




**BLACK**

**DIGGERS**

**BY TOM WRIGHT**



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# Black Diggers

by Tom Wright



A Playlab Publication

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First Published January 2015 by Playlab

Reprinted 2016 (four times), 2017 (six times)

General Editor: Alexander Bayliss

Copy Editor: Katherine Lyall-Watson

Cover design: Sean Dowling

Cover photo: Branco Gaica

National Library of Australia

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:

Catalogue in publication

Tom Wright — 1968 -

1. *Black Diggers*

ISBN: 978 1 921390 81 4

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## Foreword

One purpose of Indigenous theatre is to write onto the public record neglected or forgotten stories.

Many of these stories survive in our oral storytelling traditions and have been passed down through families to arrive today as folklore — stories of the people. Theatre has become a crossover point where these stories are made public and expressed to demonstrate our history.

One hundred years ago, Indigenous servicemen volunteered to fight for the newly formed country called Australia. Though the constitution of this newest of old countries did not recognise them as citizens, Indigenous men signed up and fought in Palestine, the Somme, Gallipoli, Flanders Fields and every major battlefield during what would be called the Great War. Despite limited social standing, appalling living conditions and lack of human rights, Indigenous men enlisted. Was it the sense of freedom and adventure? Was it the fact that the newly minted AIF (Australian Imperial Force) had no way of administratively recognising their Indigenous background and hence granted all soldiers the same rights? Or was it a sense of patriotism in a country that offered renewed hope for change?

Over one thousand Indigenous men fought side by side with their white countrymen and forged bonds that would sow the seeds of the modern reconciliation movement.

When constructing this piece of theatre we were confronted by the enormity of the task, the cultural protocols, the military records, the family lore — so we adopted a broad acceptance of truth. In post apartheid South Africa during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission there was a four-part definition of truth:

- Personal truth — the thing you believe to be true
- Social truth — what a group believe to be true through discussion and debate
- Forensic truth — the truth that can be proven through science and records
- Public truth — the value of telling the truth for the greater good

Stories have come to us through interviews with family members, scouring the official records, scholarly historical analysis and research and our own narratives; we believe them all to have equal value and truth.

*Black Diggers* honours the memories of these men and their families and through them demonstrates the long history of national service and participation in public life by Indigenous Australians. We follow a number of

archetypal character journeys based on real-life events in a fragmented view of history. It's like the shellshock experience of those in war — fragments of story mixed with emotional responses. There are 60 scenes broken into five parts:

- Pre-Nation — a reflection on the wars and experience of Indigenous people before nationhood
- Enlistment — the process of Indigenous men signing up
- The Theatre of War — the stories from the front as reported in journals, letters, official records and oral history
- The Return — the effects of returning and the expectations of both the men who returned and those they were returning to
- Legacy — what has been left behind for us

The invitation is to accumulate the stories and follow the characters/actors as they journey through. It has been a great honour to work on this project with such a dedicated and insightful group of contributors. There is much we know and there is much we can never know but sharing stories is the best way for us all to know more. If you know a story of Indigenous service in World War I or have a photo or a piece of ephemera, please contact the Australian War Memorial and have it recorded. As we commemorate the centenary of World War I these words become even more apt.

Lest We Forget.

Wesley Enoch  
Director

## Introduction

Trying to write about our history is always a fraught exercise. Questions leap to the mind, over and over again: *Whose* history is this? And who *owns* it? But when a set of stories is at the intersection of big national myths and profound moments in Indigenous experience, then the exercise is potentially a minefield, if you'll forgive the over-apt analogy.

I inherited this job with six months to go before rehearsals began. Research the weight of several phone books landed on my desk, and it became very clear that there is no one central black experience of WW1. It differs from family to family, from community to community, from individual to individual. One young man could walk into a recruiting hall, enlist, serve, discover brotherhood with white mates who had previously ignored him, and come home with a strange new pride. That same man's childhood friend might encounter racism and rejection, at enlistment, in service, and afterwards. One country town might ignore black servicemen at ANZAC day, while the town over the hill would celebrate their service. And of course, many of the Indigenous servicemen never came home, lying still in strange unfamiliar mud on the other side of the world.

We have decided to not use actual names in this production, in case of an innocent factual mistake, and out of respect for the difficult tension within communities and families between fact and myth. But all the scenes in *Black Diggers* are based on genuine moments; real men, reported incidents, documented arguments. It deliberately tries to be a patchwork quilt of the past, presenting a variety of short sharp scenes, as if the theatre itself is suffering from shellshock. It's not trying to tear apart Australian myths about war (that may be for another time and place). It is about putting black faces back into all our history.

Much thanks to Dr. David Williams and Louise Gough, and to Aboriginal elders and communities for allowing me in.

Tom Wright



## Tom Wright



Tom Wright started as a member of Barrie Kosky's *Gilgul* in the early 90s, then with Michael Kantor's *Mene Mene* in the late 90s. He has worked as an actor and director at the Melbourne Theatre Company, STCSA, Sydney Theatre Company, Playbox, La Mama, Company B, Anthill, *Gilgul*, *Mene Mene*, Bell Shakespeare Company, *Chunky Move*, Black Swan State Theatre Company, Chamber Made Opera and the Adelaide, Sydney, Edinburgh, Vienna, Perth and Melbourne Festivals. He was Artistic Associate at Sydney Theatre Company 2004–2008 and Associate Director of Sydney Theatre Company 2008 to 2012.

He has written a number of plays or adaptations, including *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Castle*, *Ubu*, *This is a True Story*, *Lorilei*, *Medea*, *Babes in the Wood*, *Puntila and His Man Matti*, *Tense Dave*, *The Odyssey*, *The Lost Echo*, *Criminology* (with Lally Katz), *Tales From the Vienna Woods*, *The Misanthrope*, *The Women of Troy*, *The War of the Roses*, *The Duel*, *Baal*, *Optimism*, *Oresteia*, *On the Misconception of Oedipus* and *The Histrionic*. The radio version of his play *Lorilei* won the Gold Drama Award (British Radio Academy) and BBC Radio Drama Award, 2007. His adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *The Lost Echo*, won five Helpmann awards in 2007, including Best Play. His adaptation of Shakespeare's history plays, *The War of the Roses*, won six Helpmanns in 2009, including Best Production.

## Acknowledgements

Aaron Pedersen, Annie Sutton, Anzac Centenary Advisory Board, Aunty Verna Koolmatrie, Australian War Memorial, Belvoir, Brisbane Festival, Carriageworks, City of Sydney Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Panel, Clyde Rigney, Dr David Williams, Department of Veteran Affairs, Elizabeth Rechniewski, Fabienne Cooke, Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, Garth O'Connell, Gary Oakley, His Excellency Patrick Renault, Belgian Ambassador to Australia (2009 –2013), Imogen Millhouse, Josephine Ridge, Julia Morwood, Kim Spinks, Louise Gough, Liza-Mare Syron, Malarndirri McCarthy, Margaret Beadman, Mark Stapleton, Michael Rowe, Loretta Busby, National Archives of Australia National Indigenous Television (NITV), Noel Staunton, Phillippa Scarlett, Professor Richard White, Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Raukkan Schools (Meningie Area School and Birdwood High School), Rhoda Roberts, Robyn Archer, Ronald Briggs, Sam Vanoverschelde, State Library of NSW, State Library of QLD, Sydney Opera House, Travis Cardona, University of Sydney, Wim Opbrouck.

## First Production Details

*Black Diggers* was first produced by Queensland Theatre Company and Sydney Festival, and presented by Sydney Festival in association with The Balnaves Foundation, premiering in the Drama Theatre at the Sydney Opera House on January 18, 2014

DIRECTOR	Wesley Enoch
SET DESIGNER	Stephen Curtis
COSTUME DESIGNER	Ruby Langton Batty
LIGHTING DESIGNER	Ben Hughes
COMPOSER/SOUND DESIGNER	Tony Brumpton
DRAMATURGE	Louise Gough
CULTURAL CONSULTANT	George Bostock
RESEARCHER	David Williams
CAST	Luke Carroll George Bostock David Page Hunter Page-Lochard Gary Simon Colin Smith Eliah Watego Meyne Wyatt Tibian Wyles

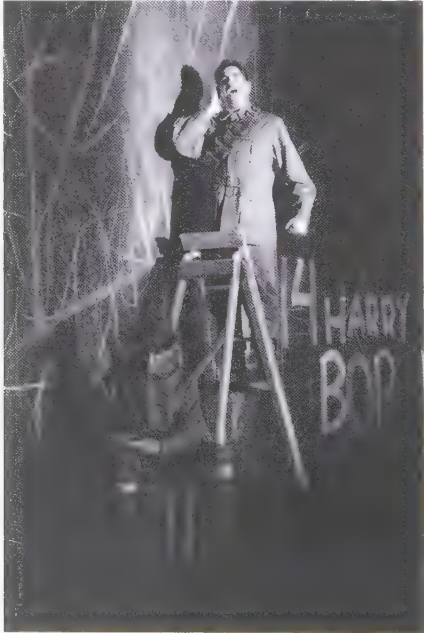
### *BLACK DIGGERS* INDIGENOUS REFERENCE GROUP

Uncle Harry Allie  
Professor Lara Jackson Pulver AM  
Dr Jackie Huggins AM FAHA  
Pastor Ray Minniecon  
Gary Oakley  
Garth O'Connell  
Colin Watego

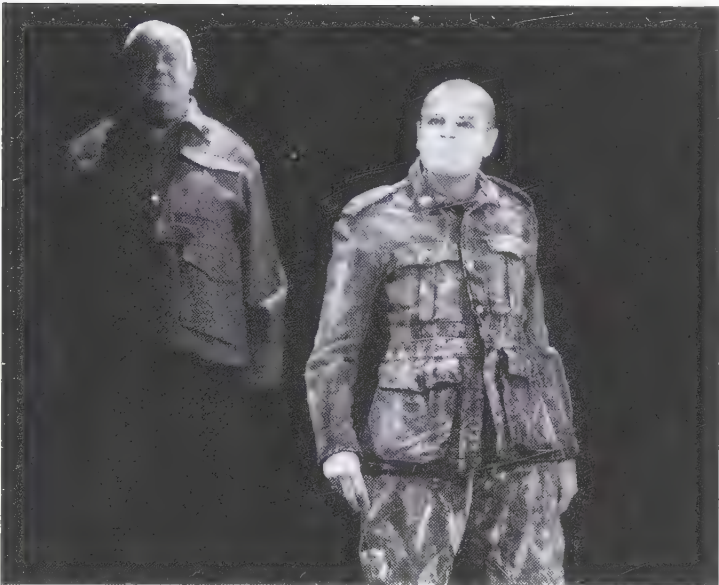
# Production Photos



From Left: Tibian Wyles, David Page, Hunter Page-Lochard, Meyne Wyatt, George Bostock, Guy Simon, Luke Carroll, Elish Watego & Colin Smith. Sydney Opera House, 2014. Photographer: Branco Gaica



Colin Smith. Sydney Opera House, 2014. Photographer: Branco Gaica



From left: George Bostock & Luke Carroll. Sydney Opera House, 2014. Photographer: Branco Gaica



From left: Tibian Wyles, Eliah Watego, Guy Simon & Luke Carroll. Sydney Opera House, 2014. Photographer: Branco Gaica

# Notes

For nine male indigenous actors

# Black Diggers

## ACT ONE

1887. Bellenden Ker, Queensland.

*Darkness. The sound of Australia.*

*Gunfire. Confusion. Screaming, running, shouted orders. Silhouettes.*

SETTLER                    The rest have gone, bugger it.

