The many transformations of Albert Facey

Ffion M. Murphy
Department of English Studies

Richard Nile
In the last months of his life, 86-year-old Albert Facey became a best-selling author and revered cultural figure following the publication of his autobiography, *A Fortunate Life*. Released on Anzac Day 1981, it was praised for its "plain, unembellished, utterly sincere and un-self-pitying account of the privations of childhood and youth" (Semmler) and "extremely powerful description of Gallipoli" (Dutton 16). Within weeks, critic Nancy Keesing declared it an "Enduring Classic." Within six months, it was announced as the winner of two prestigious non-fiction awards, with judges acknowledging Facey's "extraordinary memory" and "ability to describe scenes and characters with great precision" ("NBC" 4).

*FACEY'S FIRST EDITOR*  

A Fortunate Life also transformed the fortunes of its publisher. Founded in 1976 as an independent, not-for-profit publishing house, Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP) may have been expected, given the Australian average, to survive for just a few years. Former managing editor Ray Coffey attributes the Press’s ongoing viability, in no small measure, to Facey’s success (King 29). Along with Wendy Jenkins, Coffey edited Facey’s manuscript through to publication; only five months after its release, with demand outstripping the capabilities, FACF licensed Penguin to take over the book’s production and distribution. Adaptations soon followed. In 1984, Kerry Packer’s PBL launched a prospectus for a mini-series, which raised a record $6.3 million (PBL 7–8). Aired in 1986 with a high-rating documentary called *The Facey Phenomenon*, the series became chapters to national and regional newspapers, stage and radio productions, audio- and e-books, abridged editions for young readers, and inclusion on secondary school curricula extended the range and influence of Facey’s life writing. Recently, an option was taken out for a new television series (Fraser).

A hundred reprints and two million readers on from initial publication, *A Fortunate Life* continues to rate among the most appreciated Australian books of all time. Commenting on a reader survey in 2012, writer and critic Marieke Hardy enthused, "I really loved it [. . .]. I felt like I was seeing a part of my country and my country’s history." As transformers and enablers (Munro 1), *Facey’s early years and war service, including hard-copy medical and repatriation records released in 2012, and find A Fortunate Life in a range of ways deviates from "documentation outside of the text," revealing intriguing, layered storytelling.

We agree with Smith and Watson that "autobiographical acts" are "anything but simple or transparent" (63). As "symbolic interactions in the world," they are "culturally and historically specific" and "engaged in an argument about identity" (63). Inevitably, they are also "fractured by the play of meaning" (63). Our approach, therefore, includes textual analysis of Facey’s drafts alongside the published narrative and his medical records. We do not privilege institutional records as impartial but rather interpret them in terms of their hierarchies and organisation of knowledge. This leads us to speculate on alternative readings of *A Fortunate Life* as an illness narrative that variously resists and subscribes to dominant cultural plots, tropes, and attitudes.

Facey set about writing in earnest in the 1970s and generated (at least) three handwritten drafts, along with a typescript based on the third draft. FACP produced its own working copy from the typescript. Our comparison of the drafts offers insights into the production of Facey’s final text and the otherwise "hidden" roles of editors and publishers (Munro 1). The notion of a working man with basic literacy could produce a highly readable book in part explains Facey’s enduring appeal. His grandson and literary executor, John Rose, observed in early interviews that Facey was a "natural storyteller" who had related details of his life at every opportunity over a period of more than six decades (McLeod). Jenkins points out that Facey belonged to a vivid oral culture within which he "told and retold stories to himself and others," so that they eventually "rubbed down into the lines and shapes that would so memorably underpin the extended memoir that became *A Fortunate Life*. A mystique was thereby established that "time was a very thin voice." (Jenkins). The publisher expressly aimed to retain Facey’s voice, content, and meaning, though editing included much correcting of grammar and punctuation, eradication of internal inconsistencies and anomalies, and structural reorganisation into six sections and 68 chapters.

We find across Facey’s drafts a broadly similar chronology detailing childhood abandonment, life-threatening incidents, youthful resourcefulness, physical prowess, and participation in the Gallipoli Landing. However, there are also shifts and changed details, including varying descriptions of childhood abuse at a place called Cave (Typecript 206). Jenkins pointed out that Facey’s "fabricated" (Roberts), including his enlistment in 1914 and participation in the Gallipoli Landing on 25 April 1915. We have researched various sources relevant to Facey’s early years and war service, including hard-copy medical and repatriation records released in 2012, and find *A Fortunate Life* in a range of ways deviates from "documentation outside of the text," revealing intriguing, layered storytelling.

