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Using a history of emotions to deal with the horror of war

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The defence of ANZAC Day commemoration -- as common in the 1920s as today -- turns on some fairly familiar arguments. It does not glorify war; it does not cultivate hatred; it is about honouring and remembering, not celebrating. Yet a sense of sacred nationhood created through the blood sacrifice of young men remains at its core today, as in 1916. Is this not to glorify war?

(Bongiorno 2015)

Working at the Australian War Memorial many years ago I became aware that the Memorial, from its inception, had deliberately, and perhaps properly, avoided much engagement with the emotions of the museum visitor. Many war museums and interpretation centres, even in recent times, have gone down exactly the same path. *Love & Sorrow* entirely rejects this approach. This is an exhibition that openly and deliberately works on the emotions of its visitors to proclaim its strong and powerful message: war is an unmitigated and abhorrent disaster and we need always to be conscious of its enduring impacts across subsequent generations. This exhibition is anything but a celebration of the centenary of the First World War.

(McKernan 2015)

These two quotations, both in response to commemorative activities around the First World War in Australia during the 2015 centenary celebrations, seem to pull in contrary directions, opening up a space for productive reflection. The first, by Frank Bongiorno (2015), comes from a piece in which he traces the history of the discursive qualities of the Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Armed Corps) mythology that underpins the Australian commemoration of war, pointing out that the emotive language around sacrifice, bravery and bloodshed is not only designed to elevate the ordinary individual into a hero and celebrate his capacity for ‘mateship’ but also to prevent any critical engagement either with the history of war or the way Australians have commemorated it. The result is not only to celebrate war but it is also to produce Australia’s war experience as a sacred one, making any form of critique profane. In effect, Bongiorno is suggesting that this celebratory language is emotive and that it produces an uncritical nationalism.
McKernan’s (2015) comment in his review of *WWI: Love & Sorrow* at the Melbourne Museum that the majority of exhibitions dealing with war are not concerned with producing emotional responses in their visitors seems jarring, or at the very least to point in a contrary direction. Referring to his own former institution, the Australian War Memorial, McKernan paints a depiction of its exhibition practices as straight representations of history when read in contrast with the overt emotionality of *WWI: Love & Sorrow*. While not disagreeing with his point that this overt emotionality is part of the exhibition’s strength, the assumption that the exhibitions at the Memorial and elsewhere are not emotive, I want to argue, point to the need for a more complex understanding of the possible relations between history and emotion as well as the ways in which emotions are embodied within exhibitions.

In this chapter, then, I explore the relationship between history and emotion in two different kinds of exhibitions on war – one based on military history, the other on social history. This is in order to posit a distinction between two different kinds of history-making in exhibitions about war in Australia. The first kind, which is prevalent at exhibitions within a memorial setting such as a Shrine of Remembrance or the Australian War Memorial, is emotional history – a history that produces an uncritical sentimentality that results in feelings of pathos. The second kind is a history of emotions, a genre of history-making that, following the work of Theodore Zeldin (1971, 1982), Barbara Rosenwein (2002) and William Reddy (2001), posits that emotions are central to understanding human experience and offer a unit of analysis for historians wishing to understand not only the past but also its legacy in the present. While both forms of history offer emotional experiences, they do so to different ends and using different forms of affect. My second aim is to undertake an analysis of the ways in which affect is produced across these two different approaches to the use of emotions and to ask what spaces for ‘critical pedagogy’ (Witcomb 2013) these strategies open or close. I will prosecute these analyses by comparing two new exhibitions commemorating the First World War in Melbourne, Australia. The first is at Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance, where there is a new suite of exhibitions commemorating Australia’s wartime experiences, including the First World War, and the second is *WWI: Love & Sorrow* at the Melbourne Museum. My methodology is essentially auto-ethnographic in that I explore my own sensorial and emotional engagement with these exhibitions. I do so first of all by spending time in these exhibitions, taking them in. I then photograph individual displays and take video recordings of multimedia installations as well as making notes of particular moments that arrested my attention in order to document the exhibition in ways that help me access particular details later such as the use of language, particular images, juxtapositions, layout and use of colour for example. I look for patterns and sequences that help to anchor and explain my experiences at the exhibition and then seek to analyse how these elements work together to create that experience. At that point I look for theoretical insights that help me to describe what is going on both in terms of structure and its effects.

