

1980

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Recommended Citation

Du Fresne, Yvonne, Armistice Day, *Kunapipi*, 2(1), 1980.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol2/iss1/11>

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Abstract

From the nursery warmth of Miss Martin's infant room, tender as young geraniums flowering behind glass, we spied on the senior school. In the mornings there was an austere silence about that red-brick building. Sometimes a figure of a big boy or girl sped out of a door and marched, frowning responsibly, in the direction of the school toilets, hidden behind the macrocarpa hedge.

YVONNE DU FRESNE

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From the nursery warmth of Miss Martin's infant room, tender as young geraniums flowering behind glass, we spied on the senior school. In the mornings there was an austere silence about that red-brick building. Sometimes a figure of a big boy or girl sped out of a door and marched, frowning responsibly, in the direction of the school toilets, hidden behind the macrocarpa hedge. After a discreet interval, they marched back

again. Sometimes a dull roar came out of the windows of Standard Five and Six.

'Twice twelve are twenty-four,

Thrice twelve are thirty-six!'

'Thrice!' We marvelled at that word.

And we heard —

'London is the capital of England! King George the *Fifth* is the King of Great Britain...'

They were terribly keen on kings in that building. And on war.

In the afternoons we watched the seniors at their war games. They came out in a long black line, swinging their arms, scowling, and marched all over the tennis court. By the flag-pole stood the Headmaster, waiting for the lines to come to a dead stop in front of him. Miss Martin's children anxiously sucked their thumbs at the sight of that Headmaster. He was coloured grey — grey suit, grey face, grey hair and grey teeth. We hid behind bushes when we saw him coming, pointing imperiously. We watched the senior children darting about, stuffing paper bags into rubbish tins, or tearing out weeds with dreadful obsequious smiles. When we came face to face with him, we skittered past like ghosts, with our eyes half closed, so that he could not see us.

Our room was different from the rest of that school. It was always a sea of paste, newspaper, raffia, infant scissors, paste-encrusted brushes and plasticine. And our room was swayed by the latest ideas from the *Teacher's Monthly Guide*. It came all the way from England to be collected by Miss Martin from the Fancy Goods and Stationery Shop in the settlement. We clustered around her when she opened it, and gazed at those British girls and boys, calm, pale, *clever*, in their orderly classrooms, beside their Projects. Once they had made a model English village — out of what seemed to be cardboard and pieces of straw. We made one too. I became an authority on the Old English thatched cottage. We ranged tirelessly over other people's gardens, seeking good bits of moss for the Old English crazy paving paths that went with all those cottages. All my life since, I have not been able to pass a good crop of moss without a twitch in my fingers.

But one Monday we were faced by Miss Martin, cheeks pink with anxiety.

'Who has straight backs?' asked Miss Martin. 'Who can keep in step?' We gazed hopelessly at her. 'Today,' cried poor Miss Martin, 'we are going to join in with Assembly! Isn't that lovely now?'

It wasn't. With drooping mouths we waited for the signal. It came. A death-rattle on the school drum.

'Heads up!' pleaded Miss Martin, and we stuck out our chests and stumbled out of our door, cardigans around our elbows, hair hanging over our eyes, under the jeering gaze of the rest of the school, drawn up in their fearful ranks.

The Headmaster tapped one foot as we shuffled into place.

'Raise the right hand!' he commanded. Miss Martin's class became confused. Some raised the right hand, some the left, but most of us, knowing we were about to die, raised both.

'Boy!' growled the Headmaster. The drummer boy glared over our heads and started another death-rattle.

'I love God and my country,' warned the Headmaster. Ah! The poetry speaking! Miss Martin's class loved poetry speaking.

'I love God and my country!' we piped, beaming.

'I will honour the flag!'

'I will honour the flag!'

'And honour the King!'

'And honour the King!'

'And cheerfully obey the laws of the land...'

'And cheerfully —

But I was far away, peering at the far end of the playground, to where I distinctly saw the sad figure of King George the Fifth on his horse, saluting us, in what appeared to be a snowstorm, just outside Moscow.

Back in the classroom, Miss Martin gave her little announcement. 'Soon, my dears, is Armistice Day, and you are going to march all the way down the road, with the whole school, and put lovely flowers on the War Memorial. Today was just a practice, and you looked beautiful!'

We didn't believe it. Neither did Miss Martin. Her cheeks were flushed again. We should have taken that as a warning. 'I have had an idea,' announced Miss Martin, and she held up a giant picture in the *Teachers' Monthly Guide*. There those British children stood, proud but calm, dressed in suits of armour and lovely helmets, apparently made from cardboard boxes and little bits of chocolate paper. 'We,' said Miss Martin simply, 'are going to make helmets for our Armistice Day march.' Who could resist those helmets, the plumes, and so on? 'Feathers,' cried Miss Martin, becoming dangerously excited, 'and cardboard! You will have to *scour* the district!'

We commenced the scouring.

At home, I gave the family the news.

'On Armistice Day,' I announced at dinner, 'we are going to be old-fashioned soldiers of the British Empire.'

