



Family Stories and the First World War

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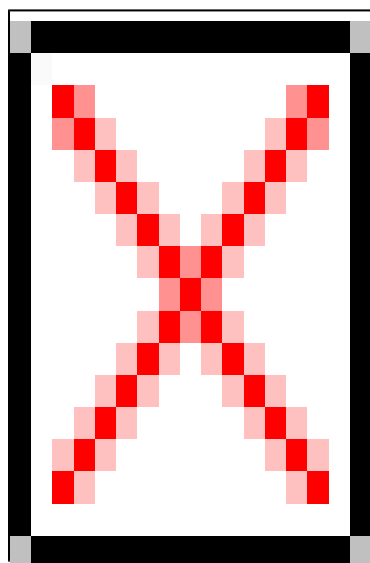
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Byline:

by **Tony Bradman**

A story from his own family past set Tony Bradman thinking about the way history changes all our lives, and inspired his latest novel for children.



I visited a lot of schools last year to talk about the anthology of First World War short stories that I'd edited, and the three books about the conflict that I'd written with my son Tom. In most of the schools the children had done at least some work on the war ? I saw plenty of projects and displays and heard about their trips to museums and war memorials. But many of the children had also been encouraged to ask their parents and grandparents for stories about family members and the war.

Of course, for children these days the closest family members who could have been involved in The Great War would be great- probably great-great-grandparents. Some of the kids were a little confused as well ? I was told several times that a great-grandparent had lived through the First World War during which they'd ?survived the Blitz? or been present at ?the Normandy landings?. I wasn't surprised by that ? for a child those twentieth-century conflicts must almost blur into one.

However, I was surprised ? and also quite moved ? by many of the family stories I was told. Again and again I heard about distant great-grandfathers or great-great-uncles who went off to war and never came home. Many children brought in ancient photographs or letters, the fading ink showing through fragile paper. One little girl brought in a diary which her great-great-grandfather had kept during the Gallipoli campaign, and which ended abruptly because he had been killed.

This made me think about the ways in which we all tell stories about our families, and how certain stories are passed down through the generations until they almost take on the feel of legends. For the children these distant, missing ancestors were still members of the family even though they had never met them. They weren't ghosts so much as a

kind of presence; reference points in the history of a family that connected it to wider things. They certainly weren't being forgotten.

I was particularly struck by this phenomenon because I had my own family story in the publishing pipeline. **Anzac Boys** grew out of a story I heard my mum tell many times during my childhood. She was born in 1925, the fifth of six children of a couple who had met and married later than most, in their thirties. So by the time she was born, her father was already 43. In fact he was born in 1882 in North London, but according to my mum his own parents had died when he was still a child.

As a result, he and his younger brother were put in the care of the local (Catholic) church and then packed off to the southern hemisphere, my grandfather to Australia and his brother to New Zealand. It seemed that my grandfather had grown up in Australia, then joined the Aussie army when war broke out in 1914. So he was one of the soldiers in the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps – the ANZACS – who fought the Turks at Gallipoli, and then the Germans on the Western Front.

But there was another part to my mum's story, something that must have caught my imagination. She said that my great-uncle had joined the New Zealand army, not knowing that his brother had become an Anzac too, and that they met for the first time in twelve years in the trenches of Gallipoli. Now that's what I call a real gift to a writer – it's a properly dramatic situation full of emotional potential, and I think I've probably spent the last fifty years endlessly turning it over in my mind.

To be honest, I don't know if it's entirely true. My mum was a great one for telling stories in which the truth was stretched to say the least – a tendency that increased with the years. I did some research, and discovered my grandfather really was sent to Australia, and there's a record of someone with his name in the Australian army. He certainly got an Aussie pension until he died in 1946 (eight years before I was born), although he never went back to Australia after he met my grandmother. And his brother did go to New Zealand – my cousin traced some descendants there.

But I couldn't prove that they met at Gallipoli after being separated.

Then a few years ago I realised that the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign was coming up in April 2015, and I realised it didn't matter if that last bit was true. I knew it would make a wonderful story, and suddenly I was writing out a whole plot about a boy who promises to look after his little brother after they've been orphaned, and then feels he's failed when they're separated. What would happen when they're reunited?

My research had also made me aware that hundreds of thousands of orphans and children in care were sent to various parts of the British Empire, and that many of them were at best badly treated, and at worst seriously abused. Large numbers of these boys grew up and fought for Britain in the First World War – and were badly let down yet again. So there was another strand of my story – suddenly I realised I was exploring the ways in which history affects us as individuals, changing lives forever.

The result is a slender book, 100 or so pages and 15,000 words in total (beautifully produced by Barrington Stoke!) but I wanted it to have the emotional heft of a bigger story. I also wanted to try and give life to two people whose stories I'd heard – two brothers who had been through some very difficult experiences and were still part of my family, even though they're long gone. For me, and I think for all those children I met last year, that's what remembering the First World War should be all about.

Anzac Boys, 978-1781124345, £6.99 is published by Barrington Stoke. Tony Bradman has written several other books about World War One.

My Brother's Keeper, Tony Bradman and Tom Bradman, 978-1-4081-9679-3, £5.99 A&C Black

Through Mud and Blood, 978-1-4451-2382-0, £5.99, Franklin Watts

Duel in the Sky, 978-1-4451-2381-3, £5.99, Franklin Watts

Stories of World War One (edited), 978-1-4083-3035-7, Orchard Books, £7.99

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