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A Review of *German Anzacs and the First World War* by John F. Williams

by John Milfull

The great German writer Anna Seghers who, after surviving exile in Mexico during the Third Reich, threw in her lot with the doomed GDR, defined the role of literature in a way that always struck me as being equally appropriate to the kind of history I most value – to preserve the aspirations, joys and sufferings of the nameless victims of history as their legacy to a better future.

This is the kind of history John Williams writes, and I admire it enormously. Against a panorama of the social and military history of Australian participation in WWI, laid out with authoritative sweep and competence, he zooms in, fine photographer that he is, on the unexpected details and life stories others miss or neglect. In this case the focus is the paradoxical situation of German Australians who fought on the Aussie side against their former compatriots. They range from country boys right up to John Monash, the brilliant general who had to contend with the double stigmata of German and Jewish origins. There were many of them –- they enlisted not always out of patriotic fervour, but certainly with a deep conviction of their right to be counted as Australians, however hostile the public mood became. This was especially true after the subsidised mass distribution of the infamous Bryce report on German atrocities in Belgium. As a foil to his "German Anzacs", Williams tells the remarkable story of Ekkehard Beinssen, who grew up in Hunters Hill only to end up fighting on the German side and finally abandoning strife-torn Weimar Germany to return to the country of his birth. The war looked much the same from the other side, from below – a chance encounter with Australian prisoners of war brings him feelings more of community than enmity.

Now that our last surviving Anzac is dead, we will miss those wise old voices on the futility and horror of war which so effectively countered the false rhetoric of the Anzac tradition Williams has dissected so persuasively in his earlier books. The void will increasingly be filled with a cult of the Anzac as the "typical Aussie battler", the remilitarisation of the "ordinary Australian" in the service of neo-conservatism and Anglo neo-imperialism.

For John Williams, WWI is part of his family history, a lesson never to be forgotten. Curiously enough, I found out only late in my own that I had a German great-grandmother, whose existence had been conveniently suppressed. My grandfather undertook a hazardous trip to England to visit her during the London Blitz – she must have been in her nineties and by all accounts as convinced of the virtues of alcohol as the Queen Mum. I often wonder what they talked about. At least I now know why his second name was Fritz.

There are many such stories interwoven in the rich fabric of John's book, played out far more directly against the ghastly backdrop of Wilfred Owen's war. The publisher's claim that "this is a thoroughly readable history, with lively anecdotal and personal material", is the understatement of the year.

John Williams, one of Australia's finest photographers, was foundation head of the Department of Photography and Audio-Visual Studies at Sydney College of the Arts before taking a PhD in Australian History from Macquarie University. He has since published *The Quarantined Culture. Australian Reactions to Modernism 1913-1939* (CUP 1995) and

Anzacs, the Media and the Great War (UNSW Press 1999).

German Anzacs and the First World War *by John F. Williams is published by UNSW Press, Sydney, 2003.*

John Milfull is Director of the Centre for European Studies, University of New South Wales.

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