

A man in a suit, looking down, with a red tint over the image. The background is a textured, mottled blue-green color.

ODYSSEY
of the
UNKNOWN
ANZAC

DAVID HASTINGS

*The story of World War I through
the odyssey of one New Zealand soldier.*

Ten years after the end of World War I, the *Sydney Sun* reported that an unknown Anzac still lay in a Sydney psychiatric hospital. ‘This man . . . was found wandering in a London street during the war,’ reported the paper. ‘He said he was an Australian soldier. Beyond his first statement that he was a Digger, he has not given any information about himself.’

Thousands of people in Australia and New Zealand responded to this story and an international campaign to find the man’s family followed.

The story tapped into deep wells of sorrow and uncertainty which had been covered over by commemorations of Anzac heroism and honourable national sacrifice. More than a quarter of the Anzac dead had no known resting place. Might this be someone’s missing son?

David Hastings follows this one unknown Anzac, George McQuay, from rural New Zealand through Gallipoli and the Western Front, through desertions and hospitals, and finally home to New Zealand. By doing so, he takes us deep inside the Great War and the human mind.

David Hastings began working in journalism as a copy boy on the Melbourne Sun in 1970 and ended in 2013 as editor of the Weekend Herald. Hastings has an MA in history from the University of Auckland. He is the author of Over the Mountains of the Sea: Life on the Migrant Ships, 1870–1885 (AUP 2006), Extra! Extra! How the People Made the News (AUP 2013) and The Many Deaths of Mary Dobie: Murder, Politics and Revenge in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand (AUP 2015).

Contents

CHAPTER ONE Rivers of Sorrow	1
CHAPTER TWO Your Country Needs You!	9
CHAPTER THREE All Aboard for the War	27
CHAPTER FOUR A Corner of Hell	41
CHAPTER FIVE Epidemic of Shock	55
CHAPTER SIX Buried Alive	65
CHAPTER SEVEN Mysterious Burden	78
CHAPTER EIGHT In the Home of Forgotten Men	94
CHAPTER NINE Where Are You, George?	110
CHAPTER TEN Mother and Child Reunion	123
CHAPTER ELEVEN Bittersweet Homecoming	140
Notes	153
Bibliography	170
Acknowledgements	177
Index	179



Returned Sailors & Soldier's Imperial
League of Australia
N.S.W. BRANCH
Wingello House, Angel Place
Sydney

Unknown Patient

Help Identify Him



DESCRIPTION.

Aged 38, height 5ft. 6½in., weight 10st. 3lb., dark brown hair, very straight; blue eyes, small scars on back, two vaccination marks on left arm, one above the other, small flag tattooed on upper part of left arm.

Please broadcast this photo. and description. It may help to identify this man, supposed Australian or New Zealand soldier, who has been a patient in Callan Park Mental Hospital, Sydney, for 11 years.

He was found wandering in a London street in 1916 or 1917, dressed in civilian clothes and wearing an Australian military hat.

The following particulars accompanied him on his being invalided to Australia:—

"Reg. No. 2584. Enlisted at the outbreak of war, Sailed with the first Convoy, October, 1914, in First or Second Battalion. Went right through Gallipoli campaign, afterwards to France, where shell shocked. Returned on S.S. Karoola; discharged disabled, July 24, 1917."

Repatriation Dept., Sydney, states that they have examined those particulars, and also reported a description to all State and New Zealand, but nothing revealed to show that he served in either the Australian or New Zealand overseas forces in the Great War. Still, he may have been an Australian or New Zealand soldier. He has given no coherent statement himself.

If he be an Australian or New Zealand ex-soldier he is entitled to receive financial benefits if his condition be due to or aggravated by war service.

Address reply—

STATE SECRETARY,
R.S. & S.I.L.A.,
Wingello House,
Angel Place,
Sydney.

Copy received

CHAPTER ONE

Rivers of Sorrow

It was my heartache for you, my glorious Odysseus and for your wise and gentle ways that brought my life and all its sweetness to an end.

