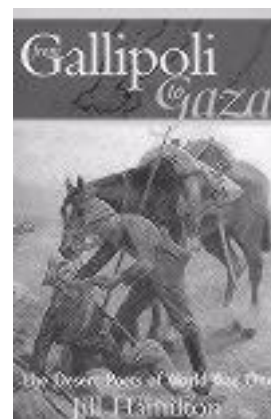


From Gallipoli to Gaza: The Desert Poets of World War I

Jill Hamilton

Reviewed by Michael Thwaites



The heroism and horror of war have been a theme of poetry from Homer to the present day. Jill Hamilton's work does not attempt an historical or literary survey but weaves the poetry into brief accounts of the campaigns that inspired them.

Her choice of poetry is limited to the writing of those who were present and actively engaged in the Gallipoli, Palestine and Mesopotamian campaigns. It is an accumulation of 'I was there' evidence—some compellingly vivid, like Harley Mathews' account of the landing on Gallipoli Beach.

ANZAC rightly remains central to the story of Australia's nationhood, as Alan Moorehead and many others have established. But Jill Hamilton adds an important perspective. She argues that to write off Gallipoli as a heroic but total defeat is misleading.

'Gallipoli was not a failure, for its aim was eventually achieved.' The four years of costly and fluctuating fighting that followed the withdrawal from Gallipoli included the Light Horse capture of Gaza and Beersheba, opening the doorway to Palestine and the Holy Land to western powers for the first time since the Crusades. The Ottoman Empire finally surrendered on 31 October 1918 because it was outflanked and beaten by these campaigns.

Wavell called it 'the greatest exploit in the history of horsed cavalry, and possibly their last success on a large scale'. The poet Banjo Paterson played a key role. Too old to be accepted into the army, he was put in charge of the Remount Service (nicknamed the 'Horse-dung Hussars'), which trained and deployed 50,000 horses and 11,000 mules. A genius with horses, the author of 'The Man From Snowy River' provided the main means of mobile desert transport for the allied forces in Egypt, Palestine and Syria.

Among the best-known poets featured in the book is Rupert Brooke, who died of blood poisoning on his way to Gallipoli. His heartfelt Englishness spoke to a whole nation. But he marked a boundary, a faith and idealism that could not be sustained. Lyrics like: 'Now God be thanked who has matched us with His hour, And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping' could not survive the holocaust years ahead. Siegfried Sassoon in contrast savagely voiced the horror, disillusionment and waste of war. Living on until 1967 he wrote fiercely against callous complacent snobbery in the officers and all who from secure Base

positions sent young men to their death.

The greatest English poet of World War I, Wilfrid Owen, burned for the truth to be known about war's reality, its best and worst. He was killed weeks before the Armistice.

As well as these deservedly known poets Jill Hamilton has collected a variety of lost verse. Little of it is distinguished poetry. I found nothing of the quality of Slessor's 'Beach Burial', one of the best Australian poems of World War II. But there are names like Gellert and Deamer who were widely acclaimed in their day. In the case of Gellert he is undergoing somewhat of a renaissance as a result of the book. At the dedication of the new Australian War Memorial on Hyde Park Corner in London on Remembrance Day this year Gellert's poem, 'The Last to Leave', about the evacuation of Gallipoli, was recited by a representative of the 27 Australian veterans and war widows present. Its inclusion in the ceremony was recommended by staff from the Australian High Commission who had read it in Jill Hamilton's book.

Even the uninhibited jog-trot doggerel is contemporary documentation of how soldiers spoke and thought in the midst of campaigning and battle. Humour and Aussie irreverence are common, with care and spontaneous compassion for friends and even foes—and little cynicism.

Light Horseman Ross Smith, later founder of QANTAS, wrote to his mother of men who were 'happy as kings because they are going to face bullets, and I bet half of them couldn't tell you what started this war'. The book includes a little-known comic verse by Rupert Brooke about being 'on the run' with dysentery, and a Kiplingesque tribute by Paterson to the toiling unsung 'Army Mules'.

Jill Hamilton has done real service in assembling this lively collection. The book would be improved by the addition of a systematic assessment of the post-Gallipoli campaigns. It would also be much improved by better maps that clearly indicated names and places covered in the text.

A percentage of the royalties from the book will flow to an 'Animals in War' statue being commissioned for the Australian War Memorial.♦

Michael Thwaites' poem, 'The Anzac Graves on Gallipoli', is read each year at the service at 'Lone Pine'.

Jill Hamilton, 'From Gallipoli to Gaza: The Desert Poets of World War I', Simon & Schuster, Sydney, 2003, pb, 277pp, RRP \$29.95.