



‘UN BON SOUVENIR POUR NOUS’:
AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS BILLETED
IN FRANCE AND BELGIUM AFTER WORLD WAR I

JILLIAN DURANCE

The two sides of the postcard shown on the following pages are the starting point for an exploration of the wartime connections between the Australian soldiers and the people of France and Belgium. An interpretation of the text can lead us to examine the ways in which those contacts were founded on a sense of mutual gratitude. By 1918, the Australian troops had played an essential role in the liberation of their countries. In return, the Australians were rewarded with often kind, if not generous, hospitality. Closer relationships also brought about a new awareness of Australians as having their own national identity. There was a sharing of language and culture. Diaries, letters, postcards, field magazines and battalion histories written close to the Great War period provide personal and intimate testimony as to the depth of those friendships and the quality of those cultural interactions that were often forged in the homes of the French and Belgian families. One such document, this postcard written by a young Belgian woman and sent to an Australian soldier, Private Herbert Godber, opens a small domestic window onto the broader landscape of interchange between troops of the First Australian Imperial Force and the people of France and Belgium. This largely peaceful co-existence of just a few months often led to enduring friendships.

Towards the end of 1919, Madeleine's postcard arrived at the Diamond Creek home of Private Herbert Alfred Godber in semi-rural Victoria, north-east of Melbourne. She had written it from her home in Nalinnes, Belgium, on 29 October 1919. The image on the front of the card with the word 'Christmas' [sic] suggests that Madeleine had written it with sufficient time for it to arrive before Christmas and possibly in response to a postcard he had sent her on his return. It took at least six weeks by ship for the mail to reach Australia and the postcard may have arrived in time for Christmas. Unbeknown to Madeleine, Herbert had already married on 4 October 1919, three months after his return to Victoria. We do not know Madeleine's family name but Herbert Godber was the author's grandfather.

Private Godber was a member of the 21st Battalion, part of the 6th Brigade, and had been fighting on the Western Front since early 1916. He was



Nahinnes le 29 octobre 1919.

Bien cher ami

C'est avec un très très grand plaisir que nous venons de recevoir votre carte qui nous apportait de très bonnes nouvelles.

Nous sommes heureuse de vous savoir rentré en Australie en excellente santé et de voir que vous n'oubliez pas votre français qui est très correcte et aussi vos amis de Nahinnes qui ne vous oublierons jamais.

Combien ^{Fabrication Française} je suis contente Herbert, de savoir que vous avez une fiancée, je vous en félicite beaucoup et vous souhaite bonne chance, car un brave soldat de l'Australie ne saurait être assez récompensé.

Que votre pays est beau je ne cesse de regarder votre carte, on peut dire que Melbourne est splendide Je joins une photo de ma soeur et moi avec quelques amies et je serais très heureuse de recevoir la votre avec votre fiancée ce serait un bon souvenir pour nous.

Permettez, je vous prie nos bons souhaits à vos chers Parents et acceptez pour vous et votre fiancée nos bonnes amitiés

Madeleine



also a bandsman who had accompanied his battalion on route marches and performed at many concerts to entertain the troops and help raise their morale (Durance 2015). Like many of his fellow soldiers, Herbert Godber had waited for many months to return home after the war ended on 11 November 1918. During that time he lived in the post-war villages, billeted in the homes of French and Belgian families. After spending a few weeks in the French village of La Chaussée, Herbert arrived with the 6th Brigade in Nalinnes-Haies in the Charleroi region of Belgium, on 20 December 1918. Charleroi is located in the ‘Walloon’ or French-speaking part of Belgium.

In Nalinnes Herbert stayed in the home of a Belgian family and met a young woman named Madeleine. It is unclear whether she was part of the host family, but her postcard was accompanied by a photograph of herself and her sister, with a few girlfriends. It seemed that Madeleine and Herbert had become good friends during his stay in Nalinnes. After a few weeks he was moved with members of the 24th Battalion to the Charleroi suburb of Marcinelle. Herbert was among one of the last contingents of soldiers to leave Belgium in April 1919. But not before he had formed a warm relationship with Madeleine and learned perhaps sufficient French to interpret her postcard. Madeleine wrote:

