

blackbird



war & memory

Stephen Mulqueen

William Hodges Fellow 2015

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Battleground Reliquary, by David Eggleton

Stephen Mulqueen's *Blackbird: war & memory*

The Gallipoli story is one of the foundation myths of New Zealand nationhood, and the Gallipoli Peninsula today is a place of pilgrimage for New Zealanders: a World War One sacred site acknowledging blood sacrifice and noble purpose. Yet the Gallipoli campaign of 1915, in which the Anzacs first served as a fighting force and which Anzac Day specifically commemorates, was actually a military failure, a strategic disaster, an example of tragic waste of life. It is representative of the dissonance between what war is supposed to mean – glory, valour, decisive action leading to victory – and the reality: frustration, absurdity, sickening slaughter. Over 8000 New Zealanders officially served in the eight-month campaign between the first landing on the beaches and the final evacuation by boat on 19th December. Nearly 3000 soldiers died and around 5000 were wounded. Most of the soldiers were volunteers

drawn from all over New Zealand. The extraordinary number of casualties has given this defeat powerful emotional significance for succeeding generations, and inevitably the story has been told and retold.

The campaign may have been a vainglorious attempt by Great Britain and its allies to storm the Dardanelles and then go on to conquer the Ottoman Empire, but for Australians and New Zealanders in particular it was a traumatic baptism of fire, where loyalty to King and Country was entangled with pluck, ardour, gallantry and manliness.

Those who served there were afterwards dubbed 'the knights of Gallipoli', and that wasn't regarded as hyperbole. Gallipoli for them, as indeed for us, was about belief, destiny, duty, patriotism and giving your all. An emblem of collective memory, the commemoration of Gallipoli 1915 symbolises how we continue to live with its various legacies, and how it has come to represent for us the very meaning of war. The cultural heritage begins with the remarkable

volume and eloquence of diaries, letters and reminiscences by soldiers, nurses and others dating from the beginning of the event itself, and also includes many post-War literary works, such as *Passport to Hell: the Story of James Douglas Stark, Bomber, Fifth Reinforcement, New Zealand Expeditionary Force*, by Robin Hyde, which is about the Gallipoli veteran 'Starkie' who was born in Invercargill, and Maurice Shadbolt's stage-play *Once on Chunuk Bair*.

As photographer Laurence Aberhart shows in his 2014 photo-book *ANZAC*, New Zealand is covered in World War One memorials – unknown fallen soldier monuments – most of them erected in the 1920s. More recently, a number of artists have made artworks about World War One – often focusing on events at Gallipoli – including painters Michael Shepherd, Jan Nigro, John Walsh and Stanley Palmer, and sculptors Michael Parekowhai and Paul Dibble.

War never ends; we experience with its consequences, its

proximity, its imminence. In Stephen Mulqueen's sculptural installation *Blackbird: war & memory*, a text painted on a chiselled block of white marble declares: "Only the dead have seen the end of war." With the incorporation of this observation by the Greek philosopher Plato, Stephen Mulqueen makes his artwork universal in implication, joining the *Illiad* with contemporary Iraq, even as it meditates on and remembers those who, when World War One began, travelled from Southland to join the Otago Battalion and other military units: 990 Southlanders did not return and are numbered among the War Dead.

Blackbird: war & memory is cohesive and austere – an abbreviated monument made up of found objects: spent bullets, chunks of stone, boat oars, the sizeable remnant of a boat, and what might be bits and pieces of folk art, or quotations from folk art, all repurposed and reworked. Stark and haunting, it's a tableau whose individual components are given a collective richness of association through visual rhymes and through a process of reduction.





Indeed, *Blackbird* is a parable of subtraction, of stripping back to fundamentals, conveying the sense of a tomb being excavated: empty of bodies but nevertheless a midden or trove of talismanic fragments that punctuate the funerary space the installation occupies.

Captain Charles Bean, Australia's official war correspondent, described the Anzac Cove area, after the first landing, as 'one big graveyard': the sea crimson and the sea floor a carpet of dead bodies. Overturned boats wallowed in the shallows while other boats laden with the dead and dying struggled back to the support ships offshore.

Stalled in their efforts to advance up the slopes, and in the struggle for higher ground, by the deadly fusillades of the Turks (commanded by Colonel Mustafa Kemal, whose success at Gallipoli led to him eventually becoming the founder of modern Turkey), the New Zealanders and the rest dug in to begin a long siege. One soldier was to write of how the air sang with bullets and shrapnel and the

crump of explosives, and of how, in the silences between, there was the sound of birdsong.

