



## A Lyrical War: Gallipoli War through Poetry in Anzac Diaries<sup>1</sup>

Mehmet Ali Çelikel\*

*Associate Professor, Faculty of Science and Letters, Pamukkale University  
macelikel@pau.edu.tr*

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### Abstract

During the First World War, Dardanelles witnessed one of the fiercest clashes in history between the British and the Turkish forces. This eight-month-war caused the settlement of British army that included Australian and New Zealand Army Corps known as Anzacs on particularly the Gallipoli Peninsula. The Australian and New Zealander soldiers and officers constantly kept diaries and wrote letters that in a sense recorded history from the personal perspective contributing to history with individual observation. If Anzac diaries kept during the Gallipoli clashes in 1915 function as secondary historical sources, they also do function as reminiscences of military officers who found consolation in expressing themselves lyrically during harsh conflicts. Some Anzac officers quote poems in their diaries and some write their own poetry to cope with the violence of war using the aestheticism of poetry. Their poems, on the other hand, remain not only as the lyrical reflections of a deadly reality but also as even more painful portrayals of war.

This paper aims to read poems either quoted or written in the diaries of Anzac soldiers and officers in order to analyse the emotional effects of war on individuals. The poems will be analysed through the perspective of cultural landscape and question the influence of landscape on the perception of war in the minds of the Anzacs. From the new historicist perspective, the diaries bearing poetry will be read not as the sources of historical information but as the texts that use history as the material for poetry. The paper will also question whether or not the individual observations change the perception of official history that does not become the main impulse behind the writing of poetry but turns merely into one of its sources.

**Key Words:** History, lyricism, Gallipoli Wars, diary keeping.

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This study is an attempt to write an essay on war poetry. Although this proposition might suggest a reading of canonical poets who wrote on war, this essay narrows down its focal point on mostly unknown poets, some of whom were not even poets but mere soldiers, who wrote poems in their diaries during the wars. Between 1914 and 1918, the world had the most catastrophic and deadly periods in modern history during the World War I, which caused the death of over seventeen million people. This war included fierce conflicts in most parts of the

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\* İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi’ A Blok Kat 3, Pamukkale Üniversitesi Kınıklı Kampusu, Denizli, Turkey

world as well as bringing about literary works centring on the theme of war. The involvement of Turkey, the then Ottoman Empire, triggered a battle between the Turkish and British navies on the banks of the Dardanelles that function as the first passage way between the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea.

The Gallipoli Campaign, also known as the Dardanelles Campaign, took place on the Gallipoli peninsula on the Thracian part of Turkey. Between 25 April 1915 and 9 January 1916 during the World War I, Gallipoli witnessed one of the fiercest clashes in history between the British and the Turkish forces. The Gallipoli Peninsula constitutes the northern bank of the Dardanelles, known as the Çanakkale Strait today, and provides a sea route to Russian Empire, one of the Allies in the war. In order to secure this sea route, Britain and France, Russia's allies, began a military campaign. The naval attack was repelled and, eight months later, the campaign turned unsuccessful and the invading forces withdrew.

This eight-month-war caused the settlement of the British army that included Australian and New Zealand Army Corps known as the Anzacs in the form of military camps on particularly the Gallipoli Peninsula. The Australian and New Zealander soldiers and officers, being away from their homes, constantly kept diaries and wrote letters that recorded history from the personal perspective contributing to history with their individual observations. Anzac diaries kept during the Gallipoli clashes in 1915 function not only as secondary historical sources, but also as reminiscences of military officers who found consolation in expressing themselves lyrically during the harsh conflicts. Some Anzac officers quoted poems in their diaries and some wrote their own poetry to cope with the violence of war using the aestheticism of poetry. Their poems, on the other hand, remain not only as the lyrical reflections of a deadly reality but also as even more painful portrayals of war.

As claimed by Azer Banu Kemaloğlu, "Gallipoli has a great significance in the lives of Anzacs even after the war" (2015, p. 26). Therefore, it was not only during the war that they wrote their poetry in their diaries, but also after the war. As a "problematic space", Gallipoli becomes a setting "where soldiers' experiences are recorded" (Kemaloğlu, 2015, p. 26). These diaries do not only function as the records of the days on the battlefield, but also as their means of self-expression. Some diaries, thus, "had no entries except for the name and the address of the soldier[s]" who "wrote home" hardly mentioning the war (Kemaloğlu, 2015, p. 27).

This paper, therefore, aims to read these poems either quoted or written in the diaries of Anzac soldiers and officers in order to analyse the emotional effects of war on individuals. The poems invite powerful analyses through the perspective of cultural landscape and enable the reader to question the influence of landscape on the perception of war in the minds of the Anzacs. The diaries of the Anzac soldiers provide striking materials for a new historicist reading. The poems included in the diaries are possible to be read, then, not as the sources of historical information but as the texts that use history as the material for poetry. Thus, this study aims to question whether or not the individual observations change the perception of official history that does not become the main impulse behind the writing of poetry but turns merely into one of its sources.

