CHAPTER

WAKING

The old, red-coated British army of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seems quaint to many people now, sometimes ridiculous and at worst a little sinister.[1] Historian Richard Holmes began his book *Redcoat* – the army's best obituary yet, and an inspiration for the book you're reading now – with a wry remark along the lines that the soldier he was writing about has recently found work in Hollywood beside the survivors of Hitler's armies, as an extra in films in which armed brutes commanded by nincompoops or sadists are required to affront all our values by waging wicked wars of conquest they can't hope to win morally or even, what's worse, militarily.[2]

The redcoat always existed under sufferance. His army, much smaller than its counterparts on the continent of Europe, was partly so because a large one would have been intolerable to the people it lived among and whose taxes it lived off. Most Britons liked to think of themselves as unconcerned with conquest and, when it came to defence, happy to depend in most cases on their incomparable navy. To Jonathan Swift any army at all seemed 'a direct absurdity; for it is no part of our business to be a warlike nation, otherwise than by our fleets. In foreign wars we have no concern, farther than in conjunction with allies, whom we may either assist by sea, or by foreign troops paid by our money'.[3] Legally, at least, the army existed only for a year at a time. Until 1953 the Mutiny Act obliged politicians in London to vote every year on whether to keep the army at all.

Then there was the social gulf between the redcoat and his parent society. The army filled its ranks with poor young men unable to find a job in an economy switching its base from farms to factories, and took for its officers the sons of the aristocracy or, more often, the gentry and the conservative wing of the middle class. The middling bulk of British society, ambivalent about these groups anyway, was easily offended by the rough character and frequent drunkenness of men in the ranks, by the cruelty with which they were sometimes drilled and punished, by quartering them during the eighteenth century in inns and private homes and in the nineteenth in looming barracks, by the privileged background and backward mindset of officers who often paid for their commissions, and by the frequent ineptitude of the army's anonymous, desk-bound administrators. To have a son pull on a red coat was a relief for many poor families and a source of pride for genteel ones, but a despair to most others. 'I would rather bury you than see you in a red coat', wrote the mother of the recently enlisted William Robertson in 1877.[4] A glimpse into the future, and her son's eventual elevation to field marshal, might not have changed her mind.

A redcoat was lucky to get away with merely being called a 'redcoat'. Some British colonists in North America preferred the ridicule of 'lobster' or the hateful contempt of 'bloodyback'. The army knew the American and other colonies almost as well as it knew its home. When not waging a major war in Europe, or sometimes as part of doing so, the army's main job was expanding and policing an empire that, whatever ordinary Britons felt about it, continued to grow after the loss of much of North America in 1783 until it encompassed one-fifth of the world's land and one-quarter of its people and found most of the army's infantry and artillery on garrison duty from Dublin to Delhi. What made the army

unpopular at home could make it even less popular in lands with large settler communities of transplanted Britons and their descendants, who were inclined to reject what seemed an expensive, top-heavy institution of roughnecks commanded by wastrels, and to think they had little real need of professional troops anyway. In colonies of conquest, of which India was the largest, the army was naturally less popular still, being the ultimate instrument of indigenous subjection. In between the colonies of settlement and the colonies of conquest was Ireland, a bit of both and the army's oldest overseas station. Redcoats spent much of their time there upholding a civil authority that was never entirely accepted. Their duties were almost always mundane – seeing that elections weren't marred by violence, say, or that a sheriff escaped assault while evicting a family unable to pay its rent. Still, duties such as the latter hardly won the heart of the populace. One officer complained in 1881 that 'the military have been so frequently called upon to aid the civil power that they are now in almost as bad odour with the mob as the constabulary'.[5] An even worse smell had risen from the army in North America a century before. Yes, the troops spent money, one Bostonian admitted in 1768, and some colonists wanted a bigger garrison 'for the sake of the paltry sixpence a day they spend amongst us', but it was hardly worth the 'luxury, debauchery, extravagance, etc' that seemed intrinsic to an armed mob led by young, wealthy, devil-may-care officers.[6] In the *et cetera* would soon come anger, even in many loyalist hearts, as the army marched and burnt and looted and shot its way from one colony to the next trying to stamp out a rebellion that became a revolution. But that was nothing compared with the vicious manner in which redcoats broke the so-called Indian mutiny against British rule. The mutiny was sparked in 1857 by objections by thousands of Indians who, whatever they thought of their conquerors, put on red coats to serve in the army's oriental affiliate and encountered harsh and alien rule, as well as abuse such as 'Dress up, you black brute', and 'Do you hear me, you nigger?'[7]

