

ANZAC CONVERSATIONS (2): Artistic Voices

*Note: The project **Anzac Conversations: Lessons Learned** was initiated by QPLC and supported by a grant from the Department of Veterans' Affairs in 2015. This is a report arising from the second event held as part of the project.*

The Event

On Sunday 21 June 2015, at the Friends Meeting House, Turner ACT, about 40 people (Quakers and others) attended the second public event, on the theme 'Artistic Voices'. Lorraine Thomson chaired the event, and the speakers presented perspectives on WW1 using drama, art and music examples and experiences. Each speaker had around 45 minutes to make a presentation and to respond to questions and comments from the audience. Audio-visual material was used to enhance the session.

The Speakers

Tessa Bremner OAM, a theatre director and Quaker, began by reminding the listeners of the Quaker peace testimony of seeking to remove the cause of war. Her presentation used poetry and quotations from correspondence from those involved in WW1 to great effect in sharing the depth of the war experience. She spoke of the campaign from 1911 in Australia by Quakers and others to object to compulsory cadet training in schools, and said that over 21,000 boys were prosecuted between 1911 and 1913. Quakers said that preparation for war would only create division, not prevent war. They believed that "children ought not to be taught the necessity of war, much less its glory". Nevertheless the country was swept up in the momentum in Britain for war in 1914, and the initial success in defeating a German force in New Guinea led to assumptions that the war would be over quickly.

The myth of war turning boys into men was reinforced by the determination of political and military leaders to continue the war. Even the short cease-fire at the end of 1914 - when troops from both sides shared Christmas songs and showed a weariness for the fight - did not delay the war for long. The reality of terrible conditions and trauma for soldiers was often concealed in their letters home. And when the survivors returned many were suffering from physical and mental wounds and damaged souls. Vera Brittain spoke of the destruction of men as 'a crime against civilisation'.

Tessa spoke of the courage of pacifists who were often physically threatened as they tried to question why Aussie men were fighting others with whom they had no quarrel. Other Christians were often critical of Quakers as unpatriotic, and the general mood was that those not prepared to fight should be ostracised. When the conscription referenda failed, the government passed a law making it an offence to say or do anything that might prejudice recruiting. In the UK, the Friends Ambulance Unit was set up for those Quakers that felt led to serve near the front lines, and some were awarded bravery medals as stretcher bearers. When conscription began in UK in 1916, Quakers were either 'absolutists; who refused to serve or

'alternatists' who would take on ambulance-type roles. There is now a memorial to conscientious objectors in Tavistock Square London, but nothing similar exists in Australia.

Comments following her presentation indicated interest in more public recognition of conscientious objectors in the War Memorial exhibits, and concern that today's public debate includes language that harks back to the pre-war language used in 1914 as a build-up to war. The natural hesitancy of citizens to go to war was overcome then by considerable propaganda to 'shame' men into fighting.

Dr Anthea Gunn, an Art curator at the Australian War Memorial, used a power-point presentation to highlight the art works held by the Memorial in relation to WW1. She spoke of Charles Bean's vision for a memorial where citizens could not only remember but also find detailed records of the war from an Australian perspective. Will Dyson was one of the earliest artists who, from a critical cartoonist's background, began to paint scenes of the battlefield. For some years the War Memorial was wary of displaying material that challenged the 'public' version of the war, but that is no longer the case. Paintings that show the suffering and agony of war have become more prominent, including those depicting the stress on horses at the front.

Anthea referred to the iconic painting of the Gallipoli slopes by George Lambert as one that has become very well accepted, despite some inaccuracies (eg troops wearing slouch hats). Other paintings in the collection are by Arthur Streeton, who emphasized nature as the context in which war took place, and Hilda Rix Nicholas who used her painting to mourn the death of her husband after only a few weeks of marriage. For some artists, like Napier Waller who did the Hall of Memory mosaic tiles, the recording of the war became a life-time's work.

In response to comments from the audience, Anthea affirmed the Memorial's comprehensive range of art works (e.g. by Ben Quilty) that show the raw emotions of war for those involved. She also spoke of the impact of attending the Dawn Service as a very strong experience of reflection, and as an example of how the people have come to value the War Memorial over the years. This in spite of the controversy that sometimes surrounds the use of the language of war and sacrifice in political discourse.

Dr Glenda Cloughley, a Jungian analyst and composer, outlined the way in which her community oratorio *A Passion for Peace* emerged from a dream about two women who have inspired her, and as a tribute to peace efforts during WW1 by the 1300 women from warring and neutral nations who gathered in the Hague at the International Conference of Women in April 1915. The writing of the *Passion* drew on the hope of a common spring from which we all long to drink. Among the songs is an aria for Jane Addams, the President of the Congress (later a Nobel Peace Laureate), emphasizing the Quaker value of listening for ways our love might break the curious spell of war: *The Ear of the Soul. While war casts its curious spell of discord, within without, the ears of the soul are listening.*

Glenda illustrated her presentation using excerpts from the DVD of the performance of the *Passion* in late April at the Albert Hall by the 110-string cast of A Chorus of Women and associated artists. The music included two levels of awareness – the underlying harmony, and the overlay of trauma and its impact in freezing time and blocking human potential. Our political systems reflect the trauma. The *Passion* includes songs about harmony, love, death and regeneration, stories of individuals affected by war, the psychology of the political and military leaders who lacked love as children, the laws of peace as represented in the resolutions of the Hague gathering, and a citizens chorus 'we are all the songs of peace and freedom'.

In discussion, it was suggested that we elect to high office many who lack love in their lives and are unable to show empathy. It is up to those of us who have been more fortunate to work to change the political culture. Artists are often the people who stand up, but none of us can be silent in the face of the dangers ahead. The role of A Chorus of Women has been to sing a way forward for a more positive future, and to express hope in the power of building peace. The recording can be accessed at www.chorusofwomen.org

Canberra
June 2015