

*Arthur Wheen, Australian World War I Hero  
and Erich Maria Remarque's Im Westen nichts Neues:  
All Quiet on the Western Front*

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**Abstract:** This article's purpose is to examine the formative years – culminating with his frontline service – of an Australian First World War veteran. The intention is to reveal how they influenced his subsequent life and helped to re-define his persona as an anti-war pacifist, expatriate scholar and prominent translator. The study uses a life-study or biographical approach drawing from a rich vein of primary and secondary sources – personal correspondence, unpublished and published war records and other contemporary documents. How he came to translate into English Erich Maria Remarque's significant novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* to make it a phenomenal commercial success worldwide is explored as the pinnacle of his scholarly life and as a major contribution to the literature of disenchantment with war.

**Keywords:** World War I, Translation,

The first bombardment showed us our mistake, and under it the world as they had taught it to us broke in pieces.

Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, translated by Arthur Wheen, 1929, 20

1916 saw Arthur Wheen on the Western Front ... in the Australian Imperial Forces. For bravery he was awarded the Military Medal and two Bars, one of only seven Australian soldiers in World War One to be so decorated. Like so many of that generation who physically survived the slaughter that was the Western Front, he was utterly changed by the experience.

Ian Campbell<sup>1</sup>

### **Formative Years**

Arthur Wesley Wheen of the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and after the war an expatriate, librarian, scholar, critic and writer, was born in the mining town of Sunny Corner in the central west of New South Wales on 9 February 1897, the second eldest of eleven children of Harold Wheen, an Englishman and Wesleyan minister, and his

Australian-born wife, Clara (née Black). Arthur, with his brothers and sisters, grew up in parsonages in New South Wales country towns of his father's calling. At Sunny Corner, Arthur started attending South Bathurst Public School; later, his father was sent to the Kiama Methodist circuit and he continued his education at Nowra Public School.<sup>2</sup> Finally, his father was posted to Sydney as the secretary of the Methodist Young People's Department of New South Wales and the family settled in the North Sydney leafy middle-class suburb of Roseville. He soon took on other roles within his denomination and became a leader in the Sydney Temperance Movement.

The move enabled Arthur, now a twelve-year-old Sydneysider and "Rosevillian" rather than a country boy, to attend the well-regarded Gordon Public School—a state school—under an inspirational headmaster, Harry L Fry, who prepared Arthur, travelling to and from the family home each day, for his secondary education through the Qualifying Certificate examination. Fry was renowned for his work in character building and Arthur When was a very willing subject as well as an excellent scholar. Arthur's elder brother Harold also attended Gordon School with some distinction. At the time Gordon, founded in 1871, was the foremost school in the district.<sup>3</sup> It was the second state school to operate in what was then the North Sydney district. In 1876 the present distinctive sandstone building was erected. A major event on the school's calendar was Empire Day, established in 1905, which instilled in Arthur and his siblings a keen sense of British patriotism, an idealistic desire to serve King and Empire.<sup>4</sup> The pupils of the school proudly paraded in the main street on Empire Day.

In 1911 following his brother Harold, Arthur entered the selective academic Sydney Boys High School under its distinguished headmaster John Waterhouse MA (1896-1915), also a Wesleyan.<sup>5</sup> Here Arthur excelled in English language and literature, history and modern and ancient languages and was appointed a school prefect in his final year.<sup>6</sup> During his high school years, Arthur was a member of the School Cadets. British Empire patriotism was all aglow in New South Wales schools in the military build-up of the early 1910s. School cadets were compulsory from 1911 for all physically fit schoolboys of eleven or more.

At Sydney Boys High Arthur When was schooled under the new academic regulations of the study course for state high schools which extended over a period of four years. He belonged to a cultured family who supported educational achievement. Admission to Sydney Boys High required a good pass in the examination for the Qualifying Certificate taken at the end of primary school. This examination made entry into a state High School a rigorous and highly selective process during the first half of the twentieth century.

After the Great War, a reference for Arthur for the award of a Rhodes Scholarship was prepared by the senior English teacher at Sydney Boys High School. It described his literary work at the school as "distinguished by an unusually brilliant, carefully elaborated style of composition, while the thought was profound and beautiful to a degree quite beyond that of the best senior students."<sup>7</sup> Arthur included this reference with others from the University in his application to the Rhodes Scholarship selection committee chaired by the State Governor, Sir Walter Davidson, at the University of Sydney.

The course of study Arthur embarked on in First Form at High School consisted of English language and literature, history, ancient and modern languages, science, mathematics and other cultural subjects. It was a classical academic curriculum that stimulated the youthful intellect. At the end of two years students sat for the new Intermediate Certificate examination and, before they could advance to higher work, they had to pass in at least four subjects including English. At the end of the four-year course, a Leaving Certificate by examination could be obtained.<sup>8</sup>

The new high school syllabus, drawn up by lecturers at Sydney Teachers College, was issued in 1911, the year Arthur entered High School—everything in education was fresh and golden. In the Leaving Certificate examination in 1914, Arthur When obtained second place in the state of New South Wales in English. On his application the University Senate awarded Arthur a public exhibition in Arts at the University enabling him to matriculate.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, he obtained a teaching scholarship to Sydney Training College at Blackfriars in Chippendale near the University in 1915 from the New South Wales Department of Education as a result of his outstanding performance at Sydney High. He took up the scholarship enabling him to pursue his studies simultaneously at Sydney Teachers College and the University of Sydney in the first year of the Bachelor of Arts course.<sup>10</sup> Only some students at Blackfriars were permitted to attend the University in the evening to obtain a degree—the more exceptional scholars like Arthur When.

