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978-0-521-66974-0 - The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement
in Australia

Joy Damousi

Excerpt

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Introduction

‘No event has ever destroyed so much’, wrote Sigmund Freud a year after the outbreak of the First World War, ‘that has confused so many of the clearest intelligences, or so thoroughly debased what is highest.’¹ This war, he observed,

tramples in blind fury on all that comes in its way as though there were to be no future and no peace among men after it is over. It cuts all the common bonds between the contending peoples and threatens to leave a legacy of embitterment that will make any renewal of those bonds impossible for a long time to come.²

It is the bonds that war so effectively severs – bonds that are our most intimate and fundamental – that are the subject of this book. I attempt to explore how mothers, fathers, widows and soldiers dealt with the grief that resulted from the deaths during and immediately after the two world wars. My starting-point is a psychological and emotional one. I examine the process of mourning and the expression of grief, drawing on the understanding that bereavement is ‘the objective situation of loss’, grief is the psychological and emotional response to loss, and mourning is ‘expressive of grief’.³ Within this context, my study is concerned not only with the psychological strategies that these groups adopted to cope with death, but also examines the cultural and social context of these experiences and thus considers the ways in which grief and loss, like notions of sacrifice, have a history.⁴

This examination reveals the ways in which the relatives of those who perished attempted to claim a legitimacy for their loss. A paradox emerges in their stories: men and women were complicit in sustaining the memory of war and its celebration, but in their demands for remuneration they tried to shape an expression of grief which the myths of war sought to deny. In this regard, mourning of wartime loss involved a process of sustaining both a continuity with, and a detachment from, the lost soldier.⁵

Mourning was channelled into various activities, such as political agitation, social networks, and shaping new identities, which gave the bereaved a public and political voice. In terms of wartime grief, then, it is

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shown that mourning can be an active, dynamic and creative process, rather than one which negates activism.⁶ Those who were lost in war were mourned in many ways, at the same time as mourners pined for a time and place without loss. But mourners also strongly resisted the loss of memory of *their* particular sacrifice in giving their sons and husbands.

This work builds on the insights of other studies which consider the responses of those left to deal with grief.⁷ Here the emphasis is on the psychological experiences of relatives rather than on the ordeal of front-line soldiers, although the two are inter-related. The pathbreaking scholarship of Jay Winter, David Cannadine, Pat Jalland, Eric Leed and George Mosse provides contexts within which to consider these experiences, as does the work of Eric Santner.⁸ Santner, one of the few historians who examines the psychological aspects of this experience, has observed that historians are reluctant to consider the psychology of grief partly because they 'strive for intellectual and not psychic mastery of events'.⁹

Discussions of wartime grief have concentrated on an examination of public expressions of mourning, through art, religion, cinema and literature.¹⁰ Symbols such as military cemeteries, war monuments, museums and commemorative ceremonies for the dead have been analysed to explore how death, brutality and the pain of war have been denied and rewritten as glorious sacrifice.¹¹ Through these accounts, historians have considered how wartime grief has been managed publicly, rather than emotionally expressed. This research is marked by an emphasis on national rather than individual and familial grief, on material symbols and artefacts at the expense of the psychological expressions of loss.¹² The impact of war has also been assessed in terms of the history of welfare and repatriation and of shifting roles of gender.¹³

Few studies have considered how the experience of mourning affected men and women in different ways. Historians have universalised rather than particularised the mourning experience, and its gendered dimensions remain largely unexamined.¹⁴ Nor have they related issues of welfare and gender to the psychological expressions of grief. The anger and resentment associated with the repatriation demands of mothers have not been linked, for instance, to their projection of unresolved grief and a sense of neglect by the state.¹⁵

In order to examine these processes, I draw on those who argue for the need to connect the psychic, the cultural and the historical,¹⁶ and examine how these have intersected to shape aspects of culture.¹⁷ Freud's fine distinction between mourning and melancholia points to possible understandings of the differentiation and complex 'layering of mourning'.¹⁸ For Freud, mourning is the process whereby the loss is negotiated and worked through; in melancholia, the loss cannot properly end.¹⁹

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But as others have pointed out since, the process of grieving has many layers.²⁰ A complicating factor which disrupts the easy binary between melancholia and mourning is that the 'self' is transformed over time, for subjectivity is not an ahistoric, unchanging entity.²¹ There are examples of this multi-layering and shifting identity throughout this study. War widows, for instance, were often reluctant to assume a different identity or to imagine 'the invention of new symbolic worlds and selves'.²² But in other respects, many of them were rebuilding a new identity as *war widows*.

