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Farewell, dear people: Australia's gifted lost generation of World War I

an address to the Institute on 30 October 2012 by

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Dr McMullin provides a brief biography of ten Australians of exceptional potential who died in World War I. They were so special that their deaths represented a profound loss to the nation as well as to their families. Yet the names of these remarkable men, and their stories, are unknown today – retrieving their stories involved immense research.

Key words: biographies; Australians; World War I.

The essence of my recent book, *Farewell, Dear People*, stems from the way Australians have thought about the devastating impact of World War I. At the start of the war our national population was less than five million. The effect of 60,000 dead and all the maimed was catastrophic. It is hardly surprising, then, that evaluation of the consequences of World War I for Australia has focused on the collective impact of all those casualties. This is, after all, appropriately democratic and consistent with our egalitarian traditions.

That there must have been exceptionally talented individuals among the 60,000 dead has been implicitly understood. But we do not know today who they were. We do not know their stories, and what made them special. If you asked informed readers in England about Britain's lost generation of World War I, a significant proportion would say: yes, you mean Rupert Brooke, and Raymond Asquith, and so on. But we do not know our equivalents here, our Rupert Brookes.

The aim of my book is to remedy this substantial deficiency in the national story. *Farewell, Dear People* covers ten Australians of rare potential who died during the war.

Geoff McCrae

Geoff McCrae was a budding architect who was a product of Melbourne's best-known creative dynasty. He combined his family's flair for writing and drawing with an endearing personality and a strong sense of right and wrong. He hated war, and he yearned to be home with his family and his girlfriend. But as long as this ghastly war continued, he felt that his duty was to play his part in it. And his was no small part – he was a battalion commander (60th Battalion, 15th Brigade) at an unusually young age.

Women adored him. Attractive women were attracted to Geoff, but he only had eyes for one by August 1914. Her name was



Geoff McCrae
[Photo: Barbara Blomfield]

Maude, and during the war he missed her terribly. He wrote about her at Gallipoli like this: "I feel very weary but do not sleep, and long for the touch of a vanished hand".

The title of the book, *Farewell, Dear People*, comes from the remarkable final letter that McCrae wrote home to his family on 19 July 1916. The battle of Fromelles, which began later that day, remains the worst 24 hours in Australia's entire history. What McCrae wrote in the quick letter he dashed off to his family was this: "Today I lead my Battalion in an assault on the German lines, and I pray to God I may come through alright and bring honour to our name. If not, I will at least have laid down my life for you and my country which is the greatest privilege one can ask for. Farewell, dear people, the hour approacheth."

Geoff was the youngest of six in his family. His father, George, was a noted poet who also wrote prose and liked sketching. Geoff and George were particularly close. Geoff's older brother, Hugh, a well-known poet, artist and cartoonist who moved to Sydney while Geoff was still young and did not see much of Geoff afterwards, carried with him for years an image of tall George and small Geoff happily together with their fingers intertwined.

George was 83 when Geoff died. His full life of personal and intellectual fulfilment contrasted with the abbreviated span of his youngest son. But in 1916 George still had another decade and more of alert life ahead of him. He devoted much of it to commemorating Geoff.

Clunes Mathison

Clunes Mathison was an internationally acclaimed medical researcher. He was a marvel, the Florey or Macfarlane Burnet or Gus Nossal that Australia missed out on, because he was fatally wounded in the first weeks at Gallipoli while serving as a battalion doctor. Mathison received the most glowing accolades from medical scientists of the highest international renown.

The director of the Lister Institute in London remarked that "No man I have ever known possesses the genius for research so highly as Mathison". Another esteemed British professor wrote after Mathison's death

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Clunes Mathison
[Photo: Walter & Eliza Hall
Institute]

that “for the science of medicine throughout the world, the loss is irreparable”. The (London) *Times History of the War* lamented Mathison’s death as the loss of “a life which had been judged infinitely precious”.

Mathison was a revered personality as well as a renowned researcher. Someone who knew him well put it this way: “Of Dr Mathison as a scientist, let others speak. I speak of him as a friend,

and as a friend he was wonderful ... He never flagged: the variety of his interests was remarkable. I have been with him on all sorts of occasions – ... yarning, cricketing, camping, canoeing, fishing, ski-running – and it was always the same: whether it was a question of scientific knowledge, or of academic diplomacy, or the value of a book or a picture or a piece of music, or the fastening of a ski-binding, it was always “Ask Mathie” ... His cheery, chubby figure was welcome everywhere; he knew every Professor and every policeman in London, and was equally at home hobnobbing with either.”