— The Odyssey, Book XI

TEN YEARS AFTER THE GUNS OF WORLD WAR I HAD FINALLY fallen silent, the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia printed and circulated 10,000 copies of a poster asking for help to identify an unknown patient in a Sydney mental hospital. The poster included a head-and-shoulders picture of a good-looking man on the brink of middle age. His hair was close cropped and his brow was wrinkled, which some people took to be a sign of his inner turmoil. But there was the hint of a sardonic smile playing on his lips which was odd given the poster's message. It said the man was 'a supposed Australian or New Zealand soldier' who had apparently been found wandering the streets of London during the war wearing civilian clothes and an Australian military hat. When he was repatriated to Australia it was said that he had been right through the Gallipoli campaign and had also served on the Western Front. The strong element of doubt was necessary because the evidence was not just unconvincing but flimsy. The only specific detail mentioned was his regimental number, 2584. He also had a name – George Brown – but this was not mentioned publicly at the time. Checks with army records drew a blank; there was no soldier in either the Australian or New Zealand Army

with that name and number. His description had also been circulated on both sides of the Tasman, again to no effect. The possibility that he was not a soldier at all had to be taken seriously which was probably why they called him the 'unknown patient' at first rather than the more obvious 'unknown soldier'.

Nobody outside of the Callan Park Mental Hospital, where the man with the wrinkled brow had been a patient for more than a decade, even knew of his existence until March 1928 when his story first appeared in the newspapers. But within days, scores of people – some said hundreds or even thousands – contacted the League and the hospital hoping that he was their man.¹ Everywhere were people yearning for men who had been reported killed or missing in action during the war and praying that they were still alive somewhere and would eventually return home to their loved ones. Inquiries came from every part of the Anzac nations: from Castlemaine in Victoria to Western Australia, from the New South Wales-Queensland border area to Sydney and across the Tasman, including the small North Island towns of Eketahuna in the Wairarapa and Stratford in the province of Taranaki. 'Many of those enquiries tell of father, brother, or son reported missing during the Great War', said one newspaper, 'and ask if the writers could be permitted to see the patient at Callan Park, or at least a photograph of him. They think he may be one they have mourned as dead.'²

The story of this unknown man who had apparently been stripped of all memory by the horrors of war tapped into subterranean rivers of sorrow and unresolved grief which had been covered over for more than a decade by the solemn commemorations of Anzac heroism and honourable national sacrifice. The toll of the war was heavy: 60,000 Australians and 18,000 New Zealanders had lost their lives.³ But the two nations were slow to recognise other statistics that suggested that the relatives of many lost soldiers harboured feelings that overwhelmed any sense of national pride. The nature of the industrialised killing of the Great War meant that 25,000 of the Australian dead had no known resting places and the same applied to about 6000 of the New Zealanders.⁴ For the relatives of those men, the uncertainty was cruel. Not only were they deprived of the

usual consoling balm of funeral rituals but often they did not know how their men had died, where their bodies lay or even if they were dead at all.

All of them carried the invisible burden of not knowing, of hoping against hope that their man was alive when logic and reason and rationality should have told them there was virtually no chance. To such people, the glory rhetoric of the Anzac legend must have been hard to bear. 'Truly those whom the gods love die young, for those brave boys grow no older in our memories,' said one Anzac Day editorial a few weeks after the existence of the unknown patient was revealed to the world.⁵ But what did the gods think of those who were missing? Such pious editorials must have seemed shallow and trite to people having difficulty coming to terms with the idea that their men were dead while clinging desperately to the belief that they still lived.

