

## **‘The Anzac Legend Didn’t Mention Mud: Australian Novels of the Western Front’**

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Mud may not have been the least of ironies of war on the Western Front. Nor was it perhaps the least of ironies that trenches had been dug ‘where the water-table was the highest and the annual rainfall most copious’ (47), as Paul Fussell observed in his classic study of British literary responses, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1974). Beyond irony, mud was a ‘gruesome fact no one had planned for.’ It claimed the lives of countless thousands ‘drowned’ nowhere ‘near the sea,’ as Adam Hochschild observed in his 2014 history *To End All Wars* (211). Mud defined the main theatres of operation and was code for the Western Front even when the conditions were dry. Passchendaele, for example, was known as the ‘Battle of Mud’ while Ypres was called ‘Wipers’ at least partly because of the atrocious conditions. Australian photographer Frank Hurley’s iconic images at Chateau Wood revealed something of the extent of the quagmire (in a compositional method that brought him into dispute with the creator of the Anzac myth, C. E. W. Bean) while bombs and rain poured down on the Somme and turned the earth into a ‘dark glutinous sea,’ as Leonard Mann called it in his novel *Flesh in Armour* (1932). Vance Palmer’s ‘mud and misty figures’ of battle fatigued diggers emerge from the ‘foul morass’ and persist into nightmares ‘endlessly coming,’ even when the war is over in his 1920 poem ‘The Farmer Remembers the Somme’ (Holloway 110). Soldier-novelist Edward Lynch wrote simply of ubiquity in *Somme Mud*: ‘We live in it, work in it, fight in it, waded in it, and many of us die in it. We see it, feel it, eat it and curse it, but we cannot escape it, not even by dying’ (108).

Also beyond irony, John Schumann’s line ‘Anzac legend didn’t mention mud’ from the 1984 song ‘I was Only Nineteen’ (1984) plays dirt music to Australia literature. Among exceptions that prove the general rule and principle is Leonard Mann’s novel *Flesh in Armour*. Originally published privately in a limited print run of a thousand copies after failing to secure a commercial imprint, critics sought to have the book mired in controversy for blaspheming Australia’s foundation myth and secular religion of Anzac. A contributor to the trade magazine *All About Books* wrote ‘surely higher instincts cannot condone the unsavoury contents’ (80). This was nothing short of warning off publishers against any consideration of a commercial imprint and retail outlets against any thoughts of stocking the copies. The commentary centred on Mann’s characterisation of soldiers’ morals and manners—‘does not hesitate to give his readers the unpleasant and lurid details of this tragedy’—that disrespects the Anzac legend—‘disgusted with the view Mr Mann presents of our Australian Infantry’ (50). More recent analysis suggests that *Flesh in Armour* survived controversial beginnings to be incorporated, with time, as ‘portable monument’ and indicative text of the war experience (Spittel 189).

Between these contrasting views, *Flesh in Armour* may be read as an expressive novel of Australian soldiers’ experiences on the Western Front and also an exception within the range of interwar Australian literary responses, in a similar fashion to British trench poetry which is considered to be indicative of the experience of the trenches (Sherry 7) while being unrepresentative of the large volume of poetry written about the war (Bond 31). I suggest here that Mann’s depiction of the muddy conditions of the Western Front contrasts with the sacralised soil of Gallipoli. Further, I observe that the mud of war has been a much neglected

topic partially at least on account of the persistence of the Anzac legend. I draw a distinction between the Anzacs at Gallipoli and the diggers on the Western Front, and expect to be criticised for questioning Australia's most durable martial legend and 'myth to live by,' as historian Alistair Thomson (2013) calls the Anzac story. My arguments follow on from an earlier intervention, 'Desert Worlds' (2019), focusing on the dust and desert sands of Egypt where Australian troops had been based in preparation for Gallipoli.

