



*Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* by Alistair Thomson.

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Last year Australians celebrated the centenary of the ANZAC landing on the shores of Gallipoli (25 April 1915) with a zeal that has been mounting since the 1980s. To feed this frenzy, many books have been published, including this new edition of *Anzac Memories*. Author Alistair Thomson (Monash Univ.) revisits a project he carried out at the beginning of his career, bringing to it the lessons of experience acquired in the thirty years since he conducted his first interviews with some of the last surviving Australian First World War veterans.

I first read *Anzac Memories* twenty years ago, as an expatriate Australian living in Dublin. I read it through tears, overcome by memories of my grandfather, who fought on the Western Front in 1916 and 1918. He was so badly wounded at the battle for Pozières (July 1916) that he had to spend 1917 recuperating back home in Australia. He returned to the Somme in time for the 1918 German spring offensive, where he was gassed. In August, at Lihons near Villers-Bretonneux, he suffered a head wound that affected his health for the rest of his life. As a seven-year-old, I became proficient at administering eye drops into the empty socket of his left eye. As a teenager in the 1960s, in a bedroom adjacent to his, I heard him cry out during the nightmares in which he revisited the battlefields of the Great War. Thus, it was with some trepidation that I embarked upon re-reading *Anzac Memories* in this new edition. Would I be disappointed? What had been altered, added, or removed?

First, the text of the original has been preserved intact.<sup>1</sup> However, the new edition features an updated introduction and a fourth part, “Anzac Memories Revisited” (255–323), comprising two new chapters (10 and 11) and a postscript. The bibliography now includes many recent works on memory, commemoration, the Anzac legend, and the aftermath of war, especially its impact on servicemen’s families.

Thomson interviewed twenty-one veterans in 1983–84, and a handful of them again in 1987. “In these second interviews I focused on how each man composed and related war memories, and explored four key interactions: between interviewer and interviewee, public legend and individual memory, past and present, and memory and identity” (15).

Three of the book’s chapters—3, “Memories of War,” 6, “Talk and Taboo in Postwar Memories,” and 9, “Living with the Legend”—provided “memory biographies” of three interviewees: Percy Bird, Bill Langham, and Fred Farrall, selected for their distinct experiences of the war and ways of remembering them. Other chapters charted the social history of the period or changing ways of remembering that history. The author linked the lived experiences of his subjects with the wider context of the war. For example, chapter 1, “The Diggers’ War,” examined war statistics and the Anzac legend in the light of the interviewees’ stories of enlistment and combat. In chapter 4, “The Return of the Soldiers,” on the interwar years, Thomson examined the Government repatriation measures and the place of veterans’ organizations in the men’s postwar lives.

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1. With the exception of a few indications of dates, such as “1990” in a chapter title or in an explanation that “now” means “1990.”

The men Thomson spoke with were bemused by his interest at a time when antiwar sentiments about Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War still lingered, at least in academic circles.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 7, "Old Diggers," followed the lives of the interviewees through to the early 1990s, an era of changing official policies on pensions and war-related illnesses, particularly mental illness.

Like these groundbreaking historical chapters, the chapters on the evolving commemorations of the Great War were also relatively novel at the time. Discussions of the historiographical development of the Anzac legend in chapter 2, "Charles Bean and the Anzacs," cultural battles over ways of remembering in chapter 5, "The Battle for the Anzac Legend," and the revival of interest in all things Anzac in chapter 8, "The Anzac Revival (1939–1990)," provided jumping-off points for Thomson's treatment of memory work. The methodology adopted by a young historian in approaching both eyewitnesses and documentary sources was addressed in his original introduction (4–27) and appendix: "Oral History and Popular Memory" (327–42).

Re-read as a 1994 "artifact," the original edition remains a pioneering work in the field of oral testimony. It was rightly hailed at the time as "a masterly study of how Australians remember, forget, invent and imagine their experiences of war" and "a superb account of the interaction of private memory with public myth,"<sup>3</sup> and those judgments still stand.

I turn now to the second edition of the book. Historian Jay Winter, in a new foreword, "Memory and Silence," describes Thomson's distinctive creation of a "quadrilateral of remembrance" (xv). To the oral history triad of interviewer, interviewee in the 1980s, and interviewee during World War I, Thomson adds a fourth element—himself, revisiting the memories recorded thirty years before in light of new archival evidence and advances in the field of memory studies.

Thomson bases his two new chapters on the voluminous personal files of returned servicemen newly accessible from the Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs (formerly Department of Repatriation) to researchers and family members alike. These materials reveal the struggles of servicemen who sought to have physical or mental illnesses attributed to their war service in order to qualify for some percentage of a pension.

In chapter 11, "Repat War Stories," the author continues his original "memory biographies" of Bird, Langham and Farrall via their "Repat" files. He also taps recent research on the Department of Repatriation and the inadequate pensions that left many veterans "consigned to the working poor" (285).<sup>4</sup>

Returning to the Farrall interviews, with his (four-inch-thick) Repat files<sup>5</sup> to hand, Thomson asked himself: "As a novice historian and occasional peace activist in the 1980s, was I too quick to accept Fred's story and mythologise his radical life?" (294). He had also found in Farrell's personal papers<sup>6</sup>

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2. Thomson's work was among the earliest on this subject, preceding that of Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1996), Joy Damousi, *Living with the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia and Grief in Post-War Australia* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2001), Michael McKernan, *This War Never Ends: The Pain of Separation and Return* (St. Lucia: U Queensland Pr, 2001), and Patricia Jalland, *Changing Ways of Death in Twentieth-Century Australia: War, Medicine and the Funeral Business* (Sydney: U New South Wales Pr, 2006).

