

A letter from Gallipoli, 20 April 1915

During both the First and Second World Wars, a program to support alumni, staff and students on active duty was in place at the State Teacher Training College and its various successors. Letters were sent out and many service personnel responded by writing to the Principal, or simply to 'College'. One response was written by William Hoggart to the principal of the College, Dr John Smyth.

This letter is included in the collection of the Melbourne College of Advanced Education (accession 1990.0001) held at the University of Melbourne Archives. Parts of Hoggart's letter were read aloud at ANZAC day commemorations of the College for many years. To accompany the exhibition 'Primary Sources' the letter is read in its entirety by Matthew Williams.

William Ross Hoggart of Middle Brighton enlisted in the A.I.F. in September, 1914 at the age of 38. As a teacher at Melbourne Grammar School, he had been an officer in The Victorian Cadet Corps, and so was assigned the rank of Captain in the 14th Battalion commanded by Colonel John Monash. The 14th battalion embarked for duty overseas in December 1914 and after a brief stop in Western Australia, arrived in Egypt at the end of January. The battalion became part of the New Zealand and Australian Division that landed at ANZAC Cove on the afternoon of 25 April, 1915.

In the first part of the letter, written as his transport ship lay off the Dardenelles, Hoggart describes life onboard, telling a story or two about the multinational crew, especially his young Ceylonese cabin boy, who had previously served with one of the great boxers of the day.

Dear Doctor¹,

We are lying in a harbour almost within sound of the enemy's guns and yet you Melbourne folks know far more of the war than we. Most of our news is gleaned from month old Australian papers. Our regiment of 1000 fighting men, physically as good as anything at the front, is in splendid spirits, all ready for the business ahead. We are thoroughly equipped and have served out ammunition, "iron" rations² and field dressings. I do not suppose that we will do anything very great and trust that we will do nothing mean. A stranger in the transport would not think we are on the brink of active service. The talk in the officer's mess is more of what we will do after the war when we return to Australia. Every one nourishes the pathetic fallacy that he will "come through all right". This cheerfulness is not confined to us. The men too are in high spirits: as I write a full-throated chorus of the National Anthem rings out. It is the ending of a "complimentary concert" tendered to our own regiment by the men of a New Zealand battalion whose transport is lashed to ours. I spent the afternoon reading Scott's *Pirate*³ and listening to my diminutive Cingalee⁴ cabin boy who unfolded a wondrous tale of how he had "knocked out" a certain Chinaman who lives in the dim recesses of the fo'c'sle. This Homeric conflict was gone through in pantomime from the preliminary sparring for an opening until the delivery of the final deadly uppercut. This fiery Cingalee further informed me that he had at one time been body-servant to no less a person than Jack Johnson⁵. Hence his pugilistic prowess. I take his word for it and furthermore forgive him for much prior neglect of his cabin duties. I now know why the cistern that supplies my wash bowl was often empty, whereas the tin that receives the waste waters thereof was invariably overflowing. How could a man who had waited on the mighty Jack Johnson be expected to fill the one or remove the other? Our ship is worked entirely by "boys" of various colours – Lascars⁶, Japanese, Cingalese, Chinese, Madrasese⁷. The ship's

¹ Doctor John Smyth, principal of the Melbourne Teacher's College, 1902-27

² Iron rations consisted of preserved meat, cheese, wheat biscuit, tea, sugar, salt, meat extract

³ *The Pirate* by Sir Walter Scott, 1821

⁴ A person from Ceylon

⁵ Jack Johnson won the world heavyweight boxing title on December 26, 1908, when he fought the Canadian world champion Tommy Burns in Sydney

⁶ *Lascar* was the name once used to describe a sailor from the Indian subcontinent employed on European ships from the 16th century until the beginning of the 20th century

⁷ A person from Madras, India. Madras is now known as Chennai

doctor is a Parsee⁸ and two of the mates are Japs. The black chief steward is obsessed with the number 10. At every meal the menu card shows 10 courses no more, no less. We live simply so he is hard put to it to fill the bill. He starts off boldly with soup then we have (2) steak (3) onions (4) potatoes (5) cabbage (6) marmalade (7) bread and butter and just when you think that you have him beaten he calls up his reserves and rounds off the list with (8) dessert (9) fruits and (10) coffee. These three items invariably end every meal. The dessert does not always materialise and the coffee is often condensed water.