BOUNDARY  
RIDER                    They won't be back. Someone else's problem now.

SETTLER                    What's that noise, one of 'em still alive?

STOCKMAN                In that humpy. No, the other one.

SETTLER                    Oh hell, don't tell me it's a bloody picaninny.  
  
*Gestures, a man comes over with a lantern.*

STOCKMAN                'Fraid so. Boy.

BOUNDARY  
RIDER                    Just ... do something to shut its mouth and leave it, let the  
dogs worry about it.

STOCKMAN                I'm not getting involved in this.

SETTLER                    You were happy enough to fill its mother's back with pellets.

STOCKMAN                Now that's different and you know it.

BOUNDARY  
RIDER                    What do you do with an abandoned calf?

STOCKMAN                Well that depends on the beast in question.

SETTLER I want to be back in Innisfail by noon, we don't have time to lug some itty around. Put it on the ground.

*He takes out his shotgun. Enter two others.*

TAXIDERMIST What in the name of heaven is going on?

*The SETTLER leaves.*

STOCKMAN Picaninny, Professor. His mother seems to have decamped.

TAXIDERMIST What are you going to do with it?

BOUNDARY

RIDER

That's just what we were debating.

*The TAXIDERMIST picks the child up.*

TAXIDERMIST I don't think there's a debate. [*Looks at the child in his arms.*] Full-blood, too. Unusual. Perfect specimen. And if I'd been only five minutes later ... it's all chance, and fate. [*To the baby*] Look at you. Back from the dead, if only you knew it.

*He sings, gently at first, a hymn, to soothe the baby. Joining the hymn, men move across the space and reassemble, sitting on the ground.*



## 1914. Somewhere on the Gwydir.

*Older white bloke with a stick walks past them, but can't help himself, decides to give them an earful.*

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER I don't know how you fellows can just ... sit there on your backsides. There are momentous events sweeping the world.

HARRY Like what sir?

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER Oh come on Harry, surely you have —

ONE OF

HARRY'S MATES What events?

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER We are at war.

*Brief pause. Wind and birds.*

HARRY I can't hear anything.

ONE OF

HARRY'S MATES It's a quiet war.

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER A war that could easily threaten all that is right, and true, and valuable to us all.

HARRY Where?

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER Oh, in far distant lands, many days over the horizon.

HARRY Narrabri?

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER Further, than that my friend.

HARRY Oh, Coonabarabran.

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER Europe. Belgium. And in the Ottoman Empire.

HARRY First we've heard about it.

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER Well, you might think about it. You younger chaps might think about it. Where your duties might lie. What sort of men you want to be. Think about what it might mean, if swathes of Mahomedan Turks or creeping armies of sausage-breathed Huns over-ran our country, imposing their foreign ways, interfering with our women. Imagine the horrors of what it would be like if we were to lose, and you wake up one morning and find us all under occupation.

HARRY Yeah. Imagine.

*They laugh. The old bloke moves on muttering under his breath. They join him, mimicking him at first, but one of them has a bass-drum, their parade of mimicry becomes a rallying march.*

*'Sons Of The Southern Cross'*

*They sing*

*There's eucalyptus in the air  
And golden wattle in our hair  
Join us, sons of Southern Cross  
Cooee and let our brothers hear  
Australian boys don't shirk or fear  
Sons of the Southern Cross  
We'll be there!*

*The drum fades in the distance, they resume their positions.*

**1914.**

HARRY                   Where are they goin'?

ERN                      Army. Fighting.

HARRY                   Yeah, I know. But why?

ERN, BOB, NORM      Buggered if we know.

HARRY                   No-one knows what it's all about.

HARRY'S MATE        Actually, there has been a long build-up of tension across the continent of Europe, and a wide range of factors; industrial, mercantile, territorial, ethnic, have been leading to a sequence of diplomatic impasses for some time. Much of it can be traced back to the failure of Europe to reach a settlement after the war between Prussia and France about forty years ago. Inside the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires there have been independence movements from smaller nationalities that have destabilised vested interests and external nations have used these to try to leverage influence or simply to assist in colonial expansion. Some mad Balkan nationalist shot the Austrian Emperor's nephew and Austria went in when Serbia started mobilising, having been given an ultimatum deliberately designed to inflame the situation. The Germans supported them because of a treaty going back thirty years. And the other nations all had reasons to go in to protect their interests and that of their allies. So in the end what we're seeing is the culmination of structural problems in continental Europe that have been festering for over four decades.

*Pause*

HARRY                   Yeah, no-one knows what it's about.

*They become stuffed primates in an nineteenth-century museum.*

## 1895. Australian Museum, Sydney.

*A young boy, is being taken through a museum. The actors play the stuffed exhibits.*

LITTLE BOY

(NIGEL)

Look father I've found something

TAXIDERMIST

And this is a lowland gorilla Nigel. From Africa. His pelt was sent all the way from Zanzibar, with a plaster cast of his skull. I had to make the rest up from drawings in books. See how I've mounted him just as he was in the jungle?

NIGEL

Is he a man?

TAXIDERMIST

No, he's an ape. But they're related to us.

NIGEL

Am I related to you?

TAXIDERMIST

Of course Nigel. This is an *albibarbus*, a Borneo gibbon.

NIGEL

How are we related?

TAXIDERMIST

I'm your father.

NIGEL

No, I mean how are we related to the ape?

TAXIDERMIST

Eons ago there were no apes and there were no men. There were creatures that looked something like a small monkey though. And some gradually over time became apes, much like the big red-haired one at the zoo remember Nigel? And like that gorilla and this gibbon. And some began to walk on two legs, and use language and tools, and establish the Free Presbyterian church, and learn taxidermy and other useful skills.

NIGEL

Father, what happened to my aborigine parents?

TAXIDERMIST

You know that, little man. They died.

NIGEL

How did they die?

- TAXIDERMIST I'll tell you one day. Look, a chimpanzee. They are our closest relatives
- NIGEL Why not now?
- TAXIDERMIST Because you're not ready yet.
- NIGEL Ready for what?
- TAXIDERMIST The world — the bigger, grown-up world — is a complicated, difficult place. You should enjoy every moment of your childhood. Plenty of time for the truth later.
- NIGEL So, they died badly?
- TAXIDERMIST Wrong place at the wrong time.
- NIGEL Killed?
- TAXIDERMIST Yes. But please don't tell your mother I told you that.
- NIGEL Were they scared? Dad? Dad?

*His dad has vanished. He looks at the exhibits, who are still, then they roar and rush at him. He flees, leaving the other blokes at a pub. Three of them have empty glasses and even emptier pockets.*

**1916. Boundary Hotel, Brisbane.**

- NORM So when was the last time it got sent down?
- BOB Dunno. Drips and drabs
- NORM Bloody ridiculous
- ERN You know, army pay – straight to us.
- BOB They wouldn't do that. Would still go to the protector.
- ERN Not a Queensland thing. An Australian thing. A Melbourne thing. Federal thing. Pounds, shilling and pence, in your pocket, he's none the wiser.
- NORM So, who would check up?
- ERN No one. That's the point. Soldiers. If you can fire a gun and stand in the sun, they might pretend to forget you're
- NORM What??

**1915. Petrie Terrace.**

*The publican shouts; suddenly they are in a recruiting hall.*

RECRUITING

SERGEANT Right, next!

ERN G'day.

RECRUITING SGT What?

ERN I'm here.

RECRUITING SGT Look, I'm a busy man and this is serious — oh. You're here here? I see. How old are you?

ERN I reckon nineteen.

RECRUITING SGT You reckon nineteen. Speak to him.

*At a desk elsewhere in the space.*

RECRUITING

CORPORAL [**Head over his papers**] Next! Name!

ERN Does it have to be my real name?

RECRUITING CPL Yes, of course. But frankly how would I know what your real name is? So, name?

ERN Ernest Hopkins.

RECRUITING CPL Age and place of birth?

ERN Nineteen, Barambah.

RECRUITING CPL Barambah? [**looks up for the first time**] Jesus Christ! Pardon the profanity. You can't come in here.

ERN Why not?

RECRUITING CPL Well, you're ... you're not a citizen.



- ERN                                    Subject of His Majesty.
- RECRUITING CPL.    Smart alec eh? Here. Here's your form. It'll go down a treat at the protector's office.
- ERN                                    'Deficient Physique'. What does that mean?
- RECRUITING CPL.    It's all there. Next!
- ERN                                    'Reason: Of Strongly Aboriginal Appearance'
- ERN looking a bit bewildered. Out on the street.*
- What does yours say?
- NORM                                 'Flat feet (Aboriginal)'
- ERN                                    Yours?
- BOB                                    'No White Parentage.'
- ERN                                    'They're just making this up. No-one has any bloody idea.
- They do a circuit of the stage. The SERGEANT and CORPORAL change hats/places. They have come to a different recruiting hall.*
- Nobody knows us here. We'll do it different this time.
- RECRUITING SGT    I'm sorry son, I have no idea what to do with this. With you. Wait here.
- He goes and talks to a superior. There is much consulting of books and disagreements until half a dozen men are all scratching their heads and carrying on.*
- Anyone have the slightest idea what 'Substantially European' means?
- CLERK                                 Use your eyes.
- CORPORAL                What do you look for, their native blood or their British blood?

- CLERK                    There must be some description somewhere?
- SECRETARY             We can't have darkies in the same battalions as white chaps.
- CORPORAL              But how dark?
- RECRUITING SGT      Perhaps if we had a letter from the relevant Protector that would cover it?
- CLERK                    If they're willing to get up off their backsides and show a bit of pluck then they're white enough for me.
- RECRUITING SGT      So I just make a decision based on what's standing in front of me?
- OFFICER                 Name?
- ERN                      Arthur Philip
- BOB                      Albert Street
- NORM                    Georges River?
- OFFICER                 Date of birth?
- ERN                      September fourth eighteen ninety.
- BOB                      September fourth eighteen ninety one.
- NORM                    Same
- OFFICER                 And the place?
- ERN                      Baram — ... Murgon.
- BOB                      Same
- NORM                    Same
- OFFICER                 Are you, would you say, Substantially European?
- ERN                      What?

RECRUITING SGT Are you, would you say, Substantially European? Your father was white, wasn't he? Let's say 'yes'. Join that line. Right, nine more and I'm on track for a boomerang.

*They melt into a line-up; a DOCTOR and his clerk moving along.*

DOCTOR Height?

ERN Five foot five inches.

DOCTOR Weight?

ERN Ten stone four.

DOCTOR Chest

ERN Yeah, I've got one.

CLERK Smallpox marks?

DOCTOR None.

ERN I'm fit as a mallee bull, me.

CLERK Any congenital peculiarities or long-term diseases?

DOCTOR Strewth, what do we say to that one?

CLERK I'll put down "Very strongly aboriginal in type".

