

Narrative In The War Histories Of C.E.W. Bean

by Megan Hirst

One of the more contentious debates in Australian historiography has concerned the work of C.E.W. Bean, who is possibly this country's best known (if perhaps not its most frequently read) war historian. No doubt much of the source of this contention is that Bean's subject matter goes right to the heart of what many Australians consider as definitive of national identity – namely the “Anzac legend.” The issue clearly has much emotive potential, and the debate has at times been heated. Thus far, however, considerations of Bean's work have remained almost entirely devoid of any considerations of theory – and in particular, of textual analyses¹. Rather, the chief protagonists in the debate² have generally been more pre-occupied with questions of the factual accuracy of Bean's accounts, as well as the reasonableness (given those facts) and internal consistency of his conclusions.

This essay necessarily sidesteps these issues in some senses, by rejecting – first of all – the positivist assertion that a “true representation” of historical events is desirable, let alone possible. Given this rejection, an analysis of the type of history (and thus the type of past) which Bean constructed becomes more pertinent than questions of how “historically accurate” his reporting of the events was. In particular, it is interesting to note the *way* in which Bean constructs his version of Australia's role in the war. This essay will rely, in particular, on Hayden White's theories concerning the role of narrative in historical writing – with the intention of showing that such an approach presents a viable alternative understanding of how Bean's writings (here, represented by the first two volumes of the *Official History*, which concern the Gallipoli campaign) are productive of a certain subjective understanding of the War.

The significance of Bean's writings has not gone unremarked upon by Australian historians – his detractors as well as his hagiographers have been eager to crown him as the Creator of the Anzac Legend.³ And perhaps with good cause. Bean's dispatches during the war certainly had an enormous impact on how those in Australia understood the events of the war,⁴ and the *Anzac Book* and the *Official History* more or less replicated these earlier versions of the war, in a more durable form. While Bean is said to have lamented the scant use which his histories have been accorded by academic historians, there can be little doubt as to the effect of those

¹ Two notable exceptions are Stephen Garton “Cultural History and Anzac History”, in Deryck M. Schreuder (ed), *The Humanities and a Creative Nation: Jubilee Essays*, (Canberra: The Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1995), esp at pp225-27; and Helen Pringle, “The Making of an Australian Civic Identity: The Bodies of Men and the Memory of War”, in Geoffrey Stokes (ed), *The Politics of Identity in Australia*, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997) – though the latter is not concerned specifically with Bean's work, and former amounts more to an acknowledgement that we *should* consider a theoretical historiography of Bean's work than an example of such an analysis in itself.

² see in particular the debate in *Australian Historical Studies* between John Barrett (“No Straw Man: C.E.W. Bean and Some Critics”, *Australian Historical Studies* vol.23 no.89 (April 1988), pp102-14) and Alistair Thomson (“‘Steadfast Until Death’?: C.E.W. Bean and the Representation of Australian Military Manhood”, *Australian Historical Studies* vol.23 no.93 (Oct 1989), pp462-478).

³ see for example, Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp125-26; Bruce Bennett, “Anzac, Literary Genre and Memory”, *Australian Literary Studies*, vol.17 no.4 (Oct 1996), p401; David A. Kent, “From the Sudan to Saigon: A Critical Review of Historical Works”, *Australian Literary Studies*, vol.12 no.2 (Oct 1985), p157; Jane Ross, *The Myth of the Digger: The Australian Soldier in Two World Wars*, (Marrickville: Hale & Iremonger, 1985), p13.

⁴ Richard Ely, “The First Anzac Day: Invented or Discovered?”, *Journal of Australian Studies*, no.17 (Nov 1985), pp41-58.

histories on the popular imagination, and the production of subsequent popular histories.⁵ Not only have Bean's substantive premises largely been accepted with little questioning, but indeed his very style has become characteristic of Australian war writing.