Approximately 100,000 Australians spent some time in British-controlled Egypt during the first world war. Many, like William Hoggart, underwent basic training in Egypt before deployment to other theatres of action.

You will have heard a good deal about our work in Egypt. At times we worked very hard but we also had our “glad days and jolly days”⁹. The most interesting part of the training was the Divisional work. This means the turning out of something like 20,000 men and 10,000 horses. You will understand that a division can concentrate and display only once in a day. We generally had one day a week of this training and it was the most valuable of all. These manoeuvres were made as realistic as possible. We did several attacks with ball cartridge, the objective being dummy figures placed in trenches. In one of these we advanced under cover of shrapnel fire. The premature burst wounded a light horseman but not seriously. We also did some night work against trenches protected by wire entanglements. The only way to deal with barbed wire seems to be to throw it into the sea. If you cut it, it is still there. If you send out adventurous spirits with grappling irons they haul it up by the roots only to dump it elsewhere. “Though our Achin’ is cut off the accursed thing remains”¹⁰. I would like those people in Australia who call us “six shilling a day tourists” to see the regiment slogging home through the sand after a field day, the men in marching order with their faces greeny-gray

⁸ According to tradition, the Parsees descend from a group of Zoroastrians who immigrated to Western India during 10th century AD, fleeing Muslim persecution in Iran

⁹ From the poem *The Best School of All* by Sir Henry Newbolt.

¹⁰ A reference to the Biblical story of Achan in Joshua 7, meaning the immediate problem has been solved but the cause of the problem still exists to cause other problems

from the caked dust. They perhaps have tramped 20 miles through the sand and have been “bucketed about” in an attack over the desert hills. And all they get for lunch is a scanty ration of bread and jam. Contrast them with the immaculate young men who in summer “camp” around the foreshore of Port Phillip and who send group photographs of themselves to the illustrated papers (crossed Union Jacks in the background) under the titles of The Lilies, The Daffodils or The Slipstones¹¹. The climate of Egypt greatly surprised us when we arrived in February, the days were warm but the nights intensely cold. Minor poets and lady novelists write of the burning plains of Egypt. Try ‘em on the outpost line at 3 AM.

Nearly 16,000 photographs taken by Australian soldiers in Egypt are included in the collections at the Australian War Memorial, many more are in other public collections and family albums. William Hoggart saw not only the pyramids, temples and tombs, he was a keen observer of the local people and ways of life very different from those he knew in Melbourne.

I have had a grand chance of seeing this wonderful old country and have found it a land of contrasts. I do not know whether you have been in Egypt or not. You find the intensest (sic) of culture and absolute desert, electric trams passing through fields painfully cultivated and watered by means of instruments which you see carved in the hieroglyphs of the temples, a climate which seesaw between a grill and a refrigerator, the 4000 year old tombs lit by electric light, magnificent mosques rising from amongst squalid hutches, motor cars jossling (sic) camel trains, Marconi stations near the site of the ancient city of Om, an Australian army camped at Heliopolis. You could multiply these examples easily.

