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GALLIPOLI  
TO PETROV

*Arguing with Australian History*

*For Henry Mayer,  
who disagrees*

GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN  
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## 5

## Literary responses

... the war marks a turning point ... only in so far as it provides an occasion for a choice between the existing possibilities.  
(Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vol. 4, p. 214)

IN a century of total war and triumphant proletarian revolutions, it was inevitable that some bourgeois scholars should try to locate the dynamics of history in war, rather than in class struggle. Because this article deals with bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideologues from about 1915 to 1935, it contains a good deal of material suggestive of war as the motive force in history. Since it is the distinction of science to separate appearance from reality, and of an ideology not to proceed in thought further than its class does in their practices, this scientific account of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideologies rejects both the view of the great war given at the time, and its subsequent reproduction as a surrogate social theory.

Scholars, who look at war to find causal explanations of a 'crisis mentality', are frequently puzzled on encountering ideas which fully articulated that mentality well before 1914. They are forced to take refuge in the notion of 'precursors', by which they try to account for anything which will not fit into their account. In fact, these 'precursors', like all alleged exceptions, are the key with which to unlock a totally different problematic—a problematic which gladly accepts that a 'crisis mentality' existed before the 1914 war, because the root cause of each developed long before 1914. The great war did not cause the 'crisis mentality': both grew from within imperialism, and were not the exogenous shocks which apologists try to make them appear. Paul Valéry was close to the truth of the matter when he observed that what had given 'this critical condition of the mind its depth and gravity [was] the patient's condition when she was overcome'.

The condition of mind of Australia's bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideologues in 1914 was neither grave nor critical. Serious strikes from 1908 to 1912 had not been revolutionary; 'sensible' Labor governments had ruled in the commonwealth and in four of the six States; monopolisation and industrialisation existed, but in a fragmented form. The resultant possibilities for optimistic certainty meant that Australia's initial response to the Great War could be to get back to what C. E. W. Bean called the one 'country still to make', by keeping the rotten old world at more than arm's length. Recapturing a pristine arcady was a plausible solution because pre-war Australia had been largely innocent of Europe's problems.

As in Europe, the Great War provided an occasion for choice in Australia. What differed was that one possibility apparently still open was that posed in O'Dowd's 1901 sonnet 'Australia', and rephrased in Bean's *In Your Hands, Australians*: could Australia build a just, peaceable and democratic social order outside the industrial, urban and political dilemmas of Europe and the United States? Although the answer 'No' had been determined in the late nineteenth century with the development of the highest stage of capitalism, the full implications were not felt here with real force until the 1930s. None the less the laws of monopoly capitalism—which posited and then destroyed Australia's exceptionalism, and which brought the imperialist nations to war after August 1914—intensified class conflict within Australia, producing extraordinary measures on all sides. The urgency with which bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideologues, in the 1920s, wanted to turn back Australia's clock sprang from the vastly heightened impact of imperialism, manifested particularly in proletarian activity. But—to return to Hauser—the 'possibilities' in Australia were such that the turning point in mental attitudes did not occur until the 1930s.

Dowell O'Reilly spanned several of the main streams of Australia's pre-1914 intellectual and cultural life. A Labor member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly from 1894 to 1898, an unsuccessful Labor candidate in the 1910 federal elections, he remained a progressive liberal, a feminist and an associate of W. M. Hughes until his death in 1923. Son of an Anglican Canon and related by marriage to a conservative knight, O'Reilly was the complete Edwardian, moving easily among Sydney's *literati* as a member of the 'Casuals' Club' which included Christopher Brennan, J. A. Ferguson, R. F. Irvine and Julian Ashton. His combination of *fin de siècle* literariness, social reformism and imperial-minded

nationalism was found throughout the British Empire in 1914. In Australia, these interests provided common ground for Bernard O'Dowd, William Holman, Walter Murdoch and most of the other Deakinites, until the day-to-day demands of practical politics during and immediately after the great war outweighed shared assumptions and strained personal relations.

O'Reilly was not a thorough-going optimist before the war, and he did not move far in any new direction as a consequence of it. Rather, the conflicts within his position were deepened, leaving him socially impotent and politically remote. Unable to abandon his feminism, he detested the war; uncertain of his Australian patriotism, he defended the Empire as the preserver of the white races; unwilling to despair of social betterment, he reviled official Labor members in the mass, whilst seeking a metaphysical justification for their perverseness.

