‘To Sanctify and Hallow the Memory’: The search for Australia’s missing from World War I

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The First World War cost over 60,000 Australians killed and 156,000 wounded. Little thought was given at the outset of the War to how information about casualties could be communicated quickly and sensitively to an anxious home front or the immense and lasting psychological damage that such carnage would produce. With the war over, efforts turned to a systematic attempt to find, identify and properly bury Australia’s missing war dead. Not only was this effort motivated by the moral imperative ‘To sanctify and hallow the memory’ of this sacrifice, but also with a growing awareness of the importance in healing the mental anguish that would be the lasting legacy of the First World War. This paper looks in brief at the story of the effort to ease the psychological suffering of bereaved families, an effort that though at times beset by scandal and incompetence, is one that continues for the same motives to the present day.

Introduction

On the 23rd of November 1930, the *Broken Hill Barrier Miner* ran a small news story above its advertisement for the Boughtman Street Cycling Club’s Dance and Euchre night titled *Told Soldier Son’s Fate After 14 Years*. It reported that the body of Private Henry Mahony, who had been reported missing on the 5th of August 1916, had been identified among the remains of nine Australian soldiers found in a shallow grave at Pozières. ‘The shock, after so many years of anxiety about what had happened to her eldest boy,’ reported the *Barrier Miner*, ‘prostrated Mrs Mahoney.’ It was news that did not go unnoticed in a country where thousands shared Margaret Mahony’s lonely vigil and for whom there were no answers to the questions that haunted them anew each day.

A hundred years on from the end of the First World War, it is perhaps a forgotten truth that for many Australians the ‘War to End Wars’ would never end. Over 18,000 Australians who fought and died in the Great War have no known grave. That there would never be a funeral for their sons, nor even a grave would be one more unthinkable reality for the bereaved to live with, and – yet more agonising for many – there would be no information beyond the bare news that their son was killed or missing.

The search for Australia’s missing war dead, and the effort to bring comfort to grieving relatives during and after the war, is one of the Great War’s lesser known stories. An effort that commenced almost as soon as the first troop transports left Australia has continued in various forms and with varying energy and success to the present day. This story is a fascinating mixture of noble intentions and outright scandal, as well as of great compassion and soulless officialdom. Despite the many failures, missteps and incompetence over the years, it remains, remarkably, pursued with solemn determination despite the clear impossibility of ever completing the task and despite the cost. The search for the missing and for the answers to some of those haunting questions is one very important way that the nation quite literally dirties its hands to give practical expression to those familiar words – *lest we forget*.

To say Australia was unprepared for the tidal wave of trauma about to crash on home shores as the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF) entered the war in April of 1915 would be a considerable understatement. It was an unpreparedness matched in equal magnitude in the AIF itself. The shortcomings in training and planning, the terrible mistakes made in their first experience of battle and the woefully inadequate medical arrangements, all contributed to the terrible losses at Gallipoli. By December when the British and their Allies withdrew from the disastrous campaign, the Australian death toll exceeded 8,000. Despite the distracting jingoism of the press reports full of stories of Australian heroism, the stark truth could hardly be ignored by the Government. Fully one third of the Australian force committed in the campaign had become casualties. Nor was the disaster ignored in small towns and cities across the nation. As the ever-lengthening casualty lists appeared in local papers, recruitment numbers plunged.

Catastrophic though they were, the losses at Gallipoli were eclipsed in 1916 during the great Somme offensive of the summer. Shockwaves of grief and trauma radiated across Australia. Families were notified by their local clergy who received pink telegrams with news of a death in their parish calling them to this awful errand. No one expected that bodies could be returned to Australia for proper burial, but what was expected, and desperately needed, was information. How did my son die? Did he suffer? Did he have a decent burial? The pleading letters flooded into Army Headquarters. Overwhelmed by disasters like the battle of Fromelles with a casualty toll of over 5,000 in a single night, the task of answering those pleas was simply beyond the resources of an Army stretched beyond breaking point.

