Part I

Loss, Memory, Desire

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The unquiet grave: imaginary journeys

On 2 December 1915 Major G. F. Stevenson, Commanding Officer of the 6th Australian Battery at Gallipoli, wiped the grime from his hands and wrote a letter home to Australia. It began in the way so many others did, bearing the most personal of messages to a woman he would never meet. 'It is with extreme regret that I find myself called upon to write to you giving details of the death of your son . . .'

Brian Lyall had been killed on 29 November. That day Turkish artillery swept the gullies and the ridges, pounding the Anzac position and breaking crucial communication lines with the beach. Major Stevenson detailed Gunner Lyall to find the break in the telephone wire and mend it. Though 'fully aware of the danger' the young soldier went on his mission 'without hesitation or complaint'. Somewhere in the trenches Lyall was 'struck down' by a shell and buried alive.

It took them several hours to prise Gunner Lyall from the earth, several hours more to carry his broken, bleeding body to the field hospital on the beach. And although Major Stevenson broke the news as gently as he could, it was clear that it took Mrs Lyall's son several hours to die:

> I . . . was informed that the poor lad had passed away at [2 am] that morning . . . This news, I assure you, was a great shock to me, as [I thought] his wounds would soon mend and that he would in all probability be sent home. However God's will was otherwise.

We don't know if Mrs Lyall found much comfort in the thought that God had taken the life of a loving son. But we can conclude, from that sheet of frayed and worn paper, that she (and probably those close to her) read the Major's letter time and time again. Somehow, knowing how her son died offered some consolation. And the Major was careful to choose words a grieving mother longed to hear. Gunner Lyall was 'the best liked man in the Battery and though one of the youngest he was the manliest of them all . . . the way he did his duty will help to sustain you a little in your grief'. In a way, Stevenson's letter strived to set things to order: it assured a family

far away that all that was possible had been done. Much of Lyall's kit was 'sold by auction to his comrades who bought them up eagerly as mementos of one they all admired'. But personal and precious things, a watch, some letters and a soiled pocket diary, were carefully set aside by the Major. 'I am [also] sending you a silver brandy flask with his name engraved thereon'. It was dated with the week that Lyall enlisted: 'you would value it more than anyone else [possibly] could'. Mrs Lyall also valued the description of her son's funeral. The boy from Victoria was 'buried in a cemetery close to Ari Burnu on the beach'. The chaplain read a service and 'a wooden cross [was] erected'. Brian's mates stood quietly beside the shallow, sandy grave on the edge of the Aegean: their last farewells laid the battered body to rest.[1]

Mrs Lyall would never visit her son's grave. She was poor, elderly and infirm and Gallipoli, quite literally, was half a world away. But others went there for her: Brian's comrades, his chaplain, and finally (with the war's end) the staff of the War Graves Commission. To this day the Commission is charged with the care of that lonely cemetery by the sea. And although she could not make the journey herself she could certainly imagine it. Indeed for most of the families of some 60 000 dead, pilgrimages to war graves overseas were next to impossible; this was to be a journey of the heart, a journey of the mind.

Confronting loss, witnessing death

Unable to tend the body of the dead, or stand beside their graveside, reconstructing the final 'crowded moments' of a loved one's life seemed a necessity to the bereaved. Great stress was laid on visualising a death in battle or in hospital, an attempt, psychologists tell us, to lend finality to loss, to witness and to accept. But the actual details of these deaths were difficult to come by. Not all Australian officers were quite as forthcoming as Major Stevenson and very few as credible. Indeed letters from all ranks to families at home often lapse into a formulaic pattern: death was painless, men were brave, he led a good life and 'played the game . . . to the end'. These comforting clichés told a family very little: loved ones craved 'any possible information', while the bravest (and most sceptical) demanded 'the real truth'.[2] Terse details released by the War Office satisfied no one. The first a family heard of a casualty was usually a bluntly worded cable: a man was reported 'wounded' or 'missing', 'sick' or 'killed'.[3] Months could pass before any official confirmation and even then these deaths seemed problematic. The Croser family from Minalton, South Australia, waited week after week in limbo:

> We had word from one of his mates, to say that [poor Will] was missing and then . . . got word from the Military Authorities that he was killed on July 17th. And later on got word that it was the 19th July. Since then one of his mates wrote home to say he was a Prisoner of War in Germany, so [we] don't know what to make of any of it. They have not sent any of his things back . . . so [we are] doubtful about him being killed at all.[4]

Percy Blakemore's mother suffered the same uncertainty. One by one, her letters were returned: 'marked successively "wounded", "killed in action" and "missing" '. Each day she waited for the dreaded cable to arrive; every moment she 'despaired' to hear of anything 'definite'.[5] Doubts like these were crippling as well as cruel. They prevented any lasting acceptance of loss and prolonged the period of 'searching' identified with the first and most difficult phase of grief.[6] Private Harry Antram was one of the first to land at Gallipoli and one of the first to fall. As late as October, his father still sought 'particulars' from the authorities, something that could confirm and somehow justify the death of his 'poor boy':

> I have [been told he was killed] officially, but when how or where or where he was buried or what became of his belongings watch chain Ring etc . . . have heard nothing up to now and I can assure you his mother and I also the family are extremely anxious.[7]

Similarly, it was not simply enough for Mrs Jones to be told that the son she loved had 'died for his country':

> I would like to know how long he lived . . . did he suffer much, and was he conscious, did he ask for his parents in any way and did he send any message? I would like to know where he is buried and . . . how long he was in the firing line before he was wounded. This is a dreadful war . . . making so many sad homes and taking so many . . .[8]

It was in the hope of answering these questions that families turned to the Red Cross. The Red Cross Wounded and Missing Bureau was established in the early months of the war. Initially it inquired only into the fate of officers but public demand was such that searches were soon extended to other ranks. It was a monumental effort, one made all the more remarkable by the entirely voluntary status of the society. Inquiry agents visited one hospital after another interviewing survivors and carefully recording their testimony. Nurses, doctors, military authorities, all were prevailed upon for 'more definite and conclusive information'.[9] Individual case files often run to fifty closely typed pages; by the end of the fighting, 4000 reports a month were being sent back to Australia. The Bureau's inquiries enabled

families to confront the loss of a loved one. They could confirm a death on some distant field of battle, they could extend sympathy and understanding. Most important of all they offered the bereaved some insight into the way their soldier died, recreating the moment of death, making that imaginary journey possible.

Collecting information was one part of the Bureau's work, evaluating it another. Vera Deakin, the daughter of a former Prime Minister, became accustomed to sifting truth from hearsay, reconciling all 'the inconclusive evidence . . . the confusion, the ambiguities, different sightings, [and] nick names wrong'.[10] Her task was hardest in the case of the missing: men whose deaths were inconclusive, whose bodies have never been (truly) found. And to hear a man was missing was 'hardest of all' for the families who loved them: 'the suspense' of 'never knowing' described as 'terrible', 'maddening', 'unbearable'. Like a hundred other mothers in Broken Hill, Janet Fox longed for any news at all of her 'poor lad': 'He was reported missing on July 29th and I can hear nothing further you can imagine how the suspense is telling on me it seems to eat into one's very soul . . . how helpless I am'.[11]

The families of the missing were denied any kind of 'closure'. Louisa Crowe writes six times to the Red Cross, hoping against hope for some news of her 'poor son'. In the end, the letters are not even dated. One week of grieving slides into another until even word of his death 'would come as a relief'.

> I would like to know if you have heard anything further about him it is dreadful not to know where he is or what's become of him day after day waiting anxious to hear something, I would be quite satisfied if they found him dead or alive what ever it may be I would have to make the best of it for there is plenty of mothers situated the same way as myself. I expect and do hope . . . that you have some news for me by now. Trusting . . . to hear from you soon.[12]

When news did come it often only added to a family's agony. Mrs Pill's brother had been missing for over six months when she finally wrote to the Bureau; her anguish seems no less real and no less urgent today:

