

# Defying Those Who Would Forget – A Hall of Remembrance and its Narrative

Graham Hucker

Stratford's Hall of Remembrance is a lonely, almost forgotten place. The local community seldom goes there anymore, except on Anzac Day. Those who do visit enter an environment that has a funereal atmosphere. It is cool and quiet there. Suspended across the rear of the hallway visitors see a wrought iron structure with the words — HALL OF REMEMBRANCE — flanked by three red poppies. To the left, on the south wall, hang 129 inscribed photo portraits in boxed frames made of oak or tawa of soldiers from the district who 'fell' during the 'Great European War of 1914-19.' The soldiers are unsmiling and dressed in uniforms or civilian suits. To the right, on the north wall, hang fifty-five framed photo portraits of servicemen in uniforms who lost their lives in World War II. In contrast they are smiling. This 'gallery of the dead' with its cream coloured walls, gray concrete floors and predominance of sepia tones is a distinctively different place from the world outside on the main street of Stratford.

To people in central Taranaki who lived through the great wars of the twentieth century the Hall of Remembrance is a representation of regional and generational war experiences. Its setting in a disused municipal building gives the impression of modern day abandonment and a lost connection with a past community. And yet, reading the brief inscriptions accompanying the photos one senses that the language is not ephemeral, but intended to connect with future generations. The inscribed language is thought provoking, moving and coded in places as if past communities wanted their war experiences to be read, thought about, and remembered, rather than forgotten.

What visitors see today is a restoration of the post-1945 re-configuration



Stratford's Hall of Remembrance - photographed on ANZAC Day in the mid-1990s - depicting the post-1945 re-configuration. The photos in the image on the left-hand side (south wall) are of the Great War dead.

of the photos. The restoration in 2000 by a team of conservationists led by Detlef Klein from *Te Manawa* in Palmerston North is in itself noteworthy because it suggests longevity of importance, and meaning. What can the photos tell visitors today of central Taranaki's experiences of the Great War? What attitudes and values did earlier generations have towards their war dead, and why is the Hall of Remembrance a significant, meaningful place?

## Configurations and 'Surface Archaeology'

The idea for a Hall of Remembrance became public in 1917, the year of the Battles of Messines and Passchendaele. The Great War had already claimed the lives of at least 82 soldiers from the region and mayor John McMillan 'thought the time had arrived for the institution of a Roll of Honor.'<sup>1</sup> McMillan believed that commemoration of the district's 'fallen' soldiers should indicate more

than a name, that a photograph should be included. The civic construction of the Hall of Remembrance took place in the corridor of the municipal building over a period of 18 months. By the fourth anniversary of the landings at Gallipoli 28 portraits hung in the arcade and another 28 were in waiting. They had already gained some meaning in the public's imagination as the *Stratford Evening Post* suggested:

'One of the most touching silent tributes to those of our brave ones who fell on Anzac Day, at the "Landing in the Dawn", and on other glorious fields was the decoration of the Roll of Honor portraits in the Stratford Municipal Arcade. Lovely wreaths were hung at intervals over the group of portraits, and festoons of white and purple ribbon artistically draped the length of the walls.'<sup>2</sup>

In May 1920, Edward, Prince of Wales, officially opened the Hall of

Remembrance in which hung 121 portraits.

What would contemporaries have seen in the Hall of Remembrance in the 1920s? In short, they would have seen a different configuration from that seen by visitors today. The original configuration displayed the photos of the Great War dead in two rows on both sides of the hallway fitting neatly between concrete columns. That configuration did not make any allowances for future wars, which is a useful indicator of contemporary understandings about the Great War. It had been so devastating, how could such a 'calamity' ever happen again? The original configuration remained that way for about thirty years until the late 1940s.

Evidence from modern conservation work reveals that a re-configuration took place in the late 1940s to accommodate the photos of dead servicemen from the Second World War. Conservators discovered that the original display boxes made for the photos of the Great War dead did not fit evenly in their new locations during the re-configuration. They also discovered that the boxed frames had been placed over air vents in the south wall, and that three redundant doors in the corridor were covered over by the boxed frames. Furthermore, by examining the 'ghost marks' left on the walls by the boxed frames, their specific measurements, and contemporary identifications on the reverse side of some of the photos, conservators were able to conclude that a re-configuration had indeed taken place; that the boxed frames housing the Great War photos were not in their original position. With some variation in the placement of the photos visitors today essentially see the Hall of Remembrance as it was re-configured in the late 1940s.