This continuing influence can be traced as much to the unusual style of Bean's writing as to the fact of his status as Official Historian.⁶ Unlike the official histories of Britain and New Zealand, Bean's work concerns itself little with questions of high strategy or the political causes of the war.⁷ Rather, his account offers a "blow-by-blow" description of the battles, presented almost as if through the eyes of one of the combatants. Detail and fascination with individuals (rather than nation states or even military units) mark Bean's approach to war history as significantly different to most that had been written previously. As Robin Gerster points out, the supposedly "democratic" nature of Bean's history has been remarked on "to the point of cliché."⁸ However upon reading Bean's work one is struck most of all by the dramatic literary quality of the story-line – in short, the narrative nature of the writing. It is this loyalty to a narrative approach which suggests Hayden White's approach as a method of analysis.

Bean's histories could clearly be seen in terms of the dichotomy between the forms of historical address which, according to White, characterises analyses in traditional historical theory⁹:

After the historian had discovered the true story of 'what happened' and accurately represented it in a narrative, he might abandon the narrational manner of speaking and, addressing the reader directly, speaking in his own voice, and representing his considered opinion as a student of human affairs, dilate on what the story he had told indicated about the nature of the period, place, agents, agencies, and processes (social, political, cultural, and so forth) that he had studied.¹⁰

White's point is that traditionally it is only the latter form of address – the "dissertative" mode – which was seen as representing a subjective interpretation on the part of the historian. And indeed, the majority of historiographical critiques of Bean's work consist largely of analyses of selected "dissertative" sections of his work.¹¹

⁵ for example P. Adam-Smith, *The Anzacs*, (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Australia, 1978); John Robertson, *Anzac and Empire: The Tragedy & Glory of Gallipoli*, (Port Melbourne: Hamlyn Australia, 1990), and perhaps to a slightly lesser extent Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War*, (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1975). It has become virtually obligatory to include in such accounts an acknowledgement of Bean's influence in the field: see Adam-Smith p472-74, Robertson p276, Gammage pp xi-xii.

⁶ on the power and role of official histories see John Murphy, "The New Official History", *Australian Historical Studies*, vol.26 no.102, (April 1994), pp119-20.

⁷ K. S. Inglis, *C.E.W. Bean: Australian Historian*, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1970), pp22-23.

⁸ Robin Gerster, *Big-Noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1987), p64.

⁹ One commentator goes further than merely implicitly endorsing such a dichotomy and actually states that "'moral' and 'fact' are scrupulously kept separate by Bean": Rob Pascoe, *The Manufacture of Australian History*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979), p14.

¹⁰ Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory", *History and Theory*, vol.23 (1984), p3.

¹¹ see for example Carmel Shute, "Heroines & Heroes: sexual mythology in Australia 1914-1918", *Hecate*, vol.1 no.1 (Jan 1975), pp19-20; Tony Gough, "The First Australian Imperial Force: C.E.W. Bean's Coloured Authenticity", *World Review*, vol.16 no.3 (Oct 1977), p41; K. S. Inglis, "The Anzac Tradition", *Meanjin*, vol.24 no.1 (1965), esp pp26-29; Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, esp pp126, 132-3.

Certainly, these sections of *The Official History* are worthy of some consideration. Bean is unashamed of the manifesto which he there sets out. The elements of it are now well known: According to Bean the Australian soldiers proved themselves to be ideal warriors – selfless and heroic, athletic and enduring, diligent and yet laconic – such qualities being a direct result of their experiences with the bush and the hardships of the Australian frontier. Above all the men are said to have held above all else the virtues of mateship and egalitarianism. Bean presents these qualities as the ideal of “Australian manhood” – and maintains that they represent the reality of the Australian troops in the war. In perhaps his most quoted statement to this effect Bean maintains that what “impelled” the men through years of war

*lay in the mettle of the men themselves. To be the sort of man who would give way when his mates were trusting to his firmness; to be the sort of man who would fail when the line, the whole force, and the allied cause, required his endurance; to have made it necessary for another unit to do his own unit's work; to live the rest of his life haunted by the knowledge that he had set his hand to a soldier's task and had lacked the grit to carry it through – that was the prospect which these men could not face. Life was very dear, but life was not worth living unless they could be true to their idea of Australian manhood.*¹²

