



A war on emotions

The latest edition of Bill Gammage's *The Broken Years* appears in time for Anzac Day, 50 years after its genesis, **PETER STANLEY** writes



Almost exactly 50 years ago a teenaged schoolboy from Wagga Wagga visited Canberra with his family. At the War Memorial his mother disregarded old ornate wood-and-glass doors marked "Staff Only" and they found themselves in the old library.

There they met staff member Bruce Harding, also from Wagga. Rather than shoos them out, Bruce showed the Gammages around. He opened a filing cabinet and pulled out a file of letters written by a soldier from the Great War. "That stuck," Bill Gammage recalled.

Two years later Gammage was driving a wheat truck in the Riverina in the ANU holidays. He parked his lorry in the queue at the Boree Creek silo and walked over to look at the local war memorial. He noticed "more names it seemed than then lived in Boree Creek". That stuck too.

Gammage might have become a pioneer historian of the depopulation of rural Australia. Instead, he became intrigued by the Great War, soon after buying volumes of Charles Bean's official history in a jumble sale. His honours year, 1965, coincided with the 50th anniversary of Gallipoli. Ken Inglis's writings on its meaning for Australia encouraged Gammage, and he wrote ANU honours, masters and doctoral theses on Australia and the Great War.

In 1974 ANU Press published his doctoral thesis as *The Broken Years*. Penguin took it up in 1975, producing an illustrated edition in 1990. Melbourne University Publishing has now produced a new illustrated edition.

The Broken Years was a pioneering work of history, partly because Gammage practically invented the use of "soldiers' letters and diaries" in writing Australian military history, something that we take for granted

today.

As my National Museum colleague Anne-Marie Condé has shown, for a decade from the mid-1920s the energetic Arthur Bazley collected soldiers' letters, diaries, memoirs and private papers for the War Memorial's collection. Though justified by reference to Bean's official history, he had in fact barely used them. Hardly anyone had until young Gammage turned up to do his thesis.

Himself the grandson of an Anzac, Gammage realised the potential of the contents of those cabinets. He did something no academic researcher had done and fronted up to the old library to ask to have a look.

The rest, as they say, is history.

So unfashionable was the study of war that young Gammage found it hard to attract a supervisor, even at a university ambitious to lead the developing field of Australian history. Bruce Kent (who is still knocking around ANU) took him on.

Gammage used about 1000 men's letters and diaries. He had the immense good fortune to benefit from the advice and the astonishingly detailed recall of Bazley, Bean's confidential clerk, who had largely gathered those sources.

It is extraordinary for a work of history to endure for half a lifetime.

Gammage acknowledges that he missed some aspects of the Australian Imperial Force's experience; sex, for one. Others will contest his claim that "the average Australian soldier was not religious".

Some claim that he had neglected to analyse the AIF's military efforts, though the book proclaimed early on "this is not a military history of the First AIF". In fact, *The Broken Years* was an attempt to write "an emotional history of the AIF", though he didn't call it that at the time he saw it more

in the stern (German) empirical tradition of describing the past "as it was". But its emotional tone explains its durable value.

The Gallipoli chapter, "Nationhood, Brotherhood and Sacrifice", remains, I think, the single best thing written to explain what Gallipoli meant to Australia.

Melbourne University Publishing's edition is handsome and expansive. Larger than any previous edition, it reproduces Gammage's text at a generous size. It includes his many source notes (though, unfortunately, as endnotes; why do publishers remain resistant to footnotes, when technology makes putting notes on the page easier than ever before?). But MUP retrieves itself with the lavish presentation of images.

Gammage has gone on to write other books, all notable. He has written on the social and environmental history of rural Australia (*Narrandera Shire*; perhaps the wait at the Boree Creek silo had other effects) and the Australian adventure in Papua New Guinea (*Sky Travellers*). His current research, on how indigenous people shaped the landscape through fire, will be equally stimulating. But Gammage will always be known for having the insight to realise that he could answer the question "What did the Great War do to Australia?" by reading and thinking about those letters Bruce Harding pulled out that day 50 years ago.

The Broken Years remains, to use an overworked compliment, an Australian classic. An artefact of its time, it also speaks to generations of readers not born when the last edition appeared.

Dr Peter Stanley recently floated the idea of forming a Canberra Great War Study Group.



Author and historian
Bill Gammage.



5 Battalion veterans
Anzac at the Suez
Canal defences,
January-February
1916. An image
from *The Broken
Years*.