For most of the war, O'Reilly was engaged in the elaborate courtship of a cousin living in England. They married in 1917; four years after his death, his widow published his letters to her. From this correspondence, as well as from a few verses and stories, it is possible to trace the tensions in O'Reilly's response to the war and its wake. Although he was supposedly writing love letters, O'Reilly told their recipient that she was the only woman he had 'ever dared to talk to exactly as if [she] were a man!'<sup>1</sup> This was not saying very much, since the dominant feature of all his writing was a refined delicacy that some might categorise as decadent. Certainly his prose was never robust, though it was always emotionally charged and frequently intense.

Like the good Labor man he was, O'Reilly had thrilled at the arrival of the Australian Fleet in 1913:

... O great white stars,  
And glorious red cross, shine  
On victory, when, rushing forth  
Against the peril of the North,  
Australia's battle-line  
Flings out Trafalgar's deathless sign.

At the same time, his feminism demanded an ultimatum 'To the 'Horrid, Selfish, Savage, Silly Old Powers' from the earth-mother of his 'Tears and Triumph', who refused to 'bear ... more little ones to glut your slaughter-yards of war'.<sup>2</sup> In line with this aspect of his thinking, he confessed, at the end of 1914, that 'Of course, I ought to talk only of the war ... it is all such a detestable vile nightmare, that—why should we talk of it—why should we exchange our evil dreams?'<sup>3</sup>

Gallipoli drove deep into his imperial-national sentiments, and into his feminism. 'You are not ashamed of your Australian cousins now, are you?' he wrote to his beloved. 'Our 52nd casualty list has just been published—15 000 killed and wounded ... when the final effort comes, we shall be there!'<sup>4</sup> Yet he cannot forget 'The Mother' who asks

Why should I try dry my tears,  
Or talk of victory?  
For my heart lies dead in a nameless grave  
On far Gallipoli<sup>5</sup>

A year later, conscription presented him with the issue around which his conflicting ideals would have to be resolved in a practical decision. Its opponents were 'civilisation's enemies', yet they were also the defenders of Labor against 'the merry thieves who hide their exploitation under the alias of "Capital"!'. But 'they are not Socialists, they are nothing but blind force—ignorance in arms'. Of their views, he concluded, 'We can sympathise, understand—but can we enthuse? I cannot!' As the day of the plebiscite approached, he drew further away from the 'antis', and voted 'Yes', to save White Australia from the Japanese. But he left pro-conscription rallies uninspired. He voted 'without any enthusiasm or any illusions, just because at this awful time, it seems the best thing—the least bad thing to do'.<sup>6</sup>

Two days before the poll he sought a larger purpose in the 'brainless, unreasonable' opposition case and asked what, 'a hundred years hence, ... will the world think of the young Democracy that kept its soul fixed on an ideal, even in this horror?' and he compared the 'antis' to the early Christians, albeit 'illiterate, plotting, dirty'. When the vote went against him, and Sydney was bombarded by the 'heaviest hailstorm' it had 'ever known', he puzzled over the result until he felt quite weak, his thoughts confused and inadequate. Next day, he acknowledged having worried most foolishly, most absurdly, over this vote, which was only a little bit of the world's madness and which should be accepted philosophically:

And, deep down, is an emotional thought that—possibly—far in the future—a wiser world may look back *not* with horrified contempt, on the young, audacious nation that shouted to civilisation with a voice that rang above the din of hell! 'War is for wild beasts not men ...' Our minds know the insanity of fighting a mad beast with bare hands, of going unarmed in a world of mad dogs. Yet our souls for ever question, 'Is this madness of armaments to tear the nations for ever?' My mind silences my soul with a blow. 'Shut up! you damned fool ... assuredly God is the God of War, not of Peace, and Conscription is the Eternal Law!

Yet war need not be external; indeed, it might well be civil strife, the class war. O'Reilly's pursuit of a profound truth beyond the victory of the 'antis' could not reconcile him to the workers whose triumph had taught them 'a contempt for the law . . . Assuredly', he concluded, 'the great war is still to come'.<sup>7</sup>

Furnley Maurice's response to the great war is well known from his 1917 poem 'To God: From the Weary Nations', although this was just one expression of the anti-war attitudes which helped to shape his thought from 1914 till his death in 1942. 'Veneer' spoke of 'frail . . . barriers' against 'War's red barbarism' that lurked within man. 'The Sleepers' discoursed on the 'marauding talons of the Golden Few' before, in obvious rejection of H. G. Wells' utopian novel, ending with

The sleeper wakes—to find those dreams are true—  
And falls asleep again!

'Headsman to the Light' mixed irony and pathos in a parody of patriotic speeches that call on men to

Remember God, and smite  
Till peaceful years blossom from plains shell-riven  
And your stained hands are cleansed and you forgiven.

