

Return to Gallipoli: Walking the Battlefields of the Great War

Bruce Scates

Pilgrimage: A Traveller's Guide to Australia's Battlefields

Garrie Hutchinson

A review essay by Dr Karl James

Although it is easy to think that Australians have only been carrying out 'pilgrimages' to battlefields for the last decade or so, these journeys have actually been occurring since the 1920s. Initially the numbers were few, but generations have now travelled to battlefields where Australians have fought and have died.

Battlefields have their own lure and, some say, their own feel. People are compelled to visit them for a variety of reasons. Among the first to make such trips were small family groups who went to see their son's grave or memorial. Former soldiers have also felt the need to return to where they fought. For many, experiencing a dawn service at Gallipoli on Anzac Day has become a rite of passage. Historians too, have long felt the need to visit battlefields and walk the ground for themselves.

When commissioned as an author for the official history of Australia during World War II, Chester Wilmot believed that he would only be able to write about El Alamein if he went to see the ground for himself. He wanted to think himself 'into the very atmosphere of the place and spirit of the people who were there.' He did not think himself capable of doing so 'merely from records and reports'. Commissioned to write about the Papuan campaign for the official history, Dudley McCarthy also felt that he had to make a pilgrimage – in this instance walking the Kokoda Trail and visiting Buna, Gona and Sanananda. As he put it, he wanted to 'test the correctness of his narrative against the ground'. Wilmot and Dudley would both have been consciously aware that they were following the example of Charles Bean.

Bean had been a war correspondent during the Gallipoli campaign and in 1919 had returned to the peninsula with the Australian Historical Mission. Bean went back to Gallipoli hoping to solve what he called the 'riddles of Anzac' – the then unresolved questions about the campaign. He later described the Anzac area 'as one big graveyard which would probably be visited by thousands of Australians and others yearly'. Bean was right; thousands now make the journey, Bruce Scates and Garrie Hutchinson included.

Both books had their origins on the battlefield: Scates was inspired by the epitaphs he read on tombstones in Adelaide



Cemetery at Villers-Bretonneux; for Hutchinson it came during his first trip to Gallipoli. While both books deal with battlefield pilgrimages, by nature they are very different. Scates's *Return to Gallipoli* is a scholarly work, which examines the history of Australians visiting the battlefields and cemeteries of the Great War, and how the meaning derived from these pilgrimages has changed over time. Hutchinson's *Pilgrimage* is part popular military history and part travelogue, discussing Australia's battlefields from World War I through to Vietnam.

Both authors are well-qualified to write about their respective topics. An associate professor, Scates has based his book on ten years of archival research and survey responses he gathered from over 700 pilgrims. Although he is an academic, potential readers should not be deterred – Scates has a conversational writing style and his work is very easy to read.

Hutchinson is a journalist and writer who has spent more than a decade exploring Australia's battlefields around the world. His passion for the topic clearly comes through in his work, as does his extensive travel experience. Hutchinson also has an easy-to-read style, and he tells an interesting story. It is here, though, that any similarities between Scates's *Return to Gallipoli* and Hutchinson's *Pilgrimage* end.

Return to Gallipoli is divided into four parts. The first section begins with the death of a soldier, what happens when a soldier died, how his family was notified of his death and their subsequent attempts to find out all they could about how he died or, when a loved one was declared missing, whether he was actually dead. These were frustrating and disappointing enquires made first to military personnel and government officials, and then to Red Cross investigators. The closest most parents came to saying goodbye to their soldier-sons was when writing the epitaphs for their tombstones in the formal cemeteries of the Imperial, later Commonwealth, War Graves Commission. (The messages

on these epitaphs were limited to just 66 characters.) Few ever saw the graves for themselves.

Some did make the trip, and the second part of this book looks at these early family pilgrimages to the Western Front and Gallipoli during the 1920s and 1930s. The first pilgrims were elderly parents; the fathers were professionals and the mothers 'accompanied' their husbands. These trips were prohibitively expensive and most Australian families could not afford them. Instead, subsequent generations have made the journey on their behalf since the 1960s, visiting the graves of their great-grandfathers and great-uncles.

