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**‘Oh for places – green oases – ’**

**Australian Soldiers and the Environments  
of the First World War**

**Elizabeth Heffernan**

**Bachelor of Arts (Honours)**

**The University of Sydney**

## **‘Oh for places – green oases – ’**

### **Australian Soldiers and the Environments of the First World War**

Nature has always played a powerful role in conflicts centuries over. Though the metallic thrum of artillery is pervasive, even more so are the blood-soaked mud of the trenches, the stinging bite of desert sand, the evergreen forests ripped to shreds by shellfire, and the abused scrub of the Mediterranean affording as much protection to men on both sides as it can. In battle, the embrace offered by the slick, damp earth may be the soldier’s ‘only friend, his brother, his mother ... she shelters him and releases him for ten seconds to live, to run, ten seconds of life; receives him again and again and often forever’.<sup>1</sup>

The imagery of nature in war is a recurring motif in most war stories, fictional and otherwise. When given the chance to write about their experiences in diaries, memoirs, or letters home, most soldiers include at least passing reference to the natural environment around them: the weather, perhaps, or the swell of the sea; the colours of the sunset, of the wildflowers sprawling over France’s green hills, of the date palms and bursting orchard fruits of the desert; the heat, or the cold, and the wonder at the environs around them forever at war with the desire to return to the environment of their home. In his seminal work of cultural history, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argues that ‘the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral’, and as such, war’s ‘symbolic status is that of the ultimate antipastoral’.<sup>2</sup> Yet the experience of war cannot be so readily divided into these two categories, for just as surely as war destroys the environment, it is surrounded and shaped by it too.

This essay takes the diaries of twenty Australian soldiers in the First World War and examines the ways in which they wrote about—and as such thought about, interacted with, placed value upon—their wartime environments. It navigates between Fussell’s twin goalposts of the ‘pastoral’ and ‘antipastoral’ to arrive at a reading of soldierly experience with nature in the war somewhere between the two, and more

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. A. W. Wheen, (1929; repr., New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2013), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 251.

complex than either designation would suggest. Specifically, it seeks to analyse how Australian soldiers understood the role of nature within the war itself—as both historical ‘actor’ and ‘victim’ of human action.<sup>3</sup> Putting such thoughts to paper forced soldiers to confront their own place in the war—as directly responsible for the environmental destruction wrought, yet also as witnesses of nature’s potential for post-war renewal. Realisations of this kind prompted a re-evaluation of the importance of the environment back home, and may have even given birth to what we may call a burgeoning sense of environmentalism in interwar Australian society.

Before delving into historical analysis, two fundamental questions must be addressed. The first concerns the use of diaries as historical sources: just how private and ‘organic’ are they?<sup>4</sup> Lynn Bloom argues for a distinction between ‘truly private diaries’, written without artifice and incomprehensible without supplementary material, and ‘private diaries as public documents’, which are often self-contained and offer an authorial persona separate to the diary writer themselves.<sup>5</sup> Yet when ‘truly private diaries’ end up in the public sphere of the archives, this question of definition becomes much harder to answer. Regarding the diaries used in this thesis from the Mitchell Library collection, it can be argued that they straddle the line between Bloom’s categories, for, like the war itself, they were at once intimately personal and unavoidably public. Joe Moran perceives the same phenomenon within British diaries of the twentieth century, in which ‘private reflections have somehow become repositories of collective memory’.<sup>6</sup> We cannot study the World War I diary as a solely private document. Rather, the personal passion and anguish of combat frequently disclosed within their pages must be read alongside references to and awareness of the wider, public circumstances of the war.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Chris Pearson, *Scarred Landscapes: War and Nature in Vichy France* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Judy Nottle Lensink, ‘Expanding the Boundaries of criticism: The Diary as Female Autobiography’, *Women’s Studies* 14, no. 1 (July 1987): 39.

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Z. Bloom, “‘I Write for Myself and Strangers’: Private Diaries as Public Documents’, in *Inscribing the Daily*, 25-6, 28-30.

<sup>6</sup> Joe Moran, ‘Private Lives, Public Histories: The Diary in Twentieth-Century Britain’, *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. 1 (January 2015): 138.

