

Soundscape and Landscape

an installation by Christine Johnson inspired by *The Troopships of Anzac*, a poem by Hilda Eileen Ramsay, née Couve

Visual artist: Christine Johnson

Sound artist: Angus Craig

Exhibition Saturday 6 February – Sunday 2 May

Soundscape and Landscape is a contemplation of an aspect of the life of Mallee botanist, Hilda Eileen Ramsay (known as Eileen). This work offers a reflection on the grief and loss Eileen is said to have experienced after her two brothers, Alan and Tom, were killed at Gallipoli in 1915. Her poem, *The Troopships of Anzac*, imagines the experience of the soldiers on the long voyage from Albany, Western Australia, to Anzac Cove.

Eileen Ramsay, an Australian of French-Mauritian descent, was a writer of prose and poetry. At Christmas 1957, she gave a copy of *The Troopships of Anzac* to her friend and fellow naturalist Les Chandler. In a handwritten annotation, she notes that she wrote the poem after meeting an officer who had sailed on the S.S. *Benalla*, the same ship that transported both her brothers to Gallipoli. Eileen's poem highlights the dramatic and unexpected encounter en route with the German warship, the *Emden*. The sinking of the *Emden* off the Cocos Islands was the first major Royal Australian Navy's victory of World War 1.¹

Then, in mid-October of 1914, like thousands of their compatriots, the Couve boys went off to war. They sailed from Port Melbourne on HMAT *Benalla*, to Albany, Western Australia to join the first convoy of thirty-eight Australian and New Zealand ships and four cruisers bound for Egypt which they reached on 2 December, where they completed their training. In early April 1915, the 8th Battalion sailed for the Gallipoli peninsula.

Dutchy and Tom, brothers in arms, to be sure, were cruelly destined to die within fifteen days of each other.

Alan, by now promoted to first lieutenant, led his men into battle on the first day of the Anzac landing, 25 April 1915. He suffered a gun-shot wound to the head and died the following day.....On 8 May, Tom was killed in action on the Gallipoli peninsula.²

Sadly, it took more than three years, until after the Armistice, for the Couve family to receive exact information about Alan's death. Alan had been engaged to Mildred (Millie) Veale, daughter of Rev. Edward Gritton Veale, the minister in Dandenong, where the family lived at the time. For the rest of their lives, Millie and Eileen remained united in grief, but also shared a deep and enduring friendship. Eileen, long considered the last surviving member of her family, bequeathed her estate to Millie.³ Millie, who never married, marked every Anzac Day in her own way. A report in *The Argus* daily newspaper in 1956 shows Millie serving hot coffee to returned servicemen before their march to Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance for the dawn service.

¹ Sydney versus Emden <https://veteranssa.sa.gov.au/story/sydney-versus-emden/> 7 November 2019

² *Five Soldiers, Untold Stories of World War One*, Michael Shmith, p. 18

³ In 2019, during research to find modern descendants of the original five soldiers, it emerged that Marna Couve de Murville is the great-grand-daughter of Eileen Ramsay's father, Joson Marie Couve, and is descended from his first marriage. In 2019, Marna was presented with Alan Couve's honorary degree.

OLD OR YOUNG – THEY STILL REMEMBER, THE GOLDEN HEARTEDS...they remember, they always will remember... And age certainly does not weary them...a small band of silver-haired, golden hearteds known as the Anzac Fellowship of Women – have gathered to serve coffee and biscuits to the men attending the dawn service.⁴

Eileen Ramsay's Anzac Days were usually spent in solitude. She was known to retreat to the bush, "well away from any ceremony" to remember her brothers.

Eileen wrote *The Troopships of Anzac* in Red Cliffs, where she moved with her mother and father after World War I. Joson Couve opened a pharmacy in the town, "the family having a deep desire to live in a soldier settlement and a place of green vineyards that reminded the bereaved father of his homeland [Mauritius]." ⁵

Eileen spent many fruitful years engaging in the life of her new community. In 1928-9 she became president of the Red Cliffs Women's Club; she was the *Riverlander's* local correspondent, and, in 1949, a founding member of the Field Naturalists Club. Eileen formed a close friendship with a young entomologist, John Plant, who helped her compile her celebrated pioneering botanical collection.

Christine Johnson, 2021

⁴ *Old or Young, They Still Remember, The Golden Hearteds, The Argus*, 26 April, 1956, p. 10

⁵ *Eileen Ramsay's Story, Four Years After* by L.G.Chandler, November, 1965, p. 8