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Post Memory Violence

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Abstract

Hundreds of thousands of Australian children were born in the shadow of the Great War, fathered by men who had enlisted between 1914 and 1918. Their lives could be and often were hard and unhappy, as Anzac historian Alistair Thomson observed of his father's childhood in the 1920s and 1930s. David Thomson was son of a returned serviceman Hector Thomson who spent much of his adult life in and out of repatriation hospitals (257-259) and whose memory was subsequently expunged from Thomson family stories (299-267).

These children of trauma fit within a pattern suggested by Marianne Hirsch in her influential essay "The Generation of Postmemory". According to Hirsch, "postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (n.p.). This article attempts to situate George Johnston's novel *My Brother Jack* (1964) within the context of postmemory narratives of violence that were complicated in Australia by the Anzac legend which occluded any too open discussion about the extent of war trauma present within community, including the children of war.

"God knows what damage" the war "did to me psychologically" (48), ponders Johnston's protagonist and alter-ego David Meredith in *My Brother Jack*. Published to acclaim fifty years after the outbreak of the First World War, *My Brother Jack* became a widely read text that seemingly spoke to the shared cultural memories of a generation which did not know battlefield violence directly but experienced its effects pervasively and vicariously in the aftermath through family life, storytelling, and the memorabilia of war. For these readers, the novel represented more than a work of fiction; it was a touchstone to and indicative of their own negotiations though often unspoken post-war trauma.

Meredith, like his creator, is born in 1912. Strictly speaking, therefore, both are not part of the post-war generation. However, they are representative and therefore indicative of the post-war "hinge generation" which was expected to assume "guardianship" of the Anzac Legend, though often found the narrative logic challenging. They had been "too young for the war to have any direct effect", and yet "every corner" of their family's small suburban homes appear to be "impregnated with some gigantic and sombre experience that had taken place thousands of miles away" (17).

According to Johnston's biographer, Garry Kinnane, the "most teasing puzzle" of George Johnston's "fictional version of his childhood in *My Brother Jack* is the monstrous impression he creates of his returned serviceman father, John George Johnston, known to everyone as 'Pop.' The first sixty pages are dominated by the tyrannical figure of Jack Meredith senior" (1).

A large man purported to be six foot three inches (1.9 metres) in height and weighing fifteen stone (95 kilograms), the real-life Pop Johnston reputedly stood head and shoulders above the minimum requirement of five foot and six inches (1.68 metres) at the time of his enlistment for war in 1914 (Kinnane 4). In his fortieth year, Jack Johnston senior was also around twice the age of the average Australian soldier and among one in five who were married.

According to Kinnane, Pop Johnston had "survived the ordeal of Gallipoli" in 1915 only to "endure three years of trench warfare in the Somme region". While the biographer and the Johnston family may well have held this to be true, the claim is a distortion. There are a few intimations throughout *My Brother Jack* and its sequel *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969) to suggest that George Johnston may have suspected that his father's wartime service stories had been embellished, though the depicted wartime service of Pop Meredith remains firmly within the narrative arc of the Anzac legend. This has the effect of layering the postmemory violence experienced by David Meredith and, by implication, his creator, George Johnston. Both are expected to be keepers of a lie masquerading as inviolable truth which further brutalises them.

John George (Pop) Johnston's First World War military record reveals a different story to the accepted historical account and his fictionalisation in *My Brother Jack*. He enlisted two and a half months after the landing at Gallipoli on 12 July 1915 and left for overseas service on 23 November. Not quite the imposing six foot three figure of Kinnane's biography, he was fractionally under five foot eleven (1.8 metres) and weighed thirteen stone (82.5 kilograms). Assigned to the Fifth Field Engineers on account of his experience as an electric tram fitter, he did not see frontline service at Gallipoli (NAA).