The Teachers College course consisted of general cultural subjects and professional or teaching method subjects.<sup>11</sup> The college had been founded in 1906 in temporary quarters of the former Blackfriars Modern School. It was in short walking distance of the University; Arthur When walked there for lectures in the evenings during the week.<sup>12</sup> He was in one of the first cohorts of this type at the University.

When did not come from a wealthy family but it was not impoverished culturally or otherwise. On a parson's stipend his father Harold had to struggle financially to raise and educate eleven children. Fortunately the state schools Arthur attended were under the enlightened and able direction of its Director-General of Education Peter Board who drew extensively from the renowned Scottish education model. Board had developed an articulated educational ladder of aspiration and scholarly success that Arthur When had climbed in his primary, secondary school and university years.

While on the Western Front, Arthur Wesley When was remembered at Sydney Teachers College in the annual presentation of prizes in the Great Hall of Sydney University in 1917. The first principal of the College Professor Alexander Mackie presided<sup>13</sup>—another enlightened Scot. At the College's presentation its Honor Roll was ceremonially read—the names of sixty-six men who had enlisted in the war while students at the College. Of the three hundred ex-students named, forty-eight had already fallen in the Great War. As well, military distinction had been won by ex-students: Major Harold Page, Captain Roy D Mulvey, Captain Raymond A Allen, Lieutenant Les Wharton, Lieutenant Charles H Harrison (Military Crosses) and Signallers Arthur When and Cecil J Byrne (Military Medals).<sup>14</sup>

Much later after the Second World War, Arthur's daughter Gretchen, who had settled back in Australia, asked her father about his initial educational experiences after

completing the Leaving Certificate. He replied in a letter from England where he had settled permanently:

I do not remember what subjects I studied at the University of Sydney before the war [meaning the First World War]. I was there only one year, and at the same time attended the Teachers' Training College, with the intent to become a teacher. At the University I think I studied English Literature, History, Latin (and how!) Philosophy—I suppose there were other subjects, but I don't remember them all. At teachers college I remember taking notes on how to teach and wondering which way not to. When the war came I saw the way and with my belly stuck out and my chest stuck in, off I went.<sup>15</sup>

Arthur was just eighteen when he began at university and teachers' college in Sydney at the beginning of 1915.

### **The Great War on the Western Front**

Shortly after turning eighteen Arthur and his older brother Harold decided to do their patriotic duty and enlist in the Australian Imperial Forces. Soon they would be serving on the Western Front. From starting as a corporal, Harold later received a commission for his frontline service. Their younger and third brother, Trooper Ronald G Wheen, served in the Australian Light Horse in Palestine. He was badly wounded in the head near Beersheba, his horse and comrades being killed, and was himself left for dead. At the last moment it was discovered that he was still alive. All three brothers were thus valiant in the cause of King and Empire<sup>16</sup> and yet survived the Great War.

In 1916 the eighteen-year-old Erich Maria Remarque born in Osnabrück had been called up in Germany for military service in the army. On 31 July 1917 in the Third Battle of Ypres at Passchendaele and, after only six weeks on the Western Front, he was badly wounded by British shell splinters and was no longer able to take part in action. Unknown to him, his future friend and translator Arthur Wheen was serving on the other side in Belgian Flanders in the Battle of Polygon Wood in September 1917 where he too was wounded, but returned to the front when he recovered.<sup>17</sup> What Remarque experienced in Passchendaele changed his life irrevocably as it did that of Wheen.<sup>18</sup> Arthur spent much longer on the Western Front than the unfortunate Remarque—more than three years. Ten years later Remarque's life was to intersect significantly with that of Arthur Wheen. But more of that later.

Arthur Wheen was eighteen and eight months when he enlisted for overseas service, on 24 September 1915. He became part of the reinforcements to the AIF. He described his occupation simply as teacher and his next of kin as his father who lived at "Norton Lees," Kelburn Road, Roseville in Sydney's North Shore with the rest of his family. Arthur was unmarried, and at the time lived with his parents.

He was in agreement to undergo inoculation against smallpox and enteric fever. Asked what military training he had had, he replied simply: "Sydney University Scouts (VI)." The University Volunteer Rifle Corps was raised on 17 November 1900 as part of the colonial Military Forces of New South Wales. In 1903, the UVRC changed its name to the Sydney University Scouts as two rifle companies. When compulsory military

training was introduced in Australia in 1911, their numbers increased and it became a militia battalion. Sixty percent of the Scouts enlisted in the AIF.<sup>19</sup>

When described himself as “Natural born,” meaning Australian born of British stock. He had never been rejected for anything as being unfit and he had never been discharged from His Majesty’s Forces before. Arthur signed the oath of allegiance on 15 October 1915 at Holdsworthy Camp, New South Wales. He left Australia for Egypt, where he was to train in the desert, on the troop transport HMAS *Aeneas* on 20 December. The desert route marches were an unpleasant and draining experience for When and his companions in the reinforcements of the 5<sup>th</sup> Australian Division.