<sup>7</sup> Irina Paperno, ‘What Can Be Done with Diaries?’ *The Russian Review* 63, no. 4 (October 2004): 572; Penny Russell, ‘On Reading the Diary of Jane, Lady Franklin, 1791-1875’, *Hecate* 24, no. 1 (1998): 86.

The second question concerns pre-war Australian understandings of the environment: what were they, and how did they influence wartime perceptions? For the traditional owners of the continent, the environment was intimately connected to their communities and belief systems. For white Australians, however, it was a relationship historically defined by hardship, hostility, and lack—of farmland, rainfall, and the ‘pristine’ English ‘garden[s]’ they were accustomed to.<sup>8</sup> Only from the mid-nineteenth century onwards did the European invaders come to appreciate and idealise the Australian bush—as a kind of ‘rural Utopia’ within which the Australian spirit was forged. By the outbreak of war in 1914, this ‘bush legend’ had been cemented within the national consciousness, and it was this complex relationship to the land that predominantly white Australian soldiers carried with them to war.

In his 1998 treatise on military environmental history, geographer Harold Winters articulates the sheer power that nature wielded over the comings, goings, successes, and failures of armies throughout time. His argument for an understanding of the ‘synergy’ between war and the environment still stands today, and has since been elaborated on at length by a number of military historians.<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Noe, in his essay on climate and weather in the Civil War, phrased it most eloquently: ‘To paraphrase Julia Ward Howe’s familiar lyrics ... we must consider the “fateful lightning” that accompanied the “terrible swift sword”’.<sup>10</sup> Yet there is a fine line to walk between acknowledging the role of nature and exaggerating its historical agency; so too between understanding the environmental impact of war and over-emphasising its destruction. Australian soldier diarists understood this careful balance, perhaps because white Australians at the time were so accustomed to complex environmental relationships—part colonial struggle with the unyielding bush, part idealised utopian ‘wilderness’.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> J. M. Arthur, *The Default Country: A Lexical Cartography of Twentieth-Century Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2003), 23, 26, 32-33; Marcia Langton, ‘What Do We Mean by Wilderness?: Wilderness and Terra Nullius in Australian Art’, *Sydney Papers* 8, no. 1 (Summer 1996): 30; Stephen J. Pyne, *World Fire: The Culture of Fire on Earth* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 41.

<sup>9</sup> Harold A. Winters, et al., *Battling the Elements: Weather and Terrain in the Conduct of War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth W. Noe, ‘Fateful Lightning: The Significance of Weather and Climate to Civil War History’, in *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War*, ed. Brian Allen Drake (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 27.

<sup>11</sup> Langton, ‘What Do We Mean by Wilderness?’ 30.

## **‘Fateful lightning’: How nature determined war**

War is an act determined by human desire and action, and is subject to the forces of nature in the ways, places, and times in which it is fought. Our own Anzac legend is built upon a story of a struggle with nature to survive: the pre-dawn landings at the wrong place on the beach, the massacre on the sand as diggers tried to claw their way up seemingly insurmountable cliffs, all the while avoiding the fire of the Turkish troops positioned perfectly above their heads. Winters’ assertion that ‘the terrain could be as formidable in battle as the enemy’ was never more true than it was that very first Anzac Day.<sup>12</sup> But the hills, valleys, and beachheads of Gallipoli could provide just as much shelter as they did exposure: Corporal Fred Tomlins from Cowra in central-western NSW frequently recounted instances of bullets ‘whistling over us’ while his regiment took shelter behind a natural rise in the land. On one occasion his saving grace was the very hill rising up from the beach ‘that the 3rd Bde. [had] made their gallant charge on ... The bullets ... cannot touch us here’.<sup>13</sup>

In their article on the defeat of General McClellan in the Peninsula Campaign, Judkin Browning and Timothy Silver argue that the very environment McClellan failed to adapt to was used by Confederate forces to their advantage.<sup>14</sup> The same need to adjust to the ‘friction’ of the natural environment, to borrow Carl von Clausewitz’s term for the ‘the force that makes the apparently easy so difficult’, was just as significant a factor in the First World War.<sup>15</sup> Nature did not take sides in combat, but it benefited those who best accommodated its needs and burdened those who did not. With no escape from proximity to the environment around them—whether in tents where the wind whipped through the cotton, or in the entrenched bowels of the very earth itself—soldiers quickly learned the power and influence nature could wield over both physical combat and their own morale.

