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From Kallista to Mont St Quentin: JG Roberts and the memory of the Great War

In August 1928, writer and journalist Dale Collins published an in-depth article in the Melbourne *Herald* on the Victorian notable John Garibaldi Roberts and his extensive book collection and 'home-made encyclopaedia'.¹ Roberts, a former manager of the Melbourne Tramways and Omnibus Company, had begun collecting books and ephemera in 1878. A renowned bibliophile, Roberts was a patron of writers and artists, including CJ Dennis, John Shirlow, Tom Roberts, Jeannie Gunn, and Robert Croll. Referred to familiarly by friends as 'Garry', Roberts was well known in artistic and literary circles as a collector and compiler.² The existence of his scrapbook encyclopaedia, particularly the volumes covering Australian Federation, was legendary;³ so too was his vast personal library of over 4000 books.⁴ In addition to this, Roberts was an inveterate collector of journals, approximately 4000 by his own reckoning, from which 50,000 articles had been taken and pasted into his 161-volume encyclopaedia.⁵

Collins identified for his readers many of the significant subject areas in the scrapbooks – biography, history, art and politics. What most visitors to Roberts's home at Kallista in the Dandenong Ranges, near Melbourne, found impressive and fascinating were the 91 volumes on Australian Federation, detailed compendia extracted from all the available printed and personal sources that Roberts could lay his hands on. Lastly is what Collins's subheading listed as the 'Record of the war':



A page of news from Ireland. JG Roberts Scrapbook, vol. 4, p. 24, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 8508

Then there are the war records, a section which should be sought by the Australian War Museum. First there is the Anzac Volume, containing a history of the campaign in the form of soldiers' letters, photographs and trophies, and then come nine large volumes containing hundreds of letters, maps, cuttings and photographs dealing with the rest of the war ... Another volume in this series is of tragic interest. It deals with Mr Roberts' son Frank and includes several hundred portraits of the gallant young soldier from his infancy, his letters, and his war diary to within four days of his death in the capture of Mont St.-Quentin on September 1st 1918. It is a unique record and in many bereaved homes do the parents wish that they had shown the foresight to prepare such a complete account of a brief but glorious career ... [t]hese books are a man's soul.⁶

This article explores the notion of remembering as a significant constituent of both personal and collective memory. My focus will be on a small number

of Roberts's 127 encyclopaedic scrapbooks held at State Library Victoria.⁷ Specifically, Book 1, dealing with Roberts' family history and including the enlistment and training of his son Frank to early 1917; Book 4, covering many details of his son's life, particularly his leave in Ireland in October 1917 and return to France in November of that year; Book 6, detailing Frank's life from November 1917 to approximately July 1918; Books 7 and 11, covering Frank Roberts's death, condolence letters, eyewitness accounts of the Mont St Quentin engagement, and postwar newspaper memorialising; and, Book 26 (vol. F111), which includes correspondence, information and reports relating to the war memorial building on Mont St Quentin in Picardy.

JG Roberts compiled many of these volumes during the latter stages of World War I and through the early 1920s as a means of memorialising and interpreting the death of his eldest son Frank.⁸ The sheer size of the Roberts scrapbooks dealing with the war, both collectively and individually, needs to be noted. The collection is large and the register-size volumes are extraordinarily heavy tomes, some weighing as much as 10 kilograms. Deliberately, they carry the weight of memory, of the Great War, and some of the many stories that emerged from that brief time, but, more particularly, they hold what one father, and his family, chose to remember of their dead son.