ERN How did you work that one out?

*They laugh and put on uniforms, hats, boots, most of which don't fit.*

**1915.**

VOICE FROM AN  
OLD WIRELESS

It needed to be seen; these extraordinary specimens, these gallant figures, resolute as they were silhouetted against a foreign sky, they had the toughness, the ingenuity of the land of their birth. They had come to the other side of the globe to defend noble ideals; to protect motherhood, the safety of law, the sanctity of liberty, to fight for their King and all His Majesty carries ... truly, from some confused, even shambolic frontier, the Australian has arrived. Fair, clear of eye, the finest of the British race cast anew under a southern sun. These boys are us, those that remain; those that returned. The greatness of the White Man, rendered greater still by peril, fighting not just for God and Empire, but to define what it is to be a man, an Australian man, in this our young Commonwealth ...

**1915. Queen Street.**

*BOB, NORM and ERN pose proudly.*

- ERN                    Hey, you've got to stay still.
- NORM                They are never going to believe this back home.
- BOB                    Their boys in uniform, they'll think we're police!
- ERN                    You noticed something? Once we started wearing this  
clobber, suddenly we're, dunno how you explain it —
- BOB                    They look at you different, don't they?
- ERN                    Yeah, can't put my finger on it. Like they've forgotten you're —
- He is interrupted by the bright camera flash.*

### **1915. Waiting to Cross to France.**

*The darkness is suddenly illuminated by the striking of a match and a lamp being lit. A young soldier writes.*

ARCHIE

Dear Aunty May

I hope this finds you in top spirits and that everyone is beaut at home. If you see Dolly give her a pat from me and tell her I'll be home and will take her down the beach. I am good. I say my prayers like you told me and you were right, there are many Methodists here and we read scripture. I think about you all the time of you back there and the light on the lakes, and the pelicans coming in. Your Archie.

*He puts the letter in an envelope.*

## 1915. Dardanelles.

*The flashes keep going. Become shell explosions. They have become a boat, moving towards the beach. Sound of the shellfire gets louder as they approach.*

FRIGHTENED

PRIVATE

*[Under his breath]* Oh Jesus oh Jesus Oh Jesus ...

MOUSTACHED

SERGEANT

Heads down, don't dilly dally, look alive.

*Bullets start fizzing. LAURIE starts to laugh.*

CORPORAL

WITH GLASSES

What's so bloody funny?

LAURIE

Sorry sir!

ANOTHER SOLDIER You're a strange cove.

LAURIE

Imagine what the old folks would say!

CORPORAL

You right, Laurie?

LAURIE

I mean, arriving in boats uninvited on someone's beach. They'd laugh their heads off.

MOUSTACHED

SERGEANT

Look alive! Look alive!

*Sudden moment of stillness. LAURIE prays fervently as his colleagues move in slow motion around him.*

LAURIE

A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness ... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies ...

*Loud sound of machine guns and explosions.*

## 1916. Indian Ocean.

*On a ship, on the way over. Everyone eating.*

AGGRESSIVE PTE What d'you think you're doing?

HARRY Same as you. I'm sitting and I'm eating my grub and I'm staying out of trouble.

AGGRESSIVE PTE I don't know what the hell's going on any more.

HARRY The world's turned upside down.

AGGRESSIVE PTE You've said a mouthful there. Upside down when a coon thinks it's all right to sit and look me in the eye and touch the same metal plate and finger the same spoon and drink the same bloody water as a white man. I don't know who you are boy but you've got gumption. And you know what they say about boys with gumption don't you? They get shown their place.

WHITE PRIVATE Ease up Jim.

ANOTHER

WHITE PRIVATE Leave it.

HARRY I've done nothing to get your back up.

AGGRESSIVE PTE You being here gets my back up. Now are you gonna back away boy?

HARRY No. No, I'm not.

AGGRESSIVE PTE FELLERS WE'VE GOT A BLOKE HERE WHO NEEDS TO BE SHOWN WHAT'S WHAT!

TALL PRIVATE Yeah. We have.

*The soldiers pile on the AGGRESSIVE PRIVATE and beat him up. He comes out of it bloodied and bruised.*

RED-HAIRED SGT What's he saying?

HARRY "The world turned upside fucking down"



*'The World's Turned Upside Down'*

*Listen to us and you shall hear, news that's been coming for a  
hundred years: Since Captain Cook, and many more, you've  
never seen the like before.*

*The white man needs us coloured boys now  
Here in the shit every face is brown*

*You see the world's turned upside down*

*See the world's turned upside down.*

*Fellers — You see the world's turned upside down*

*See the world's turned upside down.*

## 1917. Passchendaele. No Man's Land foxhole

*A light sweeps through the dark, they all hit the deck*

FIRST WHITE  
SOLDIER

You see anything Laurie?

LAURIE

Not a thing.

FIRST WHITE  
SOLDIER

What did you think you were here for? Why d'you reckon he picked you?

SECOND WHITE  
SOLDIER

I thought youse blokes could see in the dark?

LAURIE

Nah, that's rabbits.

FIRST WHITE  
SOLDIER

Seriously, they put you here 'cause you have tracking skills, you know, you can look at a blade of grass and say how many have gone past and all that sort of malarkey.

LAURIE

What? You're not fair dinkum.

SECOND WHITE  
SOLDIER

You know, 'cause you fellers all have a fifth sense or something.

FIRST WHITE  
SOLDIER

Picked up special skills from your wise old blokes.

LAURIE

I grew up in bloody Erskineville!

FIRST WHITE  
SOLDIER

Did you learn anything there?

LAURIE

Plenty. Nothing that's useful now.

SECOND WHITE  
SOLDIER

Why did you think the captain kept sending you out on recky, then?

LAURIE

Maybe he thought I had better camouflage in the dark.

## 1917. Bullecourt

*A passing soldier takes the lamp to his dugout where his mates huddle.*

NIGEL *[voice]* Can I get in with you chaps? I'm meant to be with the ninth but I can't find 'em anywhere.

SQUINTING

SOLDIER

You one of the new chums, mate? Hop in, watch out for the chandelier.

*NIGEL climbs in. Surprised silence, when they see NIGEL's black.*

OLDER SOLDIER You're a long way from home!

SQUINTING

SOLDIER

Where're you from?

NIGEL Annandale, in Sydney. Spent a bit of time in Lithgow.

OLDER SOLDIER Wal Jeffries, everyone calls me 'Judge' on account of me being so wise.

SQUINTING

SOLDIER

Got nothing to do with him sitting on his arse all day.

OLDER SOLDIER That's 'Bunny', this here is Vic, that's 'Whacker' and this is 'Darky'.

NIGEL Darky, eh?

OLDER SOLDIER In the light of recent reinforcements we may have to reconsider his name.

*They laugh.*

## **Sandy Maranoa**

*Someone is singing in the darkness. A passing soldier takes the lamp. Soldiers, exhausted, injured. One sings.*

*The night is dark and stormy and the sky is clouded o'er  
Our horses we will mount and ride away  
To watch the squatters' cattle through the darkness of the night  
And we'll keep them on the camp till break of day*

*They join in.*

*For we're going going going to Gunnedah so far  
And we'll soon be into sunny New South Wales  
We shall bid farewell to Queensland with its swampy coolibah  
Happy drovers from the sandy Maranoa.*

**1918. Villers-Bretonneux.**

VOICE IN  
THE DARK

Love that song. I'm from that way.

ERN

Me too. Just outside Mitchell.

VOICE IN  
THE DARK

Bugger me, that's where I'm from. Perce Hourigan.

ERN

Yeah, I know. The Hourigans. From the pub, the *Antrim Arms*.

VOICE IN  
THE DARK

Have we ever met?

ERN

Passed in the road. Your old man took his belt to mine a few times, when he went for a drink.

VOICE IN  
THE DARK

Why would he do that? [*The soldier lights his pipe, briefly illuminates his face, lets the other man see.*] Strewth.

Righto. [*Pause. The sound of distant artillery*] If we both get home, you'll be walking into the front bar, mate. Don't worry about that.

*ERN passes his pipe to another soldier.*

## 1917. Ypres

*Four West Indian ammunition haulers go past.*

- MICK Blow me down, who are they?
- SOLDIER Ammunition haulers.
- MICK I know what they bloody are, smart Alec. I mean, where did they come from?
- ANOTHER SOLDIER Thought you were the only coloured bloke in Flanders, did you?
- CORPORAL The poms won't let them fight, just lug things to and fro. Maybe you should have a word with em, Mick?
- MICK Why would I wanna do that?
- SOLDIER Find a bit of common cause!
- MICK Yeah, yeah, very funny.
- TRINIDADIAN What you staring at, Australian nigger?
- MICK What did you call me?
- TRINIDADIAN Well, you look like a nigger to me.
- CORPORAL Stewth Mick, they're not doin' much for empire relations!
- 2nd TRINIDADIAN Them Australian niggers, live on the creek bank, never wash.

*Pause.*

- TRINIDADIAN He's a quiet mon.
- 2nd TRINIDADIAN They slow, them Australian niggers.

*MICK punches four of them out in a row.*

- MICK Bastards said I didn't wash.

*The bombs and gunfire start up again.*

**1917. Bullecourt.**

MAJOR                   Who's shortest? You!

NIGEL                   Sir!

MAJOR                   See if you can crawl in and get that field set back.

NIGEL                   What does he mean?

SQUINTING  
SOLDIER                The telephone, Snowy.

MAJOR                   You, you and you. Follow me.

*NIGEL crawls into the dark. Germans sweep through, masses of gunfire. When the smoke clears, he emerges with a shot-up telephone.*

NIGEL                   Judge? Rabbit? Vic? Chaps? It's Nigel ...

*Everyone is dead. Germans emerge. He puts his hands in the air. The Germans are too astonished to say anything at first.*

GERMAN  
SOLDIER                Was auf der Erde bist du?

NIGEL                   Oh bugger ...

## 1915. Frying Pan Creek NSW

*The tension is broken by the sound of chopping wood. Slowly the scene dissolves into the darkness and comes up on a woman doing the work. Her son.*

- MUM                    And what good will that do?
- BERTIE                If you say I was born in eighteen ninety eight they'll say righto.
- MUM                    But you weren't.
- BERTIE                No, but if you say, I mean if you write it down they reckon that'll do 'cos there are no other records, no-one would know.
- MUM                    And if I do say you were born then what will happen? Will the sky suddenly stay blue all year? Will I get a new hat?
- BERTIE                But you'll get me out of yer hair.
- MUM                    You're a boy. No letter will change that. You've barely seen the sun rise. Your muscles fail after an hour's work. And you reckon you can waltz around with all the white boys do you? That they'll make life easy for you, suddenly you're their dearest little black mate. Suddenly you'll be a man, and a white one at that? That doors will open for you? Do you?
- BERTIE                You know what, mum? Yeah, I do. Something like that.
- Enter GRANDAD*
- GRANDAD            What's he rabbiting on about?
- MUM                    Bertie here wants to join up.
- GRANDAD            Join up what?
- BERTIE                The army. Earn money. See the world. Fight for country.
- GRANDAD            We've been fighting for country for a long time.