### Patterns and Values

During the restoration work, Klein's conservation team made every effort to restore the photos as they had found them so that historical placement could be preserved. Visitors today see that the photos are not arranged alphabetically, or placed according to rank, or regiment, or year of death, or even place of

death. It has always been that way, except for two subtleties. The absence of an immediately recognizable pattern is in itself a pattern. The placement of the photos in no apparent order suggests a pattern of equity and democracy. A noteworthy example is the placement of Lieutenant-Colonel William George Malone's photo. Malone, aged 56, is the oldest soldier and the highest ranking officer in the Hall of Remembrance. Before the war Malone held prominent public positions in Stratford, and yet his photo does not hang conspicuously, but amongst the soldiers. And that is probably how Malone would have wanted it given the respect he had for his men. The remaining 28 officers are similarly dispersed. Military hierarchy is not observed, rather all served and all lost their lives for the same issues that confronted the generation of 1914-18. Equality of sacrifice as a rural community value of the Great War is evident in the Hall of Remembrance.

A second subtlety exists in the familial pattern of the photos which suggests a prevailing social attitude towards the importance of families. The photos of twins, William and Leonard Hansen (aged 20) from Douglas were placed together. Stanley and Charles Rowson, brothers from Stratford were placed together. So too, were Frank and Earnest Keightley from Midhurst. Perhaps most poignant of all the familial associations are that of Henry, Thomas, William and James Hamblyn from Tariki, a community of 505 people. Henry (aged 26), a farmer before the war, was killed at the Somme in October, 1916. Thomas and William, also farmers, were killed at Messines on the same day in June, 1917. James (aged 30) was 'killed in action' one month later. Their photos are clustered together. For the rest of the Hamblyn family the sorrow and misery of war continued into 1918 with the loss of their father and youngest brother to influenza. In just over two years Mary Ann Hamblyn, wife and mother had lost all of the men in her family to war and disease.

### Inscribed Narrative

Less subtle than the patterns based on



The disused Municipal Building on Broadway in Stratford - photographed in the late 1990s - home to the Hall of Remembrance since 1917.

the familial and democratic values of a rural community, however, are the revelations in the inscriptions accompanying each photo. The absence of information about ages, manner of death, place and environment combine to reveal loaded messages about a community and the Great War. The absence of ages at death from all but one photo is a salient feature of the emerging narrative, giving an insight into the community's attitude towards youth in 1917. At a Stratford Borough Council meeting on 20 August, councillors 'strongly' opposed 'suggestions to lower the age of enlistment to 19 years' and they insisted 'that it will never be necessary to enlist lads of 19.'<sup>3</sup> Nearly two months later on 12 October, Private Francis P. McCullough was 'killed in action' in France. McCullough's photo hangs in the Hall of Remembrance. It is the only photo that shows age at death. The inscription reads 'age 19 years.' With nearly half (47%) of Stratford's Great War dead in the Hall of Remembrance aged in their twenties McCullough's inscription is an emotive representation of a rural community's sorrow over the loss of its young men in the Great War. Furthermore, it is an anti-war statement.

The manner in which each soldier died is briefly noted in the inscriptions. How death came is expressed without any attempt to protect the sensitivities of a community coping with loss. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the soldiers were 'killed in action' and nearly a quarter (23%) 'died of wounds.' The language used on most photos conceals the actual means of death, but there is a strong

suggestion that something dreadful had happened to them all. Loved ones may very well have stood and gazed at the photos and tormented themselves by wondering what sort of wounds and was death 'in action' quick and without suffering? For Private Thomas Gorton (aged 25) of the New Zealand Medical Corps who died in France in 1917 death would have followed suffering. Gorton's inscription reads 'gassed and died.' The inscription is significant because 'gassed' is the only reference to a technological means of death in the Hall of Remembrance. Its inclusion reveals community anguish at the immorality of using such technology that writer Geoff Dyer tells us was 'designed to torment rather than kill.'<sup>4</sup>

Equally disconcerting for family and community would have been the mystery surrounding the disappearance and probable deaths of soldiers like J. R. Moir, 'wounded and missing' at Anzac Bay, Gallipoli, on 28 April 1915, and Private William A. Jameson also 'missing' at Gallipoli. What became of them is unknown. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission holds no information on their deaths, burials or memorials. As historian Joanna Bourke says, 'surely "missing" is the cruelest word in the language.'<sup>5</sup>

