

THE DREAMER AND THE CHEERFUL THING

Bob and Harold Snape: their part in the Great War.

PROLOGUE

In late 1977, some months after Bob Snape's death, I collected two heavy old trunks from his villa unit in Sandringham. They were jammed full of papers, comprising correspondence, diaries, short stories, a poem or two, much of it typed, some of it hand-written, some official-looking documents and some music scores roughly sorted into manila folders, and a variety of souvenirs and ephemera. There were also half a dozen ordnance maps, aerial photographs of some of the battlefields on the Western Front and some battered old albums containing approximately 650 picture postcards, mainly of WW1 France and Belgium, but also of England and Wales.

A special and unexpected prize found in the collection was my great uncle Harold's pocket-sized field-diary, meticulously kept from the day of his enlistment until three days before his fatal gassing, each day's entry numbered and dated, written mostly in Indian ink but with some entries in indelible pencil. The book, of some 140 pages, now coverless, survives in loose sections. Originally, it must have been leather-bound for, if you turn the bunches of pages edge on in the sunlight, you can see the residual glint of gold-leaf.

So, this was the Bob Snape's treasure trove of war memorabilia, that is, his own and that of his younger brother, Harold, who had 'died of wounds (gas)' in August 1918. Bob was a particularly prolific correspondent and diarist: the entire body of his surviving output being some 220,000 words, whilst Harold's little pocket diary alone ran out to approximately 40,000 words, as I was to discover once I had completed the transcription of their combined writings. I had always known of the collection's existence but had never really been shown through it.

As the Snapes' first-born grandchild, I lived with my WW2 veteran parents at Bob and Madge Snape's home, 'Tarryn', No. 3 Christowel Street, East Camberwell, for the first three years of my life, and was a frequent visitor and guest there until they moved to Beaumaris, on Port Phillip Bay, in 1958. In those years of my infancy, I was Bob's constant shadow and pest. (Growing up

in a world of adults as I did, he was always 'Bob' to me and to my grandmother and their contemporaries, but Robert Oswald Snape was always 'RO' to relatives and friends of my parents' generation).

If he wasn't reading and smoking his cherry-wood pipe, he would be at the piano, or out watering the garden, then I could almost certainly find him upstairs, hidden in the attic, clacking away on his old black type-writer, surrounded by maps and piles of notepapers, or studying a huge wall-map with his magnifying glass, illuminated by a couple of bare light bulbs suspended from a roof-batten under the tiles. It was a cramped space up there, musty and windowless, but I realise now, that it was perhaps authentically reminiscent of an army HQ bunker and perfectly befitting the sombre mood and purpose of his 'war-room,' though I'm sure I never heard him refer to it as such. "This is where Harold was with the guns....." Bob would say, but that reference would have been lost on me as a child. Besides, all I wanted was for him to come downstairs and play..... I had heard that Bob and Harold had been soldiers in the war long ago, but that "Harold had died", whatever that meant.

What a treat it was when Bob put up his old army bell tent as a cubbyhouse for me in hot weather, banging the pegs into the lawn with a big old red-gum mallet.

It was a very musical household with regular soirées attended by numbers of old family friends and relatives (this was the so-called 'Fidelity Club') and they would arrive with a violin or two, perhaps a mouth-organ and platefuls of sandwiches and cakes. My mother, and at times, my grandmother, Madge, would sing, accompanied by Bob on the piano, playing some old popular favourites and arias from grand opera.

Bob was a long-term railway enthusiast and easily caught me up in his fascination for 'engines', often taking me along to see the great steam locomotives thundering around the North Melbourne marshalling yards; standing together on a steel gantry bridge and watching some monster hauling its train of trucks or carriages beneath us and smothering us in steam and soot. What fun it was when Bob spoke to an engine driver and next thing we were clambering up into the engine-cab, and onto the footplate, with the fireman

shovelling coal into the open firebox, the engine tootling down the track to the big grey round-house for servicing. You can readily see how this man assumed heroic stature in my eyes, even eclipsing my own father for some years.

Late one night, there was a commotion down in the front garden, like men fighting and yelling at each other: my grandmother (Madge)'s two brothers, Tom and Dave McLaughlin, were roaring drunk and demanding a bed for the night. Then Bob had come out, saying sternly, "Now listen here you chaps, if you're going to carry on like this, I'll have to call the Police. You can't stay here, so 'orf' you go....." And after a few minutes of arguing the toss, the pair calmed down sufficiently and left, singing down the road. (Poor old Tom McLaughlin, a Private, Reg. No. 2228, formerly of the 59th Battalion, died in about 1954, in Heatherton Sanatorium, Melbourne. Family always said that he was "badly affected by the war." Enlisting in June 1916, Tom would have been too late for the shambles of Fromelles, but was no doubt in action at Pozières and the battles thereafter.)