- BERTIE                    Yeah well if Kaiser Bill comes over the ridge and the bosh start spearing us all on their spike things then we'll really know what it is to fight for country.
- MUM                      Who's been putting this stuff in your head? You been hanging around outside the School of Arts again?
- GRANDAD                You know, my grandfather, he could walk for three days, follow the sun this time of year. How many fences did he have to cross? How many gates did he have to shut?
- BERTIE                    None. You've told me and told me, pop, I know. Now it's all fences, we're fenced, I know. But this isn't just about us. It's about ... a bigger world.
- GRANDAD                Bigger world never seemed interested in you. Why you so interested in it?
- BERTIE                    Ever since I was small you said we were fighters. Long time ago, we would be men. You know, men, the old people, move through the bush, silent, stand up. Everyone look at them. All that palarver.
- MUM                      What's palarver? Speak the King's English.
- BERTIE                    I'm going to be a fighter too. For us but not just for us. For Australia.
- GRANDAD                Australia. Never heard of it. You, Dor?
- MUM                      Think the coppers like to talk about it. Must be a magic fairy land somewhere with oak trees and shepherds pie. Don't see much Australia round here.
- BERTIE                    Will yer write the letter or won't you?
- GRANDAD                Don't look at me, you know I can't write nothing.
- MUM                      You know what, I will write it. I'll say you were born in eighteen ninety eight out at Walter's Run. I'll do what you

want. But I'll tell you something right now. You know when the Narrandera Show's on? And for a week the whole racecourse down there feels like every story book has come to life? And you and your sister would go and hang around, lounging on the barbed wire like a pair of skinned rats, looking in? How'd you feel? Like a big fancy circus, a big show of light and excitement, eh, and you could never get in? Would never get in? That's what the world's like, son. You can go to the Tower of London or the Pyramids or wherever, it's still the world. And you won't be allowed through the wire.

- BERTIE                      They need me. They need lads. For the first time, they need us. Changed the rules, make it easier for aborigines they reckon.
- GRANDAD                    Think about why that might be.
- MUM                            And you know when the Show's over each year, when you go down the grounds the next week, what's there?
- BERTIE                        Nothing. Nobody.
- MUM                            That's what this war will be like for you. There's no fancy land at the end.
- BERTIE                        So you'll write it anyway.
- MUM                            Imagine if I don't. You'll only run away to god knows where. I'm lookin' in your eyes Bertie. I've already lost you. Maybe this way there might be someone decent who'll look out for you. What're you laughing at Dad?
- GRANDAD                    Someone decent. All these blokes, you're going off to lick their boots. Same blokes, same boots that have kicked us for years. And you can't wait.
- BERTIE                        Sorry Pop. I really am. But I'll stay standing.

## 1917. Polygon Wood

*Whistle of an approaching shell, and an explosion.  
BERTIE and his mum have vanished. Barbed wire.*

SECOND WHITE  
SOLDIER

What are you gonna do when you get home, Stan?

STAN

Back to my dad's timber yard I suppose.

SECOND WHITE  
SOLDIER

If I had to spend the rest of my life being a clerk I wouldn't whinge. Harry?

HARRY

I can't even imagine what it will look like. All I hope is that it's changed.

FIRST WHITE  
SOLDIER

What sort of changed?

HARRY

If you blokes have a beer with me then that's a start.

STAN

What are you on about? We'd always have a beer with you.

FIRST WHITE  
SOLDIER

You're as good as a white man, Harry.

## 1917. A trench.

*In a trench. Occasional bullet whizzes. Distant explosions.  
But otherwise languid.*

- ERN Moon?
- ARCHIE It's not up. And no.
- MICK Munition case?
- ARCHIE No.
- ERN Mud?
- ARCHIE You've already said that. And no.
- HARRY Metal.
- ARCHIE Nup.
- STAN Mortar?
- ARCHIE No.
- ERN We've moved seven feet since April.
- STAN A triumph.
- ERN 'Bout as exciting as the Valley on Good Friday.
- MICK We could go old and grey sitting here.
- HARRY Rather grow old than never grow old.
- ARCHIE Amen.
- ERN Seriously, this has gone for years and it could go for years. We lose a few mates, they lose a few, the whistle blows, we gain another cricket pitch worth of Belgium, the horn blows, they chase us out. But most of the time we sit here and we sing our songs. And they sit over there and sing theirs. And everyone, everyone hates the whole bloody stunt.

- MICK                    Shh don't let the Captain hear you carry on like that.
- ARCHIE                 It's stalemate, innit? Stale, mate. We're stuck with it. We're here because we're here, and now we're here, that's what it is. And the world's gonna have to organise itself around us.
- ERN                     Can't put history back in the bottle, mate.
- STAN                    Matchbox!
- ARCHIE                 Bullseye.
- STAN                    I spy with my ...

## 1916. Pozieres.

*Big explosion. Dirt showers on them. Loud bombs and gunfire. Frank on a stretcher.*

BERTIE Bring him here! Quick!

TOMMY What's he saying?

BERTIE Can't make it out. Hold on. [*Frank's dead.*] We have to find a way to get him home.

TOMMY What are you saying? Listen to yourself mate.

BERTIE He can't be buried here. [*Pause*] We should ... do something.

TOMMY Like what? I don't know any of that old people stuff.

BERTIE We're the only ones. Your folks do something, over in the West? [*BERTIE shrugs*] I wouldn't know where to begin. His you know, his soul will be stuck here. You know what I mean. With all these trees, they will grow here one day all these — what do you call them? Elms and oaks and all that. And all these hedges and the flowers and we don't know the names of any of them. And when they burn the smoke is different and it will lead him a different way.

STRETCHER-BEARER What's this aborigine mumbo-jumbo?

BERTIE The first dead one I seen.

STRETCHER-BEARER Whaddya mean?

BERTIE Seen hundreds of bodies. This is the first one who looks like me. No, he can't get buried in this dirt. Or if he is we need to make sure he knows how to follow me, to get back, follow me on the ship, follow me on the train, back to the river.

TOMMY

I wouldn't know where to start. We're the only blackfellas for a million miles. Here, take this. [*He cuts a lock of the dead kid's hair*]. Hold on to it. It will have to do. Now what do we say?

BERTIE

Our Father, which art in heaven hallowed be thy name  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in  
heaven Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our  
trespasses As we forgive them that trespass against us,  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory. Forever  
and ever  
Amen

## A Ghost.

GHOST

We moved, from as long back as I could remember. Moved all over the place, me and my brothers, the same as our dad had done. Following the work. Shearing, you know? Coonabarabran, Goondiwindi, Pilliga, Moree, up to St George, I remember us taking our chances on the McIntyre when it was swollen and we almost got swept away, and got to the bank all out of breath and sitting there and laughing, we were alive ... and when the job was done you would stretch out your back and you'd set out for the next place and no-one would ever really know where you were. Which was you might say useful when you didn't want to be found, if you get my drift. And I suppose I thought that would be the way it was going to be forever. But then the big event sort of fell on top of us, didn't it? And shearing had to wait. We crossed the river when it was dark, the Somme that is, not the McIntyre. By then I was just about buggered to be honest, I was a big bloke and I was strong but I was starting to lose it, up here. Started getting the quivers and forgetting I was in France and thinking I was back on the plains. We had to get land, that was all it ever was, capture a scrap here, a scrap there. This time it was a bit of bush, a wood you know? Or what had been a wood. By then no-one could remember what had been a wood or what had been a farm or who was who or what was what. But we were copping it left right and centre from all these machine gun nests, so in we flew and ping ping ping it started and that was what it was like sometimes they would fly past your ear so close you could feel the air move, you could feel them part the hairs on your arm, and next to me a bloke I'd known since we bunked together on the *Marathon* he copped it right in the face and one of his teeth spun up and jammed into my eyebrow and sweet Jesus it was a mess, whistles and shouts and some bugger saying one thing and some bugger



saying another and I smeared the blood out my eye and thought blow this, in I go and I ran straight at that nest and that little hun shat himself when I came over the top and I took him down with my elbow, everything was going nice and slow, suddenly it was calm and the noise drifted away, and I thought 'in for a penny in for a pound' and up I jumped and thud thud thud my big boots on the dirt and the bullets did their best to avoid me and whoomph I was in another one and I had this hand around some German gullet and you know this forearm has taken the wool off ten thousand sheep, I just squeezed his eyes out of his skull and then what do you do? You just keep going, just stretch your back out and move on and thud thud thud through all the bloody mess I moved all the bits of human beings and bullets and shells like little dots like a field of flowers and into another one I leapt, kicked over the MG8, they've all got their white little doll hands in the air and as they were all marched away I just fell on my back on that Mont St Quentin dirt thinking of how I used to lie in the sand monkeys in the Pilliga scrub and how my dad laughed and used to say 'some days in the shed you just find yourself in the slot you know? Your timing is spot on and everything just slides into place and they just chalk up the numbers and life's a breeze'. I was in the slot that day. I got a nice little bit of metal for my work too, the DCM, only aborigine to get one in the whole war I reckon; three machine-gun nests in one movement, maybe thirty, forty prisoners? Killed a fair few too, felt their weak white lives flow out round my fingers. How I slept that night, like a little one, serene you know? Even the officers looked at me with new eyes, the half-caste was rising in estimation. Next morning I step out, King of the battalion with the back slaps and the nods and the handshakes and all and I'm thinking about running through the scrub when I was a tacker and I'm torn in two by a shell that chose to land

in my lap. A 'boy with his boots off' that's what we called them, arrive before you hear it, yeah? So bits of jerry steel and bits of your humble narrator were splattered over that damp soil and specks of me dribbled back through the wood into the river. I didn't get a nice long last look at life. I wasn't heading home. The boys who did, who found their way back, they could tell folks what their black mate had done. But me, I'm moving. Moving in my own way across rivers, even if they aren't my own. And I'll be here til everyone's forgotten everything that happened and the dirt can go back to being just dirt.

## 1916. Pozieres

*Five Germans, hands in the air. MICK approaches tentatively.*

MICK                    That's it you bastards. That's it. Keep it calm and everyone sees Christmas. Keep them in the air, you too fritz. Right come on, yeah, come on, move this way. What are you waiting for? [*One of the Germans ducks to pick something up. MICK shoots all five.*] Dopey bugger what would you want to do that for?

ONE SOLDIER        Looks like he was going for a bomb.

MICK                    All dead?

SOLDIER                Very.

*They rifle through the bodies*

MICK                    That's ten now. Ten I've got. Ten little sauerkrauts all in a row. Good haul for one man.

SOLDIER                Remind me to never pick a quarrel with you back home.

MICK                    Warrior blood in my veins.

SOLDIER                You're shaking.

MICK                    Just the excitement. Long line of fighters. My ancestors.

SOLDIER                Oh yeah, what did they win?

*Loud explosion. Two young blokes in a hole somewhere.*

BERTIE                 I shouldn't be here! I'm fifteen. I shouldn't be here, I shouldn't be here.

TOMMY                 Bertie! Calm down. Pull yourself together.

BERTIE                 We missed the call! We're caught, Tom, this is it, we're not getting back. We should've leave him!

TOMMY                 Don't lose your bottle.

BERTIE I'm fifteen, Tom.

TOMMY Well I'm not much older.

*Massive explosion. Tons of soil rain down on him.*

Hey! HEY!

