Mervyn Bendle

GREAT REMEMBRANCE

Les Carlyon. *The Great War.* Sydney: Picador, 2007. ISBN: 978 1 4050 3799 0. RRP: $39.95. (pbk) pp.863+xiii.

In 1992, Les Carlyon tells us, a Frenchman found a broken and rusted bone-handled table knife near a spot once called the Sugarloaf. It was an ancient battlefield and the knife had inscribed upon it "G. Blake," apparently Private George Francis Blake, a carpenter from Footscray in Victoria who had died there in 1916, aged 26. A year later, his widow placed an "In Memoriam" notice in the *Age*, lamenting how "Each day I miss his footsteps / As I walk through life alone."

Such moments of pathos typify Carlyon's book on the Great War as he attempts always to connect the titanic struggles of the Western Front in all their complexity to the fates of the individual soldiers who were caught up in them, so often losing their lives, their limbs, their faith, or their reason in the war that gave a tragic shape to the history of the twentieth century. Such a narrative strategy has its strengths and weaknesses. On one hand, it humanises the conflict, especially for Australian readers, driving home continually the tragic cost of the war in terms of the young lives that were brutally truncated by the savage systems of destruction that Carlyon describes. On the other hand, it tends to slow the narrative down, as Carlyon stops continually to introduce and describe the characters whose fates he focuses on.

And indeed, this raises an important historiographical issue, for frequently the people who he identifies and discusses, such as Private Blake, were not really agents in the events he describes in the sense that they shaped or guided those events in any meaningful or detectable way. Rather they were simply consumed by them, while the events themselves were initiated and guided by the generals far away as they bumbled and improvised their way through four hideous years of carnage, fretting about their careers and reputations as their various theories of warfare devolved quickly down into a default "strategy" of endless attrition.

Competent leadership is a very important thing in human affairs, as people tend quickly to realise when there is none around in a crisis. Possibly more than any other event in recorded human history, the Great War was plagued by a lack of competent leadership, and historians have spent a great deal of time on analysing the key personalities and the roles they played in bringing on the war and directing its course. Here it cannot be said that Carlyon provides anything new, beyond ensuring that we learn better from his account than from overseas historians about the contributions of

prominent Australian soldiers such as Sir John Monash, described by AJP Taylor in *The First World War* (1966) as "the only general of creative originality" (232) produced by the war but otherwise ignored by leading war historians such as John Keegan (*The First World War* (1998)) and Hew Strachan (*The First World War* (2004)).

It was in the mid 1970s that the current wave of interest in the Great War began to build up and historians began to identify themselves with various forms of explanation and analyses. One of the most significant fissures here was a national one, with British historians tending to see the conflict as exemplifying futility on a colossal scale while the French saw it as a monumental struggle for the survival of their nation. The German view, of course, was forever shaped by the "war-guilt" clause in the Versailles Treaty, and more recently by Franz Fischer's argument that the Kaiser and the German military did indeed have global hegemonic pretensions; while the Russians view the war through the prism of Marxism-Leninism, which presents it as the imperialist struggle predicted by Lenin. In Australia, of course, the war (and particularly Gallipoli, the subject of Carlyon's other war book) has become the central component in the country's narrative of nationhood and national identity. Here Australians share a remarkable bond with the people of Turkey, for whom the conflict plays a similar role, as a visit to Gallipoli and the Atatürk Mausoleum in Ankara reveals.

In this sense, Carlyon articulates the now dominant Australian view of the war on the Western Front: a tragic, misguided adventure full of pathos about the common men who became common soldiers full of common heroism that turned to common resignation while the men themselves became common casualties. He capably memorialises a generation consumed at Messines, Fromelles, Amiens, Passchendaele, Mouquet Farm, the Sugarloaf, Polygon Wood, and so many other places that they are still recovering the remains of Australian soldiers in France, even as these words are being written.

My grandfather was an ANZAC who fought at Gallipoli and in France along with his three brothers from the back-blocks of rural Tasmania, and Carlyon's work illuminates the battles in which they fought (and were wounded and died). Private Frederick Joseph Hack, D Company, 26 Battalion, 7th Brigade, 2nd Division, was an illiterate farm labourer and the grandson of a convict sent to Van Diemen's Land. He would have shied away from the attention he and his mates are now attracting and would have been bemused by the tendency to elevate the grinding misery, boredom, and sudden hideous violence of the trenches into a national myth. But on the other hand, he would have appreciated Carlyon's narrative clarity, sincerity, empathy, attention to detail, and remorseless concern to document the lives and deaths of the young Australian men who made the trip back across the sea to the world

of old Europe as it plunged into its titanic crisis.

Paul Knobel

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN POETRY

Sue Hicks and Danny Gardner, eds. *Light on Don Bank: Fifteen Years of Live Poets' Society*. Sydney: Live Poets' Press, 2006. ISBN 0 646 45529 X. RRP: $20.00. pp.144.

Light on Don Bank is an anthology of the work of 142 mainly Sydney poets who have read with the Live Poets group at Don Bank Museum, the oldest house in the suburb of North Sydney; each poet has one poem of no longer than one page. Poets have been reading at Don Bank for 15 years on the fourth Wednesday of each month for 11 months of the year. Live Poets was established by British emigrant Sue Hicks and latterly carried on by her former partner Danny Gardner following her return to Britain for family reasons. Some non-Sydney poets have also been guests. As the editors explain in the introduction where they give the history of the group, the title of Live Poets was inspired by a famous movie, *The Dead Poets' Society*. This reviewer has read at Don Bank and was a featured poet, with a selection of his poems appearing in the collection *Live Wires* with 21 others. However my work is not included in the current anthology as I was overseas at the time of compilation.

Many poets have made enduring friendships at Don Bank where supper is served in the interval following a monthly featured poet and before an open section. Proceedings have latterly been recorded, which will be a fascinating archive. The late Vera Newsom, who did not start writing poetry seriously until she retired from teaching, but soon became an excellent practitioner, was the first featured poet. *Light on Don Bank* is thus a defacto cross-section of contemporary Sydney poetry.

This is the first lesson of the anthology. Why not create your own poetry writing and reading circle, if one does not exist? It could occur in any town across Australia. The New York poet Molly Peacock's *How to Read a Poem — and Create a Poetry Circle* (1999) gives advice, but goodwill and a lively atmosphere are crucial; they can easily be created with the right person in charge.

On beginning this review, I read all poems twice; if a poem did not "click" on the first reading I tried again (about 90% did click on first reading). The editors have ensured that none of the poems in *Light on Don Bank* fall below being very competent poetry, having something to say and saying it well. They have done a good job.