

# *Book Review by Warwick Hadfield*

History can be told in many ways. Famous men and women try to re-write it in expensively advanced memoirs.

Professional historians, much less well paid, do their best to remain neutral observers.

And there's a third way – brilliantly encompassed in this work by 'Cass Francis: using deeply personal reminiscences to shine light both flattering and otherwise on all sorts of famous events and people.

Who of the Australian persuasion would ever have thought of Tony Greig, the South African-born villain of the Centenary Test, as a man capable of the most gentle and genuine kindnesses to an old man.

And it is doubtful if any of the writings of Rommel or Montgomery contain anything as grippingly real as the descriptions of the Battles for Tobruk and Mechili provided by Cass Francis.

And there's perspective too.

A soldier learns to deal with death on a minute by minute basis, a quick grab of regret, then on with the job.

Bring the same soldier back to civilian life and the painless death of a trusted employee causes the most profound of grief.

Then there is the story of grief reversed. For two years a much-loved brother was believed dead, yet another casualty of war.

Then out of nowhere, news that he is alive. The feeling of relief is as profound all these years on as it was then.

Hundreds – probably thousands - of families would have shared both emotions when Australia was at war.

'Cass Francis autobiography has many moments of penetrating insight and recollection.

It is his one man's journey from a tiny town in the Central West of New South Wales, to the battlefields of Northern Africa, to the repatriation wards of Australia, to a life of willing hard slog running a business in the Eastern suburbs of Sydney, to being the father of an industrious tribe of kids, one of whom got a bit famous as a Test cricketer.

The early days bespeak an Australia many young people – through no real fault of theirs – wouldn't understand.

Horse-drawn delivery car carts, where the horse knew every stop better than the delivery boy.

Houses without refrigerators.

Towns without supermarkets.

A world where you reaped what you sowed, ate what you grew, worked for your pay.

Mr Francis has done enough for the benefit of his country to be entitled to have a view on its politics and political leaders.

None of the latter would like too much of what they read, if they ever bothered to read this worthy work.

They'd rather hang their hats on the latest opinion poll rather than listen to the seriously considered view of a man who was prepared to die for his country and nearly did.

Or who paid his taxes and his dues as a businessman with nary a wince of self pity.

This was life, let's get on with it.

While 'Cass Francis was a generous giver, he was never an "expecter".

What life offered in return was greatly received rather than demanded.

His trip to a Test match at the 'Gabba when in his 90s carried the same excitement and innocence as if he had been nine. Every gesture of hospitality was modestly accepted.

As the AFL coach Kevin Sheedy often says, history tells us we never learn from history.

But a whole lot of people could learn much from 'Cass Francis personal history:

About the importance of hard work,  
About the value of family,  
About the stupidity of war,  
About how ordinary young men willingly do the extraordinary when committed to the stupidity of war.

If as someone lucky enough to have avoided military conflict – and happily that's most of us Australians – you struggle to fully comprehend what our country was like during those difficult times, here's an insight.

And there's an insight too as to why in the peace that followed there grew a certain, grateful industriousness about post war Australians.

When so many around you didn't make it, you were happy to be alive.  
You were thankful for the blessings of another chance.

You were never going to let it slip.

Though 'Cass Francis may have reservations about how we have been led and laments some of the changes in society, his affection for Australia, even modern Australia, is obvious. There is a lot of goodness about our land and its peoples, and he says so.

A timely reminder of who we are and just how we got here is never a bad thing, particularly as we get further away from the times of great hardship that shaped our mores.

In his uniquely personal way, 'Cass Francis has provided us with a timely reminder of what we put at risk if we start thinking a living is something we are owed rather than something to be earned – lots of little pictures drawing one mighty big one.

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