A Portable Monument?: Leonard Mann's Flesh in Armour and Australia's Memory of the First World War

Christina Spittel


Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/bh.2011.0002

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A Portable Monument?

Leonard Mann’s *Flesh in Armour* and Australia’s Memory of the First World War

*Christina Spittel*

Leonard Mann’s *Flesh in Armour* (1932) has been called Australia’s best-known and finest novel about the Great War, “le grand classique du roman de guerre Australien.”¹ One of its most recent readers, the Australian historian Peter Stanley, commends it as “perhaps the most insightful and honest of Australia’s Great War novels.”² He was struck that a returned serviceman should be so outspoken about the prostitutes in London, about mutiny, even about suicide—aspects that Charles Bean, Australia’s official war historian, had passed over, and which have since been sidelined by a commemorative community that regards the Great War’s battlefields as the place where their nation came of age. The war was a landmark in Australian history, the first international crisis to face the newly federated Commonwealth. Of the 300,000 Australians who served overseas, at Gallipoli, in the Middle East, and on the western front, 60,000 died fighting, as many as in the American Expeditionary Force—but from a population of only 4 million.³ Two of the war’s key dates are still of national significance today: on Remembrance Day Australians commemorate the end of hostilities on November 11, 1918; on Anzac Day they mark their first major engagement in that conflict, the landings on the Gallipoli Peninsula in the early morning hours of April 25, 1915. “Anzac,” an acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, is a sacred term in Australia, endowed with meanings of mateship, bravery, and endurance, and protected by law since 1916.⁴

On a superficial reading, *Flesh in Armour*’s publication history seems to confirm the book’s reputation as a fine and insightful response to the war that remains Australia’s costliest conflict. With the exception of Frederic Manning’s *Her Privates We* (1929/1930), a novel that occupies a tricky middle ground between British and Australian war writing, *Flesh in Armour* is Australia’s Great War novel with the longest shelf life. In the received account of its reception, the book was an immediate success with critics and readers: with the award of the Australian Literature Society’s gold medal
for outstanding novel of 1932, Mann’s literary merits were established, his reputation with publishers vindicated. According to these views, the book had come at just the right moment. As Robin Gerster notes, “1932 was a good year to publish a novel which, as Flesh in Armour does, rejoices in the uniqueness of the Australian character.” At the height of the Depression, Australians yearned for “books of the tribe,” and Flesh in Armour was just that, “a chronicle of national tradition,” providing much-needed depth and direction to the fledgling myth of the Anzacs. As a result of this demand, the story goes, the entire first edition quickly sold out.

And yet Flesh in Armour’s checkered biography complicates this success story. Privately published in 1932, the novel was rejected by publishers in 1933 and 1968, and saw new editions in 1944, 1973, and 1985. It is currently out of print in Australia, available only from secondhand bookstores or from the University of South Carolina Press, which issued a new edition in 2008, as part of the Joseph M. Bruccoli Great War Series. Book reviews and archival material, including publishers’ records and letters from Mann’s contemporaries, further challenge the image of the book as a comfortable site of memory. Where previous work on Australia’s literary remembrance of the Great War highlighted continuities—an obsession with martial heroism—these sources reveal a more nuanced picture of shifting tastes and competing expectations.

The Great War was, and remains, a particularly bookish war, “a period of intense and unparalleled creative activity.” It is a conflict that many (at least in the English-speaking world) first encounter through literary texts, notably the poems of a handful of soldier poets: Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Siegfried Sassoon. Their war is “Hell!” “a certain cure for lust of blood.” It is played out on a western front covered in “waterfalls of slime” and “deluging muck.” Here men suffer, “tired with dull grief, grown old before [their] day,” the tragic victims of incompetent staff who “speed glum heroes up the line to death” and ignorant civilians who rejoice in music halls and “mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.” But to really understand the Great War and its aftermath is to move beyond the canonized texts, to question simplistic notions of cultural staying power, and to recognize the parts readers, writers, and publishers play in producing or contesting shared images of the past. This project is well under way; Dan Todman and Rosa Maria Bracco, for example, have shown that readers in interwar Britain preferred the middlebrow over the modernist, and Rupert Brooke over Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon. But despite the fact that the Great War was a conflict of empires, the “history of war writing and modern memory,” as Santanu Das
points out, “still remains distressingly Eurocentric,” and one might add, very much focused on Britain, the Great War’s literary superpower. Most of the essays in Mary Hammond and Shafquat Towheed’s collection, *Publishing in the First World War* (2007), are dedicated to British writers and publishers; and Vincent Sherry’s *Cambridge Companion to First World War Literature* (2005) is similarly preoccupied with British writing. This article seeks to redress that balance, to draw attention to an immensely active and productive commemorative culture—Australia.

I take my cue from Ann Rigney, who uses the metaphor “portable monument” to capture the potential of a literary text to act as a social framework of memory, a potential, which, she argues (in the context of Sir Walter Scott), is owed to its literariness, its role as public discourse, and its aesthetic qualities. Although Rigney does not use publishers’ archives, she criticizes, like Todman and Bracco, a tendency “to view individual texts as the terminus or outcome of remembrance rather than as active ingredients in an ongoing cultural process.” Instead, she foregrounds the possibility that literary texts can be “recycled among various groups of readers living in different parts of the globe and at different historical moments. In this sense, texts are ‘portable’ monuments, which can be carried over into new situations.” My article follows Mann’s novel across a range of different situations—the war books boom in the interwar period; the Second World War, when reading became a way of sustaining morale; the 1960s, which saw interest in Anzac reach a low; the new nationalism of the 1970s, and its boost to Australian literature; the revival of interest in the First World War in the 1980s; and the most recent memory boom in the new millennium. Reading the biography of Mann’s novel against changing trends in postwar commemoration, I argue that the First World War did not always have an inherent purchase on the Australian imagination, but that its place in Australian cultural memory—and in Australian bookshops—is the result of constant renegotiation and reinvestment.

Leonard Mann was born in 1895, six years before the colonies became states of the Commonwealth of Australia. He died in 1981—in a very different Australia, whose citizens no longer thought of Britain as home. At the outbreak of the First World War, Mann worked as a clerk in the Department of Defence, studying law at the University of Melbourne in his spare time. In 1917, he joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), when the department finally released him. He saw fighting on the western front with the infantry until, after being buried alive by a shell on Passchendaele Ridge, he became so ill that he transferred to the engineers. He was promoted to corporal in
March 1918, but, like Frank, a character in the novel he would later write, he sought permission to relinquish that rank. Upon his return to Australia, Mann later described himself as being “in pretty poor condition both physically and mentally and emotionally.” Exercise helped him regain his physical strength, but the memory of losing consciousness under the Flanders mud continued to haunt him: “the injury,” he wrote in 1947, “is still there beneath to come out when I am overstrained or disturbed.” Back in Melbourne, he resumed his clerical work, while also finishing his law degree and trying his hand at sketches and short stories for newspapers. “It did not occur to me until well on in the Twenties that I might write a novel. . . . I had been asked to write the history of the battalion in which I had served. Well, instead, I would write a novel of infantry in the war, and I did: *Flesh in Armour.*”

*Flesh in Armour* is a fictional battalion history, following a group of Australian soldiers from August 1917, when readers meet the men on leave in London, to October 1918, when the battalion is withdrawn from the western front. Like a battalion history, the novel abounds with names, which are frequently grouped into lists. The novel’s plot develops around three men in particular—the lighthearted Charl, a raw recruit about to see the western front for the first time and hungry for adventure, and the more seasoned, older soldiers Frank and Jim, who respond quite differently to the violence around them. The solitary, anxious Frank, a schoolteacher with left-leaning sympathies, is shell-shocked after being buried alive; unable to control his nerves, he eventually resigns from his rank of corporal. For direction, the men look to Jim, a calm, strong, and assured man who finds himself in the war. The novel is quite open about the men’s sexuality, offering glimpses of the prostitutes in Le Havre, and of Jim and Charl securing an erotic adventure with a French girl and her aunt. What holds Mann’s Australian soldiers and their various battles together is their nationality. In Britain, these foreign figures in their slouch hats and greatcoats stand out, not least when they are made to pay a visit to a duchess, who treats them to a history lesson and sandwiches in the Lower Servants’ Hall. On the western front, they contrast favorably not so much with the Germans, whose “low, merry laugh . . . had no bitterness, nor malice, nor fear,” but with the inexperienced Americans and the incompetent and careless British. Of the three male protagonists, only Charl survives. Jim dies, having scattered an impending charge single-handedly. Frank takes his life after the final attack, having found out that his fiancée has slept with Charl. Mann’s novel invests these personal tragedies with a larger meaning. As the surviving men leave the front line, one soldier muses,
Some effect that return must have. They were a people, the war had shown that. The A.I.F.—was it not the first sign that they were, the first manifestation that a spirit had begun to work in the material mass? . . . It seemed, now that he was leaving the war and the old, familiar landscape of death, that his life and the life of his generation was finished. They were the dung for the new flowering and fruit of the future.  

