



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

INTO WHITE SILENCE
by ANTHONY EATON

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ONE

LIEUTENANT WILLIAM DOWNES ARRIVES IN HOBART.
TIME'S CLOUDED PERSPECTIVE. AN OLD PHOTOGRAPH.
THE BATTLE OF BULLECOURT. THE PEV RAVEN.
A MYSTERIOUS INVITATION.

October, 1921
Hobart, Tasmania

The SS *Loongana* steamed slowly up the Derwent River towards its berth at the Salamanca Wharf, and Lieutenant (retired) William Downes, a young man distinguished by his service in France during the Great War, leaned on the portside rail, watching the city of Hobart slip slowly past in the hazy, late-afternoon light. In the distance the monolithic bulk of Mount Wellington, its summit shrouded in cloud, cast a long shadow across the city, rendering the waters of the river to inky blackness.

And me? In my turn, I watch Lieutenant Downes, as I have so many times these last two years. I watch him in my mind's eye, my perceptions of him filtered through the veil of time and across the vault of many years now past.

In my research, among the documents and effects that I managed to uncover, I came across a photograph of Downes taken somewhere in Europe, sometime during the war. Faded and grainy, it shows a group of seven men all clad in military garb, sitting in comradely repose upon a low stone wall which appears to be the shattered remains of an old farmhouse. Most clutch cigarettes and two sport rakish moustaches of the sort only young men of that era could consider fashionable.

They wear their filthy uniforms with a kind of weary pride. Their slouch hats are, almost to a man, tilted to jaunty angles and their carbine rifles slung carelessly on their shoulders or, in a couple of cases, propped against the stonework beside them. All are smiling, grinning for the camera as if to convey

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to the viewer the impression that they find this whole debacle something of a joke. But the smiles don't touch their eyes. In those there is a kind of terrible distance – similar to what you see in the faces of men who've looked into the void of death and then somehow returned.

On the back, in handwriting I've come to know well, a brief inscription reads: 'Me and the lads after B/crt. Terrible affair. L. and B. no longer.' I know from other photographs that William Downes is the first man on the left but there is no clue to the identities or fates of the other six. It is easy to hope that all made it safely home again and returned from that meat-grinder of a war to farms and families and sweethearts, but of course, given the monstrous capacity of the First World War to devour young men, such a possibility is unlikely.

Downes, though, did return, and attained for himself a modest covering of glory along the way. According to official Army records, on 11th April 1917, during the hellish mauling of the first battle of Bullecourt, Downes was among the handful of infantry in the Australian 4th Brigade who managed, despite the abject failure of the much-vaunted British tanks, to find a path across the wire-laden no-man's-land and secure a section of the German trench system that made up the famous Hindenburg Line.

As the battle continued to go sour, and as 2300 members of the 4th Brigade fell to the German machine guns, it became clear to Downes and his compatriots occupying the enemy lines that their position was rapidly becoming untenable and so they fell back towards their own forces, fighting a desperate rearguard action the whole way. In the course of this their captain, one George Smythe-Davis, was injured, taking a bullet in the upper part of his left thigh.

Despite Smythe-Davis ordering his men on without him, Downes put himself at considerable risk by insisting on carrying his Captain to the relative safety of a nearby bomb crater and then holding that position for almost two hours until another Australian squad was able to assist in extracting them from the battlefield. For his efforts, Downes was mentioned in dispatches and later decorated.

I find it hard to look at that photograph nowadays, knowing what I do about Downes' eventual fate, and trying to reconcile in my mind the enormous injustice of the whole affair. To have returned unscathed from such a hideous experience as Bullecourt, to have demonstrated that sort of strength of character and leadership, only to perish in the icy darkness of an Antarctic

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winter because of the petty ambitions of another man is a travesty of justice I find difficult to come to terms with.