Particularly useful for this study have been those works which consider mourning within its specific cultural and social context, and in its various expressions.²³ The insights of Melanie Klein and Judith Butler shed light on the productive potential of mourning and, especially in the case of Butler, illuminate how grief has been used by groups to mobilise politically.²⁴ One key argument is that wartime bereavement among relatives was often expressed through a displacement and projection of grief, which channelled their anger and resentment into political militancy as a way of resisting the loss of the memory of their sacrifices.²⁵

These themes relate to another aim of the book, which is to link mourning to the shifting parameters of memory.²⁶ Although the world wars produced conditions that shaped the grieving process and made it particular to time and to place, what bonded men and women across the generational divide was their relationship to the past – a past which, to use Julia Kristeva's words, 'does not pass by'. For some men and women remained 'riveted to the past', 'faithful to those bygone days' and, in some cases, 'nailed down to them'.²⁷ This intersection between the past and the present through memory is the key to understanding the complex relationship between wartime loss and the expression of grief as it was played out during what turned out for some to be the trauma of peacetime.

Memory does not grasp an event, accurately or inaccurately, but subjects events to a process of rewriting.²⁸ In this way, memory links history to the practice of psychoanalysis, which can be considered 'the construction of a history, and history, in its turn, an act of remembering'.²⁹ The departure point here is the premise that both the historical and the psychoanalytic explore ways in which the present is shaped by the past through memory.³⁰ Drawing on these arguments, memory and grief are linked in this work in ways new to investigations of memory in Australian studies.³¹ Most recently, Stephen Garton and Alistair Thomson have dwelt on the cost of repatriation and the myths surrounding war experience and identity. Their studies continue the emphasis on the narratives of returned soldiers, but the *process* of loss and grief and its relationship to identity is unexplored.³² The work of Raelene

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Frances and Bruce Scates, Michael McKernan and K. S. Inglis has unearthed a fascinating archive of grief, but the psychological layering of wartime loss in Australia remains untheorised.³³ Raymond Evans' study of violence between women during the First World War tantalisingly alludes to this psychology but does not discuss it further.³⁴ The lingering *cost* of memory was also different for relatives as it carried with it a financial and social burden. Widows, for example, not only endured financial deprivation but also came under surveillance for their moral behaviour.

The process of forgetting is as important as that of remembering, and forgetting forms a subtle, but discernible, theme in my study. Cultural amnesia, especially in relation to Aboriginal people and to the role of women, is linked to grief and mourning in twentieth-century Australia. Powerful notions of sacrifice were shaped by white male understandings of citizenship and nationhood.

Another key theme, related to remembering and forgetting, is the relationship between memory, mourning and identity. I have attempted to move away from examining the shaping of national identities, which has universalised and homogenised individual experiences,³⁵ to consider the formation of individual identities. As parents began to find a new sense of themselves without sons, and widows without husbands, they developed individual rituals and practices which assisted them to relinquish their former roles.³⁶ Mourning is a highly individual process, but the networks that mourners formed facilitated a community which was sustained through these psychological transitions. While there was a collective spirit of remembrance, as Winter and others have shown,³⁷ mothers, fathers, widows and disabled soldiers were, paradoxically, also at pains to demand that their particular sacrifices be acknowledged. To lose the recognition of their specific contribution from public commemoration would mean they would endure another loss: that of relinquishing *their* special place in the memory of war, at a time when others were trying to forget, repress or rewrite war.³⁸ These experiences differed for men and for women, as different cultural expectations governed the behaviour of mothers, fathers and widows after the war.³⁹

This study also makes a contribution to the history of grief in Australia, which remains a small field in cultural and social history. A few studies have considered the practice and ritual of death,⁴⁰ and Peter Read examines this issue in his study, *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places*, but a full-scale history of grief awaits its historian.⁴¹

Loss in war is a profound emotional and psychological experience, most powerfully conveyed in the detail of its telling. In these stories of grief I have tried to capture the evocative force which drives the personal narratives, and also to read the silences and gaps which suggest

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psychological expression. The stories are told through sites of grief other than public memorials and monuments, which have been privileged by historians as representing *the* iconography of loss.⁴² Even when private mourning has been considered, it has been done so in relation to public commemoration and collective histories, rather than in its own terms.⁴³ These narratives are shaped in the privacy of letters and diaries; in public petitions and rallies; in applications for financial assistance; and in the newsletters and magazines which were published by various organisations. In each of these archives, a new identity and persona was forged – that of a childless father, a fatherless family, a sole mother, a husbandless wife – which symbolised a process of renewal, a necessary part of moving towards a life without the deceased.

