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Abstract
Late in August 1916, with 'Fannry Durack' diving from the steeple of the Albert CathedraJI and Pozieres reduced to rubble, Will Dyson applied to join the Australians on the Western Front. This decision to go to France to, as he explained, 'interpret in a series of drawings for national preservation, the sentiments and special Australian characteristics of our Army? was, perhaps, stimulated by the emotional reception given to the Anzacs when they marched in London on 25 April 1916. But Dyson's nationalist feelings -a complex mixture of anxiety and pride - had been deepening since news began to filter back to England of the Gallipoli Campaign, and as the Australian Fifth D1vision prepared to enter the war. It was not until December, however, that Dyson, now a lieutenant, landed in France and began his war drawings. !his was not the
Will Dyson, *Stepping stones to higher things*
Late in August 1916, with ‘Fanny Durack’ diving from the steeple of the Albert Cathedral¹ and Pozières reduced to rubble, Will Dyson applied to join the Australians on the Western Front. This decision to go to France to, as he explained, ‘interpret in a series of drawings for national preservation, the sentiments and special Australian characteristics of our Army’,² was, perhaps, stimulated by the emotional reception given to the Anzacs when they marched in London on 25 April 1916. But Dyson’s nationalist feelings – a complex mixture of anxiety and pride – had been deepening since news began to filter back to England of the Gallipoli Campaign, and as the Australian Fifth Division prepared to enter the war. It was not until December, however, that Dyson, now a lieutenant, landed in France and began his war drawings.

This was not the beginning of Dyson’s involvement with the war. He had been drawing vigorous pacifist and anti-Capital cartoons for the Daily Herald prior to the war but, after the outbreak, there was a steady and discernible shift in his attitude to a strong anti-German position in which, while he could not support conscription, he maintained that it was the Allies’ duty to oppose German militarism and imperialism. As he wrote in a letter to the editor of the now Weekly Herald, in May 1915,

I would answer the question [‘Is war so glorious?’] by saying that, as wars and their origins go, our share in this war is infinitely more ‘glorious’ than prophesying Socialists ever supposed it was going to be.³

Dyson’s 1914 cartoons of arms manufacturers, dealers and militarists and his 1915 Kultur cartoons indicated that he held no illusions about the horror of war – he never failed to oppose militarism and loathe war – but as the struggle deepened he felt compelled, as an Australian, to witness and record it. (See p. 100)

His war drawings, however, signal a further alteration in his response to the war. The anti-German propaganda gives way to an
encompassing sympathy for all rank and file soldiers involved in the war. And he replaces the cartoon with realistic drawings: militant irony for a steadily diminishing satiric mode which, in gentler but more searching ironies, foregrounds the human, as distinct from the grotesque or the heroic. Dyson asks for a direct confrontation with the human tragedy of war.

Arguably, one of the most poignant of his war sketches is the ironically titled ‘The Wine of Victory’, which is surely a companion piece to ‘Coming out on the Somme’, ‘Coming out at Hill 60’ and ‘Down from the Ridge’. ‘The Wine of Victory’ depicts a mass of wounded Germans trailing into the extreme foreground of the picture where three figures loom enormous and broken. They limp into our eyes, singular and yet, the drawing insists, simply three of many. To the left and rear of this group is another almost identical group, and behind them others, and more, until the straggling troops become a grey smudge blurring the horizon. We cannot ignore the human cost; and in this statement of defeat there can be no celebration of victory. As Dyson puts it in his prose commentary for ‘Coming out at Hill 60’:

They come out of endless holes and go into endless holes like lonely ants bent on some ant-like service ... Ant-like in the distance, they loom upon a nearer vision things elemental and Homeric, big with destiny. They are merely soldiers at the base, perhaps shopmen at Brisbane [we might add Dresden], but
Will Dyson, *Coming out on the Somme*

they are things of mystery in the line. I feel that here all soldiers of all ranks tend to have the baffling profundity of the peasant, that sense of the nearness to the beginning of things which makes the artist see in the peasant the simple, unsolvable mystery of life reduced to its least common multiple – man shorn of all his vast cultures, which are not mysterious, and left simple man, which is.