Theories on the development of social remembering (or popular memory) have been discussed since the pioneering work of French sociologist Émile Durkheim and the subsequent work by his student, Maurice Halwachs and his posthumous publication of 1950, *La Mémoire Collective* (The Collective Memory).⁹ These ideas were developed further by historian Eric Hobsbawm in the 1980s with his notion of the 'invention of tradition', and by the French historian of 'national memory', Pierre Nora, in his influential work *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Sites of Memory, published from 1984). In England, also during the 1980s, additional work was undertaken in relation to the great wars and how they were remembered and written about. A group, referred to as the 'Popular Memory Group', located at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham,¹⁰ interrogated the role of dominant memories in the public representation of history, noting that private memories cannot 'be readily unscrambled from the effects of dominant historical discourses. It is often these', they noted, 'that supply the very terms by which a private history is thought through'.¹¹ Thus, as James Wertsch writes, when studying personal memories it is much more useful to focus on their connections with public memory, rather than their differences.¹² One of the most practical



Frank Roberts posted this shamrock home in 1917. JG Roberts Scrapbook, vol. 4, p. 27, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 8508

observations concerning the Great War and its effects on personal and public memory in Australia comes from Bart Ziino who notes that '[o]utside of the criminal courts [the Great War] ... was perhaps the first occasion on which the state and vast masses of individual citizens came into direct and sustained contact'.¹³ It was this sustained contact both during and after the Great War that determined the collective consensus on the meaning of that war and how it was remembered. However, 'dominant memory is always open to contestation', especially in private remembrance,¹⁴ and it is this tension, this contestation, that I will explore in more detail through select examples in the JG Roberts scrapbooks.

The JG Roberts Great War scrapbooks – focusing as they do on the life and death of the compiler's son Frank – deal with public and private memory, the beginnings of the Anzac legend, and the memorialising of the dead. Further, they take the reader into the realm of intergenerational reporting and remembering, especially with the inclusion of narratives by Roberts's father, John Pounder Roberts, and reported memories of his grandfather. However, it is JG Roberts, as compiler, who shaped these visual and textual narratives. It is perhaps this sense of agency, of taking control of both personal and public memory and shaping it in a form best suited to his own 'remembering', that is the key feature of JG Roberts's significant archival legacy and contribution to Australia's Great War narratives.



Alistair Thomson has observed that the 'private process of composing safe memories is in fact very public. Our memories are risky and painful if they do not conform with the public norms or versions of the past'.¹⁵ In fact,

JG Roberts's memorialising of his son Frank has been largely used to exemplify this coming together of the personal and the public in the processes of both conforming with, and confirming, dominant memories of the Great War as written about in Australia. As such it has been drawn upon by writers such as Peter Stanley, Joy Damousi, Tanja Luckins and Bruce Scates, historians who have all engaged with the Great War, memory, and grieving.¹⁶ Luckins's *The Gates of Memory: Australian People's Experiences and Memories of Loss and the Great War* (2004), threads the Roberts family story of private and public grieving throughout her narrative. Drawing especially on JG Roberts's personal diaries over 1915–21,¹⁷ her work offers a fascinating and heart-rending insight into the grief of the Roberts family and their constant endeavours to remember, to record, to recapture spaces and to share together the post-death experience. This included such solemn events as a special family gathering for the opening of the parcel that contained Frank Roberts's clothing and personal effects worn on the day he was killed. These items arrived well over a year after Frank's death and were opened in the evening in the Roberts household with Frank's widow Ruby. In late 1920, Frank's kit bag arrived with further material and, one presumes, this process was repeated.¹⁸

Peter Stanley in his *Men of Mont St Quentin: Between Victory and Death* (2009) exhaustively plumbs the Roberts diaries and scrapbooks for details on the battle of Mont St Quentin, and JG Roberts's personal and public reasons for collecting and documenting his son and this particular battle on such a vast scale. Hoping for a history on the men of Mont St Quentin, something Roberts was perhaps too overwhelmed to write, Stanley notes that over 20 of the scrapbooks exhibit the visual repetition of Frank Roberts in photos and memorial cards, making it obvious that the 'record books were more about grieving than about writing a coherent publishable account'.¹⁹ Stanley goes on to note that, from 1919, JG Roberts pasted in anything and everything that had a connection to his son and the soldiers his son had fought with, always hoping that he might be able to write the definitive book on the battle. Roberts even enlisted author Robert Croll²⁰ to write a foreword for this projected venture, something Croll in fact completed.²¹

