Sarah Tout, host:

History can tell us the date that something happened: when, where, and who was there. But depending on how you look at archives, there is often a much richer, deeper, human story to be told.

[music: 'Voices of the Archives' by Sarah Tout]

Hello, and welcome to *Voices of the Archives*, a podcast exploring Margaret Medcalf Award-winning stories, from the State Records Office of WA.

My name is Sarah Tout and in this episode we consider what returning home was like for many of the soldiers who came back from World War One, injured and greatly affected by their experience at war, and many suffering what we might understand today as being Post Traumatic Stress.

Dr Leigh Straw, historian, author and academic believes in the importance of understanding what life might really have been like in the past.

Her work sometimes surprisingly crosses with her own personal history.

Whether exploring the history of women in crime, through to her research into the lives of returned servicemen from World War One.

Throughout her work it is clear that Dr Leigh Straw looks unflinchingly at what many are keen to turn a blind eye to. From researching murders to sex workers, mafia queens to widows, Straw shows us how things like discrimination or inequity can shape peoples' choices and futures, and she leads us down a beautifully empathic path of understanding.

Dr Leigh Straw's book *After The War: Returned Soldiers and the Mental and Physical Scars of World War One* was published in 2017.

It doesn't just look at historical dates and events, but reveals a delicate and careful portrait of what happened to men and families during and after the Great War. It seems like there is much understanding to be gained if we're brave enough to look at the details and the context of their stories.

Leigh Straw:

Yeah, well look, it comes from the fact that I'm a social historian, so that's kind of the lens that I put on, the way in which I engage with the past and the stories. And it was really what was driving the war work, was trying to understand, in a sense, how the society that these returned service people came back to, and how that society made sense or didn't make sense of their experiences, and how they themselves, in a very real, very human sense tried to continue on with their lives in the face of the mental or physical trauma that they'd gone through in the first

World War. So it's really about understanding people in the context in which they live, that's what we do as social historians.

Sarah Tout:

Mm. Let's start with some of the initial chapters of *After the War*. You take us right to the front of World War One, and we get some snapshots of their lives and what they see happening to themselves and their mates around them in the trenches and at the front. It strikes me that your descriptions are a real departure from what I'm used to seeing depicted in films, or other accounts of war, rather than spot-lighting action, explosions, drama, external conflict. Instead we really sit with these men and their feelings. I feel their fear and uncertainty. This is not a dry, historical account with dates and statistics. Can you tell us a little bit about the decisions you make in how to tell these stories?

Leigh Straw:

Yeah, look I think it was very much about how I was influenced in relation to some of the works that I've enjoyed reading over the years, and there's a wonderful Australian historian, Bill Gammage, and in the 1970s he'd completed his PhD and was putting together a book called *The Broken Years*, and he was really trying to humanise the stories of the men who had fought in the first World War, and I partly was influenced by that, you know, reading that a number of years ago.

But what I wanted to do in the telling of this story, you're right, was not to make it so much about…it's not the military side of it, it's not the theatre of war as such. It's more about that very real lived human experience, of what was it like to actually fight in the war. What did these men experience, as much as we can know after having not gone through it and me being a historian obviously not having a military background? It was just trying to really humanise their experiences and what families were also experiencing, as well. Because these are real people. These are people like you and I, and many others around us, who were placed in these extraordinary circumstances, and had to make sense of it themselves, so I was trying to get into their experience and their minds and then how does that communicate the very real, raw human experience of war. Because I didn't want to glorify war, I wanted to properly commemorate what these men had gone through, but also showing very clearly that their experiences did not end with the end of the war, and so quite often we'd mark our understanding of wars with a beginning and an end date. But wars never quite end because they live on in the minds and the bodies of those who fought.

Sarah Tout:

Yes, absolutely. It's almost like an exercise in empathy.

Leigh Straw:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, it is, it really is. When you read the letters and the diaries and you get a very real sense of the family experiences and records…that's the story that you want to tell, you want to tell their very, very human stories. And when I talk to family members, and I was going through those archives, what they really wanted was that these stories would be humanised. That they would have their family members understood and respected for the experience of what they went through.