*All we can hear is the dull thud of explosions. He is trapped in a pocket of air. Just enough space for him to move a little. A boot is sticking out of the mud.*

BERTIE Tommy? Oh sweet Jesus. I can't see you, where are you?

TOMMY Can you hear me? get me out, get me out!

BERTIE Tommy? Christ, he's gone. He's gone.

TOMMY HEY! HEY! HEY! Anyone? HEY!

*'Our God, Our Help in Ages Past'*

*ARCHIE closes his eyelids. Field burial. Men sing.*

*The busy tribes of flesh and blood,  
With all their lives and cares,  
Are carried downwards by the flood,  
And lost in following years.*

*Time, like an ever rolling stream,  
Bears all its sons away;  
They fly, forgotten, as a dream  
Dies at the opening day.*

*Our God, our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come,  
Be Thou our guard while life shall last,  
And our eternal home.*

**1917.**

ARCHIE

Dear Aunty May

You remember Ollie Thomas, Freda Thomas' boy? He was sitting on a bench a chatting to some fellows and he took out some revolver he'd managed to get his hands on and he shot himself in the face. The blood sprayed like that fountains on North Terrace and Jack Ware (you remember who went up to Tailem Bend after that business with Millie McPherson) just sort of grabbed his knees and fell in the mud and he wasn't screaming he was just making these sounds like a kitten. And the worst of it is that Ollie is still alive, he's in the hospital and he hasn't got a face but he's still alive Aunty May. But he hasn't got a face Aunty May, he hasn't got a face.

## 1917. Beersheba, Palestine

*Warm light fills the stage; we are in the Holy Land, the day before the attack of Beersheba. LAURIE staring out in the distance.*

BRITISH CAPTAIN A view eh? [*the Australian salutes.*] At ease. A view ...

LAURIE 'And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life, and came to Beersheba.'

BRITISH CAPTAIN '... But he himself sat down under a juniper tree; and said, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers."

LAURIE I have heard about these places all my life. Sacred places. How far is Bethlehem from here?

BRITISH CAPTAIN About forty miles. That way.

LAURIE So He might have walked on these stones?

BRITISH CAPTAIN He might.

LAURIE And those stars are the same stars He would have looked at?

BRITISH CAPTAIN They're the same stars that shine over Dorset.

LAURIE And the same that shine over Gympie too eh?

BRITISH CAPTAIN India, eh?

LAURIE No, Gympie, sir. On the road to Tin Can Bay.

BRITISH CAPTAIN Ah, you're Australian. Between you and me, the eyesight's gone. Desert squints and all that. Forgive me. You're a good chap. Best of luck to you.

LAURIE Maybe we'll see each other in Jerusalem, sir?

BRITISH CAPTAIN 'As for these things which ye behold, the days will come, in the which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.'

LAURIE

'And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies,  
then know that the desolation thereof is nigh.'



## 1917. Zössen POW camp.

*They are interrupted by a voice coming from a loud-hailer.  
NIGEL is in a POW camp.*

GERMAN

PRISON GUARD

You must all see now, having been captured, that you have been used and abused. You are victims of your oppressive masters, who brutally seized your lands and took from you your birthrights. You are little more than slaves until you rise up and throw off the shackles of your British masters. The time for being lickspittles has ended, this war and the inevitable defeat of Great Britain has washed it all away. The question is, who will acknowledge they have been made fools, have been kept children, have accepted their own slavery? It is Time to fight, to fight against your oppressors, for a free India, for free Africa ...

NIGEL

Does this happen all day?

INDIAN (P.O.W.)

Yes, more or less. They want us to take up arms and foment rebellion. But we are all British, are we not? We are sons of the Magna Carta? They might as well speak to the wind.

NIGEL

You speak English well.

INDIAN

The same might be said of you sir. Pardon me, but what are you doing here?

NIGEL

They didn't believe me when I said I was Australian. They said I must be Indian and sent me here.

INDIAN

This camp is for all non-white prisoners.

NIGEL

No-one mentioned the colour of my skin from the day I enlisted. I copped more for going to a private school!

INDIAN

But, you are a hottentot?

NIGEL

Do you mind, sir! I'm from Australia.

- SECOND INDIAN They have Africans in Australia?
- NIGEL I haven't seen an Aussie since I was captured.
- INDIAN When they look at you, they cannot see the Australian. Just as when they look at us, they cannot see we are British.
- THIRD INDIAN But one day we shall not be British. This Private will always be Australian, he has nothing else to be.
- INDIAN You sound perilously close to our sausage-eating friend!
- SECOND INDIAN Do not remind me!
- INDIAN These guards eat pig-meat all day and breathe it is our faces.
- THIRD INDIAN There is little respect for our diet or our prayers.
- They start talking over each other.*
- NIGEL No ... there's been a mistake, I should be with my mates.
- INDIAN We are your comrades now.

1917.

*Field hospital. BERTIE, strangely stiff and unemotional. Writing.*

BERTIE

Dear Mum, You have to write to get in touch with the protector's office, tell them what my real age is — *[Starts again]* Tell them the truth about what you wrote last time. I am in the pit of Gehenna I am being chased by the dogs of hell —

MEDICAL  
ORDERLY

You need to cover it.

BERTIE

Sorry?

MEDICAL  
ORDERLY

Dictation: "We are in good spirits here, all is well. Your loving son".

BERTIE

Lies.

MEDICAL  
ORDERLY

You tell your mum not to worry. She'll know to start worrying then.

BERTIE

*[Starts again]* Remember you talked about when the Show is in town? I am in the Show. I have got through the fence, I have seen what the grown-up world is like. Your boy. Bert.

## 1918. Abbeville

*Elsewhere in the hospital. NORM's bandaged around the ears. ERN's arm in a sling. BOB with bandage around his eyes.*

- BOB                      Norm? Norm?
- ERN                      He can't hear you, his hearing's been blown.
- NORM                    What's he saying?
- ERN                      Never mind. Doesn't matter. NEVER MIND.
- VOICE                    Shut those darkies up!
- BOB                      Light us a smoke will you Norm?
- ERN                      Well, youse blokes have your ticket home.
- NORM                    What?
- ERN                      YER GOING HOME
- NORM                    'Our Pastor were a solemn bloke, we called him dismal Jim.'
- ERN                      GOIN' HOME, NOT POEM. [*BOB starts to weep. The others stare at him for a moment.*] Cheer up, mate, you'll be right. You've pulled through. You can walk down the main drag with your medals and all the fillies will gaze up at yer. Not that you'll know mind, but you'll feel it. You'll be somebody.
- BOB                      Tried digging a ditch with yer eyes shut? That's the rest of my life. On the verandah if I'm lucky listening to the wind in the trees.
- ERN                      They won't forget you mate. You've fought for the King for Country. For our country. For Australia.
- NORM                    What?

- ERN AUSTRALIA
- NORM Whatever that is.
- ERN Just where we're all from, I suppose.
- BOB Not our word for it.
- ERN Well, it had better be more than just a word because I haven't come to other side of the world and had my balls frozen off for an idea.
- BOB Wonder what it will be like? When we get back? You sort of want it all to be different. But you also want it all to have stayed the same.
- NORM What?
- BOB HOME. CHANGED. WHILE WE'RE AWAY.
- NORM Maybe the folks will be different. But the land stays the same. The names get changed around it, they change the names of the plants and the birds and the rivers and then they change what the words mean. But the sun still gets up in the morning.
- ERN Cripes, where's this come from?
- NORM Change, brother. Lots of change.
- BOB For those who are there to see it.
- NORM What?

## 1917. Zössen

- PROFESSOR      Sit perfectly still, if you please. I come looking for anthropological specimens. We are building records for Berlin, comprehensive records, of all the races of humanity, measuring the cranium and so on. Pure fortune has led me to you.
- NIGEL            What will you do with it?
- PROFESSOR      With the measurements? We will draw an enormous map of the human species, and be able to compare and contrast, draw up a bigger picture of what is noble and what is ... weak, in the human races, yes? Til now the Australian native was a gap in our knowledge, a few skulls, a few skins. You will help us understand racial difference.
- NIGEL            No worries, glad to be of service. So what do the measurements tell you?
- PROFESSOR      Prominent brow, to be expected. Thank god for the war, eh? It has led you to me. Very good luck as you say.
- NIGEL            Maybe it's fortunate for us, too. Professor, might I speak to you of the food here? Some of us are Mahommedan and it would be very useful if we could find a way to exclude pork ...
- PROFESSOR      I will see what can be done. Look at you. Like nothing else in the world!

*They move away talking.*

1916.

*TOMMY, still in his living grave. They find his boot, scrape away the soil, and pull him out.*

TOMMY                    *[weakly]* Hey.

*He cries, like a little boy. He is covered in mud. They scrape it off him.*

SECOND SAPPER    Hey, mate. You should be thankful. Three days since the bombardment stopped. You're like Lazarus, in your hole. You've got a chance. Another life, mate.

*All sing, repeat under the next scene*

FIRST SAPPER        Don't think you need to scrape any more.

SECOND SAPPER    Why?

FIRST SAPPER        This one's not getting any cleaner.

*They laugh. Give him a cigarette. He is shaking and crying so much he can't hold it or light it.*

**1918. Near Amiens.**

ARCHIE

Dear Aunty May

In John's Gospel it says 'And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not! What does that mean?



**1917.**

*BERTIE, standing dumbly to attention.*

DISCHARGING  
OFFICER

You're going home. Correspondence has been received and your true date of birth has been ascertained. For you, Private, the war is over. Have your things ready for the dawn transport.

Well?

You don't seem pleased, soldier. You've been snatched from the jaws of death, don't you see? Have you nothing to say?

*BERTIE stands, unable to speak.*

**Lazarus**

*Lazarus Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!*

*The Lord is calling you! Lazarus!*

*Rise Up, Lazarus*

*The Lord says you're sleeping but if that is true.*

*(Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!)*

*Why did they put you in to that tomb?*

*(The Lord is calling you! Lazarus! Rise up, Lazarus)*

*I hear my Lord weeping, but don't be ashamed,*

*(Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!)*

*When Jesus calls your name*

*(Lazarus! Rise up, Lazarus)*

*Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!*

*The Lord is calling you! Lazarus!*

*Rise Up, Lazarus*

*The Lord says you're sleeping but if that is true.*

*(Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!)*

*Why did they put you in to that tomb?*

*(The Lord is calling you! Lazarus! Rise up, Lazarus)*

*I hear my Lord weeping, but don't be ashamed,*

*(Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!)*

*When Jesus calls your name*

*(Lazarus! Rise up, Lazarus)*

### 1917. Messines

*ARCHIE, fighting an enemy soldier hand to hand with bayonets. He is stabbed in the side, but kicks the other and overpowers him. It is desperate, bestial stuff. He stabs his opponent who falls back. He gets a look at ARCHIE, who squats and watches him die. It takes a long time*

AUSTRIAN

Schwarzer teufel. Schwarzer teufel mit weiße Augen.  
Schwarzer teufel. Schwarzer ... letzte, was ich sehe.