Of course, the bereaved reacted in different ways. For some it was a deep sense of sadness and longing. Many set out on quests to try to find their men or at least reliable information about how they had died and where they might be buried.⁶ They went to the newspapers appealing for anyone who might know anything and pleaded with the Red Cross for help. All of this was reasonable and sensible. But sometimes their reason deserted them and they became credulous, believing a rumour that the Germans were holding hundreds of thousands of allied prisoners in secret camps long after the war had ended as a way of taking psychological revenge on the victors.⁷ And people who would believe such rumours were also vulnerable to swindlers and scammers from Germany who played on their grief by promising information for money.⁸ Some relatives went even further and lost touch with reality altogether. They saw ghosts, had premonitions and dreams of their men suddenly returning to them, and some had full mental breakdowns.⁹ In an extreme case, documented by Australian historian Bruce Scates, a woman was admitted to a mental hospital after failing to get a straight answer from the Red Cross about the fate of her son. Either he was dead – killed by a shell explosion or bullet – or he was wounded and in a prisoner-of-war camp. The Red Cross could not say which was true. When they took her away the woman was crying 'so let it be, so let it be'.¹⁰

To people unconnected to the missing men the chance that any one of them still lived was so tiny it was not worth a moment's thought. But for the families who dwelled on it, the slimmest chance was worth preserving for as long as hope would hold out. These were the people who rushed to see if the unknown patient in Callan Park was their man. Thanks to the publicity he was identified within a fortnight and he was, indeed, an old soldier as the League had suspected all along. His name was not George Brown but George Thomas McQuay and he came not from Australia but from the small town of Stratford in New Zealand. He had been with the Auckland Infantry Battalion at Gallipoli and on the Western Front before disappearing in July 1916 during the opening phases of the Battle of the Somme.

The story of this unknown soldier nicely coincided with Anzac Day in 1928 and with the emergence of his identity came a new account of how he had been found during the war, not on a London street but wandering behind the lines on the Western Front and telling a story of how he had lost his memory when buried by a shell exploding near the trench where he was sheltering from an artillery barrage.¹¹ It was as though one of the much-mourned dead had suddenly come back to life, stepping out belatedly from the chaos of the war, the smoke and thunder of the Somme. For one family at least the irrational hopes and dreams had come true. George McQuay was reunited with his mother in a great blaze of publicity and the promise of a happy ending seemed to be fulfilled with reports that his memory was coming back. A few weeks later he returned to his homeland and with that he disappeared from the headlines as suddenly as he had appeared. For a second time he was forgotten, at least by the public.

Left behind were lingering questions about what had really happened to George during the war and afterwards, beginning with the obvious contradiction between the two stories of how he was found. The *NZ Truth* newspaper, for one, linked the importance of finding out the true story of this unknown Anzac with his chances of recovery.¹² But neither *Truth* nor anyone else, official or unofficial, set out to research his story fully. One reason may have been they suspected that what they would find

would not fit comfortably with the elaborate mythology growing around the Anzacs. From the very first anniversary of the Gallipoli landing there was a concerted effort from politicians, editorial writers and the pulpit to laud the Anzacs for their heroism and to claim at least a moral victory from a campaign that had gone so disastrously wrong and cost the lives of thousands of young men. The soldiers were heroes who had been fighting for honour, freedom, the Empire and the nation and they had not died in vain.

Another reason was George himself. He did not seem all that interesting. He obviously was not a great man, like the generals and politicians of his day, striving to influence the course of history-making events. Nor was he one of those brave soldiers who held their nerve under unimaginable pressure and committed great deeds and acts of courage, often at the cost of their own lives. He was just one of those ordinary men whose lives were swept along by great forces over which they had no influence, much less control. Individuals such as George pass almost unnoticed through the annals of history. They are occasional faces in the crowd, usually statistics, and, at best, their stories are told as vignettes, incomplete snippets that are useful to epitomise general themes rather than for their own sakes. They leave no wealth of documentary material behind to explain themselves and to help their peers, much less posterity, to judge and evaluate them. Nor are there crowds of observers, colleagues or even enemies – such as those that pick over the life stories of the great and powerful and heroic – to record their every move, to criticise and praise them or to say what they were like as people.