Breaking the News: *'I regret to inform you …'*

Unofficial channels filled some of the silence that followed official notifications. Letters of condolence written to the bereaved by officers or friends of the dead were a great comfort for many. When Sergeant William Turner was killed at Dernancourt, his company commander, Captain Anderson, wrote to his mother in Hobart:

> He fell in action against terrific odds on 5/4/18. He was a man highly respected by all with whom he came in contact for his clean living and devotion to duty. In action, his men had every confidence in him and a mother would be proud to have such a son … All deeply feel his loss and we combine in sending our sympathies to you …[1]

But for many the silence was deafening and for some, maddening. Mrs Bertha Robertson made her feelings clear about her treatment following the death of her son Leslie in 1916:

> I am writing to ask you to kindly explain … why parents have to wait such an endless time before they can hear any particulars of their sons when they are killed in action. My boy was killed at Pozieres on the 8th of August but beyond the bare notice from the Military department I have heard nothing … It seems to me to be gross neglect … to keep people waiting so long, there has been heaps of time for enquiries to have been made and answered … Seeing the cruel way in which mothers are treated (it is common talk everywhere) can you wonder they are against their sons enlisting, the authorities are anxious enough to get the soldiers but once they are killed, they bother their heads no more about them.[2]

Whether it was felt that the usual expressions of regret and sympathy were not due to Mrs Robertson, or the officer who responded felt a tone of terse formality was the best defence, the response she received gave little satisfaction.

> With reference to your communication of 13th instant … I have to state that all details received in connexion with the death of your son … have been promptly transmitted to you. Confirmatory documents have come to hand but have furnished no details regarding burial … You will be notified on receipt of advice regarding personal effects, and the parcels will be forwarded to your address.[3]

Though Mrs Robertson's complaints may have exasperated an overworked officer at Base Records, the far more serious consequence of her suffering and that of so many bereaved relatives showed itself in the plummeting recruitment figures and contributed to the defeat of the conscription referenda of 1916 and 1917.

Vera Deakin and the Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau: *'We cannot express in words our gratitude for your kindness'*

One woman would commit her war work to addressing the anguish of relatives and would do more than any other Australian to bring comfort amid this avalanche of grief. Nurses aside, women rarely feature in writing about the First World War but it is nevertheless remarkable that Vera Deakin's contribution remains largely a footnote in Australia's war history.[4] In London when the war began, Deakin returned to Australia and joined the British Red Cross to study nursing. Defying her parents, she accepted an offer from the Red Cross to travel to Cairo to help in its mission there and arrived in October of 1915 in the wake of the disastrous August offensive at Gallipoli. With thousands of Australians dead and wounded and an Army Administration overwhelmed by the task of communicating with anxious and devastated families back home, she founded the Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau the day after arriving in Egypt. The Bureau's mission was to discover information about Australian casualties and pass it back through its offices to relatives in Australia. Increasingly under siege from desperate families, the Army reluctantly tolerated Vera Deakin's work. Staffed mainly by volunteers, the Bureau's work exploded until it was dealing with an average of 25,000 enquiries a year.

The case of Private Thomas Leng of the 47th Battalion was typical. He was posted as missing on 7 June 1917 at Messines. Deakin pursued the case, eventually writing to Leng's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Imlay seeking information:

> to date (we have) been able to gather absolutely no information about him, and the father who is

> an elderly man, is breaking down under the long strain. If you could get any information at all, however vague, we think it would help him, and the fact that you had taken an interest in the matter would mean a great deal.

Imlay was about to lead his battalion into battle at Passchendaele but he, like many senior officers, knew just how important the smallest scrap of information could be. He responded with a lengthy letter, explaining that enquiries had been made of his platoon mates, but that nothing was known. His letter gave some insight into the difficulty of tracing the missing:

> [t]aking into consideration the fact that it was not possible for any of our men being taken prisoner on that day and that no hospital reports have been received notifying us of his admission anywhere, it would be fairly safe in my opinion to assume that he was killed in action there, but we are chary of doing this until all reasonable hopes have proved unavailing. The statement of soldiers who see others killed cannot, I am sorry to say, or rather am glad to say, be given full value to, as they have so often proved incorrect. A shell might burst where a man was last seen yet although the eye-witnesses fancy he was killed by it, numerous cases have occurred where they have proved to be quite wrong.[5]

Despite those observations, Imlay believed that, given there were no reports of Leng, 'I am afraid it is useless, hoping against hope, and perhaps it would be better to inform his parents …'

Although the official posting for Leng was 'wounded and missing', Vera Deakin quoted Imlay's letter verbatim to Leng's father. He responded in October with thanks for her efforts 'in this, our sore trouble', but he didn't give up hope. 'Trusting that you may shortly be in a position to send me some favourable news …' At war's end, James Leng wrote again to the Red Cross, hoping that 'something definite may be elicited from some returned soldier concerning the fate of my missing boy'.[6] But there were no further scraps of information to ease the old man's suffering. Leng's name is recorded on the Menin Gate memorial to the missing at Ypres.

