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‘I hope all at home will find something of interest in it for them, for that is the reason why I wrote it’

ABSTRACT

They were teachers, farmers, clerks and architects. Some were still at school. They came from cities, regional towns and the bush. From August 1914 Australian men and women sailed away to war with just a few months of training. Some would not return home; those who did were changed forever. Some kept diaries, perhaps for the first time in their lives. They knew what they were witnessing was important; life changing. Many wrote of their experiences to an audience back home. Others wrote simply to try and make sense of their surroundings. At the end of the war, the Mitchell Library in Sydney began to purchase these diaries for the collection. What had been personal became public. Originally acquired as artefacts of Australian military service, these collections are now interrogated by a range of researchers seeking the personal voice and experiences of Australian men and women who went to the Great War.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

The Mitchell Library, part of the State Library of New South Wales, was the first library in Australia to concentrate entirely on collecting Australian materials. Opened in 1910, the Mitchell Library began acquiring private war diaries after the Armistice was declared in November 1918. The Principal Librarian, William Ifould, placed advertisements in newspapers throughout Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom encouraging soldiers to sell their diary collections to the Library. These advertisements assured diarists that their collections would be important historical resources for students and researchers in future generations.

They have also proved to be important resources that might somehow make sense of the first devastating war of the twentieth century. Conde writes:

[T]he collecting of this material just months after the end of the war was when individuals and the nation tried to make sense of their war [...W]as there a pattern, was there a meaning to it all? Was it important to remember, or to forget? (2005: 135).

The acquisition process was transacted between Library staff and the returned servicemen and, in a few instances, nurses. The Library's collection of diaries was written mostly by those who did return. These writers had witnessed this first great war; they had been there, watching history being made. The significance of Australia's first war fought as a nation was thus not only preeminent in the minds of those witnessing and writing about these landings and battles, but also for the Library collecting these documents.

Around 240 diary collections were acquired during this post-war collection drive. For almost 100 years, these diary collections have resided in the Library's manuscript stacks. Researchers and historians have accessed some of these, but it has only been in the last five years that each diary and the letters in the collection have been fully catalogued into the Library's online catalogue. In the last year digitization has commenced as the Library prepares for the centenary of the war with a major exhibition of its diaries in 'Life Interrupted: personal diaries from World War I'.

These diary accounts allow us to hear the war in the first person. They are accounts from ordinary people who were there, who witnessed these events. There are many diverse accounts. The diaries reflect the authors' voices: laconic, humorous and filled with descriptions of adventures in Cairo and London. They record the names of French women met behind the lines, their rates of pay and who owed them money. They list brands of cigarettes smoked. Others are poetic, sensitive and terribly sad. Some admit to homesickness, some to the horror of trench warfare and others attempt to describe the landscape and the sounds of the French battlefields. Some admit to being unable to carry on and the relief they felt when they were stretchered off to hospital in England (which many call 'Blighty'). Still others write about their horses or what they cooked for breakfast.

It is not known how many serving Australians wrote diaries during World War I, but many did and these are housed in cultural institutions throughout the country such as the Australian War Memorial, the National Archives of Australia and the National and State Libraries. There are also countless diaries held by proud families across the country, passed down through each generation.

WHY WRITE?

World War I was a literary war, where many troops read and wrote assiduously. Fussell writes that soldiers were not merely literate, but ‘vigorously literary’ (Fussell 2000: 157), with an ethos of self-improvement propagated by organizations such as working men’s institutes, mechanic’s institutes and schools of arts, which encouraged ‘a public respect for literature unique in modern times’ (Fussell 2000: 157).