> Please I am writing a few lines just to ask you please if you can give me any trace of . . . Private W. R. Blacksell . . . please can you tell me any way in which I might be able to find my dear brother, he is all the world to me, and it is driving me out of my mind, as I cant [sic] get a trace of him one of his mates wrote home and told me that he saw my brother on a stretcher wounded and said in another letter that my brother had died of wounds. I have done all I can but [can't] find out anything, if he is a prisoner of war, how can I find out, please can you tell me . . .[13]

Inquiries confirmed that Private Blacksell was killed at Fromelles. Though it was little consolation to his sister, he didn't die alone. Blacksell was one of over 5000 casualties; the Australian Imperial Force's initiation to fighting on the Western Front was a suicidal charge at the German front line. The only eyewitness account ruled out injury or capture. Blacksell was killed 'instantly' by a shell-burst; not a 'trace' of his body was ever recovered from the Somme. Other deaths were far less conclusive. 'Wounded and missing' somewhere in France, Captain W. D. Hardy was reported taken prisoner, was seen crawling back to allied trenches, was rumoured to be on a hospital ship. It took almost a year (and hundreds of hours of interviews) to 'confirm' Captain Hardy's death. The battlefield at Gallipoli was just as chaotic. Men 'are lost sight of' within hours of the landing, 'vanishing' altogether in the scrub and the gullies. They reappear convalescing in Mudros, charging the second ridge, and limping back to the beaches. Private A. C. Clarke was 'bayoneted and killed instantly' but that didn't stop him taking the next trench at Lone Pine, boarding a hospital ship for home or being carried off a prisoner.[14]

Families too sighted their loved ones. All through the war, mothers forwarded press clippings to the Bureau, claiming to recognise their own 'missing' sons in photographs of prisoners, front-line soldiers or even injured men. Private Barnwell went missing at Gallipoli in the third week of the fighting. From the first, his mother insisted her son had lost his memory; he had been wounded in the head, perhaps, and could not be identified. 'I am afraid they have not searched everywhere', she writes in 1916, not in all the hospitals in France and England. Many years later, a photograph of returning soldiers reaches Alberton, Victoria, and the same determined hope is rekindled. As late as August 1919 Barnwell's mother begs the Red Cross to take up the search again.[15] Lost soldiers like this one would die many times in the course of an inquiry. Informants variously report a missing man machine-gunned, bayoneted or blown to pieces—in the midst of fighting, one Red Cross worker mused, men saw far too much and far too little.[16]

Deciding which account to believe was the task of the Inquiry Bureau; so too was the burden of 'breaking the news' to the family. In this regard, the Red Cross played the part of 'a fictive kin', a surrogate family. It was not just that Red Cross workers 'stood as proxies for parents, wives, brothers and sisters', advocating their case to seemingly indifferent military authorities. As 'witnesses' to a loved one's death they were also involved in mediating mourning, offering 'that human sympathy' altogether absent in 'official reports'.[17] Often the correspondence between families and the Red Cross assumes an intimate, almost loving character; far from the stiff Edwardian stoicism historians might lead us to expect. Vera Deakin's letters in particular, read as

if they were spoken, gently guiding the bereaved towards an acceptance of death:

> I am bitterly sorry we have a sad piece of news . . . A wire has come from our Rouen office stating that Sgt Adam was wounded on the 28th of July and died . . . I dare not say do not yet give up hope, these tidings may not be officially confirmed! Because then, if they prove true, the pain will be doubly cruel. It can be a very slender comfort to you to know that we sympathise with you in your sorrow and suffering, nevertheless we do. The time has come when we all begin to feel that we women would make any sacrifice if only some of these promising young lives may be saved. You may rest assured that we shall make every possible inquiry . . . I will send you every detail of his admission . . . and, if we can, his last word.