As an older boy, I liked to fiddle about with a souvenired artillery shell, especially enjoying dismantling and reassembling the shiny brass components of its 'fuze'. I was both excited and mystified to hear Bob say that he had "seen a locomotive blown clean off its rails by one of those brutes, once."

I can recall Bob talking about army training, learning to sleep on a straw palliasse, or even on the ground, and being woken at dawn with the bugler playing a tune called 'Reveille' which he said sounded like, "Get out o' bed..... Get out o' bed..... Ya lazy beggars!"

Bob said little about "the real war" in my presence, apart from a vague reference to shell-holes "filled with Anzac soup." What on earth was that about? I wondered. He never explained. But he did look forward to having a yarn with his brother-in-law, Les Ross, a veteran machine-gunner and later, a fighter-pilot with the Australian Flying Corps, flying S.E.5's over the Western Front. My mother's cousin, Robert Ross, a good eight years my senior, had been allowed to sit in on their war-talks, lucky kid By the time I turned fifteen, Bob seemed even less inclined to discuss the war, or his part in it, but I realised that there was something interesting when I heard my parents mention the so-called "Monash letters."

Then I learned that Bob had, in the latter stages of the war, been appointed as secretary to General Sir John Monash and it was said that the general had cautioned Bob that there were to be no copies of his correspondence kept, but in this one thing, Bob had disobeyed his commander, keeping a number of carbon copies of interesting documents and communications. However, only one such draft letter was to be found in the collection after Bob's death: it was in Monash's own hand, written in pencil, on, or just after, July 4th 1918, following the Battle of Hamel, thanking the Australian Governor General, Sir Ronald Ferguson, for his personal support in the bid as to whom should be chosen to command the new Australian Corps, at a politically sensitive and difficult time in Monash's military career.

Bob had been mightily impressed by Monash as a great planner and intellectual, and always regarded it as a great honour to have been chosen by him to be his personal secretary. After the Armistice, like the hundreds of thousands of other Dominion troops, Bob had to remain behind in France and Belgium, still in uniform, waiting to go home. After all, there was a serious shipping shortage as result of the U-boat campaign. In December 1918, Monash had been transferred to London to organise the repatriation of the AIF. He had recommended Bob to the new GOC Australian Corps, General Sir Talbot-Hobbs and so Bob continued as his personal assistant until June 1919 when he was finally released from duty, arriving home in Melbourne, late in July.

It must have been a difficult reunion for Bob and Madge: their marriage had been kept a dark secret from Madge's parents. Her father, Andrew McLaughlin, an Irish-born Presbyterian and perhaps even an Irish Nationalist, had vehemently opposed the idea that any of his daughters should marry a soldier. Only Madge's younger sister, Elizabeth (Betty), who had been a witness at the registry office ceremony knew that she was wearing Bob's wedding ring on a string around her neck for those long years of enforced separation. The Snapes knew, but were dismayed at their eldest boy's hasty marriage, just three months before sailing off to war. Those diary pages that might have chronicled the romance and secret wedding were torn out, so we can only guess at the upheaval it must have caused. No correspondence between the couple, apart from one or two fairly non-committal picture post

cards, addressed to 'Miss M McLaughlin', care of her parents in Richmond, survives. Anything else has been destroyed.

For a time at least Madge lived with the Snapes in Buckley Street, Essendon, 'as a boarder' and 'to be closer to her place of employment'; but (according to my late mother), this arrangement abruptly ended when her mother-in-law showed her Bob's long letter, addressed to his father, dated 15th August 1918 and entitled 'My Second Trip to Paris,' but marked: "Don't let this out of your possession. It is too personal for any eyes save yours & Mother's and Frank's."

I understand that Madge, reading between the lines, stopped writing to Bob and is said to have later become romantically interested in a dairy farmer from Gippsland. Bob survived the war however and returned to reclaim his wife, meeting Madge's suitor and telling him straight, "Look here old chap, I'm already married to her....."

Bob and Madge briefly moved in with the Snapes for a time before striking out on their own. Again, my late mother informed me that Bob and Madge agreed that they did not want to have children, but the pressure from the Snapes for them to produce a grandchild, or, preferably a grandson (to replace Harold?), was too strong. In the end, three daughters were born to Bob and Madge: Rosina (my mother), born 1922; Lorna, born 1923; and Myra, born 1927. The marriage had got off to a bad start and was hardly a love-match. It seems Madge always suspected that Bob was unfaithful, even late in life.