When was described by the recruiting officers as five foot seven and a half inches tall (he seemed taller as claimed in several sources), and he weighed 122 pounds with a chest measurement of 34 inches. (He was described by family members as being skinny and they nicknamed him “Skin”.) He had good eyesight; his eyes were described as grey (blue in other sources) and his hair brown. He had a dark complexion.

Arthur was assigned for a period to the reinforcements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion AIF, then B Company of the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion and finally to the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 5<sup>th</sup> Australian Division on 16 February 1916 in Tel-el-Kebir,<sup>20</sup>—the massive Australian training camp in Egypt—as a signaller. He stayed in the 54<sup>th</sup> for most of the duration of the war. He was designated number 4386 in the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF). Apart from basic training in Egypt, he was fully trained and became highly competent as a Signaller at the Zietoun School of Instruction in Egypt between 23 April and 10 July 1916. He was then returned to his unit.<sup>21</sup> In all, When spent six months in training in Egypt. In his spare time, he indulged his interest in Ancient Egyptian history and antiquities. He toured historical sites tirelessly by himself or with close friends on some occasions while on leave. He became fascinated.

Arthur and his battalion eventually found their way to the Western Front after Egypt via a dangerous sea crossing of the German submarine-infested Mediterranean by troopship and then a troop train north to the battlefields from Marseilles in the south of France in late June 1916.

With the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion Private Arthur When took a prominent part in what was the first Australian operation in Europe, the terrible Battle of Fromelles where he was awarded the Military Medal for bravery and gallantry in the face of the enemy. For Australians this two-day battle in July 1916 was one of the most bitter and ill-conceived experiences of the Great War, costing more than 5,500 casualties and embittering many Australian troops against both their own artillery and the British command.<sup>22</sup>

At Petillon in the Battle of Fromelles on 19 and 20 July 1916, Private When, a signaller stationed at the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion Headquarters, showed conspicuous bravery in laying and repairing under fire the telephone line across No Man’s Land. Both commanding officers of this section were casualties and When attempted repeatedly to get telephone communication between the Battalion Headquarters across the German trench lines to the Australian Brigade Headquarters. He crossed and recrossed No Man’s Land under heavy fire, endeavouring to establish communications and taking many risks.

On the night of the 20<sup>th</sup>, he volunteered to venture into No Man's Land in search of the many wounded. He showed a very fine spirit in bringing back maimed soldiers under heavy machine-gun and rifle fire. On 12 August 1916, for his courageous efforts in this engagement at Fromelles on the Somme, Private Arthur Wesley When was awarded the Military Medal.

By 1917 Arthur was serving in Flanders in preliminaries for the Battle of Passchendaele (Third Ypres). On the 16 and 17 March he displayed great courage and coolness. He advanced with a leading patrol under heavy enemy fire and established and maintained communication to the rear so that full reports of operations were transmitted to Battalion Headquarters. On the days previous to the advance, when the fierce enemy shellfire had cut all communication lines to the companies in the field, Signaller When mended the line and constructed other new lines under heavy enemy shellfire.

Owing to his courageous devotion in the Le Transloy-Papaume operations in March 1917, communications were effectively maintained throughout the battalion. A Bar for When's Military Medal was thus well deserved. This was awarded on 17 April 1917. Next he took part in the engagements of Doignes-Louveral, also in April 1917.

After living dangerously on numerous occasions, on 29 September 1917 Arthur When was wounded in action for the first time in the battle of Polygon Wood in September 1917. On 31 October 1917, he rejoined the 54<sup>th</sup> after about a month in hospital.

On 25 April the following year, When found himself in the fierce and vital retaking of Villers-Bretonneux where his repeated acts of courage won him yet another Bar to his Military Medal after the Germans had broken through the line.

He had been appointed Lance Corporal on 17 January 1918. Soon after on 24 January he was promoted to Corporal Signaller. Between 14 and 21 February, he had been hospitalised as being ill, but was then returned to his battalion. He was promoted in June 1918 to Second Lieutenant while recommended for the award of the Victoria Cross, but without success. He was mentioned in dispatches.

He had completed an officer training course at Balliol College Oxford specialising in signalling before his promotion. Later in August he was promoted on the field by a Special Army Order to full lieutenant. His experience in Balliol College gave him ideas about his future as a scholar.

When next participated in the big attack of 8 August 1918 when the Australians advanced eight miles through Villers-Bretonneux. Finally, he took part in the capture of Péronne on 2 September 1918. For further brilliant work, he was again mentioned in dispatches.<sup>23</sup> But four days later he was severely wounded, the second time in about a year. This serious wound was received by an attacking German aircraft above the Amiens-St Quentin Road at Péronne: a machine-gun bullet ripped savagely into his shoulder and lodged there. It happened on 6 September 1918, a couple of months before the end of the war.

