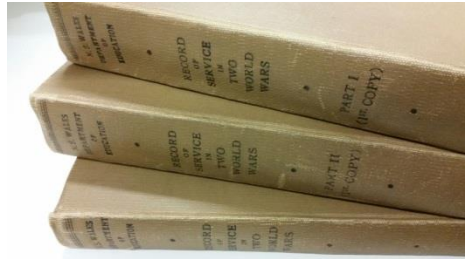


Thomas Alexander White: Public School Educator; Soldier; Author



Occasional Address

Dr Paul Brock AM

Affiliate Member, Teachers' RSL NSW Sub-branch

**Luncheon in Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Establishment
of the Teachers' RSL NSW Sub-branch**

NSW State Parliament (Strangers' Dining Room)

22nd August, 2014

I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation who are the traditional owners of the land and to pay my respect to Aboriginal elders past and present, and to any Aboriginal persons present here today.

Thank you Noel Cislowski, friend and former colleague, for your kind introduction.

Mr Patrick Medway AM, President Teachers RSL Sub-branch; Ken Stevenson, Deputy President; other members of the Sub-branch, my friend Dr Ken Boston, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

On Monday the 11th of August we finally fulfilled the dream of Tom White, a distinguished public school teacher, Principal, District Inspector, author, historian and soldier in the First World War, by publishing on our DET internet website the digitised version of his quite remarkable three part manuscript *New South Wales Department of Education Record of Service in Two World Wars*.

This would not have been possible without the permission and support of the White family, especially Dr Max White. In my speech today I am drawing heavily on Max White's superb unpublished biography of his grandfather, plus numerous telephone conversations I have had with Max over the past year. All of the photos in my powerpoint slides were sent to me by Max.

Tom White, esteemed Public Educator

I'd like to start by briefly outlining Tom White's career in NSW public education.

Tom was born in Bendigo in 1886. Later the family moved to Deniliquin where Tom attended the Deniliquin Superior School – also known locally as the George Street School - where he displayed outstanding academic ability, winning many prizes and becoming Dux of the school. That building still stands. It is now the The Peppin Heritage Centre.



On leaving school at the end of 1901 Tom started work at a clothing and tailoring shop in Deniliquin. While working at the tailor's shop he was tutored by the school Principal in preparing for the State-wide Pupil Teachers exam in May 1902.

On passing the exam Tom was employed as a probationary pupil teacher at the Deniliquin Superior School

Tom White undertook his education to prepare him to be a teacher at the Teachers College, Blackfriars, in Sydney.



Tom White's first teaching appointment as a fully-fledged teacher was at the William Street School on the eastern fringe of the Sydney CBD. The year of his appointment is unclear, but he was certainly there in 1909. He subsequently was appointed a teacher at Cobar Evening School, North Sydney, and Waratah, a suburb of Newcastle.

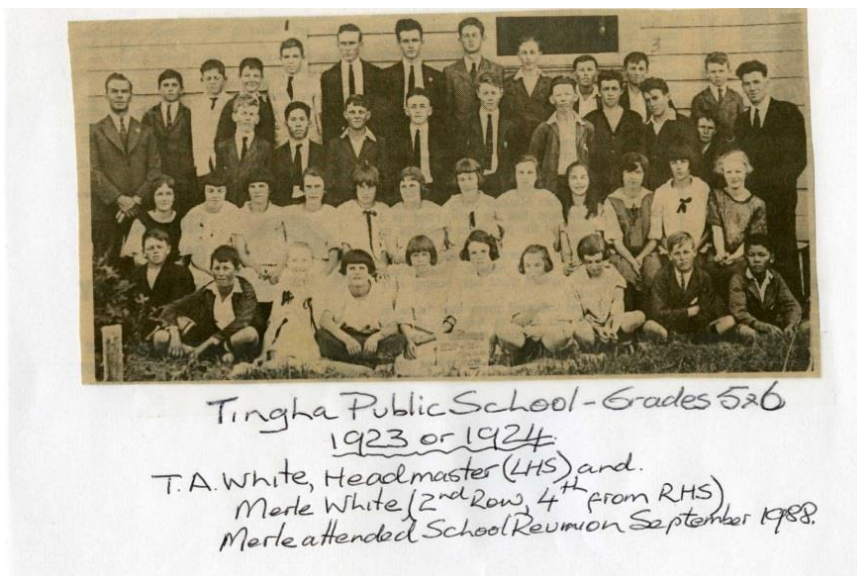
In late 1913 he was appointed Principal of a two teacher school at Hillston. It was from there that he enlisted in the AIF in February 1916 (he had unsuccessfully tried to enlist in 1914 – more of that later).

