

Voices in *Love & Sorrow*

Deborah Tout-Smith

With the approaching centenary of World War I, Museums Victoria committed to developing an exhibition which represented the war and its impacts with new honesty, which would deeply engage contemporary visitors and which would support new thinking about war. *World War I: Love & Sorrow* opened in August 2014 at Melbourne Museum, and closed on 11 November 2018. I was the lead curator for the exhibition, and curator of the museum's military history collection.

The exhibition context

Love & Sorrow was an exhibition built on story, voice and emotion. It was organised chronologically around eight unfolding personal stories, each selected for their ability to show the impacts of war on families and generations, each with photographs, first-person writings and objects through which to tell the story, and each with a descendant¹ who could speak to the meaning and long-term impacts of that story in their family. The selected characters were a butcher with a young family; a mother who farewelled her beloved son to war; a coach-builder; a nurse; a teenage telegraph messenger; two Aboriginal brothers from Victoria, one with a wife and children; and two brothers who fought for Germany. Each story was rich, poignant and unique.

The eight story characters were introduced at the entrance to the exhibition, each represented by a portrait, a photograph with their family or community, and a short summary of their life up to 1914. A symbol for each character was used to identify the four (or so) further cases or panels as their story unfolded in the exhibition. Visitors were encouraged to select a character to follow. This was facilitated in part by the *Storyteller* app, which allowed the visitor to select a character digitally. As they moved through the exhibition, further content was triggered by beacons positioned at key locations. It was not possible for visitors to move forward and discover the ending of the story – they had to experience the unfolding of fate gradually. The *Storyteller* provided further photographs

and stories about the character, and short, poignant extracts from letters and diaries were narrated.

In developing the exhibition, we faced the challenge of telling stories which were deeply personal, sometimes disturbing and often confronting. These included stories of Aboriginal displacement and disadvantage; a German family who lost loved ones in the Holocaust; and previously hidden stories of suicide, venereal disease, mental illness and alcoholism. We worked closely with the descendants to ensure that the stories were told sensitively and appropriately, and were careful to make no value judgements about any type of experience or course of action. We deliberately showed people making different decisions, such as those for and against the war effort, and people coping in different ways – or not coping at all.

The exhibition was organized around five themes relating to the chronology: spirit of the times; experiencing war; medical experience; war-time at home; and life after war. Each theme text was written for emotional impact and in narrative form. Adjectives and descriptions of personal feelings were used to disrupt the conventional, impersonal museum voice. First person voice was critical: I used as many original quotes as possible, including extracts from letters and diaries, to generate a sense of the personal, the authentic and the immediate. Different perspectives were included, such as women who spoke against the war and men interned because their family had emigrated from an 'enemy' nation.²

Texts were supported by objects selected for their particular emotional power – such as a postcard written by young Ethel Kemp, who would never see her father again: *Dear Daddy I am waiting and watching day by day for you*³ and poignant paintings of fellow patients by shell-shocked John Hargreaves, lent by his daughter. Large photographs, some subtly colourized, were also selected for impact, such as a photograph of the last farewell of Private Desmond Morris, fated to die;⁴ rows of dead awaiting burial on a battlefield in northern France;⁵ and veteran Geoffrey Carter, who lost both legs in France, unforgiving in his gaze.⁶



Entrance to *World War I: Love & Sorrow* exhibition, 2014. Photographer: Benjamin Healley. Source: Museums Victoria

The centrepiece of the exhibition was a walk-in space projecting images of a battlefield, Glencorse Wood, east of Ypres in Belgium, showing the destruction of the landscape between 1915 and 1917, and the forest which covers the area today. Visitors' own shadows projected onto the landscape, piercing a hole into the next layer of time, and placing them directly into the scene. An intermittent, subtle soundscape of birds and battle built the atmosphere. The only words in the space were names, a list of the 1,771 soldiers of the Australian, German and British armies who were killed there in little over a week in September 1917, in alphabetical order, no matter for whom they fought – and the words of a grieving family etched on a gravestone: *Tread Softly by, Our hearts are here, With our beloved Jack.*⁷

Beyond Glencorse Wood, a separate section of the exhibition explored the experience and treatment of facial wounds at the ground-breaking hospital in Sidcup, England. Again, personal stories were featured, including surgeon Harold Gilles and soldier Bill Kearsey, humanizing the graphic and often distressing impacts of war. The visitor then moved into the home environment, at the centre of which was a hearth, set up as a vignette with personal photographs, a mourning plaque and other mementoes, and children's war-time games scattered on the ground below.