The entry of the large bullet wound was about one and a half inches below the outer half of the clavicle of the left shoulder. Dangerous signs of haemothorax were discovered in hospital. He was invalided from France and admitted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> London General

Hospital on 19 September 1918 in a particularly serious condition. He hovered for a time between life and death. While the wound slowly healed, there was a distinct pulsatory swelling prominent below the collarbone of his shoulder. A rough systolic murmur was audible when his heart was checked. There was a distinct loss of strength in the biceps and other worrying complications. He had only very slight power in the muscles that extended or straightened out the fingers, an overall loss of power and sensation in his left shoulder and arm. There was intense pain on the back and front of his fingers. A nerve specialist examined him and reported severe nerve damage to the left arm. As he slowly and painfully recovered, the surgeon reported that Arthur at this junction desired a discharge from active service “in order that he may fulfil conditions of Rhodes scholar at Oxford.”

As he recuperated in hospital under intense medical treatment, the muscles in his left shoulder, arm and forearm remained atrophied, even though the entry and back exit wound below his shoulder had healed. He could rotate the shoulder and flex his elbow, but he had only slight grasping power in his hand. By this time, there was no trace of pulsating swelling. A heart murmur, referred to in earlier medical reports, could be heard only occasionally. Originally an operation had been performed and the bullet had been removed. When was still in the London Hospital seriously ill when the war ended in November 1918.

In an official Medical Board of Finalisation in Australia, made up of the officer-in-charge of the repatriation hospital Major John Fitzharding, Lieutenant Colonel AP Wall, Medical Officer, and another, all these matters concerning When’s wound were reviewed. When was examined thoroughly. The conclusion was reached that his degree of disability was permanent, that no further operation was advised to improve the situation. In military terms, he was declared totally incapacitated. It was also officially noted at the time that he was wounded in action which influenced their decision. The Board thus recommended that Arthur Wesley When was permanently unfit for duty in military service. This document was signed by the three Board members on 31 July 1920.<sup>24</sup>

He had been returned to Sydney Australia on 14 March 1919 aboard the hospital ship HMAS *Kanowna* as a “cot case.” He was just twenty-two at the time. His gallant wartime career had come to an end, with the award of the Military Medal and two Bars being mentioned in dispatches and being awarded the British War Medal, the 1914-1915 Star and the Victory Medal. When had seen action in Fromelles, the Somme, Beaulencourt, Polygon Wood and Villers-Bretonneux.<sup>25</sup>

#### **After the war**

“He brought the war back with him and it lived with him ever after.”  
Gretchen When, daughter of Arthur<sup>26</sup>

In 1919 the Reverend Harold When was proud to receive a copy of what was described as a routine order (mention in dispatches) by General Sir H S Rawlinson in which he referred to the “gallantry and devotion of Lieutenant Arthur When MM and two Bars.” By this time Harold When had risen through the ranks of the Methodist Church to President of the New South Wales Methodist Conference and had acted during the war as a home chaplain to returned soldiers. He had received news that his son Arthur had

been mentioned in dispatches. Arthur had returned home to a degree of fanfare in the media as well as the family as a war hero.<sup>27</sup>

The Sydney Teachers College Honour Board in tapestry was now complete for the war years, 1914-1919. Arthur When appeared in the list for 1915.<sup>28</sup>

When he arrived in Sydney back to his family, he enrolled at Sydney University in the Bachelor of Architecture (BArch) while applying and waiting for a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University (he had to be enrolled at the university to apply). His clear intention was to return to England and become a scholar. The prestigious scholarship was soon achieved in 1919 and When arrived in Oxford in mid-year 1920 to take it up at New College. Officially he was selected as a Rhodes Scholar for 1919 by the Selection committee chaired by Sir Walter Davidson, the New South Wales State Governor. Under the regulations at the time scholars were not required to enter Oxford until October the following year.<sup>29</sup> When was the third ex-student of Sydney Boys High School to receive the scholarship. He came after Ethelbert Ambrook Southey in 1913 and Raymond Newton Kershaw in 1918. Ray Kershaw remained a close friend for all of When's lifetime and gave the oration at his funeral in 1971. At the time, Kershaw was adviser to the Bank of England.<sup>30</sup> He had previously attended Gordon Public School and Sydney Boys High School with Arthur.

Another reason that Arthur When had for enrolling in Architecture was that it was a fallback position. In case he missed out on the Rhodes Scholarship, he intended to apply for an apprenticeship with an architecture firm in Sydney for a period of three or four years. He reckoned on a small salary of about £200 per year while also studying for the Bachelor degree at university at night (a four-year course). He was genuinely interested in this career as a realistic alternative.<sup>31</sup> He had many-sided interests. He was to take an immense interest in the visual arts and the design, especially of historical buildings such as churches, abbeys and cathedrals. Throughout his lifetime, he produced many artworks in pencil, ink and watercolours that betray his interests in designs and building structures. He was a highly competent amateur artist. The plans to complete the Bachelor of Architecture were abandoned once he had found he had won a 1919 Rhodes Scholarship.

The famous Rhodes Scholarships were created under the will of Cecil John Rhodes, the South African British colonial statesman who died in 1902. Selection for the scholarship was based on qualities of character as well as on intellect. Arthur When had both in abundance. Rhodes believed that the scholarship for residence at Oxford would produce future leaders in the English-speaking world, in the British Empire. It was a rich bequest. The first Rhodes Scholarship in New South Wales was awarded in 1904, fifteen years before Arthur When received his.