On each photo is inscribed the military unit or regiment of service. Those labels used in conjunction with the date of death can indicate to some extent whether soldiers volunteered or were conscripted. Private Irving Blackstock (aged 20) and Sergeant-Major Archibald Bonar (aged 39) volunteered and served in the 'Main Body NZEF.' There is a subtle encapsulation of the voluntary spirit of 1914 in that inscription. Blackstock enlisted in August 1914 and he was the first soldier from the Stratford district to make the 'supreme sacrifice' by being 'killed in action' at Gallipoli on 26 April. Bonar was killed two days later. Official recognition of bravery, however is not subtle. Families of those soldiers who 'fell' and who had been awarded medals felt the need to demonstrate their pride by including the award in the inscription. Sergeant George Syme (aged 28), a carpenter from Tariki was



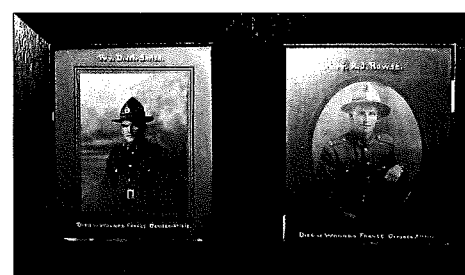
Inscribed photos of the Great War dead.

awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Private Albert Johnson, a farmhand from East Road in Stratford received the Military Medal. A notable omission, however is the Military Medal awarded to Lieutenant Edmond Malone for gallantry at Passchendaele.

### Convergence in Commemoration

Sickness and disease have always been the scourge of military campaigning, more especially before 1914. Nearly ten per cent of the soldiers from the Great War in the Hall of Remembrance 'died of sickness', or of 'illness.' For instance, Gunner George V.W. Falder of the New Zealand Field Artillery 'died of enteric fever in Malta Hospital' in 1915. At least seven others died of influenza; six during the pandemic of 1918. Of those soldiers who died during the pandemic Charles Henry Rowson and Anselm M. Flynn had been demobilized and were civilians in Stratford at the time of their deaths, and yet, their photos hang in the Hall of Remembrance; why?

Rowson, a 22-year old farmer, had recently returned home from the Western Front where he had served with the Wellington Regiment from 1916 to 1917. For one week in early November 1918, Rowson showed symptoms of influenza that were severe enough for admission to Stratford's Public Hospital. He died there on 8 November. The inscription on his photo reads, 'died of illness.' Rowson's death is significant, in part, because he was Stratford's first



fatality in the pandemic of 1918. At the time of his death the war against Germany was still being fought and returned soldiers like Rowson were still linked to the conflict, at least through experience and memory.

Anselm Flynn, a 24-old farmer from Te Wera, served on the Western Front where he was 'badly gassed' in October 1917.<sup>6</sup> One year later he arrived home and died as a result of 'heart disease and influenza' during the pandemic on 1 December 1918.<sup>7</sup> The inscription on his photo reads 'died of sickness (Gassed).' The coded word in brackets adds to the significance of the inscription. Like that of Private Gorton it is a representation of suffering. Flynn had died of influenza, but his resistance to the invasive nature of a virus had been weakened by the technology of war. At the time of his death Flynn was still linked to the war, just like Rowson. Together their deaths are significant because with them the commemoration of death through epidemic disease converged with the commemoration of death in war. Both Rowson and Flynn are buried in the Kopuatama Cemetery near Stratford. They are the only soldiers from the

Great War in the Hall of Remembrance who returned home to die. The rest lie elsewhere.

### A Global Conflict

The diversity of place and environment is a dominant theme in the Hall of Remembrance. Private Herbert Watkins (aged 33) was 'killed in action' in France in 1917. He served with the 'Australia Imperial Force.' Watkin's world before the war, like that of others in the Hall of Remembrance, may not have included many places beyond the local region, let alone New Zealand. However, by the end of the war places like Gallipoli, Palestine, and Zeebrugge, as well as environments like a prisoner of war camp in Hadji Keri, Turkey; hospitals in England and Malta; and 'at sea' represented the diverse settings of service and death. Just over two-thirds (67.4%) of the soldiers from the Great War in the Hall of Remembrance lost their lives in France while Gallipoli claimed the lives of nearly 14%. Inscribing a place or environment on a photo was significant because it recorded the location of death for family and friends. This was important in the grieving process because it helped reduce the mystery that surrounded death in war for non-combatants by enabling people to cast their thoughts towards that destination. For the families of Privates Thomas Webb (aged 27) and the Hansen twins mystery would forever surround their location because they died somewhere 'at sea' and were buried there. For nine other soldiers their places of death are unknown. Their families may have stood and gazed at their loved ones photos in the Hall of Remembrance in the years after the war and wondered – where?

