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Teaching and Telling World War I

It's an ordinary town. We arrive on a Sunday morning; the buildings are grey/brown and somehow uniform. The streets are clean and quaint; the two or three bakeries are open despite the day (and the hour). Rain falls steadily. It's cold.

This is no heraldic moment; there is no immediate connection. It's an ordinary Northern French town. A local child walks away from the boulangerie holding a long loaf of bread. I follow her with my eyes and as she turns a corner I become aware of the street sign: Rue de Melbourne.

Something here is both familiar and known.

It's why we have come a long way to stand in the rain in Villers-Bretonneux.

“There were so many of them, more than 300,000, and we never really saw them” writes Les Carlyon in his award-winning account of World War I, *The Great War*. He is writing about, and specifically lamenting, those Australian men who fought their World War I on the Western Front in Europe. Those Australian men who fought at Gallipoli (and there was, of course, some overlap) – some 60,000 – are seen or, at least, are still seen in the classrooms of Australia and are more than alive in the imagination of the Australian consciousness. Those who fought at places like Villers-Bretonneux are most ghostly – seen perhaps only as a glimpse or a flash in peripheral vision.

It appears we see only a fraction of those Australian men who fought in World War I.

My Great Uncle Harry signed up for World War I on 6 June 1916. He was shipped overseas sometime after that, and returned to Australia in 1917. He was, as far as I ever knew, shot up all to pieces. This is the extent of my “clues” to his war service. I'm left to speculate. Was he involved in the terrible events of the third Ypres – Passchendaele – where men were sent over mud fields that were so deep that they drowned? I don't know. He “never talked about it” and “was a pacifist” until he died. He died in the 1970s.

There were so many of them ... and we never really saw them.

The reason I know his dates is because a simple search on the Australian War Memorial site gives me these details including – incredibly in my opinion – a digital copy of his sign-up sheet. Seeing it feels freakishly like touching the hand of God or something, across all these years. The document contains the handwriting of all the main players. His father (Big Da in the family stories) has signed his consent, needed because

although the sign-up sheet says Harry is 20 years and 8 months, in reality he was about seventeen.

Then there is the list of soldiers and their return to Australia (or RTA date). And here is a story for me. His RTA date is 25 November 1917. I know that he was hospitalized for a while – perhaps a month – before he came back to Australia, which in itself must have been about a month on the sea. So perhaps he was wounded sometime in August or September of 1917. Perhaps he fought at the Menin Road in September and was wounded in some very bloody fighting. Eleven thousand men were wounded in a week, so it is plausible. At least it appears, by dates, that he was spared the horror of fighting in October at Passchendaele when the rains started and the men fought in deep mud.

For years, and particularly when I was a child, I thought my Great Uncle Harry fought at Gallipoli. I think that this was because Gallipoli was the only thing I really ever knew about World War I, and seemed to be the only place that Australians fought. Ergo, my great uncle, who was a soldier in the war – and I saw photos of him in his uniform with that middle distance look on his face that so many of those soldiers seemed to have (perhaps under the instructions of the photographer) – must have been a soldier at Gallipoli. It wasn't until I became interested in World War I as an adult, and a reader of histories of World War I, that I discovered that, in fact, Harry had fought on the Western Front.

Gallipoli is still the focus in our classrooms when we teach World War I (in year 9 as it happens). Even the increasingly contested Australian Curriculum for History stipulates that teachers must teach: “The places where Australians fought and the nature of warfare during World War I, including the Gallipoli campaign”. The elaboration on this content includes: “identifying the places where Australians fought, including Fromelles, the Somme, Gallipoli, Sinai and Palestine”, and “using sources to investigate the fighting at Gallipoli”. Of all the places Australian soldiers fought in World War I, Gallipoli is named three times, and others are named once.

The way in which the campaign in the Dardanelles is presented in our classrooms, and in much of the literature, equates Gallipoli with Anzac Cove. Just a cursory scan of the shelves in my local library tells me that Anzac Cove equals the Gallipoli campaign and there is very little teaching or telling to dispel that. Thus that campaign, for the purposes of our history, shrinks to a tight point.

And the other key places of Australian engagement in World War I are never named. Key places like Villers-Bretonneux.

We stand at the Hotel Ville (or the Town Hall) at Villers-Bretonneux and read the extensive brass plaque that has pride of place in the front. Above us, in the freezing wind, snaps the Australian flag alongside the French flag. The information is in English as well as French. And it is all about Australian soldiers in World War I:

Australian troops were rushed to the area and heavy fighting ensued in the town and nearby woods for the next month. The Germans attacked in force on 24 April but were defeated by the Australians who retook Villers-Bretonneux on 27 April thereby saving Amiens.