Bien cher ami,
C’est avec un très très grand plaisir que nous venons de recevoir votre carte qui nous apportait de bien bonnes nouvelles. Nous sommes heureux de vous savoir rentré en Australie en excellente santé et de voir que vous n’oubliez pas votre français qui est très correcte [sic] et aussi vos amis de Nalinnes qui ne vous oublierons [sic] jamais. Combien je suis contente Herbert de savoir que vous avez une fiancée. Je vous en félicite beaucoup et vous souhaite bonne chance car un brave soldat de l’Australie ne saurait être assez récompensé. Que votre pays est beau. Je ne cesse de regarder votre carte, on peut dire que Melbourne est splendide. Je joins une photo de ma soeur et moi avec quelques amies et je serais très heureuse de recevoir la votre [sic] avec votre fiancée, ce serait un bon souvenir pour nous. Remettez je vous prie nos bons souhaits à vos chers parents et acceptez pour vous et votre fiancée nos bonnes amitiés.¹

¹ My very dear friend,
It is with very very great pleasure that we have just received your card that

The photograph of Madeleine, her sister and friends has long since disappeared; nor is there any other evidence of their correspondence in the family archives; but the postcard survives. Herbert kept it for nearly 60 years, from 1919 when he was 27 years old until the time he died in 1980, at the age of 87. Perhaps the postcard held a significant memory, although he never mentioned it. But sometimes he would hum the traditional little tune, *La Madelon*, known to all the soldiers in France. Perhaps there was a link between the popular song and the girl he knew all those years ago.

Like Herbert Godber, many soldiers often formed firm friendships with their French and Belgian hosts, including the younger women. Some of these relationships became sexual liaisons, while a few culminated in marriage proposals and actual marriages (Lejeune 2014, 13, 76). The tone of Madeleine's postcard is consistently formal, yet very warm. It gives no hint of anything more, neither a promise nor a profession of romantic love. Besides, she may have known that Herbert had corresponded with Ivy Partington, as well as her sisters, throughout the war. Herbert and Ivy had known each other since childhood. Herbert, sober, steady and religious and always carrying her portrait, most likely remained faithful to his Australian sweetheart. Madeleine's words suggest that Herbert had made a reasonable attempt to communicate with her in French. She compliments him on the beauty of his home town. She also assures him that his good fortune in having a fiancée is somehow his due. Her comments about his bravery and commitment parallel many that were expressed at the time. Herbert, like thousands of others, had travelled far to fight for what they thought to be a worthwhile cause.

brought us such good news. We are happy that you have returned to Australia in good health and to see that you have not forgotten your French which is very correct, and your friends in Nalinnes who will never forget you. How happy I am Herbert to know that you have a fiancée, I congratulate and wish you good luck; a brave Australian soldier deserves the very best. How beautiful your country is. I never stop admiring your postcard, you could say that Melbourne looks splendid. I am sending a photo of my sister and myself with some friends and I would be very happy to have one of you with your fiancée—it would be a good souvenir for us. Please send our kind regards to your dear parents and accept our best wishes for you and your fiancée.

In the days before the Great War, very few Australians had the opportunity to travel overseas. While many Australian soldiers would have known about France from their schooldays, very few had the chance to visit. The Australian military campaigns of 1915 had been confined to the Gallipoli Peninsula of Turkey. By early 1916, thousands of Australian troops began to travel from the southern port of Marseille to the Somme region and other parts of northern France. By 1917, they had moved to the battlefields of Flanders and Belgium. The Australians brought their particular accents and ways of speaking English, very different humour, 'larrikin' attitudes to authority and 'disrespectful' attitudes to foreigners in general. But they also quickly developed an appreciation of French culture, landscape and farming practices. After the deserts of Egypt and the rugged, scrubby terrain of the Gallipoli peninsula, French scenery was green and lush, a welcome change after the sand, heat and discomforts of the Egyptian desert (Gammage 1975, 126).

Soldiers' letters home as well as their personal diaries report extensively on the new worlds that their travels opened up for them. They not only noted the beauty of the landscape, but also the productivity of the land. Travelling through the southern regions of France from Marseille to the northern battlefields in early 1916, Private Clair Whiteside, an orchardist in his civilian life, wrote to his father back in Narre Warren, Victoria: 'Never before had any of us seen such country. Not a spot wasted that could be cultivated [...] nowhere was anything neglected, no broken down sheds, not a neglected patch of vines, yet there was a war on' (Whiteside 1999, 42). A number of soldiers observed that they were not surprised that the French wanted to fight for it, something they respected.

