

Shaul Bar-Haim

*In conversation with Michael Roper*

In 2001, Michael Roper, an historian and gender scholar from the University of Essex, was in the middle of writing a biographical study of proponents of scientific management, when he caught pneumonia. The illness lasted a couple of months, and included a period in hospital. For much of the time he had a fever, which led to the most vivid reminiscences and dreams about his early life. As he got better, it became clear that he could not complete the project on scientific management, but very quickly a new idea presented itself. It was one of the figures in the management project which provided the starting point for his new research on soldiers and their families in WWI:

There was a British management theorist called Lyndall Urwick who campaigned for the setting up of management education in colleges and universities in Britain after WWII, and who was a WWI veteran. As part of the biographical work I was doing I went to Henley Management College, which holds Urwick's papers, and made an extraordinary find. Urwick was one of those people who documented his life in minute detail: drafts of every book, essay, or speech; travelogues documenting his holidays; drafts of unsent letters to colleagues; and at least four manuscript memoirs. Amongst the archives were his letters home during WWI, which, although sometimes addressed to his father, were most often written to his mother. So as I got better, I decided to visit the Imperial War Museum, stirred by this observation about the striking difference between Urwick's public life, which revolved around men, and the prominence of his mother in letters home. I wanted to know if Urwick was typical, if it was usually mothers that unmarried soldiers wrote home to in the war. I ordered up a couple of dozen collections from the Imperial War Museum, just to get an initial sense of the pattern of this correspondence, who was writing to whom, and I discovered mothers everywhere, and also the most gripping documents. I was absolutely gripped by the very deep emotional resonances in these letters, which, looking back, connected in some way to my own recent experience of having been ill.

The reading of these letters in the Imperial War Museum made Roper think that he would like to research the role of home and domesticity in the life of frontline soldiers in WWI, and particularly the relationships between mothers and their sons. The result is the book *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War*, which was published in 2009 (MUP), and was warmly accepted among reviewers and scholars of the WWI. In the book Roper examines the influence of the maternal role among soldiers on the Western Front during the war, and the ways in which life in the trenches was organized and dominated by the mental structures,

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capacities and notions of domesticity which young civilian soldiers brought with them from their own lives back home. The writing of the book, however, was for Roper much more than an historical research – it was a deep emotional process:

I began research on the letters when my daughter Alice was a year old, she was in early infancy, and the experience of becoming a father and observing the relationship between my partner and Alice, made me very aware of how concerns about their children fill the lives and minds of parents. Then I had a son, Thomas, born in 2002, so all the way through that project I had very young children, and those relationships formed part of the way I viewed the ties between soldiers and their families in the war.

The other thing was that, running concurrently with this project, I was involved in an oral history study of child psychotherapy after WWII, and one of the things I discovered from the interviews, was that I'd love to have trained as a child psychotherapist. But I couldn't reinvent myself, I had two kids, I had to earn money, and I already had a pretty good career. At around the same time, the late 1990s, I did an MA in psychoanalysis with Bob Hinshelwood at Essex, and I became very interested in post-Kleinian theory through Bob's work and his seminar. I suppose I was interested in what kind of project could explore the applications of psychoanalytic ideas to historical phenomena, generally speaking.

The other aspect would be that I carry something of the “third generation's legacy” through my grandfather and his experience at Gallipoli in WWI. I have a complicated family history but growing up in Australia, my grandfather was a very important figure, particularly in my adolescence. And I wouldn't say that it was in the foreground, but the more the project progressed the more I wondered: how did these young British men's experiences of trench warfare compare to my grandfather's experience?

Q: I divided my questions for this interview to three sub-topics – history, psychoanalysis and maternity – but I couldn't decide what would be the right order to ask them. So I'm asking for your opinion: what do you think is the right order to discuss this project?

Actually, when you first mentioned the name of the journal, *Studies in the Maternal*, I was like ahhh... because I would say first and foremost that my work is about the history of masculinity, rather than about the history of the maternal.

Q: It is a problem. We will have to take this interview to another journal.

No, because I finished the project very much interested in the psychic formations of mothers and sons, and that's maternity. My early work was an oral history of management culture in Britain post WWII, in which I was thinking about masculinity, I was thinking about male dominated professions and I was interested in the kind of gender cultures that supported them. I believe that I was the first man to do the Gender History module at the University of Essex with Leonore Davidoff, and this was sometimes an awkward experience, because some feminist historians at that point – 1985 – were quite suspicious about the idea of men studying gender, but I did that module and came out of it being a gender historian.

