
Originally published in 1920, To the Last Ridge, has been reissued by Duffy and Snellgrove, 80 years after the war which it describes finally ground to a halt. It is a useful addition to the wide-ranging and growing literature on the war experiences of the Australian nation and its individuals, though the cover blurb, quoting Patsy Adam-Smith in The Anzacs to the effect that To the Last Ridge is the Australian equivalent of Remarque’s famous All Quiet on the Western Front, is perhaps just a tad optimistic.

One reason why Adam-Smith may have been so impressed with Downing and his memoirs is that he is in many respects a model story of the Anzac soldier; or at least that is how he is constructed by his son, also William Downing, in the introduction. Downing senior was born in Portland in 1893, and had a classic Australian middle-class education at Scotch College, Melbourne, and Queens College, University of Melbourne. He was a good sportsman, winning a University Blue in lacrosse, and edited the University of Melbourne student magazine. The schools and universities of the time were hotbeds for rampant militarism and nationalism. Military drill was compulsory, boys were educated to live and die for the nation and empire, and even the apparently harmless sports with which Downing had some success were increasingly invested with militaristic and nationalistic purpose.

Downing was obviously a product of his times, and there is something sadly futile, as well as noble, in his determined efforts to enlist. Rejected eight times for being too short (thus not quite the mythical Anzac Hercules), he was finally accepted after, with good Anzac ingenuity, allegedly having his friends hoist him by his shoulders and tie weights to his feet, temporarily stretching him so that he could hurriedly enlist on 30 September 1915 before reverting to his usual height. After training in Egypt with the 57th Battalion, he fought on the Western Front from mid-1916 until the end of the war. He was offered a commission, but in line with the mythic egalitarianism of the Australian soldier he refused, not wanting to be separated from the men he had fought alongside. He did, however, accept the Military Medal. After being discharged he successfully settled back into civilian life, returning to Queens College and graduating in 1920, practising law, and eventually dying in 1965.

That the soldier’s life on the Western Front was not a happy one is well-known. Downing offers us little new here, but at the same time his memoirs provide a graphic account of the futility, barbarism and heroism of the Western Front as experienced by an Australian in an Australian division; something worth recording as the Anzac legend tends to remain rather too focussed upon the minority who fought in Gallipoli. It might also be suggested that the horrors of the Western Front were such that they can never be recounted often enough; we should always be reminded of them—lest we forget.

To the Last Ridge is Downing’s account of sixteen battles in which he fought, from Fleurbaix in July 1916 (part of the ill-fated Somme offensive) through
REVIEWS

until Bellicourt in September and October of 1918 as the Australians helped to roll the Germans back in the final stages of the war. Downing was obviously horrified by the carnage which he saw, and his accounts of his first battles are particularly graphic in the manner of a man who wonders at the death and destruction which surround him. He tells of how men 'were cut in two by streams of bullets', and of how 'hundreds were mown down in the flicker of an eyelid' as German machine-gun defences proved devastatingly effective (p. 8). The state of the terrain after the battle is captured in his descriptions of slogging through the mud near Mametz, where the dead lay everywhere: 'Hands and faces protruded from the slimy, toppling walls of trenches. Knees, shoulders and buttocks poked from the foul morass' (p. 17). It is no surprise that the cold, the rats, the stench and the death told on Downing's morale, and he includes a diary entry illustrating the sense of futility which he, as many others must have, felt about the war: 'Back to the line tomorrow. We just go into the line again and again until we get knocked. We'll never get out of this. Just in and out, in and out, and somebody stonkered every time. Australia has forgotten us, and so has God' (p. 34).

Downing is an interesting case in the psychology of war, for although there are continued references to the horror of the war (there are, for example, horrific descriptions of the Australian fighting at Bullecourt in April and May of 1917, including a reference to how men 'wiped the shattered flesh of comrades from their faces' [p. 64]), a more triumphal and more brutal tone gradually emerges. This is no doubt partly due to the improving Allied fortunes in the war, especially from mid-1918, but would also appear to result from a brutalisation of the author's sensibilities. Downing's description of the defence of Villers-Bretton, for example, includes tales of bravery and courage which are so incredible one wonders if he is retelling fact or perpetrating myth. His descriptions of some of the fighting, meanwhile, indicate a decline of human empathy, and are the stuff of gruesome 'ripping yarns':

The [Australians] were bathed in spurting blood. They killed and killed. Bayonets passed with ease through grey-clad bodies, and were withdrawn with a sucking noise ... Many had tallies of twenty and thirty and more, all killed with bayonet, or bullet, or bomb. Some found chances in the slaughter to light cigarettes, then continued the killing ... Machine-gun positions were discovered burrowed under hay stacks, crammed with men, who on being found were smashed and mangled by bomb after bomb after bomb. It was impossible to take prisoners (pp. 118-19).

One is left with the distinct impression that the Australians would not have taken prisoners even if they had thought it possible.

Downing also discusses some of the myths of the war, and while adamant that the Australians were indeed better soldiers than the English, he refuses to suggest that they were any more brave, their superiority lying in their being more mentally resourceful (billeted in a French cowshed, for example, Downing maintains that the Australians would eventually persuade their billets to put them up in the house). He claims also that the French-Canadians, not the Australians, were the fiercest fighters in the war, though the Australians, along with the
Highlanders and English-speaking Canadians, were not far behind. The Australians emerge also as lovable larrikins, irreverently nicknaming the Virgin and child hanging upside down from the Albert Cathedral ‘Fanny Durack, the champion lady diver’ (p. 171), and singing disrespectful songs about their superiors in their presence.

There is thus an interesting blend of perpetuating and undermining the myths of the Australian war experience in these memoirs. One might be disappointed in the lack of personal reflection which the book contains (Downing rarely tells us how he feels about anything), and one might even be disappointed in the brutality which seems to grow in the author, but the memoirs nonetheless constitute an interesting insight into a soldier and his recollections. This is, indeed, where these memoirs are probably of most interest—as a source for soldier psychology and the process of recollection and memoir-writing, rather than for anything which Downing tells us about the war itself.

MARTIN CROTTY
University of Melbourne

Richard White and Penny Russell (eds), Memories and Dreams: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Australia, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards NSW, 1997. 283 pp. $29.95 paperback.

Perhaps the most seductive aspect of the histories presented in Memories and Dreams: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Australia is that they allow the reader to see the essays as part of the authors’ ongoing engagement with history. The thirteen articles in this collection were previously published in a variety of journals between 1978 and 1995, and have since been identified as significant contributions to the history of Australia in the twentieth century. Each is preceded by a short description of the authors’ original inspiration. This format has allowed the authors to reflect in a removed manner on their previous work and to comment on its relationship with their current concerns. They reveal the ways in which the essays can be contextualised as part of an ‘intellectual journey’ which is often by no means complete. It is interesting to note that while some of the historians’ have used this opportunity to continue their previous arguments, others have noted changes in their opinions. For example, in their discussion on ‘Sexuality and the Suburban Dream’ Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle reflect that ‘[W]hile our original paper predicted continuing change, it properly over-emphasised continuity, and underestimated the speed and diversity of the changes that have actually taken place’ (p. 187). Most of the authors recognise, in retrospect, the importance of their original article to their subsequent work. Alistair Thompson notes that his article on oral history and memories in relation to the Anzac experience was ‘a significant turning point in how I made sense of Anzac’ (p. 60).