The final section of the exhibition showed the post-war impacts of service on soldiers and their families, including 'shell-shock', depression, tuberculosis, suicide and the struggles to have war wounds acknowledged by repatriation authorities. Some stories showed remarkable endurance, achievement and

triumph over adversary, but for others this was never possible, such as the German Jewish family for whom the influenza pandemic, Kristallnacht and the terrors of World War II loomed.

The end of the exhibition drew the visitor into the present, the denouement of its narrative. The *Storyteller* app triggered the final part of the character story (or visitors could manually select the story) – a 'farewell' video in which a descendant appeared on-screen to explain why that story was still meaningful and powerful for today, 100 years later, and how World War I had impacted across generations of their family. At this point the visitor would have realized that the narrator of the *Storyteller* was actually the descendant, who had accompanied them throughout their journey.

The interviews

During the exhibition development we asked the descendants to complete three tasks: record a complete account of their family member's life before, during and after the war, to become part of the museum's collection; provide short-form interviews for use in the farewell videos; and narrate their family member's original words for the *Storyteller*. We contracted Daybreak Films to film the oral histories and record the narrations for the *Storyteller*. Art Processors was contracted to compile content to create the *Storyteller*.

We set aside half a day to record each descendant. In all cases but one we used the film and sound studios at Melbourne Museum; the final descendant, who was elderly, was filmed on request in her own home. As we particularly wanted the recordings to capture



Home vignette, *World War I: Love & Sorrow* exhibition, 2015. Photographer: Benjamin Healley. Source: Museums Victoria

the emotional dimension of each story, the filming environment was critical. The filmmakers carefully created an environment of ‘comfort and intimacy’ in the studio to support deeper story-telling, and aimed for ‘beautiful portraiture’ through photographic lighting. The darkening of the studio’s ambient lighting reduced interference and supported the descendant’s inward focus.

I began by inviting each descendant to provide a complete account of their family member’s story and its meaning for them today. Knowing each story well, I was prepared with prompts and questions to draw out the story if needed, but my intention was to encourage descendants to tell the story as they knew it, to make their own meanings and emphases.

This needed to be more than a basic recounting of the story. I paid particular attention to the emotional valence of their telling, hoping they would express deeper feelings which could in turn help the exhibition visitor connect with the story. As they talked I tried to understand and draw out the nature of those feelings. Were the descendants imagining what people at the time would have felt; expressing natural human empathy; or articulating a lingering grief and anger which cast shadows through families and through generations? Critical to this was the closeness of most descendants to the stories, and the authenticity of their detail. Three were first-generation sons or daughters of the people whose stories they told; the other five were second generation, of whom only two did not directly know the people, but knew those who had.

Inevitably there were false starts and breaks which needed to be edited to create a single, relatively continuous recording for the museum’s collection. These edits were purely pragmatic; no content relevant to the interview, including all-important reflective pauses, re-tellings of the same content or emotional responses, was removed. The final recordings were each between 10 and 32 minutes long, with an average of just under 20 minutes.

The guided content for the farewell videos were intended to ensure we had suitable material for the short format (just over one minute each). In particular I hoped that each descendant would succinctly articulate how *they* felt about their family member’s involvement in the war, how they were personally impacted, and what they considered were the war’s impacts on their family. Importantly, each descendant was given something to hold as they spoke: a letter written by their family member, a postcard, or in the case of Jilba Georgalis, the bootie sent by her grandmother Ruby to her grandfather Frank Roberts in the trenches of France. As each spoke they unconsciously interacted with the object, turning it over, caressing it, connecting with the materiality of a long-ago past. The object seemed to support emotional engagement with the story. The filmmaker edited these interactions sensitively, moving gently between face and object, linking back to the exhibition space, where those same objects were seen.

We left the audio recordings to last, as they would need much less emotional engagement after hours of filming. For the audio, each descendant was provided with the complete *Storyteller* script for their family member, from which they read in a series of short takes. In some cases the experience was still emotional for the descendant, taking on the voice of their family member and thus connecting more deeply with the words and the sentiments they expressed. The greatest challenge was the script written in German – a German coach provided valuable support for the descendant as he read the unfamiliar language.

Each descendant approved the content of their films before they were made available in the exhibition. All provided positive feedback on the interview experience, and the opportunity to tell their family story in their own words.