Mann recalled writing his first novel as “a very lonely venture,” pursued after hours and outside Australian literary circles. But in an important respect Mann was not alone in revisiting his war in writing. “The Story of the Great War,” H. G. Wells observed in 1927, “is being written from a thousand points of view. It has produced, and continues to produce, a crop of wonderfully vivid and illuminating books as unprecedented as itself.” “The Great War,” echoed Cyril Falls in 1930, “has resulted in the spilling of floods of ink as well as blood. There cannot be an aspect of it which has not by this time a considerable literature of its own.” Indeed, Falls was well aware that his critical guide to this vastly growing field, as thick as a war book itself, would be “out of date before it was published.”

This worldwide war books boom had reached its peak in 1929, just as Mann was beginning work on *Flesh in Armour*. “By April 1929 in Germany, and by June in England, the Great War had come into its own,” New Zealander Eric Partridge wrote from London. The year was dominated by Erich Maria Remarque’s novel *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*), which had sold 640,000 copies in Germany by early May. The book’s dust jacket proclaimed that, with this novel, Germany had finally found its national war memorial: “Remarque’s book is the monument of our unknown soldier, written by all the dead.” But it was quickly branded as the entire world’s war novel, as describing, as Putnam put it in its brochure, “three things: the war, the fate of a generation, and true comradeship. And these things were the same in all countries.” By October 1930, the *Nouvelles littéraires* in Paris called Remarque the “author today with the largest audience in the world.”

But this audience was by no means undivided, for Remarque’s writing was judged in precisely the terms that the German dust jacket had evoked: as a monument, an intervention in a debate about what the war meant and how it should be remembered. Remarque himself was well aware that “a book on the war is readily exposed to criticism of a political character.” Bound page proofs had been sent to Sir Ian Hamilton, the general in charge of the Gallipoli landings and now the president of the British Legion. He
recognized Remarque’s western front—the horrors, disillusionment, and “uninspired strategy.” But he also thought that the author had gone too far by depriving the war of all meaning: “Was there not,” he asked, “the superb leading of forlorn hopes; the vague triumphs, vague but real, of dying for a cause? Was there not also the very patriotism which Remarque treats much as he treated the goose his hero murdered in the officers’ mess?”

The debate extended to other titles, into a whole war books controversy. To some, novels like Remarque’s were brave confrontations of the “naked truth about the war as it was seen and known by those who knew it,” more apt to inspire a longing for peace than any propaganda. Others, however, accused the authors of doing their readers—and the cause of peace—a disservice, by offering a “grotesque legend,” where every sector becomes a bad one, every working party is shot to pieces; if a man is killed or wounded his brains or entrails always protrude from his body; no one ever seems to have a rest. . . . Attacks succeed one another with lightning rapidity. The soldier is represented as a depressed and mournful spectre helplessly wandering about until death brought his miseries to an end.

This controversy filled newspaper columns, pamphlets, and bookshelves, as war books were pitted against each other. It continues today, as historians such as Jay Winter, Dan Todman, Gary Sheffield, and (in Australia) Trevor Wilson and Robin Prior contest popular accounts of the First World War as futile and fundamentally ironic, and provide an important backdrop to the biography of Leonard Mann’s novel about Australia’s Great War.

In the interwar period, Australians also found themselves caught up in a “maelstrom of war novels,” an “avalanche of war literature. . . . Every week, a new book appears.” They were still importing most of their books from overseas. By September 1929, All Quiet on the Western Front had sold almost 50,000 copies in Australia and New Zealand, and it was keenly discussed. One reader, the public intellectual A. A. Phillips, himself a schoolteacher, believed that it should be set school reading: “Then we would have some hope of creating a real anti-war conscience.” Another reader, six years out of school, found such a view idealistic. He, too, had read this and other war books. They had caused him “some fear,” but above all they had left him with a sense of envy: “We young men are immeasurably poorer for having missed the great adventure of war. Does not Mr. Phillips realise that the fear which he hopes will be experienced by every schoolboy who reads these books is almost certain to be subdued by the glamour of war.
described in their pages?” In Sydney, a returned soldiers’ club defeated a motion deploring the novel, contenting themselves with the observation that the book would not last, while the New South Wales government banned it on grounds of obscenity.

With *Flesh in Armour*, Leonard Mann joined this debate. He declared, in a newspaper interview, that the time had been ripe for an Australian war novel:

> It seemed to me that it had been a long time since the Armistice, and so far none of the attempts of novelists to give us an Australian war novel had succeeded. . . . I deliberately refrained from reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*, [Emil Schulz’s] *Schlump* and [Ludwig Renn’s] *War* until after my book was finished. The simple intention of *Flesh in Armour* was to record the actions and reactions of the members of a platoon in the line and out of it. It is not autobiographical, although of course, many incidents have to be taken from one’s own experience.

Publishers rejected the manuscript, and Mann eventually brought the book out at his own expense in 1932. One thousand copies were printed in his native Melbourne and distributed through Melbourne-based publisher and bookseller Robertson & Mullens, whose general manager, a returned soldier himself, liked the book. In fact, Captain Peters, as he preferred to be called, gave it such a good review on the radio that Mann’s “ears nearly dropped off.” Despite its local publication, *Flesh in Armour* attracted national attention. It was reviewed not only in the Melbourne papers but also in Sydney, Hobart, and Perth. It was featured on the cover of *All About Books for Australian and New Zealand Readers*, a monthly magazine. It earned Mann the recognition of fellow Australian writers, who welcomed him into their circles. In October 1933, it even won the Australian Literature Society’s gold medal for the best Australian novel of the previous year.

And yet the impact of the book was far from immediate. “Very few people appear to have read it,” two of Mann’s contemporaries, the novelists Marjorie Barnard (1897–1987) and Flora Eldershaw (1897–1956), noted in 1938, “it has not received the attention it merits.” They considered *Flesh in Armour* a literary event, worthy of inclusion in their *Essays in Australian Fiction* (1938). Literary critic Nettie Palmer (1885–1964), another contemporary of Mann’s, concurred. She considered *Flesh in Armour* “one of the best novels in English about the last war,” and deplored that it had only been read by “a handful of people. A few weeks ago I heard a commentator
say quite confidently that no good Australian novel had come out of the last war.” 46 In the eyes of Barnard and Eldershaw, Mann had simply come too late, “after the spate of overseas war books had died down, when public taste was sated and the inevitable revulsion had set in.” 47

Reviews, private letters, and publishers’ records reveal that the story of *Flesh in Armour* in interwar Australia is not so much a tragic tale of missed significance as a complex drama of conflicting expectations. They allow us to map the place that Mann’s novel occupied in interwar Australia, and to reconstruct readers’ diverse expectations of an Australian “war book,” for Australians had ambivalent attitudes about the war in the late 1920s and early 1930s. To those who did read it, Mann’s novel could mean a host of different things. Indeed, by November 1933 the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* reported that the novel “has been fiercely condemned by some readers, and fatuously belauded by others.” 48

Vance Palmer and Nettie Palmer, Australia’s preeminent literary couple of the time, welcomed *Flesh in Armour* as evidence of an Australian literary tradition—the book fitted the agenda of these two relentless campaigners of a national literature. 49 In “An Australian Art” (1905), his very first published piece, Vance Palmer had demanded a stridently nationalist poetics: “There must be no seeing through English spectacles. Our art must be original as our fauna and flora are original. What we require in our present development is not so much cultured writers as ardent nationalists. We need men who will bind us together, in an indissoluble bond.” 50 To Nettie Palmer, even Mann’s trajectory as a novelist had distinctly Australian contours: “He wrote his book absolutely alone, as most of our serious writers have had to do: they have had no stencils to work from & no advisers nor supporters.” 51 That Mann had to publish his novel himself fitted her notion of a struggling Australian writer. Self-publication was not an unusual route in interwar Australia: William Baylebridge had chosen it for *An Anzac Muster* (1921); Vance Palmer for his first volume of drama, *The Black Horse and Other Plays* (1924); and Frank Dalby Davison for his novel *Man-Shy* (1932), which he had bound in butcher’s paper and hawked from door to door, after failing to interest a publisher. As Nettie Palmer mused:

If some one analogous to Chaucer were to begin writing and revealing Australia to us to-day he would first find it almost impossible to be published except at his own expense. Then, suppose the book published at his own expense, the booksellers would dislike handling it, and would keep a few copies in the basement in case they were asked for, while their shop shelves were crowded with
whatever had been reverberating in overseas advertisements and had arrived here with a guaranteed “sales value.”