Before beginning that analysis, however, I want to sketch the history of debates in Australia over how the First World War has been remembered and
commemorated, as these set the frame for the different functions of each type of exhibition. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, the association between war and nation-making was very strong, due in large part to the legacy of an Edwardian belief that war purified the nation and clarified its values, testing the mettle of its men (Reynolds 2010). While Australia’s experiences at Gallipoli were an unmitigated disaster, it was the moral character of the soldiers that shone through in the ways that that disaster was recuperated for public consumption, giving rise to the association between war and Australian national identity. This allowed any need to question Australia’s uncritical support for the Empire to simply disappear from public view.

However, as Donaldson and Lake (2010) argue, there was also a strong narrative that the best way to commemorate and honour the dead was to prosecute an argument for peace between nations, rather than to continue to validate the morality and worthiness of war as the crucible in which nations are formed. As they put it, ‘[t]he view propagated by Anzac mythology that World War I was a creative experience for Australia in that it made us a nation was an obscene idea for many in the 1920s and 1930s’ (Donaldson and Lake 2010: 73). Many wondered what the enormous loss had been for, realizing that the association between war and nationhood only brought misery; some felt that Australians should not have been in the war at all and that we were fools to answer the call of Empire so readily; others found that their status as Anzac heroes was not matched by the lack of opportunity they had in post-war society. For others, honouring the dead only allowed a forgetting of those who survived. As Joan Beaumont has argued, Australia was a broken society in the aftermath of the First World War (Beaumont 2013) and there was no unity around how best to commemorate the Anzacs. The pacifist strain of thought re-emerged during the Vietnam War, with this period also seeing extensive criticism of the Anzac legend around the masculinity of its narrative, its erasure of the act of killing, as well as its racist and imperial foundations.

Contrary to expectations of the demise of the Anzac narrative, however, in the 1980s, a new discourse around the figure of the Anzac emerged, which produced the ordinary soldier as a victim who rose above his historical circumstances. He became, as Donaldson and Lake (2010: 90–91) put it, a ‘tragic hero’, one who died too young, still innocent of the ways of the world – and one with whom it was all too easy for Australia’s youth to empathize. Rather than generating anger, as the narrative of heroism had in the immediate aftermath of the war, historians such as Joy Damousi (2010) argue that this new narrative generated both senti- mentality and nostalgia amongst the young for their forebears. Placing these particular forms of emotion at the heart of commemoration, she argues, enables the erasure of any need to understand either the history of the events themselves or of their commemoration. As she puts it ‘[a] critical examination of the costs and consequences of war, its horror and waste, the mistakes and massacres is resisted and repressed’ (Damousi 2010: 97). In other words, raising questions about either agency or responsibility is understood as a form of profanity. The consequence is that there is no room to question the claim that Australia’s national identity is not
only founded in its war experience but also in the qualities now promoted as characteristic of all Anzacs and first forged in the crucible of Gallipoli. As a number of concerned historians have pointed out (Lake et al. 2010; Luckins 2004), it is as if the work of building a strong democratic society is not an essential part of what it is to be Australian, with the effect that alternative narratives around equity and social inclusion are simply erased as an important part of our history.

The Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance

The problems are in many ways illustrated by a new suite of exhibitions at Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance dealing with all the major wars in which Australians have been involved as part of a significant extension to their exhibition galleries. Opening in time for the centenary commemorations of the First World War at the end of 2014, these exhibitions are chronologically arranged, moving from one war to another but with no attention to the period between the wars and very little on the home front. Such a focus on military history rather than the history of war results, as Beaumont (2013) has argued in relation to the First World War, in the lack of an understanding of the impact of the war on Australia. In many ways, this is a conventional history – empirically based, with plenty of documentary evidence, making it the kind of exhibition McKernan is referencing in his introduction to his review of WWI: Love & Sorrow quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Even its design supports its empiricist epistemology. Minimalist in its aesthetic, objects are hung or placed in exhibition cases in neat linear rows. Everything is rigidly straight, plain and restrained, as is the floor plan – no nooks, intimate spaces or quiet corners. Rather like a three-dimensional book, intent on providing information about the course of the war, there is no particular use of design to create a sense of drama, of different scales and experiences. There is no special lighting, hardly any ambient music or use of sound – except, that is, for one significant display that provides the emotional heart of the exhibition and that reinforces the feeling that, despite all the force of a chronological approach based on original documents, we are in a sacred space that works by pulling at our emotional relationship with the Anzac legend. How does this happen? How is the stage set for this one display to have such emotive force?