On his return from war, and after a period of repatriation and convalescence from his war wounds, in 1920 he was appointed Principal of Gresford Public School. The school still stands. The following photo was sent to me by the current Principal, Ms Pauline Mitchell



Tom's bedroom is now the Principal's office. It is at the extreme right of the photo. The building to the left, behind the pencil pines, is the original classroom which at one stage was divided into 2 rooms.

Here is a photo of Tom, and his daughter Merle – who later became a poet - when Tom was Principal of Tingha Public School.



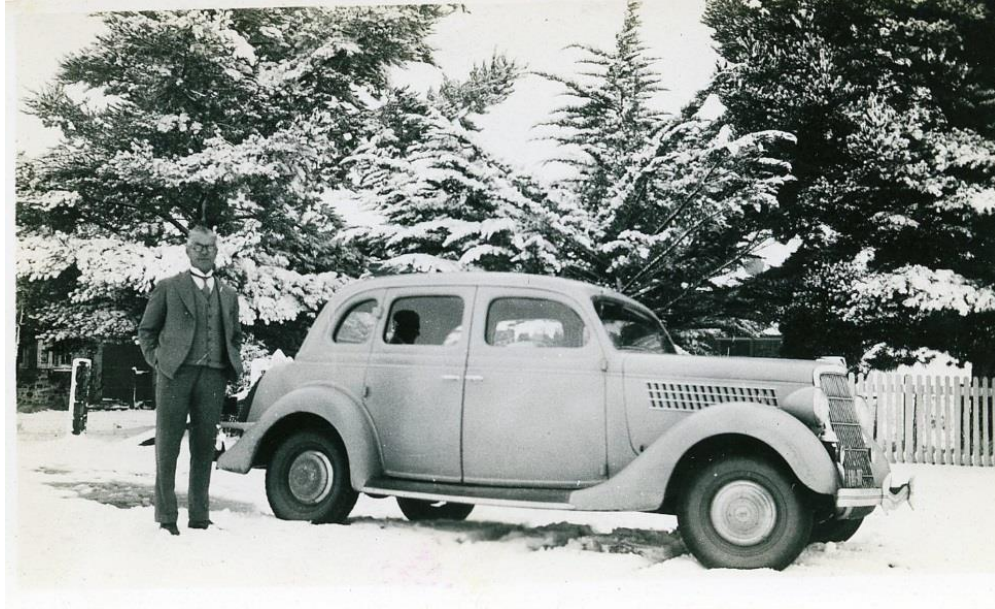
Next, is a photo of Tom in his 40th year taken while he was Principal of Peakhurst Public School.



His final appointment as Principal was to Bellevue Hill Public School. As an unreconstructed cricket tragic, I had to include this photo.



In 1928 he commenced his career as District Inspector. First of all for the Hay District of the Riverina, then Wagga Wagga District. He was then appointed District Inspector for the Cooma and the Far South Coast of NSW – this photo was taken during Tom’s time in that role.



In 1935 he received an award of the King’s Silver Jubilee Medal for his services to the State.

In 1937 he was transferred back to Sydney where he became Inspector in the Rozelle, then the Parramatta and later the Hurstville Inspectorates. He was elected President of the NSW School Inspectors Association in 1948 and hosted the Australasian Conference of School Inspectors in that year.

In 1948 Tom White served as President of the Australasian Institute of School Inspectors. The next photo of both Tom and Jess was taken of some - or all - of the NSW contingent on board ship en route to the Institute’s Conference in Perth in that year. Tom was in his 62nd year.

Only the men were Inspectors. The women were their wives / partners (although the latter term was not usually used in such contexts in Australia in 1948!).

Tom is standing in the back row second on the left, wearing glasses. Jess White is seated, second row, first on the left.



Tom retired in 1950. The next photo is of Tom and his wife Jess on the way to a farewell function Rozelle inspectorate.



In the possession of Ken Stevenson, there is a silver tobacco tin passed on by the late Dr John Dugdale, a former President of the NSW Teachers' RSL Sub-Branch on which is engraved in capital letters

NSW RETURNED SOLDIERS TEACHERS ASSOCIATION
BEST RACONTEUR

It was awarded to whoever the Association judged to have given the best 'yarn' to the Association during the year. The list of engraved names commenced at 1930. Engraved as the best raconteur in 1932 is the name T A White.