These were not introspective, private diaries. Soldiers, stretcher-bearers, war artists, chaplains, doctors and nurses were writing accounts of their experiences to those back home. The authors expected their diaries to be read by an intimate audience. Soldier Archie Barwick wrote in the first volume of his diary, ‘I hope all at home will find something of interest in it for them, for that is the reason why I wrote it’ (Barwick 2013: 186). Barwick served from 1914 through to 1918. He saw action at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. His first diary volume was written retrospectively whilst travelling from Gallipoli to France in early 1916. He describes his experiences the previous year: joining up, life in military camps and sailing away to war, training in Egypt and the Gallipoli campaign. Writing up the first year of war whilst at sea was a way for Barwick to keep busy, to reduce boredom and, as he says, tell his family of his experiences.

He does not necessarily censor his account. His time spent at Gallipoli included harrowing experiences of being in the midst of battle and the sudden, indiscriminate death of men. Barwick wrote on his third day at Gallipoli:

It was when we were in a perfect hell of bullets, and men were being killed all round me that I felt frightened, and I am not ashamed to say that, I had a terrible fight with myself that day, one part of me wanted to run away and leave the rest of my mates to face it, and the other part said no, we would stop and see it out at any cost rather than show the white feather, this sort of thing went on for about an hour and a bayonet charge settled the argument for me, I was fairly right after that. (2013: 102)

When his mate Reg Duke, who Barwick called ‘Young Duke’ or ‘Wagga’, was killed suddenly, Barwick wrote:

He was sniping at the time and Len was observing for him, and I was sitting down having my breakfast, when without any warning he fell at my feet, with half his head blown off, I got a terrible shock I can tell you, a bigger one than you have any idea of, I couldn’t touch him, and called someone else in to take him away, I was a good bit down hearted for some time after this. (2013: 134)

Barwick was a farmer in civilian life and was skilled at observing weather conditions, the environment and his stock. He carried this into his diary writing. His diaries are full of

detailed observations, whether describing a battle, a French village, leave in Great Britain or his mates and his brother Len. By the end of the war he had filled sixteen volumes. He mailed fifteen of these back home as he completed them. The last volume he brought home with him in January 1919. He ended this final volume on the troopship as it was due to dock in Melbourne.

These diaries, while particularly detailed and well written, are typical of World War I diaries. Barwick chronicles his experiences away at war. Like other diarists, he understood the significance of where he was and wanted to document his part in the great European war for both himself and for his family. Peter Cochrane has described these diarists as 'soldier tourists' (2011). They describe their travels and they visit famous sights that they had ever only read about – whether they be the Sphinx and the pyramids in Egypt or Trafalgar Square and the Houses of Parliament in London. They write for posterity of what they did and who they saw: the foreign people, the food, cafes, the unfamiliar smells, the glamorous cities, the heat of the desert, the bitter cold and the snow at the Somme in wintertime. These were new experiences and a great adventure, so different from home and worth reporting back in detail – to family, friends and in order to reminisce in later years.

When the Australians started to experience the horror of trench warfare on the Western Front, some diarists prepared themselves for possible annihilation by writing a grim farewell in their diaries. Herbert Harris, a 42 year old from Redfern wrote in his diary just prior to going into battle at Fromelles in July 1916:

Off to night to big battle. Trust to God that I come through all right [...] It promises to be worse than the other night. Was out there this morning carrying ammunitions. 5 miles out and 5 back and about 1 mile to trenches did two trips. Feel tired and hardly fit for what is in front of us, but it's no use not being fit you have just got to do it.

Good Bye Nell and Boys, Viv, Jean Syd Arthur Mary and Walter and Kate and all Friends hope it is only Au revoir [sic].

A lot of the Boys have promised to send this diary on if I get knocked, am sure you will get something interesting out of it besides knowing that my thoughts have been with You and the Boys in every situation I have found myself [sic]. Write or get Tony to do so to Auntie Lucy and give her a summary of my adventures as well as Vivs, who by the way has not joined us yet. (43)

This type of fatalism was felt by all the diarists who wrote their next of kin details in the front cover of each volume in case of death so that their diaries would be sure to get back home to loved ones.