Finally, the judicially sanctioned murder of British conscientious objectors was mourned in the treasonably titled 'The Supremest Sacrifice'.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the strength of this stand was drawn from a reaction to the great war—shared by many others of varying political persuasions—which wanted to keep Australia free from the old world's contagion, and to seek within its pristineness a path around the crisis. A returning soldier in 'Echoes' feared that Australia had been 'betrayed', its 'young soul . . . flooded with foreign despairs', 'Brooding on the romanoffs, the Syndicates, the Boyne!' Since Australia was contaminated with these 'reflected troubles', Maurice turned from its cities to 'The Gully' so that

The dread that huddles into shuddering minds,  
The false philosophies of frightened men,  
Desire that sways and falls, binds and unbinds,  
Shall not awake my foolish care again.  
If some devoted wanderer could devise  
This passage through the scented underworld,  
May not man's thoughtful habit, dumb yet wise,  
Bring back a careless people to its good?

Even this consolation could not endure the depression, as his *Melbourne Odes* so clearly demonstrated. The threat of another war turned Maurice to a total despair which silenced his poetic voice except when it railed that

. . . moons and apples mean little to us  
When all's so rotten for sure;  
Teeth and bones and boys shall the harvest truss  
And only filth endure.

Nature was denied its comforting vision since 'Eyes are only to weep with now'. If the change in Australian bourgeois and petit-bourgeois sensibilities brought about by the great war, the menace of revolution, depression and the anti-fascist war depended upon one measure only, then its proof could not be clearer than in comparison of Furnley Maurice's 1913 *Unconditioned Songs* with his 1941 'Apples in the Moon'.<sup>9</sup>

Poems could be written around incidents, and did not require an all-round summation of the entire war. Like the moments in a battle, they could be intense and brief and thus avoid sentimentality or rhetoric. When Clarence Webster took the title of his first book of poems from Matthew Arnold's 'Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born', he captured the mood of many other ex-servicemen who rejected the old world in expectation of a better one, but could not see how it was to be achieved, since they could not accept a socialist solution. Several of Webster's longer pieces hovered between Christianity and pagan pantheism, but his moves away from traditional or established values were more explicit when he dealt with the war, which he always painted 'red mad' with the 'blood of martyred youth'.<sup>10</sup> An early poem told of the 'Conflict' within

. . . Herman Bohler, Social Democrat,  
Hater of militarism . . . ordered now  
To shoot this trembling Belgian . . .

This poem is remarkable for its sympathetic treatment of a German and of a socialist, as well as for its ability to empathise with a German who in turn empathised with a Belgian. Bohler's 'Conflict' was resolved by blaming the 'machine' of war. In 'Doubt', Webster expressed the pacifist reforming ideals of Bohler more as his own 'secret vision jubilant with life', and had sunk 'in a westward sea of leaping hates' so that

We can do nought, with love of Man a spark

While armed victor nations of the earth  
In anger blaze.

His faint remaining hope lost contact with human agents as he prayed for a 'flood of pentecostal fire'. He despaired even of this release and, 'filled with nameless discontent', groped and faltered 'blind among the blind'. Shortly after the war, Webster protested against a 'Peace' which taught 'youth "glory" in the schools', corrupting 'young pure hearts with hate and pride' through 'the false heroics of an evil age'. In the 'o'er vexed' post-war world, soldiers held

The strange illusion of the good old days  
... tinged with memory's gold,

as their passion for peace and their horror at the war 'Recede to nothingness and fade', and as

Eagles and empires gleam once more,  
The old red gods rise throned again in power.

Looking back in 1921, Webster accepted that 'all the high imaginings [were] lost', and argued that the betrayal of youth's hopes had been 'a deeper wrong/ Than wounds and death'. Searching for 'one thing' of enduring worth, 'though visionary hopes are fled', Webster fell back on those 'rich memories/ Of comradeship', that is, on one of the attitudes which he had earlier seen as preparatory to the next 'fruitless sacrifice'. Bereft of all else, he grasped at the loyalty which had led Bohler to shoot the Belgian, which had ensured the war's continuance, and which, retold in classrooms, would help speed on the next war.<sup>11</sup>

