

Foreword

by
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‘The history of the world is but the biography of great men.’

– Thomas Carlyle

IF ONE SETS OUT to write biography, best to avoid saints and villains. The first lead on to hagiography, the second to finger wagging. Better to be writing about someone of quirks and contrasts and mysteries, someone to admire but also to puzzle over because, try as one may, one can never quite solve all of the riddles. Better to be writing about a character of Shakespearean complexities. Pompey Elliott is such a man: bush kid, scholar, fabled soldier of the Great War, family man, solicitor, parliamentarian. He is tough and tender, cocksure and vulnerable, charismatic and cranky, a burly and ruddy-cheeked man who, once seen, is not to be forgotten.

First of all, though, Elliott was an outstanding fighting soldier. He went up to the frontline during the battle of Polygon Wood in 1917, past blackened tree stumps and huddled corpses, to sort out the confusion there. Welch Fusiliers were mixed up with his forward troops. One wrote: ‘It was the only time during the whole of the war that I saw a brigadier with the first line of attacking troops.’ Another said it was ‘rare for anyone who combines authority and nous to be on the spot’. The Australians were unsurprised. Their brigadier was just being himself.

Ross McMullin's biography has already found a wide audience, for the timeless reasons that it is good to read and tells us things we didn't know. Here is a fine piece of storytelling, a journey back to an Australia that is long gone. Here is a narrative that never stalls but carries us along like a river heading for the sea. Here is Pompey Elliott, bursting out of the page, larger than life and worn down by life. And here, as a backdrop, is the story of Australia's part in the Great War, from the tawny gullies of Gallipoli to the sullen blockhouses of the Hindenburg Line.