Madeleine's postcard to Herbert Godber implies that he, like so many other Australians, was willing to engage with his hosts in their own language. From the earliest days in France there were opportunities for soldiers to learn French or practise what little they knew (Harvey 1920, 69). Mutual need often created opportunities for an exchange in French. Some soldiers may have found that they knew more French than their hosts knew English. As Whiteside explained to his family at home, on his way to the battlefields, amidst the waving and blowing of kisses, he occasionally used his 'imperfect French', raising a few smiles. On another occasion, he tried to buy bread and eggs, in an old kitchen in a typical farmhouse, and found that 'the old lady

didn't have a word of English, and the old dad who sat in the corner chair took little interest in the proceedings' (Whiteside 1999, 43).

Opportunities for language learning were inherent in the nature of the war waged on French soil. While photographic images of the Great War predominantly depict familiar scenes of soldiers in mud-filled trenches, and the many action shots of going 'over the top', there are also photographs of ruined villages among the smoke of shell-fire. While some areas were evacuated of civilians during the worst of the fighting, there were many stories of soldiers meeting with, conversing with, and doing business with the hardy civilians who had stayed on in the war zone, often sheltering from the heavy bombardments in the cellars under their houses (Harvey 1920, 233). Stories abound of soldiers being greeted by villagers who had dared to remain in houses under shellfire, particularly during 1918 when the Germans were in retreat. French 'publicans' ran the popular estaminets where soldiers went to find a drink, and farmers provided supplements to army rations. The generally fleeting nature of these relationships and exchanges in the French language was soon to change with the coming of peace.

At the end of the war, Australian troops were billeted in French villages or further north in the Walloon area of Belgium. For both troops and civilians it was a period of 'relative serenity', or 'the calm after the storm' (*Red and White Diamond* n° 4 December 1918, 12). Brigades were billeted in their own areas spread throughout the former Western Front, but the experiences of the men were similar in that everywhere there was an appreciation of their efforts in securing the liberation of towns, villages and farms. The French and Belgian civilians were encouraged to host the soldiers in their homes. In many homes soldiers paid a nominal rent for their accommodation, while in others they were fêted 'as honoured guests'. They stayed in homes that were sometimes damaged and in the devastated area that 'ran for over 250 miles in and around the old Western Front'. Over the course of four years of war, France had lost 1,650 towns and villages and over half a million homes (Heywood and Steel 2015, 310).

The largely favourable reputation the Australians had earned for themselves was most likely further heightened by the speech in their honour



given by Clemenceau, the French Prime Minister, on 7 July after the Australian successes at Villers-Bretonneux and the battle of Hamel:

When the Australians came to France, the French people expected a great deal of you. [...] We knew that you would fight a real fight but we did not know from the beginning you would astonish the whole continent. I shall go back tomorrow and say to my countrymen, 'I have seen the Australians, I have looked in their faces, I know that these men will fight alongside of us again until the cause for which we are all fighting is safe for us and for our children'.²

Clemenceau's speech reflects his gratitude and confidence that his country would soon be liberated by the Allied Forces, but the Australians had made a particular impression. His words carry a special, admiring respect for the soldiers of a small faraway democracy that had made such an enormous commitment and many sacrifices—to achieve that freedom. This view was shared by many of the population (Harvey 1920, 305). The appreciation is also reflected in Madeleine's words to Herbert Godber when she calls him *un brave soldat* who deserved the very best.

Being billeted in the villages exposed the Australian soldiers to a welcome return to normality despite the destruction and disruption they saw around them. Sometimes troops volunteered to help with the harvest and labour in the field, giving them, in return, a sense of normal routine, order and usefulness. In Nalinnes there was plenty of work, stacking the beetroot harvest for winter feed (Lejeune 2014, 49).

Elsewhere in France, Clair Whiteside, noting that the apple trees had been neglected over the war years, 'had a bit of a yarn on the matter' with a couple of local growers (Whiteside 1999, 170). Herbert Godber, another orchardist, may well have done the same. Among the brigades were men with other useful skills. The tradesmen of the pioneer battalions, when they were not constructing crosses for the graves for the battalion dead, were sometimes employed to repair buildings and played a role in repairing the region's road that had been damaged in the fighting, as the official reparations of war had

² Speech quoted from a plaque at the Australian Corps Memorial Park at Le Hamel, France.



not yet begun (Harvey 1920, 307). Such volunteer work further enhanced their welcome.