Other historians have been less forgiving about memorialisation: Bruce Scates notes that Roberts spent much of his retirement in 'gathering materials for "Frank's book", an elaborate and costly exercise in remembrance'; and notes further:

Unlike working class parents Roberts could call personally upon the Major at Base Records to discuss the details of his son's death; he detailed General

Monash to photograph the grave at Mont St Quentin, and quizzed both the Official War Historian (C.E.W. Bean) and an Official War Artist (C. Web Gilbert) on the nature of the fighting and the terrain ... Historians have read the Roberts papers for an insight into 'the rituals and etiquette of mourning'; one cannot but feel for a father whose every waking hour was devoted to honouring a 'cherished' son. But one also suspects that such elaborate grief was a comment on power and privilege. C. Web Gilbert was duly commissioned to raise the Australian memorial at Mont St Quentin. The face of the gallant soldier was faithfully modelled on that of Roberts' son.²²

How secure are the Roberts memories and how does one approach a collection like the Roberts archive, which, just in its dealings with the later stages of the Great War, is overwhelming in its sheer physical scale? The JG Roberts scrapbooks are mnemonic artefacts – prompts for both public and private memory, sites to visit and to reinvestigate. One telling photograph of a group of his son's Australian Imperial Force unit laying telegraph wires near Villers-Bretonneux on 11 July 1918 has a note scrawled by JG Roberts: 'Frank must be in here somewhere'.²³ It shows 30 or 40 soldiers milling around and involved in the task. Roberts can't quite identify his son in this official photograph, however, but he knows he is there. It is a picture that one can be sure the family returned to time and again to try and identify Frank, in action just two months before he was killed.

The scrapbooks incorporate many voices and discrete narratives with war letters from friends, other soldiers, other parents, both his sons – Frank and Bert – Irish cousins, and personal photographs. The personal material is also contextualised with public photographs and documents, including maps and newspaper reports, items souvenired from both living and dead German soldiers,²⁴ plus memorial cards for the dead. As a mnemonic device, the scrapbooks most resemble a newspaper in both form and content. There is no apparent order in the volumes I have chosen, or those identified by Peter Stanley, who referred to 'poor Garry', so overcome by grief that his aspiration for a meticulous chronological documentary came to nought.²⁵ Nevertheless the process of remembering, even in the immediacy of the war, acquires its own logic.

One way of reading the Roberts scrapbooks and understanding their role as memory prompts is to consider their intertextual nature, a process whereby meaning is generated not by one report on the page but from the variety of texts contiguous with the main story. The consequence is a diminution of boundaries, a 'blurring' between the personal and collective memories, and the

‘transformation’ of the whole.²⁶ In an Australian context, this transformation would see the incorporation of the scrapbooks and Frank Roberts’s story into the dominant Australian Anzac myth that became prevalent from the 1920s. This is certainly how the scrapbooks are currently used in contemporary Great War history, fusing personal remembering with public memory, in the creation of a usable past to suit the needs of the present.

For Tanja Luckins, the scrapbooks are intentionally haphazard, deliberately not chronological, emphasising the associative role of mind and memory and their need to consult and revisit to make sense of the whole.²⁷ While psychological investigation of the role of the scrapbooks is beyond this article, certainly the war scrapbooks, in eschewing chronology, also eschew closure, leaving open the possibility of continuous questioning by JG Roberts of the meaning of the Great War from both a personal and collective point of view.

Personal and public grieving runs throughout Roberts’s scrapbook narrative, especially the official correspondence and discussions of memorials with Roberts’s friend and official war sculptor Charles Gilbert.²⁸ There are as many possible ‘readings’ for the contemporary critic engaging with these artefacts and the memory of war, however, as there were for the Roberts family when they consulted these volumes during the 1920s. In effect, the meaning of the war is multifaceted, despite Roberts’s personal and public support for the continuation of the war and criticism of those against the conscription referendum.

