

## BOOK REVIEW

**Andrew Plant, *The Poppy*, Melbourne, Pan Macmillan Australia, Ford Street Publishing, March 2014, 32 p., rrp AU\$ 26.95, ISBN 978-1-92500-031-3.**

Andrew Plant has dedicated his beautifully written and illustrated story of the Australian connection with the northern French town of Villers-Bretonneux to the memory of our Diggers, but also to the hope that today's children, including his own daughter, will be able to grow up in peace.

*The Poppy* tells of the unique bond that was forged between Australians and French during the night before Anzac Day 1918, when, against great odds and with enormous casualties, Australian soldiers stopped a major German advance and recaptured Villers-Bretonneux, in what proved to be a major turning-point of the war. Rebuilt from the rubble in the 1920s with generous help from the people of Victoria, Villers-Bretonneux has never ceased to express its gratitude. Its school, the École Victoria, has as its motto 'Never Forget Australia', and after the tragic bushfires of 2009, the French town raised money towards the rebuilding of Strathewan primary school. From an Australian perspective, Villers-Bretonneux, with its prominent war memorial and hundreds of Australian graves, remains a well-visited site of memory.

*The Poppy*, following Derek Guille's *The Promise* of 2013, will help revitalise public knowledge and understanding of the Australian contribution in the Western Front war, which has sometimes been obscured by an Anzac mythology exclusively focussed on Gallipoli. The two books—neither glorifies war, but both are predicated on the belief that its consequences must be remembered and confronted—are complementary in their different approaches and in their target audiences: Guille's work is directed to young teens, Plant's to pre-teen children.

The written text of *The Poppy*, while amply informative, is spare, deliberately saving the bulk of the visual space for the many exquisitely executed paintings, which become the principal markers of the rhythm and emotional movement of the narrative. The stark and stunning cover image of a bright red poppy floating out of a dark background, its stem crossed by a strand of barbed wire, establishes the theme of tension between hope and pain, and the inescapable ambiguities of memory. Thereafter, composition and colour combine to render, variously, the sober stasis of the rows of graves in the cemetery; the serenity of the school and the town, where French and

Australian flags billow in tandem; the excited animation of two young girls as they follow a single wind-borne poppy petal that leads them through their unfolding discovery. The final double page is a quasi-aerial shot that embraces the war memorial and fields blood-red with poppies in full bloom.

*So many years ago. So many lives gone. They have not been forgotten.*

My eight year-old grand-daughter's reading of *The Poppy* proved to me how successfully Andrew Plant has made a historically and emotionally complex story accessible to the young. She was saddened by the lasting effects of the war: the destruction of the town, the long lists of names of those who had died, or who remained forever missing; but she felt comforted, too, by the positive images of the flags flying together, the school's devotion to all things Australian, and the shared friendship and curiosity of the two little girls. The author told me that in reality the poppies no longer grow as profusely in Flanders fields as they used to. The petal that guides his narrative becomes thereby all the more precious, as it beckons the reader into an affecting journey commemorating both painful loss and sustained friendship.

*Colin Nettelbeck*

*The University of Melbourne*