Mann received an invitation to visit the Palmers. Vance sent “congratulations on a great achievement,” “a fine bit of work” on “such a difficult theme.” Nettie, a relentless networker in Australian literary circles, drew the attention of the writer Frank Dalby Davison to the book: “Has Leonard Mann’s novel ‘Flesh in Armour’, reached you by any channel? He published it himself in Melbourne & Sydney bookshops may fight shy of it. . . . I think the book would strike you, & not for the moment only. Mr. Mann came to see us & we have the greatest confidence in him as an artist.” Davison wrote a note of welcome to Mann, to whom these responses meant much: they encouraged the aspiring writer, who was already working on his next novel, and they formed the beginnings of long friendships. Most important, they generated in Mann a fellow feeling, a sense that he belonged, as he recalled much later, to a larger movement, “a considerable and palpable body of serious Australian writers, drawn towards each other by a natural common feeling, . . . conscious of the separate identity of the Australian people and . . . not unaware that what they were largely about was to show their people to itself.” For Mann, this was a direct consequence of the war in which he had fought: “More than the political constitution into one Commonwealth, it was that so bloody 1914–18 war which made evident their separateness. . . . The grown self-identification of the Australian people needed to be expressed in literature also.”

When Flesh in Armour received the Australian Literature Society’s gold medal, this seemed to confirm its achievement and its place in interwar Australia. Established in 1928, the medal was Australia’s first annual literary award. It remained the only literary prize of national significance until the inauguration of the Miles Franklin Award in 1957, which has since become the country’s most prestigious literary prize. Today, the Miles Franklin is an illustrious event in the literary calendar; in interwar Australia, the gold medal was not. Frank Dalby Davison and Nettie Palmer despaired over the Literature Society’s lack of media work, and took the campaign into their own hands. Davison informed local radio stations. Palmer mentioned the award in her regular column in All About Books, where she reviewed the book a second time, highlighting it as at once universal and distinctly Australian: “not merely a war novel” that might, she seemed to imply, fall out of fashion, but “a story of human beings, with their subtle contradictions and their mysterious possibilities,” written in a style that was original and yet reminiscent of the writing of fellow Australians—Tom Collins and
William Baylebridge—and thus evidence of “a cumulative force in our literature.” The medal, she wrote, “does at least guarantee the existence of the book it crowns,” but her private correspondence reveals that she had her doubts. She knew very well that the inaugural winner of the prize, Martin Boyd’s *The Montforts*, had gone out of print “just when it was beginning to make itself felt in this country, where it was especially needed.” As for *Flesh in Armour*, a friend of hers had been unable to obtain a copy from the bookstalls of Australia House in London: “Nothing later than *We of the Never Never*,” Nettie Palmer groaned. Hoping that Sydney-siders might fare better, she asked Davison to see “that Angus & Robertson stocked it & perhaps displayed it with a card mentioning the medal. It’s a very significant book.”

Angus & Robertson was an important address in Australia’s literary marketplace. For over a century, the company dominated Australian publishing, counting among its achievements Australia’s first encyclopedia, and among its authors famous Australian names such as A. B. “Banjo” Paterson, Henry Lawson, Xavier Herbert, Katharine Susannah Prichard, and Judith Wright. The firm had started out as a bookselling enterprise, and in the 1930s the bookshop was still its most profitable venture. It sprawled across an entire city block in Sydney, “a landmark for booklovers throughout Australia.”

Also in Sydney was the country’s biggest printing operation, Angus & Robertson’s own Halstead Press.

In October 1933, Mann approached Angus & Robertson, having taken heart from winning the gold medal. He knew that Frank Dalby Davison had had a similar experience: after his self-published *Man-Shy* (1931) had won the gold medal, Angus & Robertson had repented and published it. For Mann, the first response was encouraging: Angus & Robertson offered to represent him in England and America, and sent a complimentary copy of the house’s “latest war-book,” H. R. Williams’s *The Gallant Company*, hot off the printing press. Disappointment followed five days later in the form of a curt letter: “Dear Mr Mann, We have gone into the question of re-publishing *Flesh in Armour* but would rather not take it on. Thanking you for writing about it.” No further explanation was given.

To the publisher, Mann had introduced himself as “the author of an Australian War novel”—and that was precisely how *Flesh in Armour* was judged, not so much on its literary merits but on its success in recapturing and interpreting Australia’s Great War as Australians imagined it. Even after the international war books boom had calmed down, war novels and memoirs remained a viable form of commemoration in Australia—portable monuments indeed. Australia’s main veterans’ organization held a war nov-
el competition to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Gallipoli landings. Angus & Robertson published the winning entry, Jack McKinney’s *Crucible* (1935), to the acclaim of the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, which judged it “a good war-book and a good memorial to the A.I.F.”

To be sure, some readers had grown war-weary. One, assessing the typescript of a war diary for Angus & Robertson, recommended rejection: “simply an account of trench warfare, a thing which everybody who reads is already familiar with.” But for other Australians the boom had stirred an appetite for the local homegrown product. Indeed, a second reader of the same typescript concluded that “Angus & Robertson should think twice before turning down this Diary,” considering that it “does for the A.I.F. much what Remarque has done for the Germans on the Western Front.” While the reader’s report readily conceded that the Australian piece could not compete with *All Quiet* on literary terms, it pointed out that the diary was free from the “dirt that revolts one in that book.” Instead, this returned soldier offered humor and “a much more interesting story for Australians.”

The book did come out eventually, as *Jacka’s Mob*, in the early 1930s, together with the bulk of Australian war books from the interwar period.

Indeed, while Leonard Mann was preparing his private edition of *Flesh in Armour*, Angus & Robertson was gearing up for the publication of Joseph Maxwell’s western front book, *Hell’s Bells and Mademoiselles*, telling the author, “We will certainly get good publicity and the book should go off with a bang.” Published in October 1932, around the same time as Mann’s book, Maxwell’s memoir sold 2,000 copies within six weeks. “We have sold right out and are printing another two thousand,” the publisher proudly proclaimed in mid-November. By December, that second edition was still going strong, and Angus & Robertson had already asked for a sequel.

Why, then, was *Flesh in Armour* less successful? The novel certainly had its devoted readers. A returned soldier, John Dalley, in a lengthy review in the *Bulletin*, specifically compared it with the best-selling *Hell’s Bells and Mademoiselles*:

To the average Englishman of the war years the Diggers were like the cheery buccaneers of the book by Lieut. Maxwell, VC, which was reviewed in last week’s *Bulletin*. Their battle discipline was admittedly splendid, but their discipline out of the line was supposed to be bad, and so were their manners. Actually, most of them were quiet, rather shy idealists, the products of conventional and often religious homes, who had all sorts of early-Victorian notions about womanhood, friendship and duty in general.
He commended *Flesh in Armour* as a distinctly Australian tale: “Everything is right; idioms, jokes, prejudices, aspirations, brutalities—the very names and nicknames are racy of Australia.” In January 1933, in an attempt to boost the book’s disappointing sales, Robertson & Mullens could put together an impressive sales brochure quoting praise from eight different critics.

Yet at the same time, Mann’s book had disappointed, angered, even disgusted many Australian readers. The *Hobart Mercury*, while welcoming, was annoyed by the novel’s “tendency to decry the British Generals and staffs as wholly incompetent and entirely foolish. . . . It is largely untrue, as history well shows.” To this critic, the book’s vulgarity was a further diminishing feature. A reader’s letter to *All About Books* raised the same concerns, in a less generous voice: to her, *Flesh in Armour* was disappointing, unpleasant, lurid, besmirched, unsavory. “Having been closely related to many men who fought, and to some who fell, in the Great War, I like to read the books that have since been written about that awful holocaust, so that I may have an understanding sympathy for those who are still suffering from its effects.” But she had neither sympathy nor understanding for Mann’s characters, not because one of the novel’s soldiers commits suicide, but because of the men’s erotic adventures while on leave in Britain. Such immorality, she felt, “was not the central experience of our infantrymen.” Instead, she would have preferred Mann to give “a picture of the wonderful comradeship which in so many cases remains unbroken to this day. He could have told of the hardships, the privations, the unendurable nerve-strain and perhaps the soldiers would then have gathered their women-folk about his book to hear ‘just this bit and that bit,’ as we were gathered many times around Sherriff’s *Journey’s End*.” This reader’s letter was printed together with responses from soldiers who came to Mann’s defense, arguing that the AIF was “not an army of Sir Galahads.” But not all returned men agreed: the soldiers’ magazine *Reveille*, too, found the book “too real.”

