

# ***Our Corner of the Somme: Australia at Villers-Bretonneux*** by Romain Fathi

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Villers-Bretonneux is an important site in Australian commemorative imagination. It is there that the Australian National Memorial stands, and where—as Australia’s official historian Charles Bean would have it—Australian soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) single-handedly turned back the great German advance of 1918, preventing the loss of France.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding this, Villers-Bretonneux is marginalised in the public consciousness. While it has attracted its share of lionisation and bombast, it has not achieved the dense memorialisation of landscapes like Gallipoli or Kokoda. Further, unlike Gallipoli (and to some extent Kokoda), Villers-Bretonneux is a place where people lived, and continue to live, with their own national understanding about how war affected their landscape. This creates a tension. Bean’s history fails to stand against any serious scrutiny (the reality of the battle was much more complex) but, regardless, over time, Australians have ‘assembled, projected, and performed’ their vision of Villers-Bretonneux onto a place where the local French population had an active voice. They have rejected, accepted, moulded and shaped that narrative as they saw fit—or just ignored it outright.

*Our Corner of the Somme* sets about examining this tension between Australian remembrance activities and the lived context of the people inside Villers-Bretonneux. In spare, sometimes biting prose, with his arguments soundly demonstrated through a series of case studies, Romain Fathi explores how Australians have approached the area to commemorate and remember, and, in turn, how local residents have approached this

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1 C. E. W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia During the War, Vol. V – the Australian Imperial Force in France During the Main German Offensive, 1918* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1945), 298.

Australian activity. In roughly chronological order, Fathi traces how this process influenced everything from the built environment of the village, to local education, to village politics, as well as the more obvious elements of tourism and economics.

It is immediately clear that the author is French. At the core of the analysis is a great quantity of French sources that have simply not been consulted in English-language research before. These include local French newspapers and church newsletters, as well as Villers-Bretonneux council documents and private letters. Fathi uses the vitality (and acidity) of these local sources to highlight how decisions made to enhance symbolism then flow into the lives of real people. Set against a close examination of Australian involvement in the area from 1918 to the present, these sources temper and test Australian claims about the significance of their wartime and postwar roles at Villers-Bretonneux, revealing how Australians have created an imagined 'French' view of their achievements.

To ensure there is no confusion, Australian desires are treated as central to the narrative. At all times, the book remains aware of its core audience, and Fathi engages with the strong legacy of work Australian scholars have made in commemorative literature. But Australian ideas about the meaning of the landscape are also inexorably painted as largely foreign to the desires and beliefs of the residents. It is clear by the final chapter that Australian interest in Villers-Bretonneux has been both a boon for residents and a grave nuisance.

Structurally, *Our Corner* is broken into eight chapters, each of which (apart from the first) span periods of roughly similar commemorative activity. The first chapter attempts to contextualise the rest of the book by laying out what might be called a 'battle history' of the Australians at Villers-Bretonneux. This discussion is factually accurate, but—while interesting to a lay reader—quickly proves marginal to the central point of the analysis. The core of this book is not about the battle; simply knowing Australian troops fought here is enough to set the stage. Regardless, after discussing how the Australians were actually a small part of broader Allied efforts in the area, and thereby moderating the expectations of any Australian lay reader, the discussion unceremoniously moves on from military manoeuvres and never returns.

It is once the French voices enter the narrative that the analytic value of the book truly begins to emerge. The initial few chapters, which interrogate the period immediately following World War I up to World War II (WWII), are especially excellent. The back and forth negotiations between local French leaders and Australian interests (as expressed by newspapers, governments and people with large amounts of cash to donate) are examined. The tension between French pragmatism and Australian romanticism is most clearly expressed in these chapters. Fathi identifies successive generations of Australians who have sought to make and find meaning in Villers-Bretonneux. At the same time, he shows how local residents have worked with, against and through this memorialisation activity to meet their own agendas.

Fathi's accounts of the efforts made to reconcile both French and Australian interests can be confronting. He makes the point that, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the village of Villers-Bretonneux was a ruin. The people there needed immediate, sustained and practical help. But this help was not particularly forthcoming from Australia. Fathi traces the ways that funds were sought from Australia by successive French residents, who began drawing on the language of Anzac to support their appeals. He notes that this charity was difficult for cash-strapped Australians, and, that when money was offered, it often came bundled with conditions set by Australians elevating symbolism over need. *Our Corner* charts one major example of Australian charity and the tensions it could cause. The construction of a donated school (the Ecole Victoria) was actively imposed upon a village that did not want it; not only was it too big, but also it reduced the amount of reconstruction money provided by the French Government. However, from the Australian perspective, the school project was generous, a morally correct use of money and also clever; future generations of French school children could learn and be impressed by the importance of the Australian contribution in the area. The final product came complete with 'DON'T FORGET AUSTRALIA' emblazoned on its side.

Through this and other case studies, it is clear that the lived reality of Australian donations during early reconstruction was one of French frustration. Fathi spares no one; he paints a picture of a people who appear to have had little interest in understanding the Australian fascination with their landscape. This can also be confronting in the text. In one striking

example, Fathi details how the Villers-Bretonneux mayor and council requested Australians donate money to fund a local abattoir—twice. Both requests were declined.

