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## Historian discusses lost generation of Australians



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**Reporter: Tony Jones**

**Historian and author Ross McMullin joins Lateline to discuss his book, Farewell Dear People: Biographies of Australia's Lost Generation.**

### Transcript

TONY JONES, PRESENTER: Joining us now from our Melbourne studio is historian Ross McMullin. He's the author is Farewell Dear People: Biographies of Australia's Lost Generation.

Ross McMullin, thanks for joining us.

ROSS MCMULLIN, HISTORIAN: Good evening, Tony.

TONY JONES: Now you'd expect it would rip heart out of a young nation, a small nation, to lose 60,000 dead, 60,000 of its best and brightest citizens. What did it actually do to Australia?

ROSS MCMULLIN: Oh, it had the most extreme long-term consequences - or short and long-term consequences for the country. We missed out on the potential of what so many of these men could have become and this was a grievous hurt for the country.

TONY JONES: Part of the Anzac Day rhetoric has always been about this sacrifice actually helped forge a national identity. Your analysis seems to be the opposite, that it actually stunted Australia's growth.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Yes. My view is that while there may be - a case could be made for the proposition that

Tasmanians and Western Australians thought of themselves, for example, more as Australians than they might have hitherto, and that there was this sense that the country was looking for some deed that would test itself on the international stage and WWI provided that. To that extent, some have said that it made Australia, but my own view is that the damaging consequences far out-rode those aspects. And particularly we had - we were on the way to establishing in Australia an advanced, progressive society that was seen widely elsewhere as an advanced social laboratory for other members of - for other people to come, as they often did, from overseas, they crossed the globe to look at, scrutinise, assess, this advanced social laboratory. And the war blew all that away, and after the war we were no longer seen as an advanced social laboratory and there were no more such visitors.

TONY JONES: Now almost a century later, you've picked 10 of this lost generation, as you've called them, you've told their stories. First of all tell us how you choose this 10.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Well I was looking for people who clearly demonstrated by their pre-war accomplishments or their character or both that their loss represented not only a profound loss to their families and communities, but also to the nation.

TONY JONES: And what were the range of characters we're dealing with? I mean, we had explorers and sportsmen, we had medical researchers in this group.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Yes. Indeed. There's a winemaker there from South Australia, there's an Australian Rules champion from Tasmania, there's a Rhodes scholar from Western Australia who had a shining future in law and/or politics ahead of him, there's a farmer, there's another barrister, there's an outstanding graduate from Duntroon, that his brigadier, Pompey Elliott, felt was destined to become Australia's Kitchener and there was a creative all-rounder in Geoff McCrae.

TONY JONES: We'll have a look at some of these characters in a bit more detail in a moment. First, it's quite an accomplishment to go back and reconstruct the lives of people dead for nearly 100 years, particularly people who've been virtually lost to history. So how did go about the detective work of doing this?

ROSS MCMULLIN: Well I don't mind the detective part of the caper, Tony, but it was hard work. Retrieving these lost lives was an exacting task and involved deep research over many years.

TONY JONES: Let's look at the first two characters: the lives and deaths of Geoff McCrae - you've mentioned him - and Tom Elliott. They end up being bound together even right to the very end of their lives, yet they came from very different backgrounds.

One was a well-to-do family of Melbourne's artistic elite. The other was the son of a poor tram worker from Sydney. How did they end up coming together, these two?

ROSS MCMULLIN: Well they ended up coming together because they were both officers in the 60th Battalion in the lead-up to the Battle of Fromelles, which remains the worst 24 hours in Australia's history with 5,533 casualties in one night and regrettably Geoff McCrae and Tom Elliott were two of them, they were both killed in the battle.

TONY JONES: Tell us a little bit about these men because you've spent a good deal of time discovering or rediscovering their backgrounds and they are both extraordinary characters.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Indeed, yes. Geoff McCrae was a budding architect from Melbourne's best-known creative dynasty. He combined the family's flair for writing and drawing with an endearing personality and a strong sense of right and wrong, very upright, decent.

TONY JONES: And I might add: movie star good looks. I mean, he looks like a 1930s movie star, this fellow.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Indeed. That's very true, very, very true. And his strong sense of right and wrong meant that as long as this war was going - he hated war, but as long as the war was going, he had no doubt that his duty was to be - to take part in it and his part - his was no small part. He was of course a battalion commander at the Battle of Fromelles.

TONY JONES: And what about Tom Elliott, this fellow from the other side of the tracks, as it were?