The perimeter of the *Blackbird* installation is delineated by a band of red-painted wood high up on the white walls of the gallery, and to enter the installation is to feel that you are descending: your perspective shifts. The red line running the walls refers to the Plimsoll line – the loadline of a ship – and so it feels, in a way, as if you are clambering inside the hold of a ship, or else into a dugout, below the parapet, at ground zero. In the centre of the space, raised up off the floor on black railway sleepers is the massive half-hull of a wooden sailing boat, torn and lacerated along one edge.

Funereal and stained black as if fire-scorched, this arching form brings to mind the abandoned shell of a sea-god or sea-monster, or it might be a propped-up place of sacrifice, an altar, – perhaps the altar of nationhood. Certainly, it is made of the holy timber of nationhood: overlapping planks

of kauri. Four slender black oars are horizontally suspended, one against each surrounding wall, to further evoke the elegiac, the ritualistic.

A mythopoeic object by any measure – boat of death, boat of Charon the ferryman transporting the dead to Hades, Arthurian mystical black barge of Alfred Tennyson's poetry that the poetry of Wilfred Owen also makes reference to – this charred-seeming hulk, held together by copper nails, alludes most directly to the baptism of fire undergone by a warrior caste who were also New Zealand pioneering stock – those who had sought to recreate England's pastoral vision in Māoriland – as well as to the waka of Māori soldiers in the campaign.

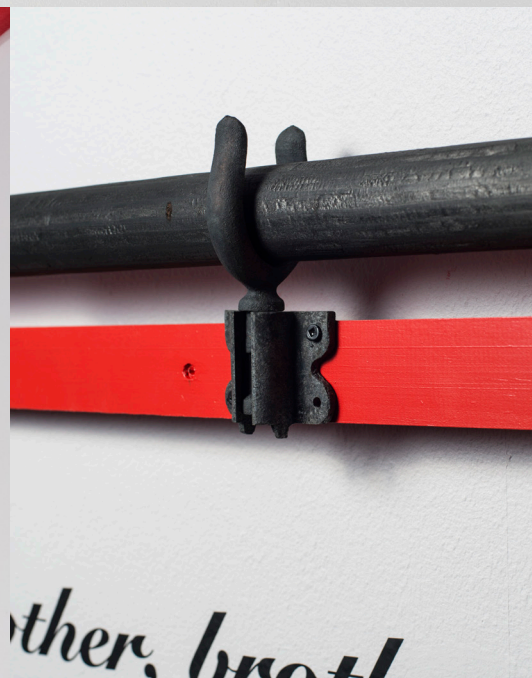
And so it is, too, that the tipped-over boat on its twinned plinth seems something dredged up from a deep well of cultural memory. In fact, the artist literally stumbled across the abandoned and rotted-out remains of this early twentieth century fishing boat sunk in sand on a

Southland beach. If its yawningly capsized status and chopped-away edge suggest destruction and carnage, its exalted position affirms a chapel-like affirmation. The mute, sombre form, splendidly curved, serves as an aid to meditation on mortality, on journeying to oblivion, or perhaps the afterlife. And standing in front of it, you feel immersed or undersea, as if plunged into an abyss of blood and darkness.

The religious iconography is made manifest by the rosary that is looped on a wall, bringing to mind Christ's agony on the Cross and His Mother's sorrow, sounded out prayerfully on the beads. But these beads are shards of bullet casings and the pendant crucifix is made of bullet-heads. This prayer aid serves to distill projectiles malevolently designed to maim and kill to a kind of poignant purity, reminding of Wilfred Owen's lines: 'The pity of war, the pity war distilled'. The rosary also signals Mulqueen's



'The blackbird sings to him, Brother, brother, If this be the last song you shall sing, Sing well, for you may not sing another; Brother, sing.'



Only the dead have seen the end of war

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allegiance to the power of trench art, where soldiers, when not staring death in the face, whiled away waiting time in the trenches making wistful souvenirs and keepsakes out of battlefield detritus.

And in his book *Gallipoli* (2014), the Australian writer Peter Fitzsimmons records how in August 1915, entrenched at Gallipoli, soldiers on both sides of the conflict paused to listen to the sound of Sergeant Ted McMahon's cornet playing one of the most plaintive melodies of the era, Ethelbert Nevin's 'The Rosary' to its conclusion, with everyone applauding before battle recommenced.

Under the railway sleepers – symbols of Imperial engineering prowess – that hold up the boat hull, there is another support pedestal, consisting of two Turkish rugs, which serve to symbolise the landscape and seascape of the Gallipoli Peninsula, but that also suggest something of the symbiotic nature of warfare – two sides locked together around No Man's Land like the sons of Adam –

Cain and Abel, brother killing brother.

