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'A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion'

The Meeting of Poetry and History.

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

I never met my great grandfather, Frank. He died decades before I was born. Consequently, the image that I have come to hold of him is not a memory, but a construct; crafted through the combined forces of an established history, memory, fiction, and my own bias.

There are very few definite facts that I can attribute to Frank's memory. I know that he was born in Patea, and attended a Catholic boarding school in Wellington. He fought during the First World War, serving in Egypt, Gallipoli and the Western Front, and was wounded three or four times, depending on the source. I have been told that he loved poetry and had many books. And there is a story that he once caught two of his children, my grandfather and his older brother, carving their initials into the side of a public building. He told them that the names of mugs were written on plaques everywhere.

My humble collection of details holds but a minute fraction of the memories that have arisen from Frank's life. As in all of history, there is much of Frank that has been lost to time, and my picture of him is littered with gaps.

The artwork discussed in this paper, *For Us There is Only the Trying*, has essentially been made in response to my experiences with the elusive memory of my great grandfather, and the history that serves as a backdrop to his life. My artwork therefore deals with Historyⁱ and memory, however, my aim is not to comment upon, or uncover the past, but to reveal one's experience with that which is indistinct and uncertain, and the poetry that surrounds these concepts.

i History as a proper noun will apply the objective and academic pursuit of the past, whereas history (regular noun) will be used in a much less definitive way. In this document, it will simply be used to describe that pertaining to the past.

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Chapter Outlines

The subject explored in this essay is a complex one. Consequently the discussion to follow throughout this document will often meander, and concepts may overlap and contradict one another. The divisions suggested by the following chapters therefore act more as guidelines.

Part One (*Subject*) explores the multi-faceted nature of my subject matter, and the varied conceptual and emotive responses that have arisen from it.

Chapter One (*There is No One to Bury*) explores the cognitive or conceptual experience of remembrance, and revolves around the broad question of what is it that I am remembering when I concentrate on the life of a family member against the backdrop of the Great War. Focus is placed upon the instability of historical memory through the analysis of the personal and social structures that define it. In particular, emphasis will be placed upon the tension created through the opposite, yet related, forces of History and memory, the individual and collective, and the factual and the romantic, so that I may illustrate the ambiguous, yet fluid terrain that is often explored in History and memory studies.

Chapter Two (*Only the Knowledge of Dead Secrets*) places an emphasis upon the emotional experience of remembrance, and looks to address the question of why I am drawn to a memory that is distant and elusive. Building upon the complexity discussed in Chapter One, I will explore the poetic spaces that resonate throughout the ambiguous and unknown. My investigation will particularly concentrate on the 'gaps' that litter our notion of history.

Part Two (*Method*) concerns itself more specifically with the methods that I have employed in making my artwork, in response to the complex subject matter discussed in Part One. This discussion will extend out to include the methods of other artists whose interests reflect my own.

Chapter Three (*The Intolerable Wrestle with Words and Meanings*) explores the way in which the written word and performative gesture may be used in an artistic response to history. In particular, I will look into how these methods may be used to explore the 'gaps' discussed in Chapter Two. Case studies will include the discussion of poetry and fiction that arose from the War, and the artists Francis Alÿs and Mario Garcia Torres.

Chapter Four (*The Sharp Compassion of the Healer's Art*) explores the various responsibilities encountered when looking into and representing the past. In particular, I will touch upon the way in which our understanding of the past can help shed light upon the present. I will also look into the politics of aesthetics surrounding remembrance. Can beautiful imagery be used in relation to past traumatic events, or is a different aesthetic necessary?

All chapter titles, the title of my artwork, and of this document, have been taken from T.S Eliot's poem 'East Coker'; a work of art that I consider to perhaps best express my own experiences with the memory of another.