

Martin Boyd

(1893–1972)

A Single Flame (1939)

*This extract from one of Martin Boyd's autobiographies emphasises the reluctance with which a member of Australia's foremost artistic dynasty enlisted in the First World War. He came to do so in England. Here, we follow him on the leisurely, but for many one-way, sea voyage to war. Besides revealing Boyd's uncertainties as to where 'Home' truly was—an issue for many Australians of his time—the seeds of his later pacifism are discernible. Boyd was spared to write fiction that exemplified his horror of war, including the novel *When Blackbirds Sing* (1962).*

On the night war was declared I went to the *Mikado* at Her Majesty's Theatre in Melbourne. I met Cousin Lizzie there and was bewildered by her enthusiasm. Having foretold the war she felt it was almost her private concern, and no retired colonel was more busy with maps and pinned flags. The posters blazoned that Australia had offered twenty thousand men to England. I imagined that I would be one of them.

I was immeasurably depressed. Every one seemed to think some glorious picnic had begun, and one which was made more enjoyable by the ingredient of moral indignation. My adolescent belief that I should have to go and fight if England were attacked by Germany had been overlain by my Shavianism, my aesthetic preoccupations, and all my optimism for the brave new world. It was difficult to drag it up from under these things.

I heard women talking of their sons who were longing to get to the front, and who were terrified that the war would be over before they arrived. I could not understand their attitude. I do not think I am trying

to gloss over cowardice when I say that the idea of maiming and killing other men, who like myself would simply be acting under orders, was nearly as repellent to me as being killed or injured myself. Perhaps there is a cowardice in disliking the idea of inflicting injury. Here, again, one has the problem of how much brute is necessary in one's make up. In an argument with my father about the war he told me that I was 'curiously constituted' because I did not enjoy the prospect of fighting, and again I had the sense of being a misfit.

I remember on a beautiful summer evening walking along a country road near Warrandyte with my cousin Susan and saying that if a party of Germans were to turn the corner, and if they were in uniform, it would be my duty to try and kill them, and how senseless and bestial was the whole idea. If one was obliged to go, there was nothing else to be done, but I could not see the attraction of living in filth, of shooting and being shot. To talk of the war as if it were a hurdle race at school or a run with the Yarra Glen and Lilydale hounds seemed to me the depth of brutal imbecility.

To my relief I found that no one expected me to go. A doctor cousin said the idea was fantastic. The war was remote from Australia, and at the beginning people only expected the more virile and adventurous type of youth, which I obviously was not, to volunteer, as for the Boer War, and they expected it to be over even before these arrived in Flanders. Then it was announced by the recruiting authorities that no one would be taken who had a physical disability, to do with my teeth, from which I suffered. I was relieved again that the onus of deciding was no longer on me, and I then declared my pacifist views with an easy mind. I mostly made myself tiresome at Cousin Ted's on Sunday afternoon, where the 'wrong end of the magnet' tried to shame me into the army, and horrible middle-aged men wished they were young again. I was far more ashamed of my dental plate than of my pacifism, and gave no excuse for staying at home. Cousin Ted said: 'As I am unable to go to the war myself, I don't feel that I have the right to advise any one else to go.'

He had a carved two-headed-eagle in his hall. At the outbreak of war he had the heads amputated and replaced by a fleur-de-lys.

I went to the local cinema with a friend who turned insolently away from a kindly old German musician for whom she had always had a friendly greeting.

I had lost sight of the idea of the England of Richard Grenville and Wordsworth and Tennyson, in peril of her life. The whole thing seemed

to me an apotheosis of Captain Jacks. Then one evening, coming home in the train, I read that the recruiting authorities had removed the embargo on men with my particular disability, and my mind, leaping to extremes, I thought: 'That is my sentence of death.' I was sitting in the left-hand corner of the carriage, facing the engine. The paragraph was small print half-way down a column of the *Herald*. When I looked out of the window, pondering its implications, I saw the red-brick convent between Elsternwick and North Brighton.

The next day I told my parents that I was going to enlist, and in the evening I went to the recruiting station in the basement of the Melbourne Town Hall. I was passed fit, but when they found I was born in Switzerland they would not enlist me until further enquiries had been made.