As both Tanja Luckins and Peter Stanley note, there is sufficient evidence that Frank Roberts came to the conclusion that the war was something that should not be pursued, that its meaning was obscure and that its overwhelming result was to dehumanise those involved in it.²⁹ Killing Germans, as his platoon comrades note, was more often than not based on how you felt or what you had experienced that day,³⁰ battlefield adrenalin, and, as Frank noted in his diary entry for 4 July 1918, whether you could get good souvenirs from a surrendering soldier instead of killing him.³¹ There was no moral imperative here, just the experience of killing to survive another day. These types of battlefield comments came in letters that JG Roberts did not choose to excise from his scrapbooks and, thus, they become part of the overall narrative of the war.



Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (2013) spends time exploring perceptions in the public mind in the months before the outbreak of hostilities to explain how the beginning of the European war came as such a shock. In the minds of many English, the trouble that was brewing in 1914



Left: Frank and Ruby with the Barrett family before Frank's embarkation, April 1917.

JG Roberts Scrapbook, vol. 1, p. 211, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 8508

Right: Frank's grave at Mont St Quentin, photographed by Bertha Monash. JG Roberts

Scrapbook, vol. 22, p. 52, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 8508

was the almost inevitable development of civil war in Ulster.³² That a war in Ireland was postponed for four years was not lost on JG Roberts, and the Irish dimension to war, and to his family's personal recollections of past wars, is ever present in his scrapbooks compiled over 1917–21. It is this thread of the Roberts family story I want to explore further, as it sheds light on JG Roberts's personal reflections on war, highlighting the fact that dominant memories (or collective memory) never remains for long a necessarily uncontested space.

John Garibaldi Roberts was born at Italian Gully, near Ballarat, Victoria, in 1860 to Irish parents of a mixed Irish, German and Welsh background. Volume one of Roberts's family history sequence, one that moves from 18th-century Ireland of the 1760s to Frank's departure for war in 1917, records the complex Irish family relationships for the Roberts, Pounder, Moore and Kechler families, who were Protestant and Catholic. It details principally their life in Ireland but, also, the experience of the Roberts and Moore families that moved to Australia. It is not clear what Roberts's relationship was with his Irish family, but certainly his father, Ballarat settler John Pounder Roberts, kept close ties with those in Wexford and still owned land there in the 1860s. Whatever the case, the members of the Roberts family in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, were well known to their Australian cousins, and it was therefore natural that Frank Roberts should visit Ireland in 1917, when on leave, as did many other soldiers in the Australian Imperial Force.³³

As detailed in the Roberts scrapbooks, both the Roberts and Pounder families (the Pounders being the maternal great-grandparents) were involved in the Irish Rebellion of 1798, something of which Frank would have been

aware. Briefly, martial law was established in Ireland in 1797 with fighting beginning in May of 1798. Within weeks, most of Wexford and the surrounding counties were under the control of the insurgents. In June, fighting also began in Ulster and, in August, French troops had landed in Mayo. Based largely in Enniscorthy township, the Irish encampment in Wexford was established on Vinegar Hill in a setting not dissimilar to Mont St Quentin. On 21 June, 15,000 British troops, under the control of the English General Gerard Lake, launched a major attack on Irish positions. Although two of John Pounder Roberts's uncles were fighting with the Yeomanry on the side of the British forces, one of the principle strategists of the Irish uprising, Father John Murphy, was a close friend of the Roberts and Pounder families, and had granted both groups his personal protection.³⁴ However, on 21 June, tragedy ensued. The Roberts and Pounder farms were directly in line of the retreating Irish at Vinegar Hill, and JG Roberts' maternal grandfather and another uncle were mistaken for Irish rebels and shot by British Hessian (German) soldiers. Further, his grandmother was on the point of being executed when she was saved by an English officer. Years later, the bones of the Irish dead were still being ploughed up in ditches on John Pounder Roberts's farm.

