

‘At the edge of Time’:
War letters from an Australian
private soldier, 1915-1916.
With Reflections on William
Salter’s earlier and later life,
and command assumptions.

Richard Ely,
Melbourne: Dissenters Press &
The Baptist Historical Society of Victoria, 2016

Richard Ely has collected the wartime correspondence of William Salter, who served in the Australian Imperial Force in 1915-1916, adding various introductory and concluding sections to bookend a fascinating set of letters, and expand on the life of a most interesting man.

The core of the book is made up of Salter’s letters, addressed ‘To all at home’, save for a couple addressed primarily to his sister Elsie. Ely has divided them into chapters, reflecting different locations of Salter’s service: training and voyage to Egypt; in Egypt; Sinai; the Western Front; Boulogne; and finally England. The letters offer a useful insight into the life of a soldier in the First AIF, being dominated by training, and general moving about, with only a little frontline service. The correspondence reveals an intelligent, educated and observant writer, not merely chronicling various aspects of his military service and the places in which he finds himself, but also offering extensive commentary on these situations. In particular, Salter’s active spiritual life is on display through his letters.

The letters have been drawn from two sources: firstly, the original letters, and secondly, Salter’s 1921 transcriptions and foreword, which can vary in small but significant ways from the originals. Ely’s editorial work is of a high standard, with footnotes offering commentary on specifics in the letters, many of which are family details which Ely contextualizes, or military details which Ely unobtrusively explains to the lay reader. He is also scrupulous in noting the points where he has taken the text from the 1921 transcripts rather than original letters, which he does most extensively at points where the original letters are missing. At other times, Ely identifies alternate readings between the originals and the transcripts, commenting on the significance of the differences, as Salter apparently seeks to present his correspondence with a more formal and literary turn of phrase, or adds hindsight to particular incidents. Along with the clarification of Salter’s perspectives, Ely includes notes from other contemporary diarists and documents, especially from Salter’s close friend Harry West, whose diary and letters shed light and alternate views on Salter’s record. The net result is a series of letters representing war service through all its varieties: the routines of training in Australia, life on a transport, further training in Egypt and the sense of frustration at the long wait to see action, the transfer to France, and at last, in the trenches. After serving for several months in the trenches, Salter took part in his first full-scale battle, at Pozieres, lasting just three days before he was severely wounded by artillery while acting as a stretcher-bearer. There is an understandable two-week gap in the letters, before they pick up again from various hospitals where Salter underwent a lengthy convalescence, before being invalided home.

For the rest of the book, Ely has eschewed a conventional biographical account, instead sketching in the pre and post-war life of Salter in a somewhat disjointed manner. The focus is more on analysis of Salter’s motivation as a Baptist minister who found himself increasingly at odds with his denomination. Ely seizes upon

the opportunity offered by Salter's life to apply a form of biographical analysis he has termed 'Command Decisions, to which he devotes the concluding chapter.

Ely begins the book with a series of short sections, including a 'Foreword' by Dr Ken Manley and an 'Introductory Comment' by Dr Allan Martin, who praises the value of the letters. Then follows a list of illustrations, consisting of several groupings of photos of Salter and his connections as well as reproductions of a number of Salter's more important paintings, along with some commentary on the nature and importance of Salter's art. An 'Acknowledgements' section follows, and then comes the foreshadowed introduction to the war letters. This begins well, providing the 'sensitive and scholarly introduction' called for in Martin's 'Introductory Commentary,' analyzing the nature of the letters and relating them to the post-war transcriptions, as well as to other contemporary sources, such as the letters of Harry West, as well as other members of Salter's Battalion. Scholarly references, where appropriate, are also included. Also in this introduction is a pocket account of Salter's life until his enlistment, followed by further discussion of the editing challenges the letters pose, a discussion of 'The Writer and His Voice,' and a brief overview of the chapters that follow the letters, including a quick introduction to Ely's concluding chapter on 'Command Assumptions,' which Ely hope the reader will venture into. As an introduction, it is effective, though somewhat untidy in its organization, and the very brief elucidation of the Command Assumptions, which Ely labels as 'conceptually ambitious,' is too brief to make much sense.

Chapter 8 follows the wartime letters, and Ely continues the Salter story post-war, beginning in standard narrative form, which he interrupts from time to time to explore aspects of interest in Salter's life, including 'Thematic Continuities,' a discussion of the relationship with a possible fiancée, Salter's growing engagement in civic and religious activism, and analysis of the increasingly difficult

relationships between Salter and his English wife, and with the Baptist Church. By the time the chapter is over, it has abandoned any sense of narrative, and is much more piecemeal, thematic and analytical in its approach.

Photographs and paintings separate Chapter 8 from the *piece de resistance*, Chapter 9, where Ely seeks out the 'major investigative keys to understanding life-paths and life choices of William John Salter.' Ely outlines the theoretical components of his method, which he terms 'Command Assumptions,' then seeks to apply the method to understanding Salter's life. For this reviewer, the attempt was unsuccessful. Firstly, the notion of Command Assumptions requires more elucidation than Ely is able to devote to it, and because of this, the resulting analysis of Salter's motivation is less than satisfying.

The result is an uneven treatment of the life of an important if minor figure in Australian history. The introduction to the letters themselves offers a model of how scholars can approach such documents, which offer rich reading of the wartime experience and yet need to be approached with a range of appropriate cautions. The insightful wartime letters enrich a growing body of published Australian Great War letters and diaries, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Australians under fire in the First World War. In particular, Salter's religious responses to the war engaged this reader, for Salter offers perspectives not seen in my own readings of over a thousand other such diary and letter collections.

Sadly, the rest of the book is not of the same temper as its core. The remaining material, often good in its own right, is disjointed and falls short of its lofty conceptual ambitions. It simply tries too many things at once, lacking an overarching unity as a book. Given Salter's range of interests, from art to animal rights to the separation of State and church, a more substantial exploration of his post-war life would have been rewarding.

Nevertheless, it is a worthy read. Firstly, the letters and their introduction are important additions to the genre of Australian wartime writings. Secondly, the ambitious attempt at theoretical analysis might be repaid by a more coherent application of Ely's Command Assumptions across an entire book on a subject as interesting as Salter.

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