The name engraved as the best raconteur in 1951 is also T A White!

Tom White, esteemed Author

By the time he commenced his herculean task in 1951 of writing New South Wales Department of Education Record of Service in Two World Wars – which he completed in 1958 - Tom White was already a published author. He had written *Diggers Abroad*, *Duckboard Memories* and a children's book *Yappy Dingo*, an Australian Fairy Tale.

He also was the author of *The Fighting Thirteenth*, the official history of the 13th Battalion (his own Battalion) in World War I. Tom had also had a number of stories and articles published in *The Bulletin*, *Smith's Weekly* and *Aussie* and from November 1936 to March 1938 a series of 15 of his stories under the heading "The Little Dovetailed Box – A Soldier's Letters" were published in *Reveille*, the NSW RSL Journal.

Captain Tom White, esteemed Soldier



This photo of Tom was taken when or soon after he was promoted from 1st Lieutenant to Captain on May 10, 1918.

As noted earlier, while Principal of the Hillston School, Tom attempted to enlist in the AIF in early 1914. His application was unsuccessful. Only recently, while undertaking research in the Hillston Library about his grandfather, Dr Max White discovered the reason why Tom's application did not succeed.

I picked up some new information on a recent visit to Hillston. Tom was Headmaster of the 2 teacher school there from 1913 to the end of 1915. It was a pretty terrible place back then; no electricity, no water and sewerage, the nearest rail head was Griffith or was it still Wagga (requiring either a 100 or 200 km Cobb and Co coach journey) and the School Residence pretty awful (it was condemned in about 1920) and on the last street in town and about 3-4 km from the shops.

That sets the scene for the new information from the Hillston Library. In 1914 shortly after the outbreak of war Tom White wrote to the District Inspector at Wagga requesting permission to enlist. The Inspector's reply was brief and terse; no! and accused Tom of enlisting simply to escape from his appointment at Hillston!!

At the age of 29, in February 1916 Tom was finally successful in his attempt to enlist. He was accepted for the intensive Officer Training Course at the Duntroon Military Academy. After his initial training he served on the Western Front in a number of famous Australian World War I battle zones, including those at Mametz, Ypres, Polygon Wood, and Villers-Bretonneux. Originally commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant, Tom was soon promoted to a 1st Lieutenant, and soon again promoted to Captain on May 10, 1918.

Tom was wounded a number of times. While fighting at Passchendaele in October 1917 he and about a quarter of his battalion were seriously injured in a mustard gas attack. Tom suffered the effects of this on his hands, head and throat for the rest of his life. On October 19, 1918, while serving in the village of Picquigny, Tom was mentioned in despatches for gallantry in attempting to save the life of a soldier in a canal.

After the end of the War, Tom arrived back in Sydney in June 1919. After spending some time in recuperation and convalescence because of his war wounds, he resumed his teaching career.

As I said earlier, Tom retired in 1950.

Tom White's remarkable Legacy – his herculean task from 1951 to 1958

There are profoundly significant times when we, as a community, gather together to honour those whose lives were sacrificed in time of war, and listen to the solemn words of Robert Laurence Binyon's Ode, "For the Fallen", as will be repeated later today.

And, of course, we honour those who died with inscriptions on memorials across Australia, and in countries overseas, where they fought and died.

But I think that sometimes we may run the risk of overlooking all of those other service men and women who **enlisted** in the armed services and who did not die during their war time service. But who returned to Australia. Often, but not always, they came home injured. Some, badly so in body, mind and spirit. And who also deserve our gratitude and acknowledgment.

Why did Tom White undertake his remarkable task which took seven years, from 1951 to 1958?

Because he had a burning desire that every NSW public school teacher, student and departmental officer should be able to learn about those public school teachers and departmental officers who had **enlisted** to serve their country in the two World Wars. Irrespective of whether they died in combat or returned home.

Tom White typed, occasionally he added and edited in his own hand-writing, every single page of his manuscript: any of his crossings out, re-writings and so on, remain exactly as they appear in his manuscript. Behind every page on which he typed, he inserted a black carbon copy paper and white blank sheet - to produce, in all, one original and five copies. His grandson Max well remembers the sound of Tom bashing hard on the keys as he typed, to ensure that all of the five pieces of carbon paper successfully imprinted his words on each of the five white pages behind the carbons.

