



## FOREWORD

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‘They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old.’ The centenary of the Great War has already generated an upsurge of commemoration and interest far surpassing the remembrance of the survivors. An upsurge of interest among a generation too young to have direct memory of the events is now served by new memorials and rituals, new histories and sources of information.

The dawn service at Anzac Bay has now passed and attention turns in 2016 to the Western Front. Here Australian soldiers were caught up in a different kind of warfare, one conducted on a vastly greater scale with aircraft, gas, flame-throwers, great defensive entrenchments and a volume of artillery bombardments absent from the Gallipoli campaign. Unlike the baptism of fire in the failed attempt to invade Turkey, the Australians were now assisting in the defence of their allies, France and Belgium. It is therefore appropriate that a group of French specialists should join here with others sharing an interest in the Western Front to reflect on that encounter.

The collection includes accounts of some of the principal Australian engagements, at Fromelles and Villers-Bretonneux. Others take up family connections or relate their efforts to increase our knowledge and comprehension of this protracted ordeal. There is possibly a danger of overplaying the lack of appreciation of the Western Front. It was indisputably central to the vastly greater number of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) who fought there, and the families of those who died; its demands gave rise to the divisions over conscription and inscribed the sombre memory of the war. The Western Front dominates the list of Australian war novels presented at the end of this collection.

The attention given to the interaction between Australian troops and their French hosts is of special note. Several of the essays explore the ways that these young men, the great majority travelling beyond Australia for the first time, responded to the French countryside, towns and villages, their sympathy for the desolation the war caused and the hospitality they were accorded. Here again there is a risk of overplaying the amity, which is uppermost in diaries, letters and other sources. It is salutary to be reminded of the disturbances and bad behaviour of men on leave, the misunderstandings



and resentments. So too Anne Brassart-Evans, who has done so much to increase appreciation of the connection with Villers-Bretonneux, recalls how fragmentary the memory of the Australian war memorial was there in the 1950s, and the scepticism of the inhabitants when one Australian official after another arrived to announce yet another unfulfilled monumental plan.

Yet the evidence presented here attests to the level of mutual interest. Of particular interest is Colin Nettelbeck's use of a magazine, *The "Dernière Heure"*, produced by members of the AIF awaiting repatriation after the Armistice. Here we see an informed engagement with the people and culture of France, with a nostalgia that would be maintained by many following return. Similarly, Jacqueline Dwyer's account of the French Economic Mission to Australia at the end of the war speaks to this desire to consolidate links, just as the fund-raising to assist the reconstruction of Picardy attested to popular sympathy. It is striking, nevertheless, how that Mission failed to grasp that the war had hardened Australian attitudes and reduced its capacity to grasp new opportunities—though the truculence of Billy Hughes at the Paris Peace Conference made that clear.

The French connection revealed in this collection occurred in circumstances that were, by their martial nature, finite. It left lasting memories among those who experienced it, but little continuing engagement, and few Australians fought on French soil in the Second World War. It is only now, as France has joined Turkey as a place of pilgrimage, that significant numbers make a similar discovery.

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