Angus & Robertson was a conservative publishing house, and in this debate the publisher’s reader assessing *Flesh in Armour* took a conservative view. The book, he believed, caricatured and distorted, when it should have shown the imperial community united in the war effort. Today Australians have difficulty imagining the Great War as part of a larger imperial story. Indeed, writes the Australian historian Bruce Scates, “If today’s Australians still have an enemy, it is probably the Empire the men of the First AIF died for. One of the most striking differences between family pilgrims today and those who proceeded them is an emphatic hostility to the ‘old ties of Eng-
In Brenda Walker’s 2005 Great War novel, *The Wing of Night*, the protagonist, who has just seen her husband off to the war, struggles with the notion of empire: “The crimson thread of kinship runs through us all. Her husband had been drawn away from her on the end of a leash of red.” Vance Palmer had argued in 1917 that Australians had to stop looking abroad for their center, but in interwar Australia these were still radical views. Australians had fought for Australia and for the British Empire; the very name under which they had sailed off—the Australian Imperial Force—suggested that both destinies were intertwined, an idea that was echoed by the country’s main veterans’ organization, the Returned Sailors’, Soldiers’ and Airmen’s Imperial League of Australia (now the Returned and Services League). The guidebook to the first exhibitions of the Australian War Memorial was entitled *The Relics and Records of Australia’s Effort in the Defence of the Empire*. And the first wreath to be laid at the Shrine of Remembrance, which still dominates Mann’s native Melbourne, came from London. It had been chosen by His Majesty the King, and entrusted to his son, the Duke of Gloucester, who had been invited to Australia to dedicate the memorial on November 11, 1934.

These imperial frameworks of memory were not Mann’s only problem. Angus & Robertson’s reader’s report was unforgiving: “Of the War, the author tells us nothing we do not know. In fact, it is rather tiring to read of it all again and in such detail. For the rest, the book had better never been written. Mann presents a picture of Aussies that will make decent Australians blush.” The publisher’s rejection angered Frank Dalby Davison, who wrote a lengthy letter in support of the book, and even sent his father, a former president of the New South Wales branch of the Returned Sailors’, Soldiers’ and Airmen’s Imperial League into the publisher’s office—to no avail. Nettie Palmer rejoiced at the thought of this “superb howitzer” in action, but she knew Angus & Robertson too well: “A&R’s refusal of the book is of course quite in accordance with the firm’s proudest traditions. The faintest hint that a book can’t be put ‘into everyone’s hands’ (whatever that means) and the fur goes erect along the spine. . . . A&R’s books must above all be innocuous. Once the firm’s frightened it stays so.”

By 1937, *Flesh in Armour* had sold 860 copies of its private print run, mainly in Victoria. But now it looked as if the novel’s fortunes might change. Very soon a new luxury edition of Mann’s book might be sold by itinerant salesmen across the country, for at the Australian War Memorial plans were under way to have the novel included in an *Unofficial History*—“a set of the war books written by individual members of the A.I.F.” Printed on high-
quality paper, and presented in an appealing uniform binding, these volumes were to be sold in an attractive bookcase, alongside Charles Bean’s *Official History of Australians in the War of 1914–18* and *Australian Chivalry*, a coffee-table book of official war paintings, which the Memorial had published in 1933. This ambitious plan never materialized, but it shows how war books had been drawn into the processes of commemoration. Grouped together into the envisaged series, they would create a collective memory of the war, a set of more personal, individual records to complement the larger *Official History*, itself conceived as a monument to the AIF.

When the Memorial approached the director of Angus & Robertson’s Halstead Press, the latter was enthusiastic, and offered, more than once, “to motor up over the week-end to discuss the proposition . . . more freely.” That reaction is not surprising. The Memorial’s initial proposal included a significant number of titles from Angus & Robertson’s own list, whose sales had been plummeting. “Few people are buying *Hell’s Bells* these days,” the publisher noted in December 1937. “All the other War books have faded right out except *The Desert Column*.” The Memorial’s *Unofficial History* was all the more attractive because the man behind it—the Memorial’s director, John Treloar, himself the son of an itinerant salesman—was no novice in the business of selling books. Under Treloar’s direction, the Memorial was already distributing the volumes of *Official History*, which Angus & Robertson’s Halstead Press was producing. Indeed, Australian historian Michael McKernan has suggested that “without Treloar the series might well have collapsed before completion.” At the outset, Angus & Robertson had been responsible for the sales of the *Official History*, which had begun well but lost momentum by the late 1920s, causing the Commonwealth auditor-general to call for the project to be abandoned. Treloar took over in 1934 and, with his teams of itinerant salesmen (all returned soldiers) and a series of clever sales strategies, reversed this situation.

Behind this enterprising activity was not so much a passion for books (or history) as a passion for the Australian War Memorial, which was desperately in need of funds—Treloar was no public intellectual, but a thrifty administrator. Under his guidance began a lively trade of guidebooks, reproductions from the Memorial’s rich collection of photographs and art works, and spare collection items with “a sentimental value so often lacking in ordinary gifts.”

The planned series of Australian war books, of which *Flesh in Armour* was to be a part, was yet another line in this ever-expanding business. It was conceived largely to keep the salesmen busy and to retain existing
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customers—and for this purpose, too, the form of the series was useful. Treloar anticipated that “many subscribers would be glad to obtain this second set of war books to add to their library which many of them founded with the *Official History*.” This required an attractive, high-quality product. Treloar had spent much time experimenting in the reproduction of photographs, fretting over frames “simple yet novel . . . which may particularly appeal to women who are interested in the colourful decoration of a home.” Now, much in the same vein, he was poring over fabric swatches, rejecting dummy books clad in a coarse brown cloth as disappointing. Buyers of the *Official History* had repeatedly asked for a bookcase that would hold their newly acquired library, and Treloar thought that such a “bookcase might help to commend the new set.” What he had in mind, then, was something to be owned and displayed as much as read—yet another item for the returned man’s household.

This does not mean that questions of content were not addressed. Here, too, quality mattered, and to Treloar this meant inoffensive reading material with a wide appeal. His proposal was inspired by Angus & Robertson’s *The Gallant Legion*, a library of twelve war volumes—mostly memoirs, all previously published—which was advertised as covering every front and every service, and suitable “for every Australian home.” While no records survive to tell how Treloar chose the fifteen titles on his initial list, it is quite clear that he followed the principles of Angus & Robertson’s selection. For each title, he had excerpts from reviews typed up, complete with short notes on the author’s war service. The excerpts reflect the mood of the war books boom, drawing out the works’ “fresh,” “vivid,” “lifelike,” “sincere,” and “truthful” qualities—here was the “war as the Digger knew it.” But they also emphasize the bright and humorous, as well as the upbeat: T. H. Prince’s *Purple Patches* (1935) was commended for showing “the spirit of comradeship rising above the turmoil of futile war,” and H. R. Williams’s *The Gallant Company* (1933) was praised for placing on “record the feelings and reactions not of the highly sensitive but of the average man.” Only two novels made it onto Treloar’s list—Mann’s *Flesh in Armour* and McKinney’s *Crucible*—both on account of the awards they had won. And Treloar frankly wondered whether he had made the right choices: “For example, *Blood in the Mists* appeals to me as being a doubtful quantity. *The Fighting Cameliers* is also rather suggestive of a regimental history and I understand exception has been taken to some sections of it. Maxwell’s book [that is, *Hell’s Bells and Mademoiselles*] may also be thought to be rather trashy.” Mann’s novel remained on the list, even as Treloar abandoned the
The idea of reissuing Angus & Robertson’s books for “a set of new titles, or at any rate of books not so widely known.”94 In its third and final iteration, however, the proposal moved away from Australia—and away from *Flesh in Armour*—to look overseas, where Treloar hoped to find “war books of good quality from a literary standpoint and of interest.”95

By the time the Australian War Memorial was finally opened on November 11, 1941, Treloar was already back in uniform, collecting material from the new war that Australia had entered on September 3, 1939—material for his Memorial, and for a new series of fifteen service annuals, featuring prose and poetry produced by the troops and illustrated with Australian war art and photography. The 1.9 million copies sold made a substantial profit for the Memorial’s fund.96 Treloar’s *Unofficial History* never materialized—the proposal was shelved with the outbreak of the Second World War.97

Nevertheless, for Mann, the new war also presented a new opportunity: in Canberra, the government itself was working on an unofficial history of a different kind—a library of Australian classics, to be supplied to the public at home, Allied servicemen based in Australia, and Australians serving overseas. What this powerful patron—the Commonwealth Literary Fund—had in mind was not a set of luxury editions acquired over time and sold in initial print runs of 1,000–1,500, but an affordable paperback canon delivered within months, in record print runs of 25,000 copies. The idea for such an Australian canon predated the war, but the war gave it momentum and added urgency. And one of the books chosen for the Australian Pocket Library, as the new series was called, was *Flesh in Armour*: this time, publishers had no say in the selection. Palmer, a member of the Fund’s advisory board, was convinced that publishers’ “taste is to say the least, questionable,”98 and was therefore adamant that they should be in charge of production and distribution only. The Fund was to retain control over the selection of books, format, prices, and royalties, and would approach publishers about works in which they had copyright. Publishers would benefit from a special supply of newsprint, made available by the government.99

