

SINGABOUT

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ANZAC – MYTH MAKER

by R Dale Dengate

THE BLOOD RED EARTH. Australian Poets in Song.

The First World War.

Doug Jenner, Christine Wheeler, Leigh Burkett, Frank Corby, Max Jenner,

Words by Henry Lawson, John Dengate and Denis Kevans

This CD includes four Australian expressions about experiences in World War 1. This has been envisaged as a series which focuses on musical settings of Australian poems - on various themes.

Recently I have been reading books that centre around experiences of war and especially World War 1. Growing up in the generation that became cynical about the reasons government leaders sent their young to battle, the causes of the war and who really benefitted from war, meant that I found it hard to accept that my grandfather in 1915 had left his young wife and toddlers to fight in a war in distant Europe. Since reading more about the propaganda and pressure on young men to enlist in the Australian imperial forces, I have more sympathy for my grandparents'

generation. However, one is still left stunned by evidence of the inefficient way that the assault at Anzac Bay was organized and Churchill's comments, when questioned about his obsession with a Naval fleet forcing their way through The Narrows that 'They were sent out to die. That was their duty. What did it matter if the ships were lost with their crews? The ships were old and useless and the crew mostly old Reservists.' This is quoted by Fred and Elizabeth Benchley in a book, that is worth reading in full, called *The Myth Maker* about Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett. He was the English journalist who sparked Australia's Gallipoli legend when he managed to get out the first report about the landing at Gallipoli on 25th April, 1915. His cable written in his racy, colourful style captured the attention of the Australian public and was even printed in a pamphlet placed in schools. The report helped raise war loans and increased enlistment as Australians read with national pride of the heroic dawn landing.

Australians were aware that the world, if they thought of Australia at all, thought of them as an unruly mob of ex-convicts who had just brought their states together as a Federation, but were still a British colony. Ashmead-Bartlett's reports replaced a sense of anxiety and inferiority with a feeling of gallant bravery and courage against uneven odds.

However, the real situation around Gallipoli and the place of events at Anzac Bay is full of controversy. By August 50 thousand were dead, wounded or missing and it was obvious the venture had been a failure, but the senior British officers were reluctant to change tactics or let the public know of their defeat. In September, 1915 Murdoch wrote that 'Australians at Gallipoli now loathed and detested British Officers for their conceit and complacency'.

From the 1970s, I recall long discussions between John Dengate and Denis Kevans as they read and thought more about the impact of this war on the heritage of Australia. John wrote *Tenth Light Horse* after our visit to W.A. and the National Folk Festival there in 1975. We traveled south and saw the memorial statue in the port at Albany from where the forces left on the long sea trip to the Europe; although they spent months in North Africa first.

John's song is sung with clarity and empathy by Doug Jenner:

Tenth Light Horse, an elite force...

Hand in your saddle and bridle, say your last farewells,

You won't be needing your horses boys, in the hills of the Dardenelles.

Past the islands of Greece they steamed. Over a cobalt sea:

Follow sea-lanes Jason sailed, bound for Gallipoli...

And from the heroic to the sad finality of death and defeat.

First wave up and over, into a storm of lead.

Second wave dies scrambling over the first wave's dead.

Third wave, fourth wave, up they go: every man must die;

Betrayed and slaughtered row on row under a cobalt sky.

This is followed by the pure vocal and flute notes of Christine Wheeler with Henry Lawson's haunting verses: *Do you hear the children singing... as the troops go marching by...as they marched away and vanished ...*

Then the words of Denis Kevans tell the story of Mitchell, a lad from the Mallee who was captured 'in the slaughter house of war, called Bullecourt', then sent to work with an elderly rural couple, who asked him to stay to replace the son they had lost in war. It is a moving story. I can recall Denis coming to share the story with us when he first wrote his poem, but can't recall the source.

Dinki Di was included on one of the early records brought out by the BMC in the 1960s and it is good to hear the story of the Australian soldier who returns from fighting zones yet remains undaunted when confronted by the criticism of HQ staff. He remains fiercely proud of his dead mates and unimpressed by British officialdom.

This CD certainly captures some of the sentiments of ANZAC during First World War.

The CD is available for download from CD Baby, and after some ironing out will be on other platforms like iTunes and Spotify. Here is the CD Baby link:

<https://store.cdbaby.com/cd/dougjenner>

It is also available from Leigh Birkett:

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