Webster's inability to discover the causes of war within the logic of monopoly capitalism led him first to a utopian vision of future peace and progress, then to a growing despair, and finally to a consolation which he had previously recognised as a contributor to the thing he hated most: war. Within the circle of his bourgeois humanism such an outcome was ineluctable. The coherence of his ideas and of its law admitted no way out. His horror and his hopes, his anguish and his anger, were as real as they were futile. Much as he desired a new world, his position between two worlds was untenable, and he fell back into the old, tragically and without realising it. By 1930, his commitment to capitalism had become explicit and he described anti-conscriptioists as men with convenient consciences.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of the 1920s, a large number of very popular anti-war books

appeared: *Her Privates We*, *War*, *The Case of Sergeant Grischa* and *The Good Soldier Schweik*. The best known, although by no means critically acclaimed as the finest novel, was Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which reportedly sold almost 50 000 copies in Australasia in the six months after it became available in March 1929. (C. J. Dennis's *Sentimental Bloke*, published in 1915, sold 66 000 copies in its first eighteen months.<sup>13</sup>) The New South Wales RS & SILA monthly *Reveille* initially gave a good deal of favourable attention to these anti-war writings, although it always found their sexual pre-occupations distasteful.<sup>14</sup> The change came with the appearance of *Goodbye to All That*, where Robert Graves recounted an atrocity allegedly committed by an Australian soldier.<sup>15</sup> From that point onwards, *Reveille's* reviews and comments either attacked the war novels as unbalanced and degenerate, or defended war as a necessary, inevitable and ennobling experience.<sup>16</sup> Graves' slanders on the AIF forced *Reveille's* editor to defend his earlier favourable attitude to anti-war novels with the ingenious argument that, having seen through their author's desire for publicity, he had declined to provide them with controversial copy.<sup>17</sup>

Frank Dalby Davison's *The Wells of Beersheba* was precisely the kind of war writing to please *Reveille's* altered outlook. Davison's tale was not an anti-war story, but 'an Australian epic' in which 'the minds and hearts of men rise to a condition in which mean things cannot touch them'.<sup>18</sup> Despite Davison's valid disclaimer that *The Wells of Beersheba* was 'really not a story of horses', the horses provided a 'unique angle'<sup>19</sup> which allowed him to approach his hurtful memories without confronting their human realities. It was not until 1939, in 'Fathers and Sons', that Davison's fiction spoke openly against war. It took the long years of depression and the rise of fascism to make this 'happy warrior' realise that 'it was not a German ... [but] ... our own people, back in Australia ... who really menaced us'.<sup>20</sup>

Only two anti-war novels of any distinction appeared: Leonard Mann's *Flesh in Armour* (1932) and J. P. McKinney's *Crucible* (1935). Neither received wide recognition. Even after *Flesh in Armour* was awarded the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal for 1932, it was refused by Angus and Robertson because it could not be put 'into everyone's hands'.<sup>21</sup> Significant features of the choices open to Australians can be discerned in a comparative analysis of Mann, McKinney and Remarque.

Reading Mann and Remarque today, there is no doubt that Remarque's novel is the more powerful in its description of trench life, and that it is in every way superior. An inclination to stop reading both

books well before their ends derived from boredom with Mann's, and from horror with Remarque's. (I did not much care what happened to the Australians, while I came to care too much to want to know about the Germans.) Before suggesting why Remarque's novel was better, several possible explanations need to be dismissed. Remarque was free of the moral censorship which deprived Mann of a commercial publisher, and which he doubtless internalised to check his forthrightness and constrain his prose. Yet both Mann and Remarque were amateurs, both businessmen of sorts before writing their first novels. Remarque had the advantage of writing in a culture where the novel was very well established, while Mann's book came just after the start of serious novel writing inside Australia. Judged alongside its contemporaries, the question perhaps should be why *Flesh in Armour* was so good, rather than why it was so poor.

One explanation as to why Remarque is able to engage the reader more directly than Mann, is that Remarque wrote in the first person. Yet most novels which move us deeply are in the third person, which clearly constitutes no intrinsic barrier to empathy. Both leading characters were killed, so there is no difference there. Nor is the sentence structure a sufficient explanation. Certainly, Remarque's style stuttered like Wilfred Owen's machine-guns, while Mann's lumbered along like draught-horses pulling a field piece, but these stylistic differences are largely the result of a more fundamental difference in content and meaning. Nowhere in Mann's novel is there anything to compare with this paragraph, chosen at random, from *All Quiet on the Western Front*:

We see men living with their skulls blown open; we see soldiers run with their two feet cut off, they stagger on their splintered stumps into the next shell-hole; a lance corporal crawls a mile and a half on his hands dragging a smashed knee with him; another goes to the dressing station and over his clasped hands bulge his intestines; we see men without mouths, without jaws, without faces; we find one man who has held the artery of his arm in his teeth for two hours in order not to bleed to death. The sun goes down, night comes, the shells whine, life is at an end.<sup>22</sup>

All of Mann's battle descriptions are so lackadaisical that it is as if he was making them up from things he had read; as if he had never been at the front. He had. He had seen it all. Still he could write this flabby description of finding his hero's body: 'They were both upset and visibly distressed. The body was very much mutilated. The chest was torn away and the head half off.'<sup>23</sup> There is nothing precise or particular here, nothing like the artery between teeth.