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So my interest was always in thinking relationally about gender, and as I became more immersed in reading letters between sons and their families during the war, it got me wondering about the history of mothers in the war, and the thing that struck me was: where *are* the mothers? Coming from the letters, you've got mothers being very active people. They are getting materials together for parcels, they are baking, they are shopping, they are queuing, they had to deal with rationing later in the war, you've got sugar shortages, things that make it difficult to send the 'comforts' that sons want. There are women involved in all this effort, why don't they figure in the history of WWI? Much of the feminist work at that time was concerned with formal political organisations, it was focused on the issue of the vote, radical feminism vs. other sorts of feminism, and the effect of the war in splintering and reconfiguring feminist movements. The everyday activities of mothers were not so much part of that history, yet mothers were central to how the war was fought and how it was endured.

But the second thing I wanted to say is that I'm a scholar of masculinity, and the book is probably rather better worked through in relation to the sons' perspective than the mothers'. And if this is the case it is because I came to the research with an interest in the subjectivity of men, and then became interested in the mothers.

Q: This gender perspective gave you some good tools to critically revise the male dominated view of military historians.

Military historians have had very little to say about these sort of relationships, and in fact their views often resemble those of soldiers during the war and afterwards. In the 'war literature' produced by Graves, Aldington, Ford Maddox Ford and others during the 1920s and 30s, a myth emerged of a home front that had been hopelessly out of touch with the soldier's situation. In military history too, the idea that home and warfront were antithetical remains a premise. I have had one hostile review to the book, and this was from a military historian who said 'look, you are not talking about comrades; it is comradeship which really matters for soldiers in the WWI and not their families'. But that was a misunderstanding, since the argument of the book is that the structure of comradeship drew a lot on the structure of familial relations. So for example when food shared out, that was often food from home, and it was shared out with your mates; when men went on home leave they often visited their comrades' families, not just their own. Family and military networks were intermeshed. So the argument of the book is to think of comradeship not as something entirely different from familial relationships.

These insights about comradeship came from gender history. One of the achievements of gender history is that it allows you to reappraise areas of historical scholarship in which a gender perspective would not necessarily appear essential, the history of war, like that of diplomacy or high politics, being principally about men. In part my book was setting out to show how a gender perspective can shed a different light on a history that we think we know well. That is to say, you may think that the story of the war is that these young men were separated from their homes and their attachments to home became increasingly irrelevant, they were facing a brutal onslaught that their families completely failed to comprehend. But I wanted to say, no, many of these civilian soldiers came from a domestic environment which gave them all sorts of practical and emotional

survival skills, and a gender perspective helps reveal the deep influence of these domestic cultures.

Q: It seems as if for you gender history is not necessarily a feminist thing. Being a gender scholar and a feminist scholar is not the same thing.

I think I can be sympathetic to feminism, which I am, but I don't think I can be a feminist. But I do think that I can have a feminist inspired perspective and be a gender historian interested in masculinity and deliver something different because of that.

There was also something else that happened to me in the late 1990s. Personally I reached something of a dead-end with masculinity. There are a few rather standard ways of theorizing masculinity today, and a few theorists that everyone tends to read on masculinity. But the more interested I became in psychoanalysis, the more I wanted to know about subjectivity and emotional experience. I felt that I had exhausted my ability to do research on the cultural representations and public norms that defined what a man was in a given historical period. I became pre-occupied by more interior, psychological questions, about how men dealt with and negotiated the cultural codes and expectations of manliness. In my research on WWI, I was confronted with quite intense emotional experiences, of anxiety, loss, love and anger, sensations sometimes so intense that, at the moment of experience, there did not seem to be a conscious engagement with social conventions of feeling and gender – just a raw emotional experience, perhaps too overwhelming to be understood even at the moment of writing about it.

Studying war is a good test of the limits of a social constructionist perspective on masculinity because soldiers often undergo extreme emotional experiences. These may leave powerful unconscious legacies, revealed for example in the nightmares which some WWI veterans suffered for decades afterwards. A topic like the history of fear in wartime, treated from a social constructionist perspective, will only get you so far in understanding the experience of fear. The ambition to write about emotional experience in the past brings with it all sorts of methodological problems, to be sure, but it seems wrong to write it off as anachronistic and methodologically unfeasible, as some do.