Major studies by Robin Gerster *Big Noting* (1989) through to Clare Rhoden *The Purpose of Futility* (1915) have argued persuasively that Australian war writing highlights the heroic figure of the Anzac. My smaller contributions over a similar timeframe have focused on the problematic hero and what Stephen Garton identified as a dissenting tradition of repatriation literature by interwar writers such as Katharine Susannah Prichard, Vance Palmer, Kylie Tennant, Martin Boyd and Eleanor Dark, among others. More recently, Ffion Murphy and I have attempted to demonstrate that the Anzac legend shaped truth telling in Albert Facey's massively popular memoir *A Fortunate Life* while masking the extent of the returned soldier's war trauma. Following the work of Bart Ziino (2007) and Tanya Luckins (2004), Murphy and I have also attempted to assess efforts to contain grief by social convention and the 1914–1915 War Precautions Act. The novelist Eleanor Dark hints at repression in her 1934 novel *Prelude to Christopher*:

How otherwise could they have lived, those countless thousands of parents and wives, how otherwise have they preserved their own sanity? They did not want to see them otherwise—as man-power wasted, as genius flung away, as potential fatherhood most tragically sacrificed. They did not want probe too deeply into causes, and still less into ultimate effects. Leave them their coverings. (63)

I argue here that Mann's novel is part of a significant cluster of war writing that shifts the Australian gaze from the beach and rocky outcrops of Anzac to the saturated lowlands and reclaimed marshes of the Western Front. Also differing from writing on Gallipoli, Mann deals with abjection whose most persistent metaphor is mud.

My topic, then, is mud and the mud of war. This is necessarily a messy subject by contrast to the more finely grained work of Christina Spittel (2011), Carolyn Holbrook (2014), and Clare Rhoden (2015) who have been among the first to challenge and successfully overturn decades-old assumptions that Australian produced little war literature of any distinction. My readings of *Flesh in Armour* alongside *Somme Mud* and Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* might suggest agreement with Rhoden that Europe had been wrecked by the war—'Millions lost their lives, millions more suffered devastating injuries, towns disappeared wholesale into the mud'—though I am more cautious around the proposition that 'Australia leapt from the debris, led by Anzacs silhouetted against the rising sun' (23). Except, insofar as the narrative of Anzac served to divert literary attention from dirty business that war, what Mann referred to as 'the dung for the new flowering and fruit of the future' (347). The pungency of such mudscapes is suggestive of an alternative digger narrative by contrast to the more prevalent Anzac legend and its central heroic figure.

### **Mud and Blood and Fear**

Responding to an upsurge in war writing in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties, a notice in the Melbourne *Argus* referred to *Flesh in Armour* rather disparagingly as being 'influenced' by the 'Remarque school of war writing' ('New Novels'). Mann distanced himself from the

comparison and claimed that he had not read *All Quiet on the Western Front* which had been published around the same time he began writing *Flesh in Armour*. Such an emphatic refutation may appear surprising though it is consistent with a desire to have an Australian war novel accepted as possessing an authentic Australian character. Almost certainly, Mann was aware of negative responses to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which was outlawed as an obscene publication in New South Wales (Moore 76). However, Mann's public distancing did not produce the desired result. The 'controversy' over the publication of *Flesh in Armour* 'resembled that which had dogged *All Quiet on the Western Front*,' observed Holbrook (81).

It is reasonable to speculate that Mann had in fact read Remarque's novel—he was certainly aware of its Australian reception—and another focusing on the British experience, *Her Privates We*, which also appeared in 1929. Written by the Australian born Frederic Manning, who had, like Martin Boyd, fought with British forces on the Western Front, and published in London by Peter Davies, *Her Privates We* is an expurgated version of Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929). In common with *Flesh in Armour*, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* had been initially printed privately in a limited edition of 500 copies. The subsequent bowdlerised version quickly sold out its print run of 15,000 copies. Yet, unlike Mann, who harboured hopes that *Flesh in Armour* might be picked as a commercial imprint by the Australian publisher Angus & Robertson after it had been awarded the 1933 Gold Medal for Australian Literature, Manning's novel was a commercial and critical success. It is probable that Mann was aware that the pseudonymous author of *Her Privates We*, 'Private 19022' (Manning's enlistment number) was a 'Native of Sydney,' as newspapers widely reported in 1930 (*Age* 9).

