

**A Literary Event: The Launch of *Bearing Witness*  
(Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2015)  
by Peter Rees**

by Justice Geoff Lindsay  
(A Judge of the Supreme Court of NSW;  
Secretary, Francis Forbes Society for Australian Legal History)  
at Tuggeranong Homestead,  
Sunday, 12 April 2015

**SPEAKING NOTES (Revised)**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

1. I thank Peter Rees, and Allen & Unwin, for an opportunity to celebrate with them the publication of Peter's latest triumph, *Bearing Witness*.
2. I am conscious that, in this audience and throughout Australia, there are still people who, personally, knew and loved CEW Bean and others in his close circle of friends.
3. I lay no claim to have known Charles Bean, or any member of his family, personally.
4. What I can, legitimately, claim is a deep fascination with, and respect for, an Australian writer who first came to my attention 45 years ago when, as a 15-year-old schoolboy, I read *On the Wool Track* (first published in 1910) as a prescribed text.

**II. MEMORABLE QUOTES**

**That General Determination to Stand by One's Mate**

5. If you turn to the 1963 reprint (not earlier versions, I have since found) you will find, on page 132, a simple statement that resonates still: "That general determination – to stand by one's mate, and to see that he gets a fair deal whatever the cost to oneself – means more to Australia than can yet be reckoned."
6. I am delighted to notice Peter Rees' allusion to that quote on page 17 of the Prologue to *Bearing Witness*. It is aspirational, rather than simply a factual observation. It remains worthy of notice.

7. A central idea that informs Australian history is “fairness”. We are taught from our earliest years to be “fair”. “Unfairness” is universally condemned. As a nation, we particularly value fairness rising above self-interest. Fairness that calls all to account, living in community with others equally entitled to life’s bounty.
8. Australia’s deeply ingrained focus on “fairness” as a criterion for testing men, women and measures is foundational to the country; and, perhaps, it distinguishes us from other nations, such as the United States of America, where different historical traditions inform debate.

**Be truthful, Upright and Morally Brave**

9. Peter Rees places Bean’s “general determination to stand by one’s mate”, almost, in the same league as what I suspect is his own favourite Bean quote. This quote is not from Bean himself, but from his mother Lucy, writing a diary note to a very young Charles. It can be found on page 15 of the Prologue:

“Charlie dear, be truthful, and upright, and morally brave, I should like you to be brave in every way, but I care far more for moral bravery than for any other...

I do not want to see you a rich man, or man holding a leading position, so much as to see you a good, charitable man. You may be all, and I shall be happy if I live to see you all, but the riches and position come after... you can be happy without them, but you cannot be happy unless you are good.

Be kind and unselfish. You Charlie my eldest, know the little talks we have had together about this.”

**III. PETER REES’ CHARLES BEAN**

10. CEW Bean has found a worthy biographer in Peter Rees: a popular style; empathetic, yet critical; measured in judgements of all men and events; presentation of Charles Bean, the man, not merely a myth; an insightful understanding of the simplicity, complexity and enigma of a brave, utopian Australian, a man who, blessed with an uncommon life, loved common people; sensitive to both the essential manliness of his subject and Bean’s equally important feminine side.
11. Peter touches all the mountain tops, and explores more than a few valleys, of Bean’s long, extraordinary life. Born in 1879. Died in 1968. An Australian nationalist, with strong links with England, at a time when Australia emerged from the Imperial shadow of Britain. Each country’s *National Dictionary of Biography* claims him as their own. His life straddled both Australia and England.