Australia was deprived of this unique precious genius in a deplorable way. He died while the 2nd Australian Brigade was temporarily transferred to Helles, where they came under the command of a singularly inept British commander, General Hunter-Weston. What Hunter-Weston directed these Victorians to do on 8 May 1915 was to charge towards Krithia for three miles along an exposed spur in broad daylight against the same Turkish machine-guns and riflemen who had halted a series of similar attacks before any of them had progressed one-sixth of that distance.

The Victorians charged with the utmost gallantry. Onlookers likened it to the legendary Charge of the Light Brigade. But casualties were inevitably severe. Mathison tended the many wounded with exceptional bravery and selflessness. Mathie made it known that “wherever I am wanted, just tell me, and I will try to go”. The historian of Mathison’s unit recorded that when it became known that a Turkish bullet had found Mathison, the news depressed the whole battalion.

In 1953, almost 40 years after Mathison’s death, Macfarlane Burnet described him as an Australian equivalent of Rupert Brooke.

Robert Bage

Robert Bage, an engineer who was a senior colleague of Mawson’s at Antarctica, is another who is long forgotten. Mawson’s expeditioners happened to base themselves at the windiest place on the planet. John Hunter, a scientist who did not know Bage before their time together at Antarctica, wrote that “Bob Bage ... is the best liked man on the expedition and personally I think he is the best man we have”.

After they had endured months of ferocious blizzards, Mawson placed Bage in charge of a daunting sledging expedition. Bage and his two colleagues

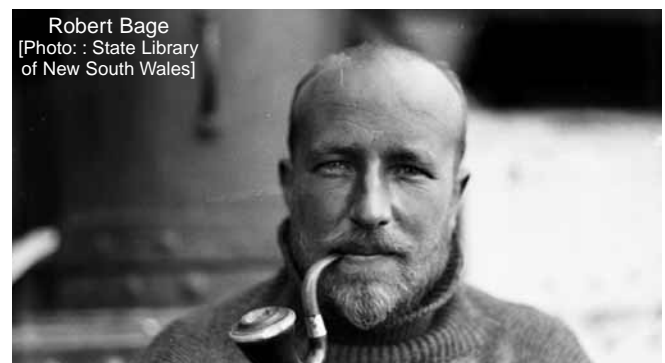
ventured more than 300 miles south across rough terrain where no-one had been before, despite encountering the most violent hurricanes. Along the way they made regular geographical, meteorological and magnetic measurements, because they were exploring for scientific research; they were in fact not far from the South Pole, but this was not a superficial exercise of getting to some target just for the shallow glory of being the first to plonk a flag there. It was an exceedingly dangerous expedition, and Bage and his comrades only just managed to survive their harrowing return journey. But their remarkable feat was little known at the time – because other explorers in other expeditions did not survive, and they dominated the headlines – and it is completely unknown now.

All the sledging expeditions returned to the hut that was the home base of Mawson’s men within a couple of days of Mawson’s deadline, except one – the three-man party led by Mawson himself. The *Aurora*, the ship that was to take all the expeditioners back to Australia, had arrived with its irascible captain, J.K. Davis. He was known as Gloomy Davis, but his concern about delay was understandable, as ships had limited seasonal scope to manoeuvre in these icy waters.

Several days later, with Davis increasingly tense and still no sign of Mawson, six expeditioners, including Bage, were selected to stay on for another winter in case Mawson’s party belatedly turned up. Eventually Davis decided he could not wait any more, and the *Aurora* departed, only for Mawson to materialise later that very day in an emaciated state with the harrowing news that the two comrades with him had died.

As if this was not dramatic enough, when they managed to send a wireless message to the *Aurora* asking for it to return, which it did – with great reluctance from Davis – the sea was too wild for Mawson, Bage and the others to be collected. They were waiting on the shore knowing that Davis would be increasingly agitated about this further delay. In the end he decided he could linger no longer, and the *Aurora* departed again.

So the hopes of Bage and his shore-based companions were shattered. They had to endure another year of isolation and limited amenities and apocalyptic weather before they could be collected. When the *Aurora* reappeared on 13 December 1913, the jubilation ashore was understandably intense. Bage and his companions really were going home this time. Their arrival in Australia was a celebrated event.