There is textual evidence in *Flesh in Armour* to suggest influences from both Remarque and Manning that deserves fuller exploration than is possible here. Suffice to say for the present that *Flesh in Armour* was generally avoided by readers who considered it to be an 'Australian *All Quiet on the Western Front*,' as the novelist and critic John Ewers put it in 1933 (5). All three novels focus on ordinary soldiers. They depict central characters who are psychologically traumatised by the mud and blood and fear of war and who are killed in the final scenes. Mann's Frank Jeffreys and Remarque's Paul Baumer die on otherwise quiet days at the front, while Manning's Bourne is fatally wounded just as the danger to his life seems to have abated. His 'face' is 'plastered with mud, and blood drying thickly about his mouth and chin' while surviving men sit 'silently: each man keeping his own secret' (301).

The third novel in my consideration, *Somme Mud*, remained unpublished in its own time and consequently falls within a category of 'birth strangled' manuscripts as the interwar critic Nettie Palmer called the.. E. P. F. Lynch had hand-written a first draft into twenty notebooks around the same time as Mann completed *Flesh in Armour*. However, it languished for more than seventy years. The 'scars and pain of the Great War' in the interwar years 'were too new and too deep for the public to want to be reminded of it,' according to the novel's twenty first century editor Will Davies (xii). The manuscript had been revised and typed by Lynch while serving in New Guinea in the 1940s though it failed to attract any interest. Upon its belated publication in 2006, historian Bill Gammage likened *Somme Mud* to *All Quiet on the Western Front*: 'in the trenches, enduring the mud and the cold . . . suffering death's randomness' (vii), noting that both works are written in the present tense. Unlike *Flesh in Armour* and *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, Lynch's protagonist, Nulla, survives the war and in the final scenes, on the long sea voyage home, engages in self-reflection and storytelling. There are heated arguments with other diggers about the reasons for enlisting and the course of the war on the Western Front (332).

Thematic similarities with Mann's *Flesh in Armour* may be coincidental—for example almost identical scenes inside a rail carriage marked '40 hommes ou 8 chevaux (40 men or 8 horses)' (*Somme* 19, *Flesh* 29) and action at Pozieres and Mouquet Farm—borne of the fact that the novels are fictionalised accounts of their authors' experiences as soldiers on the Western Front. In a like manner, it may be no more than coincidence that Lynch's Nulla and Manning's Bourne possess French as a second language. Lynch may have read *Flesh in Armour*—I think that likely—in the 1930s or in the 1940s around the same time that Robertson and Mullens produced a pocket edition that was distributed in a print run of 25,000 copies with financial assistance from the Commonwealth Literary Fund. More speculatively, Lynch may have read Manning's *Her Privates We*. An analysis of his hand-written drafts produced in the immediate post-war period against the 1940s typescript would reveal valuable evidence of the novel's provenance and development, as well as influences over these two decades.

*Flesh in Armour*, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* and *Somme Mud* reveal similar narrative structures, opening with journeying towards battle, detailing life in the trenches followed by relief behind the lines or on leave, and a return to battle. Jeffreys, Bourne and Nulla have officer potential though they remain within the ranks,<sup>1</sup> the life of which is the focus of the novels. Mud is the prime element in each. In his preface to *Somme Mud*, Davies argues that Lynch had arrived at the Western Front with other reinforcements but would not have 'known that when winter set in in late November 1916, the war would become one of survival against the elements rather than simply the Germans' (xi). That is also the experience of Nulla who observes on his first day at the front: 'absolutely unbelievable conditions . . . a solid sea of slimy mud' (22).