A CONNECTION TO HOME

War separates families and it was the written correspondence which linked those serving on the front lines with those at home. Letters were yearned for by the men and women serving overseas and much was written about the wait for letters and the joy of finally receiving them. At the front line and also at home in the suburbs and regional hamlets, letters would be read and re-read, sometimes learnt by heart and carefully hidden away with other personal treasures, like pressed wildflowers, leaves from gardens back home, prayer books and lucky tokens.

Sister Anne Donnell, a nurse from Adelaide, served with the Third Australian General Hospital on the Greek island of Lemnos and then in Egypt, the UK and France. She wrote letters home to her Adelaide friends which they passed between themselves. At the beginning of her first letter home, on the troopship to Egypt, she wrote:

When I said farewell to all my dear friends in South Australia on the 20th I secretly made up my mind that I would set aside each day some time to write a few lines [...] First I must tell you that now we have left dear old free Australia all our letters will be censored. So have no idea when these lines will reach their destination. It's rather agreeable to feel the air of military discipline all around one but I'll draw the line at my diary being read by others than my friends. (Donnell 1915: 1)

News from home provided a temporary safe haven, an entry back into the domestic world of home. Eugene Sullivan, a clerk from Lismore in New South Wales, wrote detailed, interesting letters home to his parents, although on some occasions the censor lined through some of the text. In his last letter home, dated 'somewhere, 9 October 1917', he writes:

I don't like writing about the war or my own experiences at the front as I know you are quite anxious enough about my welfare as it is, and constant reference to the risks and dangers which anyone at the front must encounter will only serve to heighten your anxiety. (Sullivan 1917: 312)

This last letter is filled with responses to his mother's letter, which he had recently received. He discusses a friend, Stewart, who he has tried to dissuade from joining up and news from friends or relatives and the neighbours next door. He ends his last letter with these words:

Well, I believe the end will be in sight by Xmas and I fervently pray that it may. I must close now as we have received orders to move back to the trenches first thing in the morning.)
With best of love to all at home and next door
Your loving son

Eugene. (Sullivan 1917: 313)

Writing diaries or letters was a way for men and women to connect with home. Writing about their experiences and sharing conversations about relatives, friends or family pets back home was a way for them to remember they were still part of a community, still part of a family – separated by distance, but still connected.

PERSONAL IDENTITY

Writing was a way for soldiers and nurses to maintain their personal identity in the face of the overwhelming inhumanity of mechanized warfare in the trenches of Europe. Writing diaries and letters to an intimate audience back home was a way to remind themselves they were part of a community and only temporarily separated. Writing perhaps consoled them, as well as focussing their minds amidst the de-humanizing trenches, their identity still intact.

One such collection held at the State Library comprises the letters of a young officer from Sydney, Terence Ward Garling. Garling enlisted early and served at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. He wrote dutifully back to his parents and younger brother Pat in suburban Longueville. His letters are filled with a running tally of letters received from his family, descriptions of places visited, names of friends and acquaintances he had met and questions and responses to family and friends at home, seeking and commenting on news of sicknesses, new jobs and what relatives and friends were doing, as well as news of friends joining up. He always ended each letter, 'With much love to yourself, Father and Pat / I am your loving son / Terence' (Garling 1915: 78). In this, Garling was writing to reassure his family he was still alive, that he was well and that he was functioning and coping, but also that he was still their loving son, Terence Garling from Sydney.

His letters continued to arrive at Longueville until April 1918. Garling had been in England recovering from the effects of gas poisoning when he was ordered to return to France on 28 March 1918. In his last letter home to his parents he wrote ominously that he 'was recalled to France yesterday on account of doings up the front' (Garling 1918: 425). On 5 April 1918, at Dernancourt on the Somme, a shell splinter struck Garling in the left thigh while he was encouraging his men who were operating a battery of guns. He was evacuated to a field hospital but died shortly afterwards.