In wartime Australia, reading could be part of the war effort. At the Memorial in Canberra, the records of the First World War had quite literally become valuable works of reference, as the *Canberra Times* proudly reported:

> Day after day, the ’phone rings, or a letter arrives from Headquarters: “What was the wastage in bicycles in the Cambrai stunt?”—“How much cotton wool is needed for a Battalion (a) in
Visits to the literary archive, libraries, and bookshops could be equally fortifying. Indeed, reading and book buying were now patriotic activities, and readers of “homegrown” Australian fiction were loyal citizens, patrons of their nascent national literature. Members of the Fellowship of Australian Writers took to the microphones: in 1942, at the moment of extreme national crisis, Marjorie Barnard, Frank Dalby Davison, Vance Palmer, Nettie Palmer, Katharine Susannah Prichard, and others appeared on ABC radio to rally the nation around Australian books. They spoke of reading and writing as social practices, of literature as a national heritage that had grown organically, “in the open,” as Marjorie Barnard put it, like a gum tree, deep within the Australian land, “in a floating mass of stories and legends and songs.” Created by men and women “full of love for Australia,” this literature was a repository of cultural memory to which Australians could look for a sense of self: “In Australia, national unity, to which we are now trusting so much, is the stronger for having been confirmed in the pages of our nascent literature,” argued Davison.

But Davison knew all too well how difficult it could be to obtain these pages. “Some of our books are very hard to get,” he had complained to Nettie Palmer in 1933, and reported proudly his feat of securing a first edition of Such Is Life “for a bob.” The war had only aggravated this situation, increasing everywhere the demand for books while limiting their availability. By late 1942, this “general ‘drought’ of books” had become critical. In 1943, the AIF Women’s Auxiliary for Prisoners of War turned to Prime Minister John Curtin, complaining that practically every Australian book they wanted to send to the camps was out of print.

Curtin deferred to the Commonwealth Literary Fund, which had already been contemplating a small library of classic Australian works since 1939. Vance Palmer, who sat on the Fund’s advisory board, was quick to see a unique chance to dictate to paper-hungry publishers a program of literary memory that might transform what he had, in the 1920s, characterized as “a public capable of responding to the hints and adumbrations of distant voices” into an audience for Australian work. In Palmer’s vision, this audience included all Australians in and out of uniform. He speculated that attractive book covers might stir interest among university students.
whose “prejudice against Australian books,” he thought, was “largely due to the crude, vulgar (or at any rate old-fashioned) jackets that they see them adorned with. . . . They re-act strongly against the comic kangaroos and realistic gum-trees of forty years ago.”

The Fund’s proposed list comprised novels, short stories, descriptive writing, historical writing, poetry, natural history, belles-lettres, and anthologies. Mann’s *Flesh in Armour* sat among novels whose narratives spanned 100 years in Australian history, from the 1830s to the 1930s. Titles and subtitles suggest a history mapped in terms of “adventure and discovery” (*Buffaloes*), a grand Australian narrative, played out in the bush, on the goldfields, on the tropical coast, and on the western front, and featuring explorers, pioneers, bushmen, drovers, and soldiers. In *On the Wool Track*, a journalistic text that also formed part of the Pocket Library, Charles Bean suggested that this was the lineage from which the Anzacs came. “The traditions of the back country,” he explained in a new preface, “weighed far more heavily than the mere number of its representatives among the influences that moulded the Australian and New Zealand soldier.”

Neil James has argued that the selection reflected a “nationalist agenda in Australian literature,” but the Australian Pocket Library also presented a conversation about Australian national identity. While Mann describes his Australians’ final moments of the war as “the last and culminating period of their history,” he questions the notion that this began in the Australian hinterland. On leave in London, Mann’s fictional soldiers mock their English hosts who think of Australia as “a lawless place of bushrangers, sheep and cattle” with preposterous “tales just like those they had expected, fights with blacks and chases after bushrangers and snake yarn after snake yarn.” One of his protagonists moves across the western front not with the assured swagger of the bushman, but with the terror of someone “lost in the bush . . . Never so dreadful a circle as this. Never was such a ghastly, dark desolation ever imagined.”

The plans for the Pocket Library were finalized by April 1944, but it took some time to reach Australian readers. By August 1944, the Fund’s secretary reported that “the publishers do not appear as keen on the Pocket Library Series as previously.” Copyright problems, royalty payments, and cover designs proved problematic, and labor was a continuous worry. Two of the proposed titles were simply too long to be stapled. In October 1944, two copies of *Flesh in Armour*, clad in a bright orange cover sporting a map of Australia, finally reached the Fund in Canberra. Buyers in Sydney and Melbourne had to wait until March, as the distant states were supplied first, and the slow rhythm of stapling and collating with a diminished workforce
dictated availability. “I cannot force more than a couple of thousand each week out of our printer,” Captain Peters of Robertson & Mullens, which now published Mann’s book, apologetically wrote to Canberra.116

The Fund’s initiative received wide newspaper coverage, from small announcements to long discussions. While there was disagreement about the selection and the production values, the initiative itself was welcomed. The Bulletin’s critic was alone in warning its readers “not to expect too much from Government institutions.”117 Guy Howarth, a member of the English Department at the University of Sydney, expressed his congratulations “on the vision and courage of the enterprise.”118 Another critic thought that the Fund’s initiative was “the best thing that has happened to Australian literature for a very long time,” and found that the presentation of the volumes did not detract from that impression: “the books stand up to a reasonable amount of mauling.”119 The women packing parcels for Australian prisoners of war disagreed, and withheld their orders: the books, however welcome, were “most unsuitable” for their purpose.120 Others complained that they would gladly have paid the extra costs for stiff covers, and bemoaned the “faulty book binding” and “rotten paper.”121

While the Fund’s selections inspired even more debate, few questioned Flesh in Armour’s place in this Australian canon. One critic still found the novel “frankly difficult reading,” “depressing, sordid and unpleasant,” ruthlessly sacrificing human sensitivities to reality.122 But many thought Mann’s inclusion was justified, and saw in Flesh in Armour a book that still spoke to Australians. “Any Australian,” wrote a critic in the new literary magazine Southerly, “will appreciate, with malice towards none, the true and typical humour of certain minor incidents of the book, such as the reluctant visit to the Duchess of Stexe.”123 The Hobart Mercury found that the book “deserves better than a small pocket edition,”124 and the Melbourne Age noted that Flesh in Armour was “not only a war book that has so far stood the test of time. It is also a worthy literary memorial to the many Australians who died or suffered in the shambles of the First World War.”125 As for readers in uniform, Howarth estimated that the soldiers who found solace and stimulation in the poetry of Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, and C. J. Dennis (also made available by the Library) would meet “with delight that best of Australian novels of the last war.”126 “Read it,” urged Salt, the Australian army’s free education journal, commending it as genuinely Australian in tone, humor, and subject matter:

Why is the republication of Flesh in Armour a fortunate event at the present time? For the simple reason that it sets our own war
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in perspective and fills in a major contour in our history in a realistic way. Dad himself will admit that much romantic flapdoodle has been talked about the last war, and verbal heroics have sometimes blurred the real heroism of the men who did the fighting. Leonard Mann’s book is dinkum. It is quite free from the cheap vice of straining for effect, it is written in our own idiom, and it goes pretty deep. . . . World-famous novels of the last war were *The Case of Sergeant Grischa*, *The Death of a Hero*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*—but it’s doubtful if any of these was better than *Flesh in Armour*—and *Flesh in Armour* is a good deal closer to us.\(^\text{127}\)

The Army Education Service placed a big order for the book, and by late March 1945, 11,990 copies of *Flesh in Armour* had been distributed nationwide. Mann’s publisher was concerned over the fate of the remaining copies, still unbound, and it is unclear what happened to them. But he was nonetheless pleased to be part of the scheme, producing a book that was “deserving of preservation and reissue,”\(^\text{128}\) and in July he proudly sent photographs of his shop-window displays to the Literary Fund in Canberra. Over the entire window a large banner advertised, “Palmer’s *The Passage* and Mann’s *Flesh in Armour*: These two plus seven others at popular prices”; and underneath, a whole section of the display was filled with paperbacks that were lying down, stacked on top of each other like cans of food, and hanging from pegs. *Flesh in Armour* occupied a prominent position, flanked by *The Voyage of the Endeavour* on its left, and on its right a collection of short stories by Gavin Casey, *It’s Harder for Girls*.\(^\text{129}\)

Mann’s was not the only Great War novel for which the Second World War created a new relevance and a new demand, but it was the only Australian war book to be part of this officially endorsed canon and to enjoy the distribution and publicity that the Fund’s collaboration with Australian publishers entailed.\(^\text{130}\) The Australian Pocket Library owed much to Vance Palmer’s understanding of Australian literature; indeed, it was “a coup for a non-institutionalised, non-academic network of writers and critics.”\(^\text{131}\) This network had expressed its appreciation for Mann’s novel before, in radio broadcasts, lectures, newspapers, and letters. The war had created a unique opportunity for these literary nationalists, and the enlarged Commonwealth Literary Fund had strengthened their positions. They used the national crisis to argue their case for a national literature, and they capitalized on the paper shortages to change the rules of the Australian literary marketplace.