Rather, according to the Company's history, the Fifth Engineers were involved in a range of infrastructure and support work on the Western Front, including the digging and maintenance of trenches, laying duckboard, pontoons and tramlines, removing landmines, building huts, showers and latrines, repairing roads, laying drains; they built a cinema at Beaulencourt Piers for "Brigade Swimming Carnival" and baths at Malhove consisting of a large "galvanised iron building" with a "concrete floor" and "setting tanks capable of bathing 2,000 men per day" (AWM). It is likely that members of the company were also involved in burial details.

Sapper Johnston was hospitalised twice during his service with influenza and saw out most of his war from October 1917 attached to the Army Cookery School (NAA). He returned to Australia on board the *HMAT Kildonian Castle* in May 1919 which, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, also carried the official war correspondent and creator of the Anzac legend C.E.W. Bean, national poet Banjo Paterson and "Warrant Officer C G Macartney, the famous Australian cricketer". The *Herald* also listed the names of "Returned Officers" and "Decorated Men", but not Pop Johnston who had occupied the lower decks with other returning men ("Soldiers Return").

Like many of the more than 270,000 returned soldiers, Pop Johnston apparently exhibited observable changes upon his repatriation to Australia: "he was partially deaf" which was attributed to the "constant barrage of explosions", while "gas" was suspected to have "left him with a legacy of lung disorders". Yet, if "anyone offered commiserations" on account of this war legacy, he was quick to "dismiss the subject with the comment that 'there were plenty worse off'" (Kinnane 6). The assumption is that Pop's silence is stoic; the product of unspeakable horror and perhaps a symptom of survivor guilt.

An alternative interpretation, suggested by Alistair Thomson in *Anzac Memories*, is that the experiences of the vast majority of returned soldiers were expected to fit within the master narrative of the Anzac legend in order to be accepted and believed, and that there was no space available to speak truthfully about alternative war service. Under pressure of Anzac expectations a great many composed stories or remained selectively silent (14).

Data gleaned from the official medical history suggest that as many as four out of every five returned servicemen experienced emotional or psychological disturbance related to their war service. However, the two branches of medicine represented by surgeons and physicians in the Repatriation Department—charged with attending to the welfare of returned servicemen—focused on the body rather than the mind and the emotions (Murphy and Nile).

The repatriation records of returned Australian soldiers reveal that there were, indeed, plenty physically worse off than Pop Johnston on account of bodily disfigurement or because they had been somatically compromised. An estimated 30,000 returned servicemen died in the decade after the cessation of hostilities to 1928, bringing the actual number of war dead to around 100,000, while a 1927 official report tabled the medical conditions of a further 72,388 veterans: 28,305 were debilitated by gun and shrapnel wounds; 22,261 were rheumatic or had respiratory diseases; 4534 were afflicted with eye, ear, nose, or throat complaints; 9,186 had tuberculosis or heart disease; 3,204 were amputees while only; 2,970 were listed as suffering "war neurosis" ("Enlistment").

Long after the guns had fallen silent and the wounded survivors returned home, the physical effects of war continued to be apparent in homes and hospital wards around the country, while psychological and emotional trauma remained largely undiagnosed and consequently untreated. David Meredith's attitude towards his able-bodied father is frequently dismissive and openly scathing: "dad, who had been gassed, but not seriously, near Vimy Ridge, went back to his old job at the tramway depot" (9). The narrator-son later considers:

what I realise now, although I never did at the time, is that my father, too, was oppressed by intimidating factors of fear and change. By disillusion and ill-health too. As is so often the case with big, strong, athletic men, he was an extreme hypochondriac, and he had convinced himself that the severe bronchitis which plagued him could only be attributed to German gas he had swallowed at Vimy Ridge. He was too afraid to go to a doctor about it, so he lived with a constant fear that his lungs were decaying, and that he might die at any time, without warning. (42-3)

During the writing of *My Brother Jack*, the author-son was in chronically poor health and had been recently diagnosed with the romantic malady and poet's disease of tuberculosis (Lawler) which plagued him throughout his work on the novel. George Johnston believed (correctly as it turned out) that he was dying on account of the disease, though, he was also an alcoholic and smoker, and had been reluctant to consult a doctor. It is possible and indeed likely that he resentfully viewed his condition as being an extension of his father—vicariously expressed through the depiction of Pop Meredith who exhibits hysterical symptoms which his son finds insufferable. David Meredith remains embittered and unforgiving to the very end. Pop Meredith "lived to seventy-three having died, not of German gas, but of a heart attack" (46).

