

“Australia’s Greatest Son”.

C.E.W. Bean and his connection with Tuggernong.

“Their uniform was like no other in the war, any degree of undress being sufficient for men and allowed by their officers. Half naked they dug, tunneled, carried food, water and ammunition up the dusty precipitous tracks, swept their trenches free of refuse, or patiently searched their clothes for the vermin that nightly plagued them....”

“...the white hospital ship...used to lie there, a beautiful with her bright motionless lights at night, and the blazing Aegean sky and sunsets, clustered mountain tops of Imbros and Samothrace, as her background by day.<sup>1</sup>

These images of the men and the landscapes of Gallipoli are familiar to many Australians, and indeed part of the wider national consciousness, that has invested Anzac Day with more significant ritual and meaning than any religious festival in our calendar.

Few people realize how much of what we know of “the Anzacs”, we owe to the labours of a quiet, scholarly writer. Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean, whose background was in law and journalism, was elected as Official War Correspondent to the A.I.F, and accompanied by the troops when they left Australia, landing with them at Gallipoli on April 25 1915.

He remained on the peninsula for the duration of the Gallipoli campaign, and spent the rest of the war with the A.I.F. on the Western Front. Having been granted freedom by the War Office in 1915 to move where he liked about the line, Bean took full advantage of this privilege, to collect first-hand data about every engagement in which the A.I.F. took part, either by personal observation from the trenches during the battle itself, or the interrogation of front line units shortly afterwards. In case of the Gallipoli campaign, he revisited the peninsula soon after the war ended to trace more clearly the ebb and flow of the battle and to talk to a Turkish officer who had served there.

The Minister for Defence Sir George Pearce had expressed to Bean the hope that he would write the history of Australia’s part in the war, and to this end Bean collected an enormous amount of detailed and accurate information about each episode in the war; his own war diaries ran to 226 notebooks.

Bean’s own bravery under shell-fire became legendary. He was recommended for the Military Cross for helping wounded under fire. As a civilian he was not eligible for this, but gained an honorable mention in Despatches.

From March 1916 until the end of the year. Bean spent with the troops on the Western Front, where allied and German forces were locked in a murderous stalemate across 500 kilometres. In that he witnessed the death of friends and relatives, the heroism of ordinary men, and the brutality and waste of trench warfare. The historians task grew larger in his mind, for it seemed essential that what the A.I.F. had suffered what they had achieved, should be recorded accurately and completely; his tale would become a monument to “that famous army of generous men”.<sup>ii</sup>

As he sailed home to Australia in May 1919, Bean set out in writing for the Government his plans both for the war histories and for a national war memorial, which would “hold the sacred memories of the A.I.F. for all its time”.<sup>iii</sup>

Much of the compilation of the war histories – and the writing of the first two volumes of what was to become a 12-volume work – took place in our valley, at Tuggernong Homestead in the A.C.T., between 1919 and 1924.

There is a poignant contrast between the drowsy sheep paddocks of Tuggernong, as it was in 1919, and the dramatic and terrible vistas which were the subject of Bean’s narrative. Bean came to Tuggernong because he needed uninterrupted peace and quiet in order to get on with the enormous task before him. Initially Bean and his staff began work on the histories in Melbourne, at the Department of Defence, but found their work there continually interrupted by well meaning visitors, often ex-serviceman.

Tuggernong Homestead had been acquired by the Federal Government in 1916 from the Cunninghams, a prominent family of local graziers, and was used as staff quarters for a planned arsenal site on the Murrumbidgee. This did not eventuate, and the homestead was lying vacant. The Government agreed to its use by the war history team, and they moved in, in October 1919 – Bean, plus a small team of writers, clerical staff and draftsmen.

The homestead was turned into a living quarters and offices, with piano and billiard table for recreation; some local people were employed as cooks and general hands around the place, and on the 60 acre paddocks that went with the place, they ran a few sheep and cows.

