

## JOHN ARNOLD

# Commemorating staff who served: the Great War honour board at State Library Victoria

Regular users of State Library Victoria usually approach the La Trobe Reading Room with a purposeful stride, while tourists are invariably overawed by their first view of the magnificent domed reading room. All tend to bypass or simply ignore the polished-timber honour board just to the right of the entrance to the reading room.

Headed 'VOLUNTEERS WHO SERVED IN THE GREAT WAR 1914–1918', the board records the name of the 13 staff from the 'Public Library and National Museum' who saw active service in World War I.<sup>1</sup> It is a significant memento of the Library's history.

The decision to have a board to honour the staff who volunteered for service was made as early as 1916. A competition for the design was held amongst the current and ex-students at the two National Gallery schools and TV Carter was awarded three guineas for his winning design.<sup>2</sup> By early 1917 the Chief Librarian, Edmund La Touche Armstrong, could boast in a letter to the *Argus* that, of the 23 unmarried men of military age on the staff, 13 were serving overseas. Seventeen had volunteered for service but four were rejected, presumably on medical grounds. Another four of the 23 were under age and their parents did not consent to them enlisting.<sup>3</sup>

Although its design was commissioned early, the board itself does not seem to have been made or hung until some time in 1922 or 1923. There is no further

Honour board, 'Public Library and National Museum Volunteers who served in the Great War 1914–1918', State Library Victoria

PUBLIC LIBRARY  
and  
NATIONAL MUSEUM

VOLUNTEERS  
WHO SERVED IN  
THE GREAT WAR 1914-1918

J N Perry  
DAR Wright  
•SDJ Figgis•  
FP Selleck MC  
•PG Towl DSO•  
•LVDA Slattery•  
E L Frazer  
F E Leask  
•J T Swain DCM•  
EM Kinley  
G E Longton  
H L Dunkley  
•J C Keys•

•Killed in Action•  
•Died on Active Service•

mention of it in the Library's trustees reports other than a line recording the sum of £9 1s for 'Honour Board' in the 'Statement of expenditure for the year ended 30 June 1923'.<sup>4</sup> It was possibly overshadowed by the competition (and controversy) for the design and installation of the World War I mural over the entrance to the Queen's Hall.<sup>5</sup>

The honour board was initially installed at the entrance to the Queen's Hall. It was later hung adjacent to the stage of the old Museum Theatre. When the Melbourne Museum moved to the Carlton Gardens in 2000, the board was moved to the Australiana Enquiry Room off the domed reading room and moved to its present position in 2014, as part of the Library's commemoration of the centenary of the Great War.

Of the 13 names listed on the honour board, five were killed in action or died of war wounds. This is double the percentage of the overall loss (18.3%) for Australian soldiers who embarked for overseas service.<sup>6</sup> Using the Australian Imperial Force Nominal Roll,<sup>7</sup> the National Archives of Australia's *Discovering Anzacs* website,<sup>8</sup> the Roll of Honour,<sup>9</sup> and, where available, the 'Particulars required for the Roll of Honour of Australia in the Memorial War Museum', as completed by their next of kin; and other war records, one can obtain a glimpse of the background of the five who made the supreme sacrifice.

Samuel Douglas Johnstone Figgis, an assistant librarian, was the first Library staff member to lose his life.<sup>10</sup> He died, aged 20, on 10 August 1915 of wounds received during the battle of Lone Pine at Gallipoli and is buried at Beach Cemetery on the Gallipoli peninsula. The nominal roll describes him as a private serving in the 5th Australian Infantry Battalion but his father, who completed his 'particulars file', crossed out 'Private' and replaced it with 'Corporal'. He also provided considerable detail on his son's life and background. A bright student, Figgis won a government scholarship from Canterbury State School, Melbourne, and first place in the Hawthorn College Scholarship competition. He then went to Trinity Grammar and was about to start a science course at the University of Melbourne when he enlisted. According to his father, Figgis was 'a keen philatelist & had a splendid [stamp] collection'. He was also 'a good cricketer & tennis player' and 'Loyalty to all his friends & associations was a prominent phase of his character'. He had belonged to the Citizens Forces before the war and was a trained machine gunner at the time of his enlistment. A younger brother also saw active service in Egypt.

