic monuments, inscribing the Australian landscape with a community's enduring sense of loss.

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Notes

1. ↑ The author thanks Rae Frances for her comments on this article and Alice McConnell. Inglis, Ken Stuart: Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape, Melbourne 1999, p. 93.
2. ↑ Inglis, Sacred Places 1999; McKernan, Michael: Here Is Their Spirit: A History of the Australian War Memorial, 1917-1990, Canberra 1991; Garton, Stephen: The Cost of War: Soldiers Return, Melbourne 1996.
3. ↑ Winter, Jay: Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History, Cambridge 1995; Scates, Bruce and Frances, Raelene: Women and the Great War. Cambridge 1997; Scates, Bruce: The Unknown Sock Knitter: Voluntary Work, Emotional Labour, Bereavement and the Great War, in: Labour History 84 (2003), pp. 113-118; Damousi, Joy: The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia, Cambridge 1999.
4. ↑ Luckins, Tanja: The Gates of Memory: Australian peoples experience of loss and the Great War, Fremantle 2004; Scates, Bruce: Return to Gallipoli: Walking the Battlefields of the Great War, Cambridge 2006; Ziino, Bart: A Distant Grief, Australians, War Graves and the Great War. Crawley 2007.

5. ↑ Manuel, Jacqueline: We are the women who mourn our dead: Australian civilian women's poetic responses to the First World War, in: Journal of the Australian War Memorial 29 (1996); Spittel, Christina: Remembering the War: Australian novelists in the interwar years, in: Australian Literary Studies 23/2 (2007), pp. 121-139; Hawksley, Jen: Long Time Coming Home: The Unknown Patient of Callan Park, in: Crotty, Martin and Larsson, Marina (eds.): Anzac Legacies: Australians and the Aftermath of War, Melbourne 2010; Larrson, Marina: Shattered Anzacs: Living with the Scars of War, Sydney 2009.

6. ↑ Jalland, Patricia: Australian Ways of Death: A Social and Cultural History, Melbourne 2002, p. 321.

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9. ↑ Damousi, Mourning 1999; Scates, Bruce and Wheatley, Rebecca: War Memorials, in: Winter, Jay (ed.): The Cambridge History of First World War, Vol. 3, Cambridge 2013, pp. 358-384, 528-66; Scates, Bruce and Bongiorno, Franket al.: "Such a great space of water between us": Anzac Day in Britain, 1916-39, in: Australian Historical Studies 45/2 (2014), pp. 220-241.

10. ↑ Audoin-Rouzeau, Stephane and Becker, Annette: 14-18: Understanding the Great War, New York 2002, p. 175.

11. ↑ Jalland, Australian Ways 2002, introduction.

12. ↑ Inglis, Sacred Places 1999, p. 98.

13. ↑ Scates, Return to Gallipoli 2006, pp. 4-9.

14. ↑ Stanley, Lost Boys 2014, p. 162.

15. ↑ Winter, Jay: Communities in Mourning, in: Coetzee, Franz and Shevin-Coetzee, Marilyn: Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War, Oxford 1995, pp. 325-350.

16. ↑ Scates, Return to Gallipoli 2006, p. 9; Statement by Pte W Patterson, Red Cross Wounded and Missing Information Bureau, Pte D Jones, Australian War Memorial, 1DRL/0428.

17. ↑ Schneider, Eric F.: The British Red Cross Missing and Wounded Bureau: A Truth Telling in the Great War, in: War and Society 4/3 (1997).

18. ↑ Mary Elliott to Major Lean, 14 May 1918, p.3, Service dossier, NAA: B2455, ELLIOT TP.

19. ↑ Mary Elliott, cited in McMullin, Farewell Dear People 2012, p. 165.

20. ↑ Mrs. Elliot died in an Insane Asylum in 1919. Damousi, Labour of Loss 1999, p. 31.

21. ↑ Born on the Wings of High Adventure: Charles Campbell, in: Scates/Wheatley/James, World War One 2005, pp.149-153.

22. ↑ Alice Irving to Secretary, Red Cross, 22 April 1919, South Australian Red Cross Information Bureau, AWJ Irving, SLSA: SRG 76/1/1654.

23. ↑ Hawksley, Long Time Coming 2010.

24. ↑ Damousi, Labour of Loss 1999, p. 15; Fussell, Paul: The Great War and Modern Memory, Oxford 2000, p. 175.

25. ↑ Damousi, Labour of Loss, pp. 13-25.

26. ↑ Scates, Return to Gallipoli 2006, pp. 9-10; Statement by Pte Charles Geedes, Red Cross Wounded and Missing Information Bureau, Pte W. Bolton, Australian War Memorial, 1DRL/0428.

27. ↑ Diary of Pte L.W. Colley-Priest, 22 September 1918, Mitchell Library, ms 2439.

28. ↑ Scates, Return to Gallipoli 2006, pp. 10-11.

29. ↑ Bill Knox to 'Mim', 20 July 1917 cited in Scates/Wheatley/James: World War One 2005, pp. 246-249.

30. ↑ Jalland, Patricia: Death in War and Peace: A History of Loss and Grief in England, 1914-1970, Oxford 2010, pp. 28-9.

31. ↑ Scates, Bruce and Oppenheimer, Melanie: The Last Battle: A History of Soldier Settlement in Australia, Cambridge 2016, pp. 188-189.

32. ↑ Abbie Mendelsohn to OC Base Records 1 September 1916, 9 January 1917. Service dossier, NAA: B2455, Mendelsohn BL.

33. ↑ Luckins, Gates of Memory 2004, p. 135; Inglis, Sacred Places 1999, p. 98.

34. ↑ Scates, Return to Gallipoli 2006, p. 17; Stanley, Men of Mont Quentin 2009, introduction; p. 163.

35. ↑ Scates/Wheatley/James: Age shall not weary them: The Carmen Brothers, in: World War One 2005, pp. 26-27.

36. ↑ Scates, Return to Gallipoli 2006, pp 4-9; Ziino, A Distant Grief 2007, pp 1-4; cf. Lloyd, David: Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, Oxford 1998.

37. ↑ Scates, Return to Gallipoli 2006, chapter 3; Scates/Wheatley/James: I baptize thee 'Anzac': Tasman Millington, in: World War One 2005, pp. 204-206.

38. ↑ Moriarty, Catherine: The Absent Dead and Figurative First World War Memorials, in: Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society 39 (1995), p. 15.

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