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<sup>12</sup> Winters, et al., *Battling the Elements*, 140.

<sup>13</sup> Tomlins, 12 May 1915, in diary 21 March-3 September 1915, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 5975/Item 2.

<sup>14</sup> Judkin Browning and Timothy Silver, ‘Nature and Human Nature: Environmental Influences on the Union’s Failed Peninsula Campaign, 1862’, *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 3 (September 2018): 407-9.

<sup>15</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 119-21; Lisa M. Brady, ‘Nature as Friction: Integrating Clausewitz into Environmental Histories of the Civil War’, in *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green*, 145-6.

On the Eastern Front, it was the sand and lack of water that most preoccupied soldier diarists. Sam Norris, an English-born private entirely unused to the arid conditions of Egypt, often wrote of the ‘jolly hard work walking on the sand’, and the way in which the dust ‘chokes’ and ‘absolutely clogs throat nose rifle & everything else up’.<sup>16</sup> Not only was this experience discomfiting, it was also dangerous—a clogged rifle could mean the difference between life and death. Several other diarists similarly recorded their experiences with the ‘periodical’ and ‘violent dust storms’ that left ‘dust inches thick on everything in camp’, and meant soldiers ‘could not leave the tents’ for days at a time lest they be ‘smothered’.<sup>17</sup> ‘I am so deadly sick of it all’, wrote agricultural student Maurice Evans in September 1916.<sup>18</sup> Unable to communicate, unable to drill, the sand posed as much of a threat to Australian soldiers as the enemy. Moreover, unlike the majority of military experiences, it was also incredibly isolating.

The sweltering heat and water scarcity in the desert posed great problems to troops as well. Sergeant Gordon Macrae of the Light Horse recorded several detailed descriptions of the debilitating thirst he and his horse suffered in the desert: ‘I never felt so done in all my life’, he wrote in July 1916, at the height of Egyptian summer. ‘I could no more run than I could fly & I don’t think I cared whether I got hit or not’.<sup>19</sup> Such thirst was a common theme for Macrae’s regiment; in May that same year, at a temperature that ‘must have been 120°’, he and his men encountered an oasis of dirty water they were ordered not to drink, but many did so anyway. Macrae was able to boil some of the water to consume, but ‘It was impossible to get any water for the horses’. Other soldiers ‘were rushing around a lot of them half silly. Some were frothing at the mouth & I saw one man put a bucket of water to his lips & finish the lot. Many more men were so

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<sup>16</sup> Sam Norris, 13 March 1915, 15 March 1915, in diary 1 February-1 May 1915, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 2933/Item 1.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick Burgis, undated, in diary 26 June-29 October 1915, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLDOC 1294; Gordon Tunstall Birkbeck, 24 March 1916, in diary 30 September 1915-23 April 1919, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 810/Item 1; Francis Vincent Addy, 3 March 1916, in diary 9 August 1915-31 December 1917, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 1607/Item 1; Leslie Kemnitz Stuart, 2 March 1916, in diary 18 March 1915-4 March 1916, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS/Item 1.

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Cann Evans, 22 September 1916, in diary 3 July-3 November 1916, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 1576/Item 3.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon Macrae, 31 July 1916, in diary 9 January 1916-20 January 1917, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS/Item 2.

weak they couldn't go on'.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Norris, Macrae had been born in Australia, and in his civilian life was a farmer from Dorrigo, a subtropical town of northern NSW.<sup>21</sup> Yet despite being accustomed to the heat, his struggle remained: 'I don't think anybody even from the hottest parts of Australia had ever gone through such a rough spin'.<sup>22</sup> Twenty-eight men ended up hospitalised from the episode Macrae describes, with many more sick back at camp along with dozens of their horses. Another Light Horse trooper, William Peterson, feared the conditions were 'killing' them.<sup>23</sup> The war on the Eastern Front was turning into a war *against* the Eastern Front, and it was as demoralising as it was dangerous, although not without the typical Australian gallows humour. As Tomlins wryly put it: 'It would be ideal fighting country for mounted troops if the ground was solid & water obtainable'.<sup>24</sup>