A key autobiographical element in the writing of *Flesh in Armour*, Mann had suffered a breakdown after being buried in the mud. His protagonist Jeffreys, like Manning's Bourne had survived earlier campaigns. Importantly, the mud of *Flesh in Armour*, *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, and *Somme Mud*, contrast Australian literary preferences for the sand, shale and limestone of Gallipoli and, by war's end, the desert sands of Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. For Ted Marshall in *Flesh in Amour*, Gallipoli 'seemed centuries ago' (201) while somewhere in the middle of the Indian Ocean Nulla and other returning men from the Western Front are treated to lectures about the Light Horse at Palestine and Sinai. By less than a few degrees of separation another Australian former serviceman Arthur Wheen had translated *All Quiet on the Western Front* and was responsible for giving Remarque his distinctive English-language title from the original *Im Westen nicht Neues* (*Nothing New on the Western Front*). Though such networks are beginning to become the focus of much critical attention, it is reasonable to assert that Australian writers (and, in the case of the translator, who produced a few lesser known stories) contributed to the creation of a war literature set in the quagmire of the Western Front.

### **The Anzac Legend Didn't Mention Mud**

The entire front 'exuded mud' and soldiers 'became almost indistinguishable' from it, observed Manning in *The Middle Parts of Fortune*. Like Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire* (1916), Manning's mud 'threatened, if neglected for a moment, to become tidal' and overwhelm everyone and everything, 'life was now one of unrelenting struggle against the encroaching mud which threatened to engulf roads and trenches in liquid ruin' (222). Bearing striking similarities to descriptions by trench poet Wilfred Owen, an exhausted Bourne falls into a fitful sleep and nightmares as battles rage around him: 'he felt the mud sucking him down, he could not extricate his feet from it, and shells burst all round him with jagged red lightnings, and then terrible hands, terrible dead hands came out of that living mud, and men with exultant bestial

faces rushed at him, and he fought, fought desperately.’ Both figuratively and literally, the mud of the Western Front contains the dead (273).

‘When all is said and done,’ recalled Siegfried Sassoon in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), ‘the war was mainly a matter of holes and ditches’ (228). For Mann, it was conducted across mud containing putrescent human remains, redistributed under perpetual bombardment and made indistinguishable from the churn, apart from the foul smell which was omnipresent. Mud soils every uniform, dirties all exposed areas and finds its way beneath coverings and into every crease of skin and orifice. ‘Frank Jeffreys, like the others, when he fell down into the thick stinking ooze, was afraid that he would fall one time or another into one of the black putrid pools . . . Another shell sputtered only a dozen yards away, bespattering their filthiness with more filth. They went on and on, dripping with the rotten wet’ (75–76). Four out of five Australian casualties were inflicted in the heavier and frequently inundated loams and clays of the Western Front between 1916 and 1918. Yet, if ‘we told ’em back in Australia that we stood up knee-deep in the mud of a front-line trench in the freezin’ cold,’ Nulla, observes, ‘without sleep, except what we could get standing up, for six days and seven nights at a stretch, s’pose they’d reckon we were tellin’ flamin’ lies?’ (47).

### Buried Alive

The Western Front was not only filthy, it was brutally loud. Allied big guns fired more than four million shells in a relentless barrage lasting two weeks before the infantry was given the order to advance across the disturbed and heavily cratered mudscape of Passchendaele in 1917. Taking up position along the Menin Road, Jeffreys’s platoon gains its first sight of the destruction in *Flesh in Armour*. ‘This new landscape,’ they observe had been ‘blasted into awful desolation,’ leaving it ‘rank with straggling grasses and muddy stagnant pools’ as further ‘heavy’ clouds gather across the ‘leaden sky’ bringing ‘more rain’ (46–47). The entire area had been transformed into an oozing morass of barely separated soaks. At the Somme, Nulla’s platoon similarly prepares to ‘advance over a thick, muddy, shell torn stretch of country that is unknown to them, against a foe whose strength or whereabouts they have but a very hazy idea and to take a position which is merely a map position’ (184); what Mann simply referred to as ‘terra incognita’ (46).