And it wasn't against an Anzac legend, there was never any mention of it being as against that as some sort of heroic ideal. But it was very much about understanding the Anzac legend in the context of the people who were involved in the war. And who in part had, you know, been taken up as creating this legend.

Sarah Tout:

Yes, and you're right, it is about context, and expanding the context through which we can understand it, and indeed, this experience did not end for these men with the end of the war. Those that did return, the book explains very well that they experienced Tuberculosis, post traumatic stress, isolation, and then issues with pensions and the stigma of disability; these men faced many challenges. How did society regard the problems facing returned servicemen? Were they understood? Were they helped?

Leigh Straw:

I got a sense really, of where it depended on the communities but there was an overwhelming sense of where people would try and help out returned servicemen and their families, but you've got to also place it in the context of those who didn't have families around them and those who struggled by themselves. I don't feel there was a lot of support for them.

I think we really have to look at the reality of the fact that we had a West Australian society that was grappling with something that it couldn't understand, because it hadn't been through a war on this scale before. So this is a conflict that's fought in far off places, and then you've got returning from that far off conflict, and a lot of the men not wanting to share their experiences and not wanting to traumatise families or just simply they can't share their experience, and so there's a lot of silences that extend in to the '20s and the '30s and beyond; family silences, individual silences, not sharing the stories.

But I think where possible there were genuine efforts where the state and federal governments tried to help out returned servicemen and their families; we've got the various leagues that are established in order to look out for families, and for those who then are not quite covered by war pensions.

But I did find certainly that one of the things that we grappled with as a society then and still do was the issue of suicide, because it was such an intensely private thing, and because there was still the stigma attached to it; that families didn't really want to talk about this experience. But I did find that in talking to some families that now that they want this experience understood because they feel there's a bit of a - more of an understanding of it. Less stigma and more understanding.

Sarah Tout:

Mm. And you're right, there is less stigma, because the ways in which some of these issues and challenges the men were facing were talked about at the time are quite astonishing to read some of the vocabulary – or indeed, see, a lack of vocabulary – around really being able to understand what was described as 'insanity' or 'neurosis'.

Leigh Straw:

Yeah, well that's right, that's right. 'Cause the medical community was trying to also catch up, as well. We talk about PTSD now because we have the medical understanding of this. But this doesn't exist as a way of seeing the mental trauma of what the men had gone through. And so, you find that there are men who are institutionalised where there could have been treatment that could have been offered. We find that even that isolation of being sent off to a soldier hospital or into another institution that the isolation wasn't good for their mental health. I don't want to be too…sort of…judgemental of the past, because we're in a present context of where we can see that there's been a bit of a movement in terms of more understanding of mental health and of trauma. But if you look at the 1920s, late 1920s themselves, this trauma is felt by the men but it's also felt by society as well, so you've got a society reeling from the first World War and trying to make sense of it. And then the medical communities: that's certainly something that they're trying to catch up on understanding.

Sarah Tout:

Mm. I was intrigued to read that there were campaigns by religious leaders and also Edith Cowan to try and provide support for those men. Were these enough?

Leigh Straw:

I don't think it was quite enough, because I think that there's a lot of private suffering that happened, and so it's great for there to be understanding of it on a larger political level or on behalf of religious groups and identities and the churches, and certainly the police as well were understanding of the situations of some of the returned servicemen that they came across in their job. But there was also an awful lot of private suffering that accounts for, I guess, the loss of lives of returned servicemen out on farms for example, out in country areas where they're just not supported by organisations as such.

Sarah Tout:

Mm. And we see the stories of many different men and their families throughout the book. Tell us about Andrew Straw.

Leigh Straw:

Andrew Straw was a complete surprise. I stumbled across him looking for other criminal records and archives, and I stumbled across this story from Collie in 1929. And I thought it was really fascinating that here's a story, Collie, 1929, and I was drawn into the story initially by the headlines about how a returned soldier had taken a life of a woman in town and then he had taken his own life. And I printed the story off, I'd thought that's quite interesting, 'cause my husband's family were originally from Collie. And it wasn't until shortly after that I realised that the gentleman involved, his name was Andrew Straw. And so, my husband didn't know anything of this story, and it opened up a family story that had been silenced.