Sadly typical also was the anguish of Mrs Minnie Viles of Townsville who had been informed that both her sons were missing after the battle of Messines. She wrote to the Army at regular intervals, letters of increasing desperation as she waited for news. Six months of waiting ended on 16 December, when she finally received news that they had both been killed on 7 June. Cruelly, no other details were known. Almost a year after their deaths there was still no information, and she wrote to Deakin:

> [p]erhaps you could get me some word of my darling boys, all that we know is both 'killed in action, 7th of June 1917'. I have written again and again to the Captains of 'A' and 'D' Companies but so far no reply from anyone and really I feel sometimes as if my reason will go, for oh my boys were good boys, no mother ever had better … will you please help me and try and get some news of my dear sons.[7]

The Bureau pursued the case with its usual determination and eventually received news from witnesses which was sent back to Mrs Viles on 19 June 1918. Sergeant Albert Murray had seen Frank Viles blown to pieces in a support trench. Two other men were standing close to Viles when the shell landed squarely on him. 'It was the most marvellous escape for them and for myself also' wrote Murray. He added that of poor Frank Viles, 'there were no remains to bury'. His brother, Private Keith Viles, was a runner and had been sent with a message on the previous day and never seen again. Despite the best efforts of the Red Cross to discover something of his fate, nothing more was known. The Red Cross reports included a grim insight into the battle from Chaplain Arthur Davidson of the 37th Battalion, something quoted widely to the bereaved of Messines.

> We gathered few bodies for burial. Those of us who saw the ground know how it was. Shell after shell ploughed up every square yard of the ground and many bodies were buried by the shells that filled up holes where bodies had fallen.[8]

Major Denis Hannay responded to the Red Cross enquiry, giving brief details of what was known of the boys' deaths and adding that the 'two brothers were thought a lot of by the officers, being well behaved lads and very good'. Deakin had little comfort to give their mother, but included the small eulogy from Hannay in her letter, adding rather hopefully that '[w]e regret to have such sad news to send, but it must be some consolation to read such a tribute from a commanding officer'.[9]

The Whitest of Lies: *'He was killed instantly by shellfire …'*

The witness reports providing information to the Red Cross about the dead or missing were often remarkably detailed and vivid, given the dearth of information about the course of the battle, the decisions of officers and observations about the war. Starkly different to the official entries in war diaries which often concealed or minimised errors, or were oblivious to the ordeal in the front line, the

Red Cross files would be an accidental treasure trove for future historians, giving the unvarnished truth about the experiences of battle and its context. Occasionally they give voice to the true horror of war and such graphic accounts of death and wounding could not simply be passed on to relatives in their entirety. Deakin had the difficult task of sanitising the reports to spare the relatives such distressing details. Death, where it was mentioned, was often 'instantaneous' and either explicitly or by implication 'painless'. The belief that a decent burial had been conducted was a comfort for many. Captain Brack's report of Sergeant von Bibra's death told of his burial under fire at ANZAC Ridge near Polygon Wood. 'Shells were bursting all along the ridge during the service, but none interrupted the little party in their holy work'.[10] Where no burial was possible, the relatives were often comforted with the explanation that their loved one's body was placed in a shell hole and later buried by the shells.

War's end did not end the questions. One month after the armistice in 1918, an English pastor wrote to the Bureau about a young English aristocrat, Gerald Levinge, serving as a private in an Australian battalion.[11]

> He is the son of Lady Levinge (one of my parishioners) who is nearly distracted with the anxiety of knowing nothing definite, having [already] lost one son killed as well. Of course, you will understand that he is of gentle birth, but, like many others of his class, enlisted.