Q: I found some parts of *The Secret Battle* contain a provocative argument against many of the works of the last three decades on WWI which focus mainly on gender and sexuality. I'm particularly thinking of the works of people like Paul Fussell and George Mosse, which are still, I suppose, central today. Fussell was famously known for emphasizing the homo-erotic aspects in the being together of soldiers in the trenches. What you did, however, in your book is to suggest that everyday life in the trenches was not motivated by this homo-erotic comradeship but more by models of domesticity, which each soldier brought with him from his own private family. It seems to me like you are trying to shift the framework from sexuality, since even though many have written since Fussell and Mosse, it's still from the point of view of sexuality, while you are trying to say something else. You want to talk about domesticity. Would you agree to this description?

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There is a sort of a gap here, between the work on domesticity and sexuality... One of the areas where sexuality does appear in the book is in soldiers' relationships with their mothers. For example there was this mother, Louisa Hooper, an evangelical Christian, who kept letters from her two sons in which they relate their sexual fantasies about her. Arnold imagines coming home to his mother at the end of the war: 'what flirtations we shall have. My knees are much larger than ever, plenty of room for your dear little body.' Now, post-Freud, and post the Oedipus complex, we find this kind of comic. I was trying to suggest something about a sexualised maternal tie among some Edwardian sons which did not have the post-Freudian stigma attached to it. The term 'homoeroticism' suffers from a similar post-Freudian, knowing wink between the historian and reader about the sexualised basis of relationships between men which might have been felt as pure and even spiritually elevated. I mean the term 'homoerotic' is a very much post-homosexual, post-gender, post-1960s . It's not an inappropriate one to use, but we need to understand more about what surrounded the supposedly buried sexual content of these relations between men.

Q: But you did something else. You tried to widen the scope and say that looking at the trenches in WWI with all these men together for so long is not just about homosexuality vs. heterosexuality, but also something about the internal domestic structure of soldiers' psyche.

Yes, that's true. But I was also interested in thinking in a more open way about intimacy as having maternal, fraternal or other elements to it while at the same time being still potentially sexual.

Q: It is not a contradiction. You are not saying that the old literature is wrong, but that in this point of sexuality, it is a bit limited.

Yes, but still when you finish a project, you have things that you did not manage to link together, and for me, the problem of how to conceptualise the relation between domestic and sexual relationships remained. Santanu Das, in his book on touch and WWI, begins to draw together these kinds of links. Another topic about which there's more to say is the Oedipal aspects, and the idea, not just of the sacrifice of the sons by the fathers, which Samuel Hynes and Jay Winter note, but the way that sons, in joining a national cause, take the limelight from their fathers.

Q: Another group of historians that I think you are corresponding with is some feminist historians who on the one hand have tried to show that women were part of the war effort, but on the other hand portrayed them as part of a male dominated patriotic project. Some feminists even would say that every war is dominated by non-maternal values, by male values. It's quite complicated how the historiography works. I think what you are pointing out is that a lot of my account is about mothers who are all too happy to be supporting the war effort through their sons. And actually there is a feminist line of argument that links maternity and patriotism in WWI. Scholars like Nicoletta Gullace argue that mothers gained status through the patriotic sacrifice of sons to the war effort. I think Gullace is right that patriotic

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discourses are important, but I also wanted to bring another perspective which, whilst not apolitical, is less obviously politicised, which is that a lot of the work which these mothers were doing was not necessarily in the context of taking part in a national cause; it was something more private and immediate. The account which Gullace and others give does I think apply to the middle and upper-middle classes, where women were often involved in public activities of support for the war. There were funds attached to some regiments, run by the wives of the military staff, which provisioned soldiers on an enormous scale. Now, these women may have had a husband or son in the front, but they were also engaged in public charity work in support of the war effort. I wanted to show that, as well as these institutional activities, there were a myriad of quite private and personal ways in which mothers supported sons, in effect, underwriting the British Army's provision, sending socks, underwear and garments to help keep them warm and clean, sending remedies for lice, boils and stomach upsets, and providing succour through letters. When you read letters, these aspects come through forcibly. One mother sent her son a cake in 1918 and described it as the first one for two years – because of the sugar ration, she couldn't get the ingredients. Rural and working-class families would send fruit and vegetables from the garden. Home comforts like these could stir deep memories and feelings. Also you don't only have to think about officers and soldiers who volunteered for the war, you have also got to think of conscription after 1916, as actually by the end of the war just over half of the soldiers who had served were conscripts. By 1917-18 people understood what war was, the physical and emotional toll it was taking; parents understood what their sons were being conscripted in to, and people felt complex things about the war. Mothers may have played a role in underscoring patriotism, such as Robert Graves's 'Little Mother' in *Goodbye to all That*, but they were also trying to look after sons as best they could, in a situation beyond their control. Patriotism could be an emotional investment for mothers, but I wanted to get at these other aspects as well.

