AUSTRALIAN WORLD WAR I POETRY: A PROCESS OF MATURATION

Nearly every Australian community, large or small, rural or urban, has its monument to the Great War. The loss of young men was tragic, and for a country which would take another generation to reach 10,000,000 people, the results were profound—women widowed or spinstered, industry stagnated, children not born. The simple tombstone to Arthur Stephens in the tiny country graveyard of Ringarooma, Tasmania, is the unadorned folk expression of a family's grief:

> Somewhere in France you are sleeping, Arthur,
> In a grave we may never see,
> May some tender hand in that distant land,
> Lay a flower on your grave for me.

Arthur, like almost 1,000,000 other men, was killed during the battles of the Somme. He probably died at Tyne Cot, in Belgium. His name is recorded in the National War Museum, Canberra, and on the Commemorative Wall in Ypres; but his grave is one of the tens of thousands marked 'Unknown.' The simple epitaph in Tasmania is a rare poetic expression of the time. Despite the horrors, despite the hardships, despite the hurts, there is surprisingly little Australian poetry which arises directly from World War I.

In 1918, Australia was an adolescent nation: young, self-conscious, uncertain, isolated. The country was in transition between the frontier era with its macho obsessions and a new era of growing industrialization and urbanization; yet the hardships of the outback, the heroism of the stockrider, the daring of the bushranger, and the martyrdom of the convict were still strong elements in the country's self-view. Transportation, which ended in 1854, was still fresh in the collective memory, while the conflicting attitudes of pride in hardships endured and conquered, and hostility towards the perpetrators of those hardships were (and still are) fundamental to national thought. Like the immature country that it was (Federation and Self Government had been attained in 1901—a mere seventeen years prior to the outbreak of war), the emotional climate was a tug-of-war between a fierce pride in new-found nationhood and a sullen feeling of a national inferiority. The umbilical cord with Britain had been severed, yet both the need for and the resentment of 'Mother England' remained.

In 1918, Australian poetic expression was still in its infancy. The first white settlement had taken place only 130 years earlier, and the convict system was class selective. The new 'immigrants' were largely Britain's unwanted 'criminal class'—poor working class, uneducated, and often illiterate. Energies were consumed by the

need to survive the system; then to scrape an existence out of an unfamiliar — and frequently hostile— environment. Little time was left for the writing of poetry, if, indeed, the skill were there. The early expression was in the form of the spoken ballad or lament, much of which is lost to the ashes of the campfires around which they were sung.

In their quest for identity, the published writers of the colonial (and post-colonial) era looked to the untapped imagery of the Australian bush—its silence, its emptiness, its solitude. This was the scroll on which they were to write—a "Chaos" that would become "creation" (Bernard O'Dowd, "The Bush", 1912). Yet there was uncertainty concerning the nature of the new land. Was it a place where "the West/in halcyon calm rebuilds her nest," or "but a mere Will o' the Wisp in marshy quest" (O'Dowd, "Australia")?

Those who inhabited the world of the outback were frequently seen as victims of time and place, but they were heroes (and almost invariably masculine ones). Sometimes they were unremarkable and undeserving, like Middleton's opinionless and idea-less rouseabout (Henry Lawson, 1867-1922, "Middleton's Rouseabout"). They gained stature, not so much from their inherent heroic qualities, but from their juxtaposition with flood, fire, and famine. Their endurance of adversity (and sometimes their submission) was often seasoned with a rough bush humour; running short of "tucker an' terbaccer" was a hardship (Lawson, "The Song of Old Joe Swallow"). The epitome of the colonial bush hero was the man who, with "badge of gameness in his bright and fiery eye" and with "flintstones flying," could singlehandedly bring in the entire band of wild bush horses ('Banjo' Paterson, 1864-1941, "The Man From Snowy River"). These were simple heroes, heroes whose identities had not been thoroughly established—heroes who ushered in the outbreak of World War I.

Australian involvement in the war was legally (though not socially) voluntary; the response was overwhelming as men flocked to enlist. Lingering ideas of republicanism were submerged beneath the tide of popular opinion in favour of Great Britain. Two underlying motives were at work: the motive of the young adult eager to prove nationhood through a show of patriotic solidarity and the motive of the child in simple need of parental recognition. True to the bush tradition, the Australian troops were amateurs and proud of it: this was their badge of identity. They staked their reputation upon their inherent lawlessness and contempt for authority, and, as they believed, their unmatched ingenuity and courage. Despite the perceived threat to its territory, Australia was never seriously under attack; yet the flood of enlistments continued in quest of national identity and recognition. Of the 8,000 Australians who lost their lives during the ill-conceived Gallipoli campaign, John Masefield said: "They walked and looked like kings in the old poems." Of the men who died in France, Arthur Stephen's epitaph is a wistful reminder.

Typical of the patriotic hysteria and anti-German sentiment of the time was Christopher Brennan's 1914-18 verse which was published later under the title Chang of Doom . As noted Australian poet, Judith Wright, says: "Both his [Brennan's] intellectual and emotional balance seem to have vanished in the gale of hatred that overcame him ... no abuse was strong enough to express his feeling, and even for the time, the violence of his emotion must have seemed intemperate" (Judith Wright, "Australian Poetry to 1920," The Literature of Australia, ed. Geoffrey Dutton [Ringwood: Penguin, 1985], pp. 85-86). As Wright observes, even after the Armistice Brennan was still shouting for slaughter:

For the sword and rope are hungry, axe and block
Demand their grim repast ...

