



Tribute to Aberhart

Christopher Moore

STATE OF ARTS



I'm writing this on the fifth consecutive day of dank drizzle and the week's pervasive atmosphere in which to discuss Laurence Aberhart's collection of photographs of New Zealand and Australian memorials to The Great War 1914-1918.

Aberhart is amongst the leading New Zealand photographers of his generation; an artist whose camera can convey a sense of hushed stillness like few others. This collection of 72 images of what are often described as the "Digger" memorials is a dual tribute; a salute to those who rallied their communities at war's end to erect these modest obelisks, columns and statues and a reminder that we their descendants in 2014 are now remembering.

These photographs pluck our collective memory. There's nothing grandiose about the memorials in these images. There are no towering cenotaphs or gesticulating bronze figures, simply austere stone figures standing at rigid attention or crouching defensively, faces gazing out towards eternity above the clusters of people who gather at their feet on Anzac Day with their wreaths and poppies, bugles and addresses. The stone faces above them are no one but everyone.

Then there are the names in the precisely carved catalogues of men who died in the despairing squalor of the Western Front, Gallipoli or one of the many other battlefields which scarred the world for four years. George Valentine, Charles Kears, Jack

Cunningham, M. Pearse, E. James. In one small Sydney suburb, the name of my great-uncle, Private Emile Victor Biart, 20th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force, who survived Gallipoli only to be blown apart by shell fire at Pozieres, France, in 1916, hovers beneath a stalwart marble digger squinting into the Australian sun.

So many names on so many main streets and flowery parks of small country towns or standing high above the rumpled tossed hills of Central Otago or the benign Southland plains. Seen through Aberhart's eyes, they are all linked forever to their Australian comrades in places like Yareck, Pimpama and Dorrigo. So many names. Lest we forget.

His photographs show statues pitted, weathered or still neatly on parade in a lick of fresh paint. Some are made dramatic either by the skill of their sculptor or their setting. In 1945, many communities inscribed the names of their dead from World War II, added to the existing names. In some cases, Korea and Vietnam followed. They are possibly now considering adding Afghanistan to this visual threnody.

At the heart of these community memorials are the 18,000 New Zealanders and 60,000 Australians who died during World War I. They lie today beneath Europe's earth; interred beneath phalanxes of crisp white crosses or carved into the stone of overwhelming stone monuments like Edward Lutyens' Menin Gate. Named or unidentified or simply Known Unto God. But as historian Jock Phillips writes in this book, their families, friends and communities needed a link with them; a surrogate tomb which they could visit and remember.

"Once erected and invested with heroic rhetoric, the monuments did indeed give relatives a sense of consolation

and the pain slowly ebbed," Phillips writes.

But descendants died and the tides of memory slowly ebbed. The memorials became familiar but invisible features of New Zealanders' human and physical landscape. Some were dismantled, others defied time. For a time, the Diggers' memorials were ignored and unloved, uncomfortable reminders perhaps of old wars. But a new generation of New Zealanders slowly began to recognise the common bonds and humanity they enshrined. They reflect different personalities, enshrine varied emotions but they are all part of a shared culture.

They might not be the greatest art linked to war but they possess a certain muted monumentality and emotion which makes them unique.

At the end of World War II, Theodore Adorno claimed that to write poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric. But words and art are often all that is left to us after such horror. A world apart and in their own mute way, Aberhart's soldier monuments to a war whose carnage and waste appears to still defy the written word are, in all their visual stillness, the best of all possible reminders.

THE DETAILS:

Anzac, photographs by Laurence Aberhart. Victoria University Press. RRP \$60.

■ This is a regular weekly column by Press arts commentator Chris Moore.



War memorials: Reminders to remember are dotted throughout New Zealand.