## ACT TWO

### 1949. Glebe Town Hall

*Everyone assembled, cane chairs, as if at an old folks' home.*

BLOKE WITH A  
GLASS OF WINE

Thanks very much, it's a pleasure to be with you tonight. I haven't got anything prepared because I wasn't expecting to have to speak. You don't need me to tell you, this country's just been through the wringer, and we've had a narrow squeak. Herr Hitler is gone and Tojo dangled on a rope so there's some justice in the world. But I feel there's a certain, shall we say weariness? Creeping into the press and the chat in our tearooms and pubs. It's fashionable among some folk, I mean younger lads and their mates, to talk about imperialism and foreign wars and about being lied to. And do you know, gentlemen, it kills me. It sticks in here inside me and it burns. The ingrates, if only I could talk to them, and say all the stuff they wouldn't listen to anyway. What do we say? How many different ways is there to say 'you wouldn't know, you weren't there?'. How do you get across what it was like to wake up with mud and human waste in your nose in your eyes in your hair in your mouth, to wrench open your eyes caked with dried tears and pus from the infections and for one brief fleeting second you thought — in that space between sleep and wake — you thought you were back home, back in a place where you understood what was what and who was who — but, no, you're in a living hell. A living hell where men scream the truth from every hole in their sad wrecked bodies? *[Drinks]* It might have passed some of the less observant of you, but I happen to be aboriginal. My ancestors came from up Macleay river way. And I'm proud of it. But I have to say, thank God for the Army.

Thank God for the uniform and the chance to serve. Because when I was a whippersnapper and first joined up I was just another woebegone failure. And in the army, you earn your way. You take on dignity. A dignity perhaps that no-one was going to let you have back home. But in the service, you are forged into something ... not white, you're not erased of your past, but it's ... it's ... incorporated into who you are, and you realise — maybe in those hideous moments in hell on earth, maybe on parade, maybe with mates, I don't know — you realise, "I belong". And I came back, and like you gentlemen I found myself identifying with Australia. It wasn't for *them* or about *them*. It was for me too. And when Dave Sands put that Turpin on his behind didn't my heart swell! Not because Dave Sands was aboriginal. Because he was Australian. I had moved over. I loved him for being an aussie as much as I loved him for being one of my mob. So for me, yes, sir, the war was on one hand the worst thing on earth, wouldn't wish it on the lowest dog. But on the other hand, it made me, and it made us, for better or worse. It brought us together and grew us up. Curse war, but bless it for it brought me into the fold. So, in that spirit, I say, join me with full glasses; to Dave Sands, to those who have gone, and those who we will always remember.

*The soldiers move on stage repeating the toast.*

*Tattooed Lady*

*I paid two bob to see a fair tattooed lady  
She was a sight to see, tattooed from head to knee  
A map of New Guinea was where I'd never been  
And up and down her thighs was a flock of magpies  
And on her jaw were the words "Great ANZAC corps"  
And on her tits was an emu and a fucking kangaroo  
All up and down her spine marched the King's own guards  
in line  
And all around her hips sailed a fleet of battle ships  
And over her left kidney was a birds eye view of Sydney  
But what we liked best was across her chest, my home in  
Wolloomolloo.*

**1919.**

*Behind them MICK and ARCHIE on the gangway. They look around, no-one there.*

MICK Well they really rolled out the red carpet didn't they?

ARCHIE That's when you arrive.

MICK Eh?

ARCHIE Red carpet. When you arrive somewhere, not when you come back. And look, there's plenty of people about.

MICK Not my people.

ARCHIE Time to go. All that stuff is the past, time for the future.

MICK Hey, before we step back on the land. Shake my hand.

ARCHIE No worries.

MICK And promise ourselves, this wasn't for nothing. Congratulations, mate, for getting though it all. And now let's make sure things don't go back to the way they were eh?

ARCHIE Amen.

**Laurie leaving camp, having been demobbed.**

LAURIE It's been a while, brother.

LAURIE'S MATE What?

LAURIE I'm back.

LAURIE'S MATE Well I'll be buggered! Laurie? I wouldn't recognise you. What've they done to you? First decent willy-willy would blow you over.

LAURIE Not the best grub. And I've been pretty wretched.

LAURIE'S MATE Eh?

LAURIE Wretched. Sick, flu.

LAURIE'S MATE Laurie. Back from the dead. So, what was it like?

LAURIE Jesus, where to begin ...

*BERTIE, expressionless, walks stiffly.*

MUM Bertie!

*She rushes to him and hugs him but he doesn't respond.*

You daa boy I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, why haven't you written, I thought you'd got caught up in the flu or weren't on the boat or something. I can't tell you how long it took me to get there, I had to get to Junee and Alf and Cissy had to stay behind because grandad's a bit 'butcher's' and there's problems with the land and look how thin you are boy you're like one of your bantams! What's that you've got in your hand there? Hair eh? Bertie, why aren't you sayin' nothing?

*BERTIE just stands there, almost at attention. His eyes are aware but his body is still. They move away, her talking gently, him stiffly, almost marching.*



1932.

*Pub in a country town, Anzac Day. Big bloke at the door.*

- CELLARMAN            You're right mate. But you? Not a chance. Don't try it on, show some respect.
- FIRST DIGGER        You're not serious —
- ARCHIE                Got me tie on. Polished the shoes. Presentable.
- CELLARMAN         You know you blokes aren't welcome any other day. What's different about today?
- ARCHIE                Do I even have to answer that?
- FIRST DIGGER        [*Gesturing to ARCHIE's medals*] BMW. St George on his horse.
- ARCHIE                Victory.
- FIRST DIGGER        Pip, Squeak and Wilfred.
- CELLARMAN         Could have got them anywhere.
- ARCHIE                Are you saying I didn't serve? Oh, come on, we won't cause any problems. We've been to the memorial service, and we want to raise a glass to our mates who didn't come back. Lest We Forget is for all of us eh?
- CELLARMAN         I'm not arguing with you.
- ARCHIE                Let me ask you something. Back in France, back in the mud. Blokes like you shook my hand. We dragged blokes like you through the shit and the blood. We saw each other when we were like babies. Like animals.
- CELLARMAN         I never saw any men like you over there ...
- ARCHIE                Well I saw piles of men like you.
- RSI SECRETARY      What's the problem, Cec?

- CELLARMAN      Abo with a mouth on him.
- RSL SECRETARY      Yeah, saw you down the memorial. You coming in?
- ARCHIE      That's the plan.
- CELLARMAN      Mr. Murphy, we don't let — we have a policy here, talk to Mr. McCartney.
- RSL SECRETARY      Let him in Cec. And anyone else with medals and rosemary.
- PUBLICAN      What's going on?
- RSL SECRETARY      I'm just explaining to Cec that these two ex-servicemen are more than welcome today. Or any day. We don't see the skin, we see the service. And that you don't want to bring down the wrath of the RSL on you.
- Pause*
- PUBLICAN      Yeah. That's fine, Cec.
- RSL SECRETARY      Come on, let me buy you a drink
- ARCHIE      Archie. Archie Gallagher.

**1922. Western District, Victoria.**

*A meeting. Public Servant from the Soldier Settlement Commission.*

- PUBLIC SERVANT Please, please, may I be heard? Please, understand this decision has been taken with the overall welfare of our returned men in mind who need land —
- FARMER But this is our land. It was a mission and then our community.
- PUBLIC SERVANT Yes, but under the Discharged Soldiers' Settlement Act of 1917 we have the authority to acquire land to be divided as soldier settlement plots.
- SECOND FARMER This is the first we've heard of it!
- FARMER You can't just take the land from us! It's barely returning us anything as it is!
- THIRD FARMER If we can't make anything from it, how are blokes from the city going to make a go of it?
- PUBLIC SERVANT Well, opportunities for new techniques, fertilisers and so on ...
- FARMER Will we be given access to these new techniques as well?
- PUBLIC SERVANT That's a different department.
- MICK This is ridiculous.
- POLICE
- CONSTABLE I'd suggest you watch your tone of voice, Dempsey.
- SECOND FARMER How can we appeal this?
- PUBLIC SERVANT Er. Well, you can't. The decision has been made. It's a compulsory acquisition. The land will be pegged and allocated to returned servicemen and any interference will —
- POLICE
- CONSTABLE Attract our attention. Does he make himself clear?

- MICK                      May I ask a question sir? Mick Dempsey, sir. Will I be able to apply for land? My dad farmed here, and my grandad was here at the mission and his dad before him.
- PUBLIC SERVANT        As I understand it you are entitled to apply but land is delegated at the discretion of the committee —
- SECOND FARMER        Do you know who this is? This a serious war hero, this is Mick Dempsey, he killed two dozen jerries with his bare hands!
- MICK                      Ease up, Joe. Just as a matter of interest, how many aboriginal ex-servicemen have been given a settlement?
- PUBLIC SERVANT        Again, not my department I'm afraid. I'm only here to outline the plans for the land division.
- SECOND FARMER        This and this and this are all in the rocky outcrops! Not even rabbits live there!
- FARMER                    And that's in the swamp! What are they gonna grow, yabbies?
- PUBLIC SERVANT        Er ... as I said, new techniques —
- MICK                      Excuse me, I don't think I've been heard. I spent four years abroad and left half a lung and my youth there. And all that kept me going some days some nights, in the frost, in the heat, shutting the eyelids of all my mates after they'd breathed their last, all that kept me going sometimes was tellin' myself 'You're fighting to protect your country. You're finally fighting to protect what's yours.' It might have escaped your notice, sir, but this is an Aboriginal community. Our grandparents were moved here because they were in the way, and probably their parents before them going back to the first cursed moment white men wandered into our lands. But I could put all that aside because I believed this would be different. This time I would be the good coon and do as I was told and for the first time I wouldn't get a sack of flour but I might actually earn some dignity. Come back to what remained of my land and farm it and try to heal this massive wound.

PUBLIC SERVANT Wound? I'm not following?

MICK This country. And now you are taking that away? Four years I spent in uniform, all of us ready to make the sacrifice. And now I get back and you say a stroke of the pen has just swept aboriginal land off the map?

PUBLIC SERVANT Look, this isn't the same country as before the war.

FARMER No. No it's not.

MICK For you the war's over. What's starting to dawn on me is that, for us, it's never going to end.

## 1920. Bertha Downs

*The Anzac ceremony transforms into station hands waiting by the steps to a veranda at a cattle station. ARCHIE stands in the rain, sheltering under his coat. The overseer is under cover.*

ARCHIE Mr. Griffen, you had time to think about that issue we discussed?

MANAGER Not here, Arch, not now.

ARCHIE Well when, then?

MANAGER When I say so. What's got into you?

ARCHIE I won't be put off, Mr. Griffen. And while we're at it, there's more that needs to be talked about. The old blokes who can't work on the station any more, they're under blankets and corrugated iron out the back of Moilong. And all that linen work the girls do at the house?

MANAGER You listen to me and you listen to me nice and close. I don't give a rat's arse where you've been and what you've done. I don't give a fuck what happened on the other side of the world. I don't care for your airs and graces. As far as I'm concerned you're still the boy who used to shut his lip and do as he was told. Ever since you came home you've been the worst kind of black, an uppity one. I suggest you get on with the job at hand and stop being a troublemaker. Or things might get tough for people you care about. Jesus, now you've gone and got me angry. Who put these bloody ideas in your head?