12. Charles Bean generally comes to notice in Australia with seasonal regularity. He is usually written up as Australia's greatest war correspondent twice a year, first as Anzac Day (25 April) approaches and, then, in the lead up to Remembrance Day (11 November).
13. There is, of course, a solid historical foundation for this. As is well known, Bean was Australia's Official War Correspondent in the First World War (1914-1918). He was an authentic war hero: wounded at Gallipoli; mentioned in despatches for an act of bravery in rescuing a soldier under fire; a man who placed himself at risk, at Gallipoli *and* on the Western front, in recording Australia's story of war. As a war correspondent, he evolved into the role of editor of Australia's official *History* of the First World War (a writer of more than half of it), and as a founder of the Australian War Memorial.
14. For all this, Charles Bean was *not* the one dimensional, iconic War Correspondent celebrated each Anzac Day and Remembrance Day. He was *more* than that. He was a fascinating, complex, other-directed, self-motivated man of high principle. He grew in generosity of spirit, and universal understanding, as he matured. His capacity for growth is one of his most important attributes.
15. Peter Rees demonstrates "the something more" in Bean's life story. He recognises the importance of Bean's parents to the boy who became the man. Their preoccupation with truth, social justice and public service became his.
16. After WWI, as Peter tells the story, Bean surprised himself by falling in love (head over heels) with a young nurse (Sister Ethel Clara Young, "Effie") 15 years his junior. She refused his hand in marriage, more than once, because she thought herself unworthy of such an educated, illustrious man. He would have none of that! He was besotted. She relented. Theirs was a long and happy life together. She was the extrovert. He was the introvert. An autobiographical essay he wrote for her shortly after their marriage (known to historians as "Account for Effie") remains a central, primary source for those who go in search of CEW Bean. The whole story of *his* life cannot be told without reference to *her*.
17. Peter Rees has named his book well. *Bearing Witness* gives a hint of the law student, barrister and judge's associate Bean was before he became a journalist with the *Sydney Morning Herald* before the outbreak of World War I. It is consistent with Bean's insistence on recording the truth of the war experience of ordinary Australians, not merely sanitised stories sanctioned by censors at the British War Office, or sensationalised news stories demanded by newspaper proprietors and editors.
18. Above all, the title *Bearing Witness* testifies to Peter Rees' discovery that, at the core of everything, Bean was driven by a "search for the truth as he saw it". Edwin and Lucy Bean, his parents, instilled in him principles that placed the quest for moral and intellectual truth above striving for personal gain, indeed at the core of life itself.

#### IV. BEAN'S SEARCH FOR TRUTH

19. Bean was an uncompromising seeker of truth. Throughout his life, and in everything he did, he sought "Truth" at every level of abstraction; in everything, large and small.
20. He thought of himself as "not a religious man". Nevertheless, in everything of consequence he did, he appears to have sought to serve a *purpose* larger than himself. He was a purposeful man. Reflecting cultural language of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the classical education he was given under the close supervision of his father (a headmaster by profession), he found his ultimate purpose in "Truth", spelt with a capital "T".
21. The Australian War Memorial, of which Bean must be recognised as a founder if not *the* founder, was planned by Bean, at least in part, as a temple worthy of ancient Greece, to reverence the lives of Australians who had sacrificed their lives in service of their nation, in a war which Bean and his contemporaries saw as founding the nation.
22. Bean's dedication to "truth", spelt with a lower case "t", was consistently on display, one imagines every day of his life, with his insistence on discovery of empirical *facts* to ground each and every story he recorded, as he saw it, for the benefit of the nation. He insisted on accuracy of facts to the extent that, unlike other war correspondents, he endeavoured to visit every Australian battlefield on the day of battle, or the day after. He insisted on plain speaking about plain facts, and honest analysis of plain facts.
23. When censored, as often he was during the Great War, he buried facts in a story rather than surrender to a plausible fiction that censors or news vendors may have favoured. And, he confided more openly in the library of contemporaneous war diaries he scrupulously maintained, and then bequeathed to the Australian War Memorial.
24. He reported events of the war, not "news" for newspapers. He risked criticism of a "wooden", analytical writing style rather than succumb to sensationalism.
25. His purity ran to battles with photographers preoccupied with artistic form. He demanded undoctored shots worthy of the historical record, not composite photographs of imagined scenes designed to sell a story or to adorn an art gallery.
26. His dedication to Truth, obsessive as it could be, was bound to offer a challenge to others to prove him wrong. That has led some commentators, in every generation, to attack him or his reputation.

27. Those attacks, in themselves, may be viewed as a by-product of his over-scrupulous dedication to truth. He was not omniscient. He did not pretend to be. He invited correction, constructive criticism, a search for accuracy, truth. In dealing with large questions, he insisted on descending to particular facts, not content to take cover in clouds. A risk in taking that course is that errors may be exposed to view, inviting particular criticism.
28. He was not perfect, even (or especially) by his own standards. It is not difficult to imagine him squirming, but acquiescent, as Arthur Bazley (soon to become a life-long friend) overstated his age in order to enlist as Captain Bean's batman in the Australian Imperial Force. Bean was visibly troubled because, as Bazley re-told the story, "being the man that he was, [he] realised that he was condoning something that he [knew] was not altogether right". Nobody else involved in this "noble lie" was the least bit troubled.

