

The extraordinary treasure trove: an ANZAC from Bendigo



■ Doch took this photo of Margot to Gallipoli, and it was still in Doch's little wartime case when Ross McMullin discovered it a hundred years later.

It occurred a decade ago now, but I recall the occasion vividly, which is hardly surprising.

A polite, sprightly, 89-year-old woman I had just met was inviting me to scrutinise the contents of a black tin box, which had been retained, and rarely looked at, by her family for almost a hundred years. The potential assistance for my quest was obvious.

Even better, this obliging octogenarian proposed to allow her inquisitive visitor, who seemed to have an unending array of challenging questions about the distant past, to take this precious material away for proper appraisal.

What was in her black tin box proved to be remarkable. It remains the richest private treasure trove I've ever encountered in more than four decades as a biographer.

My fascination stemmed from an interest I had developed long ago in forgotten Australians who exemplify our lost generation of World War I. The national focus on the collective effect of the numbing number of losses from that ghastly conflict has been understandable, and appropriately consistent with our democratic traditions, but I had a different purpose in mind with this project.

I wanted to retrieve the stories of these talented, short-lived and forgotten individuals. I wanted to write their biographies in a way that highlighted their prewar promise, illuminated their wartime experiences, and underlined the magnitude of their nation's loss when they did not survive the conflict. My multi-biography *Farewell, Dear People: Biographies of Australia's Lost Generation* was published in 2012.

With a second volume under way, one inclusion was certain. A classic example of Australia's lost generation was Murdoch Mackay, a brilliant barrister from Bendigo who also excelled as an officer before he died in France aged 25. "Doch" Mackay is unknown today, yet he could have attained Victoria or Australia's very highest positions in the law and politics.

He had married Margot Watson in Melbourne shortly before he departed for the war, so naturally I was keen to see if I could ascertain more about him through her. Might she have had a longer life than Doch, perhaps much longer?

I found that she had remarried and had become Mrs S. Hill of London. This was not a very encouraging discovery for a Melbourne-based biographer. A rueful conclusion about my prospects of finding out more was unavoidable. 'Good luck with that', I remember thinking.

But I had a go. Hours of genealogical research began to pay dividends. It gradually became evident that Margot and her second husband, Solly Hill, had a daughter, who was known as Judy. Moreover, Judy had married a naval officer from Western Australia who was based in London during the Second World War, and after the conflict they had settled in Australia.

Further ferreting revealed that not only was Judy apparently still alive at an advanced age, but also residing not far away in a Melbourne suburb. This seemed incredible after my pessimism about ever being able to connect with Margot. With minimal delay I contacted Judy and arranged to visit her, and I found her willing to be as helpful as she could.

The nature of my quest had prompted Judy to retrieve her black tin box. As she knew, it contained everything that Margot had decided to retain about her connection with Doch: his arrestingly frank letters, his wartime diary, his postcards from overseas, numerous photos, plentiful newscuttings, various certificates, even an admirer's poetry about him, together with various documents relating to her bereavement such as condolences, obituaries, death notices and official expressions of sympathy, including from the King and Queen of England.

Judy could enlighten me about aspects of Margot's relationship with Solly, as they were her parents, but she had minimal knowledge about her mother's previous husband. She was not incurious about

Doch, but she and Margot had rarely talked about him. Such conversations, they both felt, would be unfair to Solly.

Similarly, Margot and Judy had also been disinclined, for the same reason, to peruse the contents of the black tin box. Margot wanted to retain her mementos of Doch, but delving into them was another matter: as well as being disloyal to Solly, it would be painful for Margot. Moreover, even after Judy inherited the black tin box following the death of her parents in London during the 1970s, she still felt reluctant to pry into it.

But Judy was happy for me to do so. The upshot, then, was that I had been given the green light to proceed with a thorough examination of the black tin box that had been rarely scrutinised in almost a century. And the contents, especially for someone in search of insights into Doch's relationship with Margot, proved riveting. Margot had kept many of his letters. They included his initial awkward letter to her in 1910; his ardent missive not long afterwards declaring he was in love with her; his frustrated epistle four years later, when he was still waiting for her to commit; his adoring correspondence after their marriage and his departure; his fervent response, having just endured the worst of Pozieres, to her 36-page letter, number 64, that she had partly written, she assured him, in her 'very thin pink nightie'; and his extraordinary farewell love letter from beyond the grave that he had arranged for a friend to send her in the event of his death.

On one aspect, though, the black tin box was silent. It contained nothing about Doch Mackay's crucial role in one of Australia's most momentous victories at the Western Front. But that's another story.

Ross McMullin's second multi-biography about Australia's lost generation, Life So Full of Promise, includes the story of Doch Mackay and Margot Watson, and has been shortlisted for the Nib Literary Award.

Ross McMullin