Australia was one of the last lands where a mass of British colonists eclipsed a native people, where British troops guaranteed the transition, and where redcoats and civilians fell out now and then. Thirteen dozen marines guarded the initial British lodgement in 1788. Until 1870, by which time the continent was divided into six colonies that were finding their economic and political feet, one thousand to five thousand redcoats were usually dotted across the continent. It was a small garrison, and for good reason. The infant society never faced a foreign threat, and most Aborigines who resisted the almost casual white invasion were swiftly broken by the semi-military mounted police (who grew out of the

garrison) or the horses, guns and sheer unthinking confidence of most settlers. But there were enough troops to shed colonial blood and, on one occasion, to hijack colonial politics. A convict rising west of Sydney in 1804 was bloodily suppressed by the New South Wales Corps, which the army had raised a few years earlier in England in the optimistic belief it could take over indefinitely the burden of garrisoning Australia. What the Corps took over was, first of all, the lucrative trade in rum, and then, in 1808, the government, when it tossed out William Bligh, a foul-mouthed autocrat to be sure, but nonetheless the governor and legally the man in charge. The Corps was sent home for overstepping the mark, but the two dozen run-of-the-mill infantry regiments that successively took its place over the next sixty years were deployed occasionally to buttress civil authority with the threat of armed force. In 1854, on the Eureka goldfield, they carried out the threat, shooting down miners who advocated a now unremarkable program of a little more democracy and a lot less tax. A few days later a public meeting in Melbourne called for a constitution under which there would be no troops in the colony but part-time citizen soldiers recruited from among the community.[8] The son of one of the miners' leaders imbibed from his father a conviction that a soldier's life was a contemptible one,[9] and a young Tasmanian, Edward O'Sullivan, growing up in a colony where troops were despatched to reinforce those already at Eureka, thought the skirmish 'accentuated the hostile feeling between the colonists and the military'.[10]

Such hostility was all too obvious at times. 'Turn out the bloody soldiers', Sydney publican James Anlezark is supposed to have yelled when whipping up some locals to savagely beat a few troops in 1838; 'anything that is red will do'.[11] It would came naturally to many convicts and former convicts who formed a majority in some of the early settlements around the continent and had little reason to love the bayonets that ultimately kept them in subjection. 'We have no venomous animals of any description here (save for the military!)', one convict joked.[12] Then there were the everyday frictions between a garrison and its hosts, such as those that prompted one man 'to complain of the public conduct, on Sunday evening last, of some of the soldiers'.[13] Such frictions seemed more obvious because most immigrants to Australia from the 1840s to the First World War were from the British and Irish upper working and lower middle classes, the army's keenest critics back home.