## V. BEAN'S WAR

29. *Bearing Witness* proceeds, in a natural chronological flow, with short chapters each built around a particular theme.
30. The book is divided into three distinct parts. The first is entitled "The Early Years". The second, "The War Years". The third, "After the Nightmare". Threads are drawn together, at the beginning and at the end, with free-standing commentary in the form of a "Prologue" and an Epilogue".
31. Part Two, The War Years, provides a natural fulcrum upon which the whole book turns. The Great War absorbed Charles Bean and his generation in their prime.
32. As a matter of impression, several features of Bean's experience of the War can be drawn from *Bearing Witness*.
33. First, sometimes things do work out for the best. When Charles Bean (with the support of the Fairfax Family's *Sydney Morning Herald*) narrowly defeated Keith Murdoch (Rupert's father) in a ballot of journalists for the office of Australia's Official War Correspondent, fate assigned the two men leading roles suited to their talents. Both were independent spirits. However, Bean was more the team player, prepared to play within rules. Murdoch had a greater appreciation of power politics and how to use politicians, and the press, to change rules. Happily, the two men were able to work together. It is no surprise, though, that it was Murdoch, not Bean, who wrote "The Gallipoli Letter" that exposed failure on the Peninsula and led to a reassessment of the Gallipoli campaign.

34. Secondly, Bean's thinking evolved, progressively, from that of a journalist, to that of an "official" war correspondent, "historian" and "founder of a war memorial". With the blessing of the Australian Government, he grew in public service.
35. Thirdly, Bean's closeness to the action exposed him to a risk (not always resisted) of becoming a player, not merely a reporter.
36. At a personal level, he was confronted with the dilemma of what to do when, in the midst of military activity, there was something needing to be done and, being the person nearest to the action, his conscience bade him to do it. He needed to remind himself that he was a war correspondent, not a warrior.
37. At a political level, even *he*, with a distain for politics, was tempted (with Murdoch) to lobby against Monash's promotion. He needed to be reminded, as Brudenel White reminded him, that *he* was not the authority responsible for making command decisions.
38. Fourthly, despite frustrations he undoubtedly experienced with British War Office officialdom, he was generally allowed, and he regularly took, remarkable opportunities to roam battlefields, with high-level access to military and political decision-makers as well as soldiers on the ground. The most notable exception appears to have been the delay in his accreditation as a war correspondent that kept him out of the very first wave of reporting of the Gallipoli invasion. As it turned out, that delay may have been due to representations of Australian newspaper interests as much as War Office officialdom.
39. Fifthly, the carnage of the war, the Australians' unfamiliarity with any experience of the impersonal way European war machines operated and a rising tide of frustration with British officialdom magnified in Bean perceptions of military incompetence.
40. Sixthly, experiences of this character reinforced a natural urge in the Australians (fully manifested in Bean) to have Australian troops fight as a cohesive, independent unit, for both logistical reasons and to accommodate a nationalistic impulse growing out of joinder of troops from diverse Australian States in a bloody common cause.
41. Seventhly, as Peter Rees reminds us, for Bean the horrors of war he witnessed first-hand must have exposed him to post-traumatic stress. No person routinely exposed to as much death, destruction and risk of injury as he was could escape exposure to psychological damage.
42. Eighthly, as Peter speculates, Bean's regular practice of daily writing up diaries in which he was able to share immediate experiences, and his years of debriefing as an historian in post war years, may well have been what kept him sane. They might also have contributed to his passionate embrace of social reform.