The Anzac diaries exhibited in Auckland War Memorial Museum are the indications of the Anzacs' habit of keeping the records of the war daily. As part of a written culture, diary keeping functions as a means to record particularly the extraordinary experiences to carry them to future for remembrance of the past. At the same time, entries in the diaries work through emotions and rereading them may feel rather different from the moments of recording. In the case of Anzacs, writing about their traumatic experiences during the Gallipoli Campaign in a limited length of time lead to their consolation as they not only turn their experiences into writing but also see it as an opportunity to communicate with their loved ones in their absence. They do

not only record the war in a written form, but they also talk about it therapeutically. Writing, then, turns into a healing and consoling process.

In some of the diaries from the Auckland War Memorial Museum, it is observed that the Anzac soldiers use their diaries as a means of emotional rehabilitation as well as a historical record. With this in mind, this study focuses on the papers of Signaller Horace Williams in folder PR01706 from Auckland War Memorial Museum. In these papers, Horace Williams expresses his experiences in poetic form that functions as the mirror of his patriotism and homesickness. Some of his lyrical lines may also be regarded as the examples of cultural solipsism. The first example from his lyricism is an acrostic poem with all the letters of the alphabet used as the initial letter of all lines:

A is Australia the country for me

B stands for bayonet our bright suckersnee

C are our comrades who help make things go

D is our Dugout our ‘war bungalow’

E stands for Egypt where the boys broke the law

F is for the flag that we’re all fighting for

G are the Ghurkas with kybris so bright

H is the Hope that we’ll come back all right

Graeme Turner argues that the narratives produced by a culture are models by which a society conceives of and articulates a view of itself and these narratives do not only reflect the culture but they have ‘a cultural function of making sense of experience, of filling absences and of helping to explain the culture to itself’ (Turner, 1993, p. 9). The poetical lines by Williams above function to build a national construct for his fellow countrymen who suffer from the same hardships of the war as himself. If Williams’ diary is read as an attempt to create a ‘national fiction’ in Turner’s terms, it also builds ‘cultural constructions’ (Turner, 1993, p. 20). Therefore, Williams aims to strengthen his patriotic feelings and convey the same emotions to his friends by placing the name of their country in the first line to match the first letter of the alphabet, since, as Robyn MacCallum argues, ‘Australia, like many postcolonial societies, is preoccupied with notions of a national identity’ (1997, p. 102). As an Australian citizen, Gallipoli campaign becomes his first opportunity to build a national identity. Thus, an internalised emotional connection to his country becomes the major moral reasoning for him to fight on Gallipoli, a faraway land from his homeland. ‘Australianness’ is ‘a highly problematic’ notion as argued by MacCallum who points out that it is ‘an aspect of the cultural construction of value and meaning’ (1997, p. 102). The cultural values may be found either as a traditional notion of cultural values in a long-established and settled society or as the consequences of an identity search. Such a search for a national identity, according to MacCallum, ‘is also tied up with concepts of place (both physical and social) and the relationships between place and the human subject, wherein individual subjectivity as it is shaped within a social and natural landscape functions allegorically for a national cultural identity’ (1997, p. 102).

His ‘comrades’ represented by the letter ‘C’ constitute solidarity with him to ease their catastrophic conditions. A cultural solipsism stands out here. Although Gallipoli is not a land

to fight for the freedom of their homeland, Williams glorifies their presence there by divinising the image of the flag for which they are 'all fighting for'. Then, in a solipsist way, the war turns out to be justifiable from their national and cultural perspective. Although this poem does not function to relate his daily experiences and emotions in the conflict, it represents how he feels about being there and, additionally, it also relieves the pain and fear caused by the war. The heroism emphasized in the poem, especially the love of the country represented by the letter 'A', indicates his attempts to encourage and heroise his comrades. The patriotism and heroism that justify the war become source of returning home 'all right'. He makes up a cultural identity on Turkish landscape despite his alienation there. This landscape shapes his political consciousness. As in Jay Daniel Thompson's assumption, 'poetry helps transform the personal into the political' (*Text Review*, 2014). If it is usually the young men who are sent to death, purposes of politics and history result in personal destruction while at the same time the personal sorrow remains to be inarguably political. So Williams' political consciousness approves of the killing of Turks, which also means their survival:

Q stands for Question how best to live  
When the R is the ration our QM gives  
S stands for shells that go screaming o'er head  
T are the Turks who will shortly be dead

Poetry, argues Jeffrey Sychterz, 'speaks a language closer to that of trauma' (2009, pp. 144-5). The traumatic memories are 'disconnected from history' and become 'strongly imagistic' (Sychterz, 2009, p. 145). In Williams' lines, the death of the Turks is, in MacCallum's terms, 'the development of intersubjectivity within a specific social and natural setting [that] enacts a search for identity narrative which is shaped by broader cultural and ideological conceptions of a preferred national identity' (1997, p. 102). While their presence on Turkish landscape becomes one of the major causes for them to question their national identity, the construction of a national identity is, as MacCallum points out, 'grounded by specific images of place and of the interrelationships between place and the human subject' (1997, p. 114). Ironically, Turkish cultural landscape provides a ground for building a new preferred identity both culturally and nationally for the Anzac soldiers.

