

The Great War

Les Carlyon

Reviewed by Professor Jeffrey Grey

Journalists have made a significant contribution to the writing of Australian military history, C.E.W. Bean, Gavin Long and Chester Wilmot, to take three obvious examples, wrote extensively as war correspondents and as official (or in Wilmot's case semi-official) historians of Australia's part in two world wars.

Philip Knightly has suggested that on-scene journalism provides the first draft of history; beyond this, Bean and Long provided the basic foundation for interpretation that proved influential for several generations.

This situation arose in large part because of the small size and sometimes limited capacity of the Australian university sector before the 1960s. Put simply, there were not very many professional historians around, and the intellectual fashion of the time eschewed what we would now regard as contemporary history. Even when the sector expanded in size and there were lots of professional historians around, they still didn't contribute as much to the understanding of war and its place in our history because the majority of them had no interest in the subject or, in some cases, regarded it with distaste.

This is no longer as true, but some publishers and not a few editors believe that it is, or believe (with some justice) that professional historians are killing popular interest in their subject; that, to paraphrase Clemenceau, history is too important to be left to historians. Which perhaps helps to explain the recent phenomenon in Australian publishing of very long books by journalists with a taste for military history allied to publishing houses with a healthy promotional budget and an eye for what will sell.

Carlyon's book is a far better example of this genre than most. He is an accomplished and stylish writer, which is just as well given the book's length. It is copiously illustrated, with lengthy and informative captions. The maps are pretty ordinary, which is a problem in a work of campaign history, but then publishers don't seem to think that matters any more. It probably doesn't, because readers will be drawn to this book for its thumbnail accounts of the deeds of individuals and small groups of Australian soldiers, narratives of personal experience in circumstances few if any of them can really fully imagine.

In an important sense, Carlyon gives us C. E. W. Bean in 21st-century packaging.

Essentially though, this is Bean in a single, imitatively thick volume. But where Bean observed events first hand and had access to a wide range of documentary sources from Australian, British and German archives, as well as the recollections of hundreds of participants of all ranks, Carlyon structures his narrative around the work of a galaxy of scholars, especially those working in the last 15-20 years. Populist histories of this kind are necessarily a pastiche of

ideas and arguments, the author wearing a coat woven from other people's scholarship.

To be sure, Carlyon wears it fairly well. There are none of the tired and clichéd images of 'British butchers and bunglers' or 'lions led by rabbits' beloved by earlier generations of popularisers. Haig is accorded a sensible and balanced treatment, and Carlyon notes as well that Australian senior officers could fail in command as readily as their British counterparts.

Serious historians of the Great War have long since dispatched the old myths and interpretations, and Carlyon reflects the way in which popular writers are now catching up with more than 20 years of this writing. In this sense he does not put a foot wrong, but then with guides of the calibre and erudition of Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, Gary Sheffield, Joan Beaumont, Brian Bond, John Coates, John Grigg, Richard Holmes, Peter Pedersen, Geoffrey Serle, Tim Travers and John Williams, to name but the obvious, there is no excuse for missteps.

It is hard to know what purpose a book like this serves. The title is a misnomer: its subject is Australians on the Western Front, and the Great War was about far more than the campaign in France and Flanders, and that campaign encompassed much more than the participation of the five Australian divisions.

Readers with an interest in the subject will encounter nothing in these pages with which they are not already familiar, through the work of Bean and Gammage if through no others. All the great figures of the first AIF are here: Jacka and Elliot, Percy Black and Harry Murray, Moon and Tubb and Donovan Joynt, Harold Walker, the Leanes and the five Howell-Price brothers (though not the sixth, who declined to volunteer for overseas service and was court-martialled for fraud and embezzlement later in the war).

Their stories now perhaps are not well known, in keeping with Carlyon's opening and closing contention that 'we never really saw' the men who made the AIF during the years of their greatest endeavours. Whether the average reader will persevere through nearly three inches of print to rectify that omission is another matter but any appetite to read more widely that may be whetted is to everyone's benefit.

The Great War as an historical event is long in the past, and the experience is unknowable to those who did not live thought it. As this weighty volume attests, the Great War as a cultural industry is alive and kicking. ♦

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