There are three key strategies that enable an affective connection to the deep collective forms of attachment to the Anzac narrative in ways that privilege an emotional attachment rather than a rational appreciation of the historical information presented by the makers of the exhibition. These are the use of particular forms of language, the aesthetic ambience of the space itself and, lastly, the use of the human face and voice, all of which are set within a space that is a shrine, with all the connotations that that carries.

Language

An emotional rather than rational relationship to the Anzac tradition and the histories to which it refers is set outside the exhibition galleries, as one enters
the interpretation centre through a memorial-like atrium on whose walls are engraved the following words: 'ANZAC is not merely about loss. It is about courage and endurance, and duty, and love of country, and mateship and good humour and the survival of a sense of self-worth and decency in the face of dreadful odds.' Apart from the use of the present tense, which binds the readers into the message, these are the sacred words that Bongiorno (2015) alludes to as constituting the basis upon which we celebrate war as the foundation of the Australian nation. These words embody the coming together of the mateship narrative that historians on the left developed during the 1950s to symbolize national identity (see Ward 1958 for example) with the narrative of sacrifice and courage at the centre of the Anzac legend. As well as identifying the moral qualities of those we are commemorating and seeking to emulate, these words also point to the emotional qualities of the narrative itself, which are just as important to the Australian sense of self they seek to identify. For these qualities emerge as the result of story that is told as a tragic epic, a narrative form that promotes awe as well as sadness or pathos. We are meant to identify with these men and feel what they felt.

The first attempt to actively shape our emotional orientation to the exhibition once inside the building is a short visual installation that summarizes the function of the Shrine and its exhibitions. Once again, language is the key to the way this installation works, serving to link what one is about to see – mainly a ‘straight’ history of the various wars in which Australia has participated from our point of view – to our current ways of framing the Anzac legend for nationalistic purposes. The first sentence focuses on the ‘stories of the men and women honoured within these walls’ for their ‘service and sacrifice’. The focus on individuals is immediately apparent, as is the narrative of sacrifice. Both of these provide the means through which the history of war is made central to the nation. Central to this narrative is a focus on those ‘who did not return’ and in whose memory the Shrine was ‘built by those who grieved for them’, with its bricks ‘laid by hand by those who’d been to war’. The Shrine, therefore, is a sacred place of memory that embodies the grief of those who sought to remember the dead forever. The ongoing remembrance of those who died, then, is central to the work of the Shrine and its visitors. Peppered throughout the displays, therefore, are little vignettes detailing the lives of those who served, though the narrative itself is not structured by their experiences but by the relentless chronology of the war itself. Those we now remember, however, also include the builders of the Shrine – the family members who grieved, the mates who returned; for theirs was a sacred responsibility that we, according to the Anzac narrative, have now inherited.

**Aesthetic ambience**

Just as important to communicating the sacred nature of the Anzac heritage are the aesthetic qualities of the space itself. Situated within the foundation of the Shrine, the exhibition material is in part organized in a linear manner because it is set within the spaces created between the rows of brick foundation columns. We can feel that we are underneath the Shrine with its eternal flame and the space itself is
reminiscent of a church with its rows of columns supporting the vaulted roof above and leading inexorably to the altar that symbolically contains the body of Christ. The exhibition too has its altar, albeit in a side chapel rather than at the end of the nave.

Created by the removal of one of the brick pillars supporting the Shrine above, this ‘chapel’ houses a lifeboat from the SS Devanha, a former merchant navy ship turned troop carrier that took troops to Anzac Cove on the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey, in what proved to be a military disaster for the Allied Forces but the beginning of the Anzac legend for Australians. At a quarter to and past the hour, a sound, image and light show plays over the boat, creating the emotional heart of this gallery. Set at dawn, washed by moonlight, the audience is transported back to the moment of the first landing at Anzac Cove. We wait with the soldiers in the dark, hearing only the sounds of oars gently splashing the waves. A voiceover using first-person snippets from those who ‘were there’ encourages us to imagine their fears as they glide silently across the water. The tension is increased by our knowledge that the Turks are waiting too, having seen the silhouette of the transport ships moving silently towards the shore. Everything is still, and yet all the senses are alert, watching, waiting. ‘I watched and waited,’ says a Turkish soldier, slowly and deliberately. We too watch and wait, aping his behaviour. We watch above all the faces of the men portrayed in the black and white photographs taken at the time and projected onto four vertical screens behind the boat. What were they thinking and feeling as they sat in motionless silence in those boats slowly taking them to the Turkish shore?