But I digress. As far as this book is concerned, our relationship with Downes begins not in the muddy battlefields of France but a world away and several years later, aboard the stately steamship *Loongana* as she eases her patient way up the Derwent in the calm twilight of a Tasmanian October afternoon. Downes, now at the age of twenty-four, leans upon the teak railing, absorbing the passing vista of Hobart with a cigarette clutched loosely between the fingers of his right hand and a pensive expression on his face. Beside him, a battered brown suitcase contains his other suit, several shirts, his good shoes and his shaving gear. Tucked beneath his left arm is a copy of yesterday's *Melbourne Age* and in the pocket of his jacket is a new journal, covered in red leather and inscribed inside with the words:

TO WILL. FOR SAFE TRAVELS, WITH LOVE, ELSIE.
WEATHERLY, 1921.

Inside this as-yet-unblemished token is a single sheet of paper, folded once, and it is this which has brought the Lieutenant down here to Hobart from his parents' farm outside Ballarat. Though the letter is typed, the signature at the bottom is crabbed and spidery, suggesting a hand more concerned with efficiency than aesthetics.

Perhaps, as the *Loongana* steams past Kingston and Sandy Bay, Downes reaches into his pocket, retrieves the letter and re-reads it for the hundredth time, turning over in his head the enigmatic invitation. Perhaps he wonders again at the odd circumstances that have brought him once more from the peaceful security of Weatherly and tempted him into the unknown. Perhaps, in removing the letter from his new journal, he notes the inscription from his sweetheart and wonders if the price of this undertaking is too high.

Or perhaps he does none of these things, but simply continues his quiet observation of the banks of the river as they slip past.

One thing he would certainly have seen, though I imagine its significance escaped him at the time, was a particular vessel, moored among the many smaller ships and boats in Sandy Bay. The two-masted, brigantine-rigged shape of the Polar Exploration Vessel *Raven* would have dwarfed most of the smaller boats lying at anchor around it, but its tar-black hull probably blended somewhat into obscurity against the darkening waters of the river, overshadowed at that time of day by the surrounding hills. As best I can discover, by the time Downes arrived in Hobart to consider fully Edward

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Rourke's extraordinary offer, the *Raven* had been afloat and on her mooring for almost six months. Having completed her sea trials the previous autumn under the command of Captain McLaren, she had been laid up at anchor for the duration of the winter with only a skeleton crew of watchmen aboard.

As the *Loongana* made her stately way towards Battery Point and Sullivan's Cove beyond, her wake would have taken a few minutes to reach the *Raven* and, as heavy as the polar vessel was, it is unlikely that the passing of the larger ship would have made much impact, except perhaps to set the masts swaying slightly. If Downes did indeed notice the dark ship, who can know what his thoughts might have been? Certainly he could not have imagined that he was looking at his tomb.

From the Journal of Lieutenant William Downes

2nd October, 1921

Hobart, Tasmania

Having arrived in Hobart this evening aboard the SS *Loongana*, I have established lodgings for myself in a respectable boarding house, run by a Mrs Pilkington, a widow who happily accepts ex-servicemen of good character, who are of clean appearance. Though I had not written ahead to reserve a bed, she was, after some discussion, happy to accept my military credentials and my record in France, which she held in good regard.

The passage from Melbourne across Bass Strait is one which, I will admit, I approached with some trepidation, remembering well the awful weather which greeted us our first three nights at sea when we shipped out for Egypt. This time, however, Neptune was much kinder and the *Loongana*, which is clearly a well seasoned vessel and used to this particular ocean, handled the swells with aplomb. I can only hope this bodes well for whatever journeying this strange expedition will involve.

From the dormer window of my small room I have a view out across the wide expanse of the Derwent River. The city of Hobart stretches along its banks, and from what I have seen in my brief walk up from the docks, it is a pleasant enough place, though many of the buildings are of heavy grey stonework, a legacy of its convict heritage, I imagine, which lends the town a distinctly sombre air. As we steamed upriver towards our berth, the distant peak of Mount Wellington dominated the landscape, hunching black against the sunset with its summit shrouded in cloud. I hope for some clear weather in the

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next few days so I can take in a full and unencumbered view of the mountain, which certainly seems impressive, especially in comparison to the farlands I am used to.

I am looking forward to presenting myself at the expedition offices tomorrow morning, to finally meet the enigmatic Mr Rourke and investigate his curious proposal more fully. Considering his letter, which I have carried with me against the possibility that I might have been somehow deceived, I confess that I find myself somewhat at a loss as to precisely why I have decided to come here.