Q: Some feminists would link feminism to pacifism. Some feminists would say that good mothering would be to say to your son: 'do everything you can to escape the front, do everything you can not to fight, do everything you can not to kill and not to be killed.' But the mothers you are talking about didn't think that way, and still you think that they need to be appreciated more also from a feminist point a view.

Part of the book is trying to make this argument. Women's war efforts – such as the knitting of socks and undergarments – were trivialised by men at that time and by veterans afterwards, and indeed, still are by some historians. The narrative of inappropriate support is quite strong for example in soldiers' poetry, memoirs and

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novels. But not in war letters and I think that soldiers retell the war afterwards. In retrospect they want to say that mothers got it wrong – their miss-provision becomes a symbol of what Fussell calls the ‘cultural chasm’ between the home and war fronts.

Q: According to your book, they understood very well what's going on.

Yes, that's right. This mythology of the mother who doesn't understand is partly a post-war construction, and it reveals the psychological damage that the war causes, a sense of having been abandoned by people on the home front. You need to recognize it as a gender story, and it can take misogynist forms. If you look at novels like Richard Aldington's 'Death of a Hero', or the immensely popular middlebrow novels by Warwick Deeping, you see quite vicious critiques of mothers. Aldington's central character for example has a mother who presents herself as a Victorian angel of the home, but she is a serial adulteress, deeply narcissistic, with no genuine love for her son. In 1918, D. H. Lawrence described the mothers in his own family circle as having 'jaguars of wrath in their soul, however they purr to their offspring'. Such comments would have scandalised Edwardians, but fitted the post-war mood.

Q: I'm taking your examples from the book about the middle class soldiers, who grew up with nannies and servants, and therefore, for them the maternal role was really not something which had to do with their biological mother. Now, I'm trying to think on this model of 'domestic roles', as you described it, from a feminist point of view. Is this a less deterministic model than the biological one? It seems like it doesn't matter how far you are with a group of soldiers and for how long, there is always mom, dad, siblings, which force themselves on the way you interact with other people in the world. To what extent are domestic relations, and particularly the maternal role, determining everything? Or perhaps WWI is a unique case of the influence of domestic relationships on soldiers?

I have a friend from Zimbabwe who did military service and one of the things he relates to in the book is the importance of food from home, and the way that home could be evoked by things cooked by his mother. I am also struck by some similarities between the accounts of soldiers in Afghanistan, Iraq and WWI. Despite the existence of electronic communication, letter writing is still important. People still set great emotional store by the physical object that crosses between the home and warfronts. And sons still write last letters to their mothers in case of death. There still seems to be an element of idealisation of home among young soldiers; there might be a bit of constancy in that. Obviously in other ways WWI is historically distinctive. Edwardian recruits went to war with particularly elevated and moralised ideals of home and motherhood. While this was most notable in the middle class, sentimentality surrounded mothers of all classes. In WWI archives you will find hundreds of examples of postcards, with beautiful hand embroidered designs, sent to mothers on birthdays and other anniversaries, and expressing the sentiment that she is in his thoughts, or vice-versa.

Q: But you described another form of maternal role-playing and this is the need for the 'maternal' when a catastrophe happens. For example when someone in the trenches gets

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injured and someone else is taking care of him. It seems like you suggest that many times it's not a coincidence who will be the one who capable of being a caregiver, who is the one who is capable of doing some 'maternal work'. One is getting injured and regressing to an infantile state of existence and someone else is taking the role of the mother, and many times the one who is doing it is the one who was also doing it at home, with younger brothers and sisters, for example. Everyone is playing a role.

Everyone is playing a role, but I tell you, one of the things I felt quite strongly about when I was writing the book is that there is a point where role theory collapses. That point might be when the man beside you is severely wounded. When soldiers cried out for their mothers, as many were reported to do as they were dying, they were not 'playing a role'. I think that they were voicing a very primitive link between maternity and life. Regression is the right word to use here: death, the fear of death, and the witnessing of death and wounding, throws them back to a very early experience. They want their mothers. Their comrades also get caught up in this emotional experience. They have to nurse and hold the dying man, probably what they feel is 'oh my God, what on earth can I do', and their caring and their holding may be in the face of a strong urge to run away and not have to do it. Clearly there are maternal roles here in some way, but there is a psychic drama going on that cannot quite be contained in the idea of a social role.