Contrasting heroic depictions of the maritime assault at Gallipoli (the only seaborne attack of the war), the order to move forward across the mud in an entirely different type of amphibious assault is given as the sound and fury of artillery momentarily suspends into onomatopoeic ‘*Slush, slush, slush*’ of the ‘men of the first wave’ attempting to traverse the viscous terrain in Lynch’s novel. A second wave is called up to secure a more ‘distant point’ as the walking wounded begin to return: ‘staggering, lurching, limping back. Men with blood stained bandages and men with none. Men carrying smashed arms, others limping on shattered legs. Laughing men and shivering men . . . blood-shot eyes above strangely lined pain-racked and tortured faces’ (185). Pulled free from the contamination following his live burial, Mann’s Jeffreys succumbs to nervous debility and becomes a ‘walking case.’ In the final scene of *Flesh in Armour*, the war affected soldier commits his body to the mud by blowing himself up inside a crater—just as the war is about to come to an end. His mates bury the remains with the regular incantation of earth to earth though given the conditions of the Western Front Jeffreys’ body might more appropriately have been committed, ‘to the deep to be turned into corruption, looking for the resurrection of the body when the sea shall give up her dead’ (Navy).

Earthly churn and the stench of death provided the Western Front with its distinctive character—an aspect supporters of Anzac legend were reluctant to accept. ‘Mile after mile the earth stretched out black, foul, putrescent, like a sea of excrement,’ observed British surgeon Robert Briffault (cited in Liddle 430). It emitted not the ‘usual pure smell of earth’ but pungency from being ‘saturated with dead bodies—dead that had been dead a long, long time,’ Vera Brittain noted after being overpowered by the stench coming from the returned personal effects of her deceased fiancé Roland Leighton who had been killed in December 1916 (*Letters*). The war zone in *All Quiet on the Western Front* is made up of ‘Trenches, hospitals, the common grave—there are no other possibilities’ (283). For Wilfred Owen the ‘ground was not mud, not sloppy mud, but an octopus of sucking clay, three, four and five feet deep, relieved only by craters filled with water. Men have been known to drown in them’ (116). The ‘heavy stink’ of no man’s land makes the men ‘draw away’ in *Flesh in Armour* (163). ‘To the bulk of Australians, Gallipoli is the signifier of the entire World War I experience,’ notes Rhoden (37). It follows that the mudscape of the Western Front was alien to their perceptions of the war experience.

Like Mann, Owen had teetered on the brink of breaking down. He survived his urge for self-annihilation, the mud and almost the war when, just seven days before the signing of the Armistice, he sustained a shot and was killed (Silken 201). Jeffreys suicides after his live burial. His author survived a similar near-death experience though remained permanently affected. Deploying somatic wounding, ‘the injury’—a strategy frequently used by traumatised soldiers to offset suggestions of psychological breakdown—Mann explained that, twenty years later, the experience of losing consciousness in the mud still lurked ‘beneath to come out when I am over strained or disturbed’ (cited in Spittel 190). It is possible to date Jeffreys’s fictional suicide to early October 1918 during Australia’s last battle on the Western Front. In real time—two weeks on—having become debilitated with ‘sickness’ and transferred to clerical duties with the engineers, Mann handed in his sergeant stripes and reverted to being a private. ‘In view of the fact that it lies beyond my powers at present to fulfil the requirements of my position,’ he wrote on 15 October 1918, ‘and as I feel that my services in this capacity have for some time not given satisfaction, I ask that I may be allowed to revert to the rank of sapper’ (NAA).

Jeffreys enacts what the author may have himself considered doing. Also surviving being buried alive—an experience that makes Bourne ‘queer’ in *The Middle Parts of Fortune*—Frederic Manning sought a transfer away from the front and spent the post war years as a virtual recluse. Jeffreys’s burial suffocates him as he begins to ‘drown in the spew’ (73). Surviving, though feeling detached and unable to shake off the experience, he determines to end it all by his own actions. Standing ‘stiff, as if on inspection,’ he draws the pin from his grenade and holds the ‘serrated bomb with both hands at his heart.’ Upon hearing the explosion, his comrades rush to find the ‘mutilated’ corpse: ‘chest was torn away and the head half off.’ They bury what remains and in a ‘casual seeming movement’ one of the detachment covers the incriminating pin and ‘[grinds] it into the mud.’ They record his death: ‘Killed in Action’ (250).