*He leaves.*

ARCHIE No-one. Just thinking for myself. Can you believe this bloke? We know how to run this show better than him but he won't be told.

MATE Don't bring me into it.

ARCHIE You fellas all turn your tails. Work, at camp, things need fixing.

- MATE                    What's happened to you Arch? Not one of us anymore.  
You're different.
- OLD HAND             You think you're better than us, do you?
- MATE                    Not the Archie we knew.
- OLD HAND             Might be time for you to spend a bit off the property, Arch.  
You're stirrin' things up. Let 'em be.
- ARCHIE                 I thought things would change after the War.
- OLD HAND             Why? Why would things change? The only thing that's  
changed round here is you.

**1939. Cherbourg.**

*Blokes by a fire, seen better days. ERN has one arm.*

- ERN Started to shake in the last few years. See ... right hand.  
Can't stop it.
- NORM Into me good ear Ern.
- ERN Hand's got the shakes.
- NORM That'd be the grog.
- ERN Piss off.
- NORM The war.
- ERN The nightmares and everything else. But I'm always back there. Little things. Tried to talk to pastor about it but I just clam up. Little things. Like the way you see a raven dragging out the guts of a lamb in a paddock, and that night you're back at the state school but the yard's full of wire and Pat Daffy is squirming in the mud trying to hold his intestines in and he's throwing up all that purple stuff and all he says is: "Don't tell Auntie, Don't tell Auntie". Then later he comes to me, he's covered in ochre. He comes to me, in my dream I say Pat? And he can't speak, he just points. But I can't see what he's pointing at, and he walks away, he's frustrated, you know? I wake up and my hand is twitching like a dying sparrow.
- NORM Restless spirit.
- ERN He's buried there, Flanders somewhere, in that dirt that never dries out, birds whose songs he doesn't know, trees whose leaves he doesn't know, long way from anywhere.
- He wanders away. NORM listens to a hymn.*
- SOLDIER *[singing in background] On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,*



*And cast a wistful eye*

*To Canaan's fair and happy land,*

*Where my possessions lie.*

NORM

I remember a sergeant saying to me “no-one cares what bloody colour you are you useless bastard, get on with it”. And it was true. For three years no-one said a bloody word about my skin. And when I spoke I was heard. And when they called me mate they meant it. And nothing has felt as good since the day I was demobbed. I came back and Pastor Isaac said I could be a leader of people. A bridge. I was silly then, still full of meself, I said we don't need a bridge, the world's changed. They painted my colour back on the day I got off that boat. I still don't have the faintest bloody idea what we were fighting for. But I thought I won something over there. And then I lost it back here.

*On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand is sung, with each member of the cast disabled in some way; blind, one leg, one arm, wheelchair ...*

*On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,  
And cast a wistful eye  
To Canaan's fair and happy land,  
Where my possessions lie.*

*I am bound for the promised land,  
I am bound for the promised land;  
Oh, who will come and go with me?  
I am bound for the promised land.*

**1935. A country cemetery, pauper's grave.**

*A MINISTER, alone by the hole in the ground. Rain.*

MINISTER

We knew him as Tank Stand Tommy. He had a name. In fact he had many names over the years; he had a name his mother whispered when he was small, but that name is only known by the Lord now. He had a name his teachers called him, a name his friends would yell in the yard, a name he gave when he crossed the seas to serve our nation. For this is what so few of us knew. We knew him as a shadow in a blanket sleeping under the tank. We knew him as a torrent of profanity taking refuge in a bottle, we knew him because we smelled him before we saw him, we knew him because when he cried he cried so we all could hear. But what we didn't know was that Tank Stand Tommy served his country. In his cigar box under the tank we found his service medals. It turns out Tommy was buried for three days at a place called [*he reads*] 'the Gibraltar shelter at the battle of Pozieres'. For three days he lay in his tomb. He was acquainted with death, he had glimpsed the darkness. Is it any wonder when he was returned to us he found himself unable to sleep within walls?

*He looks around. Throws a clod of earth on the coffin, hurries away.*

### 1939. Murgon.

*A pharmacy.*

ERN

I wanted to ask you if you'd do me a favour. [*He takes out his medals and holds them out to the chemist*] Would you and the other blokes at the RSL, would you hold onto these for me?

RETURNED

SERVICEMAN

What about ... family?

ERN

They're not interested. They'll only get lost. Hold onto them up there, eh?

*He salutes, a bit wobbly, and leaves.*

## Correspondence.

*Pages of letters fall from the sky. Men stand in pools of light reciting their missives.*

- FIRST LETTER      There were three of us went to war out for our family, one of us killed. I always thought that fighting for our King and country would make me a naturalised British subject and a man with freedom but they place me under the act and forced me onto a settlement like a dog. It seems as if the Chief Protector thinks that returned soldier doesn't want justice ...
- SECOND LETTER    ... we come from Mount Eccles in Victoria's Western District. Our family name is Higgins. Five of us served in the war and we now find ourselves unable to claim what our white colleagues expect as matter of course ...
- THIRD LETTER     ... I have decided to stay in Katherine as the treatment on the station has grown worse since before the war. I have found it easier to call myself a Maori as no-one knows otherwise here, probably thanks to our Chinese grandad! Hope all's well. Let's both hope the back pay issue gets sorted as I am just about skint here ...
- FOURTH LETTER    ... the problem is that my name on the Protector's record is Ernest Hopkins but I enlisted under the name Arthur Phillip, which might explain the confusion. In any event I am at a loss to understand why I have to prove what my former comrades do not ...
- FIFTH LETTER     ... I am the schoolmaster and write on behalf of Mr. Prudden who has been treated most shamefully in Adelaide. Mr Prudden's nervous state is a direct result of his experiences at the front yet there is no acknowledgement or support ...

SIXTH LETTER

... I wish to point out the gross injustice intended to us by depriving us of our food. Some died fighting in France, some prisoners of war, others, again, returned to us without a limb or gassed. But we know our boys went with our white Australian brothers to give their blood to protect our freedom and privileges from German oppression. We are shocked indeed to think any person should wish to take our few poor privileges away ...

SEVENTH LETTER

... I must exhort you to grant full citizen privileges to every one of us coloured soldiers, who voluntarily wore His Majesty's uniform in active service. We fought for freedom and our much cherished British Justice. We appeal to the RSL to approach the State Government to aid us in this request. We do not wish to remain humble and servile to the Aborigines' Protection Board. Therefore, why not offer to every faithful ex-service aborigine the hand of friendship and goodwill, and tender to him equal rights with the white community?

## 1927. On the Murrumbidgee.

*GRANDDAD and MUM, sitting watching the rain. BERTIE, now a twenty-five year old, stands to attention next to them.*

- GRANDDAD            I remember when all that was scrub. Good country. Would have different colours when the fires went through. I would walk with my grandfather, he would take me by the hand and we would walk across that ground you know? Smoky, everything charred and burnt. The scrub the grass all skeletons in the sky, yeah? The charcoal glint like jewels and in your nose a hundred different smells of ash. Now look. Holes, and trenches everywhere, and all the earth churned up. What's the name for it again?
- MUM                    Irrigation.
- GRANDDAD            Irrigation. Water run down those trenches, grow all kinds of stuff. Not like it was. Not like when you played in it.
- He looks at his grandson, who just stares into space.*
- MUM                    He's still there. Not coming back. Not coming back from the world of the grown-ups.
- GRANDDAD            [*nods*] Why does he hold that lock of hair all day?
- MUM                    Never got to the bottom of it. Some stuff just stays back there I suppose.
- GRANDDAD            You know, even when the fires had been through, the little green shoots came up everywhere. Little tiny tender shoots, up from the bones. But all that's lost now.

*1949. Castlereagh Street.*

*Derro asking for money. Man in a suit goes past.*

- HARRY Got a few coins, brother?
- STAN Nah, sorry mate. [*He moves on, stops, then comes back.*] Harry?
- HARRY [*ashamed*] G'day Stan. Been a while.
- STAN What are you doing with yourself? Staying out of trouble?
- HARRY Wish I could say yes.
- STAN We don't see you at Anzac Day.
- HARRY Yeah, well, I was up country for a while, out of action for a few years.
- STAN Did you call Alf Minson like I suggested back then? Fix you up for some work?
- HARRY Oh, Nah. Things changed, you know? With the missus?
- STAN Right. It would be good to catch up, talk about the old days.
- HARRY You still at the wood yard?
- STAN No, I'm at the Department of Lands. Suit and all.
- HARRY Right. Right. [*Pause*] They were great days.
- STAN Yeah. Long ago now.
- HARRY Feels like yesterday. [*Pause*] Listen, Stan you wouldn't —
- STAN [*embarrassed*] Of course. Get you on your feet.
- Gives him a wad of notes. HARRY goes to say something but just gestures and shuffles off. STAN watches him join the crowd.*
- We that are left, grow old.



### **1937. Mount Gambier.**

*The crowd becomes worshippers leaving a church service.  
LAURIE collecting hymn books.*

CHURCHGOER      You were in the Light Horse, weren't you?

LAURIE              Excuse me?

CHURCHGOER      Palestine. Yes? The charge. [*Holds out his hand*] Jim Burchett, I was in the fourth. You were in the twelfth weren't you?

LAURIE              Must have me mixed up with someone else.

CHURCHGOER      No, you'd hardly forget a face like yours. No offense. You were, you were in the twelfth, everyone spoke about how well you handled your animals.

LAURIE              I, um, pardon me, must be someone who looks like me.

CHURCHGOER      Oh. Right. Just put it behind you, yes? No-one here knows? Have no fear, I won't say anything, you have your own reasons.

LAURIE              Just an usher on the Sabbath, doing my duty. I'm sorry I'm not the man you thought I was.

CHURCHGOER      Seems to me you probably are. The man I thought you were.

LAURIE              Mr. Burchett? What you're talking about? It's of this world. This broken, weak, sad world. I like to think of another world. A better one. I like to stay in the light, don't want to wander back into the dark.

*CHURCHGOER puts on his hat and leaves with a nod.  
LAURIE's on his own. Switches out the church lights.*

But I walked in the Holy Land. That's enough for me.

## 1929. Forest Lodge, Sydney.

*NIGEL writing a letter on one side of stage, on the other side the office of the newspaper.*

NIGEL

Sir, news of the outrage perpetrated in the Northern Territory last year requires the strongest possible condemnation from all Australians who have a Christian inclination or a skerrick of decency. This great nation has a sad past among its many undoubted and considerable triumphs, and civilised citizens would be forgiven for thinking appalling brutality and savage butchery was a relic of a long time ago. A deep past. Not the twentieth century. [*He has a drink*]. Regardless of the crime that may have instigated the incidents, it now seems clear that aboriginal people, including children, died in their scores at Coniston. And yet there seems a strange silence, a lack of curiosity, and a peculiar lack of outrage. Surely we did not go through the mud and blood of foreign fields to continue a darker purpose at home? As a proud aboriginal Australian, and former soldier, I hope ...

*A group of journalists takes the letter from his hands as they walk past.*

EDITOR

This is good. He can't be an aborigine, it's a hoax.

REPORTER

No, I checked. It's the same bloke who does those talks. He's been on the wireless. My mum heard him up at Balmain Pressies.

