

# Miss Williams' Albums



Ann Nugent dips into two autograph albums that masseuse Miss B.M. Williams took to the Beaufort War Hospital during World War I

The year 1916 marked the halfway point in the five years of slaughter that was the First World War. In that year Australian troops suffered heavy losses in battles on the Western Front. In their first engagement at Fromelles, they sustained 5000 casualties; in just over 42 days at Pozieres, casualties reached some 23 000 men of whom 6800 were killed.

Poor men—they suffered all sorts of complaints like trench feet, gas poisoning, scabies, pleurisy and shell shock. To make matters worse, they were repeatedly sent back into action until bullets shattered bones. Then they were repatriated to England where some were admitted to Beaufort War Hospital, at Fishponds, Bristol. Beaufort had been founded as a lunatic asylum in 1861. In 1915, it was operating as a war hospital which, judging from the Australian soldiers' medical records, specialised in bone injuries.

Miss B.M. Williams of 'Holgate', Kingsland, Hertfordshire, was a masseuse at Beaufort. She was also the owner of two slightly used autograph albums. Both albums, now

held in the National Library's Manuscripts Collection, are hard-covered and gilt-edged with marbled end papers. Entries dating from 1903 to 1914, the 'Holgate' period, include traditional verses, an accomplished watercolour still life, pen and ink drawings of local scenes, and cartoons. Some drawings were made by Edith Williams, probably Miss B.M.'s sister or other relative. Their rural 'Holgate' appears to have been a leisured, happy place.

Miss Williams took her albums into the wards, presumably to break the boredom of hospital life. Wounded Canadians, South Africans, New Zealanders, Australians, and soldiers from numerous English regiments all made entries in Miss Williams' albums. The Beaufort autographs give insights into the thoughts, prejudices, injuries and hopes of the wounded men.

Many soldier-patients wrote innocuously affectionate verses like this to Miss Williams:

Some girls are sweet little dears  
And some will give you deliriums  
Now I don't want to cause any wishes or tears  
But have you ever heard of Miss Williams.

J. Maclean, 2nd KRRC, 7 April 1917

above left:  
Unknown photographer  
Beaufort War Hospital, Fishponds,  
Bristol  
Courtesy Glenside Museum,  
Bristol, UK

above right:  
cover and open pages of the *Albums*  
of B.M. Williams, 1903–1920  
Manuscripts Collection  
MS 9461

Occasionally a soldier was truly smitten, as I suspect was the case with 27-year-old bachelor, Irish seaman Pte. Daniel Lynn. Lynn enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) at Liverpool, New South Wales, on 8 February 1916. He received a gunshot wound to the left thigh on 28 August 1918 and, on 3 September, was admitted to Beaufort Hospital. Lynn made three entries in Miss Williams' books. The first is the rather conventional first page warning: 'Steal not this book'. The second is stiltedly formal: 'I hope you will continue your good work with every success. I have not known you very long but I can see you do your utmost for the Boys, with best wishes'. Lynn's third and final autograph pulses with feeling:

When you read this think of the writer  
 Always bear him in mind  
 Until you find one liked you better  
 And that is one you will never find.

And if that is not enough, a margin note reveals the soldier's resignation to his unrequited yearning: 'Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all'. Lynn left Beaufort on 7 January 1919, after five months there.

The National Archives of Australia has digitised the service records of all World War I soldiers ([www.naa.gov.au](http://www.naa.gov.au)). This rich resource provides more information on Lynn and the other Australian

autographists. Lynn comes over as a slightly larger than life character. Four days before Christmas 1917, he went AWL (absent without leave) and returned on 28 December 1917. For his trouble he was given 28 days Field Punishment No. 2 (heavy duties but not the humiliation of being lashed to a post or wheel as required by Field Punishment No. 1), and forfeited 36 days pay. Lynn was discharged in Australia on 2 January 1920 after approximately four years military service.

Beaufort must have provided a welcome respite from the trenches and army discipline for war-weary soldiers like Lynn. AIF machine gunner Pte. Scott from Halby, Tasmania, puts the comparison bluntly (3 October 1916):

I have lived in the trenches  
 I have been in the 'squeeze'  
 I have seen enough of France  
 So will give others a chance.

To Blighty I came  
 And would you blame  
 If I worked my head  
 And swing the lead  
 Rather!