**Faces and voices – the creation of a powerful assemblage**

Faces are important, Anna Gibbs (2010) tell us in her essay on the ways in which affect spreads amongst humans like a contagious virus. Following the work of psychologist Sylvan Tomkins, who identified nine different affects, stretching from negative to positive ends of a continuum such as, for example, pain to pleasure, Gibbs points out that it is the face that registers these affects the most and that communicates it to others. The face and the voice. Thus, for example, if someone smiles it is very hard not to smile back, not only offering a recognition of their smile but also as a result of feeling the joy that original smile gave us. Smiling back provides an intensification of that affect. It is something that happens automatically, a visceral response from one body to the other. For Tomkins,

affects are not private obscure intestinal responses but facial responses that communicate and motivate at once publicly outward to the other and backward and inward to the one who smiles or cries or frowns or sneers or otherwise expresses his affects.

(Tomkins 1966: vii, cited in Gibbs 2010: 191)

Metaphorically sitting side by side with these men on the lifeboat from the SS Devanha, it is very hard not to get caught up in the affects and emotions being
registered by these men on their faces, feeling their apprehension, their fears, all
the more because we also know the end of the story. Many would not come back.
As one primary school girl softly whispered to her friend at the end of the show,
‘that is so sad’.

But I am jumping ahead. For our apprehension is acknowledged through the
use of the human voice as well, as what these men were waiting for suddenly
becomes clear as Australian voices, in a range of accents representing our connec-
tions back to Britain as well as the emergence of a clearly definable Australian
accent, provide descriptions of the scene taken from contemporary accounts. ‘The
first thing we heard was a single shot. Then two or three, then it began very fast,’
says a clearly Australian voice. Another comments that ‘we were completely help-
less and exposed in our slow moving boat’; ‘just target practice,’ says a working-
class voice in a slightly cockney accent. ‘We had hoped to take the enemy by
surprise,’ says an educated officer in a clearly discernable Australian accent while
the foot soldier repeats, ‘just target practice’. In those few lines, communicating
the recorded thoughts and memories of a range of Australian soldiers across the
ranks who took part in the landing at Gallipoli, is embodied what little history is
known by Australians reared by the representations in Australian cinema and
television since the late 1970s of the Gallipoli story. It goes like this: the Australians
were regarded as cannon fodder who could be dispensed with by their English
superiors who bungled the whole thing anyway. The men’s lives were wasted but
their personal and collective spirit as Australians triumphed (see also Dittmer and
Waterton, Chapter 10, this volume). A voiceover provided by a stiff-upper-lipped
Australian officer steeped within the ideology of Empire and with an English
accent to match confirms that interpretation, as if giving assent to that belief from
the very centre of Empire: ‘It was a magnificent spectacle, to see those thousands
of men rushing through the hail of death as though it was some big game,’ while
a laconic Australian voice simply says, ‘Here we are, now we are in it,’ as the
sound of the waves wash over the audience and presumably the men in those
boats. Pride in their courage is tangible as is their faith in the Edwardian
belief that war made nations. As the Turks fire back, making it impossible for the
Anzacs to advance much over the difficult terrain, a proud officer comments:
‘These chaps don’t seem to know what fear is. A barge will be sufficient to take
us back.’

The point of all this oblique representation of death was not whether or
not there was any reason as to why Australians should have been involved in the
first place. There are no grand arguments made here as to the righteousness of
their cause. The point is simple, as the voice of an upper-class Australian officer
in an English accent tells us: ‘The Australians did heroic work and the world will
know it.’ The point is to celebrate the military courage of these men, a point that
is made sharper by the emotional pathos created by our knowledge that so many
did not return. The men are rendered victims, without agency despite their bravery.
And our agency, or rather our responsibility, is only to mourn them and not ask
questions. The point is made clear in the last voiceover, in an extract from a letter
written from a soldier to his wife at home in the knowledge that he could die,
requesting her and their daughter, even commanding them – and in this context, us – to ‘never forget’. After the sound and light show, photographic panels with the faces and names of soldiers who died at Gallipoli on that first landing are shown, one after another. Their youth is clear for all to see but it is their courage and not the waste of young lives that we commemorate. The engagement is based on an emotional identification with them; there is no space for a critical political enquiry into the events.