## VI. BEAN'S MORAL COMPASS & THE ARNOLD TRADITION

43. Charles Bean had a strong moral compass, shared by many but not by everyone.
44. In reading Bean, and appreciating him, one should not exclude the possibility that his view of events was both assisted, and constrained, by natural sympathies for, or equally natural antipathies towards, actors he observed. His selection of facts, and individuals, worthy of notice must have been influenced by the intuitive assessments it was given to him, with his strong predispositions, to make. Unconsciously, he favoured those to whom he was drawn. That very human tendency is evident, for example, in his selection of authors of individual volumes in the Official War History he edited.
45. As another example, Peter Rees speculates that one reason for Bean's antipathy towards (Sir) John Monash may have been his disapproval of an extra-marital affair that engaged Monash's attention during the war.
46. Yet another illustration, which caused a chastened Bean to recalibrate his relationship with Australian troops, may have been his willingness to write a public letter home to his Australian audience chastising soldiers who misbehaved themselves upon their first arrival in Egypt.
47. Bean saw life, and selected "facts" from what he saw, through a prism governed by a variant of Victorian era, liberal Anglicanism (muscular Christianity) championed by Thomas Arnold, the famous headmaster of Rugby School in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.
48. He did not, himself, claim to be an orthodox Christian, if ever such a label has meaning. He was, however, a product of the Church of England. His father (whom he revered) took holy orders in the Church of England in aid of his profession as a headmaster of an English Public School.
49. On the evacuation of Gallipoli in December 1915 Charles wrote a poem, *Non Nobis Domine*, which was reprinted as hymn in an Australian edition of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. He was married, and his funeral service was held, in St Andrews (Anglican) Cathedral in Sydney.
50. Still, taking him at his word, he was not a religious man.
51. Bean imbibed "The Arnold Tradition" (as he labelled it, in his history of independent schools in Australia, *Here, my Son*, in the 1950s) from both sides of his family.

52. What was the Arnold Tradition? Drawing on Bean's *Here, My Son*, we can take it to have been a form of Christian humanism of a democratic (albeit patrician) kind, emphasising individual self-worth and qualities associated with "good character": trust and reliability, honesty, openness, self-discipline, self-reliance, independent thought and action, friendship and concern for the common good over selfish or sectional interests.
53. The Tasmanian family of his mother, Lucy Butler, and his headmaster father, Edwin, were, alike, devotees of the Arnold tradition. The Butlers were actively involved with The Hutchins School in Hobart, a school with an Arnold connection, in a State with an Arnold connection. The Arnold Tradition was also, Bean tells us, a model admired in each of the schools with which Edwin Bean was (and, in time, Charles became) associated: principally, Sydney Grammar School; All Saints College, Bathurst; Brentwood Grammar School, Essex; and Clifton College, Bristol.
54. CEW Bean was his parents' son. He was named "Charles" after his maternal grandfather, a prominent Tasmanian solicitor. He was named "Edwin" after his father, in whose footsteps he followed to Clifton College, a school with a strong historical connection with the British Armed Services. He was named "Woodrow" after a family friend, whom he knew as "Uncle Henry Woodrow", whose claim to fame, within the family, was that an episode in the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, *Tom Brown's School Days*, was based on a real incident taken from his life: as told in Part II, Chapter I of the novel, "Woodrow" (personified in the hero of the novel, Tom Brown) had stood up for a little boy ("George Arthur") bullied for saying bedtime prayers at Rugby School.
55. Although Bean branched out from the "family business" in secondary education that dominated his parents' working lives, he never quite broke free of the school environment. He enjoyed an active, continuing association with each of the schools he attended. He had a deep, and abiding, interest in education as a means to a better life for all Australians.

## VII. BEAN AS A "SOCIAL MISSIONARY"

56. Bean is *known* as an architect of "the Anzac legend" (some people insist on calling it "the Anzac myth") and, more generally, the distinctly Australian ethos of "mateship". He is also *known* as a devotee of the Australian "bush".
57. He can no more be *defined* in these terms than he can be limited to the role of a war correspondent or that of a journalist. Peter Rees, with justification, calls him a "social missionary".