Mother is of the opinion that the war has left me ill-equipped to deal with the more pedestrian aspects of life and perhaps she has a point. Certainly, from the few scant facts that Mr Rourke was willing to commit to the page, this 'great undertaking' of his promises some form of adventure at the very least. In the couple of years since my return from Europe, life has acquired a certain monotony which I am glad to break. In France, in the midst of that maelstrom at Bullecourt, I remember wishing fervently for nothing more than one last evening sitting with my parents on the verandah at Weatherly, watching the sun set over the house paddock. Now though, having fortuitously managed to return from Europe with both my limbs and reputation intact – the latter indeed somewhat improved as a result of my actions – the gentle pace of home has lost a deal of its lustre.

Whatever my reasons, whether they be the craving for further adventure, or simply an inability on my part to settle down, it is fruitless to dwell upon them now, for here I am, safely in Hobart and, while I am not yet completely decided on my position as regards Mr Rourke's odd invitation, I am determined to investigate it further.

It strikes me that this journal, which Elsie was good enough to give me as a parting gift, may stand as my sole record of the events of this adventure and so for the sake of completeness I will relate here the circumstances which have brought me to Hobart, seemingly, as my mother describes it, 'on a whim'.

When Captain Smythe-Davis offered my name to Mr Rourke as a 'young man of suitable discretion and admirable fortitude', I am certain he thought himself to be doing me a favour. Indeed, when the Captain wrote to me, explaining that an associate of his was seeking a particular type of man for an undertaking which he was not at liberty to set to paper, I was flattered. Certainly I can think of a number of other lads in our company who would

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have served to meet Mr Rourke's requirements just as well as myself; good blokes, all of them.

For reasons best known to himself, the Captain recommended me and it was with a great deal of anticipation and more than a little curiosity that I soon after received Mr Rourke's invitation to join him and his company here in Hobart to, in his words, 'prepare for, and then embark upon, what will doubtless become known as one of the greatest undertakings of adventure and exploration of recent times.'

This in itself piqued my curiosity – as the Captain no doubt attested, I have always had something of a hankering to step outside the normalcy of my everyday life and challenge myself against the wider world; indeed, it was this peculiar aspect of my nature which encouraged me to sign up so readily in the AIF and which, I believe, served me well on the battlefield.

Mr Rourke's letter continued thus:

At present, and without some form of informed commitment from yourself, I am unable to divulge to you more than the barest details of this undertaking, but suffice to say that I am seeking a young man, physically able and with good strength of character, who will be able to endure the privations and hardships of an extended sea voyage in often difficult circumstances while maintaining a sense of leadership at all times. This man shall work closely with Captain Smythe-Davis and be in charge of much of the logistical planning and the day-to-day running of the expedition, and in a position to step into my shoes should something unforeseen occur.

Lieutenant, make no mistake, should we succeed in this we shall achieve a great deal of recognition and regard for both ourselves and, indeed, our nation. I have committed a large proportion of my personal wealth to ensuring that our success is assured. If you see fit to accept my offer, and things proceed to my satisfaction and expectations, I am certain that many future opportunities will present themselves to you as a direct result of your involvement.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you at our expedition offices in Hobart, Tasmania, to discuss this great undertaking. Should you wish to further investigate my offer, please inform me by return post and I shall gladly book you passage from Melbourne at the earliest possible convenience.

Sincerely yours,

Edward Rourke

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Reading back over it, there is something about the letter that I find vaguely unsettling, but difficult to express. It is always hard to gain any true sense of a man from a letter but, despite its general nature, Mr Rourke's correspondence leads me to imagine him as being particularly focused – for want of a better term – and this is a trait I have often observed in other men, both for better and worse. It was my experience in France, that those men most afflicted by this type of peculiar intensity either survived unscathed like myself, or were the first to fall under German bullets.

Whatever the specifics of Mr Rourke's character, I am certain that I will gain some understanding of him once I have at hand more information about this expedition. Given that he has chosen Hobart as his base of operations, I can only assume he intends to voyage south to the polar ice cap, but for what reasons I cannot even hazard a guess.

It is getting late and I need to find a place to dine, as Mrs. Pilkington informs me she is unable to provide an extra meal for this evening, so I shall end this entry here.

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