In the interlacing arabesques of these twin carpets, with their idealised plant shapes of vines, tendrils and leaves – a pattern known as 'the falling leaves of autumn' – there is something of the Islamic relationships established between God, humankind and nature. They are devotional designs that evoke the idea of Paradise as a luxuriant garden, one welcoming the glorious dead.

That the Great War was an industrialised, mechanised war came as shock to many. Popular sentiment imagined it as the cheerfully bucolic poetry of Rupert Brooke depicted it: 'Nobleness walks in our ways again; / And we have come into our heritage'. But Rupert Brooke died on his way to take part in the Gallipoli landings and as the war continued his boyish optimism was replaced by a grim realism.

Wilfred Owen wrote in his poem 'Arms and the Boy':

'Lend him to stroke those blind blunt bulletheads
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.'

Bullets by the fistful were at the heart of the Gallipoli conflict, where sharpshooters ruled and where sniper loopholes to fire from were essential accessories. Alluding both to the newly-broken-in farms that many New Zealand soldiers came from, and to the fact that horses pulling gun-carriages were important to the campaign, on one wall hangs a stylised weapon. This 'gun' fuses the stock of the Short Magazine Lee-Enfield standard .303 bore rifle, just beginning to be used by New Zealanders at Gallipoli, with part of an old farm fence and a metal swingle-tree, a device used to balance teams of horses towing wagons. This weapon in turn is pointed along the wall at patinated (oxidised green) brass poppies binding into wreaths that

spell out 303. The 'point' in front of these numerals is a gun cartridge, driven in as if nailing a credo to the wall.

Thus, the Biblical admonition in the Old Testament's Book of Joel to 'beat your ploughshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears' takes on shape, substance and ironic meaning.

Working with remnants, Mulqueen in this installation as in previous projects is the artist as archeologist engaged in salvaging and resurrecting: 'Lest we forget', admonished Rudyard Kipling. The title *Blackbird* is embodied in a taxidermied blackbird, high on a wall, as if overlooking the scene below. It is accompanied by a soundtrack featuring the dawn song of blackbirds recorded in 2010 in Shrapnel Valley inland from Anzac Cove, scene of some of the most bitter fighting.



SEA RAN RED. SEA RAN RED. SEA RAN RED. SEA RAN RED.

SEA RAN RED.

Blackbirds, then, witnessed the to-and-fro of deadly armed combat at Gallipoli, but here there is another layer of significance to the inclusion of the feathered singer. One of the prime cultural legacies of World War One was the efflorescence of poetry, an extraordinarily intense lyrical and protest poetry that derived from the English Romantic tradition; and a key motif of this verse was birds and birdsong. Wilfred Owen wrote of freezing soldiers in trenches dreaming of a summer 'littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses'; while for Edward Thomas the song of the blackbird in his poem 'Adlestrop' represented the spirit of England: the motherland for which men were sacrificing themselves.

Julian Grenfell, one of Britain's best-known soldier-poets at the time, penned in his much-anthologised poem 'Into Battle' the wry lines: 'The blackbird sings to him, "Brother, brother, / If this be the last song you shall sing, / Sing well, for you may not sing another; / Brother, sing."

But for Stephen Mulqueen, it is the Irish soldier-poet Francis Ledwidge (1887–1917) who is of special significance. Ledwidge was known as 'the poet of blackbirds' and reference to them occurs over and over again in his poetry. Ledwidge served with the Royal Inniskilling Fusillers at Gallipoli for two months, before being wounded and evacuated to an army hospital in Cairo. He was killed at the Battle of Ypres in France.

Ledwidge wrote in his poem 'The Place':

'And when the war is over I shall take
My lute a-down to it and sing again
Songs of the whispering things amongst the brake,
And those I love shall know them by their strain.
Their airs shall be the blackbird's twilight song,
Their words shall be all flowers with fresh dew's hoar.
– But it is lonely now in winter long,
And, God! To hear the blackbird sing once more.'

Stephen Mulqueen (b. 1953) is a jeweller and sculptor and was a founding member of FLUXUS, a contemporary jewellery workshop & gallery in Dunedin, New Zealand. His post graduate studies began in 1992 – 1993 at the Canberra School of Art, Australian National University, and were completed at the Otago School of Art Dunedin, where he gained a Master of Fine Art degree with distinction in 2000. Stephen has exhibited widely in New Zealand and has work held in corporate, public and private collections. In 1994 he was commissioned by the Department of Conservation Te Papa Tawhai to design the new viewing platform for Bluff Hill.

Major solo exhibitions include *Whakamaoritanga-Translations* held at the Hocken Library Gallery University of Otago, 2000 and Southland Museum Art Gallery 2015, *TIWAI* at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2004. In 2014 he was part of a national jewellery group exhibition; *Wunderruma* which traveled to Munich, Germany and The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt.

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