

MY BROTHER JACK – HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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My Brother Jack by George Johnston is the first volume in a trilogy tracing the life of fictional Australian writer David Meredith. The three books are largely autobiographical, however Johnston has selected and shaped his material to serve the characters and situations he creates. *My Brother Jack*, structured around the relationship between David and his brother, was hailed as an Australian classic and won the Miles Franklin Award when it was published in 1964. The second volume in the trilogy, *Clean Straw for Nothing*, was also a Miles Franklin winner. *A Cartload of Clay* appeared in 1971.

The television miniseries is true to the narrative and the spirit of the novel *My Brother Jack* and offers much to History and SoSE students interested in Australia in the 1920s, 30s and 40s. It would be particularly useful for Years 11 and 12, but also mature Year 10s - if there is enough time in their teaching program. One of the great strengths of both the novel and the miniseries is the power to evoke a sense of time and place; a quality also attributed to David Meredith, the central character and narrator. David's editor, Brewster, praises his ability to produce *words that move people, writing that makes us taste and smell and feel as if we were there*.

While historical literature and film may have limitations as historical sources in terms of accuracy and reliability, they can be powerful aides to historical understanding, especially for adolescents. Works which feature rich historical contexts and effective characterisation invite students to enter imaginatively into the world of the past. Well drawn characters engaged with historical issues and events invite empathy, connecting students with the human drama of history and enabling them to reach a level of historical understanding. The miniseries *My Brother Jack*, with its strong story line and characterisation, quality acting and attention to historical detail in sets and costume, offers students valuable opportunities for empathetic engagement and historical understanding.

While students in English classes might focus on characterisation and the relationship between David and his brother Jack, History students could use the miniseries to explore several historical themes and issues, for example: the effects of World War One on family life; differing experiences of the Depression; issues of class and prejudice between the wars; women's roles; war and wartime propaganda and the significance of the Anzac legend.

Part One of the miniseries opens with the end of the First World War when David is seven and his brother Jack is ten. In a voiceover narration the adult David reflects that *World War One meant an absent father and a succession of mutilated young men who mother brought home to convalesce*. Jack Meredith Senior's return from the war is a disruption to family life. He carries with him haunting memories from the trenches and he faces disillusionment and frustration at work. He deals with it all by asserting a violent and authoritarian control over his family, with devastating consequences, especially for young David. This stark depiction of the impact of the war on families offers students valuable insight into a topic that is seldom dealt with in history texts for this period.

Differing effects of the Depression are represented. The US financial crash is signaled in newspaper headlines, and we glimpse evictions and hardship. The Merediths, however, do not lose their family home and Mr Meredith and David do not lose their jobs, although the firm of lithographers that David works for reduces wages in order to avoid sacking anyone. The unemployed are seen in the streets and parks, many wearing government issue black-dyed army greatcoats. Jack's experiences are different. He has a range of short term jobs and eventually goes to Chile in search of contract work. After a year he returns broke and sick and walks all the way from Sydney to Melbourne. We are left to imagine the hardship suffered by Sheila who supports herself and gives birth to Jack's baby while he is away. This representation of a diversity of experience broadens students' understanding of the human impact of the Depression.

Australian society between the wars harbored many divisions. Issues of class and prejudice surface in a number of contexts and could be used as a starting point for class discussion and further research.

David, *the second son of a tram driver*, is made to feel inferior when he begins work as a journalist with the Morning Post. Unlike his colleagues, David has no private school or university education and despite his obvious talent as a journalist, his supervisor sees him as a charlatan, someone who represents *a decline in standards*.

A completely different social scene is presented when David is introduced to bohemian Melbourne through an artist acquaintance, Sam. This libertarian world of jazz, avant-garde ideas and free thinking women, is a new experience for David, but is at first approached with suspicion by Jack who has a far more conservative outlook.

A new suburban middle class is shown when David marries Helen and moves to the garden suburb of Beverly Grove. At first David sees life in their new home as an escape from his working class background, *a new modern, sophisticated world*. In time, however, he comes to hate Beverly Grove and all it represents, he refers to it as a *facsimile of real life*. He instead looks with envy on the cluttered, chaotic but more alive home of his friend and colleague Gavin Turley, who is from an educated background of established wealth.

David comes into contact with anti-Semitism when he reports on Jewish refugees arriving in Australia from fascist states of Europe in the 1930s. An elderly Jewish couple are dragged away to be put back on the ship. A recently arrived refugee who witnesses the incident comments *Australia does not want Jews*. Mr Meredith spouts sectarian prejudice when Jack brings home Sheila, his Roman Catholic girlfriend. He accuses the Catholics of having helped the Kaiser in World War One by opposing conscription and condemns the Pope for his ineffectual role. The depictions of the treatment of refugees and tensions between religious groups invite comparison with similar situations today.

Mrs Meredith, Helen, Sheila and Jessica Wray offer an opportunity to explore the differing experiences of women in Australian society between the wars. The roles these women fulfil, the values they reflect and their relationships with the men in their lives would provide a useful scaffold for comparison with each other and with "real" women who lived in the same period. Cressida Morley offers yet another role, as a member of a women's defence corps in World War Two.

Part Two of the miniseries begins with an Anzac Day march in 1937 and David's coverage of the march is his first front page story. He has mixed feelings about Anzac Day and finds it difficult to reconcile what he knows about the effects of war from his father's experiences, but whatever he feels has to be *buried in the required chauvinism of the story*. His job at the Morning Post made no allowances for ambiguities, *it required one thing only, a hymn to undiluted national pride*. David's mother later tells Mr Meredith that his son's report *made you diggers look like Hercules*.

Is this the function of Anzac Day? Students could analyse media coverage of recent Anzac Day marches in terms of purpose and style. These could be compared with reportage from the 1970s when there was both apathy toward and criticism of the Anzac tradition.

Jack was keen to join up when World War Two began, *the myth of the noble Anzac was lodged and burning deep inside him*, but David was not so certain. The contrast between the two brothers is strongly drawn in their attitude toward the war. Ironically, David got to the battlefield and Jack stayed home due to injury. David arrived in New Guinea in 1942 as a war correspondent. We see glimpses of the rain and mud and some of the hardships of jungle fighting. David's editor had advised him that *propaganda is one of the most powerful weapons of war* and David is aware of the tension between the reality of the fighting around him and the function of his work. He disparages his role, claiming that he *was the perfect man for the job that must be done, a reporter with tendencies toward the unscrupulous, a writer of hymns to national pride*. He later tells those who praise his work that *the nation must have its myths*.

Such comments open up opportunities for discussion of the role of war correspondents. Should they reflect the truth of events around them – or should they contribute to national myths? What role should censorship play in wartime? Johnston's own war diaries were heavily censored, but the reports he dispatched to his newspaper and the book he wrote on the Kokoda campaign were widely read and greatly admired. Toward the end of the miniseries David the war correspondent has become a hero to Jack, the soldier who did not see active service. When David visits his brother's local pub, Jack proudly introduces him as *my brother Davey*.

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Note before screening to students. This series is rated **M**, recommended for ages 15+. It is recommended that teachers view the series before screening it. The series has some brief scenes involving nudity in Part Two which are contextual, but teachers may wish to fast forward through them.