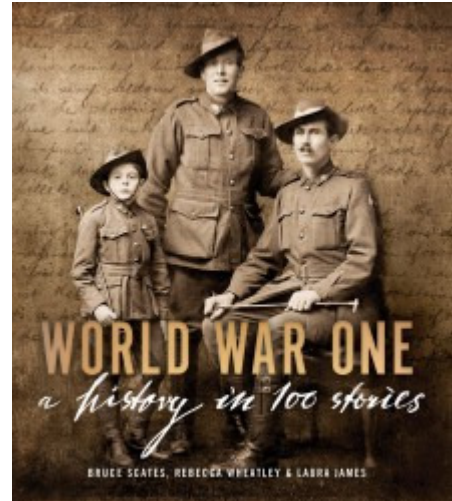


World War One: A History in 100 Stories

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Extract

Introduction

There aren't many books dedicated to the memory of a four-year-old child. But this one is. We don't know who Isabella Wilkinson might have become. We know nothing of the challenges she may have faced, the opportunities she might have seized, the hopes she might have harboured. Like every young life, hers was one filled with promise. Sadly, Isabella's life ended abruptly after four short years when her father smashed her skull in with a hammer.

Frank Wilkinson was what they called a nerve case. He was one of a generation of young men who came back scarred by the war – physically, psychologically and emotionally. Once, Frank was a hero. Bombardier Wilkinson was awarded the Military Medal at Passchendaele after taking part in some of the most terrible and costly fighting Australian soldiers endured. He survived the war but not the peace. Frank returned to Australia in 1919, took up land as a soldier settler at Stanhope, failed as a farmer, struggled against debt, illness and depression and, ten years after Passchendaele, took his own life. Before slitting his throat, Frank turned on those who loved him, bashing both his daughter and his wife to death.

No one hurried to condemn Frank Wilkinson in the 1920s. Perhaps because Australia was full of similar stories, equally tragic: good men undone by the horrors of war, brutalised by what they had seen and what they had done, unable to escape the nightmare of Passchendaele or the Somme, Gallipoli or Palestine. The question is, are we prepared to hear such stories today?

In 2012, the story of Frank Wilkinson and his family was presented to the Anzac Centenary Advisory Board in Canberra. It was one of one hundred stories developed by historians at Monash University – narratives designed to capture the true cost of war to our community. Fighting didn't just maim and kill Australian servicemen and women, though that price was staggering enough. The pain of war tore through townships large and small, cast a shadow of grief across many thousands of families, and left a crippling legacy of trauma. For families like the Wilkinsons, the Great War did not end in 1918. A hundred years on we, too, still live with its consequences.

Prior to Frank Wilkinson, Canberra had endorsed all our presentations. This was the story that went too far. 'Why was it necessary,' one board member asked, 'for historians to be so brutally honest?' As if a dishonest history would somehow be preferable. A senior civil servant told one of the authors of this book that all the public hoped for from the Anzac Centenary was 'a warm fuzzy feeling'; it was not the intention of his department to disappoint them. We were presented with an ultimatum: if Canberra was to adopt the 100 Stories project in its commemorative program, Frank Wilkinson's story would have to go. The tragedy of little Isabella would be quietly forgotten and replaced with what one board member called 'a positive nation-building narrative'.

There will be no shortage of nation-building narratives over the course of the Anzac Centenary. We will be told time and again a story of courage and sacrifice, fortitude and endurance, mateship and resolve. There will always be a space for such stories as Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand remember the Great War. But perhaps a hundred years on there is space for other stories as well; perhaps we should seek out stories often

marginalised in those 'nation-building narratives'. We believe the Centenary is a time to gauge the cost of war for our entire community, and we believe that far from building a nation, the Great War tore us apart.

