Fakes and Heroes

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Robin Gerster and Peter Pierce (eds)
ON THE WARPATH: AN ANTHOLOGY
OF AUSTRALIAN MILITARY TRAVEL
MUP, $34.95pb, 350pp, 0 522 85087 1

NOTE ESPECIALLY the last word in the subtitle — ‘travel’. This book is not, or not chiefly, about strategy and battles. It is about getting to the war, or passing through an operational area and (with luck) getting home again; it is about visiting war cemeteries, battlefields and memorials, or revisiting them, sometimes decades later.

You may think this a wispy and slender thread upon which to string 350 pages of book. I thought so myself when I picked it up, and the misgiving recurred several times during the perusal. (Since a peacetime visit to Auschwitz is neither military nor Australian, Lily Brett’s piece seemed to have strayed in by mistake.) But the thread held — just — and I am grateful to the editors for teaching me much that I didn’t know, or had not understood.

In earlier books and articles, Robin Gerster and Peter Pierce have reconnoitred this territory already. They have a good mental map of Australia’s martial landscape, from the Sudan (1885) to East Timor and Afghanistan the day before yesterday. Their own commentary, for my taste, is too tinged by present-day political correctness. This is more implicit than stated, but it weakens their authority. There is, for example, a certain underlying readiness to characterise Australian soldiers as loudmouths and racists.

How does this square with what I saw for myself: young soldiers getting the guns forward through the mud; an Australian patrol of which every man risked his life to bring in a wounded black policeman; above all, the usual taciturn modesty of boys whose subsequent decorations established them as heroes. Well, speak as you find; even among anthologists a measure of vocal self-enthusiasm has been detected now and then.

The editors have read widely indeed, and have, for the most part, selected their excerpts with some discrimination. The catholicity of their choice is confirmed, as their strength in proportion alone disqualify it as a suitable addition to school libraries. But we are on the whole better off having it than not.

One supposes that all anthologists must be driven demented by ‘Why did you put this in?’ or ‘Why did you leave that out?’ And indeed you can’t please everyone. But the editors do seem to have passed over stories of World War II. For example, their ‘distinguished war correspondent’ George Johnston was partly a fake, who filed graphic ‘New Guinea’ eyewitness reports while sitting in Australia. Eric Lambert (The Twenty Thousand Thieves) and Lawson Glassop (We Were the Rats) are second-rate material, in my opinion. They are more than counterbalanced, happily, by the likes of Kenneth Slessor, Osmar White, Nancy Wake and, above all, Ray Parkin; this permanent Navy petty officer’s Into the Smother is a wonderful piece of writing.

On the Warpath is a flawed book; its lack of balance and proportion alone disqualify it as a suitable addition to school libraries. But we are on the whole better off having it than not. Its existence adds a little to our growing sense of nationhood so poignantly expressed in the fine extract from Georgia Tan: ‘They were there on my behalf, which means that as long as I lived I must not deny them. It was my first intimation of belonging to a people, to a race.’