

REVIEWS

WW1 LETTERS OF JAMES BLACKWOOD: A BEECROFT SON AT WAR AND AT PEACE.

BEECROFT CHELTENHAM HISTORY GROUP

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Anzac history is particularly prone to being remembered in a generic fashion. The Anzac narrative in its popular form has often reduced the 300,000-plus men of the First AIF to a simplified mythical character, one who is represented most often as a bushman larrikin, worldly, cynical of authority, hard-living, yet practical, and effective in battle. It is not hard to find individual Anzacs who fit this description. But neither should it be overlooked that a very significant minority of men did not fit it, for one reason or another. And it is imperative that their story also be told, in order to preserve and re-present a truth all too easily lost in the current glorification of Anzac – that all Anzacs were not alike. If the Anzacs are to hold their place as the idealized Australian type, then a recognition of their diversity will be a powerful antidote to various prejudices that might develop from too narrow a stereotype of their true character. And convenient lies or half-truths in the name of national unity and identity will, in the long term, prove to be a price too high.

Hence the importance of *WW1 Letters of James Blackwood: a Beecroft Son at War and at Peace*, published by the Beecroft Cheltenham History Group. This book, alongside the narratives of many other individual soldiers, reminds us of the diversity of the many men who made up the First AIF. Blackwood's most obvious quality that fits with the Anzac myth is his age, enlisting as a 19-year-old, and meeting his end just a year later. Much of the rest breaks the Anzac mold. From a privileged background in the monied suburb of Beecroft, and having started a law degree at university, James Blackwood was far removed from the popular conception of the Anzac as a simple, working-class lad from the bush. Blackwood had another quality that marked him out from the stereotypical Anzac: he was deeply and sincerely religious.

This is the fourth publishing of a collection of some of Blackwood's letters, which were first published privately by the family in 1919. It isn't clear whether the family published all his surviving letters, or made a selection themselves. It seems rather unusual to issue them again, especially as they are still available on the Sydney Church of England Grammar School website. Useful additions here include an introductory chapter on the Blackwood family history, with paternal and maternal family trees, and information about uncles, aunts, cousins and the family after James' death in late 1916. Photographs, primarily of Sydney locations associated with the family, and a map of places he went to in France, also add new information, as do copies of one of his letters and one from his father enquiring about his death.

The letters themselves reveal a literate, intelligent, and sympathetic young man, writing mostly to his parents, but also to his aunt, and detail ship-board life, his time in camps in Egypt, on active service in France, and extended descriptions of his travels in the UK while on leave or convalescent. Whether in Colombo, Egypt, France, England or Scotland, visiting foreign cultures, ancient wonders or historic places, his observant eye captures his locations vividly, describing

buildings and landscapes, and local customs, or critiquing the acting in theatre pieces, or ranking the beauty of women in Egypt (in ascending order: Egyptians, French, Nurses). He was evidently a sociable man with a wide network of friends and family (he visited many relatives in the UK) from whom he received many letters.

His letters demonstrate a high regard for the capabilities and character of New Zealand soldiers while there is implicit criticism of some braggart Australians whose service at Gallipoli leads them to patronize the greenhorn. His high moral standards, while never flaunted, are evident in their contrast to the popular conception of the carousing Anzac. In France, his letters are characteristically vague on detail from fear of censorship, but one letter from the UK which he knew would not be censored gives a very full and frank account of his front line experiences.

Blackwood also writes of church experiences and attempts a philosophical reconciliation of death and Christianity when the first member of his unit dies of disease in Egypt. This reflection must have resonated with his family when they in turn had to deal with his own death later that year.

The book itself reminds us of the importance of local history. Volumes such as this allow historians to build more nuanced representations of general society through the accumulation of micro-pictures of the specific circumstances of ordinary individuals who would otherwise escape our notice.

Blackwood's letters are unexceptional in many ways – this reviewer has read the letters of a good number of similar men, but nevertheless, this volume makes its small contribution in putting forward a necessary corrective to a myopic view of the Anzacs. Sadly, an understanding of the faith and religious commitment of many of the Anzacs is as often overlooked by academics as it is in popular

conception. James Blackwood's letters remind us that the cultured, the good and the devout form as much a part of the Anzac narrative as the wild bushmen of the Anzac myth.

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