Following discussions of the immediate needs of the area, Fathi moves to the major site of remembrance at Villers-Bretonneux—and arguably the largest Australian commemorative project on the Western Front. This was, of course, the construction and concertation of the Australian National Memorial. Fathi's exploration of this memorial is superb, exploring how Australian identity was performed inside a wider sense of British imperial identity and how this created tensions in the design of memorial. For instance, while the Australian Government initially stipulated an Australian architect, in the end it was Sir Edwin Lutyens—a famous British architect—who designed most of the structure. The ceremonies performed around it also displayed this fundamental tension. Fathi juxtaposes Australian desires for glory against the reality of the inauguration ceremony: the memorial was opened by King George VI in a period of European tension, with most of the speeches alluding to the ties between France and Great Britain. Again, Fathi leans heavily on newspapers to demonstrate Australian desires and interests. Newspapers reported large crowds and praise for foreign dignitaries, 1,500 AIF veterans and 30,000 troops, global media interest (including the King) and visitors numbering in the hundreds of thousands. All of these figures were inaccurate. But, just as importantly, Fathi reminds us that accuracy hardly mattered in this instance. Indeed, he goes to some pains to show how the Australian Government played into the duality of the event, issuing pamphlets to Australian media outlets extolling the deeds of Australian fighting men while tactfully refraining from giving the same leaflet to the British and French journalists.

WWII exists in the book almost as an intermission, with the second half of its analysis interrogating the postwar slump in Anzac commemorative activity, followed by the explosion of activity (the so-called 'memory boom' period), starting roughly in the 1990s and lingering to the present day.

The postwar Anzac nadir is especially valuable. Fathi might well be unique in approaching this period through the lens of the French. Indeed, utilising such a frame elucidates potential pathways forward for alternative gazes that shed light on the mechanisms of the decline in Anzac practice. One way that the decline of symbolic commemorative activity is charted in this work is through an analysis of the composition

of visitors, as well as those who did not visit. For example, Australian Government officials delegated Anzac Day visits to military adjuncts, and few non-veteran visitors or family arrived. Further, veterans who did stop at Villers-Bretonneux tended to be soldiers with direct experience, often on tour, returning to the battlefields of their youth, and, importantly, the spaces they created were local. Local townspeople hosted them, and French veterans shared commemorative activities as a result.

But silence is ultimately less colourful than noise, and the lion's share of the post-WWII analysis is dedicated to the period after roughly 1990. Within the complex activities associated with remembering and forgetting, Fathi delights in detailing the differing agendas of many of the parties involved in commemorative activities of the modern time. The ambitions of both France and Australia are on naked display. Being bilingual, he provides such delights as commentary on differing translations of displays inside the French–Australian Museum now built in Villers-Bretonneux. He also briefly mentions Villers-Bretonneux attempting to stop the nearby construction of a major airport by alerting the Australian Government to the potential for the disturbance of Australian graves.

Alas, however, Fathi ultimately paints a picture of a modern local population buffeted by powerful forces. The French voices in the narrative seem increasingly dominated by Australian memory practices—in the museum, in visitor's books and in the activity that constitutes the town as its own economic entity.

If there is one note of caution to be sounded, it is in how one dimensional Australian narratives are presented to be. *Our Corner* assumes instances of Australian remembrance practice in France are monolithic. This is largely a product of using newspapers and government documents for the majority of the analysis. This paints a conventional picture; the modern Australian 'memory boom' activity is understood as derived in a straight line from the Howard government, back through a period of little interest, to a self-aggrandising interwar Australia, and, finally, to Charles Bean (and the desire for the mass death to have been meaningful). In actuality, remembrance practices are complex and multivalent, differing by state, social background, time of year and political leanings. Anzac activities are underpinned by very real emotions of grief and loss.

In the final section, Fathi moves to address this through the use of (by now de rigueur) notes written in visitor books. This approach has much to recommend it, and was pioneered in this context by such scholars as Jay Winter, Joan Beaumont and Bruce Scates. However, the approach is not as valuable as it might have been. Visitor books are tricky; they are as likely to mislead as enlighten. A stronger theoretical framework for their use would have served *Our Corner* well. Nevertheless, the intervention has opened up new questions; especially valuable might be scholarship about the composition of non-Australian comments in the museum, and how they contrast or emulate the standard English-language formulas.

A note here should be made on the support of the Australian Army in this work. *Our Corner* is by no means the first challenging work it has bankrolled, nor will it be the last. A lay reader might be worried that an official 'Rising Sun' badge on a book's dust jacket means that it will reflect conservative understandings of Anzac and military history. However, it should be noted that the Army aims to educate its personnel in ways that are realistic and that help its officers to draw useful lessons from the past, as the organisation has done here. It therefore funds some excellent scholarship.

In conclusion, this is a well-written, well-researched and valuable book. It fulfils the objective it sets out to achieve, that of localising commemorative activity into a landscape and a French village. What Fathi adds to the story of Anzac at Villers-Bretonneux is complexity and depth. By looking at sources outside the Anglosphere, he contextualises and (at times) even marginalises Australian voices in regard to Anzac, highlighting its essential 'otherness' to the people actually living in a site of remembrance.

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