It was not only the economic life of the villages that benefited from the presence of so many able-bodied men. Their social life was also enriched. The battalion bands played music in the streets and squares (Lejeune 2014, 38). There were many balls and impromptu dances held in decorated school and cinema halls, where the same battalion bands supplied the music, tucked away on a balcony, while the couples whirled below. The women, at first rather 'timid', were soon learning new dances in the arms of Australian soldiers and soon discovered 'that the men were not the wild bushmen that they had expected to meet' (Lejeune, 2014, 47). Such balls were immensely popular and 'dancing continued to the early hours of the morning' (Austin 1997, 227). The Australians, despite their recent ordeals, were 'full of effervescence and enthusiasm' (Lejeune 2014, 7).

Exuberance, greater freedom and perhaps more relaxed discipline did lead to occasional problems however, particularly with drunkenness. Some took 'their carousing to excess [...] that small percentage of the men in the class who lose their balance at the sight of a bottle get noisy at times and put the wind up the villagers'. (*Red and White Diamond* n° 3 November 1918, 3) While it should be acknowledged that Australian observers would express a more lenient and relaxed attitude to such behaviour, it seems that the Australian presence had widespread approval. W. J. Harvey could report in the 24th Battalion's journal that 'the troops are getting on well with the French inhabitants in the village. The civilians and the diggers have already become excellent friends' (ibid.) Less forgivable seem to have been the snowball fights or *les blancs combats* of January 1919, where the first snowfalls were greeted by a series of snow fights between the Australians and young Nalinois. The fights often got out of hand when snowballs contained rocks and stones that damaged village buildings (Lejeune 2014, 45). Again, the locals had more to lose when they bore the brunt of such disorderly, even aggressive behaviour.

There were many acts of goodwill, however, that compensated for the negative influences of 'that small percentage'. Throughout the billeting areas, the officers and men organised Christmas parties and *matinées enfantines* that were very popular among young children and their parents. Many who were children at war's end held lifelong memories of those happy events. Ghislain Servais of Nalinnes later recalled the pudding that jumped about on the table as the children danced to the band music around the room, while a young



Raymond Lebrun remembered being treated to his first cinema experience as part of his *matinée enfantine* at Nalinnes in 1919 (Lejeune 2014,16). The journalist reporting for the local *La Gazette* described the occasion as *une fête charmante* and observed among the Australian officers presiding *une tendresse touchante*, especially for the orphans, both Belgian and French (Lejeune 2014, 44).

The organisation of such Christmas and children's parties relied on the co-operation of the local authorities who were in charge of their own public buildings. On Christmas Day 1918, the 39th Battalion, billeted in snowy Bouillancourt sat down to Christmas dinner, each company gathered as a unit. The officers had their own dinner in the school hall that had been put at their disposal by the schoolmaster. The officers had also each donated a sum of money to provide a Christmas treat for the village children whose lives were still deprived and 'drab' from the exigencies of war. A Christmas tree, interestingly described as an 'Australian' rather than a French tradition, was placed in a large marquee. Lieutenant C. T. Mason, dressed as Father Christmas, distributed gifts to the children of Bouillancourt and nearby Busmenard. While Lieutenant O. R. Brown clowned around in the disguise of a buccaneer, the battalion band played Christmas carols. The children also received chocolates and cake. The schoolmaster, noting that the officers and men, deprived of being with their own families, had 'adopted' the village children instead, gave a speech of thanks:

We will keep for years the worthiest recollection of your generosity [...] As equality is a trait of Australian character, each and all shall receive his or her share [of presents]. In Australia it is not a practice to make distinctions between the rich and the poor because distinction is made by the hand of Chance or Fortune [...] This remark I wish you to remember: The Australian officers are always good to their men and for this reason we know them as a courageous army. They have supported the noble aims of the war rigorously and with animation, and this will go down in history [...] I ask you to keep this fête ever-green in your memory [...] always keep the remembrance of the friends of France who left their parents, homes, wives and children without regret to succeed us in our time of trouble and adversity. (Paterson 1934, 246)



There were many instances where shared hardship built a sense of empathy and trust between French civilians and the Australian troops who had stayed in and sometimes fought in their villages. This close proximity led to a situation where people could get to know each other and grow beyond the stereotypes many of them may have carried. It provided greater scope for initiating and developing friendships and consolidating language skills. The troops could build on the foundations of respect and gratitude that they had already earned in their earlier three years in the region. Social life was shared, rather than segregated. Many friendships grew out of a sense of mutual need among people of many different age groups. And as we see from the schoolmaster's words at Bouillancourt, the qualities of generosity, courage and equality that were demonstrated at times were acknowledged and sometimes judged to be a typical Australian characteristic.