For Australian soldiers on the Western Front, the opposite was the problem, yet they too articulated in their diaries the terrible difficulties posed by the environment in carrying out combat manoeuvres as well as the upkeep of their own morale. In the west the mud was 'heartbreaking', the rain 'wretched', the wind 'bitterly cold', and the days 'bleak' in their grey monotony.<sup>25</sup> Soldiers charmed by scenes of the European pastoral in spring were brought to their knees by the rain that made the hills so green; the English Eden of their mind's eye resolutely obliterated by the filth of the trenches during a storm.<sup>26</sup> The 'endless winter' of 1916-17 was the harshest in living memory, while August 1917, the first month of the Passchendaele offensive, was the wettest August Belgium had seen in thirty years.<sup>27</sup> The wet conditions rendered trench warfare a constant battle against the sliding earth and sodden ground; roads were 'slushy', guns 'hoary with

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<sup>20</sup> Macrae, 11-18 May 1916, in diary 9 January 1916-20 January 1917.

<sup>21</sup> 'Diarists from World War I', SLNSW, accessed 3 April 2019, <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/research-and-collections-significant-collections-world-war-i-collection/diarists-world-war-i>.

<sup>22</sup> Macrae, 11-18 May 1916.

<sup>23</sup> William Peterson, 16 June 1916, in diary 1 January-13 August 1916, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 2941/Item 1.

<sup>24</sup> Tomlins, 19 May 1916.

<sup>25</sup> Addy, 1 November 1916, in diary 9 August 1915-31 December 1917; Hector Brewer, 20 October 1916, in diary 19 June-31 December 1916, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS/Item 2; John Davison Wilson, 20 March 1917, in diary 20 March-17 May 1917, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 3057/Item 5.

<sup>26</sup> Richard White, 'Time Travel: Australian Tourists and Britain's Past', *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 10, no. 1 (January 2013): 2, accessed 19 July 2019, DOI: 10.5130/portal.v10i1.2402.

<sup>27</sup> Martha Hanna, 'Spaces of War: Rural France, Fears of Famine, and the Great War', in *France and Its Spaces of War: Experience, Memory, Image*, ed. Patricia M. E. Lorcin and Daniel Brewer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 45-47, 49-53, 55; John Charteris, *Field Marshal Earl Haig* (London: Cassell, 1929), 273.



frost', and horses 'struggled nightly through that mud ... tearing their legs on unseen barbed wire' all the while 'icicles [dripped from] their noses'.<sup>28</sup> The rain washed away shelter, bogged down guns in the mud, and drowned soldiers in the 'flooded' trenches.<sup>29</sup> It was 'pitiless', 'merciless', and 'bitterly cold too'.<sup>30</sup> It left the front in 'a deplorable condition', with the troops not far behind.<sup>31</sup> For Edward Sparke of Newcastle, only nineteen at the time of his enlistment, it seemed as though there was 'Over everything a pall, a feeling of utter hopelessness'.<sup>32</sup> With morale so low, trenches so treacherous, socks and the feet inside them so wet and thus susceptible to trench foot and potential amputation, the war in the west had truly become a war at odds with the environment, one that soldiers could only deal with by recounting such terrible experiences in their diaries, in the hope that better days would come.

Yet not all interactions with the environment were so negative. As much as the desert sand was a curse, it could also be a blessing. It was 'always soft & warm', put many soldiers in mind of home, and made those on the Eastern Front 'thank God one isn't in Flanders' amidst the mud and the cold.<sup>33</sup> Light Horse Major Frank Weir even pointed to its beneficial impact upon artillery fire: 'I'll admit if I hear the bomb coming through the air I like to lie down—but in the sand bombs are more demoralising than effective', their impact absorbed and dispersed by the dunes in much the same way sandbags were used in both military and civilian fortifications of the war.<sup>34</sup> Weather, too, could be a blessing. The wind and dust storms that were so dispiriting for Australian troops also functioned to discourage enemy bombing due to lack of visibility. Clear nights were used by both Allied and Axis powers to their advantage, such as in the

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<sup>28</sup> Wilson, 20 March 1917; Henry [Harry] Cicognani, undated, in diary 1 November 1914-September 1915, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 1238; Edward Rashleigh Sparke, 2 February 1917, in diary 23 August 1914-26 December 1917, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 3042/Item 1; Charles Hargreaves, 24 March 1917, in diary 6 February 1916-23 March 1918, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS/Item 2.