Underlying these ideas about “Australian manhood”, and the claim that “in no unreal sense it was on the 25th of April, 1915, that the consciousness of Australian nationhood was born,”¹³ are what more recent historians have identified as the racist and misogynist elements of Bean's dissertations. Clearly “Australian manhood” as understood by Bean is intended to be a quality possessed by British descendents only. Indeed, according to Bean, prior to the unifying ordeal of Gallipoli there was only one goal which united the Australian people, that being “a determination to keep its continent a white man's land.”¹⁴ Furthermore, as several Australian feminist historians have now argued, the image of Australian manhood presented by Bean “affirmed the dichotomy of the sexes and re-established and enshrined the inviolability of the traditions sexual stereo-types of man, ‘the warrior and the creator of history’, and woman, the mother, the passive flesh at the mercy of fate (or rather, man)”¹⁵ Egalitarianism and the loyalty of mateship extend only so far as those fitting the standard of “Australian manhood”, and as such represent an exclusive, divisive, and oppressive ideology.¹⁶

This much is clear from the dissertative elements of Bean's writings. However, to condone the description/dissertation dichotomy by treating the rest of Bean's histories as value-neutral is to overlook the constructive nature of narrative. It is White's argument that “narrative discourse, far from being a neutral medium for the

¹² C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Volume 1: The Story of Anzac: The First Phase*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1939), p607.

¹³ C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Volume 2: From 4 May 1915, to the Evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula*, (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1981) p910

¹⁴ C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History, Volume 1*, p7.

¹⁵ Carmel Shute, “Heroines & Heroes”, p7; see also Adrian Howe, “Anzac Mythology and the Feminist Challenge”, *Melbourne Journal of Politics*, vol.15 (1983-84) pp17-23.

¹⁶ see Alistair Thomson, “Passing Shots at the Anzac Legend”, in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), *A Most Valuable Acquisition*, (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1988), pp191-92.

representation of historical events and processes, is the very stuff of a mythical view of reality, a conceptual or pseudoconceptual ‘content’.”¹⁷ Or, more clearly, a

*historical narrative is not a transparent representation or a copy of a sequence of past events. Narration irreducibly entails selecting the events to be included in its exposition as well as filling in links that are not available in the evidential record. The historian does not find or discover her narrative; she constructs it.*¹⁸ [emphasis original]

Thus, according to White, a reality is “distorted” through narrative in two ways. First, “negative” distortion occurs through the necessarily limited selection of facts for inclusion – thereby excluding other facts. (Thus, “every narrative, however seemingly “full,” is constructed on the basis of a set of events that might have been included but were left out.”¹⁹) And secondly, positive distortion involves the imposition of a narrative structure onto those selected facts so as to give them new meaning in the context of the unified plot.²⁰

Bean’s *Official History* is a paradigmatic example of both forms of distortion. Certainly, the exclusion of material is a necessary condition for any history. However Bean’s writing demonstrates particularly well the “distortive” potential of such exclusions. Clearly certain large topic areas have been excluded – women, for example, are nowhere to be found in Bean’s story, whether as nurses, civilians or otherwise. However, even if it is accepted that Bean’s project was (contrary to the broad theme suggested by the title of the series) the narrow one of recording the deeds of the Australian Imperial Forces, it remains impossible to avoid the conclusion that certain strategic omissions were made by Bean. This is particularly so due to the availability of Bean’s wartime diaries. The discrepancies between the accounts contained therein, and what was included in the *Official History* are telling, as Alistair Thomson has observed.²¹ Examples of facts omitted include the well documented incidence of venereal disease among the troops (resulting from their rather enthusiastic patronage of brothels, particularly in Egypt)²²; self-inflicted injuries aimed at escaping further military service²³; riots, fights, racial violence²⁴ and general hooliganism such as that displayed in the “Wazza riots” in Cairo²⁵; and more generally, the gore and fear involved in war.²⁶

Perhaps more striking though, is the role of “positive distortion” in Bean’s histories. Indeed, most commentators of Bean’s work – whether or not they purport to present a theoretical reading – comment on the peculiar “storylike” nature of his

¹⁷ Hayden White, “Preface” to *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), ix.