Egypt marks a turning point in their lives as well as Gallipoli. It turns out to be a beautiful place for them and they have unexpected experiences in Egypt both on their way to Dardanelles and upon their evacuation. With its exoticism, landscape, fauna and ethnic variety, Egypt becomes remarkable and unforgettable for them. Horace Williams quotes Pte E. W. Wyatt's poem on Egypt, entitled 'Beautiful Egypt', in his diary:

Land of camels, land of sand  
Of small canals & palm trees grand  
Scattered there on every hand  
Egypt  
  
Land of Arabs, 'Gibs & Greeks  
Land of guides – the living sneaks –  
Land of which the Bible speaks

Egypt

...

Land of silence, land of sin

Land of man with sunburnt skin

Where pickets run drunk soldiers

In Williams' quotation from E. W. Wyatt's poem, Egyptian landscape and its scenery stand out in an orientalist depiction in phrases like 'Land of camels, land of sand', 'small canals & palm trees' or 'Land of Arabs'. Having arrived in Egypt from a faraway continent, the Anzac soldiers find themselves on a land unknown to them. In scenery reminiscent of holiday postcards with camels, palm trees and sand, they await to be transferred to Gallipoli to join the military campaign. Yet their temporary settlement in Egypt soon revives orientalist images and desires. The 'land of silence' spoken of in the Bible turns into a 'land of sin' with 'drunk soldiers' moving away from the image of the land as a Biblical place. Thus, the military camp in Egypt functions not only as a place where they wait for the day of journey to Gallipoli, but also as a land of pleasure. They have sunburnt skin, they drink and have fun. 'Beautiful Egypt', then, is not a poem to convey the emotional and moving experiences of war, but a poem that touches on their exciting experiences during the journey before the war. The importance of this poem lies not in the fact that it bears the feelings of touching homesickness or miseries of war, but in the fact that the recruitment gives them the opportunity to see the other parts of the world and experience orientalist pleasures.

In the poem titled 'When Arthur Goes to Bed', Williams returns to patriotic idea and justifies their participation in the war foregrounding the comfort that should be enjoyed by Arthur when he goes to bed:

We are fighting for our country  
Our home folk let us so  
We've left our home for trenches  
You see we didn't know  
And though the days are weary  
With little bright ahead  
There's always some excitement  
When Arthur goes to bed.

The stanza above brings together the contradictory feelings caused by the recruitment. While they feel that they fight for their country as their 'home folk' let them do so, they also question the fact that they leave their home for trenches which they 'didn't know'. The stanza is concluded with 'some excitement' as the nation back at home is symbolised by Arthur and their involvement in the Gallipoli campaign is justified solely by Arthur's comfort 'when he goes to bed'. In other terms, their participation in the campaign is justified by the patriotic idea that the comfortable home life back in the homeland depends on their fighting. However, this idea turns out to be an unconvincing idea as the poem changes the reference to another Arthur that symbolizes the soldiers in Gallipoli:

With waterproofs he's made himself

A kind of sleeping bag  
Though of the way he wriggles in  
There's nothing much to brag  
And now with blanket wrapped around  
And feet tied up as one  
You think, he's nearly finished  
But Lord, he's just begun.

Arthur appears as a young Anzac soldier who prepares his own bed in trenches in the above stanza. He lacks the comfortable bed at home and he makes his own sleeping bag and wraps himself in blankets. In the final stanza of the poem, Arthur's death is metaphorically referred to as going to bed:

And now he wants his great coat  
A smile is shared by each  
It suddenly dawns on him  
It hangs just out of reach  
He sits him up & glares around  
And each man hides his head  
A spring, a jerk, a smothered curse  
And Arthur's gone to bed.

*(Folder PR01706, Image SAM - 8042)*

'When Athur goes to bed' renders the patriotic pride a misery of war. While 'Arthurs' back at home sleep in their beds, 'Arthurs' in the trenches sleep in their self-made waterproof sleeping bags. Horace Williams' poetical lines quoted in his diary spans from being patriotic to critical of their recruitment in the Gallipoli Campaign. While attempting to relate his individual perspective on historical events through poetry, Williams also suggests alternative views on the hardships of war. This perspective stands out as reminiscent of Homer's *Iliad* in which the poet not only writes the epical tale of the Trojan War but also talks about the events that prepare Achilles' looming death. In the same manner, Williams also predicts the death Arthur, alluding to the death of thousands of his fellow countrymen.