The third section of the book examines how former soldiers returned to their old battlefields, 'to see old mates again', and the history of tours conducted by ex-Service organisations from the 1920s to the 1960s. Scates also examines what veterans of later wars make of their time at Gallipoli, arguing that those who have been on active service or who have at least trained for it view the battlefield very differently to civilians; the landscape of Gallipoli is not 'scenery', but 'terrain'. Visiting such sites also reinforces and honours a veteran's own sense of military heritage.

With the renewal of interest in Anzac Day and affordable international travel, young people are now visiting the battlefields of World War I more than ever before. It has become an almost spiritual exploration of what it means to be Australian. 'It's like a Mecca, like a pilgrimage' one young backpacker told Scates in the final part of the book, titled the 'Testament of Youth'. It does not matter whether their relatives served in the war or not; that they are Australians is sufficient.

This is a very clever book. Ostensibly, *Return to Gallipoli* is about the history of Australians travelling to Gallipoli and the Western Front, but the book's subtext is the lasting legacy of World War I. Reading the many examples of wartime bereavement that Scates provides, one cannot help but be moved at the cost and tragedy of war as one family after another struggled with loss – the loss of a son, brother, husband or fiancé. This grief fades over time but never completely goes away. Many pilgrims feel compelled to make the journey to honour these distant relatives and provide some closure to their family's collective memory of the war. In doing this, Scates discusses issues of grief and mourning, commemoration, and the evolving meaning of Anzac. He makes a significant contribution to these debates, and has built on the work of historians such as Jay Winter, Joy Damousi, Bart Ziino, Ken Inglis and Richard White.

Hutchinson also writes to a tradition, and is reminiscent of John Laffin. A writer-come-historian, Laffin had served in the army during World War II before going on to spend the rest of his life exploring Australia's battlefields. In two of his earliest books, *Return to Glory* (1956) and *Middle East Journey* (1958) he followed in the footsteps of the Australian Imperial Force and later wrote a number of battlefield guide books. Laffin and Hutchinson both searched for 'an

Australian presence, to see what mark we have left and what stories we have told.' There are little parts around the world 'that are forever Australian.'

A large book, Hutchinson's *Pilgrimage* has eight chapters, each covering a different theatre of operations – Gallipoli, Palestine, the Western Front, North Africa and the Mediterranean, South-East Asia, Papua and northern Australia, Korea and Vietnam. (The author is to be congratulated for including hard-to-get-at places, such as Tobruk and Kapyong, and not just the well-trodden routes to Gallipoli and Kokoda.)

Each chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides a summary of each campaign or conflict. These are good summaries and although there are a number of distracting errors, they are minor and do not deter from the overall narrative. The second section describes what travellers can expect to see in these locations with lists and detailed descriptions of cemeteries, memorials and museums. This is a very useful reference. Accompanying the text are large, colourful maps which makes locating these pilgrimage sites all the easier. There are also many interesting photographs. The final section in each chapter, the 'travel tool kit', contains some practical travel advice and references to travel agents, tour groups and other sources of information. However, it is in this area where the problem with *Pilgrimage* emerges.

The book struggles to know what it is. Its sub-heading sells itself as 'a traveller's guide to Australian battlefields', but the dust jacket states that it is 'ideal for armchair travellers and lovers of history'. It is an ideal coffee table book for those people with an interest in Australian military history. As an actual travel guide though, it is too big and heavy to stuff into a backpack and the travel advice is too brief. Phil Taylor and Pam Cupper's *Gallipoli: A Battlefield Guide* (1989, 2000) better services pilgrims as does Laffin's *Guide to Australian Battlefields of the Western Front* (1992, 1994, 1999). Other battlefield explorers will still need to take their *Lonely Planet* but include a photocopied chapter from Hutchinson as well.

Return to Gallipoli and *Pilgrimage* will appeal to different readers for different reasons. Both have something to offer and both are certainly worth reading. Hopefully they will encourage more people to undertake these pilgrimages. ♦

Bruce Scates, *Return to Gallipoli: Walking the Battlefields of the Great War*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2006, Softback, 272pp., RRP \$A39.95.

Garrie Hutchinson, *Pilgrimage: A Traveller's Guide to Australia's Battlefields*, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2002, Softback, 432pp., RRP \$A44.95.

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