<sup>29</sup> Wilson, 20 March 1917; David Pedgley, 'Meteorology in World War One', *Weather* 61, no. 9 (September 2006): 264; Cicognani, undated, in diary 1 November 1914-September 1915; Reynold Cleve Potter, 28 August 1918, in diary 17 August 1918-16 January 1919, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 2944/Item 2.

<sup>30</sup> William Henry Nicholson, 31 December 1916, in diary 19 August 1915-31 December 1916, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 2931/Item 1; Sparke, 8 December 1916, in diary 23 August 1914-26 December 1917.

<sup>31</sup> Wilson, 20 March 1917.

<sup>32</sup> Sparke, 8 December 1916.

<sup>33</sup> Frank Valentine Weir, 26 July 1916, in diary 2 January-31 December 1916, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 1024/3/Item 2; Hargreaves, 5 January 1916, in diary 4 December 1915-3 February 1916, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 2307/Item 1.

<sup>34</sup> Weir, 1 January 1917, in diary 1 January-31 December 1917, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 1024/3/Item 3.

west when ‘being a bright moonlight night of course Fritz was dropping his eggs & playing his machine gun on to the ground’.<sup>35</sup> Meteorology also determined the aiming of artillery, positioning of tanks, and timing of poison gas attacks across the Western Front.<sup>36</sup> Australian soldiers could anticipate that a fine day meant bombs, a breezy day gas, and thus shore themselves up accordingly. This understanding of nature’s friction meant that by 1918 Australian troops had gained a new understanding of what war could be: not simply a pitched battle between men of different nations, but an ordeal, ‘fought in, through, and against nature’ as well.<sup>37</sup> Upon their return home we can speculate that the men brought these new understandings with them; very few of the diaries continue much beyond the war’s end, but slight post-war shifts in white Australia’s relationship to the environment, discussed later in this essay, suggest a residual effect of the soldiers’ respect for nature’s might.

#### **‘Terrible swift sword’: How war determined nature**

In his award-winning book *The Soldier’s Tale*, Vietnam veteran and literature emeritus Samuel Hynes wrote of the dominant understanding of the Western Front, ‘not [as] a landscape, but an annihilation of what *landscape* means’.<sup>38</sup> An ‘*anti-landscape*’, to further borrow Hynes’ terminology; the defining image in what he terms the genre of ‘battlefield Gothic’.<sup>39</sup> It is easy to imagine what Hynes means by these descriptions, for it has been the archetypal image of World War I since war photographers on the front lines enshrined such scenes in film. War destroys the landscape as much as the land affects war, and almost every diarist consulted in this study, whether on the Western Front or in the east, acknowledged this fact. In doing so, they came to understand the negative influence human activity could have upon the wonders of nature.

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<sup>35</sup> Hargreaves, 24 August 1918, in diary 1 April-12 November 1918, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 2307/Item 3.

<sup>36</sup> Pedgley, ‘Meteorology in World War One’, 264.

<sup>37</sup> Chris Pearson, *Mobilizing Nature: The Environmental History of War and Militarization in Modern France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 92.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 53.

<sup>39</sup> Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale*, 7, 68; Steven Heyde, ‘History as a Source for Innovation in Landscape Architecture: The First World War Landscapes in Flanders’, *Studies in the Histories of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 35, no. 3 (March 2015): 185.

For a nation largely composed by either farmers or urban dwellers who idealised the rural lifestyle, such a realisation was haunting indeed.

Soldiers on the Western Front had witnessed firsthand the romantic beauty of the French and Belgian pastoral landscapes. Reflections on the ‘pleasant surroundings of green vegetation’ abounded in Australian diaries, and many soldiers took the opportunity of exploring the landscape as an escape from active combat.<sup>40</sup> Yet when contrasted with the devastation wrought by shells, tanks, and machine guns, the destruction of the environment became all the more tragic for the beauty it had ruined.<sup>41</sup> Private Percy Hodge, a young warehouseman from Manly who enlisted in 1915, tried to enjoy the ‘pleasant ... vegetation’ but could not erase from his mind’s eye the ‘chaos of mud, tree stumps and shell holes’ his company had passed through between Laviéville and Bapaume in northern France.<sup>42</sup> Roy Bell, who would be killed in action not two months after writing these words, tried to distract himself from ‘that great rubbish heap Ypres’ by noting the ‘verdant ... tints of nature’ around him, yet his gaze could not help but be drawn to ‘the ridge held by the Germans looking very bare and ugly as it lies in amongst those woods standing out stark and black as each limbless tree seems to tell its tale of suffering.’<sup>43</sup> The Belgian city of Ypres would go on to see three more battles wrought across its landscape after Bell was killed. The ‘green fields’ and ‘fine rows of trees’ he notes alongside the ruined environment would likely have disappeared entirely by 1918; perhaps it was a small mercy that Bell was not there to witness their ruination.<sup>44</sup>