News of Levinge, when it finally came back with the returning prisoners was very bad. Several witnesses had seen him shot through the chest and abdomen, the bullets severing his spine and paralysing him. Private Patrick Nicholson of Mackay reported Levinge 'very badly wounded in the spine. He begged me to shoot him as he was suffering so much. There was no means of moving him'. His officer, Lieutenant Goodsall, briefly tended him, giving him some water, but reported that he was 'in a very bad way'. Goodsall gave a second statement when he returned from a German prison camp in 1919, adding that he knew Levinge's mother. This might have influenced him to give a much less distressing, but entirely fictitious, version of Levinge's death. 'He was killed instantly by shell fire … and buried in the support line. His grave is marked'.[12]

Although the Army tolerated Deakin's work, it was never welcomed. In fairness, there was good reason to wait for information to be confirmed. The premature report of Sergeant John Ryan's death at Dernancourt on 5 April 1918, had disastrous consequences. Some four weeks earlier, Ryan's sister Margaret had written to the officer in charge of Base Records in frustration at not receiving any news of her brother through Ryan's wife, Ethel. Margaret Ryan asked to be listed as her brother's next of kin, claiming his wife was 'not what she should be since her husband left …' and expressing concern for the welfare of Ryan's three young sons.[13] The notification of her brother's death galvanised a grief-stricken Margaret Ryan.

> When I wrote you … asking for any cabled reports to be sent me, I told you that his wife was no better than she should be. I have been to the Red Cross today and they referred me to a solicitor with the result that I intend to take the children from their mother.
>
> Now my brother fought bravely for his country and was presented with two Military Medals and I should like these medals and whatever else he had for his children as they shall prize them in the years to come when their mother has long forgotten their Father.[14]

Official news that Ryan was a prisoner of war eventually reached his distressed and bewildered but much relieved wife and three sons late in 1918. He returned to Australia and, no doubt, into another kind of war, in July of 1919.

The War Graves Detachment: 'Raising the bodies of our dead comrades'

Finding all of the missing from the First World War was an impossible task at the end of the war, and remains so today. However, in March 1919, the Australian War Graves Detachment was formed to begin the task. Made up largely from volunteers who saw the work as a sacred duty to fallen comrades, its role was to exhume bodies from the temporary cemeteries and mass burials that were scattered about the battlefields around Amiens and inter the dead in the newly established cemeteries of the Imperial War Graves Commission.[15] The War Graves Detachment would be chiefly responsible for establishing the Australian memorial and cemetery at Villers-Bretonneux. That this was a noble and thoroughly admirable duty was unquestionably true, all the more so because of the gruesome, sickening and often backbreaking labour it involved. Private Henry Whiting was one of those who stayed behind to 'assist with the raising of the bodies of our dead comrades [to] place them in cemeteries which we have surveyed for the purpose'.[16] Whiting and his colleagues had no doubt how important it was to find and identify these missing Australians 'as it is cruel for their peoples' minds not to be set at rest to know that their sons have been located. Many mothers picture their sons blown to pieces and no record …'[17] He also considered it a sacred duty – something that helped him and other members of the

Detachment cope with the psychological toll. 'The men we have raised up … have been killed 12 months and they are far from being decayed properly, so you can guess the constitution one needs. I have felt sick dozens of times'.[18]

The work of the War Graves Detachment continued for five months and in that time they exhumed and re-buried 5,469 men and helped to identify many of those.

> Their efforts were communicated to Australians in several ways. When a loved one's grave was located, identified and concentrated in an official IWGC cemetery, the bereaved received direct personal correspondence, including a photograph, details of the location of the grave, and the name of the closest train station.[19]

Their work did not go unnoticed in Australia. On the 3rd of June, they received a visit from Prime Minister Hughes on his way to the Peace Conference, accompanied by former Prime Minister Sir Joseph Cook. On Bastille Day, the French paid them a special honour in the presence of Defence Minister, Senator George Pearce.

At 11.00 one company was formed up in the hollow square at Headquarters to receive from the Mayor of Villers-Bretonneux a monument subscribed for by the inhabitants of the town in honour of the brave Australians who fell during the operations culminating in the capture of Villers-Bretonneux.[20]

On the 3rd of August, General and Lady Birdwood inspected the unit and they marched in full ceremonial order 'with bayonets fixed' to present a flag to the Bishop of Amiens which hangs in the Cathedral to this day. The brief unit diary of the War Graves Detachment ends on the day of their disbandment on the 20th of August with the news a new unit would be formed to complete the work of finding and re-burying the Australian dead of the Great War.