In civilian life, Bob was active in both the Church of Christ Scientist and the Masonic Lodge, in particular being appreciated for his role as organist. Bob capitalised on his skills as a stenographer and secretary. No doubt his long wartime association with General Sir John Monash would have impressed potential employers. Throughout his post-war working life, Bob held many interesting positions, chief among them being that of Tariff Officer for the Victorian Chamber of Manufactures and as representative of the Australian Textile Industry at a conference of the International Labour Organisation in Brussels in 1946 and on a number of occasions following that. In 1952, upon his retirement from public life, and in recognition of his civic service, he was awarded a gratuity of £1,000 by the Governor of the State of Victoria, a large sum of money in those days.

As a father, Bob was adored by his three daughters and my mother, as a child, always thought of him as “one of ‘the heads’ of Melbourne.” Bob was a strict parent, but unfortunately saw little point in the education of girls because, of course, from his point of view, they were destined to grow up, marry and have children, so what was the point? This always rankled with my mother and her sisters.

A closely guarded family secret was the fact that Madge was a year or two older than Bob. She died in 1972. Bob stayed on living at 121 Dalgetty Road, Beaumaris, for about another three years, still teaching piano, but with fewer students; still attending church and playing the organ for the congregation; still going down to the beach most mornings throughout the year for a quick swim with some old mates, known as ‘The Icebergs’; still tending his garden; and still going for a walk each day..... the habits of a lifetime. On weekends, Bob might stay with one daughter or another, but it was not a satisfactory arrangement with all that packing and unpacking and, in a sense, “camping” in other people’s places.

Things were not right: Bob was afraid he might be losing his memory, as he sometimes struggled to find a word. Always the wordsmith, he had been a voracious reader and crossword expert, careful to use just the right turn of phrase and always ready with a funny double entendre for the amusement of grandchildren. What if he was losing his mind?

In 1975, whilst in Sydney, visiting his daughter Lorna and her family, and his brother, Frank and sister-in-law Jessie, Bob had a fall whilst alighting from a bus, resulting in a fractured hip and a long spell in Concorde Repatriation Hospital. This was followed by a further hospital admission, this time in Melbourne’s ‘Heidelberg Repat’, for the removal of kidney stones. His physical health was on the slippery slope.

With his youngest daughter’s help, Bob moved to live in a villa unit, in Sandringham, virtually next-door to her. Then, there was a minor traffic accident: a young cyclist, riding on the footpath, collided with Bob’s car when he was coming out of his driveway. This incident really rattled him and for the most part he gave up driving. Life slowed down. Meals-on-Wheels arrived. The world was closing in around him. Depression had come to stay.

I arranged to go and see Bob specifically to discuss what he wanted to be done with his collection of memorabilia. We pulled out the trunks and he opened one, taking out a few folders, but it was clearly too late: "I don't know," he said, "you can burn the lot for all I care..... You can decide one day when I'm gone." and with that he closed up the trunk and thus ended my only guided tour of his past. I had missed my chance by about twenty years.

A couple of weeks later, Bob went missing. His car was gone. Naturally alarmed, we involved the Police and there was a man-hunt for him for some days. What if he was simply lost and disoriented? Then, my aunt found Bob's suicide note, screwed up and left in his waste paper basket, written in an early, pre-Pittman's form of short-hand, but which my mother and aunt were able to decipher. Bob's car was found by the beach at Mordialloc. He had simply walked out into the sea, at night, for one last swim. His remains were found some three weeks later, floating near Port Melbourne docks. My father, an old soldier himself, volunteered to identify the body, but came home in a state of shock.

Bob could not have known that we would be left to worry for so long. He probably thought that the mystery of his disappearance would all be quickly solved..... washed up on the morning tide. But that's not how it turned out. The funeral was held at Springvale Crematorium, just a small family affair.

Bob was greatly loved and respected. His kindness and good counsel had touched many lives so it is sad to think of his final act: seeking oblivion and rest in the eternal sea, after such a quietly spectacular life. But we should not judge him harshly for his life had run its course. The future must have looked hopelessly bleak and ultimately, he had chosen the timing and the means of his leaving. I sometimes wonder what his final words would have been, but knowing his deep love of opera and his great sense of family history, I suspect he might well have echoed the famous last words of his own maternal grandfather, 'Charlie Cook the carpenter', who, on his own death-bed, is said to have quoted the opening verse of one of his favourite hymns, "Return, O Wanderer to thy Home."

Rest in peace Bob.

Walter J R Barber.