Where Stratford's soldiers of the Great War are buried or memorialized is not included in the inscriptions. It is a noteworthy omission. An examination of Commonwealth War Graves Commission files reveals that over half (56%) were buried in cemeteries. Forty-one bodies lie in France. Another 15 bodies were buried in Belgium. Of the others, five were buried in Britain, four in Turkey, two each in Malta and Stratford,

and one each in Iraq, Israel and Syria. Memorials record the names of just over a third (36%) of the soldiers 'whose graves are known only to God.' Twenty-one names were inscribed on memorials in Belgium, 12 on French memorials, 11 on Turkish memorials and three in Wellington. For ten soldiers there are no known graves or memorials anywhere. Such diversity in place and environment demonstrates the global extent of the Great War.

### Meanings?

Stratford's Hall of Remembrance is an historically significant site, partly because of the narrative recorded in the inscriptions. From the inscriptions threads can be drawn together that enable some concluding comments to be made. Not all of Stratford district's Great War dead are depicted in the Hall of Remembrance, but those who are would be represented by a soldier holding the rank of private, aged between 25 and 26 years, 'killed in action' in France in the summer of 1917—probably July—and whose remains are buried in French soil. The year construction began on the Hall of Remembrance would have been particularly difficult for people in the district due, in part, to the high death tolls. The battles of Messines and Passchendaele (1917) claimed the lives of nearly one-fifth (17.8%) of the Great War dead in the Hall of Remembrance. Those battles along with the battle of the Somme (1916) and the attack on Chunuk Bair at Gallipoli (1915) represent key military engagements where loss of life of soldiers from Stratford and the surrounding district was most pronounced. Remembering those who 'fell' is a key function of the Hall of Remembrance. The enduring images of the war dead like that of young Private McCullough, and the use of impact words in the inscriptions such as 'killed', 'action', 'died', 'wounds', 'missing', 'lost', 'gassed', and 'sickness' had the potential to shock a community into not forgetting.

Location and place leads to the most significant and meaningful aspect of the Hall of Remembrance. It was located in

the civic centre of the borough of Stratford, the place chosen been the corridor of the Municipal Buildings. There, the public conducted business of a municipal nature and they unwittingly took part in a subtle ritual of remembrance by passing through the Hall of Remembrance, not once, but twice. The photos were difficult to ignore; their faces and names familiar to contemporary and near-contemporary generations. All of the 'fallen' once lived and worked in Stratford and in the surrounding district, and yet, during the Great War they were scattered to places far beyond New Zealand from which only two ever returned, and even then to die before long. In the Hall of Remembrance they were all 'brought back' and 'gathered together' once again into the centre of their town so that they would not be forgotten.

Today the Great War photos depict 'nameless names', but for over 85 years the Hall of Remembrance has been part of Stratford's townscape and its annual calendar of events. It has defied vandalism, infestation, neglect and suggestions of relocation. In effect, the continued existence and preservation of the Hall of Remembrance is in defiance of those who would forget. After all, memorialisation is perpetual, is it not?

### Endnotes

I wish to acknowledge the support of the Historical Publications Branch, Ministry of Internal Affairs for a New Zealand History Research Trust Fund award in 1995 which assisted in the research for this article. I thank Detlef Klein, Conservator at *Te Manawa* in Palmerston North, for sharing his knowledge with me about the configurations and 'surface archaeology' of the Hall of Remembrance.

<sup>1</sup> *Stratford Evening Post (SEP)*, 20 November 1917, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 April 1919, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Stratford Borough Council, *Minutes of Meetings*, vol. 6, 20 August 1917, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1994, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Joanna Bourke cites Anon, *To My Unknown Warrior*, London, 1920, pp. 25-26 in *Dismembering the Male. Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, Reaktion Books, London, 1999, p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> *SEP*, 2 December 1918, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Death Register*, D1918, vol. 229A, entry 98.