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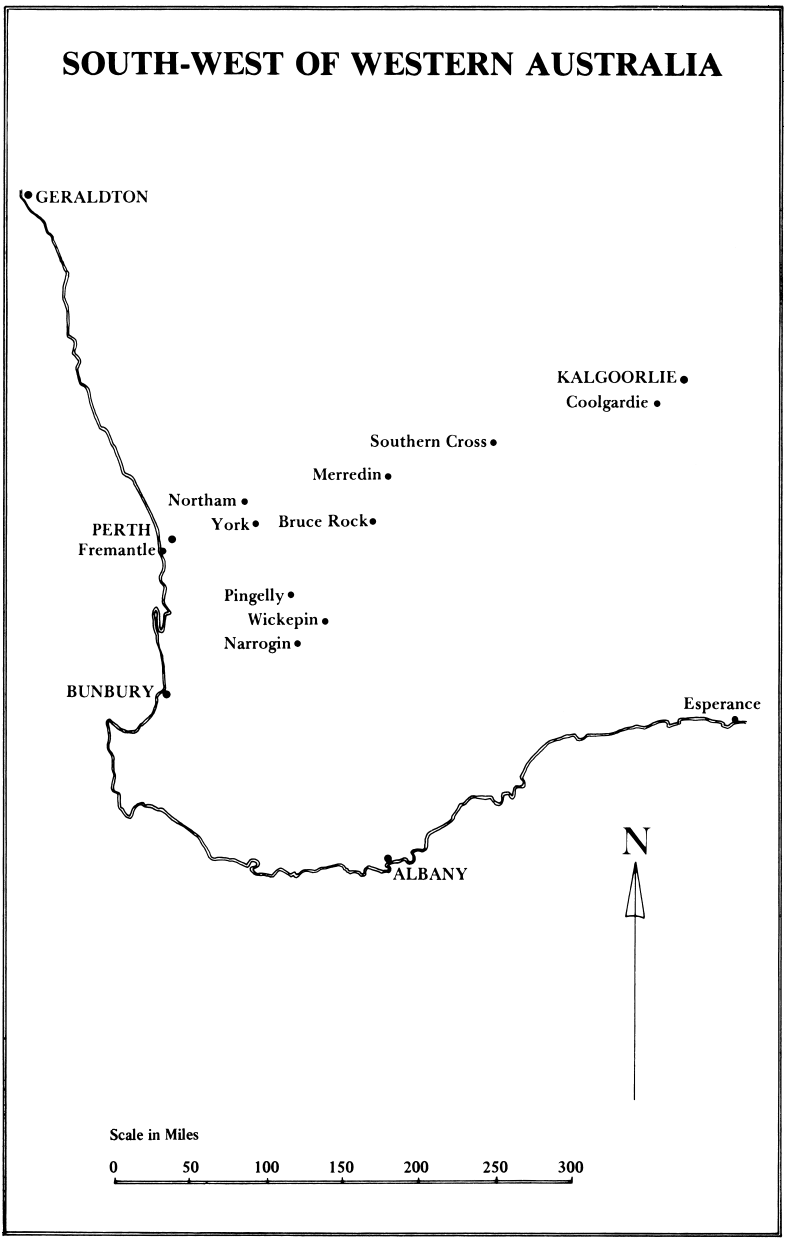
A FORTUNATE LIFE