¹⁸ Noël Carroll, “Interpretation, History and Narrative”, *The Monist*, vol.73 no.2 (April 1990), p134.

¹⁹ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality”, in *The Content of the Form*, p10.

²⁰ Hayden White, “Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination”, in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p111.

²¹ Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), p60.

²² In the year ending February 1916 around 6000 Australian soldiers were treated for VD: *ibid.* p31. Bean referred to this problem in his diary: Kevin Fewster (ed), *Gallipoli Correspondent: The Frontline Diary of C.E.W. Bean* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp38-39.

²³ *ibid.* pp39, 60.

²⁴ *ibid.* p31

²⁵ Kevin Fewster, “The Wazza Riots, 1915”, *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no.4 (April 1984), pp47-53.

²⁶ This very general omission is perhaps best demonstrated through a comparison of Bean’s text with Bill Gammage’s *The Broken Years*, which presents some of the more gruesome aspect of the war.

writing, and its “literary” quality²⁷ (though implications flowing from this style are rarely considered). Indeed, one enthusiastic supporter of Bean’s work unwittingly summed up the essence of this quality when he wrote that

*Bean’s work does not suffer from the formlessness that bedevils a lot of written history, whereby what is presented is the millions of facts dumped together, with the reader expected of make sense of them. His six volumes are directed and united by his own enduring interest in the Australian character.*²⁸

It is precisely this imposition of form and thereby unity and meaning upon otherwise inherently meaningless events with which White is concerned. Historical “narrativizing” then, is the process by which the familiar literary tool of *plot* (for example, a tragic, romantic or farcical plot) is used to draw together into a coherent whole a series of “real” events. Thereby “closure is attained, and coherence and unity are created.”²⁹ For, as White points out, “no set or sequence of real events is *intrinsically* ‘tragic’, ‘comic’, or ‘farcical’, but can be construed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story-type on the events”, and that therefore, “it is the choice of the story-type and its imposition upon the events which endow them with meaning.”³⁰

What plot-type then, did Bean use in the construction of his narrative of World War One? Again, it is interesting to note that so extreme in its use of narrative is Bean’s account that it has not been uncommon for historians (without reference to White’s work) to note its similarity to a particular literary structure – namely the epic. Homeric references abound in the literature of the ANZACS³¹ – indeed it would seem that such an approach was largely expected, if not demanded by an Australian public eager to hear of the heroism of their armed forces: Barely had the ANZAC forces withdrawn from Gallipoli than the claim was made that “the record is ended. ANZAC has been evacuated, and Australia’s Iliad may now be written ... It awaits only its Homer.”³² Robin Gerster points out that finding themselves lacking in a national tradition of military history in which to follow, the Australian war historians borrowed liberally from antiquity. Indeed, the Australian troops

*were portrayed as belonging to a new, vigorous race from the Great South Land ... [and] at the same time they were seen as having somehow atavistically inherited the transcendent qualities of the heroes of the legendary Trojan battlefield so tantalizingly close to Gallipoli itself.*³³

These ideals are clearly reflected in Bean’s text in the sense that it mimics the style of a classic epic. Enormous numbers of events are described in great detail, each involving what is obviously a quite conscious use of suspense and climax. Indeed, not

²⁷ Stephen Garton, “Cultural History and Anzac History”, p225; Clement Semmler, “War Correspondents in Australian Literature: an Outline”, *Australian Literary Studies*, vol.12 no.2. (Oct 1985), pp195-96; Glen St J. Barclay, “Australian Historians and the Study of War, 1975-88”, *Australian Journal Politics and History*, vol.41 (special issue, 1995), p240.

