

Story for performance #970
webcast from Sydney at 07:48PM, 15 Feb 08



Source: AFP, 'Hezbollah declares 'open war' on Israel', *The Age online*, 15/02/08.

Tags: war, desert, Palestine, France

Writer/s: Matt Fenton

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

It's the kind of moustache that follows you round the room. And that finger of course—the outstretched gloved hand with a jabbing finger that jumps right out at you.

Well, the name starts it and it starts well: Horatio. Military man. Man of action. As many foreign campaigns as you'd care to mention, at the height of the British Empire. Could you get a better start than Horatio for a military hero? Good name for a Secretary of State for War. And that's the big war, the mother of all wars. Recruiting Sergeant for a generation. But, quivering inside, there's a squirt of a middle name: Herbert. Herbert the clerk, Herbert the filer, the categoriser. Herbert the maker of maps. So, Horatio Herbert. An old story then. Vainglory and bathos.

And it starts (this time for real) high over France. 1870, in the freezing clean blue air of high altitude, the silence broken only by the sudden rush of burning helium. He's 20, with a young man's moustache, nothing compared to the great fat walrus he'd have by the end. Below, French ants are advancing on Prussian ants, against a patchwork grid of dark greens and yellows, beautiful Loire-blue ribboning through it like a strand of tickertape. This first view of the earth from balloon flips his mind. It is not the curve at the horizon that does it, rather the opposite. It is the flatness, the map-ness of it. Viewed from the right distance, the terrain becomes the map of itself. Leaning out over the basket's edge, he pushes an imaginary stick to shuffle a French division along a little faster (a diversionary tactic while he mentally places another group in ambush amongst a dark green square of woodland). An aesthetics of tactics.

Looking down, he understands what a map is: a scale drawing of a tragedy. It is war seen from above,

taking place on a diagram of another country. But it really is cold and, oxygen thinning, his head is swimming. The helium flares again. Tin soldiers. A hoop and stick. Trenches. Cowboys and Indians. A train set. An elephant. A U-Boat. Morse code. The Houses of Parliament. His signature. Saint Michael and Saint George. The pyramids.

The name problem again. Pneumonia and a bad case of the shakes. Words flood in. Afrikaans. Arabic. Sweating, the grid below becomes cells, an encampment seen from above. Little barbed-wire squares on brown and yellow earth. Boer soldiers dying in the heat. The little black dots are flies.

And the grid lifts and overlays itself on sand and dirt and olive grove, an ordnance survey of the Holy Land, his 24 year-old sapper self on the Survey of Western Palestine. While Horatio draws painstaking lines (one inch per mile) upon what will become Israel, the West Bank, Gaza and as far as Galilee, Herbert can't help but get sidetracked by the natural world surrounding him. A world of changing microscopic detail, inhabited by plants and animals: he records them. And by place names: he lists them—ten thousand names with links to related biblical sites. And people, and history, and folklore. Things maps might only hint at. The survey bulges by volumes, tool of future archaeologists and political geographers. On landing the young man is hurried back to England to recuperate. But the topography of warfare is in place, and he will now visualise every conflict from above. And the pointing finger is sending him on, into the 20th Century.

BRITONS. I WANT YOU. JOIN YOUR COUNTRY'S ARMY!
GOD SAVE THE KING

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Matt Fenton.