In another example, Williams uses one of the most famous mottos of American Civil War, 'we are fighting for liberty', in a military song in its chorus part:

We're fighting for liberty for freedom  
For six bob a day we're chasing the hun  
We'll stand back to back neath the old Union Jack  
And show the world what Australia has done.

The military song above illustrates the idea that Australia is still a part of the British Empire and stands beneath the Union Jack. Yet, this stance is provided by ‘six bob a day’ which is the payment each soldier gets for their involvement in the war. They wish to call it ‘fighting for liberty for freedom’. The lyrics of the song inevitably recall the questions of liberty for which they claim to be fighting as in the American Civil War. To recall MacCallum again, ‘Australianness’ is a highly problematic term and it requires constructions of national and cultural values and meaning (1997, p. 102). Williams uses the Union Jack as the unifying cultural value through which a national identity is constructed. However, the use of this song in such a setting as Gallipoli is significant as it refers to fighting for freedom which would not liberalise Australia. This contradictory meaning of the song is also intensified by the reference to their daily payment that renders the fight less patriotic despite its reference to fighting for liberty in American Civil War.

Another poetic diary includes Lt. T. P. Chataway’s notes in which he writes:

Where drifting clouds cast shadows o’er the sand  
Perturbed not by earthly the sun’s that glow  
For their brief moment. Napoleon’s band,  
Caesar and Athony’s lie low!  
And time – whose shining disc their glories lit,  
Unheeding through the azure blue does flit.

Chatway’s poetic diary also points out the fearful and gloomy atmosphere caused by the war by foregrounding clouds that ‘cast shadows’. However, the shadows of the glories will be lit by the ‘glory’, which turns the gloomy, miserable and hopeless aura of the war into a glittering and hopeful one.

Thomas Percy’s ‘The Soul of Anzac’, which will be analysed further in an extended version of this study, is typed in 49 pages and it is an epic account of the Anzac soldiers who fought in Gallipoli. ‘The Soul of Anzac’ is reminiscent of Homer’s *Iliad* in its style and thematic uses of the war scenes. This epic poem, at the same time, stands out with its deep analyses of the emotional state of the Anzac soldiers. The importance of ‘The Soul of the Anzac’ lies in the fact that it emphasizes the agony, grief, blood and tears caused by the war instead of glory and patriotism.

Poetry in Anzac diaries does not only include poems written by the Anzac soldiers themselves. In James Suggest Hagan’s folder, we come across a poem written by his son James F. (Jim) Hagan for him to be read on the Anzac Remembrance Day, which was later published in Canadian Legion Magazine in July 1970.

Lest we forget  
The glorious dead of every age  
Whose blood is passing dry on History’s page;  
(Their memory lingers yet)  
Let us waver not a fraction  
Turn their ideals into action

Lest we forget.

Hagan's poem, in a similar fashion to Horace Williams' poetry, functions to encourage fighting, praise and glorify the dead of the war in a patriotic way. Hagan does not naturally emphasize the casualties of the war in a painful way but still advise the reader not to forget those who shed their blood in the war for those loved ones back at home. As in most heroic poems in other cultures, Hagan contributes with this piece to the Anzac memories in a victorious way and honours the martyrs.

Anzac diaries, as personal accounts of Çanakkale Wars from the Anzac perspective, provide details of the war unknown by the official records. This war that has proved itself to be one of the most important historical, emotional and national experience for both the Turks and the Anzacs remains in no doubt as important milestones in both countries. The diaries provide us with the proof that this war caused ordinary soldiers from both side to befriend each other, see each other for the first time or perhaps made them closer to another culture and language for the first time in their lives. Williams' poems in these diaries can be read as the lamentations on this military campaign in a lyrical way which also turns the war itself into a lyrical war combining the sufferings of the young men from both sides.

Poetry, then, appears to be a means of consolation which functions to both encourage the soldiers to fight for their country and voice their emotions such as homesickness and fear of death. Lyricism in diaries is also used to criticise the campaign both historically and politically from a very personal perspective within the war itself instead of politicians' declarations. To conclude briefly, it is the powerful emotional influence of the Gallipoli War that gives the inspiration of poetry in the diaries. As Kemaloğlu argues, 'with its classical tradition borrowed from Homer's Troy, Gallipoli becomes a mythical land' (2017, p. 189) and, thus, becomes a source for poetic imagination not only geographically but also thematically. The fierce struggles and inexplicable political ambitions caused the destruction on individual human lives and humanely reactions to the war after witnessing the enemy suffer also in the trenches only steps away, the war itself turned into a lyrical war for both cultures.



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