Lieutenant Arthur When, MM and two Bars, Rhodes Scholar for 1919, was a rather retiring guest of honour at a social gathering organised by the Old Boys of Sydney Boys High in July 1920 at the Highland Society Rooms just prior to his departure for England. The President proposed a toast to the quiet and gentle guest of honour which was supported by the headmaster of the school.<sup>32</sup>

In the years that followed the war, the mental scars from it stayed with When as a young man. He was described as a private man "shrouded in memories of World War I

that are rarely revealed.”<sup>33</sup> He never regained full use of his left arm or hand. While he read modern history and philosophy at Oxford, his time at New College was seriously troubled by war memories and he had a severe mental breakdown in the midst of his studies. He graduated with third-class Honours as a Bachelor of Arts in 1923. The evidence is clear that he frequently suffered badly from depression brought on by his wartime experiences. While at Oxford, he openly expressed for the first time his desire to remain permanently in England.

In January 1924, Arthur When took up a position in London as Assistant Keeper (or librarian) of the library at the Victoria and Albert Museum where he stayed until retirement. He soon became recognised and recognisable as a London public intellectual in small but elite literary circles. At the Victoria and Albert Museum he met another young war veteran on the staff, the English poet Herbert Read. Because of their shared experiences of war and literary interests, they became close friends. Later, for over thirty years, Sir Herbert Read became one of Great Britain’s foremost art critics and essayists.

Read was born in Yorkshire in 1893 and educated at Leeds University. Like When, he served in France and Belgium throughout the First World War before, like When, becoming an assistant keeper at the Victoria and Albert Museum where he worked between 1922 and 1931 while establishing himself as a war poet and author. His spare, taut poems in *Songs of Chaos* (1915), *Naked Warriors* (1919) and *The End of the War* (1933) were largely based on frontline war experiences in the Great War. Several volumes of autobiographical prose included *In Retreat* (1925) and *Ambush* (1930) which spoke about the war with emphatic disillusionment,<sup>34</sup> an empathy he shared with Arthur When as a close friend.

In 1924 When published his only known novella *Two Masters*, sometimes referred to as a short story.<sup>35</sup> It established his literary reputation. The book reflected on the author’s personal experiences on the Western Front in fictional form. Nettie Palmer, the well-known Melbourne writer and literary critic, said in 1935 that it was an “unforgettable story of the war” and that it had first appeared about ten years before in the *London Mercury* (a monthly magazine that began in 1919). Since then it had often been reprinted in anthologies and as a “small chapbook.” Palmer went on to recount the story in summary:

The man who found he could not serve two masters was a soldier in the Australian forces who, on account of his intimate knowledge of German was detailed as a spy. Behind enemy lines he involuntarily makes the most intimate friendship of his life. the (*sic*) two men reading and thinking together in excitement and joy. When the hour strikes for the work he has come to do, the spy cannot bring himself to complete it, but walks out into a barrage on No Man’s Land.<sup>36</sup>

It is difficult to discern whether *Two Masters* is merely a memoir or primarily a work of fiction derived from personal experiences. It is possible that When acted as a spy on a couple of occasions, or one behind enemy lines in France, as he did speak German with some measure of proficiency.

At the time of Wheen's death on 15 March 1971, a school friend, Marcel Aourousseau of Balgowlah, wrote in a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* that:

We know that he [Arthur Wheen] was at some time [during World War One] sent on a dangerous secret mission. We could draw no information from him about it but it may account for his tense short story "Two Masters" which first appeared in the London "Mercury" [in 1924. A short story which had some similar elements, written by Wheen, appeared in a University magazine in 1919].

Aourousseau claimed that Wheen was a "convinced pacifist, but he was no defeatist." Another memorialist wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* at the same time that *Two Masters* was a "brief novella founded on a unique episode in his life at the front."<sup>37</sup>

The military records of the AIF rarely reveal such matters. Assignments behind enemy lines, even such as listening at night near enemy dugouts, are rarely expounded in Battalion War Diaries except as normal patrols at night into No Man's Land. The case of Wheen acting as a spy would be hard to prove today. It does not seem he directly spoke of it in his lifetime apart from its appearing as theme in *Two Masters*. He wrote a version of the novella less than a year after the war. But was it a novella or a chronicle or an odd combination of the two? It is not likely that the question will ever be fully answered.

In his position at the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington, Wheen was soon absorbed with his friend Herbert Read and others in the literary "Criterion group" that regularly met at the nearby Grove Tavern. The Criterion group were led by T S Eliot, the great poet of *The Waste Land*, who edited, from 1922 to when it ceased in 1939, the *Criterion*, a European-oriented cultural review journal. The group over the long run of the journal was a changing nucleus of writers on 17 January 1918—"a phalanx of critics"—who met on a weekly basis. Eliot was able to gather round him a brilliant and scholarly group of individuals, including Arthur Wheen who, while they frequently disagreed and hotly debated issues, saw with Eliot the need for a high-quality cultural review publication. There was unanimity of opinion on this point. Arthur Wheen, perhaps a quieter observer at these meetings than some of the others, remained faithful to the fundamental cause of the *Criterion*, which carried with it a pan-European sense of cultural cooperation as opposed to the growing militarism of Germany and other nations.<sup>38</sup> Wheen's thoughts about war had been radically turned around and he sympathised with the economic and social plight of Germany caused by the Versailles Treaty. His experience of the disaster of the Western Front was indelible.