Q: Are you suggesting that in some cases there is an ethical moment, when one is doing something which is beyond one's own instincts or will, only because one thinks that this is the right thing to do? Clearly, you are very impressed by some of these soldiers.

Yes, but we hear less about those soldiers who turned away and said 'I can't deal with that', and that must also have happened often. Interestingly Wilfred Bion, in his memoirs of 1919, writes about the death of his runner Sweeting at the Battle of Amiens, after Sweeting's chest was blown out by shrapnel. Bion tries to reassure Sweeting that he is alright and promises to write to his mother. Then, when he was in his seventies, and a psychoanalyst, Bion re-remembered the event. Now, Bion responds to Sweeting's refrain, 'Mother, mother, mother' by screaming at him to shut up. In the 1919 version, Bion tries to contain the dying man's distress; in the later version, he finds it unbearable. Is the story that Bion tells in the 1970s true, or is the 1919 memoir closer to what happened? In the 1919 version Bion behaves in a more 'ethical' way, but the later version is more revealing about Bion's inability to bear the man's pain. Whether it is animal nature I don't know, whether it's ethical, I think it's not really a question of ethics. It is a certainly a traumatic situation for both the victim and onlooker. I would not want to assert that a soldier who can bear this kind of distress is able to do so because of the way he was mothered, or that the one that turns away is repeating the response of his own mother, but it is certainly a psychological process. Bion, in fact, shows that elements of both responses may be going on within the same person. In any case, it will be better understood as a psychological process, than as a gender script.

Q: I think also that there are a few forms of regression. You don't have to be severely damaged to be thought of as being in a regressive state.

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This is what Bion kept saying in the 1950s, that when regressed, part of you can be totally locked into a primitive mode, and another part of you can be a fully functioning adult. I think it's not an accident that this perception comes from a war veteran.

Q: Let's talk a bit about Bion. Why Bion? What do you find so attractive in his writings?

I don't relate much to Bion's mathematical formulas and his 'grid' and all that. The way I manage Bion is to keep reading him at regular intervals, his writing gives me terrific insights, but not in a way I could formalise intellectually. You need to put yourself close to the states of mind he is describing, to get anywhere with him. He is terribly difficult, and I don't understand everything he says, I only understand a small part, and that understanding does not necessarily take place at the level of theoretical abstraction, it is more about recognising an emotional experience. I read Bion in a way I don't read many other theorists.

Q: Bion is important for you as a theorist, but he is also one of the historical figures in your book.

With Bion you've got to recognise that he was a child of Empire, with all the psychic baggage that goes with that. His early mothering was split between his *Ayah* [an Indian nurse], and his own mother, at the age of eight he was sent to a public school in England, and he goes straight from school into the Tank Corps and the war. But that kind of experience is not unusual among the British middle class of that time. Some Bionian ideas might apply principally to young men with this type of maternal history, while other insights in Bion's work are more universal. I was also trying to indicate in the book, the ways in which the legacy of Bion's war appears in his clinical work in the 1950s and 1960s. I think that actually, psychoanalytic theorising was one of the ways in which Bion sought to overcome his own trauma. In particular, his ideas about how in psychotic patients the very capacity to think is under attack, helped give him a way of subjecting his wartime experiences to thought.

Q: How do you explain the revival of the Kleinian-Bionian theory in the last few decades?

I'm also puzzled. I'm not sure how to answer this from the standpoint of psychoanalysis more generally, but I do think there are interesting questions about why it is that object relations – rather than the ego psychology tradition favoured in the US – should have found a home within Britain. One can explain this in terms of what happened in the 1930s, the responses to fascism and the breaking up of the psychoanalytic societies with the escape of analysts from Germany and Austria. Someone like Phyllis Grosskurth [Melanie Klein's biographer] would say well, once Klein got to Britain, she was able to establish networks with Ernest Jones and others, and in Britain she found a degree of intellectual independence and a loyal personal following. But then we also have to ask what it was about British culture and society that allowed the 'maternal' subject to flourish.

