

BOOK REVIEW

Anzac Spirituality: The First AIF soldiers speak

Author: Daniel Reynaud

Publisher: North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly, 2018.

ISBN: 9781925588750

Paperback, 370 pages

Price: \$44.

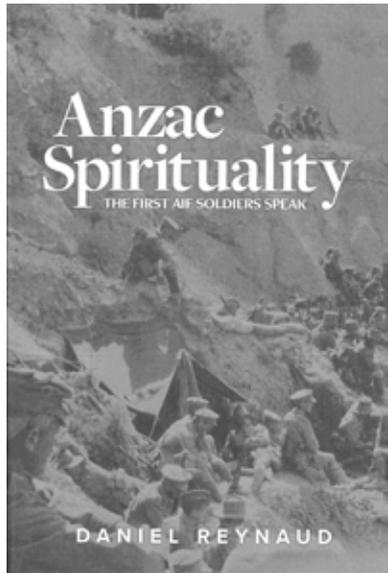
Reviewed by James Franklin*

Modern secular historians are inclined to reimagine the First AIF in their own image. That misconception will not survive Reynaud's remarkable and massively-researched book. It exhibits the religion of the soldiers of the First World War through their own words in letters and diaries. It is not the later civic religion of C.E.W. Bean and the Australian War Memorial, either, but traditional denominational Christianity.

The majority of soldiers were of course Protestants, but this review confines itself to some of the book's insights into the faith of the 20 per cent of soldiers who were Catholic.

There was lack of fervour in some circles, especially at compulsory church parade. "Often when the Sergeant-Major came along and announced 'Protestants fall out' nine tenths would swear they were R.C.s." (p. 36). But equally, there was widespread genuine devotion. A 1915 letter from a soldier in the Melbourne *Advocate* reports:

"There is no doubt about it but the Christian Brothers have a past pupil to be proud of in Captain F.W. Frawley (Victoria – Parade College). Every Sunday, as we have no chaplain of our own on board, he, as senior Catholic officer, assembles the Catholics in the for'ard



* James Franklin is editor of the *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*.

well deck, and we say the Rosary, Litany of the B.V.M., gospel of the day, and the De Profundis; and today, to the accompaniment of a small organ, we sang 'Faith of Our Fathers', 'Sweet Star of the Sea' and 'Immaculate'."

Faith operated under different conditions overseas. First, death on the battlefield was an ever-present threat. Priests could offer general absolution and Communion before a battle, an exception to the usual rules. Corporal Wilfred Gallwey wrote in 1917, "Every man gets communion and then he is fit to die. Many a time after Mass I have gone to Confession and received Communion immediately afterwards. Every chance I get I go and am always prepared for death. If I ever get killed you may be certain that I will be sure of everlasting happiness in the next world." (p.142)

Secondly, denominations mixed in a way that was rare at home, and padres of both sides often impressed all kinds of soldiers. "One Roman Catholic padre was 'universally voted as "one of the best"' because he 'risks his life to give absolution to men out in No Man's Land, and that sort of thing,' praise recorded in the diary of an ardent Protestant." (p. 235) "Father Michael Bergin, an Irish Jesuit missionary in Syria who was deported by the Turkish authorities, was perhaps the only member of the AIF never to have set foot in Australia. He attached himself to the Australians in Egypt, serving at Gallipoli, before being killed in action at Passchendaele in 1917. Bergin was described by his senior Catholic chaplain as 'tall, spare, gaunt; he looked the typical Jesuit of anti-Catholic literature ... I have never known anyone to inspire such respect and admiration from such diverse characters: good men and bad, broadminded and those devoid of that reputation.'" (p. 241)

Debate for and against religion sometimes took place too, between men thrown together by the circumstances of war. "An officer commented on the deep friendship between a Catholic chaplain, 'a tall, gaunt, sharp featured Irishman, ... [with] a voice that is manly, a keen sense of humour, a laugh that is hearty, and a mind that is broad,' and his 'particular friend' the Medical Officer, 'an atheist with a propaganda, as he calls himself.' Lively and intelligent verbal sparring, 'with good feeling and an entire absence of malice' marked the friendship, despite the doctor insulting the chaplain as "the Jesuit", "The Parasite of Faith" and several other unpleasant names – and the Padre chuckles away until he has finished and then opens out on him with equal force." (p. 188)

Ethics, Reynaud notes, was important to the Army as soldiers who were drunk, frequented brothels, gambled excessively or stole posed a threat to discipline. Chaplains were supposed to help fix the problem, and some noted a difference in emphasis between Catholic and Protestant, with Catholics hard on “vice” but comparatively indulgent on drink and gambling.

Reynaud has greatly increased our understanding of both the First World War and Australian religious history by allowing ordinary soldiers to speak for themselves.

BOOK REVIEWS

Newman College: A History, 1918-2018

Authors: Brenda Niall, Josephine Dunin, Frances O’Neill

Publisher: Newman College, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, 2018

ISBN: 9780646983004

Format: Hardback, 270 pages

Price: \$70

Contesting Catholic Identity: The Foundation of Newman College, Melbourne, 1914-18

Author: Michael Francis

Publisher: Newman College, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, 2018

ISBN: 9780646982014

Format: Paperback, 153 pages

Price \$30

Reviewed by Edmund Campion*

Brenda Niall is the doyenne of Australian biography. Her life of Archbishop Mannix won the National Biography Award in 2016. Many of her books are quarried from a cache of letters or capacious diaries, a lengthy process. But when Newman College at the University of Melbourne asked her to write their history in time for their centenary in 2018, she knew she couldn’t dawdle. So she recruited her sister, Frances O’Neill, a social historian, and oral historian Josephine Dunin, to find the material from which to craft

* Edmund Campion is a Sydney priest who taught church history at the Catholic Institute of Sydney.