'3 officers and 30 other ranks marched out to form the last remaining unit to be known as the Australian Graves Services which will remain in France for a period of two years.'[21] Major John Mott M.C., former distinguished member of the 48th Battalion, escaped POW and Commanding Officer of the War Graves Detachment signed off with 'Vive l'Australie.'

The Australian Graves Service: '… *a serious scandal bringing humiliation and disgrace …'*

The task confronting the Australian Graves Services (AGS) was a formidable one. The remaining Australian battlefields in Belgium and France were scattered over a wide area and the cemeteries and mass burials from 1916 and 1917 poorly mapped and just as scattered. Much of the vast territory they had to cover had been fought over again in 1918 during the German Spring offensive when Ludendorff's armies swept all before them from March to early April, and it was ravaged anew from June onwards as the Allies pushed them back to begin the victorious 100 days' campaign which ended the war. There was no protection for the fragile rows of wooden crosses and many of the cemeteries were caught in the shelling and the crossfire, or simply lost in the chaos of the fighting. Some survived intact, but a good many others did not and the task of finding these men was often a case of searching the grid squares by compass bearing. But it would not be the difficulty of the task which would condemn the effort to failure.

Neither the lofty ideals nor the sterling work ethic of the original volunteers of the Australian War Graves Detachment lived on in many of the members of the new unit. Nor were they as directly involved in exhumations. Labour companies of civilians undertook this more distasteful work which was under the administration of the AGS. Unfortunately, much of that administration was ineffectual and incompetent or worse and much of what ensued was every bit as ignoble as the previous effort had been heroic. A Court of Inquiry was convened in April of 1920 to examine the work of the AGS and the opening remarks of its summary bear quoting in full.

> The Australian Graves Services were primarily instituted by the Australian Government for the purposes of honouring the memory of those members of the AIF whose lives had been sacrificed in war. It is the undoubted wish of the Australian Government that this work be carried out. The fields of operation covered by the Australian forces are very extensive and cemeteries must necessarily be scattered over a large area. That this work may be properly accomplished requires detached parties detailed to great distances. Supervision of these parties is difficult and no definite record of the work is readily obtained beyond the report of the party itself. Opportunities for abuse are great and unless the most rigid control and discipline is maintained this work intended to sanctify and hallow the memory of the dead must develop into a serious scandal bringing humiliation and disgrace upon the Australian Forces.
>
> Up to the date of investigation by this Court of Inquiry, no reasonable or definite plan of carrying out the work seems to have been formed and many of the officers and men selected did not

> realise the dignity and importance of their position. The appalling condition apparent in March, 1920, must come as a warning for the future guidance of those in charge, that unless immediate and drastic action is taken for proper control, this effort to honour the dead shall only be the means of bringing shame and disgrace upon the good name, fame and reputation of Australia.[22]

With those stinging words as an opening, the summary report went on to list 35 damning findings of fact including criminal misappropriation of property and fraud and the revelation that in many cases, little effective work was done to find and record the graves, exhume the bodies or establish cemeteries. The photographers engaged to record the work had no qualifications and experience and took few photos. A bitter enmity existed between the two senior officers of the unit, Captain Allen Kingston and Lieutenant William Lee. They were not on speaking terms and instead engaged in various attempts to smear and discredit each other. This seems to have been one of the few pursuits that they put their energy to. The findings of the report are listed with barely concealed indignation.

> Women of ill-repute were notoriously and openly occupying huts with the men at the camp in Villers-Bretonneux … Drunkenness was a common and frequent occurrence among the men and no disciplinary action was taken to check it … On one occasion drunken members of the AIF returning to camp at night wantonly discharged many shots from a revolver to the imminent danger of others and no disciplinary action was taken … Captain Kingston visited Estaminets with his NCO's [sic] and openly drank with them … One member of Lieutenant Lee's staff openly and publicly managed and controlled Estaminets in Amiens serving drinks over the bar while wearing AIF uniform … A second member of Lieutenant Lee's staff publicly and openly maintained an Estaminet in Amiens, serving drinks over the bar in uniform and keeping women of ill-repute there for the use of soldiers … The assistant of the Q.M. Sergeant at Villers-Bretonneux entered into negotiations for the sale of an ambulance car to a man in Rouen for a price of 18,000 francs with the understanding that the car was to be represented as lost and the proceeds divided among two members of the AIF.[23]

And so it went on. Lee and Kingston were sacked and sent home in disgrace. Criminal charges were brought and court martials instigated while the remaining AIF personnel were placed on subsistence allowances and discharged as quickly as they could be replaced with civilian labour. The property was secured and the Villers-Bretonneux camp cleared and closed. The entire project was revised and the responsibility substantially transferred to the Imperial War Graves Commission.

