



**GALLIPOLI
TO THE
SOMME**

RECOLLECTIONS
OF A NEW ZEALAND
INFANTRYMAN

ALEXANDER AITKEN

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY ALEX CALDER

Deeply moving . . . an epic of devotion and sacrifice.
— Sir Bernard Fergusson

Alexander Aitken was an ordinary soldier with an extraordinary mind. The student who enlisted in 1915 was a mathematical genius who could multiply nine-digit numbers in his head. He took a violin with him to Gallipoli (where field telephone wire substituted for an E-string) and practiced Bach on the Western Front. Aitken also loved poetry and knew the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost* by heart. His powers of memory were dazzling. When a vital roll-book was lost with the dead, he was able to dictate the full name, regimental number, next of kin and address of next of kin for every member of his former platoon—a total of fifty-six men. Everything he saw, he could remember.

Aitken began to write about his experiences in 1917 as a wounded out-patient in Dunedin Hospital. Every few years, when the war trauma caught up with him, he revisited the manuscript, which was eventually published as *Gallipoli to the Somme* in 1963. Aitken writes with a unique combination of restraint, subtlety, and an almost photographic vividness. He was elected fellow of the Royal Society of Literature on the strength of this single work—a book recognised by its first reviewers as a literary memoir of the Great War to put alongside those by Graves, Blunden and Sassoon.

Long out of print, this is by some distance the most perceptive memoir of the First World War by a New Zealand soldier. For this edition, Alex Calder has written a new introduction, annotated the text, compiled a selection of images, and added a commemorative index identifying the soldiers with whom Aitken served.

Alex Calder is associate professor of English at the University of Auckland. His most recent book is *The Settler's Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand* (Auckland University Press, 2011).

1 *Egypt to Lemnos*

MY ACTIVE SERVICE IN THE WAR OF 1914–18 BEGAN OFFICIALLY ON 14th August 1915. This was the date on which our draft, the 6th Infantry Reinforcements of the N.Z.E.F., finished its four months of training at Trentham, near Wellington, made the usual march of ceremony and farewell through the capital, and embarked for Egypt on the troopships S.S. *Willochra* and *Tofua*. But the first six weeks, the long voyage broken only by a day of shore leave at Albany, Western Australia, and a day without leave standing a mile or two off Aden, as well as the six days in the sand at Zeitoun on the north-eastern outskirts of Cairo, seem in retrospect mere prelude. I could recover them with little trouble, and they were interesting to me then, but now that authors have visited every part of the world and described every sensation of travel, nothing is left for an unskilled pen.¹

We had come to Zeitoun on 19th September by the usual route, from Suez north to Ismailia, west to Zagazig, south-west to Cairo. At Zeitoun we lived in long, wooden huts, *tectis bipatentibus* as in Virgil, two walls with a roof across, open at both ends and floorless, planted on the sand.² The hottest months, July and August, were past, but the

September equinox still had heat enough to put parades between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. out of the question; or rather, to come to terms at once with the twenty-four-hour clock of the Mediterranean zone, between 09.00 and 17.00. There was exercise in the desert in the cool of early morning, 05.30 to 07.30; by 09.00 we were under cover in the huts except for limited leave to visit Zeitoun village, perhaps to watch, under an awning, some conjurer or contortionist; cautioned also, for our own safety, not to look too curiously into any eyes behind a yashmak,³ lest a jealous dagger should come our way in a back street.

From 17.00 to 19.00 there was a route march, usually to Heliopolis and back, then general leave until the last suburban train from Cairo, arriving at Zeitoun after 23.00. I have nothing to say of certain demoralizing, and in some cases permanently ruinous, effects of the night-life of Cairo. For completeness and full understanding something should be said of this, but not by me, incompetent to deal with an aspect of life in barracks more than adequately described by others.⁴

Cairo at night held no attraction for me. I preferred to practise on the violin in the almost empty hut, the few who might otherwise have been attentive listeners being engaged on other things. Like almost all the occupants of the hut, these few were fated to death or injury: Singleton, who now was writing his interminable letters by candlelight, destined to lose both legs in a railway accident next year at Ismailia;⁵ Paisley and Robertson farther up, now engaged in reading the Bible together (as they always did at this hour), to die in France—Robertson at Armentières in 1916, Paisley at Passchendaele on that bad day for New Zealand, 12th October 1917.⁶ But now they were kneeling in the sand before turning back their blankets; and later there will be the train whistle, the influx in the dark, and more than a rumour of disorderly adventure—and yet, tomorrow, at drill in the early morning, all of this washed away as the tide washes detritus from a beach. So the six days passed. One afternoon I visited the Pyramids and Sphinx with my good friend Frank Tucker of the Wellingtons, but, again, I have nothing to describe; from Kinglake onwards, everything has been said about

the Pyramids.⁷ They should be seen, however, like Melrose Abbey, by moonlight.⁸

We left Zeitoun for Alexandria at noon on 26th September, marching in unbearable heat two or three miles towards the centre of Cairo. The village of Ezbet-el-Zeitoun was in a drowse; only the great ravens above the camp gates watched us departing. We spread ourselves with relief in the airy wide-gauge carriages. My temperature—from a touch of the sun or sand colic—was rising.⁹ For this reason, though I was unaware of it, all impressions were unnaturally heightened. Mechanically I absorbed them; the stately Nile barges, gracefully deliberate, their tall masts like bent bows; the sudden clatterings through crowded junctions, Benha, Tantah, the equally sudden returns to Biblical scenes, here a kneeling peasant turning an irrigating rill down a furrow, there an ox driven round and round the primitive Archimedean water-screw; at last, but by this time through a film, a glaze of rising nausea, Lake Mareotis on the left, with curious fishing craft moored in its rushy edge, and mud huts on the right, eyes peering through the window-slits.¹⁰ At the quay I staggered up the gangway, paraded sick, and was summarily sent below to lie under a blanket and digest that military cure-all, a 'Number Nine' pill.¹¹

