

The DIARY
OF AN
AUSTRALIAN
SOLDIER

CAPT. K. J. BARRETT

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(Captain K. J. Barrett)

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PREFACE

THE publication of the diary of my elder son, who fell in France, April 16th, 1917, has been undertaken for two sets of reasons. I am desirous of doing whatever may be possible to place on record the services rendered by one who played the game of life so loyally and so well. The personal side of the matter has, however, been dealt with in a manner which I can admire, but cannot hope to emulate, by my old friend, Mr. H. G. Turner, and the memorial booklet written by him contains all that can be said on that aspect of the matter. The diary, which was submitted to him and by his advice deferred for publication until after the conclusion of the war, furnishes much of the data on which he based his conclusions.

Apart from the personal interest, the diary to me is of profound educational significance, and as such I present it to those who are interested in following so remarkable a human development.

Keith Barrett as a boy showed little sign of scholastic ability. Possessed of an affectionate and sunny nature, he passed through his school days at the Melbourne Grammar School without showing any remarkable ability, or indeed any great interest in his work until he began to study physical science. During the whole of this school period, however, he was keenly interested in what is generally known as nature study, and acquired a fairly full knowledge of the wild life of the Australian continent, as well as an intimate knowledge of the biological characteristics of certain domesticated animals, especially old English game fowls. He entered the Melbourne University, and in due course obtained the degree of Bachelor of Agricultural Science. At the University his work again was not remarkable from the ordinary academic standpoint. During this course, however, he obtained a good working knowledge of the theory of Mendel, and began to apply it to a series of experiments in the breeding of fowls, which became more and more comprehensive. In the intervals of the

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military campaign he kept sending home directions for the conduct of experimental work, which unfortunately was never completed. Owing to the pressure of military work he never had time to set out comprehensively the results he was seeking. At the end of the agricultural course he went to Queensland to get an experience of station life before embarking on a career of his own. Whilst in Queensland war was declared, and he volunteered at once, becoming a private in the 2nd Field Ambulance. He encamped at Broadmeadows, and left Australia with the first contingent on the S.S. "Wiltshire" on October 18th, 1914.

I saw him in Egypt on my own arrival there in 1915, during which year he received a commission in the Imperial Army. I again saw much of him in the winter of 1915-16, when I was invalided to England from Egypt, and he was invalided from the Dardanelles. He kept up a full correspondence with me until the end.

I suppose there must have been many such instances during the war, but his development in character and grasp under military necessity was amazing.

The agricultural curriculum at the Melbourne University has been much criticized, but the diary furnishes convincing evidence of the value of the scientific outlook given by that training. Lieut.-General Sir J. Monash has voiced the opinion of all sound observers that the university-trained man almost invariably rose to the top. And the reason is easy to comprehend. Students have been taught how a problem should be attacked, they have been taught what scientific evidence really means, and above all they have been taught from the intellectual no less than from the moral point of view that there is only one policy which pays: downright unflinching honesty. Those who read this diary will note the systematic way in which all problems are attacked; they will be able to see the question continually put to himself by the writer: What is it we have to do? What are the data of the subject? What are the principles involved and how are they to be applied?

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The diary itself was kept for the purpose of giving an indication to his family of what was actually occurring. It was never written for publication, and it is absolutely unconscious in its frankness. It was kept only during actual military operations; during sickness, or when wounded, or on leave the diary is interrupted. He has, however, left behind him numerous notebooks, filled with studies on bombing, on infantry attack, on artillery work, on aeroplane reconnaissance, essays on discipline, on the art of making men comfortable and contented, on the military efforts of various countries, and a large number of other technical subjects. These essays incidentally furnish to the non-combatant soldier evidence of the soundness and thoroughness of training in the officers' schools in the British army. Indeed, some of the instructions issued relating to causes of military failure are classics and force the reader to fully understand why that improvised army ultimately succeeded.

Like many other people, a survey of such a record forces on me the reflection that if Australians, in common with other British people, could develop in this extraordinary way under military necessity, why cannot we pull together, create a parallel civil organization and do great things in civil life? This, to me, is the final lesson to be drawn from such a record. I commend its perusal to those friends who will appreciate it for personal reasons, and to the serious-minded who are interested in educational matters and who will realize its significance to the full.

Readers of this diary will find in it an accurate and faithful record of the events experienced by thousands of men during four and a half years of war, and of the manner in which they faced the daily difficulty with courage and intelligence.

Those who were fortunate enough to survive and who owe their existence to the men who fell cannot but keep before them for all time the dignified words officially addressed to surviving relatives:

“He whom this scroll commemorates was numbered among those who, at the call of King and Country, left all that was dear to them,”

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“endured hardness, faced danger, and finally passed out of the sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives that others might live in freedom.”

“Let those who come after see to it that his name be not forgotten.”

JAMES W. BARRETT.

November, 1920.