It is made clear that the “allies won a great victory along 50 kilometres of front marking a major turning point in the war.”

A critical victory. And one at which Australian soldiers were apparently front and centre. But the plaque tells us a bit more about this:

Villers-Bretonneux was substantially destroyed during the war. In rebuilding, the townspeople have never forgotten the Australian soldiers. The battle has great significance in Australian history. Because of this the memorial, which stands in the military cemetery on the edge of this town, is Australia's principal first world war memorial.

The association between Villers-Bretonneux and Australia has both endured and developed since the war. In 1923 the primary school was rebuilt by donations from Victorian school children; the twinning of Villers-Bretonneux with Robinvale (Victoria) took place in 1984 and every April the town holds Australian “Anzac Day” commemorations.

Really? So important that it's hardly taught, in my experience, in our secondary schools? So important that it is not mentioned, even once, in the Australian Curriculum? So important to Australian history?

In the wind at Villers-Bretonneux on that Sunday morning, my older son – who was sixteen and had just completed year 10 – is incensed that he had never learned the story of the Australian soldiers who held the line, lost the line, and then regained the line in April 1918.

It is possible that the stories that survive are the stories that resonate. Gallipoli caught the imagination and has never let it go, and this alone is enough. We choose our history, and the improbable heroism, the impossible landscape, the “noble” enemy and the mateship is what we choose.

But can we really just rest on one story? The story that Gallipoli tells us about ourselves is specific and, in some ways, limited. If we stop here and tell only this story about our experience of World War I, and the emerging nation, we do so at the risk of establishing and perpetuating a monoculture. Or, at least, the story of a monoculture.

There were so many of them ... and we never really saw them.

What do the “many” tell us? And why aren't we paying attention?

Outside the school in Villers-Bretonneux – the Victoria School – the inscription reads:

This school building is the gift of the school children of Victoria, Australia, to the children of Villers-Bretonneux. As a proof of their love and good-will towards France. Twelve hundred Australian soldiers, the fathers and brothers of these children, gave their lives in the heroic recapture of this town from the invader on 24th April 1918, and are buried near this spot. May the memory of great sacrifices in a common cause keep France and Australia together forever in bonds of friendship and mutual esteem.

As we were there on a Sunday, we didn't see the school open, but we understand that the children sing “Waltzing Matilda” every morning in honour of the fallen Australian soldiers. Their classrooms, which we saw by pressing up to the windows, are full of drawings of the Australian flag, and wattle, and Australian animals. This is a living story. But perhaps this Australia, the Australia so cherished by these school children in

Northern France, no longer exists. And certainly we don't care to genuinely remember the feats or the sacrifices of those twelve thousand in our classrooms. We leave that remembrance to children who are not Australian and who live thousands of kilometres from our shores.

That we have a genuine legacy in a country so far away, and not England, is an idea Australia has struggled with over her history. With waves of immigration, we have often been challenged by differing allegiances and ethnicities. But here, embedded in a wholly "Australian" story we learn, once more, that we have more than one allegiance.

The Australians on the Western Front and their story remain a mystery to us. Is the story too big? (Carlyon does call his tome *The Great War*, and it is unwieldy, but so is his work on Gallipoli.) Size isn't perhaps the problem. Is it that the Australian stories of the Western Front don't tell a coherent tale and therefore perhaps confuse the message that we desire to tell through Gallipoli? We certainly seek to separate the tales of Gallipoli and the Western Front. The separation might be typified by Inga Clendinnen's 2006 Quarterly Essay: "The History Question: Who Owns the Past?". In the essay, she describes her attendance as a child at the Geelong Anzac Day Dawn Service with her father. Her father, she says, "had not been at Gallipoli, but he had been on the Western Front". There is, it seems to me, an apology implicit in her reference. Her father was not a veteran of the "real" World War I – Gallipoli. His link was through the Western Front, apparently sidelined through the syntax of the sentence. Gallipoli, regardless of what we know, still remains not only the site of nationhood, but the centre of courage, of bravery, of mateship.

The clear site of an intensely Australian story.

This is what we teach in our classrooms. This is what we assume in our culture.

And yet ...

