Knowing: Black Diggers

TOM WRIGHT

Black Diggers is a play that premiered in 2014. Made from a series of connected vignettes based on true stories, Black Diggers reflects on the experiences of Indigenous Australian soldiers before, during and after the First World War. The play highlights the ironies and injustices experienced by Indigenous Australian soldiers during this period, and the fact that Indigenous Australian soldiers were only considered equals when fighting for a country that did not consider them citizens.

CONTEXT AND AUTHOR

Context

Long before the 1967 referendum, which voted to include Indigenous Australians in the census, Indigenous Australian soldiers had served in a number of wars for Australia. As Wesley Enoch’s director’s notes attest, ‘Despite limited social standing, appalling living conditions and lack of human rights, Indigenous men enlisted.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>War</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Boer War</td>
<td>1880–1881</td>
<td>Transvaal, South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Boer War</td>
<td>1899–1902</td>
<td>Transvaal, South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First World War</td>
<td>1914–1918</td>
<td>mainly Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second World War</td>
<td>1937–1945</td>
<td>Europe, Southeast Asia, Middle East, Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation of Japan</td>
<td>1946–1951</td>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean War</td>
<td>1950–1953</td>
<td>Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malayan Emergency</td>
<td>1950–1960</td>
<td>Malaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesian Confrontation</td>
<td>1963–1966</td>
<td>Indonesia, Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are counted as Australians</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Gulf War</td>
<td>1990–1991</td>
<td>Iraq, Kuwait</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>2001–present</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Gulf War</td>
<td>2003–present</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacekeeping</td>
<td>1947–present</td>
<td>worldwide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although more than 2000 men of Indigenous Australian descent enlisted, their work, sacrifices and achievements have largely gone unnoticed. Re-appropriating their contributions into the broader narrative about Australians at war makes some attempt to redress this imbalance.

**Author: Tom Wright**

Tom Wright was born in 1968 in Melbourne, Australia. He attended the University of Melbourne where he studied Fine Arts and English and acted in student productions. He continued acting throughout the 1990s, often under the direction of the renowned Barrie Kosky in a theatre company, Gilgul, that explored Jewish cultural identity. He was a member of many esteemed theatre companies, including the Melbourne Theatre Company, Mene Mene, and the Sydney Theatre Company.

Wright began writing in the late 1990s and, by 2003 his career had moved off-stage and into theatre administration and artistic direction. His work has been performed by Australian and international theatre companies. He is a prize-winning author whose collection of adaptations and original works has attracted critical praise. Black Diggers was awarded the Nick Enright Prize for Drama at the 2015 New South Wales Premier’s Literary Awards.

**Writer’s context**

The writing of Black Diggers was inspired when Lieven Bartels, a Sydney Festival Director discovered that an Indigenous Australian soldier was buried in the cemetery near his home in Belgium. The discovery inspired questions about how the soldier came to be there, so far from home, what had inspired him to enlist in the AIF in the first place, and what this said about broader Indigenous Australian experience.

In his introduction to the play, Tom Wright explains that he was commissioned to write Black Diggers, and only got the job six months before rehearsals began. He reflects on the sheer amount of research that had already been done and, as a writer, on how writing ‘about our history is always a fraught exercise’.

Indigenous Australians were usually subject to subtle and overt forms of racism, and the Armed Forces provided Indigenous Australian soldiers with a taste of a more equal society. In Australia, they were restricted from voting, buying property and even from entering public bars. Often they worked for lower wages and were prevented from marrying non-Indigenous partners. In the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) they faced the same hardships and challenges that their colleagues endured. On the battlefield they experienced the same conditions and camaraderie, as they faced the possibility of death at any given moment. However, as Dr David Williams has noted in his research for the play, ‘when they came back home they were shunned, their sacrifices ignored and their families oppressed even further by the government.’

A poster for the 2014 Queensland Theatre production of Black Diggers

Tom Wright
Wright was faced with a philosophical challenge and grappled with the idea of history: “Whose history is this? And who owns it?” These questions are especially important when dealing with the ‘intersection of big national myths and profound moments in Indigenous experience’.

He was also faced with a technical challenge: how to encompass the fact that ‘there is no one central black experience of WWII’. The answer was to use elements and ideas from many different stories, some closely linked to an individual story and others combined or manipulated to form a different whole. Ultimately the goal was to put ‘black faces back into all our history’.

STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

Style and narrative structure

*Black Diggers* has two acts, which consist of a series of vignettes that are connected by theme and the interwoven use of some characters. The rapid-fire transitions between the short, sharp scenes and the obvious historical importance of the ideas and events gives the play Brechtian elements. The non-linear narrative time-frame reinforces the deliberate feeling of fragmentation, designed to make us feel ‘as if the theatre itself is suffering from shellshock’.

According to Wesley Enoch (the original director, who wrote the foreword to the text) the play is broken into sixty-four vignettes or units, and then into five parts:

- Pre-Nation: a reflection on the wars and experience of Indigenous Australian people before nationhood
- Enlistment: the process of Indigenous Australian men signing up
- The Theatre of War: the stories from the front as reported in journals, letters, official records and oral history
- The Return: the effects of returning and the expectations of both the men who returned and those they were returning to
- Legacy: what has been left behind for us.

The play balances comedic moments with the much darker aspects of war and racism. It also incorporates a range of theatrical devices including monologues, the use of song and radio broadcast and the reading of letters and documents.

Story

The play follows a number of Indigenous Australian soldiers on their journeys before, during and after the First World War. While most of their experiences of war are the same as those of other soldiers, the play shows us that for Indigenous Australian soldiers, society ‘painted [the] colour back on’ after army service was over.

Symbols

**EVOLUTIONARY RACISM**

The idea of evolution and the development of humanity is present, and is particularly associated with the character of Nigel. Nigel, the boy who is taken from his home and raised by a white family, reminds us that Aboriginality was regarded as inferior to a non-Indigenous lifestyle. The juxtaposition of Nigel at the monkey museum with his father, and later with the Tarzan sandwich board is intended to reinforce the notion that for most of the country, Nigel’s biological family were little better than animals. Even in the Prisoner of War camp, he is regarded as exotic, his cranium is measured and he is studied, just like those museum pieces he saw as a child.

**LAND AND THE FIRST FLEET**

References to land and the First Fleet are used as a symbol of invasion. The importance of belonging to your own land is emphasised and refers to land both at home and abroad. We are reminded of the invasion of Australia by the European settlers, and the invading armies across Europe during the First World War. Grandad tells Bertie, ‘We’ve been fighting for country for a long time’ and when Frank dies, Bertie insists that ‘he can’t get buried in this dirt’, as his soul won’t know where to go home.
THE IRON HARVEST
Specifically mentioned by Ern when he is an old soldier, the Iron Harvest refers to the bits of shrapnel that rise to the surface from the earth after a conflict. Here, it is meant to remind us that the deeds and misdeeds from the past cannot be buried, they will always rise to the surface. Ern himself picks a piece of shrapnel – of his carefully buried history – out of his skin, decades after the war.

LETTERS, PAPERS AND THE PROTECTOR
Throughout the play, characters read extracts from letters and other papers that represent the colonial bureaucracy that surrounded Indigenous Australian life before and after the war. Often the references to ‘The Protector’ indicate a kind of paternal figure who doles out money and looks after Indigenous Australian people as if they are children. At other times, The Protector has an even more sinister aspect. The fact that many of the letters are either begging for entitlements or setting out appeal cases to higher authorities reinforces this impression.

The laws regarding Indigenous Australians make little or no sense. The fact that neither the clerk, the secretary nor the corporal have any idea what ‘Substantially European’ actually means highlights the ambiguity of the nation’s approach to Indigenous Australians.

TEXTUAL ELEMENTS
Characters
The characters in Black Diggers offer a broad range of voices about the experience of Indigenous Australian soldiers. Based on the stories of real-life people, they represent an array of varied insights. The characters serve to represent the voices of people and experiences that might have been lost to time.