The letter's intimacy is all the more remarkable given the time when it was written. In the aftermath of the Somme offensive, Deakin and her colleagues were required to write hundreds of letters similar to this one. And their sympathy offered more than 'slender comfort'. 'Ever grateful and broken hearted mothers' thank the Society 'for all [their] kindness'; impoverished parents send donations well beyond their means. Even Sergeant Adam's mother summoned the courage to face the truth:

> I thank you very much indeed for your extremely kind letter, . . . which alas! I must take as final. It was easier to hear it as you so kindly wrote [rather] than in the usual terse official intimation and I am indeed grateful that you will get me any possible news when you can.[18]

Truth in war is always a scarce commodity. In conveying the news of death, Red Cross workers had to reconcile two potentially conflicting duties. On the one hand, families were to be made to confront their loss: 'lingering doubts' offered 'false hope' and that (as Deakin put it) could only prove 'doubly cruel'. This helps to explain a startling lack of euphemism in the way deaths are described. Men are killed, they seldom 'fall in battle', grieving families are told that they were shot, gassed, bayoneted or shelled. Indeed the more 'factual' the imagery, the more conclusive these deaths would seem.[19] On the other hand, mediating grief, offering kindness and consolation, meant making these deaths somehow more presentable. In September 1917 Lady Munro Ferguson (president of the Australian Red Cross) warned against passing on 'crude' inquiry reports from London: 'if the news [of a man's death] is delivered in a callous manner, all the good we do might be lost'.[20] And so the language of war was gently amended, abrupt accounts by soldiers softened for the ears of 'heartbroken' parents, siblings and wives. Men 'shot though the privates' are wounded in the abdomen; those 'cut up' by machine-gun

fire or 'blown to pieces' are 'killed instantly' and 'without pain'.[21] The most disturbing details are often simply deleted. Robert Phillips' death could be made to sound painless and heroic, the lad from Queensland had been struck down by a shell 'holding the line at Ypres'. But the file suggests it wasn't the shelling that killed him. With one leg 'practically blown off' and his body 'twisted like a corkscrew', Phillips 'crawled into a . . . hole and blew his head off with a rifle'.[22] Indeed at times one senses a disparity between the consolation Red Cross workers were so eagerly seeking and the grim detachment of the men they interviewed. Private Patterson was asked if he was able to bury a comrade killed in shellfire at Bullecourt: 'There was nothing left of him to bury' came the terse reply.[23] All this careful censorship was not simply a matter of sparing feelings or observing proprieties. The Red Cross was in the business of manufacturing memory, of constituting an image of death a family could live with. Private Leahy's family was told their son 'was buried in the field' close to where he was killed. The rough cross marking the place conferred a certain dignity; Fred's parents could imagine it as 'sacred spot', a place of future pilgrimage. His sergeant saw the scene very differently. 'Snowy' and another soldier had been practically buried when a shell hit their dugout at Passchendaele. Finishing the job was a fairly simple matter: 'We found them in the morning—with their heads sticking out [of the ground]. They were covered up [just] where they were'.[24]

Circles of mourning

In reconstructing a man's death the Red Cross drew on three quite distinct sources of testimony. Soldiers, nurses and chaplains could all be involved in an individual death in battle, they witnessed the wounds or tried to heal them, administered the sacraments to dying men and committed their bodies to the earth. Of course, every death was different, and as witnesses to death these informants could respond in very different ways. But each (in a sense) was implicated in the loss; their accounts were the ones families longed to hear.

In the front line, soldiers were often the sole circle of informants. They nursed the bodies of the dying, heard their last messages and buried them if they could. Some, as Private Patterson's account suggests, were hardened to the death of their comrades, their testimony reads as cold, clinical even callous. But others were deeply affected: contrary to what many historians have written the mass slaughter of modern warfare did not make the death of any given individual any easier to bear. 'We all loved and respected [Bill Bolton]', Private Geddes told a Red Cross visitor, 'he was one of the finest and

best hearted chaps that ever breathed'. Bolton had been shot in the neck on the Somme and drowned in his own blood in less than 15 minutes. Geddes gathered up his 'things, a prayer book [and] wristlet watch and forwarded them to his mother'. Then they dragged that 'big lump of a chap' over the parapet and buried him just behind the trenches. No doubt there was an intimacy in Bolton's death; sniped near his dugout he died with mates all around him. But inquirers also found moments of tenderness in even the most hurried and heartless carnage. Private Clarke was killed in an instant as Australians charged the German lines near Fleurbaix: 'All of a sudden his helmet blew 10 yards in front of him . . . shot clear through the head he never moved or spoke again'. There was no time to bury young Nobby but a mate paused 'to cover his dear face up' before they pushed on.[25] In the Red Cross files one hears a very different voice to the clichéd letters of condolence drafted for distant families. Perhaps that was because these words were actually spoken. Soldiers were usually interviewed in hospital, when illness or injury had taken them from the front line. These were rare reflective moments, when men confided something of the horror, exposed their vulnerability, whispered secrets long unsaid.

