

I Am Who They Have Been

In search of who and when and where I look upon those names that share
the intertwining branches of my clan,
to find some kin I recognise and some that come as a surprise
for me to now unravel if I can.

I visit sombre sacred sites where mourners act out Christian rites
midst rows of stone engraved with who is there,
with name and date of their decease, assuring me they 'Rest in Peace'
accompanied by solemn words of prayer.

The gravestones at St Mathews show the names that I have come to know
were convicts who became the pioneers,
and made a life on taken land in places I now understand
were occupied for sixty thousand years.

I recognise my forebears' crimes committed in those brutal times
with context from the pages of the past,
but as the world of hindsight shows with words in books of verse and prose,
the die of dispossession had been cast.

I wander furthermore in search of names on slabs behind the church,
connecting threads of kinfolk here and there,
imagining the lives they led and if the spirits of the dead
have stories of those times that they could share.

I thought about the Windsor lot surviving on their river plot
that flooded year on year without relent,
and how those challenges defined the people I had on my mind,
discovering the past and what it meant.

I stroll along the dusty lanes to be intrigued by what remains
of lifestyles that are hard to comprehend,
where silence now replaces scenes of bustling mines and huge machines
at Hargraves, Tambaroora and Hill End.

My great-great grandad laboured here, as tough as teak, a buccaneer
who sailed from Montenegro with his mate,
to fit the hardy miners' mould and dig for that elusive gold,
contending with the fickleness of fate.

And Adelaide, his gracious wife, epitomizes frontier life
when women had a dozen kids or more,
to bear and feed and teach to read and taking care of what they need
in families that were the working poor.

And in the archives of my heart, the images of them impart
a reverence for fortitude and grit,
to have the mettle to survive, to scarp and scrape and scrounge and strive
against the constant enemy – to quit.

I stood before an Honour Roll reminded of the tragic toll
that's also hard for me to comprehend,
the horrors of that brutal war which claimed the lives of many more
beyond the day atrocities would end.

Young Harold fought despite his fears and at the age of nineteen years
was shot below the ridges at Lone Pine,
and as I stood there numb with grief for one whose life was all too brief,
I thought about his fate compared to mine.

At Menin Gate I stood in awe and knew one hundred years before
that Albert and his mates had passed that way.

I tried to understand in vain the reasons for those soldiers slain
on battlefields so very far away.

I put myself in grandad's place, unsure of whether I could face
the slaughterhouse of gallant men and gore,
where rows and rows of those who died lay with their comrades side by side,
to signify the cruelty of war.

And like a dark demented dream that reappears as Satan's meme,
my father and his brothers went to war,
to suffer after they returned to find so many bridges burned
and traumatised from shocking things they saw.

I saw my mother struggle through the aftermath of what I knew
was - medals, marches, mateship and the beer,
until at three score years and ten I know much more than I knew then,
which resonates on ANZAC Day each year.

As generations come and go with legacies that I now know
are footprints of my forebears on the tree,
who walked a million miles beneath the Southern Cross to then bequeath
their stories which are sacrosanct to me.

To be recorded, held in trust, to be applauded and discussed
by those who have been born to follow on,
as guardians of who we are from places near and places far,
like many who have come and who have gone.

So as I look back over time I lend my thoughts to metred rhyme
in honour of those people who have been,
a part of why I came to be the person I now know as me
and what the words, 'my forebears', really mean.
For they have stood beside their peers and set the stage for all those years
enduring hardships I will never know,
which gives perspective to the way I think about my life today
and what my generation will bestow.