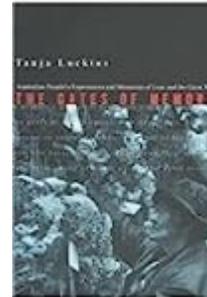




Tanja Luckins. *The Gates of Memory: Australian People's Experiences and Memories of Loss and the Great War.* Fremantle: Curtin University Books, 2004. 304 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-920731-74-8.



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The Unknown Mourner

According to American photographer Eugene Richards, the most poignant scenes around the site of the World Trade Center in the days after 9/11 were the handmade posters made by families and friends, stuck in clusters to walls, fences and poles. Each bore the photograph of a loved one and a plea for information. For the families of those whose remains would not be found and identified, these posters (until they were removed by city officials) became a place to mark and mourn their loss at the place where their loved one worked—and perhaps the last place they had seen them alive.

In this book, Tanja Luckins describes a similar scene in Australia in the 1920s. The 60,000 Australian soldiers who died on Gallipoli, the Western Front and Palestine during the First World War were buried where they fell, and their remains were not returned to Australia. For mothers, sisters and wives, unable to visit these graves in Europe and the Middle East, the wharf gates at Woolloomooloo in Sydney where they last saw their loved one before he sailed away to war took on a special meaning. They became the “gates of memory” of the book’s title. On every April twenty-fifth (Anzac Day, when Aus-

tralian and New Zealanders remember their war dead), women visited the wharf and tied flowers and handwritten messages to the gate in memory of the men they had lost.

The Gates of Memory is based on Luckins’s thesis which received the Australian Historical Association’s Serle Award as the best Australian history postgraduate thesis for 2002 and is a study of how Australians, especially women, experienced loss as a result of the First World War. The book tells the story of Garry Roberts, whose eloquent diary entries express pride at his son Frank’s volunteering in February 1916, followed by shock and grief when he is killed in France in September 1918. It also tells the story of the women who wore black dresses in mourning for dead soldiers, and those whose sense of grief became so overwhelming that they were placed in mental institutions. According to Luckins, these strong emotions of loss were erased from the public memory in the inter-war period. As Anzac Day ceremonies were established and war memorials were built, women’s memories of the First World War were marginalized. The Unknown Soldier was interred at the

Australian War Memorial, but there would be no Tomb of the Unknown Mourner.

The Gates of Memory has many commendable aspects. The book applies Jay Winter's work on memory and cultural history to the Australian experience. Luckins provides a welcome comparison of how Anzac Day was commemorated in Australia and New Zealand in the inter-war period. The analysis of how the war revived the wearing of mourning black in Australia, and—as most soldiers were single—that this mourning was done by mothers and sisters rather than by widows is excellent. The same can also be said of Luckins's work on the wartime rise in women admitted to Hospitals for the Insane in Victoria and how this increase was glossed over in the annual report to the state government.

However, the book has three significant shortcomings. The first is that the argument that “the world of loss is rarely associated with Australian identity” (p. 13) seems at odds with the existence of an extensive literature on Australian loss, memory and war including Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: The Australians Return* (1996), Ken Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (1998), Michael McKernan, *This War Never Ends: The Pain of Separation and Return* (2001), and especially Joy Damousi *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (1999). Luckins should have made more effort to acknowledge the existing literature and position her contribution within it.

The second shortcoming is her perception that Anzac Day has always been a day commemorating the soldier and the nation in which “civilian bereaved and loss have never seemed a 'natural' part” (p. 87). This underestimates the extent to which the meaning of Anzac Day has evolved and been contested since the First World War. On April 25, 1916, the first anniversary of the Australians and New Zealanders landing at Gallipoli, the Australian Government held no official ceremonies at all. The Acting Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Senator George Pearce, viewed the Dardanelles campaign as a defeat and told a colleague “after the war is over it will then be more opportune than now to consider which event of the Australian Army is the more worthy of remembering.”^[1] During the 1920s and 1930s different groups attempted to claim ownership of the day by preventing others doing what they considered unsuitable activity. In Victoria, women's temperance organizations tried to stop veterans drinking and playing traditional soldier's gambling games at Anzac Day reunions, while the returned sol-

diers succeeded in banning women from attending the dawn service at the main war memorial in Melbourne because of their wailing during the ceremony. Luckins notes the rise in rhetoric about the need to pass the “Anzac spirit” to the next generation in the early 1930s, but does not link this to the growing public realization that war with Japan was likely following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and occupation of Shanghai in 1931 and 1932 and the Australian Government's announcement that it had commenced rearmament in 1933.

The third shortcoming is a profound misunderstanding of the existing literature of Australian military history. According to Luckins, the genre was initially “a history of military strategy and biographies of generals” which in the 1980s “expanded to including the lot of the 'ordinary soldier' and, on occasion, life on the home-front” (p. 249). In fact the literature developed in the opposite way. As Joan Beaumont has noted, C. E. W. Bean, the First World War official historian and the first great exponent of military history in Australia, “established a tradition of writing which was essentially narrative, rather than analytical, and inclined to see the infantrymen as being more worthy of notice than the generals.”^[2] The classic study of the Australian private soldier, Bill Gammage's *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War*, appeared in 1975, three years before the first book on Australian military strategy, David Horner's *Crisis of Command: Australian Generalship and the Japanese Threat, 1941-1943*. Few works of military biography were published in Australia until the 1990s when the Australian Army's History Unit decided to support a biographical series.

Luckins's lack of knowledge of the literature is however symptomatic of a wider problem in Australian military history. Joan Beaumont has written that in Australia historians “researching the social history of war, gender studies and memory rarely interface with those working in the more traditional operational and strategic studies.” She adds: “what Australian military history needs is integration of the various approaches to war.”^[3] Perhaps this is also the situation with military history in other parts of the world. In any case, we can never understand those left behind at the gates of memory unless we also understand those who walked through it.

Notes

[1]. Letter Senator George Pearce to Andrew Fisher, Australian High Commissioner, London, 15 April 1916, Australian War Memorial, Pearce Papers, PRMF0037, Reel 2, Bundle 7, Item 43.

[2]. Joan Beaumont, ed., *Australia's War 1914-18* (Allen and Unwin 1995), p. xx.

[3]. Joan Beaumont, "The State of Australian History of War," *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 34, no. 121, April 2003, p. 167.

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