Frank Morley, Wheen's friend and flatmate during his Oxford days and later before his marriage, was an important influence on his life as was Herbert Read. The three men ably assisted T S Eliot in his task of developing the *Criterion*.

### ***Im Westen nichts Neues – All Quiet on the Western Front***

Aided by Morley, Read played a crucial role early in 1929 in suggesting that Arthur Wheen take on the task of translating from German Erich Maria Remarque's novel *Im Westen nichts Neues*.

As a step in promoting the talent of Wheen, Frank Morley who had joined the board of the publishers Faber & Faber (who published the *Criterion*) convinced them they could accompany the journal series with a series of longer monographs by individual outstanding writers to be called *The Criterion Miscellany*.<sup>39</sup> Wheen's novella *Two Masters*—that had been previously published by the *London Mercury* in 1924—was the first cab off the rank in the series, published in 1929 when a boom in publishing prose writing about the disenchantment of war was underway with Charles Edward Montague's *Disenchantment*, pioneering and naming the anti-war movement in literature in 1922, and culminating with Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929), Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* (1928), Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That* (1929), Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man* (1928) and *Memoirs of An Infantry Officer* (1930), Henry Williamson's *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1929) and *The Patriot's Progress* (1930), Frederic Manning's *Her Privates We* (1929) and several others.<sup>40</sup> But *Im Westen nichts Neues* became the phenomenally popular centrepiece of the movement, especially when it was translated into English by the Australian expatriate Arthur Wesley Wheen.

The memories of the Western Front flooded back to Wheen with great force in 1929 when, on the recommendation of his Victoria and Albert Museum colleague, he began as the official translator of *Im Westen nichts Neues* for the London publisher G P Putnam's Sons. The work of translating Remarque's remarkable anti-war book was the pinnacle of Wheen's public literary career and fame and his greatest achievement. Nevertheless, for the rest of his working life, he quietly maintained his position at the Museum which provided both personal security and security for his family. Moreover, he was intensely interested in the Museum's work.

Wheen had a flair for foreign languages, even though being formally trained in History and Philosophy. He later wrote to Charles Bean, Australia's official war historian, claiming that he understood Remarque's manuscript in German "less by reason of my knowledge of German, which I have but imperfectly, than by virtue of having made the experience recorded in it ... On the other side of No Man's Land was, as near as, damn it, our very selves."<sup>41</sup>

Wheen possibly underestimates the quality of the teaching of Modern Languages at Sydney Boys High School which could sometimes outrank that of the University, especially in fundamentals.<sup>42</sup> His reaction to Remarque's book demonstrates how Wheen's life had been utterly changed by his experiences of the war. His Christian faith had been lost as well as his youthful patriotic fervour. He clearly felt an affinity with Remarque and the German infantrymen that was heightened rather than something new. By his *Two Masters* he had expressed a deep sympathy for the German frontline soldier. He had a keen sense of the futility and disillusionment with modern total industrial war and its evil destructive forces and how they impacted on individuals.

"Im Westen nichts Neues" literally means "No News from the West"; it was Arthur Wheen who coined the evocative romantic title of *All Quiet on the Western Front* as he translated the book with great rapidity and skill. Remarque was to acknowledge Wheen's translation had greatly contributed to the phenomenal success of his novel in the English speaking world. By 1930 a Hollywood movie version of the novel had been released worldwide with great success.

Within a few months of the release of Wheen's translation, the English and American editions had sold more than half a million copies. Before World War Two, Wheen continued to maintain his reputation as a brilliant translator. In 1931 he translated and published Remarque's second novel *Der Weg Zurich* as *The Road Back* and then Remarque's third work *Drei Kameraden* as *The Three Comrades*. All were powerfully anti-war.

Following the Nazis' rise to ultimate political power in Germany on 11 May 1933, Remarque's books were proscribed and banned and publically burned by Nazi authorities. Sensing accurately the mood of the times in 1931, Erich Maria Remarque had already fled from persecution to Switzerland from where he sent instalments of his third novel to Arthur Wheen in London. This was to appear in English in 1937 in Wheen's translation because of the author's exile in Switzerland—ahead of its publication in German by the Dutch publishing house, Querido.

As an ex-signaller, Arthur Wheen had kept up an effective and strong line of communication with Remarque in exile and later when he became a naturalised American citizen. These communications included revisions with various instructions and comments by Remarque from his temporary Swiss base. Between 1933 and 1936, Remarque's covering notes written in German were sent to Wheen with the novel's instalments. Wheen sent back instalments of his translation.<sup>43</sup> The interaction between author and translator was intense and highly productive in nature.

