

AUSTRALIAN CHIVALRY: AUSTRALIAN CHIVALRY?

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HERE is a moment in Russell Braddon's memoir of World War Two captivity, *The Naked Island* (1952), when the author is given a book by a Japanese officer called Terai. Preferred for the enlightenment of the uncouth Australian, the book is called *Bushido, or Japanese Chivalry*. Braddon has use for neither the text nor the concept. Nor – on the evidence of our dictionaries of quotations – have other Australian authors before or since cared about any national or supra-national notion of chivalry.

And yet there is a book that baldly, confidently proclaims its subject as *Australian Chivalry*. Edited by J.T. Treloar, Director of the Australian War Memorial, and published in 1933, the book was – in its own words – 'a representative collection of reproductions of official paintings' of actions involving Australians during the Great War. A brief, but suggestive introduction, and the micro-narratives which attend each painting, seek to explain what is meant by an Australian style of chivalry in the context of that war, that time. The concept, and the book *Australian Chivalry*, are the objects of the following inquiry which will be brief, by fiat, although longer than numerous bar-room wits have supposed since they heard the title of this paper.

Michael McKernan's history of the Australian War Memorial, *Here is Their Spirit* (1991) does not mention *Australian Chivalry*, but provides a context for the understanding of its production. The book was one of the varied products and projects by which Treloar attempted to raise money during the 1930s for the Australian War Memorial Fund. In 1929 nearly 100,000 Australians paid to view Sir John Longstaff's painting, 'The Menin Gate at Midnight' during its tour to Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Hobart and Launceston. Smaller, but profitable numbers parted with three guineas for a print of the painting, or paid five guineas for both 'Menin Gate' and 'The Immortal Shrine'. Yet sales of what had been expected to be the main source of income for the Fund, the early volumes of C.E.W. Bean's *Official History of Australia in the Great War*, were patchy. Bean's own *The Story of Anzac* sold out its first run of 5,000, but thousands of other volumes remained unsold. Treloar's inspired solution was the 'government order' scheme where through garnisheeing the wages of willing public servants (2/6d a fortnight) – a complete set of the *History* would eventually be acquired. The scheme began in July 1933. It was in that year that *Australian Chivalry* was published.

Other notable Australian war books of 1933 included H.R. Williams's *The Gallant Company*, the exultant fantasy of a former warehouseman, for whom Diggers 'seemed to burn with a military fervour close to a religious fanaticism'; May Tilton's account of the nursing service, *The Grey Battalion* and Frank Dalby Davison's *The Wells of Beersheba*, a 2/6d Christmas gift suggestion from Angus & Robertson. While in *Big-Noting*, Robin Gerster speaks of Davison's work as a 'memorial to the chivalric mode of warfare', and hears echoes of both 'nationalistic ardour and chivalric accomplishment' in the name of Light Horse commander Sir Harry Chauvel, the word 'chivalry' is never used by Davison. Nor, so far as I have seen, is it used by Bean. Lexically absent, historically long vanished, how did 'chivalry' come to compete for a share of the Anzac legend? What consciousness, or what committee, conjured it up? As long ago as 1791, Edmund Burke

had declared that 'the age of chivalry has gone. That of sophists, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever'. Perhaps Burke spoke too soon.

In one respect, 'Australian chivalry' is another of the multiple, and sometimes contradictory, annexations by analogy of the experiences of the First A.I.F. in the Great War. In 1936, for instance, Angus & Robertson released twelve volumes of veterans' reminiscences called *The Gallant Legion*. 'Epic Stories That Touch the Heartstrings', they proffered a metamorphosis of the Digger, not into a knight crusader, a paladin in 'the field uniform of modern wars', but into a Homeric hero, 'The Modern Odysseus'. With Troy supposedly in sight of Gallipoli, this was a favourite comparison. But it was not the only possible, if implausible one: the Light Horse in particular had campaigned over old crusader battlegrounds in the Middle East.