Firsthand memories of that war were part of the Roberts family history. John Pounder Roberts recalled in his youth travelling with a man who had fought with the insurgents in the very first engagement of the 1798 Irish Rebellion at the battle of Oulart Hill:

It was a fine Sunday morning and the old man told me that he could see the soldiers at a considerable distance and the glitter of the sun on the red coats and the flashing of the bayonets gave him such a scare that he would have run away but an officer threatened to shoot the first man that would run and so he had to remain all of a tremble ... But when the first volley was fired he felt fear no longer, it was rush on with your pike.³⁵

Such reminiscences find direct parallels in Frank Roberts's diary description of his company's attack on 4 July 1918, his trembling at the start of a major gun barrage and imminent confrontation with the Germans, but then the absence of fear in the moment before going over the top with bayonet at the ready:

Left the support trench at 1.45 am loaded up like a mule. Usual fighting order, 120 rounds of S.A.A. and 2 bandoliers – in all 220 rounds: 2 mills bombs: extra water bottle: shovel – down back, and a pannier for Lewis gun – all hellish weighty. Long struggle through trenches to front line ... Only out a few minutes however when barrage opened. ... Advanced in second

wave; first wave consisted of 3 lines extended in order: 2nd wave section in artillery formation, lastly toppers up, and in rear of all 3 tanks to our battalion section. Knees knocked when barrage opened, but after the start all trepidation vanished.³⁶

The Irish Rebellion was a confused affair of mass killings, torture, transportation and ethnic vendettas, and one where the motives for its cause were mixed. The irony of the Roberts family involvement, and the mistaken killings of John Pounder Roberts's grandfather and uncle is what stands out in Roberts's Great War saga when seen as a family narrative that encompasses the death of Frank Roberts. The losses were personally overwhelming for the family, the killings gratuitous and without meaning, and John Pounder Roberts has much to say in assessing political responsibility for those events.³⁷ As an echo to the narrative of the Great War and the Western Front, it is chilling as a personal critique of the confusion of war and the inability of its participants to truly discern meaning in the grand narrative.

It is this memoir that flanks the introduction of Frank Roberts's visit to Ireland in October 1917, nearly 120 years after the events recounted by John Pounder Roberts. In a letter to his wife Ruby, Frank wrote that he travelled to Holyhead, Wales, from London's Euston Station for six hours in a carriage full of 'drunken Micks' of the Australian Imperial Force: Australian Irish soldiers 'all going to Paddyland for leave'.³⁸ Frank Roberts, himself a returning Irish colonial, spent eight days in Ireland, touring Dublin on his first day then spending the remainder in Wexford with his middle-aged cousin Lucy Roberts. Here he walked the surrounding countryside and helped about the house, writing letters, taking photographs and meeting the extended family. He walked the old battlefield of Vinegar Hill – and there are many images of Vinegar Hill scattered throughout the volumes – commenting on how poor the farms were. Frank Roberts's time in Ireland is the one piece of normalcy – a domestic interlude and important reconnection with distant family cousins – in the chaotic life of a soldier in the fraught year of 1917. His cousin Lucy wrote back to Ruby describing Frank's time in Ireland and how wonderful it was to have him around, while Frank and Lucy maintained their correspondence over the following year, Lucy regularly sending him books.

Frank Roberts returned to France in November 1917 and, a little over a year later, he was dead on his own Vinegar Hill – Mont St Quentin, one of the last decisive engagements of the Western Front, when Australian troops broke the German lines above the Somme River. However, Frank's life in the

trenches from late 1917 was far from easy. Death from shrapnel was random, and life in the trenches on occasion intolerable, as he complained (and for which he apologises) to both his wife and his father. Cramped conditions, in winter the endless cold, the fatigues (cleaning and cooking), bad food and too little of it, the often unnecessary work, and, on occasion, persistent dysentery all took their toll.³⁹ In his letters home there are moments of heightened descriptions of fighting and his personal exploits, including statements, like that to his wife, that 'we don't want peace',⁴⁰ at least not until the Hun has been beaten. By September 1918, however, in the days before he is killed, the shelling, bombing from planes, constant movement to new trench positions, exposure to unremitting machine-gun fire, and randomness of death, make his life at best precarious. One of the last descriptive images we have of him is sitting in the sun quietly eating from a tin, soon before his Company's attack.⁴¹