Attempts to resurrect a moment in history and to place us there, particularly those associated with difficult and traumatic histories, have a long history of critique, and for good reason. They share in the problem that Dominick LaCapra (2001) identified in relation to the use of victim testimonials at the site of the original trauma in films such as Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah. In wanting to produce an empathic relationship between the victim and the film audience – such films were, LaCapra argued, in danger of replaying the original trauma by not having sufficient distance from the moment of origin. In placing the victim back at the site of their original trauma, lending their testimony the authority of the place where those events took place, time is made to stand still. By erasing temporal distance, audiences were given no outside from which to engage with the reenactment. While LaCapra’s discomfort was out of concern for the victim, who was left in a continual state of victimhood, LaCapra also argued that it was naive to assume that it was possible to take on the victim’s position. As an audience, we know the trauma is momentary, he argued, that it does not really belong to us. To pretend that we can step into someone else’s shoes is, for LaCapra, to wallow in dangerous sentimentality. Rather than calling for the need for empathy, then, LaCapra suggests that what we need are strategies that, in their interpretation of difficult histories, cause an ‘empathic unsettlement’ that enables us to ask questions out of concern for the victims but that nevertheless returns to them their agency over their own destiny. To be able to do that, we need to be able to connect their experience to that of our own, in our own time. We need to normalize the subjects of the past.

Normalizing the Anzacs is not, however, what this display achieves. Instead, the representation of Australia’s wartime experiences as one in which ordinary men become heroes is in the tradition of monumental history. Monumental history, as Friederich Nietzsche (1997) tells us, is concerned with providing moral lessons – examples of best behaviour that we can emulate in the present. While in Nietzsche’s time such examples came from politicians and military figures, the Australian innovation, is, as Graeme Davison (2000) points out, to elevate the ordinary man to such a position, particularly the foot soldier. Hence, the language of Anzac frames both the Shrine and the exhibitions within it as a commemorative act. This should not be a surprise, given the memorial functions of this site, but it does remind us that the power of the place and the language that informs it is such that no attempt at a positivist form of historical narrative is going to overcome its function in myth-making for purposes of nation building.
WWI: Love & Sorrow at the Melbourne Museum

WWI: Love & Sorrow offers a contrast to the Shrine, making no attempt to explain the causes and course of the war. Its aim is neither military history nor monumental history. It has none of the traditional language associated with the commemoration of the Anzacs. Blood, sacrifice, courage, mateship and bravery are neither concepts nor words that can be found anywhere within the exhibition. There are no examples of ordinary men and women as heroes, though individuals are the focus of its narrative structure. Rather than being represented as an epic story, war is the setting for the destruction of families and communities in ways that echo down through later generations. Tragedy, rather than the epic, is its narrative form.

This narrative form is given shape by a focus on eight individual and family biographies through an analysis of two of their emotions as they develop in response to the experience of war – love and sorrow. In tracing and giving body to these two emotions, curator Deb Tout-Smith has used them to provide not only a heart-wrenching story as to what happened to each and every individual and their family but also to provide a window into the effects of the war on Australian society more generally. The exhibition is a rendition of the way in which war breaks society by breaking its emotional heart – the home. It is thus no surprise that the exhibition contains a representation of a fireplace at the centre of its geography, signifying the hearth. Such a centre allows for a consideration of the ways in which society itself was broken as the impact of the war impinged on the home front – read both as the nation, the local community and the family, across all classes and racial and ethnic divides.

Visitors to the exhibition are invited to follow the intensity of people’s love for one another as well as manifestations of their pain when things go wrong. These intensely private experiences are difficult to witness and all the more so as by the end we come to realize that the pain they embody is still felt two or three generations later – a theme that has its echoes with Marianne Hirsch’s (2001) discussion of post-memory within families that survived the Holocaust. It is this pain that opens up a range of political questions that are suggested in snippets of contextual information that run alongside the eight biographies. They range from the question of what it was all for, to the duty of care by the state to those who survived, to awkward questions concerning unequal treatment around racial divides, to the longevity of the social and economic impact of the war, to the weight born by families of those who returned with their spirit or their bodies broken.

How affect is deployed as an interpretative strategy to achieve this is what I want to focus my analysis of this exhibition on. In essence, my argument is that these strategies are responsible for enabling a form of ‘empathic unsettlement’ (LaCapra 2001), precisely because the exhibition refuses to maintain a linear narrative between past and present. Instead, it builds connections across time and between people. It does so both within the families represented and those who end up as witnesses to what is, in effect, their testimonies via a form of mimetic communication (Gibbs 2010) that builds on the ways in which the exhibition produces ‘sticky objects’ (Ahmed 2010: 29) that embody the emotions of love and sorrow.
between people, enabling a contagion-like spread of these between generations and to the audience. In my interpretation of how the exhibition works, affect is a central medium of communication and emotions are both the subject of enquiry and the aim. Together with the help of the information that is provided within the narrative aspects of the exhibition, this provides the ground for a form of critical enquiry on the part of the visitor.