Pop Meredith's return from the war in 1919 terrifies his seven-year-old son "Davy", who accompanies the family to the wharf to welcome home a hero. The young boy is unable to recall anything about the father he is about to meet ostensibly for the first time. Davy becomes overwhelmed by the crowds and frightened by the "interminable blaring of horns" of the troopships and the "ceaseless roar of shouting". Dwarfed by the bodies of much larger men he becomes

too frightened to look up at the hours-long progression of dark, hard faces under wide, turned-up hats seen against bayonets and barrels that are more blue than black ... the really strong image that is preserved now is of the stiff fold and buckle of coarse khaki trousers moving to the rhythm of knees and thighs and the tight spiral curves of puttees and the thick boots hammering, hollowly off the pier planking and thunderous on the asphalt roadway.

Depicted as being small for his age, Davy is overwrought "with a huge and numbing terror" (10).

In the years that follow, the younger Meredith desires emotional stability but remains denied because of the war's legacy which manifests in the form of a violent patriarch who is convinced that his son has been rendered effeminate on account of the manly absence during vital stages of development. With the return of the father to the household, Davy grows to fear and ultimately despise a man who remains as alien to him as the formerly absent soldier had been during the war:

exactly when, or why, Dad introduced his system of monthly punishments I no longer remember. We always had summary punishment, of course, for offences immediately detected—a cuffing around the ears or a sash with a stick of a strap—but Dad's new system was to punish for the offences which had *escaped* his attention. So on the last day of every month Jack and I would be summoned in turn to the bathroom and the door would be locked and each of us would be questioned about the sins which we had committed and which he had not found out about. This interrogation was the merest formality; whether we admitted to crimes or desperately swore our innocence it was just the same; we were punished for the offences which, he said, he knew we *must* have committed and had to lie about. We then had to take our shirts and singlets off and bend over the enamelled bath-tub while he thrashed us with the razor-strop. In the blind rages of these days he seemed not to care about the strength he possessed nor the injuries he inflicted; more often than not it was the metal end of the strop that was used against our backs. (48)

Ironically, the ritualised brutality appears to be a desperate effort by the old man to compensate for his own emasculation in war and unresolved trauma now that the war is ended. This plays out in complicated fashion in the development of David Meredith in *Clean Straw for Nothing*, Johnston's sequel to *My Brother Jack*.

The imputation is that Pop Meredith practices violence in an attempt to reassert his failed masculinity and reinstate his status as the head of the household. Older son Jack's beatings cease when, as a more physically able young man, he is able to threaten the aggressor with violent retaliation. This action does not spare the younger weaker Davy who remains dominated. "My beating continued, more ferociously than ever, ... They ceased only because one day my father went too far; he lambasted me so savagely that I fell unconscious into the bath-tub, and the welts across my back made by the steel end of the razor-strop had to be treated by a doctor" (53).

Pop Meredith is persistently reminded that he has no corporeal signifiers of war trauma (only a cough); he is surrounded by physically disabled former soldiers who are presumed to be worse off than he on account of somatic wounding. He becomes "morose, intolerant, bitter and violently bad-tempered", expressing particular "displeasure and resentment" toward his wife, a trained nurse, who has assumed carer responsibilities for homing the injured men: "he had altogether lost patience with her role of Florence Nightingale to the halt and the lame" (40). Their marriage is loveless: "one can only suppose that he must have been darkly and profoundly disturbed by the years-long procession through our house of Mother's 'waifs and strays'—those shattered former comrades-in-arms who would have been a constant and sinister reminder of the price of glory" (43); a price he had failed to adequately pay with his uncompromised body intact.