Dr W. H. R. Rivers treated the English trench poets Graves, Sassoon and Owen among others at Craiglockhart Hospital where he trialled a talking cure as an antidote to repressed trauma. His case notes published in the British Medical Association’s *Lancet* in 1918 focused on men, like Mann, who had been buried. One young officer remained unresponsive to all treatments, having been propelled by an explosion face-first into the distended abdomen of a decayed German corpse which ruptured on impact. ‘Before he lost consciousness,’ Rivers observed, ‘the patient clearly realised his situation and knew that the substance which filled his mouth and produced the most horrible sensations of taste and smell was derived from the decomposed

entrails of an enemy' (174). On account of the contamination of the mud, every live burial brought soldiers into direct contact with the viscera of the already dead. In this context, *Flesh in Armour*, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* and *Somme Mud* might be read as trauma narratives.

While more work needs to be done in this area, it might be argued that Rivers is talking cure had a correspondence in writing therapy in the case of Mann, Manning and Lynch, that has continued through to the more recent past. Pat Barker's *The Regeneration Trilogy* (1996) links textually to Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, most obviously through the naming of her character Charles Manning. Yet it is the complex relation to working class origins in the figure of Barker's Billy Prior and the working-class men of *The Middle Parts of Fortune* that more precisely establishes the link: 'to touch the heart with a finger of ice . . . stumbling on a defective duck-board, uttered under his breath a monosyllabic curse . . . "Fuck . . ."' (192), and where *Flesh in Armour* and *Somme Mud* also make their most valuable contribution. While British literature traditionally focused on the tragedy of subalterns, the grim emphasis of Australian writing was men in the ranks. Critic Bruce Clunies Ross was the first to draw attention to this peculiarly Australian inflection in Manning's novel. Following his experience in the mud, Mann's Jeffreys—'His nerves, his nerves, his nerves, they were all in pieces' (112)—is unable to recover his composure. 'Frank pitched under the blankets, his muscles in a state of uncontrollable tremor' (113), as all former associations and bonds between the men can no longer sustain him: 'A soldier; yes, he was a soldier. Alone, quite alone, so far away . . . Gentle Jesus pity me. He was alone' (174).

### Sanitation and the Sacred

Across the profane landscape of the Western Front, bodies could be seen lying in wreck in no-man's land, as the customary practice of body retrieval and grave digging gave way to more pressing tasks such as repairing collapsed sections of the trench and the breached thickets of barbed wire. 'Out to the wire between the trenches we see our first dead man and several half buried,' observes Nulla on his first day at the front (21). Attending to the survivors had been a priority at Gallipoli but the effort now involved in bringing in the wounded through the churn became increasingly difficult. 'From the sunken road the stretchers go back by relays and it's quite common for a stretcher case to take twelve hours to get from the sunken road to the dressing station three miles away,' continues Nulla, 'Nine or ten relays of bearers handle the stretcher in that short distance' (33–34). According to Australia's official medical history, it typically took field ambulances under 'average conditions' around 'six hours' and 'thirty-six bearers on relays for each stretcher case.' This work was made 'insuperable' in the 'mud which lay deep over the whole 6,000 yards of the carry.' Communications trenches, dug at right angles to the forward positions were frequently rendered impassable on account of inundations, 'in parts up to thigh high so that bearers perforce carried in the open.' The roster and rate of rescue became almost impossible to maintain under these conditions, while the arduous work of retrieval had become more dangerous than ever. Attending to the dead was high risk and labour intensive as corpses and other remains became an accepted part of the detritus of the battlefield. 'Sticking out of the earth where the frames had been blown off was a forearm and a hand, an arm on which hung some dirty shreds, and the skeletal hand, thick, white bones stuck together by withered sinews and mud,' observes Jeffreys across no man's land (121).

