

Roy Writes Home

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We were not surprised, his mother and I, when our youngest rushed off to enlist. It was in his nature. I remember the date quite clearly – 21st September 1914, five days before his 23rd birthday. He'd felt, I suppose, that he was just marking time at home and this was his chance to take life by the collar. Quite fearless, only a little chap but nuggety, and as loyal as they come. He would never walk away from a stoush, as he called it, and would never betray a friend.

He was our last born child, an afterthought you might say. We'd lost two boys early on, just babies. Fragile little fellows, never meant to stay long on this earth and soon back in Our Lord's care. "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not." But Roy was different – from the time his eyes first focused his gaze was steady and his tiny hands had a firm grip. He could run as soon as he could walk. We were encouraged then and felt he'd stay with us.

It was hard for such old parents to keep up with him. The scrapes he got into! But he could always talk his way out of trouble and he had his mother on a string. We were only two streets from the beach in those days and he was always there, climbing rocks and walls and jumping off the pier for a dare. There was never any skin on his knees and elbows. I did think that his friends were rather a wild lot, but there was no real harm in them, nothing nasty or unkind.

Roy was never much of one for school, not that he wasn't bright. Once he could read and write he thought it was all he needed. He read a lot at home and loved the old favourites his grandfather had brought with him from Ireland. We had many a talk about books and adventures and faraway places. In the evenings we'd often walk on the beach together, not saying much, enjoying the sound of the sea. I felt he was my friend as well as my boy.

He left school quite early, insisting that he wanted to get on with life. I tried to talk him out of it, but I wasn't very convincing. He knew that for all my grammar school education I was only fitted for a clerk. But he soon found work as a storeman, settled down and even managed to put a bit of money by. There were one or two girls, but nothing came of it. Roy wasn't one for flirting or dancing, but he would have made a steady beau for the right sort of lass. He was happy enough with his lot, I suppose, but like a lot of young fellows his age he seemed to think there was something missing from life. There weren't many frontiers left to cross, not so much adventure to find. So when the war came it was like a magnet to them all, just moths to the flame.

It was a few days before Christmas when he left on the HMAS Themistocles, with the 8th Battalion Reinforcements. He told his mother he'd be back soon – it would all be over in no time once the St Kilda boys joined in. Then he disappeared below with his mates, but we stood and watched until long after the ship had gone from view. We had a sombre journey home and a rather melancholy Christmas Day.

Months drifted past and the worst thing was not knowing where the boys were or how they were faring. One heard things everywhere, mostly rumours of course,

but there was a lot of talk in the papers about our lot going up against the Turks. Then at last, thank God, Roy sent a letter from England. He'd been wounded at Gallipoli, and they'd sent him off to hospital in the Old Country. He wrote a bit about what he'd gone through.

"I was fifteen days fighting before I was hit. The Turks have fought like devils, killing our wounded, firing on the Army Medical Corps and shelling the field hospitals. We found some of our men that had been wounded with their throats cut. When I got wounded I was a mile away from the first field hospital. The Army Medical Corps men could not get up to the firing line, owing to the heavy shell fire, so I lay in a little creek until dark. The bullets were flying overhead like rain. I then made a move and hobbled about nearly all night, unable to find the hospitals. At last I found an Army Medical Corps man who put me on the right track".

Now to me, that sounded very self-reliant for a young man away from home for the first time. I thought people should know what the boys had to cope with, so I sent that paragraph into the papers. I didn't send the part where he admitted being fined 50s for jumping ship in Cairo. Well, of course he would, he'd be keen to know what the rest of the world was like. He wouldn't have been Robinson Crusoe, as they say. The Argus published the excerpt from his letter and I felt I'd done the proper thing to share it. In due course he was patched up and sent back to Gallipoli, but blow me down if he didn't manage to cut himself on a rusty tin and ended up with a septic arm. So it was back to hospital again.

After that the 8th Battalion was shipped off to France. We read about the fierce battles they were in and the awful loss of life and limb. It was beyond anyone's imagination, the numbers too big to comprehend. We dreaded going through the

long lists in the papers, all those lost boys, but thank the Lord, Roy's name never appeared. But his health had begun to fail. We were informed that he had tonsillitis, then it was thought to be diphtheria, but in the end it was just another unexplained fever. Bouts of dysentery of course, all the boys had that, and something they called general debilitation. He was in hospital at Le Havre on one occasion and was able to write to us again. His mother and I were never so pleased to get a letter.

Dear Old Dad, he started. Not so much of the "old ", young fellow, I thought. Then some sentiments that made his mother weep. I sent a part of this letter to the Prahran Telegraph and they placed it in a prominent spot.

It was headed: "Roy Writes Home."

"...I had a walk through the town and around the beach this morning. It was a biting cold, wintry morning, and, when I reached a corner leading on to the Esplanade, the wind was so strong that it nearly carried me off my feet, at the same time taking my hat for a trip some hundreds of yards up the road. The sea was lashing about into a foam and looking very angry. Apart from a French soldier, who was walking along the beach, the seashore was deserted. The place reminded me very much of the St Kilda Esplanade, and brought up many pleasant memories. ... "

I must allow I shed a tear or two myself at that...

