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Anzac Sons: Five Brothers on the Western Front YA

By Allison Marlow Paterson

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Big Sky Publishing | 1 April 2015

Asking Allison Marlow Paterson – 10 Questions and Answers from the author of [Anzac Sons](#)



1. Can you explain what your book is about?

Anzac Sons: Five Brothers on the Western Front Australia in the First World War. It tells of the impact the war had on their family and the small community of Mologa, Victoria, from where they came. It is based on the original version titled *Anzac Sons: the Story of Five Brothers in the War to End All Wars* which was compiled from a collection of over 500 letters the brothers sent to their family at home along with many years of research, including a trip to the Western Front to walk in the footsteps of my ancestors and honour the three young men who did not make it home. Ultimately, it is a story of mateship, bravery and sacrifice; it is a heartbreaking account of a family torn apart by war and a mother who never recovered from the tragedy. It is about ordinary people who showed great courage and who suffered immensely in the hope they would preserve a way of life. *Anzac Sons* also provides an overview of the Australian experience of war on the Western Front for children and young adults and is, therefore, unique in its form and content.

2. What inspired you to write the book?

Primarily, I undertook the writing of this story to honour my family. I have a conviction that their story needs to be shared with others. After completing the original version I reflected on the sacrifices made in WWI and felt compelled to share this story with a younger generation. As a teacher librarian I wanted to share a real experience with our children rather than relying on fiction to develop an appreciation for the meaning of Anzac and Remembrance Day. The book is my undertaking that the sacrifice that our family made will never be forgotten.

3. Where were the letters found and I believe there is an interesting story about their recovery?

The letters were found in the crumbling home at Mologa which the boy's parents had built in 1912. My uncle Jim had lived there all of his life and eventually the property was sold to my father. At this point my uncle left the home to live in nearby Pyramid Hill. He left everything behind, furniture, photos, food. It was a home frozen in time. As a child I recall there were rooms in which I refused to enter. Like most young children my imagination had few boundaries and I was convinced there were ghosts, there was a sense of emptiness and sadness, and it was cold. It is in this house where this story begins.



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Over 500 letters and postcards along with mementoes and photos of the Great War were uncovered in an old wardrobe, cupboards and trunks that Jim had left behind. They were once close to being destroyed. A group of thieves, who were scavenging antique furniture from abandoned homes across central Victoria, were interrupted by my father arriving minutes before their attempt to burn the timber home to cover all traces of their activities. My father arrived late one afternoon to the smell of cigarette smoke and old newspapers piled high in the centre of the living room, they were ready to ignite. The thieves escaped. I often wonder if my imaginary ghosts had anything to do with saving the home and the letters.

4. What are the main themes in the story; is there a message?

I explore the tragedy of war and focus on ordinary men who through a sense of duty and loyalty became heroes defined by their courage and the enormous sacrifices they made. The book also explores mateship and commemoration. The impact of war upon the families of those who served and how that long shadow continues to darken the generations is also a major theme. I wrote *Anzac Sons* in the spirit of remembrance and commemoration and the book concludes with this message, it is my testament to my family and the soldiers who served with them.

5. What age group is the book targeted at?

Anzac Sons is adaptable across a broad range from 6-14 year of age. It can be shared with parents in the early childhood years as a family experience. The level of text complexity allows for independent reading from mid-Primary through to Secondary.

6. How can *Anzac Sons* be used in the classroom?

Anzac Sons has deliberately been written for classroom use and can easily be adapted from mid-Primary for Anzac Day and Remembrance Day services through to Year 9 as an introduction to the study of the Australian experience of war. The text is in narrative form enabling a perfect whole class reading experience within the confines of a classroom period. The break-out boxes, maps and visual supporting material also allow for further exploration and can be used as a catalyst for discussion and research.

7. What do you hope children will take with them from reading your book?

I hope it provides an appreciation for the great suffering that both soldiers and their families endured and an understanding of the Australian experience of WWI and society at the time. I intend that it will also develop an understanding of what it means to be Australian; I strongly believe that we need to understand our past to move forward to the future with conviction and empathy. In addition, I hope that readers will be inspired to research their own families and share their knowledge with others.

8. Does the story have links with the Australian curriculum?

Anzac Sons strongly supports the descriptors and content of the Australian History curriculum. It explores commemoration and remembrance and can be used as an opening resource for study at Year 9. It presents both primary and secondary sources of information, along with social perspectives and events of the time, including imperialism, allegiance to the mother country, the conscription debate, Australian identity, sacrifice and mateship. It also outlines major Western Front battles including Fromelles, Passchendaele, Bullecourt, Messines, Passchendaele and the battles of 1918. I believe *Anzac Sons* fills a gap in student knowledge of the Western Front and the availability of engaging resources which are not fictional nor too detailed and challenging.



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9. Were there memorable people and places that you came across in your research?

There was Jack Lockett who became Australia's oldest man at 111; I met him when he was in his nineties. He was living at home by himself and still drove his car. He was charming and so helpful; he spoke very fondly of the Marlow's. He told me the secret to a long life was to never worry. I guess when you have spent a night trapped in No-Man's Land hiding in shell holes while dodging searchlights, you could come to accept that in civilian life there are probably not so many things that should spend time worrying about. There was Bert Wishart, the Light Horsemen who served at Gallipoli and the Middle East. Also Colonel Jack Swatton who drove horse teams through Hell-Fire Corner at the entrance to Ypres. He told me he never came back with the same number of horses he had left with. In later years he led the 38th Battalion. It was wonderful to have the chance to meet them and spend even just a few hours with them, it was an honour. The battlefields are heart-breaking. It struck me that this was such a small area yet millions perished here, many never to be found. At Pozieres where Charles Bean's words reverberate on the memorial at the site of the old Windmill, he said it "... marks a ridge more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth". Places like Tyne Cot cemetery near Passchendaele, rows and rows of white crosses. They are pictures in my mind I will never forget. Then there are the people who I have encountered – all those that provide encouragement or go that extra mile to help you.

10. How long did it take you to research and write the book?

To explain this question I need to return to the creation of the original version of *Anzac Sons* (688 pages). The thought first occurred to me thirty years ago when I was using the letters for a university assignment. Then life got in the way. I began transcribing the letters 12 years ago and reading whatever I could lay my hands on. It was not until we visited the Western Front in 2011 could I gain a greater understanding and move forward with a purpose. I began by organising the letters chronologically and slowly transcribing each one, which took years. Many are written from the trenches with faint pencil and are badly stained. I then researched – I read everything I could find on Australian involvement in WWI, spent days in the online archives of the National Archives of Australia and on the Australian War Memorial website reading the details of the brothers, their friends and neighbours. I ploughed through battalion diaries for specific information. I made contact with local museum curators who assisted with detail I could not find online and travelled to the Western Front where we toured the region, stood on the ridges, visited the graves and spent a lot of time reflecting. All the while I was writing, editing and gathering more information. I came to a point where I knew the research would never end if I did not draw the line. Which I did, I completed the work, gave it to a valued colleague for comment and then, with his comments digested I considered the purpose of my work and began a major edit. The result is publication, for which I am very grateful.

After the publication of the original version I created a short narrative text which succinctly told the story of the Marlow brothers. I then set about adding photos, copies of letters, postcards and memorabilia to the text until I was satisfied I had created a true story which utilises many of the strategies of fiction writing to create an engaging story. The publishers agreed!

Allison Marlow Patterson is available for interview

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