For the next two decades, books about the Second World War eclipsed Mann’s novel. The new soldier writers produced export hits that British
publishing houses like Corgi readily bought up, and they enjoyed immense sales. Eric Lambert’s *The Twenty Thousand Thieves* (1951), a novel about his experience of desert warfare in the Middle East, was first published privately, like Mann’s, but unlike Mann’s it soon found a commercial publisher. In 1959, it was among the best-selling Australian novels ever; by 1974 it had sold 750,000 copies.¹³²

By the mid-1960s, however, Leonard Mann sensed a change. “Historians and biographers are again busy about the First World War,” he observed, “old scraps of movies are now made up for television, some books are being revived.” In fact, he had just been asked to review a new edition of Frederic Manning’s *Her Privates We*.¹³³ Hoping that the time had come for a revival of *Flesh in Armour*, he wrote to Angus & Robertson in 1967: “Since Australia is now stuck on the Vietnam escalator the novel about the First World War ought to have some public interest.”¹³⁴ As in 1932, the publisher’s initial response was positive, but in January 1968 they expressed their regrets, and returned his Pocket Library copy of the book, “since it is so rare these days.”¹³⁵

In postimperial Australia, Mann’s anti-Britishness was no longer a concern—but sales were, and for those Angus & Robertson now looked to schools and universities. For them, Mann had come too early: for Australian historians in the 1960s, the Great War remained “a subject for angry tears rather than for investigation.”¹³⁶ When the Australian historian Ken Inglis spoke about the Anzac tradition at a history conference, he met with surprise: it was not considered a subject for academic inquiry, and the country’s prime history journal rejected his article. At the Australian National University in Canberra, Bill Gammage, a young history student who would later write his important book *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* (1974), was struggling to find a supervisor for his honor’s thesis on the AIF on the western front. Staff at the Australian War Memorial were no less surprised by the arrival of the young man who expressed a desire to study soldiers’ letters and diaries for his Ph.D.¹³⁷ Photographs from the 1960s evoke the Memorial library as serene and quiet. There is no visitors’ desk with reading lists and brochures, no family history corner, not even a sign pointing out directions. This is the behind-the-scenes space of cultural memory, entered not through today’s glass doors that slide open automatically and encourage a constant traffic between the working memory of the exhibitions and the archival memory in the vaults, between the collective and the autobiographical, but instead through the rear, past signs marked “staff only.” Here, it seemed to Gammage, “were the relics of antiquity.”¹³⁸ An internal memorandum reveals that Angus & Robertson looked at *Flesh
in Armour in similar terms: “It’s quite a good quiet book but hasn’t the verve of Landtakers or The Young Desire It, and, without a definite textbook prescription, would surely sell even worse than they did. Not popular enough in one way, not up-to-date enough in another way.”

This was not the final verdict on Mann’s war book, however. Australia’s emergence from empire ushered in a “scramble for a national culture,” a process whose milestones included the Australian, a new newspaper founded in 1964; the Australian Dictionary of Biography, whose first volume appeared in 1966; as well as Australia’s Ministry of Culture, founded in 1971. Australian literature was an integral part of this search for an Australian story: “The late 1960s to the late 1980s proved to be the great age of Australian reprints,” writes David Carter, making “Australian literature visible and accessible to contemporary readers as never before.” Having rejected Flesh in Armour twice, Angus & Robertson finally brought out a cheap paperback edition in 1973. In 1985, Allen & Unwin followed with another. The circumstances of these reprints are more difficult to gauge—they seem to have left no traces in the archives. In the 1970s, paperbacks played an important role in the revitalization of Angus & Robertson’s publishing activities, and the publisher established long lists of literary paperbacks with a view to the expanding market of Australian literary studies.

Leonard Mann’s Flesh in Armour is introduced by an almost disgruntled Marjorie Barnard, who bemoans “a population explosion in the world of books” and voices fears for the short life of books in this rapidly turning market: “The individual writer... is working against a glut... Only in the Mitchell Library can a book expect to survive.” Mann’s novel came clad in a silver-gray cover, with a stylized photograph by Frank Hurley, showing soldiers walking along duckboards across the moonscape of the western front. Barnard attested to the documentary value of Mann’s prose: “He writes throughout of what he knew and experienced. The authentic ring of truth is unmistakable.”

But Mann’s prose did not ring true for some of his younger readers. Born during the Second World War, the poet and novelist Roger McDonald had grown up with commemorative sermons that alienated him and removed the battlefields into a dusty, mythical past that bore no relation to the present: “The Anzac legend with its sanctified heroes had nothing to do with our lives in Australia.” And what he found in Australian libraries did nothing to change that “with the exception of Frederic Manning’s Her Privates We, . . . no deeply effective works of imaginative literature were produced by Australians from their war experience. Neither the poems of Leon Gellert and Vance Palmer, nor Leonard Mann’s novel Flesh in Armour or [sic] J.
P. McKinney’s *Crucible* can be mentioned in the same breath as work produced by British writers of the same period.”

McDonald was not alone. Australian public intellectual Humphrey McQueen found *Flesh in Armour* boring and lackadaisical, “nothing like the artery between teeth.”

Others also thought that crucial “records” of the Australian war experience were missing from their libraries, and needed to be rewritten, reimagined. David Malouf wrote *Fly Away Peter* (1981) in an attempt “to create (in terms of present feeling and understanding) a document that the past had neglected to pass on to us.” These impressions received scholarly confirmation in Robin Gerster’s study of Australian war writing, which describes Australia’s literary response to the Great War as “assured and aggressive,” and *Flesh in Armour* as a “half-hearted heresy.”

While the shell-shocked Frank offers a corrective to the lionized soldiers of Australian tradition, Mann’s novel is restrained rather than angry, and contains “a host of heroes who meet the accepted Australian standard of versatility and capability.”

What had seemed unpleasant and depressing to some Australian readers in the 1930s and 1940s seemed insufficiently unpleasant and depressing to a generation living with the fear of nuclear war, who turned back the Great War as the *ur*-scene of a long century of industrialized violence. These writers were heavily influenced by Paul Fussell’s notion that the Great War was fundamentally ironic, “more ironic than any [war] before or since,” counting among its “ultimate casualties” the idea of progress and the traditional rhetoric of valour and sacrifice.

By 1982, one Australian critic believed that “recounting the story of the Anzacs has become something of a growth industry.” Leonard Mann died in April 1981, just when this industry was gaining momentum, when 19,000 copies of Jack Bennett’s *Gallipoli* entered Australian supermarkets, in anticipation of the August release of Peter Weir’s film, on which that novel is based. It is against this backdrop that *Flesh in Armour* reappeared in 1985, for the last time in Australia. In 1932, John Dalley, reviewing the book for the *Bulletin*, had commended Mann’s strengths as record-keeper, and hoped that *Flesh in Armour* “be kept alive, if only for the sake of future historians.”

Now Australia’s most eminent historian, Manning Clark, served as a patron for the book, which he himself had first read in the 1940s when he was tutoring at the University of Melbourne. At the time, Mann had been among the Australian writers who were invited to speak to Clark’s history students. Now, the novelist was “invited” again:

> With the revival of interest in the First World War . . . readers want to find out as much as they can of what those Australian
soldiers lived through. So, at long last, proper recognition can be given to Leonard Mann. . . . Now, when we want to find the truth, we look to him. . . . He was not spectacular: he was not a way-out front man. He was the honest, helpful, reliable man—the man for us as we approach another time of troubles.153

In 1933, Angus & Robertson’s reader had accused Mann of cocksureness and immodesty, complaining that he credited the Australians with more than their due: “On [sic] ‘Flesh and Armour’ the Aussies are demi-gods. It was they (apparently) not the Americans who won the War.”154 Now the author was fashioned as a quiet man, himself an unsung hero, and his war as a European conflict—an important shift in the Australian commemorative landscape. “It is a novel of heroic deeds,” buyers were told, “and the sheer struggle for survival in the senseless carnage of Europe at war.” This notion echoes through the products of the new Anzac industry. In Peter Weir’s film Gallipoli, which is often credited with playing a key role in the refashioning of the Anzac story for a postimperial, post-Vietnam audience, the young Australian protagonist insists, “I’ve come a long way to be in this.” The phrase “12,000 miles away” echoes through Anzacs, a television miniseries that came out in 1985, the same year as the last Australian reprint of Flesh in Armour. It similarly charts the Great War as a foreign conflict. “What’s it got to do with us?” says one character. “Whatever the Europeans want to do is no business of ours.”