He went on... "While I was on the Somme, I got leave for one day to visit Amiens, a very interesting city. Many old church buildings there of rare architecture. All the

women I saw were in mourning, many were widows, all looked serious and all seemed bent on some job or another. Absolutely no idlers standing about. Many of them as they passed me said, "Bon Australia", some patting me on the back in a friendly, approving manner... "

I thought that he'd painted a really good picture. Then he wrote a bit that made me really feel proud:

"I often think about my mates in the trenches, they must be having a rough time of it, poor lads, what with cold, mud, rain and frost. One beautiful fact is that there exists amongst all the boys a feeling of camaraderie and in the midst of battle there are always displays of this camaraderie. Of course, the "cold-footers" will not be able to understand the bond of brotherhood which exists amongst the boys. It is a puzzle to me how any eligible man can act the part of a parasite and allow these brave fellows to spill their blood for them without helping. As a brave comrade, since killed in action, said: "Far better to die a thousand deaths than to desert such brave men". Through their shirking their duty, some of the boys have not been able to get any leave. I only had one day's leave in ten months, and I have been at the trenches now for nearly two years and a half."

Then the paper said, "Private Dwyer has now returned to duty". Just like that. Returned to purgatory would have been more appropriate, in my opinion.

Somehow the years went painfully by and 1918 dawned. The papers announced that our boys were ready for one last push – the spring offensive. I knew Roy would be up for that, he'd be chafing at the bit. But then we got the first telegram, from Villers-Bretonneux. It told us he'd received multiple gunshot wounds in his

arm and knee, as well as a bullet in his eye. They said he was in a serious condition, but a few days later we got another telegram to say he was on the mend. It mixed up his right leg with his left arm, but we didn't care as long as he was going to pull through.

But when another telegram arrived with just two words "Roy Dying", just like that with nothing to soften the blow, I was compelled to take action. I've never been one to harass the authorities, they've enough to cope with, but you must understand that we had to know the truth. I tried to let them see what it was like for us.

"I hate making complaints, but I feel it my bounden duty to draw your attention to the discrepancy in the several reports I have received from your office with regard to the condition of my son...Which report is correct? They all differ... I think you will agree with me that the country owes more than it can ever repay to my son, and men like him, and that the feelings of Fathers and Mothers should be considered and be saved from such unreliable reports, for it is nothing short of torture".

But in the end he did survive, although his war was over. They took him to London and patched him up once more and the news was that he was improving, although he'd lost the sight of one eye. We grieved over that of course, but thought he'd be able to manage, there were worse things. And in the November they sent him home. We hadn't been told much, and just assumed he would be himself again by the time he returned. His mother and I waited for hours on the pier until we saw the dot which was the ship coming in at last. After it docked, a lot of the other boys were hugging their parents, their wives and children. Some of

the wounded were assisted off, in chairs or on crutches, but they looked to cheer up with the first sight of home. Then we saw Roy, shuffling between two orderlies, a patch over one eye. We could see that it was him, that it was our boy, but then again, somehow it wasn't. I don't know quite how to explain it, just that there was no spark of life in his face or energy in his movements. He was like a walking shadow.

The doctors said that the best thing was to take him home in the hope familiar things would bring him around. But he just sat on the porch on an old chair and stared, as if he was searching for something in the distance. He didn't say much, only that there were bells in his head and he couldn't hear well enough to think, and could someone please turn them down. His mates called by sometimes, but he didn't recognise them, no matter how hard they tried to get through to him with their jokes and yarns.

It was only a matter of time before the Veterans people admitted Roy to the mental home that had just been set up for soldiers, out at Mont Park. They assured his mother and I that he'd be better off there, that he'd get some treatment for his condition which something they called shell shock. But when he was assessed they labelled him as a lunatic and the doctors said he'd never be able to care for himself again. I must say they looked after him well enough, even repaired his teeth, but otherwise his condition stayed the same. Eventually we got a letter to say his damaged eye was to be removed; it was useless and unsightly, in the doctor's opinion. His mother was very upset to hear that – after all, he was her last born baby.

It isn't such a bad place. They have space around and gardens where the inmates

sit on fine days. On our first visit we realised that there were others worse off than our boy. They just lay on the grass with a blank look in their eyes, like so many unburied casualties. Roy usually sits on a bench, poking at the dirt with a stick. One day he told his mother he was making roads for ants. We didn't know what he was getting at, but it seemed to mean something to him. It was nice for her just to hear his voice. He does not talk at all now.

His mother and I go out there as often as we can, mostly on a Sunday, after Mass. We still pray that one day a veil might lift and he will know us again. It does happen, I believe, in a few cases, one or two. What worries us most is what will happen when we pass over. We are not getting any younger and we wonder if anyone will remember him in years to come.

I was talking to a chap on our last visit, another father. His boy was very badly off, had dreadful nightmares, spent most of his time curled up in a ball. This man said straight out that it would have been better if they'd died outright and been buried along with their mates. I could not agree with that at first, it seemed so harsh, but I thought about it on the tram going home.

I have to admit that Roy has no life to speak of. He'll never work again or have a wife or children. Or get together with his mates to reminisce. Won't see how the world is changing or be able to count the passing years. He can't take himself for a quiet walk along the beach; there'll be no more letters. He's just inmate Roy Ignatius Dwyer, a lunatic. He'd hate them using his middle name – said he never wanted to be a saint. But I thought it suited him. As St Ignatius Loyola's prayer says:

"Lord teach me to be generous, to give and not to count the cost." He certainly did that, all of the boys did.

And one thing we can hold onto is that because of men like our son, and the hell on earth they went through, there will never be another war like it. Never again will mankind be blighted in such a horrific way. We owe them so much for that.

We're going out to visit him next Sunday, if his mother's cold is better and if the weather's kind.