

Review by Peter Leete

## Charles Bean

When my wife and I first moved to New Zealand, and subsequently Australia, from the UK, I found it really hard to understand the intense focus on the Gallipoli campaign. I liked to think of myself as pretty well read when it came to military history. The failed Gallipoli campaign had always been to many in Britain a small side campaign that merely proved the old adage of “lions led by donkey.” Indeed, on the scale of death, destruction and incompetence, it might be said that Gallipoli was a sideshow. So when I was given the opportunity to read Ross Coulthart’s biography of Charles Bean, I deemed it to be a great opportunity to deepen my Antipodean education.

Charles Bean is an important character whose own personal and professional life appears to mirror the maturing and awakening of Australia itself as a nation with its own separate identity from the “Mother Country.” Bean was chosen to act as Australia’s war correspondent for the troops during World War One, both in the Gallipoli campaign and on the battlefields of northern France. Then, following the end of the war, he resolved to write an open history of Australia’s involvement in “The Great War.” It is this account that indirectly leads to the establishment of the Australian War Memorial.

Coulthart’s biography of Bean is a solid read. Indeed, it provides an accessible and valuable insight into a man. The style of writing is clear and evenly paced which makes the accounts of Bean’s life engaging and fairly simple to follow. He does not fall into the trap of many military biographies—cluttering the reader’s mind with the names and numbers of so many regiments, divisions and armies.

As the book progresses, it is soon apparent that Coulthart’s style reflects the writing style of his focus, Charles Bean. The events, successes and failures, of both Bean and the Australian troops are detailed in a calm and measured way. Bean—with his privileged, private school background—struggles with his desire to report the true nature of the war and the patriotic, triumphalist propaganda desires of the British military hierarchy.

Through the use of Bean’s thorough and detailed war-time diaries and his newspaper reports, the reader is able to witness clearly the struggles and conflicts Bean has with the

British military hierarchy and their desire to hide the truth from the Empire's readers. Indeed, it is not just with the fiasco of the Gallipoli landing that we witness this, but also with the events on the battlefields of Western Europe after 1915. And perhaps this is one of the most important things to come out of this book—the illumination of the struggles and sacrifices of Australian troops after Gallipoli as they fought and died on the battlefields of northern France. It is here that the reader is able witness the maturing of the Anzacs spirit among the battles of Pozieres, Bullecourt and Fromelles.

Bean, in gathering his information, would constantly put himself at risk by venturing into the front line trenches. He found himself, on a number of occasions stranded in no-man's land. Coulthart's book describes a man would go to dangerous lengths in his struggle to tell the truth about the true heroism of the Australian troops serving during World War One. After the war's end, Bean went on to write the most thorough and informative recount of the war, using his own personal resources and accounts.

So, do I now understand the importance of Gallipoli to the start of the Anzac legend? Yes, but, by reading this highly-engaging biography, I also get an insight into a man whose bravery and determination to “stick up” for his comrades and do “the right thing” in the face of adversity and extreme hardship reflects the qualities so commonly linked with “Anzac.”

***Charles Bean* by Ross Coulthart. Sydney: Harper Collins, 2015. ISBN 9780732297879. RRP \$45, pp. 464.**

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**About the reviewer:** Peter Leete is an English and Humanities teacher at St.Margaret Mary's College, Townsville. When not teaching he enjoys spending time with his family, and reading. Despite his teaching workload he usually has two or three books on the bedside table.