

## ANN CAREW

# Matchless son and brother: Eric Harding Chinner

Goodby, darling parents.  
Fondest love from your soldier laddie,  
Ericy Boy.<sup>1</sup>

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In the days leading up to the battle of Fromelles in July 1916, First Lieutenant Eric Chinner was on fatigue duty, repairing trenches along the battlelines in France, near Fleurbaix. He was serving with the Australian Imperial Force in the 32nd Battalion of the 8th Infantry Brigade. At 6 pm on 19 July 1916 he led a party of grenadiers into the German trenches near Fromelles. On that one night the 5th Australian Division lost 5533 soldiers. The 32nd Battalion alone suffering a devastating loss of 17 officers and 701 other ranks.<sup>2</sup> Chinner was mortally wounded during the battle. An exceptional young man, dearly loved by his family and friends, the letters and personal belongings he left behind give an insight into the experiences of a young officer serving in the Australian Imperial Force, and are now held in the State Library Victoria Manuscripts Collection.

The letters from Eric in the State Library collection are typed transcriptions of the originals. Although his mother, Sarah, cherished his letters, they were destroyed following her death in 1947. Fortunately, Eric's older brother, Mervyn, a Hansard reporter in the Commonwealth Parliament in Melbourne, had transcribed the letters in the 1920s and these transcriptions became family

treasures. Mervyn's daughter, Elizabeth Alice Guest, donated her father's transcripts to the State Library in 1965.

Eric Chinner was born in Peterborough, South Australia, in 1894, the fifth child of Thomas and Sarah Chinner. He grew up with four brothers – Mervyn, Clive, Cyril, Thomas – and one sister, Viv, in a Baptist household.<sup>3</sup> He was educated at Prince Alfred College in Adelaide. In 1909 he passed the junior commercial exam and came first place in the honours list for bookkeeping. After finishing school, he worked as a bank clerk while also serving four years in the military cadets, attaining the rank of lieutenant.

In August 1915 Eric enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force and was sent to the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in Canberra, for three months, and subsequently for a two-week course at the Machine Gun School in Randwick, New South Wales. In October 1915, at just 21 years of age, he was appointed 2nd lieutenant and posted to the 32nd Battalion.

According to his family, Eric posted to his parents an 'inscribed' army biscuit from his army camp in Australia.<sup>4</sup> The message read: 'A SOLDIER HAS TO HAVE GOOD TEETH AND THIS IS WHY'. Many soldiers were known to break their teeth eating a 'hard tack' biscuit and resorted to soaking the biscuits in water, grating them down to a porridge or, like Eric, writing messages on them and sending them back home.

Eric set sail for Egypt in December 1915 on the HMAT *Geelong*. He thoroughly enjoyed the sea voyage, and counted the days on the 'troopship' as 'amongst the happiest of his life'. In a letter to his parents he writes:

On Wednesday we will see land. One of my boyhood's dreams will come true. I shall see the coast of Africa. And then comes the Red Sea. Then the [Suez] Canal, and then – well, I'll have to wait and see, for that is all I know. It is still hard for me to realise that I am to see other lands, other life, other nationalities – the wonders of this world. I'm lucky and I am thankful for the opportunity of seeing so much.<sup>5</sup>

On their arrival in Egypt, the 8th Brigade (comprising the 29th, 30th, 31st and 32nd battalions) joined the newly raised 5th Australian Division in Egypt. In March, Eric attended an officer training school where he was fiercely competitive with the English officers he encountered there. He writes to his brother Clive:

I have been promoted to First Lieutenant now, and I am very well pleased. I went to a three-weeks school of instruction in Cairo, and there were 350 officers in the school, and fully 300 English Tommy officers. They are an



Left: Eric gave this gold locket to Gladys Dunn, c. 1914. Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15834

Right: 'Laddie', portrait of Lieutenant Eric Harding Chinner, 1915, gelatin silver print, courtesy of John and Andrew Guest

awful lot of snobs, so I made my mind up to take them down a peg or so. I worked hard and had the satisfaction of being amongst the first half dozen, with a percentage of 96%.<sup>6</sup>

He was immensely proud of his success and sent Mervyn a copy of his results, writing that he was now 'slogging' to get his captaincy.<sup>7</sup> 'I am glad to be a soldier,' he wrote to his sister Viv and her family in April, 'but I shall welcome the day that brings with it the return home. Victory gained; duty done, welcome home.'<sup>8</sup>

Along with copies of Eric's letters and other family correspondence, Elizabeth Guest donated a collection of photographs and negatives to the State Library. The pictures were taken with a No. 3 Autographic Kodak camera that had a stylus for inscribing information on the negatives. Amongst the images are photographs taken by Eric in Australia, on board the *Geelong*, and in Egypt. He also carried with him a developing tank and a printing frame, so it is likely that he printed some of these photographs himself. In 2015, Eric's camera was also donated to the Library – by Eric's great-nephews (Mervyn's grandsons), John and Andrew Guest.