And from that I wanted to understand what Andrew had gone through; why in July of 1929 had he shot a woman dead and then turned a gun on himself? What had led him to do that, and how much was the war responsible for that? So tracing back his story, going through his war experience was really how it all started, to try and figure out: was there some sort of mental trauma that could explain why in 1929 he had done this? And I guess he was an entry point into wanting to understand the experiences of what other men had gone through.

So how common was his experience? How much violence was associated with returned men when they came back after the war? And it also made me want to understand his story in terms of a murder suicide just a little bit better. But he - he was a shocking story because it is unexpected but I imagine there are any number of other families around the country that certainly have similar stories that can be told but they get silenced by families, because of the shock of it too, and the trauma of what had happened. This is a small town where this has occurred and everybody knows everybody. And he had taken Muriel Pope's life, her children were orphaned, his children were then left with his wife, who then had the trauma associated with what had happened. It was a pretty shocking story to stumble across.

Sarah Tout:

Indeed. And there's so much there. And you say that trauma wasn't isolated to the incident, it ripples out through the families, and even generationally the trauma of such events are still with us now.

Leigh Straw:

Yeah, that's absolutely right. Yeah. It's also I think really it was a way in which I think my children could understand their family story as well, on their father's side, because they were starting to know a lot about World War One and the Anzac leg-

end and here they actually had a story that in the past you would say, 'we're not going to talk to children about that', but I talked to them about it so that they could understand the realities of war as well, that it's not just that you fight a war and you come back home and you set up your life again. That the war and the trauma associated with it does carry on. But part of telling Andrew's story was also respecting Muriel's story as well, the fact that she was the victim of his violence is a really important thing to certainly acknowledge in relation to that story.

Sarah Tout:

Yes, and you met with her grandchildren…

Leigh Straw:

I did, they were really lovely and approached me, and wanted to have a conversation around this, which I felt was an incredibly generous thing to do. And had also said they had wanted family members to know that it was okay, they knew what had happened, and there's a lot of forgiveness that's come through into their lives. It was, yeah, it was quite a poignant moment, to make that connection.

Sarah Tout:

And very powerful, a strong intersection between work and private life.

Leigh Straw:

Yes it is. Yeah, yeah, I don't often stumble into the realm of more private histories, I'd much rather to keep a bit of a distance because it tends to be a little bit easier, but Andrew Straw's story is only one of two personal stories I've told, the other is my Scottish Granny's story.

Sarah Tout:

Yes. Since you've raised that, tell us a little about that story.

Leigh Straw:

Well that story was about giving a little bit of more understanding to what working class families experienced in Scotland in the early 20th century and the people that are around in our lives that we meet when they're older, we never really understand all the things they've gone through, and the resilience and the toughness of their lives, and I'd been writing about particularly criminal women's lives for a number of years, and my Mum had mentioned to me about my Granny's story would be one that would be interesting to research, so I ended up fictionalising the story, but a lot of people who know me what's fiction and what's not.

It basically tells the story of Janet Calder, who was born in Glasgow and how her life being abandoned by her mother, left with her father, she and her two sisters are put into care, and just the life that she had lived in her younger years, and it's - on one level it's an incredibly hard and difficult story of abuse and of domestic violence, but at the other end of it it shows the remarkable resilience of people and their lives, and how you can have quite these intensely private people, who on the outside appear very…like they've completely got everything together as

my wee Granny was like, but in delving into her story really understood the deep problems of domestic violence in society, and particularly domestic violence in Scotland in the '50s and '60s, and what was very much kept behind closed doors, but not so different to the Andrew Straw in the war story, it was very much about intergenerational trauma as well. And for me, understanding what a grandparent can go through can be born into you as well, because of the intergenerational nature of that. So there's a lot that my Granny went through that explains a great deal about my Mum and myself I think.

Sarah Tout:

Yes, absolutely. It strikes me that your work is very important, because we get to follow these essential threads of story and context to understand more about the human experience.

Leigh Straw:

Yes, absolutely. I mean that comes through, in my work, it comes through in my teaching in university as well. It's about people of the past, because, as I'm often telling my students, we currently are the past, we are the people of the past if you look to the future people are going to look back at us. So you have to imagine yourself in the shoes of people in the past, and the experiences that they've had, because what it essentially allows you to do is that you see the people that make up the past and make sense of the people that make up the present today.