²⁸ John Carroll, “C.E.W. Bean and 1988”, *Quadrant*, vol.32 no.6 (June 1988), p48.

²⁹ Andrew P. Norman, “Telling it Like it Was: Historical Narratives on their Own Terms”, *History and Theory*, vol.30 (1991), p121.

³⁰ Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory”, p20.

³¹ Analogies to Tolstoy are also not infrequent: see Stephen Garton, “Cultural History and Anzac History”, p225; and Robin Gerster, *Big-Noting*, p66.

³² A Perth correspondent to the *Age* (1 Feb 1916), cited in Richard Ely, “The First Anzac Day”, p56.

³³ Robin Gerster, *Big-Noting*, p2.

only in terms of narrative style, but also by way of the incredible volume of information contained therein is the *Official History* epic-esque. (Though as Gerster and others have pointed out, the story lacks the poetic resonance to truly do justice to this literary form.³⁴)

However, to consider a historical narrative only at its macro-level is perhaps to pass over the intricacies of White's theory. Rather, consideration must be given to the literary tropes utilised – which themselves are inseparable from the type of narrative form employed. White's scheme, which he developed from that of Northrop Frye, is rigid (in fact, perhaps problematically so³⁵): the use of certain tropic devices (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) corresponds to the employment of certain narrative forms (romance, tragedy, comedy and satire respectively). Thus, "a given historian will customarily gravitate towards the use of one trope over others. The use of a particular trope is likely to predispose her toward, or to correspond to, one form of culturally available emplotment over others."³⁶

In terms of the present analysis this approach appears somewhat problematic. If it is accepted that the form of Bean's work is that of an epic, it is unclear from White's scheme which trope would be expected to predominate, since his theory was clearly limited in this regard to the four tropic and narrative forms identified above. This illustrates, perhaps, one of the primary weaknesses in White's analysis – namely its inflexibility. The theory is clearly significantly limited by the cultural specificity of the forms identified by White.

However, to take the converse approach, and begin by considering which trope is predominant in Bean's histories, an interesting conclusion may be reached. While an extensive and thorough tropic analysis (of the sort which White performs on a segment of A.J.P. Taylor's *The Course of German History*³⁷) would require an essay in itself, even a cursory use of White's approach is perhaps worthwhile. Leaving aside the problems associated with distinguishing from one another the clearly interrelated tropic devices as identified by White, the briefest of encounters with Bean's text suggests the metaphor as his preferred trope. Indeed two images predominate in the text of the *Official History* by way of metaphor.

The first is that identified by Marilyn Lake as permeating not only Bean's own work, but the history of "Anzac" generally. Lake demonstrates how images associated with birth, procreation and the life-cycle generally have dominated the rhetoric of Anzac Day.³⁸ Bean's work is certainly no exception to this. Along with the apparently obligatory references to the birth of "the consciousness of Australian nationhood"³⁹ can be found comments as to the "virility" of the Australian soldiers⁴⁰; and references to Britain as a "parent"⁴¹, to the "birth" of regiments which are "living breathing things"⁴², and to pre-war Australia as "the embryo... of one of the earth's greatest nations."⁴³

³⁴ *ibid.* p63;

³⁵ It is beyond the scope of this discussion to consider in detail the problems with this aspect of White's scheme. However, in brief, they involve questions as to the inevitability (or not) and nature of the relationship between tropes and narrative forms, and whether or not the tropes isolated by White are, in fact, distinct from each other: Richard T. Vann, "The Reception of Hayden White", *History and Theory*, vol.37 no.2 (1998), pp150-51.

³⁶ Noël Carroll, "Interpretation, History and Narrative", p142.

³⁷ Hayden White, "Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination", pp107-10.

³⁸ Marilyn Lake, "Mission Impossible: How Men Gave Birth to the Australian Nation – Nationalism, Gender and Other Seminal Acts", *Gender and History*, vol.4 no.3 (Autumn 1992), pp304-22.

³⁹ C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History, Volume 2*, p910.

⁴⁰ *eg ibid.* p429.