In what follows, Part I is concerned with the First World War. Chapter 1 explores the ways in which the experience of grief was shaped by an intersection between the battlefield and the homefront. It examines the interaction between soldiers and parents of the deceased, and considers the ways in which soldiers' experiences of grief shifted their identity, influencing the ways they told the stories of their comrades' deaths, and shaped the ways in which they conveyed the details of death. This chapter also shows that through the news of death which circulated in letters and newspapers, women were drawn together into a community of mourners.⁴⁴ This produced a particular form of grief, that of anticipating loss.⁴⁵ Both for soldiers and for women at home expecting bereavement, we can see the ways in which identity becomes shaped by their experience of grief.

Chapter 2 considers how memories of the 'sacrificial mother' changed over time. The campaigns undertaken by mothers for remuneration reveal a projection of unresolved grief and a feeling of abandonment. This was particularly pronounced when the identity of the 'sacrificial mother' was subsumed into the generic category of 'women's sacrifice', effectively erasing mothers' particular sacrifice.

Chapter 3 turns to fathers and considers how some fathers dealt with the loss of their sons as a challenge to their own masculine identity. In attempting to keep alive the memory of their deceased sons, they were also trying to resist the loss of their status and their own sacrifices.

Widows are the subject of Chapter 4, which discusses the cost of sustaining the memory of loss in both financial and cultural terms. The ambiguous sexual status of widows created anxiety for the repatriation authorities; but there was also deep resentment *between* widows as some remarried, while others politicised their grief through protest. The moral codes that widows were expected to uphold, because of their connection with the memory of the fallen, made them targets of surveillance.

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Chapter 5 discusses the ways in which limbless soldiers created a new postwar identity by privileging their physical loss. They expressed political militancy by channelling their grief and embitterment into an affirmation of their physical disabilities.

Part II deals with various aspects of grief and the Second World War. Chapter 6 explores the ways in which grief and loss on the battlefield and the homefront shaped each other; as in the First World War, anticipating loss could be as debilitating as loss itself. Chapter 7 shows how familial memories and mythologies were formed through grieving mothers' stories, while Chapter 8 considers how the identity of the war widow – framed through anger and resentment – was an empowering and sustaining one for war widows immediately after the war.

In this complex tapestry of emotions, the common threads are the ways in which individuals created new identities and a different sense of self through their experience of grief. Through their memories, we can see how 'events become experiences', in that they assume a particular meaning over time.⁴⁶ Grief is expressed in diverse ways, and it can be a productive process that can forge political mobilisation.

In 1945, the writer Gertrude Stein, who witnessed both world wars, reflected prophetically, 'And when there is no war, well just now I cannot remember just how it is where there is no war.'⁴⁷ This book examines the stories of those for whom loss in war remained the experience through which they understood themselves, and through which they shaped their lives. After the wars ended, their lives had been irrevocably changed through continuing grief, for the burden of memory would remain with them as they attempted to rebuild an internal and external world without those to whom they had been so fundamentally attached.

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Part I

The First World War

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1 Theatres of Grief, Theatres of Loss

No mail now brings his cheery lines to read;
No message breaks the silence of that grave.¹

In writings on war, the enactment of grief is often overshadowed by the drama of battle. As in the wider conflict where loss is born, grief leaves no one unaffected by its devastation: like combat, there is no space to retreat and to take refuge from the havoc grief unleashes among those who give and those who receive the news of death.

Soldiers were messengers and chroniclers, as well as watchers and sufferers of grief. Unlike the theatre of war, where they played out their performances like actors trained in melodrama, they were given no script for this role.² Their confrontation with death meant they could not act out their military selves with the control and certainty expected of them by others who witnessed battle. One soldier, E. W. D. Laing, wrote to the mother of his deceased friend, expressing his awkwardness, reluctant responsibility and individual mourning:

I was a friend of your son, Mort, & his death was a blow to me. I was away from the Bn at the time he was killed & have just got your address. Your son was one of the most loveable straight forward chaps I have ever met. This I know is the opinion of all the officers & men in the Bn . . . [the] world is considerably poorer through his death . . . I wish I could express all I feel, but believe me all my sympathy is with you . . . Please forgive me if I have put things crudely but [I am not] very good at expressing myself.³

Writing to the families of the dead allowed soldiers to share their anguish as a way of coming to terms with their harrowing loss and sense of guilt as survivors. The effort to mourn and then revive a persona bonded soldiers with the families of the fallen, and they became complicit in exalting the dead and resisting the finality of loss.⁴ In this task they had been given no instruction, however, for the etiquette of letter-writing had not equipped them to transmit the news of carnage to strangers.