Looking back, a more mature David Meredith attempts to establish order, perspective and understanding to the "mess of memory and impressions" of his war-affected childhood in an effort to wrest control back over his postmemory violation: "Jack and I must have spent a good part of our boyhood in the fixed belief that grown-up men who were complete were pretty rare beings—complete, that is, in that they had their sight or hearing or all of their limbs" (8). While the father is physically complete, his brooding presence sets the tone for the oppressively "dark experience" within the family home where all rooms are "inhabited by the jetsam that the Somme and the Marne and the salient at Ypres and the Gallipoli beaches had thrown up" (18).

It is not until Davy explores the contents of the "big deep drawer at the bottom of the cedar wardrobe" in his parents' bedroom that he begins to "sense a form in the shadow" of the "faraway experience" that had been the war. The drawer contains his father's service revolver and ammunition, battlefield souvenirs and French postcards but, "most important of all, the full set of the *Illustrated War News*" (19), with photographs of battlefield carnage. These are the equivalent of Hirsch's photographs of the Holocaust that establish in Meredith an ontology that links him more realistically to the brutalising past and source of his ongoing traumatization (Hirsch). From these, Davy begins to discern something of his father's torment but also good fortune at having survived, and he makes curatorial interventions not by becoming a custodian of abjection like second generation Holocaust survivors but by disposing of the printed material, leaving behind artefacts of heroism: gun, the bullets, the medals and ribbons. The implication is that he has now become complicit in the very narrative that had oppressed him since his father's return from war.

No one apparently notices or at least comments on the removal of the journals, the images of which become linked in the young boys mind to an incident outside a "dilapidated narrow-fronted photographer's studio which had been deserted and padlocked for as long as I could remember". A number of sun-damaged photographs are still displayed in the window. Faded to a "ghostly, deathly pallor", and speckled with fly droppings, years earlier, they had captured young men in uniforms before embarkation for the war. An "agate-eyed" boy from Davy's school joins in the gazing, saying nothing for a long time until the silence is broken: "all them blokes there is dead, you know" (20).

After the unnamed boy departs with a nonchalant "hoo-roo", young Davy runs "all the way home, trying not to cry". He cannot adequately explain the reason for his sudden reaction: "I never after that looked in the window of the photographer's studio or the second hand shop". From that day on Davy makes a "long detour" to ensure he never passes the shops again (20-1). Having witnessed images of pre-war undamaged young men in the prime of their youth, he has come face-to-face with the consequences of war which he is unable to reconcile in terms of the survival and return of his much older father.

The photographs of the young men establishes a causal connection to the physically wrecked remnants that have shaped Davy's childhood. These are the living remains that might otherwise have been the "corpses sprawled in mud or drowned in flooded shell craters" depicted in the *Illustrated News*. The photograph of the young men establishes Davy's connection to the things "propped up our hallway", of "Bert 'sobbing' in the backyard and Gabby Dixon's face at the dark end of the room", and only reluctantly the "bronchial cough of my father going off in the dawn light to the tramways depot" (18).

That is to say, Davy has begun to piece together sense from senselessness, his father's complicity and survival—and, by association, his own implicated life and psychological wounding. He has approached the source of his father's abjection and also his own though he continues to be unable to accept and forgive. Like his father—though at the remove—he has been damaged by the legacies of the war and is also its victim.

Ravaged by tuberculosis and alcoholism, George Johnston died in 1970. According to the artist Sidney Nolan he had for years resembled the ghastly photographs of survivors of the Holocaust (Marr 278). George's forty five year old alcoholic wife Charmian Clift predeceased him by twelve months, having committed suicide in 1969. Four years later, in 1973, George and Charmian's twenty four year old daughter Shane also took her own life. Their son Martin drank himself to death and died of organ failure at the age of forty three in 1990. They are all "dead, you know".

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