THE AUSTRALIAN CLASSIC

A·B·FACEY

FREMANTLE PRESS

I dedicate this book to the memory of my wife, Evelyn.
It was her patience and understanding
which made it become a reality.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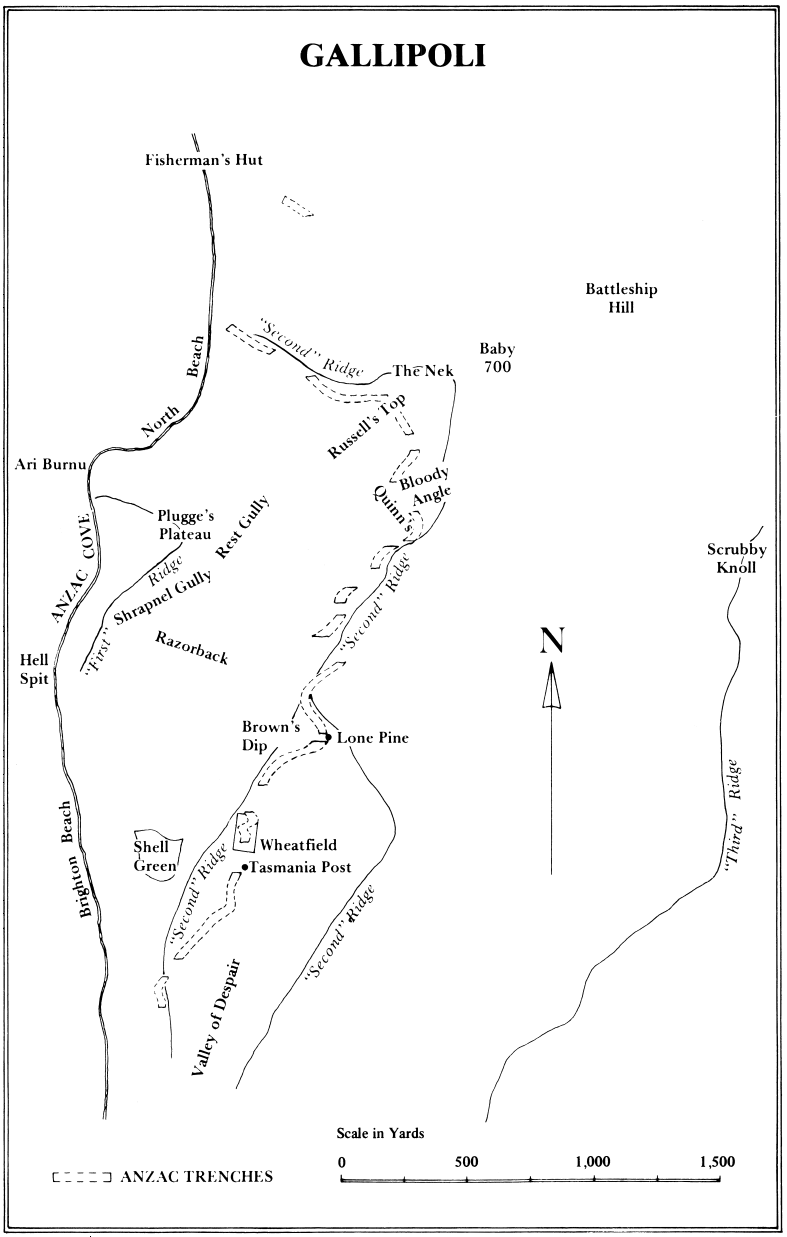
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Hell Spit
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Shell Green
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Brown's Dip
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The Nek
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Quinn's
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Battleship Hill
Scrubby Knoll
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ANZAC TRENCHES

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Foreword

The publication of *A Fortunate Life* on Anzac Day 1981 ushered in one of the more intriguing and unexpected literary successes of the late twentieth century. It transformed Albert Facey, a frail eighty-seven-year-old, into a bestselling, award-winning author and ensured the viability of Fremantle Arts Centre Press, a nascent not-for-profit regional publishing house on the west coast of Australia. Demand for the story quickly outstripped the capacities of the press. Under a lease arrangement, Penguin Australia licensed the production and distribution of the book, with full rights reverting to the renamed Fremantle Press in 2018.

Facey's life writing recalls a tough, itinerant, solitary childhood. He describes abandonment, neglect, poverty and many other trials, as he earns his keep and misses out on schooling. He becomes a resilient youth showing impressive physical prowess, whether working on a railway gang, loading wheat bags in record time, playing football, taking on all-comers in the boxing ring, showing expert marksmanship, or achieving success in track and field – but all this ends with the 1915 Gallipoli campaign.

Facey's adventurous childhood and coming of age aroused reader fascination and sympathy, while his war story resonated broadly, contributing to the Anzac legend while decrying war itself. Invoking pioneer myths, he provided an alternative perception of frontier masculinity: sensitive, thoughtful, modest, vulnerable and grateful for any display of kindness. His writing illuminates the way a man can hold to his principles and push through adversity he won't drink alcohol, pursues a range of different jobs, and finds remedy for fears and ailments in the family he creates with his beloved wife Evelyn, who perseveres with him through the economic hardship of the 1930s Great Depression and the tragedies of

the Second World War, which claims the life of their oldest son Barney.

When it was published in 1981, there had been nothing in Australia's literature quite like *A Fortunate Life*, wherein a working-class battler survives a tumultuous century and becomes its humble witness. He often lives in fear of violence, injury or even death, including as a boy flogged by his employer or lost in the outback, as a youth trapped down a caved-in well, or as a soldier under sustained shelling or fending off enemies with a bayonet. Discharged from the army on medical grounds, peace for Facey never truly arrives. Gallipoli bound his adult life to assessments by the War Pensions Board, created in 1914, and its successor, the Repatriation Department, commenced in 1918 by the Commonwealth Government to superintend resettlement and the medical and financial welfare of more than a quarter of a million returned service personnel.