Worse, the garrison cost money. Most of the cost was met by the government in London, but the middle class men who came to dominate Australia's colonial parliaments, from the 1850s miniature Westminsters with almost full power over everything that happened within their

borders, had to levy what seemed a large sum each year to lift the soldiers' pay to something like what local civilians earned. When London asked them to pay the full cost of keeping the garrison in place – well, that guaranteed the troops' departure. The colonial parliaments might have accepted the burden if in return they'd received the right to keep the garrison in Australia if war came, but London was never going to grant provincial politicians power like that. The garrison's withdrawal in 1870 suited London, and it made strategic sense; the armies of Europe were growing larger, and the burden of policing huge imperial domains in Asia and Africa was becoming heavier. The withdrawal also suited many Australian politicians and some of the electors who voted for them. 'Some people were sorry, no doubt, the redcoats would no longer march up and down outside Government House, and some ladies must have sighed to think that British officers would no longer sign their cards at queen's birthday balls', judged historian Ken Inglis in his book *The Australian Colonists*, but 'in parliament and the press the departure of the regiments was accepted as having become inevitable. Among the majority of colonists who did not read newspapers, one may guess that those who heard of the decision were not made unhappy by it'. Indeed, Inglis cited the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the oldest newspaper in the land, as looking on the withdrawal as the first step towards eventual nationhood.[14]

It certainly opened up a vista in which a distinctive Australian fighting man would soon be spied. 'What have we to do with red ochre, feathers, gunpowder, and all the devices for destroying humanity?', scoffed Edward O'Sullivan, by now a politician and journalist, in the New South Wales parliament in 1887. If Australians were ever threatened by war, he predicted, they'd spurn the British army's 'subsidized myrmidons' and turn to 'sons of the soil', in other words to their own men.[15] The boast reflected a growing belief that a better breed of Anglo-Celt, as Sullivan would have said, was emerging on the empire's frontiers – taller and leaner, self-reliant, less deferential, more manly – and an increasing pride in the society he was building in Australia. It also reflected the emergence of a substantial force of citizen soldiers, such as those the post-Eureka public meeting had once looked to. Citizen soldiering seemed to many Australians, and to their cousins in Britain and North America, a virtuous and inexpensive path to military security: no barracks or bull, and no big budgets because local communities carried nearly all the cost, which, given the part-time nature of the military force being sustained, was low anyway. By 1885 most Australian towns and suburbs were supporting an infantry company or mounted troop, some of whom had begun to

dress in the khaki tunics and slouch hats that would come to signify, once soldiers of other nations gave the rig away, an Australian fighting man. O'Sullivan was among many who expected great things from these 'buff-coloured boys', as he called them.[16] Mingling the superiority that citizen soldiers sometimes affected to mere professionals with the arrogance felt by frontiersmen towards city types, some of the boys expected to show the British army how to fight when the chance came.

They found their chance soon enough. From 1899 to 1902 they did their best, along with citizen soldiers and raw volunteers from other white societies around the empire, to help the army win the Boer war as it blazed across southern Africa. Instead of bringing Australians and the army closer, the experience pulled them further apart. The army wanted efficiency and obedience from its civilian auxiliaries, and sometimes fumed at the dearth of these qualities. Australians wanted to find themselves superior to their British cousins, and in Private Tommy Atkins – apparently short in stature, deficient in education and strangely unassertive – they claimed to have found the proof they were seeking. On campaign, now that close ranks had given way to open order, red coats to khaki and the rumble of drums to the rattle of maxim guns, there was no chance of a happy, heraldic haze shielding the army's mundaneness and mendacities from searching Australian eyes. Then there was the question of command. Nearly all Australians accepted subordination to the army's colonels and generals – 'Our officers know nothing and would get us all shot', one frankly admitted.[17] But there was hunger for greater autonomy when the next war came, mostly the result of puffed-up pride at the Australian performance in this one, partly of frustration that the army twice failed to pamper its antipodean auxiliaries. On the first occasion, in 1901, a general sentenced three Australian soldiers to death for mouthing discontent at him (they were, in the end, merely gaoled); on the second, in 1902, British soldiers executed Harry 'Breaker' Morant and an accomplice for killing unarmed Boers in their custody. James Page spoke for Australians back home who bristled at news such as this. Now a politician, he'd worn a red coat in the British army before coming to live in Australia and he knew, he said, 'the overbearing manner of some of these British officers' with their 'gold lace and jingling spurs'.[18]