Many other diarists were unable to focus on anything but the beaten and ravaged landscape, and left reflection on the beauty of nature to happier, peaceful times. ‘The ground for miles round here is torn up badly by shellfire’, wrote Hector Brewer in 1917 at the annihilated remains of Hooze, near Ypres, ‘...

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<sup>40</sup> Percy Hodge, 1-7 April 1917, in diary 17 December 1915-6 July 1919, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 2278.

<sup>41</sup> Heyde, ‘History as a Source for Innovation’, 187.

<sup>42</sup> Hodge, 1-7 April 1917.

<sup>43</sup> Roy Pinto Bell, 20 October 1916, in diary 16 December 1915-26 October 1916, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 886.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*; Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 2-4.

and only a few dead stumps can be seen to mark the one time wood'.<sup>45</sup> The year prior, Brewer was in Delville Wood in Longueval, France, three months after the battle there had ended as part of the Somme offensive: 'It must have been a Devil of a Wood right enough. Large trees are blown to smithereens & the ground is ploughed up yard by yard'.<sup>46</sup> Of the trees, Private Hodge too had words to spare, writing at Bapaume: 'The tall trees ... would prove a very pretty picture in Spring. But all these have been cut down 2 feet from the ground and left where they fell. Likewise all orchards have suffered in a similar manner'.<sup>47</sup> Charles Hargreaves, writing of his march through the fields of the Somme, would come to put it best in April 1917, five months after the end of the offensive: 'The country looks more devastated than ever ... just a desolation without any life'.<sup>48</sup> 'Utter desolation scored and pitted', wrote Sergeant William Watson.<sup>49</sup> Over a year later, gunner James Young echoed those words at Amiens: 'it was nothing but desolation'.<sup>50</sup> Hynes' landscape of annihilation would not be out of place amidst these descriptions; it seemed as though the war was obliterating the environment to the point of extinction. Australian soldiers mourned the loss of such landscapes with almost as much regularity, anguish, and poignancy as they did their fallen comrades; in these instances, the war diary became a kind of confessional, absorbing their grief as well as their guilt at taking part in nature's destruction, and transmuting it into an evolved understanding of the devastating consequences of modern warfare.

Soldier death and the destruction of First World War landscapes were also inextricably linked. During periods of intense combat, troops often had to bury their dead comrades where they fell—a returning to the earth of the soldier who would never return home again. That ubiquitous image of Flanders Fields, the poppy, grew from soil watered with the blood of thousands. Its 'arterial crimson' petals were a constant

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<sup>45</sup> Brewer, 23 September 1917, in diary 18 September 1917-1 January 1918, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS/Item 4.

<sup>46</sup> Brewer, 4 December 1916, in diary 19 June-31 December 1916.

<sup>47</sup> Hodge, 12 April 1917, in diary 17 December 1915-6 July 1919.

<sup>48</sup> Hargreaves, 23 April 1917, in diary 6 February 1916-23 March 1918.

<sup>49</sup> William Charles Watson, undated, in diary 1917, revised transcript of original, Mitchell Library, New South Wales, MLMSS 2949.