⁴¹ *eg* C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History, Volume 1*, p14.

⁴² *ibid.* p83.

⁴³ *ibid.* p7.

The second variety of metaphor favoured by Bean is that which relates elements of battle to experiences in nature – and, in particular, those associated with a rural existence. Often such comparisons are put in the mouths of the troops themselves. For example, one soldier is said to have commented during the landing at Gallipoli, with respect to the Turkish bullets that they were “just like little birds.”⁴⁴ Bean’s retelling of the episode which is perhaps renowned as the most bloody and senseless loss of Australian lives in the Dardanelles – the attack on “The Nek” of August 7th – includes a comparable metaphor. There, one of the surviving officers is said to have remarked that bayonets protruding from the Turkish trenches reminded him of “the way a stubble paddock looks when you have put sheep across it, and they have turned the earth up a bit, and you see the stubble standing in rows behind their tracks.”⁴⁵ In yet another battle the enemy men are described by Bean as looking like “handfuls of peas”⁴⁶, and later as “bolting like rabbits”.⁴⁷ Bullets and bombs are referred to throughout in language which likens them to mere rain.⁴⁸

Clearly such metaphoric images serve a purpose in themselves. Whilst reaffirming Bean’s emphasis on gendered identities and the importance of the bush in securing “manhood”, they also serve a more fundamental purpose in terms of the meaning of the war. As Lake identifies, the life-cycle metaphor makes meaningful what is otherwise a pointless loss of life – by creating a sense of life through death.⁴⁹ Further, the agricultural and rural images serve to both trivialise and naturalise war.

However, the use of metaphor is also significant in terms of what it represents in White’s tropic scheme – namely the use of a romantic emplotment. How can this be assimilated with the more apparent use of epic structure in Bean’s work? and – indeed – is it possible to make a romance of war? First, White makes it apparent that a narrative history may “mix configurational options.”⁵⁰ Therefore it may be that in Bean’s work we have what amounts to a *romantic epic*. Secondly, as to whether a war may be emplotted romantically – certainly according to White there is no theoretical reason why not. (Although he does note that a historian may “misfire” by using a narrative type which readers will not accept as pertaining to the events in question – White gives the example of a comedic telling of the life of President Kennedy⁵¹). Interestingly, Helen Pringle has concluded (and not by means of a tropic analysis) that “war is indeed a romance, but a romance conducted among men.”⁵² Pringle’s thesis places the romantic element of war stories as the celebration of sacred male friendship, and the homeo-erotic undertones by which they are characterised. It is interesting to note the ease with which this reading fits alongside Bean’s histories. His elevation of “mateship” to a paramount virtue, combined with his worship of the (often described as “naked”) Australian male form are highly suggestive of the sort of romance suggested by Pringle.

Thus, we may perhaps conclude that Bean’s work imposes the narrative form of a romantic epic upon the events with which it concerns itself. How then, does this imposition effect the *meaning* of the text? Narrativization represents, for White, a form of “allegoresis”.⁵³ The events are linked in the mind of the reader to the literary

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p254.

⁴⁵ C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History, Volume 2*, p632.

⁴⁶ *ibid.* p158.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* p160.

⁴⁸ eg see *ibid.* pp28, 29, 54, 107,

⁴⁹ Marilyn Lake, “Mission Impossible”, p313.

⁵⁰ Noël Carroll, *Interpretation, History and Narrative*, p141.

⁵¹ Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”, in *Tropics of Discourse*, p84.

⁵² Helen Pringle, “The Making of an Australian Civic Identity”, p93.

⁵³ Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory”, p22.

form in which they are expressed. Thus through a process which White likens to that of metaphor or allegory, the historian conveys the impression that the sequence of events described are *like* a certain type of recognisable genre of story – here the epic.⁵⁴ It is in this way that the use of narrative conveys meaning upon historical events.

