

Independent Scholars Association of Australia Conference
1, 2 October 2015

Independence meets Scholarship
and
Monash University's World War I 100 Stories project

Independence can mean many things. In this case I am using it to describe the fact that in my research into members of my family I am not subject to any family sensibilities or restrictions, am in the pay of no academic institution and have no research assistants.

The scholarship I will talk about is the 100 Stories project emanating from Monash University and described as 'an instance of scholarship in the service of the community'. It consists of the stories of 100 individuals who were each in their separate and different ways involved in and affected by World War I. As the university website says, 'Amongst the cast of the 100 stories are not just soldiers, airmen and nurses, but parents who lost their sons, wives who struggled with shell-shocked husbands, children who never knew their fathers'. 'Indigenous servicemen and groups of diverse ethnic origin'.¹ It is designed to tell the story of the war and its impact, with truth and not mythology. Extensive use has been made of the files of the Repatriation Department which add a significant dimension to an individual's war experience which is missing from the standard service records and which are now all available. There are some very poignant stories.

The project has been extensively publicised especially around the time of Anzac and Remembrance Days in recent years; articles in the press especially the *Melbourne Age*, on ABC radio, FM and RN, and even the BBC world service² – links to all of which can be found via the Monash University website.

¹ <http://future.arts.monash.edu/onehundredstories/creating-the-100-stories/> accessed 29 Dec 2014.

² eg., ABC RN Life Matters, 25 Apr 2013; BBC World Service, 9 Dec 2012; *Age*, 7 Nov 2013, 23 Apr 2015; *SMH*, 11 Nov 2012.

It is in two parts or formats. First an online version of each story – a series of power-point slides, lasting about five minutes, slowly and silently done, not too much text, the content and message easily absorbed. The first 50 were ‘launched’ last October at the time of the commemoration of the departure of the first contingent from Albany, Western Australia. They form part of the permanent exhibition in the National Anzac Interpretative Centre there and the Victorian ones part of the exhibition at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne. The final 50 were to be out by last Anzac Day and ‘simultaneously exhibited in Turkey, France, Belgium, the UK and Aotearoa/New Zealand and available thereafter on line’.³ They have yet to appear but you can watch the first 50 – just Google ‘100 Stories Monash’.

The second format is to be in book form published by Penguin due out at Remembrance Day next month. This version of each story will be both more extended and give references to sources and further reading. But as the publicity says ‘First and foremost the 100 stories are an educational resource’. They come with suggestions on the website as to how they can be used in the classroom.⁴ A sample of 20 was sent on a promotional disc to every secondary school in Victoria.

All this needs to be said to establish that what I am talking about is wider and more important than any one of the individual stories.

And it is appropriate to state from the Monash website: ‘The project is led by Professor Bruce Scates, a leading scholar of the Great War, and (2011-13) chair of the Military and Cultural History panel advising the Anzac Centenary Board in Canberra’, chair of History and Australian Studies at Monash University, Director of the National Centre for Australian Studies and since last November a fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences of Australia. He is currently the leader on three ARC grant projects investigating soldier settlement, the meaning of Anzac Day, and pilgrimage to battle fields.⁵ He is assisted by two Monash PhD students.

³ <http://future.arts> etc accessed 29 Dec 2014.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ <http://profile.arts.monash.edu.au/bruce-scates/>
<http://monash.edu/research/people/profiles> (Professor Bruce Scates)
<http://www.assa.edu.au/fellowship/fellow/100179> all accessed 19 July 2015.

So much by way of introduction.

In November shortly after the launch of the first 50 stories at Albany I heard that they were up and that my grandfather's story was included.

The first four stories are entitled;

A deeply damaged man – Noble Black

A Duntroon man – Tom Elliott

A guardian angel of the Anzacs – Ettie Rout

A labour of love – Mary Chomley

About number 12 was

A gruesome trade in the dead – W.A. Windeyer

I knew he was to be included at some stage. Professor Scates had written to me asking for permission to use a couple of pictures from the biography I had written. He was complimentary about my book; I was flattered and rang to speak to him. I wondered why Windeyer should be included. He didn't go to the war although he tried to enlist. Perhaps it was his strong public support for conscription as the Mayor of Hunters Hill. No, it was to illustrate the aspect of postwar pilgrimage to the battlefields and cemeteries. Consequently you will understand that I was rather taken aback by the title linking him to 'a gruesome trade in the dead'. Perhaps there were aspects of him that the family chose not to speak about.