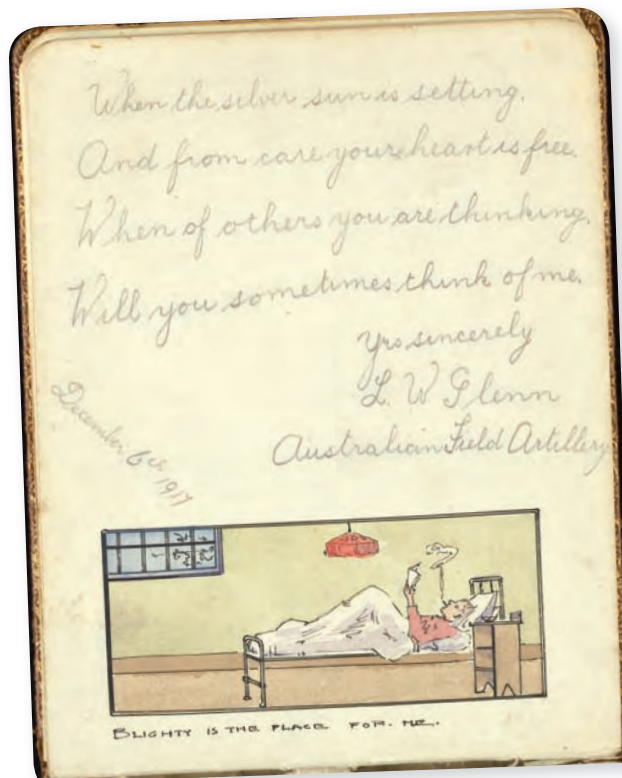
London born, Harry Light was 22 when he enlisted at Liverpool, NSW. He suffered multiple injuries, several promotions and demotions (reaching the rank of Sergeant), field court martials and punishments all the way from Rabaul through Gallipoli and on into France. A gunshot wound to his right arm landed him in Beaufort for a two-month stay, from October to December 1918. Light's contribution to Miss Williams' album is a moralistic poem, 'The Goal', which ends with the lines:

I saw the **Powers of Darkness**  
 put to flight  
 I saw the morning break.

In 1967, Beryl Light, possibly his widow, requested the 'Gallipoli medal' for Harry 'now deceased'.

Unlike those who praised Miss Williams unreservedly, Lance Corporal Albert John

L.W. Glenn and unknown artist verse and *Blighty is the Place for Me* reproduced from the *Albums of B.M. Williams, 1903-1920* Manuscripts Collection MS 9461





Presumably the patient, J. Stucky, made the cards to order. An unsigned drawing shows a relaxed patient smoking in bed. The only drawing identified as being by an Australian is a cartoon by S.S. Smith of the 5th Australian Division Engineers. This drawing, in which the Kaiser's face floats above an empty field, is one of a few in the albums that expresses an anti-war sentiment.

left:  
J.H. Toovey  
*With Apologies and My Deepest for the Patient* 1916  
reproduced from the *Albums of B.M. Williams, 1903-1920*  
Manuscripts Collection  
MS 9461

below:  
S.S. Smith  
*All That Was Left of It* 1917  
reproduced from the *Albums of B.M. Williams, 1903-1920*  
Manuscripts Collection  
MS 9461

The anti-authoritarian attitudes that contributed to the Australians' initiative and daring in the field were the same attitudes that saw them being tried for repeated AWL breaches, insubordination and bad

Tout, in a slightly tongue-in-cheek entry, warns (27 May 1917):

Attend, ye patients to my tale of woe!  
(Miss Williams) of Beaufort massaged me so  
That my right foot, dislocated  
...  
In terror, dear reader, of such consequences  
I sought to become a true amanusis [sic],  
And save you, O patient,  
From a fate now grown ancient:  
Do not be massaged by the masseuse in  
parenthesis.

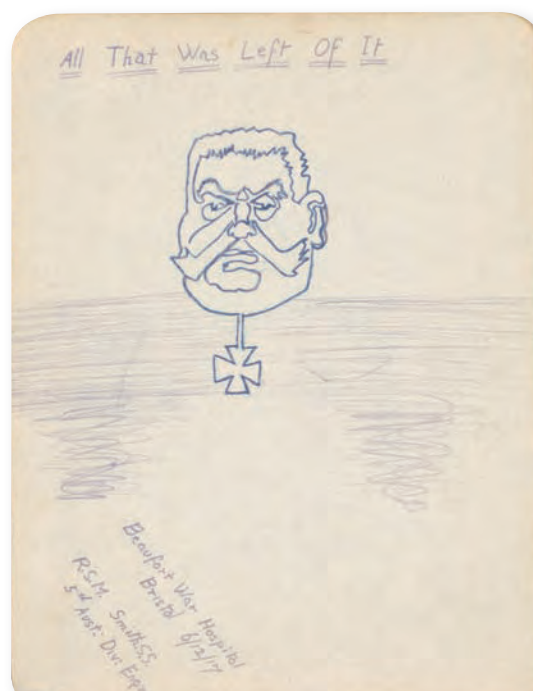
language. One court martial report records a private's rebuke to a superior officer who was attempting to enforce lights out. On 22 December 1916, Pte. J.M. Axelsen, a Queensland miner in civilian life, shouted an unambiguous, 'Get out you fucking bastard'. He was initially sentenced to two years detention which was later reduced to three months of Field Punishment No. 1. Axelsen writes in a more subdued, but still forthright, tone in Miss Williams' album:

Tout, a clerk from Sydney enlisted in the AIF on 6 October 1915, and saw active duty in France. He was appointed Lance Corporal on 20 January 1917, was wounded in action on 3 March 1917, and was admitted to Beaufort six days later. On 16 April 1918, Tout was discharged in Australia. Eighteen years after the war, Tout was the subject of a query by an officious official of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia who wanted confirmation that Tout's injuries were real, and not, as he put it, one of 'the unusually large crop of alleged Anzac heroes whose credentials ... will not bear the limelight'. The officer in charge of base records sternly refused to supply this 'confidential' information. Tout died on 26 October 1951.

I cannot love my neighbour's wife  
His ox I must not slaughter  
Thanks be to God, it's not a sin  
To love Mr. Williams' daughter.

Like the earlier 'Holgate' entries, the Beaufort pages also contain drawings. A pen sketch by J.H. Toovey, dated 17 December 1916, depicts Miss Williams at work. A coloured postcard shows a ship and the allied flags with the note: 'Painted by a patient to sell for the Belgium Fund'.

South Australian Pte. John Frederick Hirth, 42 years of age, single, over six feet tall, and with a tattoo on his left arm, writes a 'roses are red, violets are blue' verse in an unsteady hand. As Hirth was a gardener, the choice seems apt. 'Roses are red' verses make several appearances in the albums. Arthur G.H. Wilson, Wellington Battalion, New Zealand Force, writes his 'roses' in both English and





above:  
J. Stucky and B.G.H.  
watercolour and note 1914  
reproduced from the *Albums of  
B.M. Williams, 1903–1920*  
Manuscripts Collection  
MS 9461

below right:  
G.E. Lancaster  
*Seen on the Riviera* 1920  
reproduced from the *Albums of  
B.M. Williams, 1903–1920*  
Manuscripts Collection  
MS 9461

Maori (25 October 1915). Another New Zealander, Trooper F. Sperry, uses Maori in his inscription of the Maori War Cry. Both men finish their entries with a cheery 'Kia-ora'.

Some AIF soldiers went to war with wattle in their pockets. South Australian, Pte. James Green, a linesman from Adelaide, stuck two small blossoms on the page of his entry as tokens of home. When he enlisted on 20 November 1915, the twenty-year-old Green gave his next of kin as 'Lady friend, Mary Hanrahan'. Green had a military career of two years. He served thirteen months overseas, four of which were spent in Beaufort where he was treated for a bullet wound to the right knee. No doubt that wound put an end to his work as a linesman. Green returned to Australia and was discharged in October 1917. He died on 29 March 1939.

There was a marked difference between the men's admiration of, and affection for, Miss Williams and their attitudes to women in general. The entry by Corporal Jas P. Clark of the 12th Australian Machine Gun Company could be construed as demeaning, although it might have been thought witty at the time. When the first word of the first eight lines is read vertically, Clark's poem makes the proposition: 'When shall I sleep with you my love?' J.G. Watt of Chatswood, Sydney, gives his description of 'a ladies' afternoon tea party':

Giggle, Gabble  
Gobble, Get

AIF soldier N.H. Cook puts in a plea for female fidelity in a simile that compares the faithful woman to a train:

Here's to the train, that runs on wheels  
And never enters danger  
Here's to the girl that sticks to  
Her bloke.  
And never goes with a stranger.

World War I ended with the Armistice on 11 November 1918. The Beaufort War Hospital closed in February 1919.

But what of Miss Williams? One of her albums gives a final clue. A pen and ink drawing, dated March 1920, by G.E. Lancaster of Coupland Hospital, Gainsborough, shows a fashionable young woman wearing a stylish fur coat and hat, with the caption: 'The Future 1920 ... seen on the Riviera'. Could the model for that drawing be Miss Williams? Perhaps. It certainly indicates that in March 1920, Miss Williams' albums, and most likely Miss Williams herself, were at John Coupland Hospital. But for 'The Future', it is impossible to say if Miss Williams ever reached the Riviera.

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