While the coming of peace brought more pleasant experiences for both hosts and their Australian guests, there were still shadows in the background. The Germans in their haste to leave the occupied areas had left many dumps of unexploded ordnance, particularly in the Charleroi district. Both civilians and soldiers were caught up, killed and wounded in the inevitable explosions, and both shared in the mourning that followed (Lejeune 2014, 61). The death of Medical Officer Captain Clarence Cecil Haines on 4 April 1919 was keenly felt. He had gone to assist local civilians who had been wounded at an explosion near the station at Charleroi, when he himself was mortally wounded in the same way. 'The greatest regret has been expressed among the local population and troops at [his] death, on account of his unselfish services' (*Geelong Advertiser* 8 May 1919). This shared grief and acknowledgement of another's 'sacrifice' would certainly have brought people closer together.

Captain Haines was one of the many soldiers who had stayed on in Belgium. As we know, while many veterans of the Anzac campaign who were lucky enough to have survived the Western Front were the first to leave in October 1918, others who were uninjured or who had enlisted later, had to wait many months before a troopship became available. In December 1918, when Herbert Godber arrived in Nalinnes, the prospect of home was still a long way off. For some of the troops, it was a long wait. Herbert Godber would not embark on the *Mahia* until June 1919. Troops were still under army discipline and while army routine took up some time, they no longer

had a war to fight. They did, however, have the future prospect of peacetime occupations for which they had time and opportunity to train.

By November 1918, the Australian soldiers were being encouraged to take courses in those subjects, skills and trades that would help them on their return (*Red and White Diamond* n° 3 November 1918, 11). Under the auspices of the AIF, an Education Service was set up and commenced operations in the towns and villages where soldiers were billeted. Soldiers could take advantage of classes and lectures in a wide range of areas—in agricultural subjects such as fruit growing and commercial egg farming as well as vocational subjects that included shorthand, bookkeeping and motor mechanics. Soldiers could also study mathematics, English and French (Paterson 1934, 244). The pre-war peace occupations of many soldiers gave them the necessary background to teach, while educational officers as well as teachers were appointed from the reservoir of talent within the army itself. Professional teachers in civilian life, like Lieutenant Horace Fenton of the 8th Battalion, were often put in charge of their battalion's educational program (Austin 1997, 227).

In addition, the resources of local areas were put to good use. In Nalinnes in the 1918–1919 winter, soldiers were also offered educational tours of local factories, particularly the iron working and other metallurgical enterprises. Some were given temporary work in the electrical industry.

Jules Hiernaux, the principal of the Université du Travail de Charleroi, put at the disposal of soldiers in that area amenities and classes for 500 students (*Red and White Diamond* n° 6 January 1919, 3). Herbert Godber may have taken subjects that would later set him on the path to becoming an electrical engineer once he returned to Australia, but he most certainly also took French lessons.

For Herbert and many of his fellow soldiers, knowing a bit of French would have made social interactions as well as travelling a little easier, while misunderstandings formed the basis of stories that became the focus for hilarity, humour and entertainment. There was the story of one 24th Battalion soldier whose fumbling sign language and many mispronounced words led his French host to believe that it was 'raining inside his boot', when it was simply 'leaking' (*Red and White Diamond* n° 6 January 1919, 3). Another

story, published in the 24th Battalion field journal, perhaps served as a reminder about the value of having another language:

The Colonel's groom has commenced to study French. He didn't think it worthwhile till, a few days ago, he was forced to change his mind. He asked the lady at the billet to call him at 7.30 on a certain morning. His French was so excellent that the lady understood him to say that he had to travel seven and a half kilometres before breakfast, so she got him up at 4.30, so he would have enough time to do it. (*Red and White Diamond* n° 3 November 1918, 3)

Like many other Australian soldiers, Herbert Godber later taught his own children (and grandchildren) French words and phrases. He referred to his daughter and son as his *enfants*, fed them *blancmange* and *poires, oranges* and *chocolat*. The words *merci, bonjour* and *très bien* were regularly sprinkled through his conversations. These words and phrases, along with the place names of the battles in which he fought—Pozières, Bullecourt, Mont St Quentin—became part of the family lore that was replicated in many other homes of Australian soldiers who had fought on the Western Front.