58. Bean's best known, enduring work may be the multiple volumes of Australia's *Official History* of World War I, but equally instructive of his character are his other writings.
59. Of these, *On the Wool Track*, is the most well known. There, we first encounter his technique of relating *large* stories through the *personal* stories of individuals who are engaged in them.
60. That technique, deployed in Bean's war writings, deeply affected the way Australians see their history.
61. That can be demonstrated by the way, in contemplation of World War I, we think little of the politicians and generals who directed grand strategies, and everything of the men and women who bore the burden of fighting, or served those who fought, and lived with the consequences of death and disablement.
62. For many Australian families, stories of war (World War I in particular) continue to be a shared experience. Everyone has a relative or family friend who served in the Great War. Everyone has a story.
63. Perhaps least well-known of Bean's major written works, but perhaps also the most revealing of his character, are the two short books he wrote as a "social missionary" at the end of World War I and in anticipation of the end of World War II.
64. *In Your Hands, Australians* was published in 1919. *War Aims of a Plain Australian* was published in 1943, and republished in 1945. They are long out of print. Peter Rees has consulted them in detail.
65. Both books demonstrate a deep commitment to the importance of education, conservation of the environment, town planning and social planning more generally. Here we see Charles Bean, utopian. His was not a preoccupation with the Australian bush only for the sake of the Australian bush, but, more especially, for the sake of a healthy lifestyle, with a healthy environment, for all Australians. The champion of *bush* life was, in large measure, an *urban* social reformer.

## VIII. TRUTH AS A GUIDING STAR

66. Truth was his guiding star. Writing in 1945, he was an advocate of liberty, equality, fraternity: "Liberty to seek the truth and state it; equality of opportunity and all that this involves; and fraternity – the resolve to progress by helping our fellow men forward and not by thrusting them back."

67. The ultimate foundation for Australia's post war future was, for Bean, "the freedom of every citizen to discover the truth and proclaim what he finds". No wonder he is loved by journalists! He is a role model for investigative journalism.
68. He was confident that "[given] that freedom, we have at least the means of, sooner or later, discovering and resisting deception. Of course, many men will proclaim 'truth' without having made any serious study in order to reach it, and much of the proclamation will be valueless; but so long as truth can get out, even amid a host of mistakes and distortions, it has an immense power for prevailing in the end".

## **IX. BEAN, THE ENIGMA**

69. Bean *can* be described egalitarian, *but* the social advantages he enjoyed, in the circles in which he moved, and his quiet introverted manner, probably (more than he realised or wanted) kept him apart from the common people he loved, whose cause he served. He had a strong plebeian side; but Peter Rees, correctly, describes him as a "quiet patrician".
70. Bean was by nature conservative in many things, but he seriously flirted with socialism, even communism, in his search for truth. He could not, however, be contained within any party allegiance. He had a strong attachment to freedom, living within an ever expanding community, in which self-interest was subordinated to public service, education and fairness, equity for all. He advocated "planning" as necessary for achievement in all things, large and small, not as a means of social control. He was fiercely independent.
71. After nearly 500 pages of close attention to the man, Peter Rees pays him homage as an enigma. So he is.
72. Charles Bean could not have been otherwise than he was. He was a deeply reflective man, true to himself, true to the ideals instilled in him by his parents. He was driven by the purposeful work in which he was engaged, intent on telling the truth of Australian war experience, defining Australian "character".
73. One illustration of this, recounted by Peter Rees, is how Bean spent Armistice Day, 11 November 1918. As others celebrated peace, he drove to the battlefield at Fromelles, a scene of death and disaster for Australian troops in July 1916. His justification, to himself, was a need to take photos. Peter sees, instead, a need to pay homage to the dead. Charles Bean *was* a *deeply* reflective man.

74. Another illustration of the same phenomenon, also recounted by Peter, is how, in the immediate aftermath of the War Bean occupied himself in writing the first of his war-driven homilies to young Australia, *In Your Hands, Australians*, and busied himself in preliminary work towards his Official History of the War and establishment of the Australian War Memorial. Demobilisation was not enough for the purposeful man.
75. Those who pass over his contribution to Australian history without pausing to examine the complexity masked by a veneer of simple virtues, or casual references to war or “mateship”, miss much of what there is to learn from a man who moved, without bitterness or envy, in and between all social circles of egalitarian Australia and Imperial Britain. Without misgivings he, more than once, declined an offer of a knighthood. That he was not indifferent to honours is evidenced by his acceptance of honorary doctorates from the University of Melbourne (in 1930-1931) and the Australian National University (in 1959) , and his acceptance of the title “Dr Bean” as a common mode of address; but those were *Australian* honours, patently merit-based awards. Imperial honours, knighthoods, he saw as different. Incapacitated by the onset of dementia, he was content to live, and die, in the company of old soldiers at Concord Repatriation Hospital.
76. The voluminous, primary records bequeathed to the nation by Charles Bean and his family make it inevitable that future generations will increasingly turn to the Bean papers, and to the story of CEW Bean, to know themselves.