The editor of *Australian Chivalry* had to conjure up a code of behaviour, what he called a 'spirit', which – as I have said – did not exist lexically (in earlier Australian accounts of the Great War) or as a current social practice and set of ideals. His first contention was that the Australian combatants had been inspired by a high sense of honour, disdain of danger and death, love of adventure, compassion for the weak and oppressed, self-sacrifice and altruism. Though no spiritual dimension was specifically mentioned, these qualities were taken to be the embodiments of chivalry. Conceding that the 'days of knights in glistening mail on richly caparisoned steeds . . . had receded far into the mists of time', Treloar (or his committee) contended that although the banners, lances, armour of the knights had 'decayed centuries since', their 'spirit' lived on. Moreover, it was 'the most potent weapon in the armoury of Great Britain and her allies'. Never before had shot and shell so insouciantly been wished away. More grandly yet (and why not, since this was a joyful fabrication) a 'new Order of Chivalry' had been established by Australian men at arms. In terms which – in an earlier time or in another country – would have been irretrievably contradictory, Australians had established an egalitarian chivalry:

from all grades of society came Paladins to champion the cause of peace-loving people whom they believed to have been wantonly assailed . . . They were warriors in modern dress: the slouched hat replaced the crested heaume, the sombre khaki tunic the mail hauberk, and the magazine rifle the sword and lance. But, with an enthusiasm as lofty as that of any knight of old, these young men swore fealty to the oppressed against the despoiler . . .

This is the diction that Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) calls the 'raised', essentially feudal language in which combat was spoken of in the early years of the Great War. Evidently it had not altogether been discredited and extinguished by the experiences of war or not – at least in Australia.

To confirm the historical continuity from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, a nonchalant digger, cigarette smoking in his hand, the ruined shells of buildings as his backdrop, faces a dignified crusader in the Frontispiece of *Australian Chivalry*. Both images are *sui generis*: costume and demeanour denote the martial idealism of warriors whose distance from each other in time is collapsed for the polemical purposes of this volume. It is a confirmation, in part, of another of Fussell's contentions, that the Great War was the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful 'history' involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future. Yet the Digger was in many ways a curious descendant of the knight crusader. Grim in action, the Digger was also sardonically humorous in mien (and by reputation). The crusader's

face is sternly composed, the Digger's wears a half-smile. *Australian Chivalry* offers other generic portraits of the Digger – for instance by Charles Wheeler, and by the German, Max Brunning, who sketched a cheerfully imperturbable, pipe-smoking Australian prisoner. Norman Lindsay's cartoon figures in the *Bulletin* during the war, Billjim and Sergeant Bill Anzac, share the same features, the same lineage. Through such productions as *Australian Chivalry*, the Great War did much to create the archetypal male Australian face.

Another key group of reproductions in *Australian Chivalry* features the Light Horse campaign in Palestine. Gerster has argued that no Australian unit was more assiduously self-promoting: 'the Light Horse, like any vainglorious creature, perpetually felt ignored'. Propagandists like Oliver Hogue came to the rescue. But the illustrations of Light Horse actions in *Australian Chivalry* tell a more sober and dignified story. Particularly revealing is the composite picture by H.S. Power, 'Leaders of the Australian Light Horse', purportedly of a group of officers on a hillside in the Jordan Valley in August 1918. Mounted on his chestnut, Chauvel is centre-stage. These men have the stern complacency of victorious commanders: the enemy is banished from the field and from the picture, the argument of arms is done. It is an image which celebrates 'the fiction of chivalry as a moving force' in history; 'history thus conceived becomes a summary of feats of arms and of ceremonies'. The picture satisfies 'the passionate desire to find [oneself] praised by contemporaries or by posterity'. Those words concerning chivalry were written in a book published in 1924, one indelibly influenced by the destruction of a European community thus barbarously removed from the chivalric fiction and practice which had been one factor that had given it unity in medieval times. The book is Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. He writes of chivalry in terms which bear significant, if accidental, resemblance to the Introduction in *Australian Chivalry*. It is, says Huizinga:

the very core of courage: man, in the excitement of danger, stepping out of his narrow egotism, the ineffable feeling – caused by a comrade's bravery, the rapture of fidelity and of sacrifice – in short, the primitive and spontaneous asceticism, which is at the bottom of the chivalrous ideal.