By May, Eric's spirits had fallen and he had grown tired of the heat and living conditions in Egypt, he writes to his brother 'Dick':

Dick, old man, if they don't shift us out of this HELL very soon there won't be much of us left for them to shift. It's more than I can stand, and I'm a healthy brute. Every day is well over 110 deg. now, and it has been 127. I'm full up of Egypt and so is everyone else ... I tell you straight, Dick, it's dashed hard to keep smiling when sweat is pouring off you, dust filling your mouth and lungs, rotten with diarrhoea and dysentery. Foolsore, weary, fed up with everything ... I thank my lucky stars I've got a cheerful mate. Hagan always sees the humorous side of things ... Well, Dick, this is a pretty miserable kind of a letter to send home, but it will show you that it's not all beer and skittles out here. Don't show this to Mother because she will worry.<sup>9</sup>

The 32nd finally departed Egypt on 17 June 1916 to sail to France on the *Transylvania*. Eric arrived in Marseilles on 23 June and was transported with his battalion by train to Fleurbaix and then, in the first week of July, to a school of instruction for grenadiers in Terdeghem. He was appointed acting brigade officer when he rejoined his unit in Fleurbaix on 14 July. As he writes to his brother Clive, who was also on active service, the battalion was preparing for its first major battle:

In a couple of days we are taking part in a great offensive. We are the first to go over the parapet ... I am not afraid. Of course, I'm a bit shakey, but not very scared. Of course, we are trained for a bayonet charge, so we expect it more or less. Well, Clive, old chap – I'm writing this to you because you will know something of what is doing should anything happen. I feel sure that God will watch over me and pull me through. Cheero anyway. Love and thanks from Brother Eric.<sup>10</sup>

On the evening on 19 July, Eric went over the parapet. The battle was a disaster for the 32nd Battalion, which suffered 718 casualties, close to 75 per cent. Eric and his close friend, Lieutenant Thomas Percival (Perce) Hagan, were amongst those killed.

The collection of Chinner family correspondence held at the State Library is a palpable record of their grief. It includes transcripts of letters sent to the family from relatives and friends in the months following Eric's death, and a report from official war correspondent and later war historian CEW Bean. Some of these report that Eric was a prisoner of war, others that he died of wounds as a prisoner of war, and others that he was killed during the action on the night of 19 July. Eric's great faith in God and in prayer is



Eric sent this army biscuit home to his family to indicate the quality of the rations he was receiving while training in Australia. Army biscuit no. 4, Huntley & Palmer, c. 1915–16, Pictures Collection, H28109

evident in his letters to his family. Because Eric fell in German territory and his family feared that he had been buried in a mass grave, they sought to learn from officials whether there was any record of a Christian burial.<sup>11</sup> The exact whereabouts of Eric's grave remained a mystery for almost a century.

In 1927 Mervyn, who corresponded with military authorities over many years, received a letter from his friend, Charles Bean:

I am inclined to think that your belief is correct, and that he was buried in a common grave by the Germans at Fromelles. As to obtaining any trace from the German side, the only course that I could suggest would be to search the cemeteries on the spot. There is little likelihood, however, of your brother having been placed in a separate grave unless he reached hospital. The history of the 21st Bavarian Infantry Regiment, which was opposed to him, says: 'For the fallen enemy, mass graves behind Fasanen Wood were arranged.' This means 'Pheasant Wood' or 'Pheasant Copse' (for

the German word means 'little wood'). The German dead were buried in the cemetery of Beauchamps. I think your brother would probably have been buried behind Pheasant Copse; whether this grave has been discovered by the British graves authorities, I do not know.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in 2008, a burial ground was located at Pheasant Wood, close to Fromelles. It was thought to contain the bodies of 250 unknown British and Australian soldiers, who had been buried by German soldiers after the battle of Fromelles. Following a 2008 report in the *Australian* about this discovery, a remarkable connection was made in Adelaide. When a photograph of Eric's great-nephew, John Guest, along with a portrait of Eric Chinner, signed 'Yours sincerely Eric H Chinner', appeared in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, local John Leask immediately recognised Eric as 'Laddie', the soldier in a framed photographic portrait that belonged to his unmarried aunt Gladys Evelyn Dunn (1895–1985).<sup>13</sup> Eric had also given Gladys an exquisite locket which is engraved with Eric's school crest and the initials EHC – for Eric Harding Chinner. Inside the locket is a tiny hand coloured photograph of Eric. After discovering the identity of the soldier's family, Gladys's nephew gave the locket to Eric's relatives. Gladys and Eric had been engaged to be married. Gladys's nephew recalled that Gladys rarely spoke of her fiancé 'Laddie', but she kept his locket until the day she died, aged 90.