Sarah Tout:

Yes. Can you speak a little about the importance of archives to being able to understand people and contribute to the process that you're describing?

Leigh Straw:

Archives are essential to the work of historians in particular because we are very much dependent on the evidence that's left to us from the past. Archaeologists for example will talk a great deal about the material remains, and the evidence that you might well find at archaeological sites and so on, and that's quite crucial to their work and then they provide the context around that.

For historians, our evidence largely can be found in the archives. And so when we go to the archives there is the excitement of opening up a folder and what lies within that folder is a connection to the past, and it's going to reveal something to you about a particular topic, a person, a case, whatever it might be. And so that evidence is really crucial to historians because that's how we would make a case around whatever it is that we're researching. We're very much dependent on what those archives reveal. They tell us something of that past.

Sarah Tout:

Yes. Can you speak a little about winning the Margaret Medcalf Award, and what that has meant to you?

Leigh Straw:

Oh, it was absolutely fantastic, it was wonderful to receive that award. I really felt like receiving that award in part is significant because of the wonderful name of Margaret Medcalf associated with it, and the wonderful work that Margaret had done for many, many years. But the other part of winning the award was that it wasn't about me, it was about the stories contained within the book. It was about the men that I had researched and their families, and I really felt like it was recognition that their stories were important. So that's why the award meant a lot to me. Professionally it means a great deal, because it's an award that carries a wonderful reputation because it's about exactly what we do in terms of the archives we use, the evidence we refer to, the professional nature of referencing and putting a professional work together. So I was absolutely ecstatic.

Sarah Tout:

And can you offer advice for why people ought to nominate for the award?

Leigh Straw:

Well, I think people should nominate for the award, because quite often you'll find that people who have created the works, they won't nominate themselves. They'll say 'Somebody's done something better, why would I put myself forward for this?' And yet their works are all fantastic. So in nominating for this award you're recognising somebody's contribution to knowledge, to research, to scholarship, but you're also acknowledging their contribution to the work that they have produced and the significance that that has, be it maybe in relation to history, or memoir, or archeology, whatever it might be. I think that it's really important to nominate people because I know from a number of different examples that there will always be people who will not nominate themselves, and so you must nominate them.

Sarah Tout:

Thank you. Thank you so much. Leigh, I feel like I could talk to you for hours about your work, but is there anything that you would like me to include that we haven't covered today?

Leigh Straw:

I think just really the general importance of the State Records Office and the work that the staff do there. It is immeasurable. Honestly, every time I've gone in with a new project they've been enthusiastic, they've offered whatever support they can, and they genuinely are very interested in not only the work that people do, the research they have, the projects they're working on, but they're so enthusiastic about what the archives actually hold, so there's been a number of occasions in which I've been there that Damien Hassan has come back with a folder and said, "You have to have a look at this, I've just stumbled across it," and I think it's that genuine enthusiasm that keeps people coming back wanting to research more and more. And history for me is certainly so important, because as I said before, you can't understand the present without understanding the past.

Sarah Tout:

Leigh, it's been so wonderful talking to you, I really enjoyed that so much! (*laughs*)

Leigh Straw:

Good! Oh, that's great, you can talk to me anytime you want.

Sarah Tout:

I will! (*laughs*) And I look forward to the new book.

Leigh Straw:

Oh yeah, yeah, that's been a lot of fun. Yeah it's been great, so thank you.

[music: 'Voices of the Archives' by Sarah Tout]

Sarah Tout:

Thank you for listening to *Voices of the Archives*: a podcast exploring Margaret Medcalf Award-winning stories, from the State Records Office of WA.

Dr. Leigh Straw's book is *After the War: Returned Soldiers and the Mental and Physical Scars of World War One*.

If this conversation has raised anything for you please contact lifeline on 13 11 14. For help and support with domestic or family violence call 1800 RESPECT and help and support for Defence members, ex-serving members, veterans and their families is available 24/7 through Open Arms on 1800 011 046.

We'll also include those links in the show notes and on the SRO website.

This conversation was recorded on Whadjuk Boodjar, at RTRFM studios in Mt Lawley by me, Sarah Tout.

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For more episodes, and more info about the Margaret Medcalf Award, head to the State Records Office of WA's website.