During the Boer war the Australian colonies federated – Page had spoken up in the new federal parliament – and it was understood that, next time Australians went to war, they would be the British army's junior partners rather its auxiliaries. It was in that role, and under their own officers, that thousands of Australians landed on Gallipoli on

25 April 1915, the first time a significant number of them fought together and died together. In an age when nations were thought to be forged on the battlefield, the Gallipoli landing was widely judged to have founded an Australian nation, or at least the promise of one. It was lucky timing. The British empire tottered and collapsed within a generation and Australia was obliged to make its own way in the world. Colonial nationalism swiftly ratcheted up a notch or three, based on a popular vision of a recent glorious past that Australians felt their soldiers had made and, apparently, had made in happy contrast to the supposedly lacklustre performance by the British army, or at least by British brasshats in command. Australia's birthday was celebrated every 25th of April. What happened on Gallipoli and, later, around Kokoda in New Guinea during the Second World War, hardened into a national military story to which events and attitudes and experiences that predated 1915 shrank to a curt and serviceable prequel.

This nationalist understanding of Australia's experience of war and military life gave the modern, khaki-clad British soldier important roles in the story: those of butcher (if in command) and bungler (whatever his rank). It therefore remembered the earlier unease about the army's redcoated predecessors and conceded them a trivial role within the story's prequel, usually as colourful villains. A decade after Gallipoli the first edition of the *Australian Encyclopaedia* concluded that 'nothing very good' could be said of the New South Wales Corps.[19] High Court judge and part-time historian Herbert Evatt was harsher, calling the overthrow of Governor Bligh by a hitherto little-used title of 'the rum rebellion' and damning it as the 'sole military exploit' of the 'short and disgraceful career' of the Corps.[20] The soldiers deployed at Eureka rarely got off better. The Anglo-Australian film *Eureka Stockade* released in 1949 at least allowed them the excuse of being tools of wrongheaded authority (except for Captain Wise, who, among other sins, speaks with the lisp that was shorthand for a supposedly arrogant and effete officer class). But a reduction of the old British army in Australian minds to a small and baleful presence was less common than amnesia about its existence. When teachers' college lecturer Charles Currey wrote a much-lauded small book, *The Irish at Eureka*, in 1954 for the centenary of the clash, it apparently never crossed his mind that many or perhaps even most of the redcoats (and police, for that matter) hailed from Ireland too.

Nor did such things cross anyone else's. Few historians gave much thought to the British army in Australia, a minor exception being Malcolm Ellis, an angry conservative offended by the radical tint to Australian nationalism in his day. Things almost changed in the 1980s

after a young Peter Stanley, who grew up in a decade when bookish boys were rediscovering the great wars and great armies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, took a job at the Australian War Memorial and an equally youthful Jeffrey Grey, a general's son who understood the importance of professional soldiering, began to teach at the Australian Defence Force Academy soon after. Stanley was influential in creating the Memorial's colonial-era and Boer war galleries; Grey wrote the first serious, single-authored military history of Australia.[21] Both men made it clear that redcoats were part of the national military story; both drew on a new interest in the destruction of Aboriginal Australia, called it a war, and showed how the British army helped fight it. Yet to most Australians who gave the matter any thought the army remained an alien, irrelevant and even unwanted part of a largely uninteresting prequel to the national military story – colourful birds of passage, as Stanley once put it.[22] No paintings or sculptures predate 1915 in art curator and historian Betty Churcher's 2004 book *The Art of War*, and cartoons in Australian newspapers every now and then show redcoats as alien oppressors.[23] This pantomime role will grow as Australian patriotism becomes another of political scientist Benedict Anderson's creole nationalisms, drawing strength from a romantic vision of indigenous history that will elevate Aboriginal resistance to redcoats to par with the miners' resistance at Eureka.