A long-time storyteller, Facey's listeners included employers, medical professionals and family members, who believed or disbelieved his accounts to varying degrees. In retirement, with Evelyn's encouragement, he fashioned a singular chronicle from his recollections and imaginings.

Part of the book's mythos is that Facey's original manuscript arrived at the Press as loose pages tied together by string, with the idea that Fremantle might print and bind around twenty copies for the family. Recognising the story's greater potential, publisher Ray Coffey and editor Wendy Jenkins offered to develop it for a wider readership. On learning this, Facey thanked the publisher by letter, adding, 'I feel that you have a job ahead of you and that you won't let me down.' Three handwritten drafts are held in the Special Collections of the University of Western Australia Library, along with a typescript that formed the basis of the published work.

The penning of a 'classic' generated intrigue, summed up by the title of a documentary, *The Facey Phenomenon*, which

was aired in 1986 to complement a miniseries based on his life story from birth in 1894 up to 1916. This became the most watched television event of the year. In the decades that followed, *A Fortunate Life* contributed to Australia's settler narratives with sales of over a million copies, listings among Australia's most popular titles, new editions, multiple reprints, translations, syndicated chapters in newspapers, radio and stage adaptations, audiobooks and ebooks, picture books, abridged editions for young readers, and inclusion in primary and secondary school curricula.

Readers marvelled at Facey's extraordinary memory, unadorned prose, and authentic scenes and characters. Even so, details, sequences, events and emphasis differ among drafts and from the published version in sometimes significant ways. We also might expect certain narrated episodes, such as touring nationally with a boxing troupe or playing league football, to have left archival traces, but these have proved elusive. Though his suffering in war is indisputable, historical records do not readily align with Facey's stated participation in the Gallipoli landing on 25 April 1915, which granted the special status of an 'original' Anzac. Rather, he is recorded among reinforcements that arrived twelve days later. Nor does military evidence match all description of battles or of severe physical wounding that resulted in his removal from the war.

In *A Fortunate Life*, Facey's pre-war body evokes splendid masculinity and the ideal Anzac, while his post-war body is defective, unreliable and inscrutable. He expresses sympathy for, but differentiates himself from, those men withdrawn from battle and isolated on account of 'nerve sickness' and 'because they would be upsetting to the others, especially those who were inclined that way themselves'. Any visible signs of bodily trauma had healed before he returned to Australia, he writes, but there remained 'something amiss deep down inside' that 'had the doctors baffled'. His debility

persists, resulting in significant time off work and extended periods in hospital.

War service and medical files indicate that Facey presented with 'heart trouble', 'frequent attacks of palpitation and giddiness' and was often 'short-winded'. The onset of these attacks left him exhausted and in a state of 'embarrassment' and 'depression'. Doctors diagnosed 'tachycardia' or 'neurocirculatory asthenia', once also referred to in medical literature as 'soldier's heart'. They attributed his 'nerve strain' to partial burial by sandbags and dirt when his trench collapsed under bombardment and also noted recovery from a 'slight unimportant bullet wound to his left shoulder'.

'War neurosis' was widespread during the First World War but was typically regarded with distrust, hostility or ambivalence due to its effeminate associations with hysteria, cowardice, malingering and constitutional weakness. Repatriation doctors were trained as physicians and surgeons whose assessments of returned soldiers used a calculus that measured degrees of bodily disfigurement and specific types of illness and injury. They had little or no training in psychological trauma or its physical manifestations. When dealing with 'nerve cases', they relied on what the official medical history of the war referred to as 'common sense' and continued to search for physical causes of Facey's symptoms without success. This approach left him in no doubt about what constituted acceptable war-related trauma. In 1953, after nearly forty years of observation, doctors conceded that his condition was 'a real handicap and hindrance', while reporting 'no underlying myocardial disease'. In 1958, when he was sixty-four, Facey's permanent debility was acknowledged with the granting of a full service pension.

The medical archive, together with Facey's writing, suggests he was haunted and shamed by infirmity and that he repeatedly attempted to compensate through storytelling. His drafts make more explicit the contested status of his disability

and the ongoing grief this caused him. They are notably darker than the published life, his conclusions less optimistic, reminding that survival is complicated and war may lay waste to a life.

Beyond dramatic and testimonial impulses, it seems Facey's motive in writing *A Fortunate Life* was to craft a bearable past. His conclusion was balm for his many readers: 'I have lived a very good life, it has been very rich and full. I have been very fortunate and I am thrilled by it when I look back'. With the book's title, this affirmation has guided reader expectations and interpretations.