Siegfried Sassoon, poet of The Great War, conscientious objector, and Englishman, famously fought on the Western Front. But his brother Hamo was killed at Gallipoli in November 1915. Of course, there were Englishmen on the Gallipoli peninsula in 1915. So who *was* on the Gallipoli peninsula in 1915?

As a teacher of year 9 History, I put this question to my classes every year. What can they tell me about the Gallipoli campaign? They can often tell me the date of the first landing (with prompting: When is Anzac Day?). They can tell me that the Australians landed on the wrong beach. Finally, we get to who landed on the peninsula on that April morning in 1915.

"Australians," they tell me. (Some years, they might say "Aussies". It can depend on the cohort.)

"Who else?"

There is silence. And then, from the back of the class:

"Turks."

"Good. And?"

They are baffled. When I push a little more, and ask them, for example, what the NZ in Anzac stands for, some of them can come up with New Zealand soldiers. But,

predominantly, the Australians faced up against the Turks, and that was Gallipoli.

I give them a pack of resources and break them into groups. The packs are: S Beach, X Beach, W Beach, V Beach, Z Beach, Kum Kale, Cape Helles. These are the points of the seven landings that occurred on the peninsula on 25th April 1915. The students have a series of inquiry questions to answer about their beaches or landing sites. One of the questions is about nationality.

On the beaches that day in April, there were Australians and Turks, yes, and of course, New Zealanders. But also Englishmen, Irish, Welsh, French and Scots. Six Victoria Crosses were awarded to English, Irish, Welsh and Scotsmen on that morning. They, too, were sent to their deaths by commanders who were on boats too far away to understand what was happening. At yet, we teach and tell this story in isolation. The Australians in a vacant landscape. The Australians fighting alone and with little or no support.

It seems that even this most told of our war stories has a filter. We tell it to tell something larger about our culture. So why that story?

This moment in World War I is a site of origin, of nationhood. It's the idea of courage in the face of overwhelming odds. It's also a story of victimhood and of loss.

The Australian Curriculum wants teachers to tell of Gallipoli (but which story?) and is also interested in "The Somme" and "Fromelles" for the Australian experience of the Western Front. "The Somme" presents its own special problem for a history teacher. "The Somme" is a river in France where terrible fighting occurred during most of the four and a half years of the Western Front. "The Somme" was also a huge offensive led by the English on July 1 1916. Villers-Bretonneux could be credibly included in any study of "The Somme" as the town is located near the Somme. But so could many battles. Pozieres, perhaps. Pozieres is, once more, a story of terrible loss, of Australian soldiers brutally sacrificed by English generals. It's not clear what is meant by "the Somme".

Fromelles, like Gallipoli, was the worst kind of baptism of fire. The first engagement of Australians in the field on the Western Front, it was a "feint" for a larger engagement south, and it resulted in the worst twenty-four hours in Australia's military history. More than five thousand casualties. "Badly mauled" as they say. And all for nothing as it turned out. The European generals were still refining their military tactics that made some sense in the context of the 20th century.

There were so many of them ... and we never really saw them.

When we left Villers-Bretonneux, we did so only after we visited the official Australian War Memorial just outside the town (as indicated on the plaque at the Victoria School). There are a lot of graves where the body interred is "known only to God", but similarly, there are a lot of names – Australian names. The graves are carefully maintained and tendered. There is a huge stonewall with the names of all the places of engagement during the war. There are also bullet holes in this large memorial wall, a relic from heavy fighting during World War II (how Villers-Bretonneux must have wondered about these stories then). And we also learned, via a sign, that when the Memorial was dedicated in 1938, the entire French cabinet was in attendance, as was the French Prime Minister and

King George VI. Australia sent the deputy prime minister, Earle Page. Even then, the importance of the Western Front appeared to be in abeyance.

Charles Bean, historian of the Australian Army in World War I and tireless driver of memorializing the efforts of Australian soldiers, wrote this about the Anzac legacy:

In the end ANZAC stood and still stands for reckless valour in a good cause, for enterprise, resourcefulness, fidelity, comradeship and endurance that will never admit defeat.

It is possible that nothing is more emblematic of “reckless valour”, of the desire to “never admit defeat” than a terrible encounter that was fought not just to a standstill but to actual defeat though with morale and effort intact. Those who don’t give up when they face defeat are these young men of Anzac.

Our stories then are perhaps less about “importance” and more about the emotional legacy. Like those myths of ancient times, we are not so much interested in the strategies, in the logic or the clean lines of the events, but in what was left: honour, courage, relationships. The more outrageous the events, the more wedded we are. The terrible choice between two impossible battles – Lone Pine or the Nek – leaves only the dignity and courage of those who were forced to enact those choices.

