

Somme Mud: The War Experiences of an Australian Infantryman in France 1916-1919

E.F.P. Lynch

(Edited by Will Davies)

Reviewed by Dr Peter Stanley

Edward Lynch was an 18-year-old from Bathurst when he joined the AIF in 1916. He arrived at the front in France just after GHQ finally gave up on the Somme offensive, just in time for the war's worst winter. The Australian War Memorial's 'Somme Winter' diorama depicts the notorious winter of 1916-17, the setting for the first chapters of this newly discovered classic of Australians at war.

Lynch served as a signaller and runner with the 45th Battalion from that winter until the war's end. Twice wounded, he survived Messines and third Ypres, Villers-Bretonneux and the great 1918 offensives. At the end of the four-day fight at Messines Lynch's battalion mustered just 61 men, many wounded. But the soul-destroying mud of that icy Somme winter defined the war for him.

Filmmaker Will Davies came across Lynch's memoir by chance. Lynch had written in pencil in exercise books in 1921 (Davies thinks as a way of 'exorcising' the trauma he – like all of them – brought home). Lynch had re-typed it in the 1930s, hoping to publish, at a time when 'war books' had become unfashionable.

Davies recognized the typescript for what it surely is. In a foreword Bill Gammage, the first AIF's foremost living historian, compares it to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It is certainly the most compelling Australian memoir by a front-line soldier. Davies deserves our warm thanks for giving us a new opportunity to understand the lives and deaths of the infantry on the Western Front.

Bill Gammage's comparison with Erich Maria Remarque's novel is apt. Also couched in the first-person present tense, *Somme Mud* traces the loss by death or wounds of Lynch's mates, one by one. It is not consciously 'literary', but its power and economy retains its force across the years.

The men of Lynch's section, based on real people, are convincing characters, archetypes who never topple into stereotypes. (Incidentally, they include Yacob, a Russian volunteer for the AIF, one of Elena Govor's *Russian Anzacs*.)

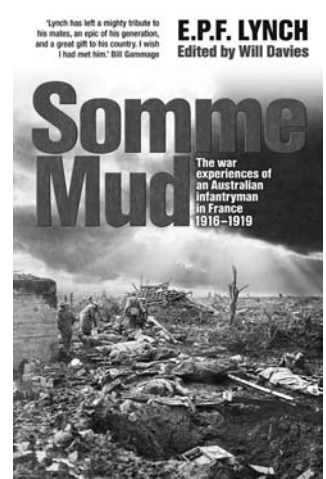
Lynch's gift for graphic description and for candid reflection makes *Somme Mud* a source of new evidence. For example, he uses new slang terms and compares German and Australian soldiers' graffiti, pet interests of mine. More darkly, he sheds new light on men's behaviour in battle. A sergeant condones his shooting of Germans – found hiding in newly captured trenches at Messines – and admonishes Lynch (who had not shot them) with the advice 'Your conscience is back in your pack with the transport'.

Lynch writes without artifice but with an acute ear for the vernacular. His mate 'Longun' hands out 'real stark naked bullock driver abuse' when he upends a dixie of stew on himself. When Lynch is set to cleaning harness for going absent he writes that he rubs the horse-chains with 'spit and sand and blasphemy'. This is an authentic old Australian voice, devoid of the media-manipulated nationalism of the one-eyed Oi, Oi, Oi! mob.

But *Somme Mud* is also a book worth reading for its insights into the Great War as a human experience. Describing a burial party, interring corpses in the Somme mud, he writes of the dead: 'Yesterday, mates of men. Today, 'fallen comrades', but mates still in the minds of mates.' There is much here to stimulate musing on these men in that war, what it did to them and what it means to us.

Even if you know the Great War or the AIF, read this book: it will inform, astound and move you, as has little else since Leonard Mann's *Flesh in Armour* or, indeed, Bill Gammage's own *The Broken Years*. ♦

E.P.F. Lynch (Edited by Will Davies), *'Somme Mud: the War Experiences of an Australian Infantryman in France 1916-1919'*, Random House, Softback, 347pp., RRP \$A34.95
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