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As elsewhere, the First World War brought a new shock to the experience of death.⁵ In early colonial Australia, rituals of death and mourning were, as one historian has described it, characterised by directness and emotion ‘largely unfettered by concerns of ritualised propriety’. The funeral processions of both rich and poor passed through the streets, and it was during the 1820s that the commercial funeral began to appear.⁶

The Victorian ritual of death introduced not only a more elaborate system of public and private ritual according to social class, but also a more formal and polite expression of grief.⁷ This was a generation that was accustomed to strict regulation of people’s actions in mourning, both in public and in private. Mourners wore black; women were expected to abide by this social custom longer than men. The required etiquette could be costly, demanding of women that they were adorned with appropriate jewellery and silk dresses.⁸ The period of time for mourning depended on one’s relationship to the deceased. The spectacle of a slow public procession from the service to the grave site and, for the wealthy, of an elaborate and ornately decorated hearse with horses decked in feathers, was an essential part of the cultural expression of grieving. Many of these conventions were shaped by religious and Christian beliefs which enforced a public respectability and propriety in the grieving process.⁹ The war ushered in less ornate mourning rituals, leading to an increasing acceptance of cremation as a burial practice where the public spectacle of death was far simpler.¹⁰

After the war broke on 5 August 1914, death in combat demanded that soldiers express themselves in a new way. Without the remnants of a body, or the ritual of a funeral, their descriptions were more than just words. Psychologically, these details were crucial: they carried the weight of reality and truth, providing a presence which filled the empty void of unknown events.¹¹ The details of death which soldiers conveyed offered an emotional comfort to families, but at the same time their words would also scar those families forever.

Surrounded by an unimaginable number of men who had died prematurely, soldiers fumbled to find a voice to convey the meaning of such extraordinary circumstances. In this process, they shed their innocence and had to realign their sense of self and their perspective on reality. The identity of survivors, as others have noted, is deeply affected by death.¹² Self-understanding is dependent on others: the loss of someone who has been part of shaping one’s identity can be a shattering experience, precipitating a crisis, because the bereaved must create a new identity without the deceased.¹³ Letter-writing was one way soldiers began to shape another self in their correspondence. Through letters,

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they attempted to order, contain and control the chaos which surrounded them.¹⁴

To deal with the death of their fellow-combatants, soldiers were required to accept another identity, one which expressed the frailties of the warrior. For while the rhetoric of war insisted that men repress their emotions, war paradoxically created the very conditions which feminised them as they searched, panic-stricken and ill-prepared, for a response to its pain and sorrow.¹⁵ They nurtured the parents of those who had been killed, a task seemingly superfluous in war where public proclamations overtly disparaged the feminine. It was not that they had forgotten their lines, only that they unexpectedly discovered that the words they had rehearsed so well could not communicate the unspeakable. While the havoc of war created a spectacle of grief which left its protagonists speechless, it also produced incessant conversation about war.

Writers and soldiers alike have emphasised the inadequacy of language to convey the experience of trench warfare. The inability to describe the trenches became, as Paul Fussell has observed, one of 'the motifs of all who wrote about the war'.¹⁶ Letters by soldiers are said to have been clichéd, uniform and flat, but my reading of soldiers' correspondence to family members of deceased soldiers shows that this was not always the case. In meticulously documenting the details of death, soldiers took care to describe the particular circumstances of a special loss, rather than use tired clichés which denied the family the distinctiveness of their son's death.¹⁷

Battlefronts

Soldiers felt acutely the loss of a comrade in combat, and much has been written about the bonds forged between soldiers in battle.¹⁸ These intimate bonds sustained and protected them, and they sought to replicate them through writing letters to their friends' parents. Lieutenant John Archibald wrote of the collective grief experienced by his brigade following the death of Morton Allan:

I do not exaggerate when I say the whole of the Third Brigade will feel his loss for he had friends in every battalion in the Brigade & all will miss his cheery, gallant personality & his cheery smile, that he never lost, no matter how bitter were the prevailing hardships or how hot the fight. He was one of those great spirits who could never die but who became one of 'your Deathless Army', whose grace and example whilst amongst us render their influences for good eternal.¹⁹

An entire battalion would share the grief. Sergeant Livingstone wrote to Mrs Chapman saying that her soldier son was 'respected by all', and that