The *Osmanieh* appeared to be a cargo steamer of the Levant, perhaps captured and pressed into transport service, for which, with her limited deck space and lack of cabins, she was entirely unsuited. She was later torpedoed in the Mediterranean. Company quarters were away down in the forehold, on a grimy iron floor reached from the hatch by a long ladder. In the dim light of two portholes high above, one could just make out heaps of onion skins, remnants of a previous cargo, swept into corners. The crew of Levantines, seldom seen in the day-time, prowled abroad on that first night and stole socks and shirts that we had washed and put to dry on steam-pipes. As for rations, there was a sudden decline from the relative luxury of the *Willochra* east of Suez; the hot stew, the New Zealand butter and cheese, the bread, were at one stroke exchanged for the regular military fare of the Mediterranean zone, the hard biscuits and the small tins of Fray Bentos bully beef.

All day on the 27th I lay below, much recovered but unfit for drill, with nothing to do but order my impressions of the previous six weeks. The violin lay in its case beside me; not originally mine, but won in a raffle on board ship, some days after we had left Albany in Western Australia, by my cabin-mate and old schoolfellow R. J. Maunsell, and handed by him to me. Mediocre in tone and cheap, it was wonderful to have in such a place. Sooner or later I would have to part with it; it was excess luggage, contrary to regulations, and could not be expected to survive the strict kit inspections that would precede our disembarking on Gallipoli. I was determined in spite of this to smuggle it along as far as I could, and had begun to print a hopeful list of names on the baize lining of the case. I added one now, so that the list showed: *Indian Ocean, Aden, Suez, Cairo (Zeitoun), Alexandria*. The violin was by this time almost a platoon mascot, while the piece most in demand, Dvořák's *Humoresque* in Wilhelmj's arrangement in G major, was becoming what in later years would be called the 'signature tune'.¹²

On the 28th, recovered though still shaky, I sat above with the platoon about the deck-housing on the port side, looking west. Mr. Johnston, the platoon commander, whose orders had clearly been to use his inventive discretion and keep us occupied, was refurbishing from memory old lectures heard more than once in Trentham. Our course was north with a touch of west; we must have passed during the night between Rhodes and Karpathos and were now in the southern Aegean. I listened with half my mind; we were skirting the eastern fringe of the Cyclades, small, beautiful islands, some too small to be inhabited, rising from the north-western horizon, gliding abeam and vanishing in the south-west. In the late morning a much larger one, dark and mountainous and steep along its eastern coast, came opposite to within fifteen miles. I realized, not then, but in retrospect, that this must be Naxos, the Naxos of Theseus and Ariadne, largest of the Cyclades; this eastern side seemed too precipitous for harbour or beach, which must be round to the west. I began to think of several of those ancient legends. But it was useless; mythology had lost its meaning, the names

had no conviction. Gallipoli and Anzac were everything; we were bound for there, perhaps to be actually there within another night and day; meanwhile we were sitting on this deck, listening as before to those trite themes of musketry, of judging distance, of locating objects by a clock-and-finger method, or of carrying out imagined attacks by short skirmishing rushes, as understood and last practised in the Boer War. So the magnificent island faded southward with the rest, a protecting destroyer came from the north at high speed and circled us three times, the last of the Cyclades thinned away, and in the afternoon we were in the blank waters of the northern Aegean.

All this time, and in Egypt, Gallipoli had been uppermost in our minds, yet hardly ever mentioned. Not from fear, but because it was pointless to speculate concerning a place none of us had seen, being without exception volunteer recruits none of whom had yet been in action. No one doubted that Gallipoli was our immediate destination, though rumours, which among soldiers will seize at any fortuitous possibility, did sometimes suggest Salonika. In those days Gallipoli was hidden under a cloud of official silence. Sir John Maxwell, commander of the Egyptian garrison,¹³ briefly reviewing us one morning in the sand at Zeitoun, had barely mentioned it. We knew of the Landing on 25th April, which had taken place soon after our entry as recruits into Trentham, and we also knew vaguely of some of the later operations; but not of the August advance, which was too recent to be definite, and which had been moving towards its collapse when we embarked for Egypt.¹⁴ It was true that at Suez, about to disembark, we had met some wounded and invalided men, brought on board the *Willochra* to be taken home; but inert in stretchers or lying back exhausted in deck-chairs, they were so evidently reluctant to revive painful experiences that we had left them alone. None the less, a few words had passed, an outline had emerged, and on the main points my own mental picture was exact enough; a narrow, ridgy, barren peninsula, the tail-end of Europe, probably a magnified edition of my own Otago Peninsula, sun-baked and unhealthy of late; Cape Helles on the south tip, Anzac on the west side, Suvla Bay farther up; Anzac itself,

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