## **X. SELF PROMOTION, MONASH AND A PLACE IN HISTORY**

77. Bean disliked self-promotion. That was probably a principal cause of his personality clashes with (Sir) John Monash. In his opinion, Monash was a self-promoter. Nevertheless, like Monash, he knew the value of the written word, and the dependence of historians on well-placed primary records. With greater modesty and self-effacement than most, he endowed the nation with primary records, and publications, that guaranteed his place in Australian history.
78. Peter Rees deals, sensitively and maturely, with the “History Wars” that have at times overshadowed stories of Monash and Bean. He is critical of Monash at Gallipoli, but, beyond that, principally a narrator of events, rather than a partisan. As he records, Bean and Monash had need of one another. Neither could do his best work without actively engaging the other. A strained working relationship was tempered, ultimately, by mutual respect.

79. Bean had not been alone in his reservations about Monash. Keith Murdoch had also had skin in the game. Ultimately, all the active players were saved by the quiet dignity of Brudenell White, who deferred to Monash's appointment as Australia's leading general, spiking the campaign of Murdoch and Bean to have him preferred. The campaigners overreached themselves on this occasion.
80. Monash's ultimate success as a military leader, measured against his comparative failure at Gallipoli, suggests that he was a more effective operator at a higher, than a lower, level of command. On such an assumption, exceptionally, he *rose* to his level of *competence*. Had he not been so effective in bringing the War to an end, it is an Australian tradition to wonder whether he could have risen even higher. Thankfully, Armistice Day 1918 relegated that to the "what ifs" of history.

## **XI. BEAN AND PERSONAL GROWTH IN PURSUIT OF TRUTH**

81. Bean *was* a good man, a man who sought truth, wherever it might lead, and as uncomfortable as it might be. Whatever his deficiencies, he provides a standard against which we can, as Australians, measure ourselves. *He* is worthy of study as a means of understanding *ourselves*. We can, through a study of *his* journey, chart our *own* growth as a nation.
82. He grew in stature as he rose, with the nation, to deal with a fractured world living in community. The rise of Adolf Hitler demanded repudiation of any vestige of claims to racial superiority. He met that demand emphatically, authoritatively. This is masterfully brought out by Peter Rees in his Prologue, where he relates Bean's personal reflections in a draft speech he was too sick to deliver when, in 1959, he was honoured with this second doctorate.
83. As unsettling as modern Australia may now find the "White Australia Policy" (of which young Charles Bean had been an enthusiastic champion), the story of how Bean became an early exponent of multicultural Australia during and after World War II is an enlightening story of *growth* in understanding and generosity of spirit. Bean's public criticism of the Australian government's demonisation of the Japanese *during World War II* is a manifestation of these qualities, reinforced by moral courage and independence of mind.
84. As Peter Rees explains, and in this way demonstrates, Charles Bean endeavoured to examine every question on its merits, fearless in pursuit of truth, taking nothing on authority alone.
85. It is through the prism of such a personality, that *Bearing Witness* engages some of the great personalities of 20<sup>th</sup> century Australian history: Billy Hughes, Keith Murdoch, John Monash, Brudenell White and others.

86. At this distance in time, there is no need to make heroes or villains of any of them or to become mired in their controversies. It is enough, as it is the fact, that Peter Rees brings them all to life as part of a very Australian story.
87. We have too often been blinded by the light shone by Charles Bean on the horrible grandeur of World War I and the minutiae of its harsh realities, not noticing the broader vision of an enigmatic man. Peter Rees has kept the whole man in view.

## **XII. CONCLUSION**

84. Peter is to be warmly congratulated on a major contribution to our collective understanding of CEW Bean, his life and times. So too is his chief collaborator, his wife Sue. Well done.
85. Charles Bean lived such a life, at such a formative time in the history of modern Australia, that, if he is ever lost from public view, Australia will have become a very different place. *Bearing Witness* makes an important contribution to maintenance of a uniquely Australian Legacy.
86. We are, all of us, better off for the life, and example, of Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean.

GCL  
14 April 2015