

A black silhouette of a soldier in a trench coat and hat, holding a rifle, stands on a dark, tiered pedestal. The background is a bright, cloudy sky with a gradient from blue to white. The text is overlaid on the image.

Gilles Durand

Translated by
Sonia Fuchez
Claire Habart

BULLECOURT 1917

The remembrance of soldiers past

Les Lumières
de Lille
éditions

BULLECOURT 1917

The remembrance of soldiers past

By the same author

Les Noyés de la Deûle [la contre-enquête]
Les Lumières de Lille, juin 2015

Book cover

The "*Digger*", this statue remembers the memory of Australian soldiers at Bullecourt.
(*Gilles Durand collection*)

Les Lumières de Lille Éditions

Frédéric Lépinay
3, avenue Poincaré
59700 Marcq-en-Barœul

Tél. 03 20 659 507

contact@leslumieresdelille.com

www.leslumieresdelille.com

Les Lumières de Lille sont adhérentes de l'Association
des éditeurs du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais.

Le conseil régional Nord-Pas-de-Calais-Picardie soutient l'édition indépendante.

La loi n° 92-597 du 1^{er} juillet 1992 interdit les copies ou reproductions destinées
à une autre utilisation que privée.

Tous droits réservés pour tous pays.

© Les Lumières de Lille, avril 2017

ISBN 978-2-919111-45-9

To my father, Claude

To my mother, Colette

To my sister, Agnès

Foreword

Of the many books written about the Great War, this one is unique. It was inspired by a French family as a tribute to the effort of the Australians involved in the two battles of Bullecourt. The first battle, cost 3,000 Australian lives and was over by lunchtime on 11th April 1917. The second battle lasted a fortnight, involved many determined counter attacks by the German Army, cost a further 7,000 Australian casualties and finished when the German commander, Crown Prince Ruprecht decided that the position was not worth further loss. He retired a few hundred metres and remained in new lines. Officially, 2,421 Australians killed at Bullecourt have no known grave. Many remain in the soil where they fell.

In the 1970's Monsieur and Madame Durand were appointed schoolteachers to Bullecourt and neighbouring Hendecourt. They heard stories of the Australian sacrifice in the nearby fields. Monsieur Durand taught himself English, read the *Australian Official History of the War, Vol 4, Bullecourt* and enthused others. Relics came in from the fields and the mayor of Bullecourt, Monsieur Letaille, joined by Madame Letaille established a museum.

Much help was given by the Australian Embassy. The Ambassador, Mr Rowland took a personal interest in the enthusiasm of the Durands and Letailles. Word spread and soon the Durands were receiving letters from relatives of some who were at Bullecourt. All were answered. A few visited; others asked for photographs. Madame Durand was soon cooking for travellers and later busloads of visitors who came for Anzac Day. Many Australians have lifelong memories of the hospitality offered at Hendecourt. Most who stayed a few days were driven to places of interest either locally or in Belgium.

In 1994 the Durands were rewarded for their work. They were awarded an honorary “Order of Australia,” a rare distinction for foreign nationals.

Marc Bastien, one of the local people who became interested in the battlefield began a search for the missing, eventually finding over twenty soldiers. The recovery of early November 1994 became the first Australian to be identified in more than 50 years. A year in planning, Sgt White’s reburial in the presence of his 80 years old daughter, an event respectfully covered by the media of France, Australia and the UK became the high point of remembrance work at Bullecourt. A hitherto unknown soldier, reunited with his family. The Letailles were now honoured. Age told on the searchers and finds dwindled but the Durands work of answering letters, meeting, hosting and driving visitors, organizing luncheons for tour groups and placing flowers in the nearby cemeteries continued.

In this book the reader will meet veterans of the battles, their relatives, gain an insight into lives from a different world, both now over and learn of the years of work of this remarkable family. The many initiatives which have become part of the remarkable work at Bullecourt are mentioned. A degree of disappointment emerges, initially referring to the restricted contact allowed to veterans who returned on the 75th anniversary pilgrimage; The Durands were not permitted to meet a soldier they had been writing to, nor was there to be any absence from the official program irrespective of a digger’s hopes. Official ceremony becomes more extravagant and then more distant. There are examples of recent official indifference, even direct obstruction of efforts made to locate some of the missing. Friends in Australia have repeatedly tried to see the Durand family again recognized for a further 1/4 century of dedicated work remembering soldiers of the Great War. Following yet another rejection in November 2016, there seems little point in further effort.



Memorial windows at Killara Uniting Church (North suburb of Sydney) referring to Bullecourt. Tribute to Frank Alexander Rea, 4th Battn. (Picture by Peter Bidentope)

an easily readable tribute particularly to “The Australians” but also to all who remember the debt owed to those who served or suffered because of the Great War.

Perhaps remembrance is best left to the ordinary person; to those who place poppies, photos and messages on graves or walls in France and Belgium, who write in the CWGC cemetery visitors’ books or who quietly research personal records or war diaries. Such folk are genuine and are rapidly rising in number, evidenced by the frequency of private tributes to be seen on the Western Front compared to two decades ago.

This book is genuine. The author quietly refers to “my father”. Writing it was to be a deeply personal collaboration between father and son. Sadly Claude Durand died suddenly on 1st March 2016. Working alone, his son has completed the task and, incorporating anecdotes of his family’s forty years of work, privately remembered by thousands of Australians if not their government, has written

Georges Cochrane

From the fields to the heart



Colette and Claude Durand attending a commemoration ceremony in Bullecourt in 1984. *(Claude Durand collection)*

“**A**t night, I could hear my father screaming and I didn’t know why. I learnt, much later, that he fought in France during the First World War. He never talked about it, until he died.” John Williams has tears in his eyes when he tells my parents about his father, traumatized for life. My parents used to collect this kind of evidence. John William’s father was one of the tens of thousands of Australian people coming from the other half of the world to get involved in the War of 1914-1918 in the North of France. Since the mid-1970’s onward my father,

Claude Durand, took a very close interest in the history of these soldiers from the Antipodes.

A battle remembered

It was a professional transfer that changed the whole destiny of my family. In 1972 my parents were appointed schoolteachers in Hendecourt-lez-Cagnicourt, a small village in Artois, 20 kilometres southeast from Arras. As natives of Charente Maritime, they did not really know the region and its history. However each week their pupils would bring to school small lead shrapnel pellets, metallic shards or brass shell fuzes and my parents began to get quite intrigued. I also often happened to spend whole afternoons in the fields with my friends, picking up relics and their morbid messages.

My father becomes very interested in the local history of the First World War. He discovers that, in 1917, the trenches of the front line were crossing Bullecourt, the next village, two kilometres away, and that Hendecourt was a rear base for the German soldiers. No surprise then to find out that the earth still carries the remains of a war that took place more than 60 years ago.