Robert Bage
[Photo: : State Library
of New South Wales]

Only a year later, though, he was killed in the first fortnight at Gallipoli. Bage, as the deputy leader of one of the original companies of engineers, landed with his company on the original Anzac Day. During the chaos of the first few days ashore Bage and his men did the kind of things that engineers did, and, on 7 May, Bage spent the morning surveying. The young men with him paused for a bit of lunch, and Bage strolled across to the adjacent Australian Imperial Force (AIF) position, perhaps intent on getting something to eat there himself. As it happened, the commander of the AIF's 1st Division, Major-General Bridges, was there. Bridges had been appraising the tactical options in the local area, and he had just come to a decision about what he wanted. When Bage materialised along the trench, Bridges said "Here's the man!"

Bage was startled. He was not used to being addressed in such fashion by a major-general. But then he found out why he was the man, and he became seriously perturbed. Bridges had decided that he wanted the infantry to occupy a forward post, and he wanted a reliable engineer to mark out the position beforehand.

This would involve Bage venturing out 150 yards in front of the then Anzac position, and banging in some marker pegs in view of the Turks. He respectfully pointed out that this would be a very risky undertaking, and the best chance of carrying it out effectively would be to do it at night. But Bridges was adamant. He wanted it done that afternoon – that is, in broad daylight and in full view of the Turks.

Bage resigned himself to his probable fate, and arranged for the dispersal of his belongings. He was hammering in a marker peg where Bridges wanted when he was killed by a fusillade of fire from umpteen Turkish riflemen and at least five machine-guns.

Australians have been critical of incompetent British generals whose ineptitude led to the deaths of regrettably many Australians – understandably critical, in the case of commanders like Haking and Hunter-Weston. But what happened to Bob Bage at Gallipoli on 7 May 1915, when his life was cavalierly imperilled by Bridges and he predictably died, confirms that inept decisions by generals that led to the deaths of Australians, including those with the most outstanding potential for future greatness, were made by Australian commanders as well as British ones.

Tom Elliott

Tom Elliott was an exceptionally talented soldier from a working-class Sydney background. He was part of the second intake at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, which entered the college in 1912 after a series of competitive exams; there were more than a hundred applicants from around Australia, and Tom ended up with the highest marks. He did well at Duntroon, and served in the 7th Light Horse at Gallipoli.

In 1916, Tom transferred to the infantry. He became an officer in the 60th Battalion, which was part of Pompey Elliott's 15th Brigade. Pompey knew Tom for only four

months, but in that time formed the view that Tom was the finest natural soldier he had ever met, and an officer of immense potential who would be crucial to Australia's future. Pompey kept saying that Tom was potentially an Australian Kitchener, an extraordinary accolade in the context of Kitchener's prestige at the time.

When Pompey concluded – correctly – that the proposed attack at Fromelles would prove a disaster, he tried to persuade his superiors to cancel it; when this attempt did not succeed, he tried to keep Tom out of the battle because he was so precious to Australia's future. But Tom ended up participating at Fromelles, and he was killed.

A big focus of the book is the dual impact of the loss of these special Australians – that they were a big loss to Australia as well as to their families – and this is certainly the case with Tom Elliott.

The upshot within his family was catastrophic. His mother, Mary, could not accept Tom's death. The mixed messages that she received were influential. First she was told that he had been wounded, then that he was missing, and later that he had been killed. She kept pressing the authorities for clarification: "it is an awful thing to leave a mother in doubt [*sic*]", "the suspense is dreadful", she told them. She resorted to alcohol to help her cope, and then began to have delusions about Tom. Eventually she was placed in an asylum for the insane. She died there of Spanish Flu in mid-1919.

Edward Larkin

Edward Larkin played rugby for Australia in 1903. Later he became the key figure in the rise to prominence of the breakaway code of Rugby League, which became the leading winter sport in Sydney and beyond while Larkin was running it.

In 1913, Ted Larkin pulled off an upset at the New South Wales state election by winning the seat of Willoughby as the Labor candidate, and he proceeded to make a highly impressive start in parliament. Political pundits predicted a big future for him, and some were even seeing him already as a future premier.

But then the Great War began. Larkin enlisted in the first rush, and he died in the first rush on the original Anzac Day. He left a grieving widow and two little boys.

Larkin was particularly devoted to his family and not particularly devoted to the military. He had attained prominence and success through determination and toil. Bigger and better things were not far away. All this Larkin relinquished, reluctantly, with no illusions, because he conceived it as his duty, by virtue of his prominence, to set an example for footballers and other sportsmen to follow.

Ted Larkin is commemorated in a plaque on the wall of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly. It was unveiled at a moving ceremony in November 1915.