ROSS MCMULLIN: Yes, Tom Elliott, as all of them did, displayed outstanding potential from an early age. He ended up applying to go to Duntroon and his application was successful and very, very successful in that there were over 100 applicants from all round Australia, they all contested these competitive examinations and Tom Elliott came top in those exams. He went through Duntroon successfully. He was academically - and as a future officer, he did well in all spheres. He was very good at sport. He was the key player in the Duntroon rugby team which was undefeated for several seasons and he was also editor of the Duntroon Journal. Now, he...

TONY JONES: We should add here that this is Duntroon in its very earliest years. And one of the striking things about it, and it comes out through the history of this gentleman, Elliott, is that Duntroon seems to have gone out of its way to erase social differences between the cadets.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Yes, that was certainly a priority of General Bridges, who was the commander - he was Colonel Bridges, I think, at the time, but he was the same Bridges who ended up commanding the first Australian division in the war. And that certainly was a priority of his: to maintain an egalitarian approach to the regime at Duntroon. But unfortunately for the cadets, the way he did that was to maintain a very dry, acerbic sort of approach to running the show and he insisted on the tightest of discipline and the most narrow of restrictions.

TONY JONES: It was a pretty tough place, more like a prison, according to the cadets.

ROSS MCMULLIN: They called it a prison.

TONY JONES: There is this important difference, it seems to me, about the AIF. At one point you get General Sir Ian Hamilton advising the Duntroon cadets that gaining respect of troops as an officer in Australia's not going to be easy because in democratic Australia every man thinks he's as good as everyone else or better.

ROSS MCMULLIN: That's right.

TONY JONES: Now, that would have been quite unique for Hamilton to think like that, presumably.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Yes, I don't think - Hamilton travelled around the world inspecting institutions like Duntroon and I don't think he drew conclusions in other countries quite like that one.

TONY JONES: Now both of them, McCrae and Elliott, go through the cauldron of Gallipoli. As you've said, they end up together on the Western Front, the Battle of Fromelles. How did they end up there? Because fate could have led both of them in different directions. It's almost accidental that both of them end up on the same battlefield on the same day.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Well they're both at the same battlefield on the same day because they're in the same unit. And Pompey Elliott, who commanded the 15th Brigade, was very keen to get quality officers in his brigade. And he...

TONY JONES: Oh, sure, but my point is that that particular unit wasn't going to go over the top that day but for the fact that another gentleman who was meant to do that work and his battalion commander fell, let's say, ill, got drunk.

ROSS MCMULLIN: That's true, yes. He, he - well, to be fair to him, he had been wounded in multiple spots on the first day at Gallipoli and it became increasingly apparent that he could no longer dice with death without the crutch of alcohol. And when Pompey Elliott found this out, he swapped the frontline battalions, only two frontline battalions from his brigade were to take part, and a 60th had not been initially intended to take part, but he - there was a switch and Geoff McCrae and Tom Elliott ended up in one of the frontline battalions for the attack.

TONY JONES: OK. As you say, you've called it the worst day in Australia's history. Both of them go over the top, both of them killed. How did they die?

ROSS MCMULLIN: Well, Tom Elliott was in the second line, there were four waves, and Geoff McCrae was in the fourth. Each of them were picked off by German snipers and the Germans had a particular priority for picking out officers and no doubt as they made their way across the large expanse of no man's land that the 15th Brigade had to cross, they made their officer status apparent - apart from their uniform, their gestures and so on - and they were shot down in no-man's land.

TONY JONES: And in both cases, the effect on their families back home as absolutely profound, in fact almost the worst-case scenario in the case of Tom Elliott.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Yes. Yes, yes, indeed. Geoff McCrae's father, George, was of quite an advanced age when Geoff was born and when Geoff died he was in his 80s, but - and he had, as it happened, another decade or more of long - life left in front of him, but he devoted much of that to commemorating Geoff in a variety of ways.

He had a memorial window installed in the local church, he wrote the most poignant poetry imaginable, he wrote out - transcribed all of Geoff's war-time letters and diary entries and even the sketches that Geoff had drawn to accompany them and a host of other things as well.

TONY JONES: Tom Elliott's mother on the other hand just completely deteriorated into madness, didn't she?

ROSS MCMULLIN: She did, she did. This a very sad story obviously. Tom was initially described in the notifications back home as having been wounded and then they were told that he was missing and then later again they were told that he'd been killed.

