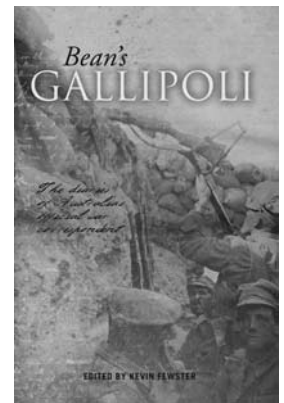


Bean's Gallipoli: The Diaries of Australia's Official War Correspondent

Edited and Annotated by Kevin Fewster

Reviewed by Dr Michael McKernan



I was listening to the ABC radio's nightly quiz quite some time back. The quiz-master asked: in terms of loss of life what was the most expensive war of the twentieth century? There was a long pause, the plea for a clue, and then the hapless answer: 'Gallipoli'. The answer told a great deal about the need for the teaching of history at least somewhere in our society and about the power of myth. Something over 100,000 all up lost their lives at Gallipoli; millions upon millions lost their lives in World War II. The lack of understanding of these most obvious bits of information could make you weep.

Kevin Fewster, still the Director of Sydney's Powerhouse Museum despite the threat of amalgamation with the Australian Museum, has been in the history business all of his working life. He first brought this book out in 1983 and if a new edition dispels some of the ignorance in which we appear to be sinking then well and good. Fewster thinks that few Australians know the Gallipoli story. Only a quarter of those surveyed in Melbourne recently, he tells us, knew that the campaign took place in 1915. So he wants us to read, or re-read, Charles Bean's 'for my eyes only diaries' as a way into the Gallipoli story.

This second edition of the edited and annotated Bean diaries is a better book in 2007 than it was in 1983; better paper, better size, easier to handle, better and more pictures, better organisation of the material and some new text. My favourite picture in the new edition (it was there in 1983 but a little obscure in the less-than-generous printing) is of Bean's dug-out. A photograph that Charlie Bean himself took a few minutes before he left the Peninsula for the last time; a few minutes before he destroyed the place that had been his home for some eight months.

There is a primitive desk and a chair, both made out of packing cases, a sand-bagged wall for protection, a spirit-lamp, a few items of clothing, some discarded rubbish. But in that little cubby-hole Bean wrote millions of words, surely millions. Despatches to the Australian newspapers, lengthy accounts to be printed in the *Government Gazette*, letters, notes and this diary. That photograph will make you weep, too. What drove this man to write so much, to record the very stuff of our history? How on earth did he keep going, bearing in mind that apart from the discomfort, the primitiveness of his conditions, the dirt, the dust, the heat, the truly awful

food, Bean was almost in as much danger as the frontline soldier a few hundred metres away.

You need the background to Bean the writer to appreciate fully this diary. To marvel at the man who wrote it. To know that in reading his words nearly a century after they were written you are in the presence of one of the greatest Australian writers ever who was prepared to give his life to record what these Australians did. Not because his words in the diary (or in his official history for that matter) flow with ease, or excite the imagination, or tickle the fancy. Some-one has recently said, quite unfairly to both parties in my view, that Bean wrote with all the style and grace of a suburban solicitor.

It is the how and why of the writing that makes me stand in awe of it. There are occasional flashes of humour and anger to amuse or perplex: 'God has blessed the British Navy with much courage and little brains'; 'undoubtedly the N.Z. fights more with his gloves on than the Australian: the Australian when he fights, fights all in'; 'the other day a shell landed in the dentists' dug-out and covered the hillside with false teeth'. But more importantly: June 12 'writing all day'.

That was Bean's Gallipoli. Writing and writing and writing so that those at home could know, and so that we, who come so many years later, can know as well. Gallipoli was not the most costly war in the twentieth century in terms of loss of life – far from it – but we can know it possibly better than any other campaign in which the Australians fought because of the remarkable work of Charles Bean. Bean's diary deserves a new readership and this is certainly the edition to have. ♦

Kevin Fewster (editor), 'Bean's Gallipoli: The Diaries of Australia's Official War Correspondent', Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2007, Casebound and jacketed, 292pp., RRP \$A35.00.

Michael McKernan's history of Australia in World War II, 'The Strength of a Nation', was published last November and reviewed in the Summer 2006/07 issue of 'Defender'. This review is republished courtesy of 'The Canberra Times'.