Wheen later detailed to Charles Bean how he approached translating *All Quiet on the Western Front*:

I found it easy to translate for the same reason that any other infantry private found it easy to understand ... *As far as ex-infantrymen are concerned, there can be no question of the truth of Remarque's description of the life of the German front line soldiers, for the startling, even horrifying but sufficient reason that mutatis mutandis we know only too well that it is as faithfully our story as well.*<sup>44</sup>

Wheen's translation work was not solely restricted to Remarque. He translated lesser known German authors like Ernst Johanssen (*Four Infantrymen* 1930) and Theodor Plivier (*The Kaiser Goes: The Generals Remain*). His translation skills were in much demand in the 1930s. There were some translations that Wheen started but was not able to finish.

After returning to Australia in September 1926 for a brief visit to his family on the death of his father, he met an expatriate Australian Aldwyth Lewers on the voyage back to England. She was the sister of the well-known sculptor Gerald Lewers (1905-1962), who frequently set his public sculptures in landscaped gardens. He designed a landscaped garden as a war memorial in Memorial Park, Carlingford, and another in Hornsby, Sydney.<sup>45</sup> Arthur and Aldwyth married on 20 October 1928 at the registry office Kensington, London, and had two daughters. One died early in 1939 of meningitis and the other, Gretchen, was sent out to Australia for protection during the Second World War. She never lived in England again but stayed in Australia. Aldwyth was a passionate gardener (later becoming a farmer, orchardist and bee-keeper). The couple acquired a small peaceful farm that Aldwyth continued to develop, even

including milking cows and hens. It was situated on the edge of a Quaker village, Jordans in Buckinghamshire in the Chiltern Hills. In 1939 When was appointed Keeper of the Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum and retired from the post in 1962. They lived on their farm for the rest of their lives.

Jordans, a peaceful Buckinghamshire village about 4 kms (2.5 miles) east of Beaconsfield, had important Quaker connections—nearby is the famous late seventeenth-century brick Friends' Meeting House often described as the “Quaker Westminster Abbey.” The famous Quaker William Penn (1644-1718), founder of Pennsylvania in the United States, is buried in the local churchyard with his two successive wives. Jordans is set picturesquely in the Chiltern Hills, a chalk range of some beauty. When became influenced by Quaker philosophy about conscientious objection to war—their notion of the Peaceable Kingdom—but not their religious dogma.

When kept up a vigorous correspondence all his life with his family and even his school friends in Australia. He never forgot he was an Australian by cultural heritage and birth.

After the Great War, When had set up a peaceable kingdom of scholarly and literary activity in England as an Australian expatriate. Remarque died in Switzerland in 1970; When in Buckinghamshire in 1971—their lives were parallel and intertwined in nature from the war years until their deaths. The writing and the translation of *All Quiet on the Western Front* outlasted them. It still ranks as the greatest account of the First World War and one of the most powerful anti-war books ever written. And in When's version, it has remained a classic of immense power.

To his friends, Arthur When had displayed a singular verbal talent. He had a delightful range of wit, oblique fancy, irreverent humour and erudition. All of this is exposed in his extant correspondence. Tall, with reported striking blue eyes and an expressive face, he was a “spellbinder,” both as a speaker and a listener. His intellect was penetrating and logical, and he had a wide knowledge of English and foreign literature, both classical and modern. He was sympathetic to the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s with a particular interest in the great Spanish artist Pablo Picasso. He was a great encourager of young British artists. For the Victoria and Albert Museum he bought extensively for its art gallery and tracked down important and rare Eastern European and Oriental literary works in their original languages, especially on aesthetics and philosophy of art.<sup>46</sup>

On retirement When took up ceramic art at Jordans and continued to advise former colleagues. Survived by his wife and daughter, he died in Amersham Hospital in Buckinghamshire on 15 March 1971 and was cremated—significantly—without religious rites. Total war and its cruelty had made him doubt the very existence of God despite his Wesleyan upbringing in prayerful parsonages.

Arthur When's ashes were left on a shelf at “Further Pegs”—the farmhouse near Jordans where they had lived all their married life—until Aldwyth suddenly died of a heart attack in 1977. Soon after, their daughter Gretchen, who had travelled from Australia, took her parents' ashes and those of her sister Sally, who had died in 1939, to a place near the church at Wytham Wood and scattered them together among the green

growth while a misty rain fell softly. The preservation of Wytham Wood had come under the guardianship of Oxford University to protect the fauna and flora there. In 1923 Arthur When wrote: "The other day I discovered the place where I should have been buried eventually ... It is the abbey-church yard at Wytham."<sup>47</sup> Gretchen was unaware of this letter when she scattered the ashes of her parents and sister.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ian Campbell. "The editor, his collaborators and contributors: Eliot's editorship of the *Criterion*." *Literature & Aesthetics* 18.1 (June 2008): 77-8. Ian Campbell's grandfather was Harold Frank When, the immediate older brother of Arthur Wesley When. Harold was the eldest of eleven siblings.

<sup>2</sup> Sally O'Neill. "When, Arthur Wesley (1897-1971)." John Ritchie (gen. ed.). *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Vol.12. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990. 455-6.

<sup>3</sup> "Historic Schools. Willoughby, Gordon and Chatswood." *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*. 26 December 1934.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Burnwoods & Jim Fletcher. *Sydney and the Bush. A Pictorial History of Education in New South Wales*. Sydney: NSW Department of Education, 1980. 174.

<sup>5</sup> Media Collection. Sydney Boys High School. 1911 Cadet Corps. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/people/1467017?c=people>. Accessed 13 May 2013.