Tom was meticulous in his research in which he was assisted by a Mr Arthur Cousins who, Tom happily acknowledged, “spent many weeks in research”. For example in Part I, under the heading of “Department of Education 1914 – 1918”, in his own handwriting he included the following information under the sub-heading “Enlistments for Overseas”.

“Teachers 755; officers 109; sailed overseas 789; killed in action 116; died of wounds 29; died of illness 8.” He then proceeded to compile an “Honours List” of 34 teachers and 4 departmental officers. He arranged the awards across 13 different categories.

Part I of *New South Wales Department of Education Record of Service in Two World Wars* focused on public school teachers and officers who were soldiers in World War I, and Part II covered World War II.

In Parts I and II, and especially Part III, Tom also described the significant contributions made to support the efforts of Australian service personnel in both Wars by public school Principals, teachers and students, parents and members of the wider school communities. As well as by men and women in the Department.

Of course, absolutely central to this desire was his determination to have his manuscript published. As he wrote by hand very early in Part I, “Their children and their children’s children will be proud of them. They have the right to know of them.”

His hand-written comment brings to mind another remark, written roughly at the same time, by Polish poet Czesław Miłosz, who said that, “The living owe it to those who no longer can speak to tell their story for them.”

In similar vein, early on in each of the three Parts of his manuscript Tom White typed the following.

There are countless places, as holy as great cathedrals, far from their homeland, where lie Australia’s heroes.

The gates of memory are never locked; they swing open to ever-recurrent thoughts of loved ones and heroic deeds.

Every peep through them is an inspiration.

Tom’s burning desire was never fulfilled in his lifetime. This final photo of Tom with his son William Thomas White, 2/13 Bn, AIF, was taken on Anzac Day, 1962. Tom died 6 months later on October 27, 1962, one week short of his 76th birthday.



1958 – 2014: unlocking the gates of memory

Since 1958 the gates of his memory remained almost unlocked, never fully opened to enable all of us to “peep through them”. To be amazed by the scope of his work. And to be inspired by his commitment to the memory of his colleagues in the NSW public teaching profession who had enlisted in the service of their country in World War I and World War II.

The story of the journey of Tom’s 1958 unpublished three part manuscript - from when it was rediscovered in 1995 and published in a handful of sets in 1996 up until 11th August, 2014 - is summarised in the Introduction PDF document which I have written and which appears on the Departmental website where Tom White’s three PDF volumes are now published. The site is accessible at http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/news/educators_wv1-2/index.php

The 1996 publication included a superb Preface added by the then President of the NSW Teachers’ RSL Sub-Branch, the late Dr John H Dugdale. This has been retained in the digitised version now on the web.

I only learned about the existence of Tom White’s manuscript through my former colleague, Monica Ling, locating in the Department and providing me with two of the 1996 three part sets last year. She told me she thought I would be interested in them. Was I what?! Her action started me on the year long process which culminated in the Minister launching Tom’s work on the DEC internet less than a fortnight ago. I am very happy to see Monica here today.

I am delighted that my friend the former Director-General Dr Ken Boston AO, who was very influential in having those sets published in 1996, is also here with us today. Like all of you I’m sure, I am very much looking forward to hearing what Ken has to say today.

Having Tom’s three part manuscript now available on the web will have particular value for learning and teaching in **all** schools next year as we commemorate the Centenary of Anzac 1914 - 1918.

But Tom White’s legacy to NSW public education should continue for as long as we commemorate Australia’s participation in World War I and World War II.

I'm sure that if he were here today Tom would be so very grateful that the access to his monumental work has been finally "unlocked" and that the "children" and the "children's children" of those whose names appear in these three volumes will now have the right "to know of them". And to be, or to continue to be, very proud of them.

I am confident that not only every member of the Teachers RSL Sub-branch, but our present day NSW public school Principals, teachers and departmental officers, once they become aware of the remarkable Thomas Alexander White and his remarkable publication, will feel very proud that he was 'one of us'.

Finally, on a personal level, I am so delighted that 56 years after Tom White completed his monumental work, 52 years after his death, 18 years after the handful of three part sets were published, and just over 1 year since I set out on my quest to honour Tom and his legacy in the best way I believed we could – enthusiastically supported by our Departmental Secretary, Dr Michele Bruniges AM - we have finally been able to fulfil Tom White's passionate desire to have his work made accessible to all public school educators and their students for generations to come. But, thanks to the power and accessibility of the internet, in 2014 we have been able to expand, indeed surpass, the scope of Tom's vision all those decades ago.

I think that that is something to make all of us here today both happy and proud.

Thank you.