Mann's Jeffreys 'never succeeded in getting his bearings' in Flanders: 'in the winter it rained enough and was cold enough on the Somme, but the north country was a darker country' (159). Under such conditions he comes face to face with the arbitrary fate by which life and death are determined in war. Living among the dead in the mud, the men 'distrusted' any claims to the

sacred, according to Gammage (xiii). In diaries and letters, men often blasphemously express bewilderment in the face of the grave realities of their circumstances. Mann's Anglican padre fights to 'control his emotion,' while offering prayers before the men go into action and is 'lost in a turmoil of thoughts.' He resolves this turmoil through recourse to the figure of Christ the man in an altogether unconvincing declaration: 'if Christ should exist anywhere, He must exist in that flesh and soul within, be dwelling there in each confronting foeman within the armour, even at the moment of the shot, the bayonet thrust, the bursting of the bomb, the detonation of the gun.' The irony is that no amount of armour including the use of the Brodie helmet which contributed further to the Australians lack of distinction from British and other white Commonwealth troops—Canada and New Zealand especially—would afford any meaningful protection against the conditions of war.

Mann's chaplain defers to a more radical spirituality: 'Christ must be in each; not in the nations and sects, parties and armies but in the breasts of the soldiers, in the flesh within the armour, making war, the general slaughter and the individual killing or shot and shell bayonet and bomb, immaterial.' Yet men had gone to war in the name of nations or in the case of the Australians 'God, King and Country,' which may have sustained them at Gallipoli though not, it would seem, in the quagmire of the Western Front. Eventually the 'padre's soul' cries out in distress, 'I was wrong.' He gives up on sermons before battle and dedicates himself to work in the 'first-aid post' with the wounded. This work provides some solace but little hope of redemption and so he prays not for others but himself: 'O Lord, please help me' (43–44). His place of prayer, however, is a dirty, crowded and noisy purgatory; an environment where, as the poet John Le Gay Brereton declared in 1919, 'God is dead.'

## Conclusion

The low-lying terrain of the Western Front was more open than the steep inclines, rocky outcrops and gullies of the Dardanelles. Yet like all other military forces, the Australians remained bogged in the mud by contrast to earlier reports of their great athleticism crossing the beach and scaling the cliffs of Gallipoli. Not uncommonly, those trapped inside their trenches were buried alive in what were in effect pre-dug graves, bringing the living profanely into contact with the already dead. Frank Jeffreys notices 'bodies half in the water where they had slipped or rolled down the declivity' (223). Up-ended cadavers mix with the mud while corpses marked by even the slightest lacerations expose soft tissue to the elements that hastens decomposition. Micro-organisms, bugs and larvae enter every orifice, rupture and wound to feast on decaying entrails. Plagues of rats and scavenging birds adept at dodging missiles ravage the detritus. 'In bloody fragments, to be the carrion / Of rats and crows,' Manning wrote in his poem, 'The Trenches.'

Now widely considered to be Australia's most notable novel of the Western Front, Leonard Mann's *Flesh in Armour* depicts war as a struggle between opposing armies over barely concealed mass burial sites which give mud its morbid quality. Under every step and trench are remnants of the dead, preparing to claim the living. Any advance logically means moving across decomposing corpses that become indistinguishable from the mud. The relentless pounding of bombs unnerves Frank Jeffreys though it is the redistribution of the earth that is the source of his abjection. Scattered gore of the recently dead mixes with more putrefied remains whose presence stalks his every step, leading to his eventual self-annihilation. 'Some feared bullets and some shells, and some feared everything' (220) wrote Mann. My re-reading of such scenes alongside *Somme Mud* and *The Middle Parts of Fortune* suggests to me at least that mud is an

important though neglected aspect of Australian literary responses to the First World War which have been significantly shaped by the Anzac legend.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Differing from J.P. McKinney's *Crucible* (1935) also set on the Western Front whose protagonist is promoted.

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