Anzacs and Gallipoli are still screened regularly in Australia, as the search for the Great War’s meaning continues with renewed fervor. Since Prime Minister Bob Hawke’s Gallipoli pilgrimage in 1990, which saw veterans return one last time, commemorative services have been broadcast live from Gallipoli on Australian television. In 1993, an Unknown Soldier was repatriated from the western front and laid to rest in the War Memorial’s Hall of Memory, and the last surviving veterans similarly received state funerals. Under the Howard government, the Department of Veterans’ Affairs even created a special Commemorations branch, which did more than any other government agency to enhance Anzac observance.155 On Anzac Day 2008, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd drew attention to the monuments that line Canberra’s Anzac Parade—the avenue that leads to the Australian War Memorial. These were, he said, “silent, still, but speaking to us softly with the voices of a hundred thousand souls.”156

The voices of Mann and his characters are no longer among them, despite the fact that the new wave in commemoration has also seen a new war books boom. Anzac Day and Remembrance Day have become key dates
in the publishing calendar, generating novels and nonfiction that pile up in alterlike displays.\textsuperscript{157} There is, however, one further twist in the tale. In 1933, Angus \& Robertson had offered to place Mann’s novel in the United States. Now, \textit{Flesh in Armour} finally went on that trip.

To Mann’s children, the letter from Columbia must have come as a surprise. The rights to \textit{Flesh in Armour} had been returned to the estate some time ago—and now, in July 2007, Matthew J. Bruccoli was seeking permission to reprint the novel as part of the Joseph M. Bruccoli Great War Series, named after his father, who had served in France: “I am eager to have Australia represented by this excellent novel, which is unknown in America.”\textsuperscript{158} Developed in 2004 in response to the growing attention to the First World War, the series sought to print works from all belligerent nations, introduced by notable literary figures or historians, with an initial cutoff date of 1930.\textsuperscript{159} These were nearly all recruited from the “rank and file” of the boom books, and came to readers in print runs of 1,000 in the original typeset, but with fresh, colorful covers.\textsuperscript{160} One of the first volumes, Lawrence Stallings’s \textit{Plumes} (1924), featured a color-washed photograph of a war cemetery and a picture of the burial of the American Unknown Soldier—a clear indication of the book’s commemorative role. The image of the war cemetery is repeated throughout the series, tying the books together, suggesting equality in death, but also, in the words of the series’ editor, equality in outlook: “The war to end all wars’ generated a vast literature—much of it antiheroic and antiwar. The best books of the war convey a sense of betrayal, loss, and disillusionment. Many of them now qualify as forgotten books, although they were admired in their time. The intention of this series is to rescue once-influential books that have been long out of print.”\textsuperscript{161} The decision to include a book, Bruccoli explained, “is based on what it does to me—how personally I am moved by the material.”\textsuperscript{162} Mann’s novel was a serendipitous find, made in a secondhand bookshop, where Bruccoli came across a copy of the original 1932 edition, which would eventually be used for the reprint.

The Australian novelist Janette Turner Hospital, a close friend of Bruccoli’s and then the Carolina Distinguished Professor in Bruccoli’s own English department at the University of South Carolina, was asked to introduce the novel to its new audience. Turner Hospital was moved by the book, which she now read for the first time. Her introduction strikes a very personal note, using the religiously observed Anzac Days of her childhood as a point of entry into Mann’s war and his book. Her recollection of that experience differs quite markedly from the remoteness that Roger McDonald remembered almost cynically in the 1980s—“I still choke up with the emotion I felt
as a child." She commends Mann’s “frightening but compassionate” depiction of shell shock, and singles out as “powerful and unforgettable about *Flesh in Armour*—and of major literary and political significance” Mann’s depiction of the experience of trench warfare, which some of Mann’s first readers, notably the powerful reader assessing the book for Angus & Robertson in 1933, found tedious. But she shares with earlier readers a delight in Mann’s humor—like Nettie Palmer, she finds the episode of the men’s forced visit to the English duchess “hilarious,” and admires how “magnificently unintimidated” Mann’s fictional Australians are. Indeed, in a reading that would have gratified the Palmers, Turner Hospital detects in this irreverent humor a distinctly national trait that can be traced back to the convict period. Now Mann’s strident nationalism and his anti-Britishness are offered as major selling points: “The novel bears an unmistakable Australian point of view, particularly in its wry sense of humor . . . and in its vehement disdain for British commanders.”

As Turner Hospital was writing, the last veterans of the Great War were dying fast, and she notes that by the time he was seventy-four Mann had already gone silent about “the war that changed his life.” *Flesh in Armour*, she believes, opens up a conversation that veterans would normally only have among themselves. This conversation, Turner Hospital insists, can feed into a continuing debate about Anzac Day, a “flashpoint of controversy in Australian literature and cultural discourse.” The publication and reception history of Mann’s book reveals Australians grappling with that issue, rereading, rethinking, and rewriting what it means.

The Great War’s monuments are now being renovated and restored for the approaching centenary. In Britain, work is under way for a new film of Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, with Daniel Radcliffe (Harry Potter) in the lead. In France, a new war cemetery has been constructed to host the remains of British and Australian soldiers recently discovered in mass graves near Fromelles; DNA tests have identified many of the unnamed men, and “reconnected” them with their families. In Canberra, the Australian War Memorial has already built a new car park and a new café; its First World War exhibitions, last refurbished in the 1980s, will be renewed soon. The National Archives of Australia has created a Web site that allows Australians to link the names on Great War memorials nationwide with the service records of the Anzacs, including the opportunity to leave short commemorative messages. It remains to be seen whether *Flesh in Armour* will undergo a similar process of renewal: it was recently included on a list of some twenty texts submitted to an Australian publisher looking for out-of-print Australian classics.
Notes

I thank my anonymous referees as well as Peter Londey, Curtis Clark, Peter Elford, Jeffrey Makala, Nicole Moore, Robert Nichols, Gillian Russell, Hannah Schürholz, and Janette Turner Hospital for their support.


4. Anzac Day was first commemorated in 1916 throughout Australia, but also in London, where, significantly, the Australians and New Zealanders were the only body of troops to be honored. They marched down the Strand, through Trafalgar Square, and along Whitehall to attend a service at Westminster Abbey, with the king and queen in attendance. See E. M. Andrews, The Anzac Illusion: Anglo–Australian Relations during the First World War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 84–91; Richard Ely, “The First Anzac Day: Invented or Discovered?” Journal of Australian Studies 17 (1985): 41–58; Michael McKernan, The Australian People and the Great War (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 120–125; John F. Williams, Anzacs, the Media and the Great War (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999), 98–101. The word “Anzac” was initially protected under the War Precautions Act in the same year. This was repealed in 1920 and substituted under Statutory Rules 1921.


7. Ibid., 63, 95.


14. In Britain, the war’s best-selling poet was not Wilfred Owen, but John Owenham, who by 1918 had sold over 7.5 million volumes of his comforting, traditional poetry. Owen, on the other hand, was “all but unknown as a poet” when he died in the last month of the war. A first volume of his poetry, compiled by fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon in 1920, reached a print-run of 730 copies; a second impression of 700 was not yet fully bound by 1929. By that time, the collected works of Rupert Brooke had found 300,000 buyers. Dan Todman, The Great War: Myth and Memory (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005), 155, 162. According to Rosa Maria Bracco, “a whole body of work . . . which formed the staple of publishers’ list, needs to be reopened to reveal a set of evidence concerned not with the alienated role of the writer, nor with presenting a reality of irreconcilable fragments, but rather with offering an analysis of their society which would serve as a blueprint for reconstituting the fragments into a familar picture.” Rosa Maria Bracco, Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919–1939 (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 18. Jay Winter has drawn attention to the strength of traditional forms in mediating bereavement, whereas “the cutting edge of ‘modern memory,’ its multi-faceted sense of dislocation, paradox and the ironic, could express anger and despair . . . , but it could not heal.” Jay Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.
17. Ibid., 383.
20. Leonard Mann, Flesh in Armour (Melbourne: Phaedrus, 1932), 225. This edition of Mann’s novel is cited throughout.
21. Ibid., 347.
28. Putnam Australian Circular, n.d., Papers of Arthur Whenn, NLA MS 3656, Series 11, Folder 1. Arthur Whenn (1897–1971), himself a former member of the AIF, translated Remarque’s books into English. The quote on the German cover came from Walter von Molo, then president of the poetry section of the Prussian Academy of the Arts; according to Thomas F. Schneider, “Das virtuelle Denkmal des unbekannten Soldaten: Erich Maria Remarques Im Westen Nichts Neu-

29. Eksteins, Rites of Spring, 276.


33. Falls, War Books, xi.

34. Thus an edition of German Students’ War Letters (1929) was offered as a relief to “readers disgusted with the squalor of much recent War literature.” A. F. Wedd, introduction to Philipp Witkop, German Students’ War Letters (Philadelphia: Pine Street Books, 2002), xxy–xxvii, xxvi.


