

The *Morning Star* Tapestry in the Sir John Monash Centre, Villers-Bretonneux

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On 24 April 2018, the Sir John Monash Centre was opened in the grounds of the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery in northern France and adjacent to the Australian National Memorial. The opening ceremony was timed to coincide with Anzac Day commemorations and the Centenary of the Second Battle of Villers-Bretonneux, a battle in which Australian troops recaptured the village from the Germans, thus putting a stop to the German advance towards Amiens, a strategic rail hub.

Guests at the opening ceremony included the Prime Minister of Australia Malcolm Turnbull, the Prime Minister of France Édouard Philippe and descendants of those who fought on the Western Front, amongst whom was Michael Bennett, the great grandson of Sir John Monash.

The Centre tells Australia's story of the Western Front through predominantly audio-visual displays. It forms part of the Australian Remembrance Trail along the Western Front, which links the First World War sites of significance to Australia, including museums, battlefields, memorials and cemeteries. More than 295,000 Australian men and women served on the Western Front in the First World War. Of these 46,000 gave their lives.

In his speech, Malcolm Turnbull said, that in order to appreciate John Monash and the Australian men and women who gave their lives here we need to 'stretch the boundaries of our imagination and see this landscape as they did'. The exhibits at the Centre allow the visitor to do just this.

Complementing these is an extraordinarily moving work of art, a tapestry produced in Melbourne at the Australian Tapestry Workshop. Taking a tapestry to France, with its long tradition of tapestry production, could be seen to be somewhat like ‘carrying coals to Newcastle’. It was a bold decision, but one that has resulted in a very fine work of art. The tapestry adds a different dimension to the visitors’ experience, taking them into the minds and imaginations of the young men who set off from Australia one hundred years ago.

Two artists were selected to design the tapestry—Charles Green and Lyndell Brown. They had previously been Australia’s Official War Artists in Iraq and Afghanistan and had subsequently worked on a follow-up collaboration with Melbourne-based artist Jon Cattapan about the aftermath of Australia’s wars since Vietnam, resulting in an exhibition across two galleries in Melbourne in 2014 and the publication of a book entitled *Framing Conflict: Contemporary War and Aftermath*. Their work is included in many Australian public art collections and institutions.

Charles Green also had a personal connection with the story. His grandfather was a soldier with the Australian forces on the Western Front battlefields where he was badly wounded and invalided out.

The two artists took their inspiration for the tapestry design not from the battlefields but from the Australian landscapes the soldiers left behind. This is a tapestry of memory and ‘the imaginary spaces’ the soldiers carried with them as they set off for battle. The overall imagery is one of dawn light illuminating a pathway through eucalyptus trees and bush undergrowth to a misty landscape beyond. There are a number of small inset images—of men boarding ships, men enlisting and some family snaps. The tapestry is almost monochromatic, and draws on the virtuosity of the tapestry weavers to create tonal images using a subtle range of greys and greens. The resulting tapestry is evocative and moving, imbued both with the personal stories of young men as they leave home and the heroic but tragic reality of war. In choosing a monochromatic palette, the artists took advantage of the skills and artistry of the weavers at the Australian Tapestry Workshop to draw on slight variations in colour to provide depth and perspective, light and shade.

The work took 4,000 weaving hours, with teams of weavers working on it. Working alongside the Australian weavers for a number of weeks was Pierre Bureau, a weaver from the *Manufacture des Gobelins* in Beauvais,

the first time such an exchange had taken place between the world's oldest and youngest tapestry workshops. While the Australian Tapestry Workshop celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2016, the history of the *Gobelins* factory dates back more than four hundred years to 1602 when it was set up by Henri IV. He rented space from the Gobelins family of dyers in order to house two Flemish tapestry makers. For the next two centuries it existed as a royal workshop for the manufacture of tapestries and furniture and is still a state-run institution, part of the French Ministry of Culture. Like its young counterpart in Australia, its production today is a collaborative process between contemporary artists and weavers.



Morning Star, 2017, Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, woven at the Australian Tapestry Workshop.
Photograph: John Gollings.

The *Morning Star* tapestry carries with it not just the memory of the heroic sacrifice of the many thousands of Australian soldiers who gave their lives or were wounded on the battle fields of the Western Front in France during the First World War; it also bears witness to the cultural exchange that is a critical component of the relationship between France and Australia today.

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