Those relics of Private Godber's experience filtered down to yet another generation beyond yet another war. Among the first words of French the author ever learned were: *Voulez-vous promener [sic] avec moi ce soir mademoiselle?* ('Come out with me this evening, miss?') *Après la guerre* ('after the war' or 'nothing doing') was the required and rehearsed response. This exchange was enacted by many soldiers and young women in France as a kind of flirtatious 'play'. Many descendants of Australian Great War soldiers went on to develop an interest in the French language and that shared history with France and Belgium in the Great War.

Madeleine's message to Herbert Godber exemplifies the most enduring legacy of those times: the bond of friendship between the people of France, Belgium and Australia. This is reflected in the way Australian visitors are received in those historical areas, in Villers-Bretonneux in particular. It is within the small villages of the French and Belgian people that those ties of friendship were most securely strengthened. In some ways those homes and families took the place, not only of the soldiers' Australian homes, but also the 'home' that their battalion had become during the fighting. Loyalty



was strong among men ‘whose very existence depended on the others, who would share their last franc or crust with each other, bound together till victory or death’ (Gammage 1975, 229). The battalion was described by some as ‘a family’, by others as ‘home’ (*Red and White Diamond* n° 7 1919, 10). This loyalty among the members of each battalion also extended to their commanding officers. Good commanding officers were not only respected, they were also ‘beloved’ of their men. At the warm farewell the officers gave to Colonel James of the 24th Battalion, he was described as ‘father of his men’ (*Red and White Diamond* n° 7 February 1919, 10). For Herbert Godber and those other soldiers whose battalions had disbanded, the warm welcome of a Belgian home and family would have been particularly appreciated.

With the end of the war the necessity for that close bond between ‘brothers in arms’ had loosened a little and in the warmth of civilian homes new kinds of friendship and a more ‘normal’ sense of family life were formed. Madeleine’s postcard alludes to the nature of these relationships, with her reference to her sisters and their friends. For Herbert Godber, Nalinnes may have been ‘a home away from home’. Sergeant W. J. Harvey describes the process of integration and domesticity more generally in an article headlined ‘Entente Cordiale’:

Here and there we have discovered even common diggers snuggling into real beds with white sheets in rooms rented from the village inhabitants and nice little dinners served up on dining room tables [...] The change is a welcome one after shell-hole life. The family clothes lines are adorned (?) by the washables of the soldiers, and around the family tables in the evenings the Aussies are found making themselves at home with ‘papa’, ‘mama’, and some of the lads even come the ‘sister stakes’ with the daughters of the household, while les garçons appear to take delight in the presence of their big Aussie brothers. This touch of home life, though it be only the quality of French peasantry in most cases [sic] is a treat for men on active service, especially for men who have been so long away from their own homes, and it testifies to the esteem in which our boys are held by the people in whose country they are now so well and favourably known. (*Red and White Diamond* n° 3 November 1918, 4)



Such was the pull of the home life offered by the French and Belgians that attendance at education classes often suffered as well as organised social events. Captain Wright of the 7th Battalion, billeted in the Belgian village of Couillet, reported that ‘all ranks have been living in the happiest possible times with civilians, and everybody has made friends here and the people are so cosy and snug, drinking coffee in front of kitchen stoves that it is exceedingly difficult to drag them out’ (Austin 2004, 262). Soldiers would only attend concerts if they could bring their Belgian friends. A strong sense of community was forged in the sharing of meals, in attending common social events and significant celebrations. While there was mutual joy in an engagement or wedding party, there was also the shared sorrow at the continuing loss of lives, from ordnance explosions in particular.