What then is mimetic communication and how does it work? In her essay, Gibbs describes mimesis as a form of communication practice that embodies relations between people, rather than the communication of information. For Gibbs, this involves
corporeally based forms of imitation, both voluntary and involuntary... At their most primitive, these involve the visceral level of affect contagion, the 'synchrony of facial expressions, vocalisations, postures and movements with those of another person', producing a tendency for those involved 'to converge emotionally'.

(Hatfield et al. 1994: 5, cited in Gibbs 2010: 186)

As explained above, in the discussion on faces, there are a range of affects such as, for example, joy, anger, pain, disdain and pleasure that are communicated through facial expressions (grimaces, smiles) and in the tonal quality of the human voice (loud, quiet, soft, harsh, fast, slow, rising, diminishing), which, as argued by Tomkins (1966: vii, cited in Gibbs 2010: 191), spread contagion-like, across bodies. As the surface traces of deeply felt bodily sensations, these affects help to build emotional landscapes that build as well as break social bonds (Gibbs 2010: 191). Ultimately these affects contribute to building a sense of belonging to or being excluded from society.

Within the exhibition, this form of communication is built up through a particular assemblage of objects, images and voices, built into a narrative sequence in which time is at once chronological, in that we follow the lives of particular people, but is also flat in that the temporal distance between those who experienced the events that are the subject of the discussion and their descendants and visitors to the exhibition is broken down and we are encouraged to feel the same emotions they did via this process of mimesis. The difference between this exhibition and the one at the Shrine is that this process of mimesis is not aimed at getting us to be in their shoes (the resurrection of the past) but to ask questions about the larger narrative in which this historical event is usually framed within Australian society.

Of particular importance to the power of this mimetic form of communication is the way in which a small group of objects become 'sticky objects'. This is a concept developed by Sara Ahmed (2010) to describe the ways in which objects can accrue layers of meaning that become attached to them and which leave a residue on those who come into contact with them. This residue is what she describes as affect. For her, affect 'is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects' (Ahmed 2010: 29). In doing so, she is also subscribing to the view that the material world has agency, that it has
particular forms of power that can draw people as well as other objects into a field of relationality with them. Understanding these relations is to understand how affect works and what it produces.

**Mimetic communication in WWI: Love & Sorrow**

While each of the eight biographies we can follow in the exhibition have a ‘sticky object’ and a witness to their stickiness, here I only have space to focus on three examples. We first come across the eight individuals we are invited to follow across the exhibition through black and white portrait photographs of them. These are set against other photographs of them with their families, as if on a mantelpiece, suggested by a small narrow shelf on which their portrait is placed underneath the larger family shot. Succinct text underneath these photos provides enough biographical detail to enable us to situate them as part of a wider family, their ethnicity or race, their age, where they lived and what they did for a living. The theme of love and the suggestion of possible sorrow are introduced with a short extract from a letter written by a soldier to his wife that says: ‘If I am to die, know that I died loving you’. Amongst them is Frank Roberts, then 27 years old, who married his fiancée, Ruby, months before he left. His parents, though worried, were proud that he was doing his ‘duty’. Albert Kemp was a butcher who lived in Normanby Street, Caufield with his young wife Annie and their two small children, one of them a newly born baby at the time he left. John Hargraves was an 18-year-old from Horsham in Victoria, a small country town, who worked as a telegraph boy. He had to have the permission of his parents to enlist as he was so young. The bonds between these three individuals and their families were strong, a point that is made through an assemblage of objects that includes photographs, letters, telegrams and personal effects that have been kept within these families and are still owned by them. Some of these are used a number of times, becoming ‘stickier’ each time we meet them. Thus, for example, in the panel that tells us fairly early on in the exhibition that Frank Roberts was sent to France, we have a black and white photograph of him looking up at his sweetheart, Ruby, adoringly. She looks down on him as she is lifted up above him with a gentle smile, placing her arms around his neck in an embrace. It is obvious that they adore one another. The negative space between their faces is charged with love and that is what our eyes focus on, as this is the centre of the image. The figure of their baby daughter, born in November 1917, the same month that Frank was sent to the trenches in Belgium, is referred to in his diary, where he wrote that as he lay in his trench waiting for the orders to go over, ‘the picture I had before my eyes was that enlarged photo of you and little Nancy’. The next time we come across this family is to learn of Frank’s death in Belgium. We do so with that enlarged photograph of Ruby and baby Nancy before us. Beside it is a little package containing a letter purportedly from Nancy to her father with one of her little booties asking him if he would be able to fit into it. The letter and the little bootie never made it to Frank, and were returned to Ruby. She kept them all her life, later giving them to Nancy. At the end of the exhibition, in a movingly filmed interview with Ruby’s own granddaughter,
the little bootie turns up again, this time in Ruby’s granddaughter’s hands. Unconsciously, as she talks of Ruby’s pain and the hole that Frank’s death had on their family, she strokes the little bootie, as if to console her mother and grandmother. Sticky with the residue of the pain experienced by this family, including that of Frank’s father who spent the rest of his life compiling every bit of information about Frank and his life in a series of scrapbooks in a labour of love that also documents his own grief, we become witnesses to the ways in which this war had a lasting effect on Frank’s family and his descendants. As we watch Ruby’s granddaughter fight back her tears and notice her involuntary caresses of the little bootie, we cannot but respond mimetically, metaphorically caressing her back with our own affective and emotional response. We become part of the circle of sorrow.