Now, Mary Elliott felt that this implicit to her confusion in what had actually happened to him prompted her to maintain hope. She kept hoping. And abandoning hope meant abandoning Tom, as far as she was concerned. And the stress and strain of it all reduced her to relying on alcohol. She said she didn't like beer but she certainly consumed a fair bit of it for a while there. And in the end, she ended up having delusions about Tom. And there were some stormy incidents with the authorities and a succession of vicissitudes and she ended up being put in an asylum for the insane. Some of her children got her out. There were more incidents, she was placed back in an asylum and she ended up dying there of Spanish flu in 1919.

TONY JONES: Let's - we haven't got a lot of time, but another of your lost generation was one of our greatest Antarctic explorers. Give us a quick sketch if you can of Robert Beige.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Robert Beige did an outstanding engineering degree at Melbourne University, went into the Army, and as a permanent soldier - in the engineers there - and then noticed that Douglas Mawson was making an expedition to Antarctica. He applied successfully to join it and performed heroically down there in the most horrific conditions. It's the windiest place on the planet. They're going out on sledging expeditions, hauling massive amounts of gear and equipment. They're doing scientific exploration, they're making measurements, taking recordings, they're not just going somewhere for the - just to plonk a flag there for the so-called honour and glory of being the first to do so.

Mawson wants them to be scientific explorers. Beige embodies this. Mawson is inclined to criticise members of the expedition when he feels they're letting him down. He never criticised Beige.

TONY JONES: No, he did a 600 mile round-trip into the centre of Antarctica into possibly the worst conditions you could imagine, with blizzards and so on and he survived it. The he goes to...

ROSS MCMULLIN: Just.

TONY JONES: Exactly, just. He comes back a hero. He then goes to Gallipoli. What happens to him there?

ROSS MCMULLIN: Well he's a senior officer in an engineer's company and he lands with the unit. They do the things that engineers do in the first few days and then on 7th of May, he's out surveying in the morning and he finishes up his work and then comes around the trench to an adjoining position, perhaps he had his eye on getting a bit of lunch there, and he encounters General Bridges, the commander of the 1st Australian Division, who greets Beige as he appears and says, "Here's the man!"

Now, Beige was a bit taken aback to be greeted like that by the commander, but then he found out why he was the man and he became seriously perturbed. Because what Bridges wanted Beige to do was to go out 150 yards in front of the then Australian position and hammer in some marker pegs in full view of the Turks. And Beige respectfully said to Bridges, "Sir, this is a very dangerous mission. And the best chance of it being effectively carried out is to do it at night." And Bridges said no, no, no, no, he was adamant: "I want it done now, this afternoon," and that meant broad daylight, full view of the Turks.

TONY JONES: Suicidal, in other words.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Suicidal. And Beige was a loyal officer, a very competence officer, insightful, he knew what was ahead of him and his chances of surviving were slim. He told the people around him that he didn't expect to survive. He arranged for the dispersal of his belongings. He did his very best to carry out the task and was hammering a peg in at the spot Bridges intended in mid-afternoon, broad daylight, full view of the Turks when a fusillade of fire from umpteen Turkish marksmen and five machine guns or so killed him.

TONY JONES: We should point out here though briefly that you could say homicidal General Haking, who sent the 5,000 or more Australians to their deaths in Fromelles was British. Bridges, who did the same thing to this gentleman, was Australian. So I guess you were getting pretty bad leadership on both sides of the coin.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Yes, Australians have often tended to blame people like Haking and Hunter Weston, who was responsible for a dreadful fiasco at [inaudible] on 8th May, 1915, for killing Australians through ineptitude, but in the case of Beige, Bridges was very much equally culpable.

TONY JONES: A final quick question because somehow these men going to their deaths, to their certain deaths, as they did in many battles, on the Nek, the charge on the Nek, everyone knew they were going to die there as well, this is somehow at odds with the idea of the egalitarian Australian, the larrikins who thumb their noses at authority. Why did they do it? Why didn't they rebel?

ROSS MCMULLIN: Well, I think they - in the case of Nek, they knew what they were going in for. The third line of the Nek, the one that, you know, is depicted in the film Gallipoli that we're all familiar with, they knew what was ahead of them. But they believed that at the time they did that if they sacrificed themselves, they would be assisting the chances of other offensives - other advances happening at the same time to achieve the overall objective, which was the sweeping August offensive, breakout, that could have decided the whole campaign, so it was thought at the time.

TONY JONES: Ross McMullin, we'll have to leave you there. We thank you very much for taking the time to come and talk to us tonight.

ROSS MCMULLIN: Thanks very much, Tony.

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