Visitor response

Visitor response to the overall exhibition was strongly positive: for instance, 89 per cent of visitors reported that they had learned new things and 97 per cent said it made them think of the impact of World War I on Australian society. Extensive evaluation was undertaken by Museums Victoria to understand why the exhibition was so effective.⁸ The exhibition’s ability to generate emotional responses was identified

as a key reason for its impact. As many as 97 per cent of a quantitative group noticed that the text was ‘written as a story and described how people were feeling’; the primacy of personal stories, the provision of information previously unknown (such as the facial wounds section) and the power of particular objects were also significant. These impacts have been discussed by authors including myself, Andrea Witcomb and Candice Boyd.⁹ Unfortunately, due in part to technical issues including the inaccessibility of the farewell videos during some of the evaluation and low uptake of the *Storyteller* (which triggered the videos), it is not possible to reflect specifically on the videos’ particular impacts.

Reflections

Working with descendants to understand and elicit emotions raises significant questions, particularly in the context of long time-frames and intergenerational memory. As I looked for emotional responses in the descendants, I wondered about the nature of those emotions. In what sense and in what ways can grief and anger be passed between generations within families? The fictive kinship effect observed by Jay Winter¹⁰ and others contends that informants may be unduly imaginative and emotionally engaged by events they have not personally experienced. But with first- and second-hand stories and observations within families, might these be considered almost, if not actually, personal experiences? What does it mean to grow up in the presence of absence due to war, or with a narrative to explain why a family member struggled in their later life with loud noises, depression or physical scars? The lack of agency in many stories told by the descendants was particularly striking: the war and its impacts were beyond individual control; no-one could make wounds of body or mind disappear; and individuals could be powerless in the face of authorities who disputed claims for post-war support. What *could* be controlled was the way the story was told and remembered in families.

A particular challenge for memory and war, too, is the entanglement of public commemoration with private meaning-making. The fact that war is a public, shared event adds a special burden to memories within families and communities. It is easy to identify with the language and imagery of the public war event, particularly around Anzac Day; but how does that play out in families with direct connections to war? Interestingly, the descendants I interviewed had all thought deeply about the war and its impacts throughout their lives, and our preliminary conversations about the nature of the exhibition also helped them to share their thoughts largely without using formulaic language, imagery or stories.



Display case featuring a baby's bootie sent by Ruby Roberts to her husband Frank, a soldier during World War I, on loan from Jilba Georgalis, 2016. Photographer: Rodney Start. Source: Museums Victoria.

The centenary of the terrible events of World War I has provided a particular opportunity to reflect on the ways that memories are held or released within families over the course of a century; how trauma and violence might have intergenerational impacts; and how public and private narratives interplay. The example of *Love & Sorrow* highlights the value of emotional engagement – for historical subjects, for informants and for visitors.

Endnotes

- 1 I use the term ‘descendant’ (aka informant) throughout this article to emphasize the nature of the familial connection, although some informants are not direct descendants – for instance, a great niece and great nephew.
- 2 As discussed in Deborah Tout-Smith, ‘*Love & Sorrow: The Role of Emotion in Exhibition Development and Visitor Experience*’, in Tracey Loughran and Dawn Mannay (eds), *Emotion and the Researcher: Sites, Subjectivities and Relationships*, Studies in Qualitative Methodology series, West Yorkshire, Emerald Group Publishing, 2018.
- 3 Museums Victoria collection MM 91075, Postcard - Ethel Kemp to Private Albert Edward Kemp, ‘Fond Thoughts of You’, 1917.
- 4 Australian War Memorial collection, AWM H16139.
- 5 Photographers – Frank Hurley and George Hubert Wilkins, Imperial War Museum collection, IWM E(AUS) 4944.
- 6 Australian War Memorial collection, Sapper G J F Carter, M51.
- 7 Grave inscription for Jack Edwards by his parents, quoted in Bart Ziino, *A Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley, WA, 2007, p.143.
- 8 Using visitor observations, online summative evaluation, in-depth qualitative interviews, and drawing and walking interviews.
- 9 Tout-Smith, ‘*Love & Sorrow*’; Andrea Witcomb, ‘Mapping the Use of Emotions in Representing WWI at Australian Museums and Memorial Sites: Politics and Poetics’, War & Emotions symposium, Melbourne Museum, 17 Sept 2015; and Candice Boyd, ‘Audience Experiences of the WWI Love & Sorrow Exhibition: A Drawing/Walking Method of Evaluation’, unpublished report, University of Melbourne, 2017.
- 10 Jay Winter, ‘Forms of Kinship and Remembrance in the Aftermath of the Great War’, in Jay Winter (ed), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p.40.