The Frank Roberts story is the pivotal point of remembering for JG Roberts and his family. On one level it narrates the personal life of a young man and his family growing up in Victoria, and that of a soldier who died on active duty in France. It is a story that continues to resonate as a key point in the nation's collective memory because it is visually and textually so well documented. It is perhaps for this reason that the Frank Roberts story and a selection of the JG Roberts scrapbooks so easily lend themselves to museum exhibitions marking the 100th anniversary of the Great War.⁴² Given the variety of content, however, and the Irish material that can easily be read as a counter narrative to the story of Empire, the meaning of this Great War narrative can be seen as more nuanced and more complex than a simple national war story.

JG Roberts, his wife Berta, his son and daughter, continued to grieve through the 1920s, but it was Roberts who obsessively reworked his scrapbooks, cutting and pasting, having photographs developed and inserted but, especially, rewriting by hand many of the personal letters that Frank wrote, or having the entries from other reports, letters, and Frank's war diary typed and inserted in his volumes.⁴³ We do not know whether or not this active engagement with the artefacts of memory altered his perceptions of the war and of Frank's role in this enterprise. Tanja Luckins writes on the therapeutic nature of this rewriting and, perhaps, considers it as a way of JG Roberts personally reliving or recreating his son's life, rather than seeing it as a violation of his son and daughter-in-law's privacy. How Roberts managed to incorporate into the structure of his memorial books (as he called these scrapbooks), Frank's love letters to Ruby, or personal letters to his Irish cousin Lucy Roberts, is not explained. What we do know is that there are no letters by

Ruby, Frank's mother Berta, nor Roberts himself in the Great War scrapbooks. This part of the personal narrative, in what were memorial books designed to become public documents for circulation to friends and former comrades in some publishable form,⁴⁴ has been excised.



In conclusion, how are we to finally assess the Roberts scrapbooks, these personal volumes that have now become national icons? This article has endeavoured to show that personal and collective memory are forever entwined; that we do take from the past to build our present narrative, but that counter discourses are possible and disruptive of dominant memories. Tanja Luckins notes that, when JG Roberts first received news of his son's death, he recorded it in his notebook as a 'hero's death'.⁴⁵ Yet, the family memoirs, incorporated as they are into the war story, contain material that places a question mark over the enduring place of this view. While JG Roberts does not directly comment on the Irish question or his families troubled political past, he does incorporate later events into the scrapbooks – the 1916 Irish Proclamation of Independence, reports on the subsequent uprising, and the later Anglo-Irish war of 1919–21. His family's links to that country create an obvious uneasiness surrounding collective perceptions of Empire, the colonial world, the Great War, and the rights of small nations – whether Belgium in 1914 or Ireland in 1916 and beyond. How these have manifested themselves in the scrapbooks, and whether consciously or subliminally, is something that requires further investigation. Whatever the case, while there was questioning, silence, national myth-making and memorial-building in post-World War I Australia, JG Roberts and his wife continued to play a part.⁴⁶ His great memorial to that war, the scrapbooks, continued – and continues – to be called into service to confirm the established narrative and memory of that war.

Roberts and his family were not religious; religion in fact does not enter the scrapbooks we have considered in any way except via letters from a military chaplain and as symbols on memorial cards. Further, the scrapbooks, as Bruce Scates notes, may be in part a memorial to power and privilege, and that selfless sense of duty and public service inculcated amongst certain classes. But, personal and collective memories are complex, and it is doubtful that Roberts ever found any closure to his memories of the Great War and his role as a recipient of a tremendous grief. Yet, his mapping of his own remembering, and understanding, and the complex personal and collective memories at work in the scrapbooks, make his active memorialising compelling reading, even in the 21st century.