A Fortunate Life has been positively received over many decades as one man's story but also as a culturally significant text. Yet Facey revealed only as much as he felt able to convey at the time. While the stigma of mental suffering has not lifted entirely, his shadow narrative of fear and abjection has become clearer and more explicable. *A Fortunate Life* continues to be admired as a story of survival and resilience while also contributing to newer understandings of stereotyping, exclusion and shaming, war and revered national myths, and the complex nature of autobiographical storytelling.

Ffion Murphy
and Richard Nile

The foreword draws on four essays by Ffion Murphy and Richard Nile: 'Gallipoli's Troubled Hearts: Fear, Nerves and Repatriation' in *Studies in Western Australian History* 32, 2018; 'The Many Transformations of Albert Facey' in *M/C Journal* 19.4, 2016; 'The Naked Anzac: Exposure and Concealment in A.B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life* in *Southerly* 75.3, 2015; and 'Wounded Storyteller: Revisiting Albert Facey's Fortunate Life' in *Westerly* 60.2, 2015. Primary sources include: Facey's draft manuscripts, University of Western Australia Library; A.B. Facey Papers, State Library of Western Australia; war service and repatriation records, National Archives of Australia; embarkation rolls, Australian War Memorial; Trove newspapers and magazines, National Library of Australia; uncatalogued newspaper clippings and reviews, Fremantle Press.

Starting Out
1894 1905

MANY PEOPLE HAD LITTLE FEELING OR SYMPATHY FOR THOSE IN NEED.

1. A prelude

I was born in the year 1894 at Maidstone in Victoria. My father left for Western Australia just after this, taking with him my two older brothers, Joseph and Vernon. The discovery of gold in the West had been booming and thousands believed that a fortune was to be made. At that time there were seven children in our family: I had four brothers – Joseph, Vernon, Eric and Roy – and two sisters – Laura and Myra. My mother stayed at Maidstone with the younger children and my father arranged to send money over to support us until he could find us a home.

In 1896 Mother got word that Father was very ill. Typhoid fever had broken out and hundreds were dying of this terrible disease. A few days later Mother received the sad news that Father had died. When Mother had got over this terrible shock, she decided to go over to the West, as Joseph and Vernon were still only teenagers. Mother left the rest of us with our grandparents at Barkers Creek. I was then nearly two years old.

Barkers Creek was situated sixty-three miles from Melbourne on the Bendigo road, three miles from the small town of Castlemaine. Grandpa and Grandma, whose surname was Carr, had a small property with a few acres of orchard and a five-roomed house. There were no aged pensions in those days, nor were there any free doctors, hospitals and medicine, nor baby bonuses or endowment payments. So my grandparents had to live, and keep us children, on their own resources. Our mother was to send money to support us, but

although she wrote many letters she always made excuses for not being able to send us anything.

At the age of seventy-seven, Grandpa was a big man, over six feet tall and weighing around two hundred pounds. Grandma was a small woman in her early sixties, about five feet tall, and between seven and a half and eight stone. They were very poor. Grandpa depended on odd jobs, such as ploughing orchards and pruning, to get a few pounds to keep us all. He, with my brothers, Eric and Roy, trapped rabbits, and the boys used to go out picking fruit on Saturday mornings during the fruit season.

Early in the year of 1898 Grandpa became very ill. A doctor came from Castlemaine twice a week to give him treatment, but his condition got worse and he died in October that year. I had turned four years old in August and remember Grandpa's illness and his funeral quite well.

After this tragedy Grandma became very worried as our only bread winner had been taken. She wrote to our mother telling her of our plight and asked for financial help. Although Mother wrote, she was unable to send any money. She said that she had married the man who had employed her as a housekeeper, as she was forced to find work when she found that Father had died not leaving enough money for her to live on. Our two older brothers found it hard to get jobs, as they were too young to go down the mines on the Goldfields. The surface gold had been worked out, leaving the mines and woodcutting in the bush as the only ways of obtaining work.

Grandma was shocked at hearing all this after the terrible ordeal she had just been through. She went out working – house-cleaning, washing and ironing. She was also an expert midwife. Nearly all the babies born in and around Barkers Creek were attended and helped by Grandma Carr and very few women needed a doctor. Grandma knew as much as any doctor on the subject.