In contrast to Brennan's vitriolic verse is "Furnley Maurice's" (Frank Wilmot 1881-1942) overtly pacifist plea for the return of the young volunteers and for the forgiveness of nations.

Then call Thou home the bold, young boys again,
Who front a ruthless and bewildering fate;
Call home the young who suffer senseless pain,
And leave the war to those who taught them hate.

("To God: From the Warring Nations," 1916)

Maurice was one of the few who doubted the value of so much self-sacrifice. From his bookstore in Melbourne, he was a voice of sanity, and at a time of poetic poverty, he was one of the heralds of Australia's poetic "coming of age." In the poem "Apples in the Moon" (published posthumously), Maurice contrasts the gentleness of home with the brutality of the front. His "apples" are symbolic of Tasmania (the "Apple Isle"), the quietest, smallest, and most removed of the Australian states. Yet the "shroud" of war reaches "down Lenah Valley track;" and the "bunched apples" rot. The final couplet is an appeal for future isolation:

We must be blinder, lad, when apples glow,
Eyes are only to weep with now.

("Apples in the Moon," Poems, 1944)

His poetry lacks the immediacy of Graves and Owen, but it is one of the few Australian expressions of compassion.

Vance Palmer's poem "The Farmer Remembers the Somme" comes from his active service with the AIF. However, it is a retrospective poem. The farmer's mind is haunted by memories of the battlefield;

Will they never fade or pass
The mud, the misty figures endlessly coming
In file through the foul morass,
And the grey flood-water lipping the reeds and grass,
And the steel wings drumming.

Yet, at home "there's talk and quiet laughter." The contrast between the simplicity of things familiar and the persistent images of the past is strengthened through understatement and the absence of sentimentality:

I have returned to these:
The farm and the kindly Bush, and the young calves lowing;
But all that my mind sees
Is a quaking bog in a mist—stark, snapped trees,
And the dark Somme flowing.

("The Camp," 1920)

Perhaps the most graphic and immediate portrayal of life in the trenches is Leon Gellert's "These Men." Here, too, bald understatement is central to the imagery, but the effect is more stark. The world, both physical and human, is infected with a grim, sardonic humour:

Men moving in a trench, in the clear moon,
Whetting their steel within the crumbling earth;
Men, moving in a trench 'neath a new moon
That smiles with a slit mouth and has no mirth;
Men moving in a trench in the grey morn,
Lifting bodies on their clotted frames;
Men with narrow mouths carved in scorn
That twist and fumble strangely at dead names.

("These Men")

Gellert volunteered for the First AIF at the age of twenty-two. His active service on the Western Front undoubtedly gave him the material for his collection, Songs of a Campaign, from which "These Men" is taken. From the same publication comes "Before Action." In puzzled bewilderment, Gellert recalls the powerlessness and mute obedience of men at the front:

I wondered why I always felt so cold.
I wondered why the orders seemed so slow,
So slow to come, so whisperingly told,
So whisperingly low.

I wondered if my packing straps were tight,
And wondered why I wondered. Sound went wild ...
An order came ... I ran into the night,
Wondering why I smiled.

("Before Action")

ANZAC Day (April 26) is Australia's national day. It is the celebration of a defeat: the defeat of the Allied Forces at Gallipoli. But, according to popular persuasion, it is also the celebration of the nation's coming of age. Be that as it may, out of the war experience (and despite the paucity of the poetic output) comes the ratification of the national identity. The work of Maurice, Palmer, and Gellert placed Australian poetry on the brink of maturity, a process that would continue for some thirty more years. Kenneth Slessor's lament to the El Alamein campaign of World War II is a continuation of that process:

Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
The convoys of dead sailors come;
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,
But morning rolls them in the foam.

Between the sobbing and clubbing of the gunfire
Someone, it seems, has time for this,
To pluck them from the shallows and bury them in burrows
And tread the sand upon their nakedness;

And each cross, the driven stake of tidewood,
Bears the signature of men,
Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered pity,
The words choke as they begin —

'Unknown Seaman' — the ghostly pencil
Wavers and fades, the purple drips,
The breath of the wet season has washed their inscriptions
As blue as drowned men's lips,

Dead men gone in the same landfall,
Whether as enemies they fought,
Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together,
Enlisted on the other front.

("Beach Burial," Poems, 1957)

The examination of Australia's involvement in a 'foreign war' and the search for an Australian identity continue in Alan Seymour's stage play, The One Day of the Year (1962). The compassion and realism of the 1981 movie Gallipoli is a culmination of that process. Australian literature — and its poetry — has come of age.

Joan Dehle Emberg
University of Maryland
European Division

Bibliography

Dutton, Geoffrey (ed). The Literature of Australia. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1985.

Harris, Alexander (?). Settlers and Convicts. (Foreword by Manning Clark). Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1986.

Heseltine, Harry (ed). The Penguin Book of Australian Verse. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1984.

Hughes, Robert. The Fatal Shore. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986.