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badly wounded at any time. His war service record indicates that he was removed from Gallipoli due to "heart troubles" (Reparation), which he also claims in his first draft. Facey’s editors did not have ready access to military files in Canberra, while medical files were not released until 2012. There existed, therefore, virtually no opportunity to corroborate the author’s version of events, while the official war history and the records of the State Library of Western Australia, which were consulted, contain no reference to Facey or his war service (Interview). As a consequence, the editors were entirely dependent on narrative logic and clarifications by an author whose eyesight and memory had deteriorated to such an extent he was unable to read his amended text.

A Fortunate Life depicts men with "nervous sickness" who were not permitted to "stay at the Front because they would be upsetting to the others, especially those who were inclined that way themselves" (350). By cross referencing the draft manuscripts against medical records, we can now perceive that Facey was regarded as one of those nerve cases. According to Facey’s published account, his wounds "baffled" doctors in Egypt and Fremantle (353). His medical records reveal that in September 1915, classified in Egypt as "Tachycardia triggered by war-induced neuropeptides", he was granted a full war pension on 28 June. This suggests that Facey endured seven weeks in the field in this condition, with the implication being that his bodily worsened, resulting in his hospitalisation.

A diagnosis of "deblind," "nerves," and "strain" placed Facey in a medical category of "Special Invalids" (Butler 541). Major A.W. Campbell noted in the Medical Journal of Australia in 1916 that the war was creating "many cases of little understood nervous and mental affections, not only where a definite wound has been received, but in many cases where nothing of the sort appears" (323). Enlisted doctors were either physicians or surgeons and sometimes both. None had any experience of trauma on the scale of the First World War. In 1915, Campbell was one of only two Australian doctors with any pre-war experience of "mental diseases" (Lindstrom 30). He had served on the General Base Hospital at Gallipoli, and he claimed that all times nervous cases "arrived at the Repatriation hospital under his charge (319). Bearing out Facey’s description, Campbell also reported that affected men "received no sympathy" and, as "carriers of psychic contagion," were treated as a "source of danger" to themselves and others (323).

Credentialed by royal colleges in London and coming under British command, Australian medical teams followed the practice of classifying men presenting "nervous or mental symptoms" as "battle casualties" only if they had been wounded by "enemy action" (Loughran 106). By contrast, functional disability, with no accompanying physical wounds, was treated as unnaturally and a "hysterical" reaction to the pressures of war. Mental debility was something to be feared in the trenches and diagnosis almost invariably invoked charges of predisposition or malingering (Yuquin 148–49). This shifted responsibility (and blame) from the war to the individual. Even as late as the 1950s, medical notes referred to Facey’s condition as being "constitutional" (Reparation).

Facey’s narrative demonstrates awareness of how harshly sufferers were treated. We believe that he defended himself against this with stories of physical injury that his doctors never fully accepted and that he may have experienced conversion disorder, where irreconcilable experience finds somatic expression. His medical diagnosis almost invariably invoked charges of predisposition or malingering (Tyquin 148–49). This shifted responsibility (and blame) from the war to an individual. By cross referencing the draft manuscripts against medical records, we can now perceive that Facey was regarded as one of those nerve cases. According to Facey’s published account, his wounds "baffled" doctors in Egypt and Fremantle (353). His medical records reveal that in September 1915, classified in Egypt as "Tachycardia triggered by war-induced neuropeptides", he was granted a full war pension on 28 June. This suggests that Facey endured seven weeks in the field in this condition, with the implication being that his bodily worsened, resulting in his hospitalisation.

Such experiences cast a different light on Facey’s observation of men suffering nerves on board the hospital ship: "I have seen men doze off into a light sleep and suddenly jump up shouting, ‘Here they come! Quick! Thousands of them. We’re doomed!’" (350). Facey had escaped the danger of death by explosion or bayonet but such experiences cast a different light on Facey’s observation of men suffering nerves on board the hospital ship: "I have seen men doze off into a light sleep and suddenly jump up shouting, ‘Here they come! Quick! Thousands of them. We’re doomed!’" (350). Facey had escaped the danger of death by explosion or bayonet but...


"Interview with Ray Coffey." Personal interview. 6 May 2016. Follow-up correspondence. 12 May 2016.


PBL. *Prospectus: A Fortunate Life, the Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Blake*. 1–8.


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