Huizinga exhibits, although he also analyses, a nostalgia for chivalry in the aftermath of the Great War which is consonant with the temper of *Australian Chivalry*. But the Australian production has important local factors which need to be addressed.

'Australian chivalry' is a 'spirit' which links the Australian warriors of recent days to their heroic English forebears. It speaks strongly of a desire for historical continuity which it knows to be unattainable. 'Australian chivalry' initiates a regressive process, which finds its happiest circumstances in the mounted warfare conducted in the vicinity of old crusader battlefields. Thus 'Australian chivalry' is conceived of as an instructive code of idealistic behaviour, however anachronistic. At the same time, and vitally, it is also a transforming process. In Bean's words in *The Story of Anzac*, something like this process turned 'all the romantic, quixotic, adventurous flotsam that eddied on the surfaces of the Australian people' into that corporate heroic figure, the First A.I.F. On an individual level, such a metamorphosis (the chivalric effect) transformed C.J. Dennis's 'Ginger' Mick – in Gerster's words – from 'graceless rabbit-vendor . . . into a teetotalling patriot and nation-builder'. Of reconstructed Mick and his comrades, Dennis can declare with a straight face that 'each man is the clear, straight man 'is Maker meant 'im for'. Moreover, 'the lumper, an' the lawyer, an' the chap 'oo shifted sand/they are cobbers wiv the cove 'oo drove a quill'. The chivalric effect dissolves class distinctions

and the disreputable recent past by dispatching men to an idealised, remote past. Thereby, it becomes an improbable bolster for Australians' notions of their egalitarianism.

The origins of a renovated chivalry lie in nineteenth century Romanticism, but not in the stream of that revolution in European consciousness which produced the familiar Anzac legend. The latter is the expression of German *Sturm und Drang*; is concerned with the making of a nation by bloody trial in battle. Its agents are the Anzacs whom Bean revered; their apogée Gallipoli. Yet 'The Man With the Donkey', Private Simpson (whose portrait by G.C. Benson features in *Australian Chivalry*) is also a hero of Gallipoli. And Simpson was a non-martial man, who gave succour to the wounded at the peril of his own life and – as the cliché has it – 'laid down' that life all too soon. Simpson is a chivalric hero in the mode of Sir Philip Sidney, in his death-scene in the Low Countries. And Simpson is the expression (as is the whole enterprise of *Australian Chivalry*) of Gothic revival Romanticism, that tradition which stretches from Hurd's *Letters in Chivalry and Romance* (1762) to Kenelm Digby's *Broad Sword of Honour*, to Walter Scott's *Essays on Chivalry* and his novels *The Talisman* and *Ivanhoe*, the comical disaster of the Eglinton tournament in 1839, thence to the poetry of Tennyson and the art of the pre-Raphaelites.

This is a quietist, rather than a militant tradition, more concerned with the exemplary character of the chivalric ideal than with deeds of arms. This is the tradition which informs that strange compilation *Australian Chivalry*, whose scenes of battle are relatively few, and which are usually constructed from a distant aerial perspective. A significant exception is the bloody, close quarters action of G.W. Lambert's 'The Charge of the 4th Light Horse Brigade at Beersheba'. It is as if the compilers of the volume by intention gave that instance of the brutal arms-reach war in which knights actually had to engage, before passing, two reproductions later, to the Australian cavalry commanders in serene possession of another field of battle. What the compilers contributed to was an alternative interpretation of the Australian military role in the Great War.

If overwhelmed by the clamorous promotion of the Anzac legend, *Australian Chivalry* still speaks significantly of a complex and divided set of origins in European Romanticism for the supposed birth of a nation in time of war. It is a gentler fancy, a more dignified delusion, than the legend which we know too well to interrogate closely. For the blood sacrifice, the corporate heroism, the second failure of Gallipoli which are at the core of the dominant legend, *Australian Chivalry* makes its tentative, substitute offer of 'honour', of individual moral choice, the enduring power of 'compassion', 'self-sacrifice and altruism'. Thus *Australian Chivalry* looks back to find inspiration in a romanticised lost time, rather than in the recent carnage at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. But the book also looks forward – as the familiar Anzac legend does not – to the qualities which can build a nation in peace as well as in war.

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