

The War That Changed Us Views World War I Through Australian Eyes
(review by Graeme Blundell in *The Australian* 30.8.2014)

Anyone can write an academic piece directed at other academics, the great television historian Simon Schama said recently. “To write something that delivers an argument and a gripping story-line to someone’s granny or eight-year-old takes the highest quality of your powers. I am completely unrepentant.” Schama’s comment was in answer to the rather tiresome accusations, particularly some still made in academic circles, that he has “dumbed down” history in his entertaining presentation of it in his many TV shows.

Until Schama and American filmmaker Ken Burns came along, the standard format for TV documentary was a juxtaposition of interviews, voiceover narration and archival footage; sometimes — depending on the budget — re-enactments. We have become increasingly used to this form (nothing like the life it discusses), often bored by its banality. As viewers, we respond best to the sense of being there that an anthropologist experiences in the field. And that’s what Schama and Burns have given us in their very different ways.

Burns has produced powerful and well-received series on the American Civil War and baseball, among many other topics. Many of them have won or been nominated for Oscars and Emmys. His objective as a filmmaker, he says, is to rescue history from those who teach it “and the scholars who only wish to talk to themselves about it, and to return history to kind of a broad dialogue”.

And you can see the influence of these two great filmmakers in *The War That Changed Us* airing on the ABC. The four-part “dramatised documentary” is driven by human stories, especially those of six key protagonists, which are beautifully interwoven. The series is from Electric Pictures, created from an idea by historian Clare Wright, produced by Andrew Ogilvie and directed by Don Featherstone. The latter also wrote the series with Wright, distilling the narrative from their subject’s vivid and evocative diaries, letters, speeches and newspaper articles.

The dramatisations of key moments, layered with seamlessly incorporated colourised archival film, are intercut with commentary from their biographers and other historians — sometimes they are spoken emotionally in the first person. It’s not only meticulously researched but also highly entertaining; it’s never too dense as to not be engaging.

At times the program is almost unbearably moving, especially if, like me, someone you loved fought in that terrible war and your own family was forever altered. My grandfather — we called him Pop Stanger — was in the second wave at Gallipoli and later fought in France, where he was gassed. When he finally returned home he drank heavily to deceive himself that he was still capable of love.

At home with my grandmother, the laughter was often bitter, mocking and violent. In the late afternoon, he disappeared into his book-strewn bedroom. “Need to get the sun-dazzle out of me eyes, boys,” he would say to my brother and me when we visited. We knew he was going in to hit the bottle.

It's understandable after watching this series. As narrator Robert Menzies says, the brutality and mindlessness encouraged a terrible fatalism in the Australian soldiers that saw them expecting wounds or death and no other alternative. And in many cases it returned with them.

It also shows us that for many families those fading photos in old boxes stored under the stairs can have a surprising life of their own, and can offer their own brooding meditations of nationhood, nostalgia, morality, loss and politics.

Like Burns's epic *The Civil War* series especially, a landmark in historical storytelling, this is history on a grand scale, exploring the measure of the loss, the experience of grief and the motivations that took so many Australians to war.

As World War I fades into history, this documentary turns names frozen in time back into remembered lives, unlocking the legacy of the Great War on a personal, family, community and national level, and hopefully ensuring they are not forgotten.

There's foot soldier Archie Barwick (Myles Pollard), who compiles a 16-volume war diary; army nurse Kit McNaughton (Jane Watt), a Catholic farmer's daughter who writes three small books of impressions; and 36-year-old Harold "Pompey" Elliott (Luke Hewitt), commanding the 7th Battalion, who becomes Australia's most famous fighting general. Somehow he finds time to send a constant stream of letters to his wife, Katie, providing a rare insight into the toll that high command exacts.

At home Tom Barker (Tom Milton), a militant activist who opposes the "capitalist war", provides editorials, articles, letters and memoirs; fearless Vida Goldstein (Virginia Gay) is poster woman of the revolutionary feminist movement; and upper-class Eva Hughes (Alexandra Jones) leads the powerful and successful pro-war movement.

Director James Bogle is responsible for the "dramatic reconstructions"; they isolate and highlight moments from the written accounts, the impression almost like photographs briefly coming to life, sometimes poetically in slow motion, at other times explosively in full colour. It's directed with a kind of cinematic lushness that brings it all to life in a way that is often surprisingly evocative — all tied together by the mesmerising, haunting voice of Marita Dyson and her song *The Distant Call of Home*, her whispery vocals capable of bringing tears to the eyes.

As the third episode, *Coming Apart*, gets under way this week, Pompey Elliott leads his men into the battle of Fromelles and Australia suffers the worst 24 hours in its history.

There are shocking casualties, and Featherstone gives us an extended heartbreaking sequence of bodies hanging, dangling, caught between the foul trenches. The archival footage again blends almost surreally with the staged sequences to the lyrics of Dyson, who whisper-sings: "If you want the old battalion I know where they are, I know where they are, I know where they are; they're hanging on the old barbed wire."

It is followed up with the taking of Pozieres. In 42 days of fighting at Pozieres and nearby Mouquet

Farm, the 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions of the Australian Imperial Force sustained 23,000 casualties. About 6800 Australians died. Featherstone has Archie huddling in a muddy trench and the earth explodes around him, intercut again with tinted archival shots of men from both sides operating machineguns and huge howitzers.

We hear Archie's thoughts in voiceover from his diary: "The guns on both sides put you in mind of a choir — when one sings, the other answers. And away they go, for all they're worth." The complex sequence is edited percussively to Beethoven's Fantasy in C minor, the Choral Fantasy. "The whole force of the choir is used — trench mortars open, then follow basses, trebles, tenors, concluding with the high contralto note of 'Happy Jane', the grandmother of the lot, with her 15-inch throat." (Possibly a reference to the monumental BL 15-inch howitzer operated by the nearby British, also known as "Granny".)

The filmmakers may be criticised in certain quarters for appealing to emotions, but what they achieve is an empathetic engagement with the past, a visual clarity and structure that is spellbinding at times in a way no written account can be.

As Burns says, if historians prefer to read books, the public prefers TV. This really is a stunning piece of montage and editing, the artfully filmed sequences with the historians, filmed in period settings but in modern costume, providing the subtle digressions and qualifications we may look for in a written account.

The camera-work from Jim Frater is intimate and compelling, magisterial and yet full of detail and Featherstone presents us with a backcloth of powerful images over which Menzies' spoken commentary — urgent and slightly reminiscent of Peter Coyote's work for Burns — and composer Ash Gibson Greig's musical themes gather purpose.

If you haven't seen it, watch the final episodes — and then purchase the box set for your children when it becomes available, if only to let them see where we come from and how Australia first started to engage with the increasingly insistent issues of national identity, cultural diversity and civic tolerance.

The War That Changed Us, ABC, 8.30pm, Tuesday.