Of course, there's always Hollywood to reassure Australians in this view. And, before Hollywood, celluloid's canvas predecessor.

In the early 1890s, when the clash at Eureka was settling into popular memory as a brave stand by Australian democrats, the people of Melbourne were drawn to a vividly painted canvas recreation of it by Thaddeus Welch, a visiting Californian landscape artist. It was in the form of a cyclorama, a large, circular painting that curved around viewers who, as they turned on their heels and looked about them, enjoyed the illusion of being there. The Eureka cyclorama was painted from the rear of the miners' camp, so viewers looked first at the humble tents and equipment of ordinary men and then at a band of freedom fighters, each one an individual, battling under a brave rebel flag, inspired by a leader with arm raised. Towards the patriots, and in the distance, advanced a horde of menacing, anonymous, alien soldiers in red and police in blue. Perhaps the only soldier close to viewers – we can't be sure, as no images of the full cyclorama have survived – was one unarmed and alone, running crazily from three miners. In a sense he's still running today, a fugitive from a national military story that venerates slouch hats and repudiates red coats.

But for most people who came to see it the Eureka cyclorama wasn't the main event. Large as it was, it was the supporting act to another cyclorama ten times its size within the same building, promoted as the work of 'two among the most prominent artists of Paris', in which redcoats were among the heroes rather than the cast of villains. Visitors to the building could climb a winding staircase to find themselves 'in Belgium, on a little knoll' amid the battle of Waterloo, fought four decades before Eureka. A masterful canvas of romantic horsemen, resolute infantry and a cool Duke of Wellington wrapped itself around the visitors. 'The realism of this scene is beyond description', marvelled one, and even Arthur Streeton, a far better painter (and better known) than the allegedly prominent creators of the cyclorama, had to concede its 'certain spontaneous magic'.[24] The sense of realism was reinforced by the presence of an old man, supposed to be a Waterloo veteran, who sat in the building relating bogus memories of the battle over and over and evading any searching questions by claiming deafness. 'Go, if it takes your last two bob', nudged one advertisement pitched at working men, for not only was it 'the grandest scene ever witnessed by mortal man', with thousands of men and horses 'in the most furious rush of war', but it was also a chance to 'see over twenty miles of the most beautiful country in Europe at mid-harvest'.[25] The colour, the size, the excitement moved more people more often than the landscape, and children stared at it with almost the same enthusiasm they might show at a football game. 'Until you had seen the cyclorama you were a nobody', remembered a woman later in life who'd admired it in Sydney, where it pulled crowds for several years before it came to Melbourne.[26] But there was an extra dimension for some visitors, something more than entertainment or even education. As one newspaper put it, the painting could 'touch the feelings or arouse the patriotism' of the Australian branch of 'the Anglo-Saxon race'.[27] Could, and did. After all, the Melbourne edition of *Punch* said, it portrayed 'the valour of fresh English yokels' to men and women who were their descendants.[28]

How does the Waterloo cyclorama and its popularity square with O'Sullivan's claim of a hostile feeling between colonists and military, with Anlezark's rallying cry of 'anything that is red will do', with the nationalist understanding that most Australians were glad to see the back of redcoats and, having kept what martial loyalties they had to themselves, gave their hearts only to slouch hats? The pride the Waterloo cyclorama seems capable of having stirred in colonial Australia, the sense of personal and patriotic connection with troops from the other side of the world who, in another chamber of the collective consciousness,

could seem alien – above all, the relegation of a clash with redcoats to a preliminary to a celebration of them – suggests that indifference to the army and resentment of it, however real and at times powerful, were never the whole story. They might even have been, like the Eureka cyclorama, a supporting act to the main feature – a reverie for redcoats who existed more in the mind than as a physical presence, whose past victories were more significant than their current deployment, whose battles and bold stands made others proud, excited, more complete when they contemplated them, who inspired a dream from which Australians would wake so completely that they could scarcely credit having ever dreamt it.