Albert Kemp is one individual whose biography is central to the exhibition, forming part of its emotional core. He wasn’t particularly brave but he was loved and he loved in return. Admitting to his own fears in a letter to his wife Annie, we feel for his little daughter Ethel, then five years old. She looks out at us a number of times through the repeated use of an image of her taken from a family portrait produced to send to Albert. She seems a vulnerable little girl, looking at us with wide, open eyes and a very serious demeanour. In the first showcase introducing us to the family, there is a postcard she had written to her dad in which she tells him ‘Dear Daddy I am waiting and watching every day for you.’ Immediately round the corner from this, we hear the only sounds of guns in the entire exhibition. Walking into this sonic landscape I found myself standing between a Memorial Roll and the landscape of Glencourse Wood – a desolate piece of no man’s land, ripped apart by cannons. As I walked through the space I encountered myself in a direct relationship to the past, for the display involves the slow dissolve between three images. Two are historical, taken by the English and the Germans documenting the progressive destruction of the woods. The third is a present-day image of the same place – the woods have returned, the birds are singing, everything is fresh and green. Life has returned, but it is on top of bodies that were never recovered. ‘Tread softly by/Our hearts are here/With our beloved Jack’, says the text behind, quoting the words put on the grave of Jack Reynolds by his parents. The request means something, for as we move through the space the silhouettes of our bodies cause the dissolution from one image to another. We are present in that landscape and provide continuity between past and present. The act of walking is an act of remembrance. Walking out we are faced almost immediately with the image of little Ethel’s postcard and her face again – this time beside a reproduction of a telegram sent to the local priest asking him to communicate Albert Kemp’s death at Glencourse Wood to his wife Annie. His body was never found and I had just tread softly on his place of death.

Around the corner we come to an Edwardian fireplace that is not only the hearth of every Australian home but also the hearth of Albert Kemp’s family. On the mantelpiece is a Memorial Plaque given to his family. Beside it, the family portrait from which the image of little Ethel we saw as we took in the news of his death is taken. To the side is a photograph of Frank Roberts, festooned in mourning
ribbons and placed in the family’s dining room. Around these objects are many other mementoes from other familiar hearths. To the left of this display is a multimedia interactive detailing the impact of war on all the residents of Normanby Street, where the Kemp family had lived before the war. Together with the hearth, it is clear that Ethel’s story and that of her mother, of Frank, Ruby and Nancy is repeated not only on that street but also throughout the land as Albert and his family become a microcosm of a global experience let alone a national one. At the end, Ethel’s god-daughter, a woman now in her middle years of life holds Ethel’s postcard to her dad as she explains the impact of his death on his family. Her thumb caresses it, as if she was offering comfort to Ethel and Annie, acknowledging not only their sorrow but also physically, viscerally, embodying her own witnessing of this sorrow. In turn, in reading her face, her voice and her gesture, we too become witnesses and ponder on not only the emotional impact but also what it meant in practical terms – having to leave the family home, live with in-laws and deal with economic hardship.