Dyson’s guild socialism of the pre-war years never left him. His Australians are not so much ‘soldiers of the king’, as essential humans moving and acting, as he puts it, with ‘the baffling profundity of the peasant’. And the heroic values that he notices in *Australia at War* are ‘dull, undecorative’, seen in endurance, stoic courage, and simple dignity; in the ability to withstand boredom, exhaustion, discomfort and filth. The moments he privileges are the ordinary and the commonplace. They speak of community and loss: meal times, stretcher-bearers, a cook lounging in a doorway, men asleep, passing a bottle, engraving a cross, resting on a shovel, coming out of the line in silent, stunned groups, exhausted. The grandeur is in the ability of the human spirit to endure: there is no relish.

Sixty-five of Dyson’s drawings from the Front were shown in an exhibition at Leicester Gardens on 5 January 1918 and twenty of them, including his dedicatory poem which was printed in the exhibition catalogue, were reproduced in *Australia at War*. As far as Australian
DEDICATION

TO THE MEN OF THE A.I.F.

Will Dyson, To the Men of the A.I.F.
responses to the war are concerned, these drawings and his prose commentaries remain among our most moving and profound: in their simplicity of line and phrasing Dyson touches the essential complexity of the war. Indeed, his poem, 'To the Men of the A.I.F.', is one of the most ignored Australian poems produced during the War.5 (See p. 104)

Far from the tone of popularizing patriotic poems, 'To the Men of the A.I.F.' joins Leon Gellert's earnest attempts to find a language for war. This language is not unreservedly achieved perhaps – 'Death' needs no personification when it is so constant and close, and 'bandying with Death' and 'pity moving roundness of the child' are clumsy – but it is a moving poem which celebrates the humanity of the troops, while acknowledging the inhumanity and reversion to a Satanic primal dark in which they are implicated. Recognizing this tone, in his note to the drawings, Dyson apologizes in his Artist's Note for their 'winter note':

They are not primarily cheerful – but it is open to doubt whether we are behaving generously in demanding that the soldier who is saving the world for us should provide us with a fund of light entertainment while doing it.

The drawings are not entirely without humour but, as he says in his poem, what he is trying to expose and to show to a wider audience is not that superficial picture of the soldier which may see him as wolf, mule, murderous hawk, or exhausted horse – that inhumanity thrust upon him – but, rather, he is probing 'the silent places of the soul' of both the public hero who might 'save the world' and the private gesture, no less heroic in this man's pantheon of behaviour, which will 'succour poor old bloody Bill'. And that 'bloody' is so accurate. As are the two lines at the poem's fulcrum: those evasive 'ribald jests that half convince the blind / It does not wholly anguish you to die'. In one sweep the poem makes contact with the tone of the major English war poets, while retaining an ironic mode common in Australian writing. He may be a satirist, then, and a caricaturist but (and this, of course, is no contradiction) his work is fundamentally serious, his subject, as it was for Gellert6 or Owen, is the pity of war. Dyson is interpreting the war, using drawings and brief prose commentaries which, unlike so many of the early Australian narratives, are pointed and evocative. And so, the stew which is brought up from the wagon lines was not simply, 'real stew with fresh meat'. It was, says Dyson, 'a triumph of the art, something to send the boys from the supports into the line if not singing the merry songs of the imaginative press at least with some of the content of the gorged python' (p. 14) It was also a 'hope-giving potion, ... the last evidence of the existence on earth of any civilization or culture that the battalion will know for some days' (p. 14). Besides, he comments, sliding wryly away from questions of 'civilization' and 'culture' once he has inserted them into the text, 'To have fluked a good meal before you go [and he means this in the ultimate sense] is to
have cheated death to the extent of having bagged a good human satisfaction under his chagrined nose’ (p. 14). One of Dyson’s most famous drawings ‘A Voice from Anzac’ is of two Anzacs with what seem to be halos of light shimmering above them’ but there is nothing like this in *Australia at War*. The closest he comes to a transcendent light is the halo from a candle lighting up the Battery in order that two men, back from the forward Observation Post, can set into their Hurley’s whisky. Dyson is interested in the whisky, not the light. This need for a drink, he explains, is something that:

bears no relationship to anything you and I could ever know in a nicely regulated civilian life. It is of a world which the temperance die-hard has never envisaged, and in which the drink does nothing more criminal than make a man more stoical of conditions that in themselves are cruel enough to justify him in committing the seven cardinal sins if that would procure alleviation of those conditions. (p. 16)

The very essence of the drawings and the prose passages is Dyson’s compassion, sympathy and humility. Of a boy he sketched sleeping the sleep of the spent, he writes:

He looked like a hundred others one has seen – like many in the company that were lining the corridors, but that his abandonment was greater – he was emphatically lost, lost like a child, and evoking some of the pity that goes to a child, he looks so very young – that quality which here has power to touch the heart of older men in the strongest way. To see going into the line boys whose ingenuous faces recall something of your own boyhood – something of someone you stole fruit with, or fought with or wagged it with through long hot Australian afternoons – to see them in this bloody game and to feel that their mother’s milk is not yet dry upon their mouths. (p. 18)

He also understands the fatalist; perhaps has a head start in coming to terms with him because of what he knows about the bushman, spiritual ancestor to his fatalist. He locates in these men a ‘hardihood that persists through it all ... a sort of savage irritation with the grossly incalculable element in the mischance of death’ (p. 44). There is a poignant absurdity about many of their actions, but not about the men themselves. He turns to one particular group,

who drift out of nowhere, asking the whereabouts of the 27th, or the 19th, or the 6th, and who drift on into nowhere, and no doubt ultimately find what they seek – no doubt through the exercise of a native scepticism regarding what is told them ... No doubt they will find it [their battalion] for all things are ultimately found in the army, through the Chinese patience with which life has imbued all – a patient and an oriental sense of the unimportance of time bared by countless experiences which tells you that however long it takes you to get there you will one day or one year get there without disaster, and to hurry it unduly is bad in philosophy and unavailing in fact.

They come, these strays, from leave, from all those temporary detachments from their units, from hospital, from rest camps, and they live on the country,
Will Dyson, A Voice From Anzac, "Funny thing Bill - I keep thinking I hear men marching!"
Will Dyson, *Labour Battalion Man*
trust no doubt to the freemasonry, the trades' unionism of the fighting man, the large confederation – the offensive and defensive alliance of the lance-privates. (p. 24)

As this passage suggests, to be serious is not to preclude humour. His two men looking for their battalion, linked in the confederacy of 'lance-privates', who drift out of and on to 'nowhere' are depicted moving over France through villages, and over what were villages – over duck boards and shell holes with that grousing league-devouring indifference to all things made which is bared by a life two-thirds of the activity of which is moving from a place you don't want to be in to a place you don't want to go to' (p. 24). The humour is gentle, laconic, and wise, relying upon nuance. As he suggests in his prose commentary on 'Group', he distinguishes two audiences, two distinct responses. The one, 'proper and wise', arises from the shared experiences of the line; the other, tinged with pity – the observer's emotion – is, in Dyson's words, 'scarcely seemly'; is almost voyeuristic. Above the sleeping youth in 'Dead Beat', who could be propping in some slum, is 'Wardour Street', but this is not Soho. In, 'In the Tunnel – Hill 60', a group of men, besieged by exhaustion and an aching misery, recline beneath 'Vine Street': but any link with London Society is purely ironic for these men 'from the forge, the factory and the mine' (p. 42). In each case the humour is disconcerting. We get the joke but the drawings subvert any easy response: there is no warming laughter, rather the wish, perhaps, that we have not been privy to these private places of the soul.

Dyson's 'Labour Battalion Man', who is an abjectly miserable and incongruous figure against the grey landscape of war, takes the next step and becomes pungently ironic as the artist tightens the connection between a war-time and civilian plight: 'I am sometimes solaced by the feeling that their miseries are not very much grosser than those in which a grateful country found them when war made her cognisant of their civic existence' (p. 32). Once again, Dyson's peace-time and war work are knotted together; he wants us to recognize that for many the hardships of war are merely an extension of peace-time conditions with, as G. K. Chesterton points out in his introduction to Australia at War, 'less hope of an outlet on victory'.

If, in drawings such as these, Dyson points towards the seeming commonplace of war, in others he draws out its absolute other-worldliness. I have in mind his sombre and moving 'Coming out on the Somme'. There is a face on the right hand upper corner that stops our eye and glosses the whole. He is looking back (out of the picture) from where he has come, his eye is piercing, his face anxious and drawn. We can only guess what he's looking at: a mate, some part of his inner being he's left behind, the unbelievable carnage? The other shapes seem to huddle together, defined only by the faces that speak of
where they have been. Dyson writes:

They come back, these pioneers of the liberties of the world, with them still the eternal mystery of no-man’s land, men walking in their sleep ... Young men bearded like unshorn Andalusians, and garbed like ragged adventurers of another age ... companions of a new Marco Polo returned from gazing on strange and terrible lands. (p. 30)

Having recently visited Polygon Wood on a glorious October day, the sun’s rays playing through the trees, and watched children picnicking, I turn to Dyson’s ‘Back to the Wagon Lines after Polygon Wood’ once more stunned by the chaos and the effect on the human by war. Not merely the physical effect; we see that in all its graphic horror, and perhaps can respond to it, but its psychological effect. This lies at the heart of Dyson’s art. This drawing reveals not just exhaustion but despair and a loss which is almost indescribable; he can only catch it in language through negatives; his men ‘for the while [are] content with the negative joys of being merely out of it’.