<sup>50</sup> James McCall Young, 3 June 1918, in diary 22 April-5 August 1918, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS 989/Item 2.

reminder of the war dead, and remain so today.<sup>51</sup> Across the hundred-year-old battlefields of Ypres and the Somme, marked and unmarked graves spring out of the green grass like flower stalks themselves. Cultural historian Jay Winter argues that ‘Remembrance is part of the landscape. Anyone who walks through northern France or Flanders will find traces of the terrible, almost unimaginable, human losses of the war’.<sup>52</sup> That remembrance functioned during the war as well, with poet and official Australian war artist George Lambert forever reminded of the connectivity between the landscape and death:

Think more of perfumed flowers and blossoms bright  
And Lilies hallowed in history ...  
Think not about the bodies underneath,  
Forget the dead. Weed out your memory.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps it is no wonder some soldiers wished for the landscape of war to remain forever ravaged; they had lost so much there, would bear the physical and emotional scars of that experience for the rest of their lives. For the environment to stay similarly scarred would be a tangible reminder of the suffering they bore.<sup>54</sup> Yet as Winter and a number of others have argued, the recovery of the environment does not preclude remembrance of what happened there. Soldier death in World War I is impossible to excise from the landscape in which it occurred; just as the war diary makes indelible the experiences recorded within, so too does the land make unforgettable those who died in its embrace.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> C. W. W. Webster, ‘Night on Guard’, in *The Poems of an Australian WWI Gunner: Poems from World War I and Post-War*, ed. Anne Bachelard (York: York Publishing Services Ltd, 2015), 6; Fussell, *The Great War*, 275.

<sup>52</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>53</sup> George Lambert, ‘Weed Your Memory’, in Amy Lambert, *Thirty Years of an Artist’s Life: The Career of G.W. Lambert* (1938; repr., Sydney: Bloxham and Chambers, 1977), 228.

<sup>54</sup> Jon Price, ‘The Devonshires Held This Trench, They Hold It Still: Cultural Landscapes of Sacrifice and the Problem of the Sacred Ground of the Great War 1914-1918’, in *Landscapes of Clearance: Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Angèle Smith and Amy Gazin-Scwartz (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008), 180-1.

<sup>55</sup> Heyde, ‘History as a Source for Innovation’, 188.

## Healing the ‘scarred landscape’

Australia was, and still is, a country defined by its environment, and it is therefore no wonder our troops were so preoccupied with the devastation of the same overseas. It is also no wonder that these soldier diarists searched for a glimmer of rehabilitation in nature, perhaps more so than troops of other nations. To find evidence of the environment healing after the war was to gain no small measure of comfort in the knowledge for our new nation that such tragedy could be overcome. The ‘horrors’ having ‘faded away into an unpleasant dream’ alleviated the guilt many felt at being instrumental in causing those horrors to begin with, and perhaps even inspired returning troops to look upon their own home environments with greater love, respect, and appreciation.<sup>56</sup>

The rehabilitation of the wartime environments was most noticeable to soldiers on the Western Front. Just as the French and Belgian landscapes bore the deepest scars of war, the flowers that grew from muddy and bloody fields—among them poppies and cornflowers, the colours of ‘arterial and venous blood’—bloomed the brightest.<sup>57</sup> ‘All last years battlefield is now a blaze of colour’, Hargreaves wrote on his way through Pozieres, ‘—covered with wildflowers where last winter one would have thought nothing would ever grow again’.<sup>58</sup> A battle fought as part of the Somme offensive, official war historian Charles Bean named Pozieres ‘more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth’.<sup>59</sup> It was a place of loss, grief, and devastation; a year later, had become a site of rebirth. Earlier that year Hargreaves again noted nature’s resilient industry near Amiens in France: ‘One wouldn’t recognise this as the same country of 4 months ago ... the fruit trees in the farms & along the roads are in full blossom’.<sup>60</sup> In that same region the following year, James Young described how ‘the countryside took on its peaceful aspect again, the soil being cultivated and crops of rye & barley for acres and acres intermingled with beautiful patches

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<sup>56</sup> Brewer, 27 July 1917, in diary 12 June-16 September 1917, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MLMSS/Item 3.

<sup>57</sup> Fussell, *The Great War*, 275.

<sup>58</sup> Hargreaves, 23 June 1917, in diary 6 February 1916-23 March 1918.

<sup>59</sup> C. E. W. Bean, *Anzac to Amiens: A Shorter History of the Australian Fighting Services in the First World War* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1946), 264.

<sup>60</sup> Hargreaves, 30 May 1917, in diary 6 February 1916-23 March 1918.

of varied hued wildflowers'.<sup>61</sup> The Battle of Amiens took place after both Hargreaves and Young's diary entries, and laid waste to much of the beauty they had seen. But the land had recovered once before and it would do so again, even if all that grew from the churned-up earth were weeds.