Sanctifying and Hallowing – The current era: *'… never forgotten, bearing an honoured name.'*

Despite the scandals, the passage of time, the missing or incomplete records, and the impossibility of completing the task, the Australian Government's commitment to find, identify and re-bury the missing Australians of the First World War remains undiminished today. Bodies of fallen soldiers from the Great War are still found with regularity as the old battlefields are built upon, during the course of archaeological digs or, as in the case of the discovery of the mass burial of Australians at Fromelles, through dogged research by civilians.[24] In March of 2018, the modern version of the War Graves Detachment, the Unrecovered War Casualties Unit, conducted a search for the mass grave of 86 members of the 45th Battalion killed in the Battle of Messines. Despite the very credible evidence and unusually accurate map references recorded, the men could not be found despite a determined, well-funded and comprehensive search. This effort is part of the much larger search which, successful or not, will never end. The determination to continue that search in the face of failure and setback, to bring comfort to the bereaved and to properly honour Australia's war dead is driven by the same noble motives that link the Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau and the Australian War Graves Detachment and its progenitors with today's Unrecovered War Casualties Unit. Doctor Brendan Nelson, director of the Australian War Memorial, perhaps summed it up best at the funeral in 2010 of Private Alan Mather whose body was found some 90 years after he fell in the battle of Messines and laid to rest with full military honours in Prowse Point cemetery.

'It is easy from the safe distance of almost a century to look back and settle for the abstract. But this man who lies before us is real … Here now will lie one, "never forgotten, bearing an honoured name"'.

'Lest we forget'.[25]

End Notes

1. Service Record: 2728 Sergeant William Turner, NAA B2455
2. Service Record: 3424 Private Leslie Robertson, NAA B2455 *Letter 13/1/17*
3. *Ibid.*
4. No biographical note seems to leave unmentioned the fact that Deakin was the daughter of Prime Minister Alfred Deakin. Although this may have opened doors and shielded her from some of the opposition she met, it is wholly irrelevant to her remarkable achievements during the war and beyond.
5. 1DRL/0428, Private Thomas Leng, Red Cross File 1580906
6. *Ibid.*
7. 1DRL/0428, Corporal Francis Viles, Red Cross File 2820407
8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. von Bibra papers, PR 03339

11. 1DRL/0428, Private Gerald Henry Levinge, Red Cross File 1590704

12. *Ibid*.

13. Service Record: 2490 Sergeant John Ryan MM, NAA B2455 *Letter 20/2/18*

14. *Ibid. Letter 29/5/18*

15. These were chiefly in the region of Villers-Bretonneux, Proyart, Warfusee and Mareclave

16. Letter, Private Henry George Whiting AWM PR05609

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Smart, Julia: "A sacred duty": locating and creating Australian graves in the aftermath of the First World War AWM Summer Scholars Paper, 2016

20. AWM224 MSS611 Diary of the Australian Graves Detachment

21. *Ibid.*

22. NAA MP367/1 Summary – Court of Inquiry into Australian Graves Services.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Five Australians were recovered near Zonnebeke in Belgium in 2006 during the laying of new gas mains. Private Alan Mather was recovered in 2008 during archaeological work on the Messines battlefield and the remains of 250 British and Australians killed at Fromelles were recovered from mass graves at Fromelles in 2009 thanks to the research of Lambis Englezos.

25. Australian Embassy, Belgium, Luxembourg and Mission to the European Union and NATO. Address by Dr. Brendan Nelson, Ambassador of Australia at the reinternment of Private Alan James Mather, Prowse Point Cemetery, Hainaut Province, 22 July 2010

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Christmas Island

below us
rock plummets to depths
we cannot hold true
while all else thrusts skyward
with the violence
of uprising

we sit on this delicate
formation of faults
that quakes and quivers
with change and witness
life wanting life –
with each red claw

the wind breathes
back to the sea
with each turtle's lumber
up the slow sand
speaks an ancient will
to continue

like each new boat
buoyed and heavy with hope
just one dance;
the grace of the willing.

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Western Australia