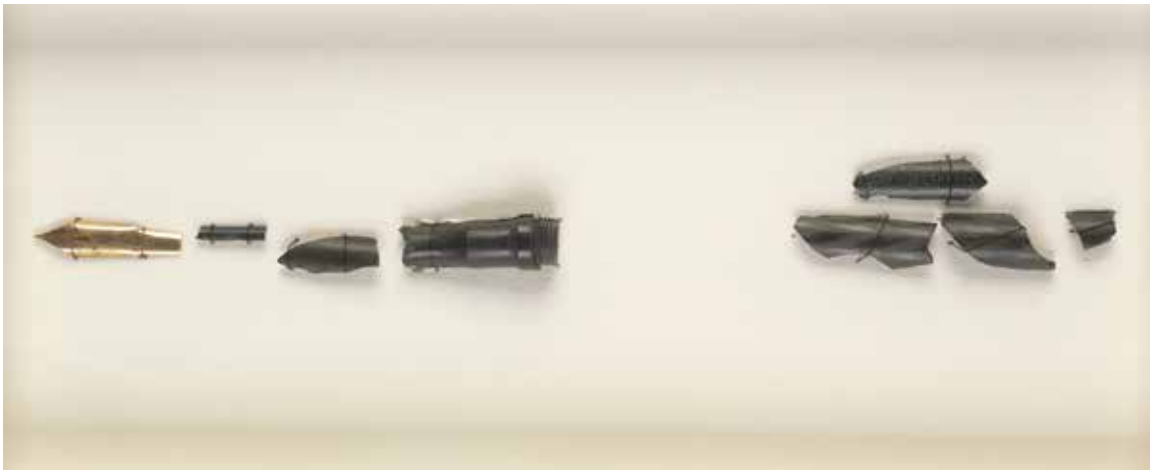
While there are no surviving letters from Eric to Gladys, she is mentioned in his letters and, following his reported death, Eric's Platoon Commander, Captain Jack M Hutchens, wrote to her:

My dear Miss Dunn

You have long ere this received the very sad news of Lieut. Chinner's death, and as the one remaining officer of his old Company I felt I must write this little note of sympathy to you ... While condoling with you, I know you will be proud indeed to know that your soldier boy died at the head of his men – a man's and a soldier's death ... and yet I know your sorrow must be to some extent alleviated by the pride which is rightly yours – to know he died leading his men to victory, and the grandest death any soldier could have and the most noble of sacrifices in the sacred cause of freedom and liberty.<sup>14</sup>

Gladys sent a copy of the letter to Eric's family, and Mervyn transcribed it for the family archive.

In 2008, the British Government sent a team of archaeologists to exhume the bodies at Pheasant Wood.<sup>15</sup> By means of DNA from relatives, Eric's remains were identified in 2009. In 2010 his remains were reburied in the



Fragments of Eric's pen, which were recovered in 2009 from the burial ground at Pheasant Wood. Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15872

presence of family members at a new cemetery in Fromelles. His headstone is engraved with the words his parents and family composed in 1920:

Matchless son and brother  
Ever tenderly cherished  
In our hearts<sup>16</sup>

In 2011, the British recovery team sent back to Australia fragments of a pen that was recovered from Eric's uniform. It is likely to be the one he had used to write his letters home. This precious item – an extraordinary and tangible link between the trenches of World War I and modern memory – has now been conserved, and was recently donated to the State Library by Eric's great-nephew, Graham Chinner.

The collection of items that Eric Chinner's family has generously donated to the Library give us a unique understanding of aspects of his war experiences, and of the impact of his war service over generations. Eric's letters convey the admirable qualities of his character – his honesty, his love of his family and his faith. His letters are included in a short film produced by State Library Victoria in 2014, *Writing the War: personal stories from the World War I*. His story is also featured in the commemorative Museum of the Battle of Fromelles which opened in Fromelles in 2014.<sup>17</sup>