Mighty Monash

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Tony Macdougall (ed.)

War Letters of General Monash
Duffy & Snellgrove, $19.95pb, 224pp, 1 876631 279

This Little Book — 224 pages of modest but well-made paperback — may seem at first sight to be a mere shortened reissue of War Letters of General Monash, edited by Frank Cutlack, and issued in 1934. They were written (mainly) to his wife from Gallipoli and France. Make no error: this new book is a great deal more than that. For one thing, its appearance now vindicates again the faith of Monash himself. On 8 June 1915, writing against the crash of gunfire from among the carnage of Gallipoli, he wrote: ‘[We] bury them in our little cemetery and reverently inscribe their names in the roll of Australia’s fallen heroes. That Australia will honour the memory of all such, we are all well assured.’ Clearly, the ‘myth of Anzac’ arose on the first days from the battlefield itself, and is not an accretion of folk history lately discovered by historians. John Monash undoubtedly would be touched by the strength and warmth of Australia’s Anzac remembrance, but he would not be surprised.

These Letters are a timely — even an overdue — reminder of an outstanding Australian life. In the decades that followed his death in 1931, Monash was slipping slowly towards oblivion until retrieved for us by Geoffrey Serle’s noble and immense biography of 1982; the present editor of the letters, Tony Macdougall, calls this ‘possibly the finest biography of a public figure and a private man published in Australia’.

Although reprinted several times shortly after its first publication, Serle’s book went out of print when the fourth impression (1985) was exhausted. I have been told that the publishers now contemplate a reissue in paperback, but that the university that bears Monash’s name has declined even a paltry financial contribution to the project. If Macdougall’s bijou edition of the letters is left to hold the door of memory a little longer, it is quite strong enough to do the task bravely.

Tributes are legion to Monash’s outstanding capacities. Britain’s prime minister in World War I, David Lloyd George, acknowledged that the Australian might well have been promoted to commander-in-chief of all British armies in France, but the ‘greatness of his abilities was not brought to the attention of Cabinet … Professional soldiers could hardly be expected to advertise the fact that the greatest strategist in the Army was a civilian when the war began.’ (He might have added: ‘and a colonial, to boot.’) Writing in 1968, Field Marshal Montgomery named ‘Sir John Monash as the best general on the Western Front’.

The amazing frankness of these letters seems inconceivable today; nor can one now imagine censorship permitting them. The future broad scope and thrust of the campaigns are described for a lay reader, and particular battles that followed thus gain a context otherwise likely to be obscured in the fog of war. But here we can see in advance the commander’s intention, not merely his later excuses, or complacencies.

A grateful reader finds that Monash’s style offers no flourish or purple patch, but that it has the special grace of clarity. George Orwell himself would have been proud of such writing. The frankness never descends to spite or scuttlebutt, though Monash was well aware of the backstairs machinations by meddlesome journalist Keith Murdoch and official correspondent Charles Bean.

Monash shared the widespread false optimism that attended the early stages of World War I. Disparaging the ‘bull at the gate’ methods of Winston Churchill (now on the skids), his letter of 18 July 1915 praised Lord Kitchener’s plans and preparations that ‘just can’t go wrong’. Flanders and Belgium would soon be straightened out. And a few days later: ‘So far as I can judge, the prospects of the war are daily becoming more satisfactory.’ Yet soon came the evacuation of Gallipoli, followed by the mud of France, and tens of thousands of killed and wounded.

Monash pays moving tributes not merely to the courage and endurance of his men, but to their humanity and chivalry, and to the corresponding reciprocal ‘decency’ of the Turks on Gallipoli. If his forces had to abandon wounded men in evacuating the peninsula, ‘I have every confidence the Turks will play the game’. A few letters to people other than his wife slightly change our angle of view of the busy letter-writer. (How did he manage private correspondence, even standing in a trench?) One is to a little girl; another to a young woman who had sent him a tin of Havelock tobacco. Great humanity lay not far beneath the skin of the iron commander. Perhaps nothing commended him to his serving troops more than the introduction of field laundries, described in one letter. Troops just out of the line marched to one of these steam-enshrouded barns, stripped their pig-filthy uniforms, bathed, and drew a fresh issue of all clothes, from the underpants up. What did that do for morale?

Macdougall’s superb editing matches the worth of his subject. He has not simply ‘cut’ Cutlack’s edition, but distilled it, so that, by subtraction, he has added point and punch. Anyone who has enjoyed half-an-hour’s conversation with Tony Macdougall accepts him as one of the best-read persons alive. His discreet notes, graceful introduction and restrained comments shine a light on the great man who wrote the letters, but also upon the earlier Australia that made him. Monash himself, a Jew, says proudly that he grew up in a country free from prejudice and intolerance; that was why he went away to fight for it.

A gripe at the end: general maps of Gallipoli and of France would have been appreciated and helpful; so would an index.