In the meantime, one of my uncles-by-marriage, who had thought me a worm as a child, did me this good turn. He told my parents that I would not survive the life of an Australian private, and that I should go to England and get a commission among people 'of my own class.' In Australia there was no direct access to commissioned rank.

It was the end of August 1915 before I left Australia. My architect employer kept me to finish the working drawings of a huge warehouse, which I was sufficiently advanced to do unaided. Also I had to wait a few weeks for a berth in a liner.

When I left my mother she had already spent nearly a year lying on a sofa, and it was another year before she was up and about again. Her body seemed too frail to bear the sorrows that had come upon her, but her spirit was strong. There are some lives in which the pattern of tragedy and affliction is evident, and the scientists are still children until they have discovered the cause of this. It cannot be all put down to individual psychology. It was nothing to do with my mother's psychology when on a fine afternoon she stopped the wagonette to walk across a field to the house, she was met on arrival with the corpse of her beautiful and brilliantly promising eldest boy, who in that ten minutes had been thrown from the pony on which he had been riding beside her.

I left on the *Miltiades*, an Aberdeen liner that went round the Cape. I had a great many presents of articles which were supposed to be of use at the Front. An aunt gave me a money belt, stuffed with golden sovereigns. I took with me a bag of golf clubs and someone said that was no way to go off to a war. My parents gave me everything they could and opened an account for me at a bank in London.

A great many people came to see me off at the ship. Among these was a girl with whom I was in love, though it was undeclared. I had a vague idea that it was dishonourable to make any advances to a girl 'of one's own class' unless one was in a position to marry her. Just before the ship sailed occurred one of the most shameful incidents of my life. I lured this girl round to a secluded part of the deck with the intention of kissing her, but when we were alone I found myself too inhibited to do so.

I shared a good deck cabin with a commercial traveller on his way to Perth. The weather was stormy, and after the excitement of departure I was very unhappy at leaving my parents and my small sister. At intervals to me in this sick and miserable condition appeared the commercial traveller, smoking a strong cigar, and saying: 'What you want to do is to get up and eat a hearty meal.' This went on for a week, while the ship plunged like a submarine through the Great Australian Bight.

At Perth the commercial traveller was replaced by a Rhodes scholar. After a day ashore I suddenly became well again and took an interest in my fellow passengers. I became more friendly with a young man named Lord whom I had known as a child, but who had since been to one of the famous English public schools. He enjoyed telling me about England, and in which areas of London it was possible to live, and where to have one's clothes made. For all his knowledge of the correct thing he was a sentimental and engaging young man and when the ship drew away from Fremantle, he said: 'I wonder when we shall see Australia again.'

I gave an indifferent reply and he was shocked. I had cut my umbilical cord on the day I left Melbourne. Yarra Glen and Kew Hill were holy places to me, but I had no feeling for the soil of Fremantle merely because it was Australian. Lord had some reason for his sentimentality, as before he returned he had been badly wounded in the stomach and had undergone seven operations.

Most of the young men on the ship spent their time reading *Infantry Training*. I read Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson* which had been given me by Susan, and pored over Mrs Carruthers' Baedeker. Mrs Carruthers and her son, a youth of about twenty, who was also on his way to the war, were aristocratic in appearance and very consciously genteel people. Mrs Carruthers as well as Lord told me about London, and talked a lot about nice people and nice neighbourhoods: 'The part about Knightsbridge' she most preferred. But she could be friendly and amusing and in a certain dress she said: 'I feel like Rosie Rapture, the pride of the beauty chorus.'

There was a very attractive Danish couple on the ship, who were avoided as German spies.

Older but more innocent than either of them, I listened to Lord and Carruthers talking about women. Carruthers was chaste in fact and intention, not from moral scruples, but because, as he said: 'I couldn't bear to have a paid woman messing me about.'

Lord startled me by talking not only of women but of boys with equally interested appraisal. I expressed surprise and he told me of the prevalence of homo-sexuality among public-school boys, sailors, and Egyptians. I thought this rather more funny than shocking and said: 'Then really it's quite virtuous just to go with a woman.'

We called at Durban and Capetown, where some South Africans joined us, young men who had been in the campaign in German South-West. The ship had at one time been cut in half and lengthened, and a dummy funnel had been added for the sake of appearance. Its spacious gloom, reached from the boat-deck, made a rendezvous for lovers. Carruthers said that one heard sensual chuckles coming from it at night. 'Sensual chuckles in the dummy funnel' became a stock phrase with us.