NIGEL
- 1887: He survives the massacre of his parents in Bellenden Ker, Queensland. He is adopted by the Taxidermist. This is based on the real life story of Douglas Grant who was adopted by a Scottish anthropologist and taxidermist, Robert Grant and was then raised in Sydney.
- In 1914, he is in Gwydir, New South Wales and hasn’t heard about The Great War. He can see the irony in the Retired Schoolmaster’s fears that he might ‘wake up one morning and find us all under occupation’.
- 1895: He discovers the truth about his parents’ death from his taxidermist father.
- 1917: In Bullecourt, Nigel is welcomed into a dugout by other soldiers.
- Nigel is captured by the Germans while attempting to cut telephone wires.
- 1917, Zossen: Prisoner of War (POW) camp. Nigel is interned in a POW camp specifically designed for black soldiers from the Commonwealth. ‘They didn’t believe me when I said I was Australian. They said I must be Indian and sent me here.’
- 1917, Zossen: A German professor from Berlin measures his skull for an anthropological exhibition, as ‘Til now the Australian native was a gap in our knowledge, a few skulls, a few skins’.
- Nigel uses the opportunity with the professor to plead for better food in the POW camp. In particular he attempts to accommodate the Muslim POWs who cannot eat pork for religious reasons.
- 1929, Forest Lodge, Sydney: Nigel is an activist. He uses his education to fight for parity and justice. His correspondence with the journalists about the massacre at Conston where an estimated 170 Aboriginal people were slaughtered is futile. They appear to be less interested in this terrible crime than the fact that he is a literate Indigenous Australian man.
- 1932, George Street, Sydney: Nigel is reduced to wearing a sandwich board promoting Tarzan the Ape Man. He is drinking.
- 1951, Callan Park: Nigel is in the Callan Park Hospital for the Insane. The psychiatric nurse tells him that the bugger from the RSL (Returned and Services League) will be joining them for the Anzac Day service. His final words, and the final words of the play: ‘I don’t want to join in. I don’t belong’ are poignant.

TAXIDERMIST
- This character is based on the Scottish taxidermist and anthropologist, Robert Grant, who worked for the Australian Museum.
- He adopts the infant Nigel after his family is massacred by settlers. He reveals to Nigel that his biological parents were killed because they were in the ‘wrong place at the wrong time’.

HARRY
- 1916: On a boat travelling across the Indian Ocean, he experiences camaraderie and racism. The aggressive Private reveals his racism when he says it’s ‘upside down when a coon thinks it’s all right to sit and look me in the eye’. When the other soldiers rally and beat up the aggressor, Harry sees this is an acknowledgment of his being accepted.
1917 Polygon Wood: Harry reveals in a conversation with other soldiers his hope that when they return they’ll have a beer with him. He believes he is accepted when the soldier says, ‘You’re as good as a white man, Harry.’

1917, a trench: Ern, Archie, Mick, Stan and Harry reveal the tedium of trench warfare by playing the game ‘I spy’.

1949 Castlereagh Street: Harry is homeless. He is begging for money.

NORM

Norm is with Bob and Ern when they hear the news of the war breaking out in 1914. He has no idea what has caused it.

1915: He attempts to enlist but is denied because he has ‘Flat feet (Aboriginal)’. He lies at the next recruitment centre in order to sign up.

The stage direction, ‘They laugh and put on uniforms, hats, boots, most of which don’t fit’ indicates their displacement in the AIF.

1915, Queen Street: As Bob, Norm and Ern pose for their photograph dressed in their army regalia, they reflect on the fact that they are treated differently.

1918, Abbeville: Norm loses his hearing. He, Ern and Bob reflect on what life will be like when they return. Their hope for acceptance is met with some scepticism. ‘Maybe the folks will be different. But the land stays the same.’

1939, Cherbourg: Norm laments the lost opportunity for changed race relations. The promise of the war: ‘no-one said a bloody word about my skin’, has been dashed by the reality of his return: ‘They painted my colour back on the day I got off that boat’.  

BOB

Bob is with Ern and Norm when they hear the news of the war breaking out in 1914. He has no idea what has caused it.

1915: He tries to enlist but is rejected because he has ‘No White Parentage’. He lies at the next recruitment centre in order to sign up.

The stage direction: ‘They laugh and put on uniforms, hats, boots, most of which don’t fit’ indicates their displacement in the AIF.

1915, Queen Street: As Bob, Norm and Ern pose for their photograph dressed in their army regalia, they reflect on the fact that they are treated differently. ‘They look at you different, don’t they?’