Leo Vincent D'Arcy Slattery, the second staff member to be killed on active service, was a private in the 8th Australian Infantry Battalion. He died of wounds, aged 23, on 24 July 1916, one of the many Australians killed at

Pozières on the Western Front. A junior assistant librarian at the Library, he was born in Ballarat, Victoria, and educated there at St Patrick's College, Christian Brother's College in East Melbourne and Xavier College. His mother completed his 'particulars file' stating that her son was halfway through the second year of an arts degree at the University of Melbourne when he enlisted in July 1915 and that 'he spoke French and German fluently'. Like Samuel Figgis, he also had a brother who served in (and survived) the war.

John Thomas Swain, a sergeant in the 8th Australian Infantry Battalion, was killed in action in France on 25 August 1918, aged 24. His mother completed his 'particulars form' with the minimum of detail. Her son was a clerk, born in Maryborough, Victoria, and educated there at St Augustine's Roman Catholic School. The honour board notes, however, that he was awarded the prestigious Distinguished Conduct Medal.<sup>11</sup> He was recommended for this as a lance corporal following an attack on Broadside Ridge, east of Ypres, on 4 October 1917. The recommendation reads in part:

His resourceful actions saved heavy casualties and greatly helped the advance. Afterwards when the enemy retired he pushed right forward ahead of the line and inflicted heavy casualties on them with his gun. He continued to do fine work until he was finally wounded and out of action.<sup>12</sup>

Swain is buried at the Heath Cemetery in Picardie, France, as is Percy Gilchrist Towl, a captain in the 37th Australian Infantry Battalion who died on 8 September 1918 of wounds sustained in the Somme Valley. There is no 'particulars file' on record for him, but a profile on the Library website<sup>13</sup> tells us that he was born in Ballarat in 1879, the son of a local pharmacist, and completed a pharmacy apprenticeship before going into business with his father. After the latter's death in 1910, Towl completed a Master of Science degree at the University of Melbourne before taking up a position as an assistant in the Geology and Mineralogical Department at the Museum in May 1915. Six weeks later he volunteered for service in the Australian Imperial Force, enlisting as a private on 18 June 1915. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his role in an attack the week before he was killed. He is the only member of the (much smaller) staff of the National Museum whose name is recorded on the honour board.

The last library staff member to lose his life as a result of active service in the Great War was John Charles Keys, a private in the 38th Australian Infantry Battalion. Born at Portsea, Victoria, and educated at Hawksburn State School, he enlisted, aged 19, on 1 October 1917, embarking just before Christmas as part of the 8th Brigade Reinforcements. In the second half of 1918 he became

ill while serving in France and was sent to hospital in England. He was then invalided back to Australia but died from meningitis in the Caulfield Military Hospital on 2 March 1919, only 15 days after he arrived home. He is buried at Sorrento Civil Cemetery in Victoria. One can only guess at what his parents would have felt at the time: elation on the arrival home of their son and then the desolation and grief of his dying so soon after. At least they were able to bury their son, unlike the four other sets of parents, whose sons were killed in action.

One of the other staff members listed on the honour board, FP Selleck, was awarded the Military Cross. He later became a successful accountant and businessman in Melbourne, was thrice lord mayor and was knighted in 1956.<sup>14</sup>

The deaths of the five servicemen during the Great War robbed the Library and Museum of the lives and careers of five staff members, at least two of whom (Figgis and Slattery) were sure to have been appointed to senior roles in the Library. The five killed are, despite the low number statistically, a representative cross-section of Australia's involvement and losses in the Great War: one killed at Gallipoli, another on the Somme in 1916, two at Passchendaele and the other dying from war wounds. They were part of the generation lost to their families, their professions and work colleagues, and to Australian society overall.