By reading this book, you affirm the decision we made in Canberra. Frank Wilkinson's story is not one we can afford to cast aside. It stands alongside ninety-nine others, one hundred stories in all to mark the Centenary of Anzac. We have selected these stories from across Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. They highlight the experiences of women as well as men and recover Indigenous narratives too long ignored by mainstream histories. Amongst the cast of the 100 Stories are not just soldiers, sailors, airmen, nurses; but parents who lost their sons, wives who struggled with shell-shocked husbands; children who never knew their fathers; daughters like Isabella Wilkinson. The recent release of repatriation records has extended our understanding of war well beyond the battlefield. New sources (hitherto locked away in closed archives) offer fresh insights into the way war came home. Each story is a microhistory in itself, but all relate to larger issues during and after the fighting. The 100 Stories are not just about the lives of individuals but the experience of combat, the nature of loss and bereavement, the politics of gender, nation and empire, and the challenge of building a new society in the aftermath of war.

We offer these stories as an insight into the generation of 1914–1918. But the 100 Stories are just the beginning. Within every community that suffered through the Great War there are hundreds of similar stories; the mass digitisation of papers, letters and journals enables researchers the world over to find an Isabella Wilkinson in Austria and Serbia, Turkey and Germany, Russia and France. We hope these stories suggest ways we might extend this conversation beyond the narrow national and imperial boundaries that drove the world to war. And like every sample, this one has obvious limitations.

The stories we have chosen do not claim to be representative in any statistical sense; nurses, Indigenous soldiers and shell-shock victims are all over-represented here. We highlight their stories to redress what we see as a great imbalance in the way we remember that watershed in human history. And we contest the simple tallies that diminish the true cost of war. Officially, Australia's war dead numbers 60 000; New Zealand's around 20 000. But that counts only those who had died when our armies were formally disbanded. What of the tens of thousands who died of war wounds years after the fighting had ended; a 'burnt out' generation that lingered on in repatriation hospitals, whose lungs corroded away years after being gassed, cot cases confined to bed for most of their lives?

It is hard to say if suicide cases are over-represented in this collection. Many coroners left their findings open and we can never know how many desperate men took their own lives. What we can say with certainty is that for many, the nightmare of war never ended; thousands returned to Australia irreparably damaged. Many could never readjust to civilian life, some knew no other life than that of soldiering. And there were many other non-combatants who died as a result of hostilities, Isabella Wilkinson included. In a conflict of such catastrophic scale, the true number of casualties can never be counted. *World War One: A History in 100 Stories* is a collective endeavour. Authorship is shared here between senior and early career historians. All the stories have been painstakingly researched and, where possible, we have consulted the families concerned.

Conventional histories are bounded by the archives, and the 100 Stories respects that need for a verifiable 'truth'. But the writing of history is also a creative endeavour; a matter of perspective and choice. Very occasionally, we have embarked on what might be called an 'imagined history' – constructing the diary of a nurse from medical case notes, sketching the scene of a battle or a homecoming, imagining what one of Australia's first pilgrims might have thought as he prepared for a journey to war graves overseas.

We acknowledge our immense debt to the families, archivists and researchers who suggested stories in addition to those we found. Finally, we thank the relatives of Isabella Wilkinson and all those other families who have come forward in the course of this project. We have benefited immensely from their suggestions and welcome further comments from readers.

A hundred years after the end of the Great War, the telling of these stories aids in our understanding of that conflict. It widens the ambit of remembrance, beyond our blinkered vision of 1914–1918 to the broken years that lay beyond. And perhaps it helps to heal the pain of a past we never truly left behind.

The 100 stories distill the experience of the Great War. Amongst the cast of the 100 stories are not just soldiers, sailors, airmen and nurses, but parents who lost their sons, wives who struggled with shell-shocked husbands, children who never knew their fathers. The themes these stories explore - grief and suffering, hope, anguish and loss - are universal. They are told in a language everyone can understand and are based on archives only just opened to historians. Hear from leading historians in the field, and together debate the meanings of the stories. Home News. First World War Centenary: Powerful photographs bring wartime Britain. History of the First World War in 100 moments. A History of the First World War in 100 Moments: Massacre at Wirballen. History of the First World War in 100 moments. A History of the First World War in 100 Moments: The day they shelled. History of the First World War in 100 moments. A History of the First World War in 100 Moments: When the guns fell. History of the First World War in 100 moments. A History of the First World War in 100 Moments: A poet leads his. History of the First World War in 100 moments. A Hi...