

# Essential texts on the national fixation

## MILITARY HISTORY

**GALLIPOLI. THE BATTLEFIELD GUIDE.** By Mat McLachlan. Hachette. 388pp. \$29.99.

**THE GALLIPOLI LETTER.** By Keith Murdoch. Allen & Unwin. 98pp. \$29.99. Reviewer: **PETER STANLEY**

What is it about that stretch of rugged Turkish coastline that draws us back, again and again? Ninety-five years on, Gallipoli retains its fascination. Every year 50,000 or so Australians visit, many drawn by emotional desires transcending the actual events of 1915. Too many visitors are myth-seekers, wrapping themselves in the flag on Anzac Day and reinforcing a romantic, parochial nationalism at odds with the facts. They too often leave without understanding the historical reality of Gallipoli. They could do with reading this book.

The best way to encounter Gallipoli is as an independent traveller, by car or (best of all) by scooter. Joining an organised tour (Australian or Turkish) can be a lottery, unduly dependent on the guide's ability to convey knowledge and foster understanding without boring, lecturing or patronising – sometimes all three.

A self-guided tour allows visitors to find their own routes, travel at their own pace and form their own conclusions. But to do this confidently and successfully you need help: here it is.

Mat McLachlan, tour operator and sometime television presenter, has followed his successful 2007 *Walking with the Anzacs* guide to the Australian battlefields of the Western Front with an equally authoritative and practical guide to the battlefields of Gallipoli.

McLachlan's guide is certainly not the first or even the most authoritative guide to Gallipoli aimed at Australian visitors. The first and most detailed was Pam Cupper and Phil Taylor's, first published in 1989,



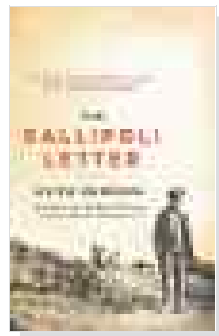
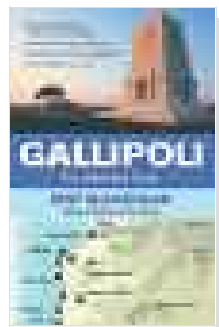
A huge crowd at the Anzac Day 2005 memorial service at Lone Pine, Gallipoli. Photo: Reuters

and reissued as a second edition in 2000. It took in the Greek islands from which the invasion was launched and the sites around Istanbul, including the cemeteries in which dead Australian prisoners of war lie.

But now it has competition. Glenn Wahlert's *Exploring Gallipoli* and Garrie Hutchinson's *Gallipoli: The Pilgrimage Guide*, both recent and more colourful, are available too. Richard Reid's Department of Veterans' Affairs-funded website caters to tech-savvy back-packers.

McLachlan's guide is intended to be used on the spot. Utilitarian rather than glossy, in the style proved by *Walking with the Anzacs*, it suggests routes and stops by which the self-guided traveller will gain most from their time on the battlefield. Written in an easy style with just the right proportion of pointers, quotations and detail, it includes useful and clear maps.

The greatest virtue of McLachlan's guide is that it is even-handed, paying due attention to Australian, New Zealand, British and Turkish aspects of the campaign. It is less detailed than Cupper



and Taylor, more detailed than Wahlert, less sentimental than Hutchinson and more readily portable than Reid. Every traveller planning to visit Gallipoli should carry a copy.

In the case of *The Gallipoli Letter*, publisher Allen & Unwin has pulled off the not inconsiderable coup of turning a 25-page typescript into a 98-page hard-backed book. Is this a canny exploitation of the marketing advantage of publishing anything with "Gallipoli" in the title (what's next – *The Gallipoli Cookbook? Gardening Gallipoli Style?*) or is it a useful addition to the bookshelf?

The answer is that *The Gallipoli Letter* puts into interested readers' hands one of the key sources of the Gallipoli campaign, a document raising still-important questions about the campaign's wisdom and Australia's part in it.

Journalist Keith Murdoch's "Gallipoli letter" – a denunciation of the folly of continuing the Gallipoli campaign, written in September 1915 – has long been seen as marking the point at which disillusionment

over the stalled campaign turned into active opposition.

Judge for yourself Murdoch's impassioned advocacy, repeating gossip and hearsay picked up through casual chats during his four-day flying visit. It is as shocking to read today as it was when Murdoch wrote to then prime minister Andrew Fisher. It fairly burns with indignation, famously asserting that "sedition is talked around every tin of bully beef on the peninsula".

The text of the letter – taken from the original in the collection of the National Library – is accompanied by a foreword by actor Jack Thompson and an introduction by historian Michael McKernan.