The ship rolled lazily northwards through a sweltering ocean. I felt as if I were suspended between two incarnations. Part of me had died in Port Phillip Bay. The past and the future were dreams, and the only reality was this ship, where from Mrs Carruthers and Lord I gleaned brief glimpses of the life to come. The life of the ship had a curious unreality, with the lazy games under the awnings; the pseudo-smart people from the tropics who talked of *sahibs* and *tiffin*; the bogus spy and his lovely wife; the slight excitement of flying-fish; the pock-marked and bejewelled woman at my table who complained about the perfectly good food; and at night the queer phenomenon of sensual chuckles in the dummy funnel. It was unlike anything that I had known hitherto.

At concerts the third officer, who had a broken nose and a tenor voice, used to sing very sweet songs, which stirred my still adolescent longings. He sang about a girl who was brown and bright and made for love, and about another whose two grey eyes and two white arms were waiting for him. In the evening, when before dinner I lay in my bath of warm sea-water, with the sub-tropical sun streaming through the skylight, I thought sensuously of the impersonal acquiescent girl waiting for me somewhere.

We called at Teneriffe, my first contact since infancy with an old civilization. The water was bluer in the shadows of the boats that came out

to meet the ship, and more opalescent than I had ever seen it in Australia. The golden brown Spaniards dived from the bridge for coins. One could see them deep down, like fishes in the clear water. I went ashore with the Carruthers. We visited the bull-ring, the cathedral, where there was a flag captured from Nelson, and then drove up the hill to luncheon in a hotel garden. The cobbled streets and the crumbling walls, all this sun-drenched antiquity, filled me with delight.

Lord had gone off with the Rhodes scholar to the brothel. In the evening in my cabin they were describing, for the benefit of Carruthers, their afternoon's experience. Lord said: 'I didn't do anything. She was too much like a cow.'

He had, however, bought some obscene post cards. I looked at them and they affronted my imagination. I had not thought that it would be like that. Those leering men and black-stockinged women bore no relationship to my dreams of the nymphs in the olive groves.

Lord and Carruthers and the Rhodes scholar went on talking about the brothel, and took no notice when I told them to shut up. So I soaked a bath towel in water, crept along the deck, and flung it through the porthole, where it caught fairly their three heads, bent over the post cards. I fled and dodged them all over the ship, through places forbidden to passengers, and finally lay in a lifeboat, and heard them a few feet from me, wondering where in the devil I had gone. I had the feeling of elation which the foxhunter, excusing his sport, says the fox enjoys. But I doubt if I would have enjoyed it so much if I had known if I were caught, I would not merely be ragged, but broken up, and pieces of my body hung on a wall.

On the last four days of the voyage there was the chance of our being torpedoed, and some people did not dress for dinner, though I could see no particular argument against being drowned in a dinner-suit. I was very anxious not to be torpedoed, as one of the consolations for coming to war was that I would see England before I died.

I landed at Plymouth and spent two or three days walking about Devon and Somerset to get myself into good condition after the seven weeks on the ship. I saw the cathedrals of Exeter and Wells and the ruins of Glastonbury. I became gothic drunk. For fifteen years my imagination had been historically stimulated, and when for the first time I visited the scenes of the ancient dramas, their beauty and significance struck me more forcibly than they could ever have done if I had grown up amongst them. A young man is more likely to fall in love with a girl whose face

is strange to him, than with one who has always lived next door. In every cathedral and church and inn the remembered pages of John Richard Green leapt to brilliant life. I had this reward for my long exile.

In a church in Plymouth a woman spoke to me, and when I said that I had just arrived from Australia she invited me to tea in a drawing-room that was made festive with twenty yellow satin bows tied to the furniture. In Somerset, in another church, a youngish woman in widows' weeds came up to me and asked why I had not joined the army. I told her that I had just come from Australia for that purpose, but she did not believe me, and gave me a short address.

I went to see the tombs of my mother's family in their chapel in the parish church of a Wiltshire village. In the stained glass window appeared the same arms with which I had been familiar on the carriages at Wilton, and in this chapel my parents had sat in a high enclosed pew before I was born, which accentuated the immediate sense of homecoming I had on arriving in England. To many Australians this will seem shameful and renegade . . .