The difference between Remarque and Mann was that Mann was not writing a war novel at all, but rather a novel set in the war. The war was a time of testing for Mann's hero, whose decision to enlist was not in response to any of the momentous questions he had grappled with, but was 'almost impelled by the need for some decisive action to relieve himself of the agonies of doubt and shame he had endured during the preceding months'.<sup>24</sup> In some important ways, the war was just an interlude for Mann, for his hero, and for Australia. When the Australians went on leave they did not go home, but to France or to Britain. For the German, the war, if not the fighting, was at home. More than this, the trenches were home. Remarque's hero loved a fellow soldier. The Australian had a girl in London. Mann's diffuse reconstruction of his war experiences resulted from the distance which he had been able to put between himself and the trenches. The failure of his novel was a measure of the success with which Australia as a whole had been able to shut out the war and its aftermath. While it remained to menace, the war was not the ever-present reality that it was for that generation of Germans who, in Remarque's words, 'even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by war'.<sup>25</sup> No large body of Australians thought of this kind of destruction; thus Mann's prose suffered from the relative optimism of his society. That he wrote at all was an indication that the hollowness of Australia's optimism was being realised. *Flesh in Armour* was a novel of the 1920s brought to the surface by the economic crisis of the 1930s, a novel of transition. It featured disquiet and concern, rather than despair and chaos. Part of its importance is its reminder that the qualitative change in Australia's 'crisis mentality' came, not from the great war, but at the end of the 1920s, when the world once more broke through our self-imposed isolation.

McKinney's *Crucible*, which won a Victorian RS and SILA competition for an Australian war novel, stands somewhere between the works of Remarque and Mann in both style and content. McKinney's book is livelier, better written and more gripping than Mann's, yet it is barely remembered—partly because its prose sometimes experimented with interior monologues in which real events were transformed into imaginings, as when the hero was wounded and his mental confusion given in place of a naturalist description. In the light of the general absence of modernist writing in Australia before the 1940s, it is more than likely that many readers found vital segments of *Crucible* incomprehensible.

On the surface, McKinney wrote less of a war novel than did Mann. McKinney's hero, Fairbairn, became an officer and survived the war;

only one-eighth of the *Crucible* is set in the trenches. The tising, the loss of innocence and the sexual guilt were as present in McKinney's book as they were in Mann's. Yet *Crucible* was a war novel in a way that Mann's was not. McKinney's battle scenes were precise, without being journalistic; his grip of the reality of fighting was sufficiently strong to allow him to loosen the naturalistic threads, as when an Irish lieutenant entered, apparently drunk, but after a while was found to have shrapnel in his neck. McKinney in no sense avoided the horror of the trenches, and his briefer treatment was more than outweighed by the specificity of his writing.

A clue to McKinney's purpose—and possibly to the lack of popularity of *Crucible*—was Fairbairn's survival, since something of his loss of innocence returned with him to Australia. It was too easy a solution to have the guilt of swearing, drinking and fucking exculpated by a German bullet. Fairbairn left a child in France in order to return to an Australian girl whom he was still too decent to deceive. Although he recognised that he was a 'better and bigger man', less 'narrow and critical', 'for these exacting years',<sup>26</sup> he could not avoid paying a price, just as Australia could not cut itself off entirely once the war was over. In the book's long closing discussion, Fairbairn rejected the escape of blaming everything on the war, on Europe; he, and by analogy Australia, were of such stuff as these weaknesses were made of. While the fighting was only an interlude in Fairbairn's war experience, the war was no mere interlude in his life; it remained alive in his illegitimate son, and in the distance this would place between him and his fiancée. *Crucible* was a book with the temper of the 1930s, showing that the war had neither ended in 1918, nor been confined to the old world. The burdens which Fairbairn brought home were a fair copy of those which Australia in general inherited in the depression, and from the threat of a new war. [1976]

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## Part Two

### Classes and cultures

The originality of Marxist criticism, then, lies not in its historical approach to literature, but in its revolutionary understanding of history itself.

Terry Eagleton *Marxism and Literary Criticism* p. 3