However we admire Thompson's gifts as an actor, especially in portraying Australian characters, his foreword must surely have been solicited simply to attract readers. The letter is patently not about what Murdoch has experienced "first hand" and Murdoch himself was not "one of the Anzacs".

The introduction by Michael McKernan, well known to *Canberra Times* readers, is another matter. The product of a historian who has steeped himself in the Great War for 40 years, including numerous visits to Gallipoli, it alone is worth the cover price. McKernan places this letter in its historical context carefully, clearly and memorably.

In 2010 Gallipoli has been well served by works that allow us to reconsider and reinterpret that campaign that will not leave us alone, and for reasons these two excellent books make clear.

**Peter Stanley is the author of *A Stout Pair of Boots*, the first Australian guide to battlefield research.**

# Grand survivor of revolution and family strife

## BIOGRAPHY

**AN IRISH WOMAN IN CZARIST RUSSIA.** By Jean Lombard. Halstead Press. 191pp. \$29.95.

Reviewer: **FRANK O'SHEA**

Kathleen ffrench died in Manchuria in 1938, one of the most prominent members of the Russian aristocracy who had made their homes there after the communist revolution. As a former owner of large estates, she had been an immediate target for the Bolsheviks, whom she called a "pack of hounds . . . the lowest, vilest, degrading, wanton and unholy forces of the universe". Her houses and possessions were ransacked, she spent time in prison and was lucky to escape with her life.

Fortunately, she also owned Monivea Castle with an accompanying thousand-acre estate in Ireland, but found that she was not entirely welcome there either. Absentee landlords such as her were not fondly regarded, though this book suggests that her main reason for not taking up residence there was her inability to get on with her cousin Rosamund, who had been looking after the property for many years.

When ffrench came to writing her will, she left sums of money to a large number of relatives and friends, but nothing to Rosamund. She left Monivea to the Irish

Kathleen ffrench: daughter of a Russian heiress and an Irish diplomat.



nation to be used as a home for retired teachers, writers and artists. The Irish government wisely refused the gift, avoiding thereby the need to spend a substantial sum on restoring the castle and land to a liveable state. The property thus reverted to the dead woman's next of kin, who happened to be Rosamund; she died before she could benefit from this piece of dubious good fortune. The property was put on the market and was bought for the proverbial song – by the Irish state.

That is just a small detail in this intriguing story, but one that took my fancy. As it happened, poor Rosamund never knew that the Irish government had cleverly repaired the injury that had been done to her by her ungrateful cousin while getting itself out of the ongoing need to provide retired teachers with genteel luxury for their declining years.

Jean Lombard, whose husband is a second cousin of Rosamund and Kathleen, has done a sterling job of recording the life and struggles of Kathleen ffrench. Research was begun in the years when the former Soviet Union was breaking up. John Lombard, the author's husband, was at that time ABC bureau chief in Moscow; although glasnost was in the air, it did not necessarily include permission for foreign journalists or their families to fossick through documents and letters from the days of the tsars. And when photocopies were obtained by a journalist friend of the author, they were often faded and written



in a mixture of French, English and Russian, with abbreviations and minimal punctuation, sometimes with a second page written at right angles across the previous writing.

Most of the book covers Kathleen's life in Europe and Russia, though she once declared she "could quite happily spend my whole life in Monivea". Her father was in the British diplomatic service and her Russian family was a seriously dysfunctional one, her mother being in almost constant dispute with her own

parents, her husband and Kathleen.

At one stage, still in her early 20s, Kathleen ffrench ran six substantial properties on the Volga River, all of them heavily mortgaged. She seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time and energy trying to raise loans or borrow money from friends or relatives. Meanwhile, her mother – "a triple cretin of whom I am ashamed" – seemed to have little appreciation of her financial responsibilities. She had developed a morphine habit as a young woman and seems to have never fully abandoned it.

There is some repetition and even what seems like padding in the book: long letters are sometimes quoted in full, where only a portion is required to make a particular point. Clarifying the relationships among the various characters would have been helped by a family tree, and the book itself would benefit from an index. At times the author – quite endearingly, it has to be said – seems to slip into the language and expressions of the letter writers of a century earlier.

These quibbles do not take from what is a remarkable story of survival and courage. We follow the life of Kathleen ffrench from cradle to grave and discover a woman of strong will and fierce independence who lived by her own highly moral, if sometimes idiosyncratic set of rules.

It would make a splendid film. Are you listening, Emma Thompson?

**Frank O'Shea is a retired teacher.**