Thus Bean's narrative imbues the events which it describes with the significance and characteristics generally associated with romantic and epic stories. This should make clear then the important revelation that it is not merely in the dissertative sections that the *Official History* presents a constructed and subjective interpretation of the war. Rather the narrative itself, in presenting a romantic and epic form predetermines Bean's dissertative interpretations which posit mateship and heroism as fundamental virtues. The subjectivity of this meaning is underscored by the recognition (according to White) that these events could potentially have been represented in another narrative form, using other tropic devices, and thus producing a radically different meaning.⁵⁵

Indeed, the need to impose *any* narrative structure at all is telling. Narrative is a powerful way of denying the essential meaninglessness of historical events, and indeed our own lives. Or, as White phrases it,

*narrative strains for the effect of having filled in all the gaps, of having put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in the place of the fantasies of emptiness, need and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time.*⁵⁶

Perhaps Bean's zealotry for narrative can be explained thus. For clearly war, more so than any other historical phenomenon – demands an explanation, a meaning. To acknowledge that the events of 1914-1918 had no inherent unified meaning outside of a subjective and constructed narrative is effectively to accept, not only on a political, but also on a philosophical level, that there was no reason for the lives lost in the war. Bean manages to avoid this unbearable conclusion by imposing upon the events of the war a story and thus - in Marilyn Lake's words – "turn[ing] that terrible loss into a meaningful event."⁵⁷

It is probably worth acknowledging at this point what has no doubt become clear already – namely that my approach has embraced the useful elements of White's theories whilst choosing to avoid the many weighty theoretical concerns and contradictions which they inherently involve. Perhaps the most fundamental of these is the question of how – if historical narrative can be situated alongside fictitious literature – is the "quality" or "truthfulness" of such a history to be assessed? Just as problematic is White's failure to justify treating the narrative "whole" as discursively produced while insisting that individual events (this concept in itself being somewhat ambiguous) do exist in "reality", and therefore outside discourse.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ It is unclear whether White considered that the categories of narrative form are limited. Generally he discusses only four: romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire: see Noël Carroll, "Interpretation, History and Narrative", p141.

However at times he does mention other forms, including, specifically, epic: see for example Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory", p2.

⁵⁵ The use of irony is perhaps the most commonly represented alternative approach concerning Australia's involvement in the First World War: see for example Peter Stanley, "Gallipoli and Pozières: a legend and a memorial", *Australian Foreign Affairs Record*, vol.56 no.4 (April 1985), p281.

⁵⁶ Hayden White, "The Value of Narrative in the Representation of Reality", p11.

⁵⁷ Marilyn Lake, "Mission Impossible", p313.

⁵⁸ see Richard T. Vann, "The Reception of Hayden White", pp154-55.

Certainly a consideration of the *Official History* has the potential to demonstrate the downfalls of White's theories as well as it may the benefits. In particular it is interesting to note Bean's meticulous (almost obsessive by some accounts) dedication to verification of individual facts in his quest for objectivity. Where this leaves White, who seems to suggest that while the truth of a narrative is constructed, separate events may possess an objective truth, is an interesting question. For if (as White suggests) a methodology which promotes the "reality" of individual facts is the only indicator of a "good" history, where does this leave a critique of Bean? Must we accept that fragments of his story represent historical "reality"? If so, how can such fragments be separated from the discourse in which they are placed? On the other hand – if not, what then may be gained by claiming that objective truth may subsist in an "event", for how may our understanding of it ever be divorced from its narrative context?

Clearly the theoretical problems associated with White's analysis are as numerous as the benefits that his approach may provide. However, it is equally apparent that White has much to offer, not only to the philosophy of history, but to practical historiography. A textual analysis based on his theory may demonstrate the meanings constructed through use of narrative which might otherwise be overlooked in favour of a straightforward consideration of the dissertative sections of a historical account. Certainly in the case of C.E.W. Bean's *Official History* such an approach demonstrates the power of the narrative form itself in attributing meaning to past events. To borrow White's phrase then, it is clear that much of Bean's message concerning the meaning of Australian manhood finds its voice in the content of his narrative form.

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