After Garling's death, his parents collected the letters he wrote home during the war and bound them together into a memorial album. They embossed the front of the book with

the words 'In memoriam, Terence, 1914-1918'. They built a box to house the letters with Terence's initials and brigade colours decorating the front. This was their memorial to their son who never came home. Garling's letters, once a brief update from a dutiful son to his family, became a sacred memorial to his brief life.

Jack Hutton kept a diary during his war service in France. His diary is somewhat different from those above as Hutton's entries are short and to the point. At the beginning of his 1917 diary volume (a small appointment diary purchased in Amiens, France), he wrote:

My motto's while in the army is as follows [sic]
Do as you are told
Be obliging always
Smile at trouble
Never say die
Think for yourself but never speak them but just wander around and say nothing
Don't argue for it ain't worth while [sic] (Hutton 1916: 33)

Jack writes that he purchased this diary at Amiens, '[t]hou city of sins.' Jack's style of writing reflects his character: blunt, humorous, wicked. More like a poet than a conventional diary writer, Jack wrote one or two sentences each day. These are concise sentences, full of dark humour and tales of soldiering. His Padre called him the 'Little Disgrace'. He had many girls in France and many more back home.

When he wrote his motto about soldiering, he had been in France for around a year. He had managed to survive the horror of Pozieres, which he describes succinctly as 'murder bloody murder':

Monday 24 July
Off to the line full of faith
Tuesday 25 July
After 24 hours ride in train we arrive at VICNACOURT
Wednesday 26
You'll soon know your fate Jack the same good spirit will lead you
Thursday 27
It's just like hell pure and simple
Friday 28
Murder bloody murder
Saturday 29
God in heaven tis awful
Sunday 30
Sunday, on the scene of death
Hope and pray
[July-August, 1916]
Monday 31
Wipe the scenes away they are awful

'I hope all at home will find something of interest in it for them, for that is the reason why I wrote it'

Tuesday August 1
Thundering guns and flame lit skys [sic]
Wednesday 2
Men brave men of Australia a heroic breed
Thursday 3
How long O Lord how long (Hutton 1916: 79)

Jack moves easily from the horror of the front to enjoy the French towns behind the frontlines. He likes a drink and French women, but still goes to church on Sunday.

Thursday 17 [May]
Last night was spent in Writing home, too too many girls
SENLIS
Friday 18
"Senlis" our first stop moving tomorrow we all got full on Champagne
Saturday 19
Arrived at Reubempre seems a nice place
Sunday 20
The country side is a perfect picture
Staying with a dear old lady...
CONTAY
It is just fine rambling among these villages
Sunday 27
Believe me the French women are O K
I still go to church (Hutton 1917: 73)

These are Jack's spontaneous thoughts, written in the raw. The words are not planned or edited and feel authentic. They have the immediacy of being in the moment, in a farmhouse in rural France, coming out of a haze of indescribable horror. Unlike the other writers, Jack is not necessarily connecting with home, but rather maintaining his own sense of identity.

Jack Hutton, Herbert Harris, Anne Donnell and Archie Barwick sold their diaries to the Mitchell Library after the war. Eugene Sullivan's grieving parents donated their son's letters to the library in 1920. Terence Garling's letters, safe in their memorial box were donated in 1978. They had belonged to Terence's younger brother, by then an old man who had no one else to pass them on to.

CONCLUSION

These diary and letter collections, originally intended to be read by an intimate audience of family and friends, were transformed into publicly accessible historical documents when acquired by the Mitchell Library. What originally was private correspondence became public resources, and 100 years on, these collections are being released to an even larger audience,

digitized and displayed in online and onsite exhibitions at the State Library of New South Wales as key primary documents of Australians' experiences in World War I.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Elise Edmonds is a curator at the State Library of New South Wales and received a staff fellowship in 2009 to research the Library's World War I collections. She has recently curated an exhibition at the State Library on the World War I collection of diaries and correspondence, 'Life Interrupted: personal diaries from World War I'.

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