The intensity of the friendships forged over the last months of the war and the few weeks of living in Nalinnes and elsewhere is reflected in the heartfelt farewells at the end of their stay. The Australians were only moving a short way to a neighbouring suburb of Charleroi, but one soldier reported that ‘his hostess commenced weeping three days before the departure’, a regret that was only heightened when the remaining troops finally left the region (*The Red and White Diamond* n° 7 February 1919, 4). It was as though the Australians were witnessing their long-ago send-offs from Australia all over again: ‘it reminds one of the departure of the troopships from Australia with ma, pa, mademoiselle and all the family along to bid a last farewell to some digger who has endeared himself to them all’, reported Captain Cecil Fletcher (*Guyra Argus* 31 July 1919). Much the same sentiment was expressed nearly a century later in Jules Dardennes’s account of that time:

They tasted the charm of our villages, wept, laughed, sang, danced and created a circle of sympathy around themselves, but most of all, they found among us the warmth of the homes they had left behind (Lejeune 2014, 8).

Just as there was gratitude on both sides, so too, the feelings of sadness and regret at the final farewell were not altogether one-sided. ‘The people of Nalinnes have our sincere thanks for the generosity they displayed during our short sojourn in their midst [...] there were hearty handshakes, copious kisses and sincere ‘*bon chances*’ [sic] (*The Red and White Diamond* n° 7 February 1919, 7). Many anecdotes speak eloquently of the nature of the relationship



that existed between the Australian soldier generally and his Belgian host. Harry Massie wrote to a young Nalinnes friend, Lucy Gauthier, many years later and recalled the happy times when they would go gathering herbs for the meals that Lucy's aunt would cook for them all:

I have often thought of you all and those who did so much for us at that time. Perhaps some people might say that it is nothing to give a little good or other comfort, but to be thousands of miles away from home yet made to feel that you WERE HOME, well it gave one a very wonderful feeling. (Lejeune 2014, 81)

It was not only in correspondence that those friendships were continued. Henry Massie returned to Australia, where, in honour of the village that welcomed him so warmly, he named his home *Villa Nalinnes* (Lejeune 2014, 80). Another soldier, in order to keep the good memories alive, changed his hometown name of 'Lockhart Creek', near Tallangatta, Victoria, to 'Charleroi' (Lejeune 2014, 82). Yet another returned soldier called his daughter 'Denise' after the daughter of his hosts (Lejeune 2014, 77).

By its very nature the hospitality of French and Belgian communities was ephemeral as a vast distance would soon stretch between them. But the relationships that flourished in the ruined villages of the war would transform and ultimately endure. They were relationships founded upon a mostly favourable reputation and shaped by mutual respect. They were relationships that transcended the immediate sense of gratitude. The firm friendships that developed were characterised by trust and often deep affection that lasted much longer than the time it had taken for them to develop. Private Wally Atkins assured his host Albert Pourigneux of Nalinnes in March 1919: 'You will always be in our thoughts, because you were the best friends we ever had in France and Belgium' (Lejeune 2014, 11).

Despite the inevitable downsides, disturbances and bad behaviour among some Australian soldiers that was reported on both sides, the mostly beneficial experience of their brief stay seems to have taken on a greater significance with the passing of time. 'Little did they know', wrote Jules Dardennes, mayor of Nalinnes in 2014, 'that their presence among us would be one of the most moving chapters in the history of our village' (Lejeune 2014, 12). Among the ruins of a destructive war came an abiding friendship, a deep gratitude, a curiosity in another culture and language and finally, for





the Australians, the gift of belonging, a reassuring reminder that ultimately their own hearths and homes awaited them. In some cases, connections strengthened over the years and became enriched with the passing of time. Even after all these years, it is remarkable that the vestiges of this warm friendship remain in the collective memory of both the Australian, French and Belgian people. Madeleine's postcard to Herbert is a symbolic testament to the quality of that relationship and memory. Herbert Godber arrived back in Australia aboard the *Mahia* in July 1919. On 4 October 1919 he married his fiancée, Ivy Partington, in the garden of her parents' home in

Greensborough, Victoria. He wore his army uniform because, as the family story goes, he did not yet have a suit. Herbert never forgot his French and kept forever his postcard from Madeleine, perhaps never forgetting his friends in Belgium, friends who had intended always to remember him. We do not know whether he sent Madeleine the photo that she requested, as *un bon souvenir pour nous* ('a good souvenir for us'), but their brief friendship parallels the many that formed in that post-war period between the soldiers of the 1st AIF and the liberated people of France and Belgium.

Moyarra, South Gippsland

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