My brother Eric, who was then twelve years old, had to leave

school and go to work. My eldest sister Laura went to help our uncle who had lost his wife in an accident. He was a hawker, carrying stores, drapery, medicines and anything he could sell. My sister was ten years old, and Uncle's place was about three miles from Castlemaine on the Ballarat railway line at a place called Campbells Creek. The accident had happened at a railway crossing. Our aunt was killed and Uncle's spine was hurt so badly that he lost the use of his legs and never walked again. He had three children, all very young.

Early in 1899 Grandma became very ill and was unable to work. In fact, she had to be seen by a doctor, who put her to bed. She had some internal complaint and the doctor came to see her twice a week for about three weeks. She was able to get up after that, but could only walk around for a short while. We were in terrible financial distress but at least Grandma could get around again. My brother Eric's wages were all we had and they amounted to twelve shillings and sixpence a week – not very much to feed five of us.

Grandma overcame the financial trouble temporarily by getting a forward payment on her apple crop. The apples were a good eating variety and were easy to sell when ripe. Grandma recovered from her sickness but found that the paid work she had been doing had been given to others. Many people had little feeling or sympathy for those in need.

Things got so bad that Grandma decided to try and sell her property and take us over to the West to our mother. She put it up for sale and many people came to see it but they all said the price was too high. She wanted three hundred pounds for the property, which consisted of twelve acres of land, a five-roomed house, eight acres of orchard in full profit and a nice vegetable garden – all good loam. The agent advised Grandma to reduce the price to two hundred pounds. This she did and finally sold it for one hundred and sixty pounds. Some overdue bills had to be paid out of this.

About the second week in August 1899, we left Barkers

Creek and went to Footscray, a suburb of Melbourne, where one of Grandma's daughters lived. We all stayed there until everything was arranged for our trip to Western Australia.

2. The journey begins

It was the first week in September, 1899, when we arrived at Port Melbourne to embark onto the old tramp steamer *Coolgardie*. Just before we went aboard I nearly lost my life. The wharf labourers were unloading bananas from the *Coolgardie* and this fascinated me as I hadn't seen so many bananas before – there were thousands of them scattered all about the place. They had come from Queensland. I went to pick one up and one of the men shouted, 'Hey, drop that!' I got such a shock that I jumped, and being so close to the wharf edge I overbalanced and fell between the wharf and the ship into the sea.

There were steps at intervals leading down under the wharf to the lavatory landings. People used to fish from these landings and, luckily for me, a man who happened to be trying his luck saw me fall into the water. He grabbed me and pulled me out, but not before I had swallowed plenty of dirty salt water. I couldn't swim. The man carried me up the steps to the wharf. I was sopping wet and feeling very sick. I'll never forget the look of anger on dear old Grandma's face. She lost control of herself and gave me a hiding with her umbrella, and to make things worse, she made me strip off all my clothes while she opened one of our travelling trunks and got me a change of clothes. I had only just turned five years old and Grandma had taught us to be modest so this hurt me more than the ducking and hiding I got.

Finally we boarded the *Coolgardie* and sailed for the West. I had never been to sea before and didn't know about seasickness. The trip to Port Adelaide was very calm and we

all enjoyed being at sea, but after we left there, bound for Albany in Western Australia, the sea was terribly rough and we all got very seasick.

Owing to Grandma not having much money we had to travel steerage. It was the cheapest way to travel and the passengers were packed together with very little room to move, especially in the cabins. The one that Grandma, my sister Myra, my brother Roy and I were in had twelve sleeping bunks. Grandma and Myra slept together in one bunk, and Roy and I slept in another. The other ten bunks were all taken by women. (Eric, being older, was in an all-male cabin.) Everyone was terribly seasick.

We arrived at Albany but didn't get off the ship. We went on to Fremantle and disembarked there. At last we had arrived in Western Australia. When our luggage was brought off the ship we didn't have much – two travelling trunks and a large travelling bag and three travelling rugs. Between us we carried these to the Fremantle Railway Station, about two hundred yards from the wharf.

There was no one to meet us. Grandma had expected our mother or at least our Aunt Alice to be at the wharf. Aunt Alice, who was Grandma's eldest daughter, had come over from Victoria with her husband, Archie McCall, and their family at the same time as our father. She had five daughters, Alice, Ada (Daisy), Mary and May, and one son, Archie, who was called Bill, and they lived three and a half miles out of Kalgoorlie on the goldfields.

At the railway station we put our belongings near a seat and Roy, Myra and I were told to stay there until Grandma came back. She took our older brother Eric with her and went into the town of Fremantle. They came back about an hour later and we all boarded a train for Perth.

It was only a short ride to Perth – about forty minutes. We arrived at about midday, and were again left at the railway station with our luggage. This time Grandma went out alone.