Linking back to WWI, I find it fascinating that Bion goes through an emotional crisis which, as early as 1919, when he is not a psychoanalyst and does not have a

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psychoanalytic vocabulary, he perceives in terms of a mother's care and holding. Then in his late fifties, as a psychoanalyst, he comes out with all these theories about maternal containing. But of course there is also Winnicott, Bowlby, Ian Suttie and others, none of whom had Bion's traumatic war experience; this maternal issue is a big thing in Britain. It's also an earlier thing than some people imagine. The usual explanation is that WWII and evacuation exposed the importance of maternal attachment, but I'm pretty clear that it's not just WWII. You have to understand the long life of the maternal pre-occupation in Britain, which relates to the aftermath of the First as much as the Second War.

Q: Reading the book, I felt that you are fully aware how risky it could be to mix psychoanalysis and history. It is particularly psychohistory which is not very appreciated in some places. What do think about it? I'm asking because you are using some psychoanalytic interpretations to explain the feelings of soldiers, mainly of traumatised soldiers, but it did not feel to me like I'm reading psychohistory, but something else. Do you agree?

I think I see what you mean. There is a psychoanalytic understanding going on, but it is not explicit in the interpretations. There is a real difficulty in drawing on psychoanalysis as an historian, because historians are easily put off by theory, and many have a strong aversion to psychoanalysis. I myself think that theory can become abstract and disengaging. At the same time I wanted to show that my interpretations of these letters were based on something more than commonsense empathy. The way that I tried to manage this difficulty was to state in the introduction: 'this book is informed throughout by psychoanalytic theory, but it is treated with a light touch'. I didn't want to give an explicit working through of psychoanalytic ideas because I feared it would distract readers from the narrative. I get really fed up sometimes with American historiography because the theory is so polished and worked through. I didn't want the reader to be given a Cook's Tour of clinical concepts, I wanted the insights to be foregrounded, not the working through. And I wanted it above all to be a book about WWI. I wanted the drama, I wanted the situations, to be the main way that people would encounter the book, not through an archaeology of concepts. But it did leave me at the end of it with lots of energy to think about how historians might work with psychoanalytic theory, and what can be gained – and lost – through the encounter.

I also didn't want military historians turning away from the book saying 'Oh God, what touchy-feely guff!' Some did anyway, but I didn't want them to be able to dismiss the book as psychohistory. Looking back, I do actually think I should have called it a psychohistory. I also think it will be quite interesting to reopen the debates about psychohistory, and ask what went wrong, and ask if it all went wrong, or whether there are some issues raised in this literature – for example relating to the inter-subjective nature of historical work – that could usefully be revisited.

Q: Let us finish our conversation with a story about your grandfather. I'm reading from your epilogue: 'When I was about ten I went with him to a reunion on ANZAC [Australian and New Zealand Army Corps] day. Surrounded by his veteran mates near the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, drinking tea, one of them asked me if I would become a soldier.'

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“Ruddy Salvation Army, more like”, granddad quipped. I felt it as a sharp insult; I could never become the man he had been. But it was his views, and his stories, that turned me away from war’ (320-1).

We are talking about the late 1960s, a huge national occasion, and the idea of the birth of the Australian nation through the baptism of fire at Gallipoli, and there was I, ten years old or so, and there was my grandfather, in the procession, on horseback [he had been in the Light Horse Regiment]. Talking to his friends at the reunion afterwards, he says, ‘oh my grandson, he is a bloody pacifist’. But he refused to take part in the ANZAC day marches for over 50 years, he viewed the war as an Imperialist-capitalist conflict, and he hated the right wing politics of the national veteran’s organisation. So although in old age he gave up his private protest against the war and joined in the commemoration, the ambivalence was still with him.

You’ve got to think back to Australia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Vietnam War, the student movements and the protests against the war and the military draft. In my mid teens I joined demonstrations against uranium mining and nuclear weapons, sitting down in Melbourne’s main square. Most of the protestors were older than me, they were the 1960s generation, but the peace movements made a deep impression on me. This was the moment of my formation as a young man and that divided legacy, of a grandfather who was a Gallipoli veteran, and a political context of militant anti-war campaigns, remains with me now.

Q: Did you ever want to be a soldier?

There is something about that side of masculinity that holds me in thrall, but I don’t think I could ever be a soldier. I can identify with the poet Wilfred Owen. As a soldier I might have been like him, a kind of rather nervy, sensitive character. I think there is a mood in the book of sympathy towards characters like Owen who were comfortable in a woman’s world, and at the same time I think that the war created a split between more feminine sensibilities and ideals of manly duty that most recruits – even Regular soldiers – struggled to live with.

### **Further Reading**

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**Shaul Bar-Haim, in conversation with Michael Roper**

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