The family looked *amazed*.

'Warriors!' said my Bedstemoder, in a voice that should have warned me. 'Ha!' She spent the evening searching through the bookcase. She gave me a vast red book with a piece of paper sticking out of it. On the paper was carefully printed, 'Dansk Warrior of Old Days'.

I bore it to school.

Miss Martin excitedly opened it. There stood a Viking warrior wearing his fearsome helmet with the horns on. She peeped at him. The Viking glowered at Miss Martin. Miss Martin smartly shut the book.

'Horns, Astrid,' she said, 'would be a little hard to *find*!'

'We have some horns!' said Betty Cooper, 'old cows' horns that Dad —'

'*British* soldiers,' said Miss Martin, 'did not wear horns. Perhaps one day we will have a parade of warriors of the world. But just now — feathers — and cardboard!'

I haunted the henyard, eyeing the hens, and I haunted the local store, gazing hungrily at a cardboard sign of a lovely lady in a picture hat. 'Smoke Desert Gold,' announced the lady. I wished to see the other side of her, to see if the cardboard was snow white. *Usable*.

'Taking up smoking now, are we?' asked the store-keeper, and hooted at his joke, day after day.

The days sped by to Armistice Day. Miss Martin grew haggard with the surprise. We did the sums, the compositions, with our eyes flickering regularly to those intricate cardboard shapes trailing long pieces of tape hanging from nails on the walls.

Outside, long lines of children marched to the drum-beat; the Headmaster barked commands, practising.

On the afternoon before the great day, Betty Cooper ventured to clear up a little mystery.

'Miss Martin,' she said, 'What is Armistice Day for?'

'Well —' began Miss Martin all over again, 'at the stroke of eleven, all over the Empire, everybody stops whatever he or she is doing — and Remembers...'

But while she talked, we glanced out of the window. And there, on the tennis court, sat a line of senior girls, twisting pieces of macrocarpa into wheels. We peered more intently. The macrocarpa wheels were wreaths, the kind you sent to funerals.

On the Day, we assembled early. Too early. We rushed to meet Miss Martin as she came to unlock the classroom door. Miss Martin checked when she saw us — best purses embroidered with raffia daisies, patent-leather shoes, best dresses with the fullness.

'Now remember,' she said, 'we must keep *up*, and not dawdle. We must be assembled in plenty of time for the speeches, for the wreath-laying, so that at eleven o'clock precisely, we may observe the *Silence*.'

We did the Arithmetic, to calm the nerves. Then the school bell tolled for the Dead, as usual; only this day, with more significance. With trembling fingers, we put on our helmets. I had harvested a fine collection of feathers for mine. It would ruffle nobly in a light breeze, I had thought. Through a storm of feathers in the rising wind, I watched with the others as the columns set off, to the battle drum-roll from that boy in Standard Six. We stayed somewhat concealed behind the school hedge.

'We do not wish to reveal our surprise too early!' explained Miss Martin.

Last of all the classes, we set off. But fate was against us. The road was covered with gravel; our patent-leather best shoes felt every stone. Our purses got in the way when we swung our arms. Then from far behind us we heard the remorseless tread of marching feet coming nearer and nearer. Peering through my feathers, I saw the Scout Troop, led by Mr Prowse, the Scout Leader. Behind him, big boys held banners. Those banners were so pretty.

'March just a little faster, dears!' urged Miss Martin.

Our helmets started to slip. My eyes were slowly covered in darkness. By peering intently through one side of my eye-piece, I saw Cherry Taylor, wearing her rustling flower-girl-dress, go slowly and more slowly.

With a fine flurry of flags and drums, the Scout Troop shouldered past. I distinctly heard Mr Prowse ask what the hell did we think we were doing, dressed up like sore toes and painted savages. We ignored him.

'Push up your helmets, dears,' urged Miss Martin.

We hung on to our helmets and purses with one arm and swung the other.

Far down the road, a sombre crowd clustered around the War Memorial. We faintly heard the drums.

'*Faster*, dears!' said Miss Martin, low but urgent. 'Swing your arms!' We swung our arms. Our helmets commenced the slipping again. Miss Martin fell back to retrieve Cherry Taylor, who had tripped.

We marched on, past the first houses of the settlement, past the iron

ranks of the senior warriors, past the Headmaster, standing in helpless rage among his funeral wreaths by the granite War Memorial, he and it the same grey. And helmets muffling our proud smiles, heedless of Miss Martin's warning cries, we marched on and on, and came to a halt at last, far, far past the War Memorial. Then, feathers in our mouths, we saw the incredulous faces of that silent crowd of parents, mine among them, and I heard, I *heard* the shameful, uncontrollable laughter of Onkel Sven echo over the ruins of Armistice Day.

Who laughed with him? The Fallen. Our Dead.

I think they get so tired of all those bugles and drums. I think they loved our helmets.

'Armistice Day' has now been published in Yvonne du Fresne's first volume of stories *Farvel* (Price Melburn for Victoria University Press). A review will appear in the next issue of *Kunapipi*.