I have seen some 500 miles of the Nile Valley. It is one huge market garden and farmyard. In and around Cairo I have found time to visit the pyramids, the wonderful tombs of Sakkara, the Ali Mohammed mosque, the

¹¹ While clearly disparaging, Hoggart’s reference is obscure. He may be referring to the 19thC language of flowers which equates lilies with purity and daffodils with narcissism or perhaps that the men look ‘sharp’ as a slipstone is used by woodworkers to sharpen tools

tomb of the Mamelukes¹², the Roman aqueduct, the great Delta irrigation works. A party of us spent two glorious days at Luxor where we saw the great temples of Karnak, Luxor and Amon Ra, the avenue of sphinxes, the colossi at Thebes, and, greatest of all, the tombs of the ancient kings. If you have been there you will know what a wonderland lies around Luxor. The tomb of Amenophis II impressed me most of all. The paintings and hieroglyphics on the walls of the passages leading to the tomb chamber are as fresh as if painted yesterday. The sarcophagus has been covered with a sheet of glass and the mummy unswathed. The old king lies as if carved from ebony, every feature and limb perfect. It is difficult to believe that he lived 1000 years before Socrates. In a niche nearby lie the bodies of his 3 favourite slaves and another niche was carved for his treasure chest. Why can't we leave these old pharaohs undisturbed? A phrase of Charles Lamb's about "meddlesome trouble-tombs"¹³ was at the back of my head all day.

I have some admiration for the fellaheen¹⁴ who toil on their few feddans¹⁵ of land aided by the family buffalo, the family camel and the family donkey but his city bred brother is poor stuff. If he is wealthy he runs to fancy socks and loud suits and infests the city gardens. As far as superficial acquaintance with the situation here can be relied on there seems little chance of a rising against British rule¹⁶. The Moslem section may be against us but they have no method of organising or of obtaining munitions of war. It is impossible to buy rifles or cartridges in Cairo. The Gypsie army has been sent away down to Khartoum except for a few squadrons of cavalry and a few companies of infantry while their barracks are occupied by territorials and Indian troops. If it were allowed to quote figures the number of troops in Egypt and along the Canal would surprise you.

¹² A military caste, originally composed of slaves from Turkey, that held the Egyptian throne from about 1250 until 1517 and remained powerful until the early nineteenth century

¹³ Possibly a reference to Lamb's *The Essays of Elia*

¹⁴ An agricultural labourer in an Arabic country

¹⁵ Area of land that could be tilled by pair of oxen in a certain time

¹⁶ British rule of Egypt took various forms from 1882 until independence in 1922

Hoggart closes his letter with a few remarks about home. War strengthened the connections between members of the teaching community so that Hoggart had no hesitation in asking for support for his wife, Rebecca. He also refers to propaganda regarding the Turks, as he prepares for battle. Many references in this letter are not immediately understood by a 21st century audience so a footnoted transcription is available from the Archives' website.

I wish I were able to tell you something of what is going on around us. We form part of a force of mixed nationalities which is under the control of an English general of repute¹⁷. If the expedition is successful the result should be historic and I for one will feel proud of having played a very small part in cancelling an event which happened in 1453¹⁸.

I read your Christmas circular letter with pleasure and appreciate to the full the references you made concerning those members of College who are with the A.I.F.

Give my best wishes to Mrs Smith (sic) and tell her that I would be glad if she would call on Mrs Hoggart who will have an anxious time from now on. The address is 164 St Kilda St, Middle Brighton.

Yours sincerely,

Wm R Hoggart

¹⁷ General Sir Ian Hamilton

¹⁸ The end of the siege of Constantinople, resulting in Ottoman rule of the city

Hoggart was killed in action just a few days after writing this letter. According to his service record, he was buried on Quinn's Hill but the exact location of his grave is unknown. His personal effects and kit bag were sent to his wife Rebecca, and two daughters, Jean and Margery. The bodies of Australian soldiers were not repatriated.

In 1921, Rebecca Hoggart received a copy of the Education Department's Record of War Service, which was distributed free to every government school and teacher soldier or their next of kin. It described the Department's wartime activities and contained brief biographies of 769 teacher soldiers who served on active duty. The University of Melbourne published a similar war record and included an entry for alumnus William Hoggart.



Capt. WR Hoggart

Photograph from Victorian Education Department,
Record of War Service publication (p56)