

## Goodbye Cobber, God Bless You: The Fatal Charge of the Light Horse, Gallipoli, August 7th, 1915

John Hamilton

Reviewed by Dr Michael McKernan



Is there a sadder Australian battlefield anywhere in the world than the Nek? On a good day it is also one of the most beautiful. Flowers in profusion, a bit of lawn, trees. A view down a long narrow gully to Anzac Cove, or, to the right, across a patterned plain to Suvla Bay. The plain framed on one side by low, gentle, blue hills. Yet even now, it seems, few people go there. They'll make a beeline for Anzac Cove, walk up to Lone Pine, walk along the road to Quinn's Post, but perhaps not the Nek.

Apart from the beauty there is not much to see at the Nek. There are only ten gravestones in the little cemetery there, in two sets of five. Nothing dramatic here, nothing to catch the eye of the visitor, but for the beauty. I have stood there reading aloud to those who have travelled with me Charles Bean's account of the futile charge on 7 August 1915 and I have seen people flinch, as if someone is about to hit them. The place does that, and the story. The sheer physical beauty of the place and the awful reality of the senseless slaughter that happened there. The senseless slaughter of lovely young Australian soldiers.

But any visitor to a battlefield must come prepared to confront young death. What makes the Nek stand out from all the rest is the awful inevitability of it all. The sense, even now, that somehow we can call it off, stop the slaughter, the useless waste of innocent life. In the last image in Peter Weir's *Gallipoli*; a pocket-watch moves to the appointed time, a whistle blows, men run to their death. And again; and again. Someone I know laughed at the scene in the cinema. It is so terrible that it is simply confusing to know what to do. Stop that, you want to say, as if talking to a child about to grab something hot.

I would hate to write a book about the Nek. Peter Burness, of the Australian War Memorial, did and very well, too, in 1996, and now John Hamilton, a journalist has. Like Les Carlyon, Hamilton is very good on sense of place, and very good on straightforward narrative. This is not a hard book to read, but the foreboding of the inevitable horror to come saw me putting it to the back on the pile of books to be read. But that's silly, this is a book well worth reading.

The trouble was this beautiful bit of land. The Turks had tried a charge there against the Australian trenches at the end of June 1915. It had ended for them disastrously,

at least 255 dead lying in the small bit of no-man's land. A warning—Charles Bean, as usual, gives us the clue: 'going forward here would be like trying to attack an inverted frying pan from the direction of its handle'. The land was just too narrow to sustain an attack. The attackers would be funnelled into a narrow defile and machine guns could just mow them down. Anyone could see that.

And they did, those on the ground itself. But those planning this battle did so from a distance. As Australia's best military planner from that war, Brudenell White, told Charles Bean after the war was over, the plan was brilliant 'but it totally disregarded the almost impossible nature of the country'.

One of the strengths of Hamilton's book is the detail he gives about the men and officers of the Light Horse, who would carry out the attack. He takes more than half the book even to get the Light Horse to Gallipoli. By the time they have landed we know a dozen or so quite intimately. Well-loved, well-developed characters, like the regimental medical officer, Sid Campbell, who is killed off even before serious planning for the charge at the Nek commences. We come to know such men through their letters and diaries and this increases the sad expectation of impending disaster. These are men we care about.

But not their most senior officers. Burness had little good to say about Hughes and Antill, and Peter Burness is a gentle man; Hamilton has found even less to warm to. Hughes, 57 years of age, a stickler; his idea of soldiering, one of his lieutenants reported, 'was to salute smartly, roll a great coat correctly and note the march discipline'. Antill was just a bully. 'Push on' was all Antill seemed to be able to say once the tragedy began to unfold.

The charge should never have been ordered and should certainly have been called off when a series of failures elsewhere conspired to turn its chance of success from extremely unlikely to suicidal. It is hard to read Hamilton's account, accurate and measured, without deep anger and sorrow. This book is a fine tribute to the many hundreds who died there. ♦

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