Private diaries offer just as intimate a testimony. It may well be true that stoicism, codes of manliness and 'emotional repression' sustained men through the horror of battle, but when the fighting was over, when the moment came to bury their mates, one sometimes sees a very different kind of soldier. A veteran of three years fighting, Private Langford Colley-Priest MM attended a memorial service in the closing months of the war. Corporal Crosier spoke in honour of four of his fallen comrades; neither he nor his audience kept 'a stiff upper lip'. 'It was indeed an impressive service', the young private confided to his diary and 'one I shall never forget. I have never seen men break down as they did this night'.[26]

Words embody emotion but so too do gestures. The marking of a grave was often a comrade's final tribute: in the bleakness of a battlefield soldiers dignified death as best they could. 'Rough crosses' were fashioned from bits of broken machinery, bodies buried 'on the parapet' identified by 'bayonet and scabbard'. At Gallipoli graves were decorated with stones, beaten jam tins and biscuit boxes. In the desert south of Gaza, scratching on a sheet of cardboard said all that was needed to be said.[27] Families (as we'll see) often longed to raise a monument for their loved one, to carve a memory and an epitaph in stone. Soldiers' graves were simpler but no less poignant: a pencilled name in a blighted landscape conquered the anonymity of death.[28]

It was the description of a man's grave that could most console a grieving family. More than anything else a grave signalled closure, an end to the rumours, suppositions and false sightings, it was physical incontrovertible

evidence of a man's death. Relatives were thankful when loved ones were buried by their comrades: knowing the men (or even 'their people') helped a family through their grief. Killed at night in a vulnerable forward outpost, Lieutenant Irving's body was buried 'as best it could be' so near the enemy. The want of ceremony mattered little to his sister:

> How grateful we are that it was you who laid our dear Willie to rest. It is nice to know that [it was] someone other than strangers. We were in hopes that news of his death was a mistake until we [heard it was] you [who] buried him and took his belongings off him. Then we knew it was too true.[29]

Knew and accepted. Lieutenant Irving's boyhood companion, Edwin Inwin, could be trusted to attend to all the intimacies surrounding death, to close the eyes and fold the arms as a loving sister would. His presence ensured that Willie wasn't just covered over with mud in the darkness, their friendship somehow transcended all the sordid details of death. Most important, Inwin's letter opened a passage into pilgrimage. Through him, Gertie Irving stood by her brother's grave in Decoy Wood.

The way the AIF was raised, with towns and districts the building blocks of battalions, improved the chances of families 'knowing someone'. It also meant that siblings enlisted together, that one brother could be called upon to break the news of another's death.[30] Alan Mackay's letter to his family explains how he and Colin came to be separated; it describes the fierce fighting at Mont St Quentin and invites his 'dearest Mother, father and sisters' to witness the 'poor boy's' fate. Most important of all, Alan engineers an imaginary journey; he takes them to the side of their 'gallant soldier' and helps them lay 'dear old Colin' to rest.

> I went in search of him and found the dear old chap as I have told you. I kissed him with a loving farewell for all of those who loved him and with my own hands laid him tenderly to rest. What more is there to say? I am blinded with tears as I write and my heart bleeds for you all . . . He sleeps at the foot of Mt. St. Quentin where he fell, with his rifle by his side and his ribbon on his breast. I shall have a cross made and put it up myself . . . I cannot write any more, but you know that my most loving thoughts are with you constantly.[31]

Soon there were no more letters from Alan; he was killed on the Somme within a month of his brother. A tattered poem in the Mackay family papers stands as a frail memorial. And again it evokes the imaginary qualities of a pilgrimage:

> There's a little grave in France
> That mine eyes may never see