Witnessing such regrowth and renewal in so devastated a landscape as the Western Front left many Australian soldiers in awe of the power of nature to overcome even the vilest of human acts. Strolling through the fields of Picardy in a brief respite from the front line, Private Reynold Potter 'marvelled at the profusion of cornflowers and poppies that almost hide the ugly shell holes and uglier trenches'.<sup>62</sup> After the war, he would turn his hand to poetry:

Who'll unravel why we travel  
Over war's broad barren waste?  
Oh for places – green oases –  
Life to breathe and taste.<sup>63</sup>

Though it is difficult to follow the trajectory of what may be called a burgeoning sense of environmentalism in many of these diarists, it is not impossible. Potter, at the very least, longed for that landscape of peace and plenty to last him for the rest of his eighty-two years. We can speculate that other diarists similarly returned with a renewed appreciation of Australia's wild trees, sloping hills, tilled fields, and local wildflowers, having seen the very same brought to ruin across the other side of the world.

The slow growth of early environmentalist organisations after the war—the Royal Zoological Society of NSW, for example, established in 1879 but experiencing a rise in membership from 1919, or the Royal Australian Ornithological Union who now 'wanted to study birds, not shoot them'—may also have something to do with returning soldiers, either those who had been rural workers before the war or who took part in the ultimately dysfunctional soldier settlement schemes from 1915 onwards.<sup>64</sup> The Wild Life

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<sup>61</sup> Young, 3 June 1918, in diary 22 April-5 August 1918.

<sup>62</sup> Potter, 8 September 1918, in diary 17 August 1918-16 January 1919.

<sup>63</sup> R. C. Potter, 'Not Theirs the Shame', in *Not Theirs the Shame Who Fight: Edited Selections from the World War I Diaries, Poems and Letters of 6080 Private R.C. (Cleve) Potter A Company 21st Battalion A.I.F.*, ed. Stephen Matthews (Charnwood, ACT: Ginninderra Press, 1999), 114.

<sup>64</sup> J. H. Prince, *The First One Hundred Years of the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales* (Sydney: Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales, 1979), 10; Thomas R. Dunlap, *Nature and the English Diaspora:*

Preservation Society of Australia was formed in 1909 but gained traction after the war; forestry legislation enacted in 1916 in NSW ensured greater bureaucratic and legal protections for the state's vast bushland.<sup>65</sup> In the 1930s, interest in bushwalking also spiked, leading to the formation of a number of exclusive clubs as well as growing popular interest in day trips from the city, such as from Sydney to the surrounding Hunter, Illawarra, and South Coast bush regions.<sup>66</sup> These links are admittedly tenuous, but it would be remiss to dismiss them entirely. It is clear that some kind of change was beginning to take shape in the years following the Great War, one that inspired greater enthusiasm for the country's native flora and fauna than before. It is logical to attribute such change to the returning soldiers, who had seen the world and all that its environments had to offer, yet returned home to the beaches and the bushland all the same.

Travelling through the fields of the Somme the summer after the battle, Hector Brewer marvelled at its beauty even after all the horrors he had witnessed there the previous winter: 'Who would have thought nature could be so bitter and yet so heavenly!'<sup>67</sup> No words better summarise the experience of Australian soldiers in the First World War with the environments around them. Nature in the war was friend, ally, enemy, and victim all at once, as richly diverse as the environments themselves, and the experiences of the soldiers within them. Understanding the role of nature in the war changed how Australian soldiers understood combat, its influences and effects. Understanding these effects changed how Australian soldiers understood nature itself—as something to be protected, mourned, thankful for. Soldier diarists worked through these understandings in their diaries, and though the journals rarely outlast the war they suggest implications far beyond Armistice Day—a lasting legacy of the First World War as enduring as the Australian bush itself, that place both 'bitter' and 'heavenly' for the white invaders, and all generations since.<sup>68</sup>

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*Environment and History in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 111.

<sup>65</sup> Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, *A History of the Australian Environment Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 58-9.

<sup>66</sup> Melissa Harper, 'The Ways of the Bushwalker: Buskwalking in Australia, 1788-1940', (PhD. diss., University of Sydney, 2002), 279-84, 327.

<sup>67</sup> Brewer, 27 July 1917, in diary 12 June-16 September 1917.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*



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