1918, Abbeville: Bob loses his eyesight. He, Ern and Norm discuss the reception that they will get when they return home and the hope that the service they have offered their country will be recognised and their place in society accepted. Bob weeps, ‘You sort of want it all to be different.’

ERN

Ern is with Bob and Norm when they hear the news of the war breaking out in 1914. He has no idea what has caused it.

1915: He tries to enlist but is rejected because he’s ‘not a citizen’. He lies at the next recruitment centre in order to sign up. The stage direction: ‘They laugh and put on uniforms, hats, boots, most of which don’t fit’ indicates their displacement in the AIF.

1915, Queen Street: As Bob, Norm and Ern pose for their photograph dressed in their army regalia, they reflect on the fact that they are treated differently.

1918, Villers-Bretonneux: Ern meets the publican’s son from near his hometown. He reveals to him that the publican had taken his belt to Ern’s father for daring to want to be served a drink. Perce Hourigan promises that: ‘If we both get home, you’ll be walking into the front bar, mate’ thus giving hope that race relations might change upon Ern’s return.

1917, a trench: Ern, Archie, Mick, Stan and Harry reveal the tedium of trench warfare by playing the game ‘I spy’.

1918, Abbeville: Ern, Norm and Bob discuss what life will be like when they return home. In contrast to the other two men who are more cynical, Ern (perhaps naively) believes that, ‘They won’t forget you mate. You’ve fought for the King for Country. For our country. For Australia.’

1939, Cherbourg: Ern reveals that he has flashbacks to the war. He experiences terrors. He laments that Pat Duffy is still buried on foreign soil.

1939, Murgon: Ern’s dislocation is complete. He hands his service medals to the chemist.

1956: As an old soldier, Ern reflects back on his experiences. He reveals that shrapnel in his body is slowly working its way to the skin’s surface. It takes until 1956 for him to join the Anzac Day march. It is an experience where he stands in the rain and cries.

LAURIE

1915, Dardanelles: Laurie sees the irony in being part of an invasion force, and notes they are ‘arriving in boats uninvited’.

He turns to prayer to comfort him in his fear, as he lands on the shores of Gallipoli.

1917, Passchendaele: He learns that he has been sent out on reconnaissance under the mistaken belief that he has traditional tracking skills, despite the fact that he is from the inner Sydney suburb of Erskineville.

1917, Beersheba, Palestine: Laurie reveals his Christian heritage as he recites scripture to the British captain.

He returns home almost unrecognisable and finds it hard to explain what he has seen. ‘Jesus, where to begin …’

1937, Mount Gambier: Laurie is working as an usher in the church. When he is recognised as an ex-serviceman, he denies it.
**MICK**
- 1917, Ypres: Mick experiences racism from other black soldiers; in this case West Indian ammunition haulers. He punches them out.
- 1917, a trench: Ern, Archie, Mick, Stan and Harry reveal the tedium of trench warfare by playing the game 'I spy'.
- 1916, Pozieres: Mick shoots dead five Germans who had surrendered. He then reveals that he has killed ten German soldiers. 'Good haul for one man.'
- 1919: He survives the war and returns to Australia with Archie. He hopes that 'things don't go back to the way they were.'
- 1922, Western District Victoria: Despite his service record, Mick appears to be excluded from the Soldier Resettlement Scheme, which gives land to returned servicemen. He resents that some of the land that will be given away is an Aboriginal Reservation. 'Our grandparents were moved here because they were in the way ... I believed this would be different ... For you the war's over. What's starting to dawn on me is that, for us, it's never going to end.'

**BETRIE**
- 1917, Frying Pan Creek NSW: Bertie appeals to his mother and grandfather to sign the form allowing him to enlist, so that he can join 'the army. Earn money. See the world. Fight for country.' His romanticised view of the world is challenged by his elders. In particular, his mother reminds him that he will continue to be excluded because of his Indigenous Australian heritage and poignantly reminds him about the Narrandera Show when 'you and your sister would go and hang around, lounging on the barbed wire like a pair of skinned rats, looking in.'
- Bertie ends up in a field hospital. Bertie's letters to his mother are censored. In code, he writes to her to say that he needs her help to reveal the truth about his age. Cleverly, he uses the reference to the show to convey this fear. 'I have got through the fence. I have seen what the grown-up world is like.'