But Bean’s “good cause” is problematic. Courage there was, and honour there might have been, but “good cause”? We don’t discuss the role that the Australians played on that peninsula in 1915. We are clear and in no doubt the role the German army played in World War I. They were the aggressive enemy. By dint of their invasion of Belgium on their way to France, they were the aggressors, and they were the group that threatened our “freedom”. What we fought for.

And yet ...

What was the campaign in the Dardanelles but an attack on a sovereign nation? The Australians are cast as the underdogs and the fodder for the madness of the British command – and there is ample evidence to suggest the veracity of such claims – but they are also part of an army that choose to invade a sovereign country in order to facilitate another way to win the war against Germany. Was it our role as “colonials” that protected us against the charge of aggressors?

What is more interesting in this legacy, and probably adds to the problem, is that the Turks, too, see the Australians as heroes in this war. In 1934, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first president of the newly created Turkish nation and a veteran of the Gallipoli campaign on the side of the Turks, penned this letter to the Australian mothers of the soldiers of 1915:

Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives ... You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore, rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehments to us where they lie side by side, here in this country of ours. You, the mothers, who sent their sons from far away countries ... wipe away your tears. Your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land, they have become our sons as well.

These words are enshrined at the Australian memorial site at Gallipoli. Can anyone really imagine these words coming from the French government to the German mothers of

those German soldiers who lost their lives at Verdun? Or for that matter, anywhere else up or down the Western Front?

And they are strangely like the words memorialized about Australian soldiers at Villers-Bretonneux.

Even of itself, the Gallipoli campaign is more complicated than we allow ourselves to tell it. And in the way we tell, and the way we remember, the war tells us who and what we are. This is very much like history, but it is also a gift of the imagination and the collective sense of self. We teach, in our classrooms, what we might imagine ourselves to be, how we seek to best represent ourselves.

My assumption of my Great Uncle Harry was that he fought at Gallipoli because that was the only story I was ever told either in classrooms or more generally about Australians in World War I. This assumption has meant that I failed to ask the right questions of the right people when I could. Now I have discovered that he was a soldier on another Front, it's too late to ask the right people the right questions. They are all gone. Part of this story, and my history, is now lost.

The question for our classrooms is this: how do we teach the stories so we get to ask as many questions as we can? How do we create the complexity?

It is clear we can't remember "everything". Stories will always be missed and things will always be lost. But if stories offer us anything, they offer us a glimpse at what we were, and what we are. If we only have one story about ourselves, can we really grow as a nation, or even as a culture? Surely, like culture, war is complex. There is not just one story to tell. The courageous failure of the Australians at Gallipoli has a powerful quality. But the genius of John Monash on the Western Front, and the manner in which the Australian troops were transformed into extraordinary fighters is another story – not just courageous, not just noble and honourable – but also successful and triumphant. Not just the victims of the nineteenth century manias of English generals, but innovators of the twentieth.

Monash is an interesting figure in all this remembering and teaching. Acknowledged by many historians as a true genius of twentieth century military tactics, he made some of the significant breakthroughs on the Western Front, finally finding ways through the deadlock of trench warfare. And yet, he is not mentioned in the Australian History curriculum. In my experience, he is not mentioned in year 9 history classrooms or textbooks.

Why is this story of innovation and triumph missed?

Carlyon tells us a figure, 300,000 men, and then tells us that we never really saw them. We have chosen to wrap up 300,000 in an abridged story of 60,000 men. So why are complex stories of our nationhood simply reduced to the Aussie Battler (Bean's definition of what Anzac means seems like a very early version of this concept). Surely we are not just this tunnel version of the Gallipoli campaign – innocent colonials at the mercy of a heartless mother country, in a mostly vacant landscape with a noble enemy. We need to tell and to teach the larger version of the Gallipoli campaign, including the problem of invasion. We need to tell and teach the triumph of the Australian soldiers in Northern France. The monocultural story-telling that may have been consolidated through the teaching of Gallipoli as World War I seems to have handed to us, in the

twenty first century, some very simplistic notions of who we are. It seems to me urgent that we change what we tell in our classrooms to our children. We need to embrace the complexity of our history. If we do, we might have a chance at becoming a more complex nation.

And in Villers-Bretonneux, French school children walk past a sign – “Do Not Forget Australia” – every school morning.