42. Marjorie Barnard, introduction to Leonard Mann, Flesh in Armour (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1973), n.p. Unfortunately, no records survive to show which publishers turned Mann down.

43. Major Maxted to John Treloar, October 4, 1937, Australian War Memorial, AWM21/1/68.


46. Vance Palmer and Nettie Palmer, “It Takes Readers as Well as Writers to Make a Literature,” in Australian Writers Speak: Literature and Life in Australia (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1942), 87–96, 94.

47. Eldershaw, Essays in Australian Fiction, 121. Vance Palmer argued along similar lines, although he knew better: “I don’t think the ignorance about Flesh in Armour is entirely the fault of readers. Wasn’t its significance missed because it happened to come out obscurely, just after a flood of English and German war books had made people turn against everything connected with war?” Palmer and Palmer, “It Takes Readers,” 87–96, 94.
51. Nettie Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, February 16, 1933, Papers of Frank Dalby Davison, NLA MS 1945 Series 1, item 31.
53. It appears that Vance Palmer’s letter has not survived. Leonard Mann refers to it in his first letter to the Palmers, January 26, 1933, and again on January 30, 1933, when he asks Vance Palmer for permission to use a quotation from his letter on a circular prepared by Robertson & Mullens: “Peters of Robertson’s & Mullens who are handling my book . . . wants to send out a circular containing inter alia extracts from reviews and suggested that a slice out of your letter would be of great help. Of course it would.” NLA MS 1174 Series 1, item 4189. The material quoted above is taken from this circular.
54. N. Palmer to Davison, February 16, 1933, NLA MS 1945 Series 1, item 31.
58. N. Palmer to Davison, October 2, 1933, NLA MS 1945 Series 1, item 45. We of the Never Never, a popular tale of station life by Aeneas Gunn, was first published in 1908.
63. Cousins to Mann, October 17, 1933, MLMSS 3269/246 vol. 453, item 15.
64. Mann to Cousins, October 10, 1933, MLMSS 3269/246 vol. 453, item 5.
68. Cousins to Maxwell, September 3, 1932, MLMSS 3269 vol. 462 Correspondence with Captain J. Maxwell, item 39.
70. Cousins to Maxwell, December 19, 1932, MLMSS 3269 vol. 462, item 73.
74. “A Platoon and a Girl,” Reveille, November 1, 1933, 16.
79. Fred Davison to Cousins, October 23, 1933, MLMSS 3269 vol. 233 Correspondence with Fred Davison Mitchell Library items 9, 11, 13. Fred Davison was one of Frank Dalby Davison’s pseudonyms.
80. N. Palmer to Davison, October 31, 1933, NLA MS 1945 Series 1, item 48.
81. George Maxted, AWM Melbourne, to John Treloar, October 4, 1937, AWM 93 21/1/68, “Proposal to sell war novels.”
82. Treloar to Arthur Bazley, May 26, 1937, AWM 93 21/1/68.
83. W. T. Kirwan to Treloar, July 27, 1937, AWM 93 21/1/68. See also his letter from September 23, 1937.
84. Kirwan to Joseph Maxwell, December 14, 1937, MLMSS 3269 vol. 462 Correspondence with Captain J. Maxwell, item 125.
87. Quotation from 1925 Guide in McKernan, Here Is Their Spirit, 82.
88. Treloar to Maxted, October 5, 1937, AWM 93 21/1/68. See also Treloar’s letter to Bazley, July 9, 1937, another reminder, “The position we are in requires early attention so that we can provide further employment for our salesmen.”
89. Treloar to J. D. McAulay, May 9, 1930, AWM 93 21/1/68.
90. Treloar to Mrs. W. B. Rees, October 16, 1937, AWM 93 21/1/68.
92. Notes attached to Treloar’s letter to Bazley, May 26, 1937, AWM 93 21/1/68.
93. Treloar to Bazley, May 26, 1937, AWM 93 21/1/68.
94. Treloar to Kirwan, November 9, 1937, AWM 93 21/1/68.
95. Treloar to Chief Clerk, September 11, 1938, AWM 93 21/1/68.
96. McKernan, “War Memorial as Publisher,” 34.
97. Bazley, Acting Director, note dated September 22, 1939: “With regard to the proposal to produce a set of war novels for distribution by the War Memorial, the outbreak of war has made it necessary for us to proceed cautiously in our sales section, and it would therefore be advisable to defer this proposal until the reaction of the public to publications on the late war is clearer.” AWM 93 21/6/68.
98. V. Palmer to H. Temby, August 14, 1944, CLF Australian Pocket Library Series, NAA 58/3451 Part 2.
100. “Links with the Past,” Canberra Times, July 26, 1940, held at AWM press cuttings, AWM 93/12.
101. The talks were published as Australian Writers Speak: Literature and Life in Australia (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1942).
103. Katherine Susannah Prichard and Gavin Casey, “How Has the Australian Writer Affected Australian Life?” in Australian Writers Speak, 68–73, 73.
105. Davison to N. Palmer, October 4, 1933, NLA MS 1174 Series 1, items 4300–4302, item 4300.
110. Quoted in James, “Paperback Canon,” 295.
111. V. Palmer to Temby, August 14, 1944, CLF Australian Pocket Library Series 58/3451 Part 2.
112. Charles Bean, On the Wool Track (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1945), vi.
113. James, “Paperback Canon,” 298.
115. Temby to V. Palmer, August 17, 1944, CLF Australian Pocket Library Series 58/3451 Part 2.
120. Frances Derham, A.I.F.’s Women’s Association of Melbourne to Chippindall, Director General, Department of War Organisation of Industry, Melbourne, CLF Australian Pocket Library Series 58/3451 Part 3.
129. Held at CLF Australian Pocket Library Series 58/3451 Part 1. The photos seem to have been attached to Robertson & Mullens to Temby, July 6, 1945, CLF Australian Pocket Library Series 58/3451 Part 1.
Annie Rixon’s *The Scarlet Cape* (1939) had got no more than “one small insignificant notice from the *S.M. Herald*”—relating not to the book itself, but to the fact that the complete print run of 900 copies had been handed to the Red Cross. Rixon to Philip Whelan, April 18, 1941, Papers of Philip Whelan, NLA MS 2449, Series II, Box II, item 648. Whelan (1873–1943) was a former soldier of the AIF who returned from the Great War severely disabled, and henceforth spent his time collecting autographed Australian books. His collection, which he built by writing to the authors themselves, asking for signed copies of their work, also contains an autographed copy of *Flesh in Armour*. Together with the letters and photographs Whelan had received from Australian authors, it was later donated to the National Library, in whose possession it remains, as the Whelan collection. See, for example, W. Farmer Whyte, “Adventure and Books: The Whelan Collection,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 20, 1940.

James, “Paperback Canon,” 299.


Mann to Editorial Department of A & R (Miss Elva Hog), October 21, 1967, MLMSS 3269/246 vol. 453, item 341.

Beatrice Davis to Mann, January 18, 1968, MLMSS 3269/453, item 365.


Talk by Roger McDonald, May 25, 1979, Papers of Roger McDonald, NLA MS 5612/5/12/38, 2.


I thank Mark McKenna, Clark’s biographer, for sharing this information.
157. Michael McKernan, “An Avalanche of War Books,” *Canberra Times*, April 21, 2007, “Panorama,” 4–5. McKernan was responsible for the revival of the Australian War Memorial’s publication program in the 1980s. He notes that in 1989, the Memorial published Ian Grant’s *Jacka VC*, a biography of Albert Jacka, the first Australian in the First World War to be awarded the Victoria Cross. In 2006, Allen & Unwin brought out Robert Macklin’s book with the same title, and even the same cover photograph, but a much better cover design: “They had taken vastly more trouble because Australian military history had come to stand alongside other mass market titles. Macklin’s is a good book but its presentation and marketing show a confidence that was simply not around when Ian Grant’s book came out.” (ibid., 5)
158. Matthew J. Bruccoli to Richard Mann, July 12, 2007, unprocessed papers of Matthew Bruccoli, Rare Books & Special Collections, Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina.
160. E-mail from Curtis Clark, Director of University of Southern Carolina Press, to the author, July 17, 2010.
164. Ibid., xv, xiv.
165. Ibid., xvi.
168. Ibid., xi.