On my pressing 'play' to see his story, things did not improve. In the first slide his birth and death dates were both wrong (they were those of one of his brothers); in slide 4 'dotted', (as in cemeteries dotted on the Western Front,) was spelled 'doted' and 'sown', as in flower beds, was spelled 'sewn'. I wrote drawing attention to these, perhaps minor things, but expressing disquiet at the title and seeking evidence for other things said in the slides, *eg.* that he found 'the grave or memorial of every man killed from his suburb', and 'whispered a prayer over each'. I was confident I knew most of the sources. I questioned the embellishment by which flowers 'growing in most of the cemeteries' as in the source, became poppies 'growing in the killing fields' on the slide. I suggested the language was not only a distortion but also

according to the source, stories were developed of bodies being dissected to claim a double reward. In the slide ‘double’ is magnified to ‘multiple’ rewards. Indeed a gruesome trade. Windeyer visited many battlefields and cemeteries when he was overseas in 1921. He was concerned that many British bodies were simply being covered over, but he specifically said he was ‘discounting the gruesome stories’ of dissection. Together with some other Australians, he took a delegation to the Australian High Commission in London. The first version said he led ‘one protest after another’. There is evidence of only one.⁸

Here is slide 14, the revised version of the visit to the High Commission:

They demanded
that each and every battlefield
be searched again ‘by Britishers’
and made to yield up its harvest of dead.

We ask that rewards be paid to the Belgians and
the French for the discovery of Australian bodies,
as other nations paid for such information.

Cost should be no object
to the decent burial of our dead.

In the source they ‘emphasised the necessity’: they did not ‘demand’ and they used no expression like ‘harvest of dead’. From the source it was the Acting High Commissioner, not the Windeyer delegation, who referred to cost saying, ‘The question of expense did not come into consideration’ and certainly no one was so confused as to say cost should be no ‘object’ when they meant the opposite, that is ‘obstacle’ to the decent burial of our dead.⁹

The question of language leads not only into the distortions already noted but also to a significant inaccurate ascription. The text version initially said Windeyer claimed that “‘Belgian peasants’ ... ploughed bodies into the earth like manure”’. He made no

⁸ *SMH*, 10 Oct 1921; *Adelaide Register*, 15 Oct 1921.

⁹ *ibid.*

such claim. That expression was used by someone entirely different, a Mr Hemenstall, when interviewed by the *British Australasian*. Hemenstall concluded ‘Australians and New Zealanders will receive with the greatest dismay and indignation, the news that the bodies of their fallen sons and brothers are being ploughed in as manure.’¹⁰

The first text version of the Windeyer story began, ‘Assembled in a corner of the room were all the things a man of his age and status was likely to need for many months abroad – a battered suitcase, a sturdy hat box, an umbrella, camera and notebook. Windeyer looked skeptically at a dark woolen overcoat, sagging beneath the weight of itself ... This was a garment fashioned for another place and another climate, made to cheat the icy winds of the Somme and the drenching rain of Flanders.’ Further on in the text, reference was made to his dipping the ‘silver’ nib of his pen in ink to write the list of those from Hunters Hill whose graves he sought to visit.

This is not *The Secret River* or *Wolf Hall* but it has, and I understand the book will explain, it has pieces of historical imagination. The opening passage after revision begins ‘We can imagine’ Windeyer looking at the suitcase etc. The silver nib has gone as have the whispered prayers. That is good, but one must wonder whether there are other undisclosed and undetectable examples of historical imagination in the other 49 stories and is historical imagination appropriate in this project.

My grandfather’s story for the publisher is now essentially accurate and his words unembellished. Importantly the title will be either ‘revealing’ or ‘denouncing’ the gruesome trade. But some of the sensationalism in the language remains.¹¹ As I said, I have yet to see a further amended version of the slides.

However, his story is not the problem. It is simply an indication of problems in the project. I know about him. About a month before Anzac Day I thought to look at the other 49 stories. I know little about any of the subjects but I did know that the line, ‘Justice Higgins founder of Australia’s High Court’, in one story was simply wrong. He was not even one of the initial three judges. And I knew that saying one of the

¹⁰ *British Australasian*, 29 Sept 1921.