It is now that are told stories that will perhaps never be told again, for on his return from the line slowly but surely the civilian habit of mind reasserts itself, standards that are based on the sanctity of human life and which are at variance with the grim necessities of the hop-over, assume their normal control. (p. 34)

Briefly, speaking a language known only to those who have been initiated into this other world, these men seem to speak in whispers; the rest is silence, as the knowledge – never lost – is overlayed by the veneer of sociability. Dyson is taking us into the realm of silence; as an artist he is trying to realize the black space that subverts articulation; wants to capture, in drawings such as ‘Group’, ‘Down from the Ridge’, ‘Coming out at Hill 60’, ‘Coming out on the Somme’, and ‘Polygon Wood’, that moment before the public voice takes over. The British artist Paul Nash, asks implicitly, how do you give form to this space?

[No pen, or drawing, can convey this country ... no glimmer of God’s hand is seen anywhere ... the shells never cease ... annihilating, maiming, maddening, they plunge into the grave which is this land; one huge grave, and cast up on it the poor dead. It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless.]

This godlessness is everywhere in the vigorous anti-transcendence of these drawings; sustenance comes from a dixie of ‘real stew with fresh meat’ (p. 24), from a swig of Hurley’s whisky; love finds its expression in the bustling concern of the quartermaster or in the wisdom of cooks who know ‘that love and kindness are best expressed in the primitive world by food’ (p. 34); the hands that reach out, and touch, and are layed upon others are distinctly human and speak of a common suffering. The traditional symbols are denied. The heavens, bleak and
Will Dyson, *Reporting at the Battery*
Will Dyson, *The Wild Colonial Boy: Sooner than dwell in slavery bowed down by iron chains*
furious above the world-weary figures in ‘Group’ offer no signs to the
lost traveller in ‘Looking for the Battalion’ or the solitary ‘Labour
Battalion Man’. For the most part the heavens are neutral, mute. The
radiant light in ‘The Mate’ foregrounds the expression of human love
as the digger inscribes a message on a wooden cross for a dead mate.
That is, the light turns us back to the human loss – now marks on
wood – and comradeship, and away from the comforts of a vision of
eternal life. Two drawings not in *Australia at War* underline most
acutely this seeming disappearance of God: in one, a soldier is
gathering wood for a fire, a large plank over his shoulder forms, to the
eye looking at the drawing, a cross with a shattered stump behind him.
But, at best, this is a tilted cross. This man’s peace will come from the
fuel he has collected. In another, ‘The Wild Colonial Boy’, a dead
Anzac lies beneath a thunderous sky that offers no solace and a light
outlining the body offers no image of deliverance; it simply enables us
to see the cost of war.

In his dedicatory poem, Dyson projects an image of the troops as
‘cave men rough-hewn of the mud, / Housed in a world made primal
again’, and in his prose pieces he kneads away at this image of men
returning to a primal, satanic nether-world of mud and slush. At times
this is explicit (see, ‘Back to the Wagon Lines’, or ‘Outside the Pill
Box’ where, Dyson suggests can be seen ‘a landscape the like of which man
has never gazed upon since early chaos brooded over all’), at other
times it is there in an allusion: it lies in the ‘downward suck of the
Somme mud’ in ‘Stretcher-bearers near Martinpuich’ and in the
description of them moving ‘slow and terribly sure through and over
everything, like things that have got neither eyes to see terrible things
nor ears to heed them’ (p. 38). They are like creatures adapted to a
new, ‘liquescent world’ in some kind of primal reversion which has no
need of eyes or ears. As is suggested by his constant turning in prose
to metaphor and simile, Dyson’s sketches are multi-layered. In this
sense, ‘Stretcher-bearers’ is also about heroism, and gestures towards
what goes on in ‘the privacy of the soul’.