George Challis

George Challis was a brilliant Australian Rules footballer. He was recruited from Tasmania by Carlton, and played four splendid seasons with the Blues before

he went away to war and became another very special Australian to be killed at Fromelles.

My biography of Challis covers his upbringing and education at Cleveland and then Launceston; how he came to be recruited by Carlton; how he became a revered star for the Blues; how the way the game was played at that time differed from today; how the fierce rivalries between Carlton and Collingwood, and between Carlton and Essendon, which are so alive and well today, were initiated in the era just before World War I; and how Challis's death was lamented by Tasmanians and Carltonians for decades afterwards.

Challis's most dazzling performance in his first Victorian Football League season, 1912, was against Carlton's bitter rivals from Essendon. The big crowd was captivated by his pace and grace. The typical Carlton supporter of that era was described as barracking with "a voice like that of a man who has swallowed the claw of his crayfish in the boozers' express at midnight", and they were ecstatic on that memorable day, when a reporter wrote this about Challis: "He played like a champion against Essendon, pulled himself out of tight corners, swung the ball into position, measuring his kicks almost to the inch. He was superb, and if there was a cup for the best player on the ground, Challis would have won the chalice."

Carew Reynell

Carew Reynell began managing his family's winery at Reynella in South Australia when he was only 19, and used the latest scientific techniques to good effect. A visionary vigneron, he was a highly successful one, and a widely admired community leader as well. He became commander of a light horse regiment in the AIF, and was killed leading it into action at Gallipoli.

Wilfred and Gresley Harper and Phipps Turnbull

Wilfred Harper was a popular and successful farmer in Western Australia. Although little-known today, as is the case with all the men whose extended biographies have been retrieved in this book, his death – especially the manner of it – in the charge at the Nek became the inspiration decades later for the well-known film *Gallipoli*.

Wilfred had a notable brother in the 10th Light Horse, Gresley Harper. He was also killed in the charge at the Nek. Gres Harper, a barrister with a vivid personality, had a brilliant career ahead of him in the law and/or politics.

Phipps Turnbull, another member of the 10th Light Horse with exceptional promise, was also killed in the charge at the Nek. After a brilliant scholastic and sporting career, he was awarded a Rhodes scholarship, and became the fourth Rhodes scholar from Western Australia. He proceeded to Oxford University, and emerged with an outstanding degree. In his year, 60 candidates attained final honours in jurisprudence, but only three of them were awarded first-class honours: Turnbull was among the three – an exceptional accomplishment.

Phipps combined widely admired character and personality with academic attainments of the highest distinction. He qualified as a lawyer in England before returning to Western Australia, where he joined a leading Perth firm of solicitors and became prominent in a variety of sporting and administrative spheres as a player and an office-bearer. A shining future for Phipps Turnbull in the law and/or politics was a certainty.

I found that Phipps Turnbull knew the Harpers and they had a quite a bit in common. So I decided to combine the stories of the three of them into a single chapter, which covers not only these three interwoven biographies but also a collective account of how the charge at the Nek devastated Western Australia.

Conclusion

During the years I was researching and writing this book I was asked, as historians — indeed, all writers — often are, what project I was working on. When I explained what this book was about, I was struck by the reaction. The idea of the book seemed to strike a strongly favourable response, much more so than I've experienced with any of my previous books when I was asked that question and answered it.

Naturally I hope that the execution of the task has lived up to the potential of the idea. Retrieving these forgotten lives has been an exacting research challenge. I think they are strong stories, but I am hopelessly biased so what I think about that does not matter. What does matter to me is this: now that these men and their stories have been retrieved, they should not be forgotten again.

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McMullin, Ross (2012). *Farewell, dear people: biographies of Australia's lost generation* (Scribe Publications: Brunswick, Victoria)

The Author: Dr Ross McMullin is a historian and biographer. His acclaimed book about a celebrated Australian commander in World War I, *Pompey Elliott*, won awards for biography and literature. Another biography, *Will Dyson: Australia's Radical Genius*, was highly commended by the judges of the National Biography Award. Dr McMullin also wrote the commissioned ALP centenary history, *The Light on the Hill*. He combined politics and biography in *So Monstrous a Travesty: Chris Watson and the World's First National Labour Government*. Chapters by him have been published in numerous multi-authored books, most recently *Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War*, and he has contributed articles to a wide variety of newspapers and periodicals. *Farewell, Dear People* is his latest book. [Photo of Dr McMullin: Colonel J. M. Hutcheson, MC]