And yet George did pass under the gaze of great institutions that recorded something about him. One was the army which had a meticulous record-keeping system that allows us to pinpoint where he was and who he was with at certain times during the war. Then there were the three mental hospitals where he was a patient between 1916 and 1928 when he was finally identified. The evidence from these and other sources together with what is known about the context of his times enables us to recover his story from the leftover scraps of history, and it is a story both

more complex and far more interesting than the simple happy-ever-after fairy tale told in 1928. And if the journalists and officials of that year suspected George's real story did not fit with the Anzac mythology of the day, they would have been right. It was a different kind of story, not of the great tacticians and strategists and armies moving together into battle, nor of individual heroics, but of one man's personal, terrifying experience. Of human fragility, rather than strength. Of being pressured into fighting by the irresistible weight of public opinion. Of hunger, thirst and malnutrition. Of disease and vermin. Of somehow surviving the horrors of battle where men were being shot down and blown up and dismembered until nothing recognisable of them was left to bury. Of mateship and loneliness. Of facing up to the meaning of courage and cowardice and desertion. And of all the external terrors of the real world crowding in on one man and being multiplied many times over by the force of imaginary terrors welling up inside his head.

George's story takes us deeper than we have previously been inside the personal meaning of war as opposed to the public and political. It reveals the other side of the Anzac legend which, at the time, was being composed out of references to the ancient world. Gallipoli was in the middle of the theatre of the great mythical and historic wars of the ancient Greeks and it was commonplace for the newspapers in the 1920s to compare the exploits of the Anzacs to the heroics immortalised in stories such as the 300 Spartans defending the pass at Thermopylae and Homer's tales of the Trojan War.¹³ But most of all they saw in the Anzacs a clear reflection of the classical Athenians, the founders of democracy, who had fought in the Persian Wars of the fifth century BC and later, in the Peloponnesian War, against the might of their former allies, the Spartans. Like the Athenians, the argument ran, the Anzacs were a citizen army fighting for freedom against enormous odds with courage, endurance and intelligence. The comparison was so important it was not confined to the pulpit or the printed page but expressed also in the neoclassical architecture of the Auckland War Memorial Museum, which was built in the 1920s. The building has many references to the Parthenon, which dates from

the height of Athenian power in the fifth century BC. Its eight columns at the north entrance replicate the eight Doric columns at each end of the Parthenon. A frieze on the outside showing New Zealanders at war is a reference to the external frieze of the ancient building. The homage to Athens is made in words as well. Inscribed on the museum's lintel is a famous quotation from the funeral oration of the Athenian leader Pericles in praise of the citizen soldiers who fell in the war with Sparta: 'The whole earth is the sepulchre of famous men. They are commemorated not purely by columns and inscriptions in their own countries. But in foreign lands also by memorials graven not on stone, but on the hearts of men.'

Even the most superficial glance was enough to show George's experiences were unlikely to fit this narrative. And yet his experience did echo the ancients' – but not of the stories about Thermopylae and Marathon that the editorial writers of the 1920s loved so much. Rather, it was an echo of Homer's *Odyssey*, the story of Odysseus's ten-year struggle to find his way home to Ithaca after the Trojan War. He had to overcome all kinds of obstacles placed in his way by vengeful gods and devious sorcerers. Although George was not a great warrior like Odysseus, they still had much in common. Like the ancient hero George had a decade-long struggle to find his way home from a war, and like Odysseus he faced imponderable obstacles from forces which, if anything, were even more mysterious than those described by Homer.

Also like the *Odyssey*, George's story is as much about his family as it is about him. His mother and sister waited for him to come home, clinging to the hope that he must still be alive. They reflect the roles in the *Odyssey* of the hero's wife, Penelope, his son Telemachus, and his parents Laertes and Anticleia. Under the crushing weight of the uncertainty, Anticleia dies of grief and her ghost tells Odysseus that his father is fast fading too. 'He lies in his misery, nursing his grief and yearning for you to come back, while to make things worse old age is pressing hard on him,' she says. 'That was my undoing too . . . it was my heartache for you, my glorious Odysseus and for your wise and gentle ways that brought my life and all its sweetness to an end.'¹⁴ And Penelope says to one of the phantoms who

AUCKLAND
UNIVERSITY
PRESS



9 781869 408824

\$34.99

Paperback

210 x 140mm, 208 pages

ISBN 978 1 86940 882 4

12 April 2018