The fountains that sprout roaring at their feet fall back to the earth in a lace-
work of fragments – the smoke clears and they, momentarily obscured, are
again moving on as they were moving on before: a piece of mechanism
guiltless of the weaknesses of weak flesh, one might say. But to say this is to
rob their heroism of its due – of the credit that goes to inclinations conquered
and panics subdued down in the privacy of the soul. It is to make their
heroism look like a thing they find easy ... These men and all the men
precipitated into the liqueous world of the line are not heroes from choice –
they are heroes because someone has got to be heroic. It is to add insult to
injury of this world war to say that the men fighting it find it agreeable or go
into it with light hearts. (p. 38)

He returns to this theme again in ‘In the Tunnel – Hill 60’ where he
writes of a fatigue ('actual brutish and insensate') which is a 'Dull, undecorative heroism':

But the poor fabric of military glory is woven of such – of trials that seem to break down the proud partitions which separate our lot from that of the animals ... These heroes of ours, alas, are unsupported by a helpful consciousness of their heroism. That joy is only for the onlooker. The tragic fact is that the incomparable heroisms of this winter warfare bring no compensations to the heroes – no element of dramatic exhaltation in the performance of them. They are less dramatic acts than long states of siege with exhaustion as the besieger. (p. 42)

Dyson is weaving his themes into each other, he cannot in fact write of or depict the war without speaking of its primitivism, its heroism and its overall unheroic nature compared to any conventional interpretations of heroic battle. In writing of 'Coming out at Hill 60', he works away again at the essential behaviour he is trying to convey.

Fatigue at its worst is to the most articulate of our generation the least familiar of humanity's woes, but here in this world it is about us again with the torturing insistence of the troglodyte past – one of the commonplaces of the Stone Age with which war and the wonders of science have familiarised us ... The brutish weariness of our earliest hairy forbear, trembling in the savage morasses of an unfamiliar planet, is the daily lot of men like these – shopmen, men from the forge and factory and mine – heirs to all the amenities of the ages. It is part of the supremacy in suffering of the inarticulate infantry. Fatigue, actual brutish and insensate, is borne by them to a pitch at which mules might be heart-broken. (p. 42)

We are all, we who come later and dip into diaries and letters and read these narratives and poems, trying to understand that incredible War. We are, as Dyson said of himself, 'timid peepers into forbidden places, who look and go, who keep [a] virginal wonderment at what are the commonplaces of the trenches' (p. 50). We are in awe of these men, their 'statuesque quietism ... in places of risk and great events' disturbs us, and although we may detest war, they draw our sympathy, our compassion. At the same time the subtext of these drawings and the prose pieces is war's soul-destroying absurdity, its profound human damage.

NOTES

1. The Australians nicknamed the damaged statue of the Virgin, leaning like a diver from the Albert Cathedral, 'Fanny Durack', after the Australian diver who had won a gold medal in the 1912 Olympics.
2. Letter from Dyson to the Official Secretary, Commonwealth of Australia, 23 August and 12 September 1916: cited by Ross McMullin, Will Dyson: Cartoonist, Etcher, and Australia's Finest War Artist (Sydney: Angus &
Robertson, 1984), p. 126. I am in debt to Ross McMullin for details of Dyson’s crossing to France.


4. These three drawings are in Dyson’s, Australia at War: A Winter Record (London: Cecil Palmer and Hayward, 1918). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

5. It is not included in either J. T. Laird’s, Other Banners (Canberra: Australian War Memorial and the Government Printing Office,1971) or Peter Pierce and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Clubbing of the Gunfire (Melbourne: MUP,1984).

6. For readings of Leon Gellert’s war verse, see Bruce Clunies Ross, ‘Silent Heroes’, in this collection; and James Wieland, ‘Leon Gellert’s, Songs of a Campaign: reading an unread poem’, Southerly, 52, 2 (1992), pp. 82-98.

7. This drawing was ‘A Voice from Anzac’ which appeared in the Herald (Melbourne) on Anzac Day, 1927. One Anzac is saying to the other, ‘Funny thing, Bill – I keep thinking I hear men marching’.

8. ‘The passion of soldiers for amusing drawings of the front is a different thing to the civilians’ demand for them’. Dyson, op.cit., p. 22.

9. His cook, a classic drawing that introduces the 1917 Christmas Book, From the Australian Front (London: Cassell, 1917), transporting the bush into the war and standing not for culinary delights but a belligerent democracy, takes the humour in yet another direction.


Will Dyson, Gathering Fuel, Delville Wood