There in this quiet and very rural Australian setting, with neighbours scattered on homesteads linked by dusty roads, and the Brindabellas in a blue and unchanging backdrop to the landscape, Bean set about his ambitious task, which was to write the history of the A.I.F. – not only as a narrative, but as a study and celebration of the Australian character.

Bean’s earlier writings show his interest in exploring the connection between history, culture and national identity. His series of articles “On The Wool Track” (commissioned by the *Sydney Morning Herald* when he was a staff reporter) were reports on the wool industry in far western N.S.W. and Queensland. His observations of shearers, farmhands, boundary riders and station managers showed him that the men who worked the country were a breed quite different to the city dweller. They were extremely resourceful – they had to be, miles from any store or township. They were egalitarian: a man had to gain his authority, and keep it by common sense, courage and good humour – there was no established feudal order to back him up. They showed hardy qualities of physical endurance, born of living in a harsh climate and coping with natural disasters: and they were ready to help out neighbours and strangers when crisis arose.

These men were recognisably different from their English forebears. They were the product of a new and challenging environment, their character formed in the absence of a fixed or inherited social structure.

These were the men of the A.I.F. In writing their story, Bean was writing about, and writing for, ordinary working Australians – most with little education beyond primary school. He was determined that his prose would be clear and accessible to the ordinary reader, and that his

volumes of history would be the stories of individuals, not just accounts of the plans and strategies of high commanders. His 12 volumes contain in all, over 6,000 individual histories supplied by personal footnotes. This is part of what made the Australian war histories so different from the British official history, which was the work of an official committee, and contained little information about individuals.

Bean's writing is full of the stories and reports of ordinary Australians, and is marked by a strong sense of compassion for their individual histories. A British visitor remarked about Bean: "He is always on the spot. His tall figure was familiar to the Anzacs who loved him, for they well knew that he recorded their deeds".<sup>iv</sup>

The first two volumes of the history appeared in 1921 and 1924. Bean had been suffering for several years from a kidney ailment, and in 1924 he went with his wife to England for treatment and a kidney was removed. Doctors advised a warmer climate, so the Beans left Tuggernong for Sydney. The staff and records were transferred to Victoria Barracks.

Tuggernong Homestead, in 1995, has been overtaken by the developing suburbs of Southern Canberra. The paddocks surrounding it are still used for horse agistment: the concrete cricket pitch which Bean and his staff built for their weekly cricket match is still in evidence. The homestead and the original farming land surrounding it are owned by the A.C.T. Government.

Plans to subdivide the site for medium density housing were shelved in 1994 after a storm of protest from local residents and other interested groups. The site is at present in limbo, while plans abound as to the best use of the land and its buildings.

The homestead itself and outlying buildings are in a poor state of repair and the gardens are neglected. Yet the site is picturesque, and one could imagine how, after sympathetic restoration, the place could become a fitting museum for Bean's work and an interesting memento of an earlier stage of rural Australia.

Bean has been called "Australia's greatest son" by General White, Chief of Staff of the A.I.F.<sup>v</sup> It is clear that Bean was a brave and resourceful man. He was also an outstanding historian who recorded and celebrated the deeds of Australians at a turning point in their history. His significance needs to be more widely known among the general public, and his connection with our own valley recognised.

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<sup>i</sup> Bean CEW. (1946). *Anzac to Amiens*. Reprinted by Penguin Books, 1993. P134, P137.

<sup>ii</sup> Winter D. (1992). *Making the Legend: The War Writings of C.E.W. Bean*. UQP. P228.

<sup>iii</sup> Inglis, K.S. "C.E.W. Bean – Australian Historian". (John Murtagh Macrossan Lecture 1969) P228.

<sup>iv</sup> Winter D. *Op. Cit.* P100.

<sup>v</sup> Bazley, A W. "Writing the official history of World War 1 at Tuggernong" from Selth, P.A. *The Canberra Collection*. Lowden Publishing Co. 1976. P235.