

INTRODUCTION

Australia's Lost Generation

For Australia, a new nation with a relatively small population, the death of 60,000 soldiers during World War I was catastrophic. It is hardly surprising, then, that Australians evaluating the consequences of the conflict have tended to focus primarily on all those countrymen who did not return. The emphasis has usually been on the collective effect of the numbing number of losses.

That there must have been extraordinary individuals among them has been implicitly understood. But these special Australians are unknown today. They have been neglected by posterity. Their names and their stories are unfamiliar to later generations.

This book seeks to remedy that neglect.

It contains ten biographies of individuals who exemplify Australia's lost generation of World War I. Each displayed such superb potential before 1914 that their absence after 1916 was a distinct deprivation for their nation, as well as a crushing bereavement for their families. They came from a variety of backgrounds — socially (some affluent, some decidedly not) as well as geographically — and distinguished themselves in a range of spheres. Also, they served in the AIF in different ways, not only as infantry: one was a doctor, another was deputy leader of an engineers company, and some were in the light horse. Their premature deaths represented a significant post-war loss for their nation because of their outstanding pre-war accomplishments or their outstanding character, or both.

This book tells their stories for the first time. In these pages are biographies of an internationally acclaimed medical researcher; a splendid military officer described by his brigadier as potentially an Australian Kitchener; a rugby international who became an esteemed administrator and a rising Labor star; a widely admired engineer who excelled with Mawson's mission to the Antarctic; a visionary vigneron and community leader who was renowned for successful winemaking at an unusually young age; a Western Australian Rhodes scholar assured of a shining future in the law and/or politics; a brilliant Tasmanian footballer who dazzled at the highest level; and a budding architect from Melbourne's best-known creative dynasty who combined an endearing personality with his family's flair for writing and drawing.

These previously untold stories exemplify Australia's lost generation, but they do not purport to constitute a ranking of some kind of top ten. Even so, Clunes Mathison, the subject of chapter five, was so remarkable — his death, an eminent British professor wrote, was an 'irreparable' loss 'for the science of medicine throughout the world' — that he would rank, in fact, as one of the top two (together with Harold Wanliss, who will be included in a second volume on the lost generation that is under way).

The term 'lost generation' can be interpreted in various ways. It could refer to the generation that was slaughtered — all the men who died. Or it could refer to those soldiers who returned only to hospitals or asylums, and died in them. Or it could refer to all those returned men who struggled to readjust to civilian life in Australia — those who lived in a shed out the back, couldn't sleep in a bed, and relied on alcohol to help them cope. Or it could refer to war widows, or to all those women who remained single — either because the battle casualties diminished their matrimonial options, or because one of those casualties was a precious friend whose shattering loss left them living much of their lives haunted by a faded photo on the mantelpiece.

In this book, however, the term 'lost generation' refers to exceptional Australians who died. My aim has been to unearth

compelling examples of this lost generation, and to illuminate how Australia was profoundly affected by their loss.

This effect was all the more damaging because of Australia's impressive social development before 1914. The young nation was progressive, forward-looking, and advanced. Most of its citizens welcomed the advent of welfare measures and innovations in public policy that confirmed Australia's emergence as a relatively cohesive society based on egalitarianism and democratic mechanisms such as the secret ballot. The first national labour government in the world had materialised in Australia in 1904, and six years later Australians had elected the world's first labour government with a clear parliamentary majority (in both chambers) and the capacity to initiate substantial change. Visitors crossed the globe to scrutinise this advanced social laboratory. After the war, though, things were very different.

Multi-biographies can sometimes be sweeping and broad-brush affairs — a couple of pages devoted to each person, a couple of photos, and then on to the next one. While such volumes can be worthwhile, this book takes a different approach. I have depicted each of the ten main characters in *Farewell, Dear People* in depth, to make it clear why he was special and why his death was a grievous loss to his nation. Retrieving these elusive stories, amending posterity's neglect, has been an exacting task. But such extraordinary and inspiring Australians of rare potential should not be forgotten.