

Roland Perry, *The Australian Light Horse: The magnificent Australian force and its decisive victories in Arabia in World War I*, Hachette Australia, Sydney. 2009. ISBN: 978 0 7336 2272 4.

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For Australians, the Anzac legend and spirit is something which is sacred. It is this spirit which Australians have used as the foundation of our national history and social character. Yet the Anzac spirit, which was forged under fire by Australians during World War I (1914-1918), seems in recent times to be only present within our collective and popular consciousness when Australians think about those battles and events which occurred at Gallipoli or the Western Front. Roland Perry's *The Australian Light Horse* attempts to reclaim for the Anzac legend those Australian troopers of the Light Horse who fought just as gallantly in the Middle East against the Ottoman Turks as they had earlier at Gallipoli.

To achieve this, Perry helps the reader understand who the men were that made up the ranks of the Light Horse. These troopers came from all across Australia; they were not just men who had spent their lives working and riding horses, but also many came from the urban centres who had never before been on the back of horse. These men were attracted to the noble and gallant sentiment attached to the Light Horse; to ride off into battle just like the legendary cavalries of the past.

While Perry's book is written for a wider audience, it should not be dismissed as lightweight. It is a work which will not be lost on the broader reading populace as he is able to portray the Light Horse in the same manner which Australians have become accustomed to for other ANZACs. For example Perry depicts Australian bravery under fire in the Middle East in the language attributable to the Anzac legend:

Mounted stretcher-bearers arrived and attended to [the wounded] with their customary bravery. Some explained their courage by the fact they had to save lives. It was their job *and* duty. They didn't have time to think about anything else. They just did what they had to in any accident situation. None had shirked the heaviest of fire. (page 10)

Passages such as this one reveal Perry's gripping style which places the reader into a battle, to feel the heat, fear, adrenaline, and the determination of the soldiers under fire.

However, Perry does go beyond this typical glorified language to tell the wider story of the Australian Light Horse and the complexities of the Middle East theatre of war. The author explains how in May 1915 the mounted rifle troopers, trained and expecting battle on open plains, were seconded to the Gallipoli peninsula as makeshift infantry to assist those Anzacs already fighting in the trenches. While initially these troopers were not adequately suited to this close quarters warfare, their sacrifices at places such as 'the Nek', where hundreds of Light Horsemen died, led these units to solidify a spirit with the other Australian soldiers fighting against the Turks.

After their withdrawal from Gallipoli, the Light Horse was returned to Egypt where it was led by Australian Sir Harry Chauvel under the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) to continue the war against the Ottoman Turks. This was seen by the troopers as a chance for redemption after the disaster at Gallipoli, and the opportunity to defeat the Turks. Apart from bringing to light these sentiments, Perry also draws attention to the enormous task of mobilising, acclimatising, and training not just the troopers to the harsh desert environment but also the huge number of horses which had been transported from Australia. The author shows that the 'walers' – those horses from New South Wales – were necessary for the type of warfare the Australians would be waging against their enemy.

Perry interlaces the story of the Australian Light Horse on the Eastern Front (Middle East) with the geo-political imperial ambitions of the British and the French, and the espionage and guerrilla warfare enacted by T.E. Lawrence who set about leading an Arab revolt against the Ottomans. At times Perry strays into these two subject areas, but no story of the war in the Middle East can be effectively told without *Lawrence of Arabia* and the British and French carve up of Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Mesopotamia (Iraq). Yet the author is able to find a suitable balance between these themes, and identifies the vital role Australians played in winning the war in the Near East.

For me the most enjoyable element of Perry's work is how he has skilfully brought to the forefront the significant battles and victories which the Light Horse achieved. Such battles as Romani, El Arish, Rafa, Magdhaba, and Beersheba, were significant in defeating the Turks and their German allies in this theatre of war. Perry covers these victories along with the 10th Western Australian Light Horse being the first to enter the vital city of Damascus to accept the city's surrender. The last act was later officially reported by the British as being achieved by Lawrence and his Arab force; a fact which has downplayed the Light Horse's importance and involvement within the Middle East at both the time and ever since. The names of Beersheba and Damascus need to find a place within Australian popular consciousness which elevates them to the same standing as at those famous battles on Gallipoli and the Western Front such as the Somme, Fromelles, Ypres, Polygon Wood, Passchendale, and Villers-Bretonneux.

Perry supports these efforts of the Light Horse in battle by also recognising individual bravery. While many Australians know of Simpson and his donkey at Gallipoli, it is stories like those of Corporal F. P. Curran which are desperately needed to be brought into Australia's understanding and which will increase an appreciation for the Anzac spirit. In one battle Curran rode back into the oncoming enemy to rescue seven wounded troopers. Not to be deterred by the heavy Turkish

fire, Curran attempted to save an eighth trooper but was shot in the back and killed. Probably the best story that Perry tells is of the huge 16-hand chestnut horse known as Bastard Bill who was “famous for bucking and never having been fully broken in.” Under attack Bastard Bill carried five troopers – three on his back and two clinging to the stirrups – more than a kilometre to safety. On this, Perry said that Bastard Bill’s “spirit was evident in a crisis....Any other horse would have collapsed. But not this Bastard.” (pp 160-61) Surely it is stories such as these which embody the Anzac spirit?

As Perry has accurately managed to convey, the Anzac legend is more than just Gallipoli. Australians need to embrace a greater understanding and appreciation of all those soldiers and troopers who fought in all theatres of the Great War. Roland Perry’s *The Australian Light Horse* is a book which can help us to gain this wider knowledge and wisdom.