John Hargreaves provides the basis for the most heart-wrenching critique of the war. A young man who set off for adventure as an 18-year-old, he came back suffering post-traumatic stress as a result of gassing on the front as well as being buried alive. While he recovered to some extent, his trauma was always with him. At the beginning of the exhibition, we sense his excitement on going to the front. The possessions kept by his family include his runner’s armband, a photograph of him with two of his ‘mates’ also in uniform and his war diary. It is this last object that becomes ‘sticky’ in the hands of his daughter Joan as she reads to us from it and then, looking straight at the camera, tells of the impact of his trauma on himself and the family. She herself is clearly traumatized by it but she is not a victim. While tears well up in her eyes and she covers her face in her hands as the camera dissolves away, this is not before she delivers her stinging critique based on her experience of the effect of the war on her father. ‘It gave me a horror of wars,’ she says, going on to conclude ‘it is just incomprehensible why we continue to go to wars’, indicating in this one statement what the purpose of the exhibition was – to support a pacifist argument by clearly indicating the ongoing traumatic, social and economic costs of war.

In many ways, this exhibition is an example of what Theodore Zeldin describes as a history of emotions based on individual biography. ¹ In an article about the nature of social history, Zeldin (1971: 242) advanced an argument as to the need for historians to be freed of what he called the tyranny of chronology and a conception of time as being able to be periodized as if the past bore no relation to the present. For him it was important to ‘show that the past is in fact alive’ rather than to ‘resurrect’ it (Zeldin 1971: 242). In his own work, Zeldin seeks to do this by concentrating his unit of analysis on individuals and their biography, rather than on abstract categories such as class, gender, race and ethnicity, nation or community – or, in our case, Anzacs. He is interested in how people’s emotions play a part in shaping their approach to the world around them and thus a role in defining what opportunities they have to act in the world. Understanding the histories of these emotions is thus one of the keys to explaining past events
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(history) – a point that is equally relevant to those of us who study the construction of heritage and are concerned about the ways in which narratives of heritage can confine one’s horizons and ability to engage across difference. It is important, he argues, for historians to ‘liberate themselves from the frameworks they inherit from their predecessors’ (1971: 243), just as it is for all people to recognize that the narratives they use to understand themselves are historically produced and therefore can be changed. The future, he suggests, can only be different, if we understand the history to our present. He is aware that doing so makes it impossible to establish causality, as the more one looks at individual biographies, the more complex people’s agency becomes. Nevertheless, he maintains that a focus on the individual does produce an understanding of society at any given time and across time.

Significantly, given Zeldin’s comments on the importance of letting go of chronology and his resistance to the notion of resurrecting the past, the assemblage of objects, images and voices at work in this exhibition work, as we have seen, to destabilize any notion of the past as disconnected from the present while emotions are given life by the ways in which a particular suite of objects weave in and out of the story at particular moments in time, building the emotional intensity as well as an understanding of the significance of the two emotions under scrutiny – love and sorrow – to the messages this exhibition embodies. The past, in a real sense, collides with the present and with us, the witnesses to other people’s pain. Not simply mementoes, these ‘sticky objects’ become ‘sites of feeling’ (De Nardi 2014), which in turn have the potential to become what I have elsewhere called a ‘pedagogy of feeling’ – a form of cultural pedagogy that uses affect to open up a critical engagement with received narratives about the past (see Witcomb 2015a, 2015b).

The effectiveness of this strategy as well as the difficulties it faces in countering the weight of the Anzac legend can be seen in the written responses people leave behind on a comments wall designed to enable people to respond to the exhibition and the emotions it elicits. While the great majority of responses gesture towards the ‘lest we forget’, there are a significant number that indicate support for the pacifist argument as well as pass comment on current foreign policy. Examples of statements made by a wide variety of people include questions such as ‘Why are we still involving ourselves in war?’ from a child; ‘It was a war we didn’t have to fight in. So many died and yet we still celebrate’; or ‘I look forward to the day when war does not occur, when we do not live in fear with greed and power dominating our selfishness preoccupations, when we have the courage to vote in leaders who are honest, egalitarian and will not allow killing in the name of our country.’ One who gave new meaning to the phrase ‘lest we forget’, embodied what I would argue is the aim of this exhibition – to question what the dominant language around Anzac hides and in the process to produce a position from which we can be more engaged citizens: ‘May those who have gone before give us pause to remember and reflect before we fight the wars of tomorrow. Lest we forget what we have lost.’ This, it seems to me, encapsulates the critical potential of forms of remembrance that use a history of emotions to refuse a distinction
between past and present and recover the voices of those we have forgotten in order to ask questions about the present.

Note

1 With many thanks to Julian Thomas for suggesting Theodore Zeldin to me after a joint visit to the exhibition with our families.

References