<sup>6</sup> "Rhodes Scholar. Lieut. A.W. When Chosen." *SMH*. 12 November 1919.

<sup>7</sup> Senior English Master. The Sydney High School, Ultimo. 14 June 1919 (reference on behalf of Arthur When's application for a Rhodes Scholarship for 1919). Arthur Wesley When Papers. MS 3656 & Acc 12.113. Australian National Library. Canberra.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Barcan. *A Short History of Education in New South Wales*. Sydney: Martindale Press, 1965. 208-11.

<sup>9</sup> "Public Exhibitions. The Awards." *SMH*. 2 March 1915.

<sup>10</sup> "Rhodes Scholar."

<sup>11</sup> Barcan. *A Short History of Education*. 214.

<sup>12</sup> Barcan, *A Short History of Education*. 215.

<sup>13</sup> Barcan. *A Short History of Education*.

<sup>14</sup> "Teachers College in Sydney. Presentation of Prizes." *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill, NSW). 27 September 1917.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Tanya Crothers, ed. *We talked of other things. The Life and Letters of Arthur When 1897-1971*. Woollahra: Longueville Books, 2012. 249.

<sup>16</sup> "Fine Family Record," *Kaima Independent and Shoalhaven Advertiser*. 2 October, 1918.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur When to his mother. 28 September 1917. 32<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital, Nr Boulogne: "I was the grateful recipient of a very slight flesh wound in the right hand." Arthur When Papers; see also Crothers, ed. *We talked of other things*. 86, 87, 94, 380. It should be noted that the Battle of Polygon Wood is considered part of Passchendaele, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ypres by most military historians.

<sup>18</sup> Ian Campbell. "Remarking Remarque. The Arthur When Papers." *National Library Magazine*. April 1998: 4.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.army.gov.au/Who-we-are/Divisions-and-Brigades/Forces-Command/2nd-Division/5th-Brigade/Sydney-University-Regiment>. Accessed 20 May 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Tel-el-Kebir was a large military training centre for the Allies near the Suez Canal.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Wesley When. Enlistment papers AIF. Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

- <sup>22</sup> See “Fromelles.” In Ian Grant. *A Dictionary of Australian Military History*. Sydney: Random House, 1992. 129-31.
- <sup>23</sup> Entry on Lieut. A W Wheen in “The War Records of the University of Sydney.” *Hermes. The Magazine of the University of Sydney* XXV.2 (October 1919): 223.
- <sup>24</sup> Enlistment Papers AIF.
- <sup>25</sup> His two brothers also survived action on the front: Lieutenant Harold F Wheen, 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion and Trooper Ronald G Wheen of the Second Machine Gun Squadron, Australian Light Horse.
- <sup>26</sup> Broadcast 16 November 2011. Leigh Sales Presenter. Reporter Rebecca Baillie. “The family of the digger who translated *All Quiet on the Western Front* has published a treasure trove of his letters & papers.”
- <sup>27</sup> *Cairns Post*. 28 March 1919.
- <sup>28</sup> Soldier Teachers War Memorials.
- <sup>29</sup> “Rhodes Scholar.”
- <sup>30</sup> Crothers, ed. *We talked of other things*. 373.
- <sup>31</sup> Crothers, ed. *We talked of other things*. 122.
- <sup>32</sup> “Personal.” *SMH*. 24 July 1920.
- <sup>33</sup> Cited in Book Review by Graeme Powell: Tanya Crothers, ed. *We talked of other things. The Life and Letters of Arthur Wheen 1897-1971*. Longueville Media. *Australian Book Review*. March 2012: 54.
- <sup>34</sup> “Read, Sir Herbert Edward, 1893-1968.” Margaret Drabble, ed. *Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 839-40.
- <sup>35</sup> Campbell. “Remarking Remarque.”
- <sup>36</sup> Nettie Palmer. “Our Own Writers.” *Argus* (Melbourne). 2 March 1935.
- <sup>37</sup> Both letters are cited in Crothers, ed. *We talked of other things*. 378-9.
- <sup>38</sup> See John Ramsland. “The Power of Disenchantment in Prose Writing.” Gretchen Poiner, ed. *Language and Power*. Canberra: ISAA Proceedings, 2012. 85-105.
- <sup>39</sup> Campbell. “The editor, his collaborators.” 69-83.
- <sup>40</sup> M S Greicus. *Prose writers of World War I*. Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1973. 14-22. Frederic Manning was also Australian.
- <sup>41</sup> Cited in Powell’s review.
- <sup>42</sup> See K R Dutton. *Modern Languages at Sydney Boys High School: The Making of a Tradition*. Cameron Memorial Lecture. 1984. Wheen would have studied French and/or German (as well as Latin) in the junior years, giving him a firm basis for foreign language acquisition.
- <sup>43</sup> Campbell. “Remarking Remarque.”
- <sup>44</sup> Cited in Campbell. “Remarking Remarque.”
- <sup>45</sup> See Ken Scarlett. *Australian Sculptors*. Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1980. 372-80.
- <sup>46</sup> O’Neill. “Wheen, Arthur Wesley.” 456.
- <sup>47</sup> Crothers, ed. *We talked of other things*. 374.

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