¹¹ Windeyer / Scates, emails, 10-13 March 2015.

causes of deaths of civilians in Turkey was ‘genocide’ was perhaps unwisely controversial. The web is brilliant for spreading ideas and information and inaccuracies.

During the process of revising the Windeyer story it was taken down from the website but it remained with all its inaccuracies as part of the exhibit at the Centre at Albany: it remained there for four months until I thought to check with those in Western Australia, found it was still up and asked for it to be taken down.¹² Higgins and genocide have been altered on the web¹³ but they remained there in their original problematic form for five months: indeed for a month after their problems had been drawn to the attention of the Vice Chancellor as well as Professor Scates. It was only after some follow-up phone calls and letters to the Vice Chancellor that any move was made to correct them. And they too remained uncorrected at Albany for a further 3½ months, again until followed up by me – 10 months in total. As at three weeks ago they were also uncorrected at the exhibit at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne.¹⁴ There are still matters of English expression in the 49 which I believe should be changed but which remain unaltered; *eg* of Bernard Walther it says, ‘Over seven months in the line he survived disease – dysentery, fever, cholera’. His service record says he never suffered from any illness. I suggested ‘he avoided’ might be more accurate than ‘survived’ dysentery etc. It was to be changed but has not been.¹⁵

Reactions to my comments, corrections and suggestions have been various. As I said, the web version of the Windeyer story was quickly removed for review – but Albany was not told. There was surprise that I had not seen the book version. It came with the revised version of the slides and a covering letter from Professor Scates:¹⁶ ‘We have corrected the couple of typographical errors you noted (the death date was still wrong) ... [and] I must admit we are still trying to master this technology’. Further on he says, ‘as you can see we can verify in published and archival sources all of the claims we have made in this account... [and the term] killing field was often used at the

¹² Windeyer / Wegerhoff, emails, 13 March 2015.

¹³ as at 24 April 2015.

¹⁴ Windeyer to McAuslan, Director Exhibitions and Collections, Shrine of Remembrance, 9 Sept 2015.

¹⁵ Bernard Walther story as at 31 July 2015.

¹⁶ Scates to Windeyer, 16 Dec 2014.

time'. A search via Trove of Australian newspapers of the time reveals no such usage. Truth without mythology?

There were some sources listed in the text version including two articles in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, one by me ascribed to JM Bennett and one by Bennett ascribed to me and neither of them of any real relevance. And references to the *British Australasian* that show the origin of the manure version – as Hempenstall not Windeyer.

I replied with the annotated copies I showed you earlier.¹⁷ Professor Scates acknowledged 'a number of minor amendments' he was happy to make but which he considered involved 'a slight change of emphasis rather than matters of fact'; adding 'I take it you have not read the *British Australasian* yourself, it is not available in many archives and I don't believe it has been digitised yet'.¹⁸ As it happens, it is in the National Library and I had checked his references and they did not support the statements made.¹⁹

I have been told 'Historical inquiry is a matter of constant review as well as careful research';²⁰ that as a history graduate I 'will understand that there is scope for debate, different interpretations and writing genres in history'; and that Higgins was not the founder of the High Court was 'a question of semantics'.²¹

Among the innumerable historians of the First World War is the late Barbara Tuchman whose wonderful works include *August 1914*. In an essay in *Practicing History* she says she does not invent anything 'even the weather'.²² I am not in her class but of the same school.

Does it all matter?

I believe 'Yes' – in the context of current debates
about standards in our universities;

¹⁷ Windeyer to Scates, 28 Dec 2014.

¹⁸ Scates to Windeyer, 14 Jan 2015.

¹⁹ *British Australasian*, 20 Jan and 29 Sept 1921.

²⁰ Scates to Windeyer, email, 14 Jan 2015.

²¹ Scates to Windeyer, email, 30 April 2015.

²² B.W. Tuchman, *August 1914*, London 1962; In search of History (Address Radcliffe College April 1963), *Practicing History: selected essays by Barbara W. Tuchman*, New York 1981, p18.

about ‘What is history?’ and the distinction and connection between history and fiction;

about how we understand and remember World War I – not just VCs, sacrifices, mateship, and the birth of the nation;

and about how the national story is told via history in schools.

And all especially so in an age in which communication of information and misinformation is equally instantaneous.

In conclusion let me remind you: ‘First and foremost the 100 stories are an educational resource’ produced within and published by one of the Group of Eight Australian universities.

JB Windeyer

2 October 2015