3. By, respectively, Ken Inglis, in a dust-jacket blurb, and Richard White in the *American Historical Review*.

4. Crediting the work Marina Larrson, *Shattered Anzacs: Living with the Scars of War* (Sydney: U New South Wales Pr, 2009), Thomson acknowledges that "This new research questions my assertion in the first edition (chapter 4) that Australian war pensions were more generous than those of most other combatant nations" (365n5).

5. Compiled from 1920 to 1981.

6. Held in the University of Melbourne archives and unavailable to Thomson in the 1980s.

five uncensored letters Farrall had sent to his mother and siblings during the war. And, too, he was able to read Farrall's ASIO file.<sup>7</sup>

Thomson learned several new things about Farrall and oral testimonies. The wartime letters allowed him to compare Farrall's views of certain incidents at the time—for example, a meeting with German prisoners (295)—with the memories of them recounted in his 1980s interviews (295). Also, his Repat files showed that “Fred Farrall learnt how to work the Repat system to best advantage” (296) by listening carefully to the doctors and then incorporating the useful bits into his Repat story. Initially Thomson had thought that the “socialist politics and histories of shell-shocked Australian soldiers helped Fred to see himself as a damaged victim of war” (309) and shaped the telling of his memories. “Before I saw the Repat files, I concluded in the first edition that for Fred in his later years [the] ‘composure’ of his war story also provided psychological reassurance, a past he could live with.” But, having read the files, Thomson realized that “it was through his exchanges with the Repat that Fred developed a medical language of explanation and put the jigsaw pieces of his war and his postwar life together in a way that made satisfying and useful sense” (309–10).

By contrast, Thomson found Bill Langham's memories of the war to have been “often impressively accurate” but that “the Repat file did not always represent Bill's emotions and understandings in his terms” (290). The files showed that Langham had made mistakes in putting his case to the authorities, for instance, by not fully reporting his medical conditions on his discharge, by claiming for the wrong conditions, and by misunderstanding the medical jargon. Langham's claim for a pension was not resolved until the Returned and Services League took up his case in the 1970s.

The Langham files also revealed a false assumption in Thomson's contacts with him. Specifically, he learned that the wife Langham had married in the early 1920s was not the wife Thomson met in the 1980s, when the elderly couple had just celebrated their *fiftieth* (not *sixtieth*) wedding anniversary. The Repat file showed that the first wife had died in childbirth in the late 1920s. Thomson cautions that “The lapse is a sharp reminder for interviewers to record vital personal details, to follow up on the clues and to explore significant silences” (291).

Chapter 10, “Searching for Hector Thomson,” tells the story of Thomson's paternal grandfather. Hector's son (Thomson's father) did not want his story told in full in 1994, when a residual stigma still surrounded mental illness. Thomson confesses that “in removing the reference to mental illness I was contributing to a selective version of Anzac history.... I felt that I was compromising the aim of my book” (258).

Fortunately, Thomson's father permitted Hector's painful story to be disclosed in the second edition of *Anzac Memories*. Once more, the Repat files revealed “contemporary medical understandings and prejudices [and] how medical practices and bureaucratic attitudes towards veterans changed over time” (259). On the personal level, the files became a family history by describing not so much the extent of Hector's mental and physical illnesses, but the profound effects they had upon his wife and sons. Thomson, as a historian, recognized and admitted that he had neglected this critical aspect of his interviewees' narratives. By concentrating so narrowly on the veterans, he had ignored the impact of the war across generations (282).

In a new postscript, “Anzac Postmemory,” the author ponders what he achieved in 1994. He discusses some recent studies of both memory and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but concludes that the “popular memory [theory] which informed the first edition ... is still, to my mind, a useful approach to understanding Anzac remembrance, though it now needs a postmemory twist” (318). His

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7. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation was interested in Farrall, a political activist, during his communist years. Such files, in part redacted and subject to the thirty-year rule, are now available through the National Archives of Australia.

interviews with Bird, Langham, and Farrall do indeed preserve “deep memory” and will continue to provide guidance to historians and politicians aiming at coherence and closure.

This new edition provides additional illustrations to accompany the new chapter on Hector Thomson. Among these, five pages reproduced from his Repatriation files give a good sense of the archival materials newly available to researchers.<sup>8</sup>

*Anzac Memories* is a remarkable book, both for its original content and for the light it sheds on a fine, conscientious historian’s re-engagement with his earlier work in view of new archival evidence and relevant studies in such fields as remembrance, medicine, and the social history of war.

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8. I do have a couple quibbles: many of the illustrations were clearer in the first edition than they are in the second. E.g., Thomson’s letter to his soldier father, written when he was five years old (6), is now illegible. Also unfortunate is the excision of the very pertinent caption (“Funny thing, Bill—I keep thinking I hear men marching”) for Will Dyson’s famous 1927 cartoon, “A Voice from Anzac” (152).