EDITOR

Damn good turn of phrase for a darkie. No-one's going to believe it.

SUBBIE

Maybe we could print a facsimile of the letter, he's got beautiful handwriting. To show that aborigines are educated enough to write like this.

EDITOR

Doesn't prove anything — but not a bad idea.

REPORTER

Surely the letter's point is about the massacre up in the Territory?

EDITOR

No-one's interested in payback in the back of Bourke. An Aborigine who can write like this is a much better story. He must be doing all right for himself, mustn't he?

### 1932. George Street.

*NIGEL, a sad figure, walking against the flow of a busy city footpath, wearing a sandwich board, which reads TARZAN THE APE MAN. He hands out flyers but no-one takes them.*

NIGEL

Tarzan. At the *Empire*. Tarzan, man of the apes. The ape man. Tarzan. Ape. Man. Lowland Gorilla. From Zanzibar. Ape. Man.

*He stops, has a surreptitious swig from a bottle. Stands still, watching people rush past him.*

Sorry Dad.

1956.

*An OLD SOLDIER, in a chair, downstage.*

OLD SOLDIER

I was a kid. We all were. But I mean, I knew nothing. You know, when you're young and you can't get a handle on the big things, things that are bigger than you? Like when you're really small, you know the grown-ups are talking about important stuff but you don't really get the full picture? It's just grown-up business. And when you're a young bloke you know there's big stuff going on but it's too hard to see when you're in the middle of it. But I was a real kid, I knew nothing about the way the world worked. Nothing about men. About how men work. You know when I came back I showed people my scars down my side, showed them where they'd stitched me back up, showed them the railway tracks up and down me? And they whistled and said poor bugger you and we all got on with things. With just the rough and tumble. With making a living, staying out of trouble. I remember sometimes I thought "Did I just, you know, imagine it all? Did all that stuff really happen?" And I'd snap out of it and get on with things. And by the time I was in my thirties I barely gave the whole bloody experience a second thought. I'd made a few mistakes with my life by then so perhaps I didn't want to look back. Just keep going you know? I was pretty pleased with myself, I thought "You've come through OK you could have copped a shell back there at Plugstreet Wood and it could have blown your head off". And apart from that I didn't think about much at all. But when I hit forty, well, it was during the war, the next one I mean, so there was a fair bit of uniform floating round and talk of war and things, I was at work one day and this bloke says "Hey Ern jeez you look like you've been shot" and I said "Don't be bloody ridiculous" and he said "Look at you, you've been shot" and I just laughed and went back to work and he said "You're bleeding you stupid bugger" and

I reached round and felt just here under that scar and yep it was oozing that lovely rich black blood you know not the fairy light stuff close to the surface skin blood no this was that dark dark blood that comes from deep and has been there for ages, you know? And I went to the sick bay and some of the blokes had a look at it and it wasn't done at work, I mean I hadn't been hurt there. Once that was decided the foreman lost interest. That night I took off the bandages and smelt that mixture of KAG (you remember, 'kills all germs'?) and dried blood and it brought me right back, that stench of black body fluids and the dark, that dark you couldn't see through. And I reached and felt that place on my side where I was seeping this stuff and blow me do you know what I felt? Something cold and hard, hard as a stone, and I got my fingernail under it and I screamed like a baby as I pulled that hard dark little knot out of me. Bit of a shell casing. It had been there, floating round me since Messines. And I held that little bit of truth in my palm and I just bled there on the tiles. Over the next three years seventeen bits of metal worked their way to the skin and pierced their way out of me. You see, when there's been a war there's metal everywhere, just tons of it and it gets buried in the mud and the dirt and it gets forgotten. But every year it inches its way up, because that's what a leftover bit of war does, it inches up until it comes to the surface and some farmer picks it up if he isn't blown to smithereens by it. The Iron Harvest, they call it over there. But I had my own iron harvest. Those little black scraps wanted out of me just like they want out of the Flanders soil. That's the thing, the bits left behind, they'll come out, they must. They have to. Eventually. I gave each one of my grandkids a bit of my iron harvest. Dunno what they did with 'em. Probably lost 'em, doesn't matter. Because they were out of me. And do you know, the next Anzac Day, the first one after that day at the factory? That

Anzac day, do you know what I did? I took the train into town and I hauled myself across Ann Street, and I stood in the rain among all the yanks and the busted up old blokes like me and I just felt about as lonely as a black bastard can feel. Thank God it was pouring because no-one could see me cry and I just bawled, mainly because I had no idea why I was there. And I went to the Spring Hill, the pub I mean, that's where our mob were, and I swung my carcass in there. And do you know what they said? "Coony! Coony! We thought you was dead!" Which was funny.

Because for a long time, I was.

*Recessional*

*God of our fathers known of old  
Lord of our far flung battle line  
Beneath whose awful hand we hold  
Dominion over palm and pine —  
Lord God of hosts be with us yet  
Lest we forget — lest we forget.*

*The tumult and the shouting dies  
The captains and the kings depart  
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice  
A humble and a contrite heart  
Lord God of hosts be with us yet  
Lest we forget — lest we forget.*

*Amen*



**1993. The voice of the Prime Minister, at the  
Dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.**

We do not know this Australian's name and we never will. We do not know his rank or his battalion. We do not know where he was born, nor precisely how and when he died. We do not know where in Australia he had made his home or when he left it for the battlefields of Europe. We do not know his age or his circumstances — whether he was from the city or the bush; what occupation he left to become a soldier; what religion, if he had a religion; if he was married or single. We do not know who loved him or whom he loved. If he had children we do not know who they are. His family is lost to us as he was lost to them. We will never know who this Australian was.

## 1951. Callan Park.

*NIGEL sitting on the other side of the stage from the sleeping old bloke. A NURSE, wheeling a sleeping patient, comes past.*

PSYCHIATRIC

NURSE

Enjoying the sun, Nigel?

NIGEL

I wouldn't've said enjoying, exactly.

PSYCHIATRIC

NURSE

Don't stay out too long, will you? They'll have my guts for garters.

NIGEL

Have no fear, son, I'm the British Forces Representative in this camp, I'll intervene on your behalf with the Red Cross.

PSYCHIATRIC

NURSE

They're rowing on Iron Cove, can you see that far?

NIGEL

Further than that. I can see the big world.

PSYCHIATRIC

NURSE

*[not comprehending]* We'll have the Service at nine tomorrow. The Rozelle RSL is sending a bugler this year. Will be quite an affair, make sure you're in a good state to take part.

*He moves on.*

NIGEL

I don't want to join in. I don't belong.

*Light fades until he is silhouetted against the dusk. The Last Post is heard.*

*END*

# A Brief History of the Indigenous Diggers in World War I

When World War I broke out in 1914, the White Australia policy was well and truly in force.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not considered citizens of Australia, but were rather the wards of the local Protector of Aborigines. They were paid low wages, were forced to live on reserves and mission stations, could not enter a public bar, vote, marry non-Indigenous partners or buy property. They were actively discriminated against, and yet when war was declared, many Indigenous men wanted to join up and fight for Australia.

The Defence Act of 1903 prevented those who were not of ‘substantially European descent’ from being able to enlist in any of the armed forces. Many Indigenous men who tried to enlist were rejected on the grounds of race, but others managed to slip through the net. In late 1917, following the defeat of a second conscription referendum, these restrictions were slightly eased. A new order stated that: “half-castes may be enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force provided that the examining Medical Officers are satisfied that one of the parents is of European origin.”

Despite the difficulties, it seems that over 2000 Indigenous soldiers managed to join the AIF, out of a total of only 80,000 Indigenous people thought to be living in Australia at the time. Some did so despite being rejected several times for being insufficiently white. Some lied about their age or parentage, and some were granted formal permission from their local Protector of Aborigines to serve. Once past the initial barriers to enlistment, these soldiers fully integrated into the AIF. Whilst almost exclusively of low ranks, these black diggers were paid the same as other soldiers, underwent the same training and experienced the same hardships. As Gary Oakley of the Australian War Memorial has noted on several occasions: “The Army was Australia’s first equal opportunity employer.” In their civilian life they had to put up with constant racist slurs and attitudes. But in the trenches, any negative stereotypes that many non-Indigenous diggers had would have quickly disappeared when they were living, eating, laughing and dying with these young men.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Diggers fought in every significant engagement of the war — from Gallipoli, to Palestine, to the Western Front. They served as infantrymen, machine gunners, light artillery and as light horsemen. They won the respect of their fellow soldiers, and won many bravery

awards and commendations. Many were wounded, some were captured and dozens were killed. But the most tragic aspect of their service was not that they offered their lives for a country that did not recognise them as citizens, but came after they returned to Australia. When they came back home they were shunned, their sacrifices ignored and their families oppressed even further by the government. Very few Indigenous diggers were given the land grants offered to returned soldiers, and in many cases, the land for grants to war veterans was taken away from Indigenous communities whose men had fought overseas. War pensions and back pay were frequently denied and very few Indigenous diggers were welcomed at their local RSL — except sometimes on ANZAC Day.

Even though their small number seems insignificant compared to the 416,809 men enlisted in the AIF to fight in World War I, their significance to modern Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history is immense. Slowly, due to the efforts and enthusiasm of researchers such as Rod Pratt, David Huggonson, Phillippa Scarlett, Doreen Kartinyeri, Gary Oakley and Garth O'Connell, among many others, the long-forgotten service of these men is being acknowledged and celebrated. The Ipswich re-burial in April 2012 of Trooper Horace Dalton, 11th Lighthorse Regiment, with full military honours and traditional ceremony, is a welcome example of this change. Today the bodies of Indigenous Australians who fell in the battlefields of France, Belgium, Turkey and Palestine remain buried thousands of miles away from their ancestral homes. Their brave spirits deserve the honour of remembrance — lest we forget again.

Dr David Williams  
Researcher *Black Diggers*







# BLACK DIGGERS

BY TOM WRIGHT

One hundred years ago, in 1914, a bullet from an assassin's gun in Sarajevo sparked a war that ignited the globe. Patriotic young men all over the world lined up to join the fight — including hundreds of Indigenous Australians.

Shunned and downtrodden in their own country — and in fact banned by their own government from serving in the military — Aboriginal men stepped up to enlist. Undaunted, these bold souls took up arms to defend the free world in its time of greatest need. For them, facing the horror of war on a Gallipoli beach was an escape from the shackles of racism at home, at a time when Aboriginal people stood by, segregated, unable to vote, unable to act as their children were ripped from them. When the survivors came back from the war, there was no heroes' welcome — just a shrug, and a return to drudgery and oppression.

*Black Diggers* is the story of these men — a story of honour and sacrifice that has been covered up and almost forgotten.

Written by Tom Wright and originally directed by Wesley Enoch, *Black Diggers* is the culmination of painstaking research into the lives and deaths of the thousand or so Indigenous soldiers who fought for the British Commonwealth in World War I.

Grand in scale and scope, it draws from in-depth interviews with the families of *Black Diggers* who heard the call to arms from all over Australia, as well as conversations with veterans, historians and academics. Young men will step from the blank pages of history to share their compelling stories — and after the curtain falls, we will finally remember them.

**SYDNEY  
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Playlab acknowledges the assistance of the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

ISBN 978 1 921390 81 4

KP-368-805