**BETRIE 2**
- 1916, Pozieres: Tommy and Bertie witness the death of an Indigenous Australian soldier. They reveal that they have lost their traditions for burying their dead. Tommy cuts a lock of the dead soldier's hair to return it to Australia. Bertie responds with the Lord's Prayer.
- 1916, Pozieres: 'I shouldn't be here! I'm fifteen. I shouldn't be here, I shouldn't be here.'
- After an explosion which entombs Tommy alive, Bertie panics as he searches for him.
- Bertie is discharged for being underage.
- Bertie returns to Australia. He is unable to speak.
- 1927, on the Murrumbidgee: Bertie remains mute. He is still holding the lock of hair from the dead soldier.

**ARCHIE**
- 1915: He writes to his aunt reminiscing about home and recalling scripture.
- 1917, a trench: Ern, Archie, Mick, Stan and Harry reveal the tedium of trench warfare by playing the game 'I spy'.
- 1917: In his letter to Aunty May, Archie reveals that Ollie Thomas has made an unsuccessful suicide attempt.
- 1918, near Amiens: Archie writes to Aunty May seeking clarification about John's Gospel. He doesn't comprehend that the scriptural meaning is that even at the darkest times, God's presence remains. He appears to have lost his faith.
- 1917, Messines: Archie fights an enemy soldier to the death; it is brutal and violent. The dying soldier, in German, calls him a 'Black devil. Black devil with white eyes ... last thing I see.'
- 1919: He returns to Australia with Mick. He hopes that 'all that stuff is the past, time for the future'.
- 1932, country town pub: Archie is refused entry to a pub on Anzac Day. He is told by the publican that he is not welcome. He laments that the experience of fraternity on the battlefield has not manifested itself in relationships in Australia upon return. 'Back in France, back in the mud. Blokes like you shook my hand.'
- 1920, Bertha Downs: Archie agitates for change on the cattle station. In particular, he lobbies the owner for assistance and care for the old, retired Indigenous Australian station hands who have been cast aside. The manager's response is harsh, 'I don't give a rat's arse where you've been and what you've done'. Archie becomes increasingly aware that he is different to the other Indigenous Australian workers.

**TOMMY**
- 1916, Pozieres: Tommy and Bertie witness the death of an Indigenous Australian soldier. They reveal that they have lost their traditions for burying their dead. Tommy cuts a lock of the dead soldier's hair to return it to Australia. Bertie responds with the Lord's Prayer.
- 1916, Pozieres: Tommy and Bertie are buried alive after an explosion caves in their dug out. Bertie reveals that he is fifteen, and Tommy is not much older.
- Tommy has been trapped in his hole for three days. He is traumatised by the experience: 'he is shaking and crying'.
- 1935, pauper's grave: Tommy is buried without ceremony or anyone in attendance. The minister reveals that Tommy had been homeless and that he had suffered from alcoholism. He was found dead with his service medals.
■ GHOST

The ghost’s soliloquy represents the fallen, nameless soldier. He recounts his experiences prior to enlistment when he would drift from one shearing job to another. His time on the battlefields of the Western Front is traumatic as he witnesses death and destruction. It is implied that he is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as he started getting the quivers.

He becomes a war hero when he storms a German machine gun post and graphically describes the way in which he kills the gunner: ‘I just squeezed his eyes out of his skull.’ He is honoured with a Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) for his bravery. Significantly, he says ‘even the officers looked at me with new eyes, the half-caste was rising in estimation’. He is blown apart in battle and his story becomes lost to the war.

■ STAN

- 1917, a trench: Ern, Archie, Mick, Stan and Harry reveal the tedium of trench warfare by playing the game ‘I spy’.
- 1949, Castlereagh Street: He offers the homeless Harry money.

■ THE PROFESSOR

The German Professor measures Nigel’s cranium in order to contribute to his anthropological records. His assumption is that it will help understand ‘racial difference’. This may be a precursor to the Aryan policies of the Nazis that became popular less than twenty years later.

■ BLOKE WITH A GLASS OF WINE

1949, Glebe Town Hall: The Bloke With a Glass of Wine is an Indigenous Australian public speaker who had formerly served in the armed forces. He reminisces about his time in the army with fondness, despite the trauma that he has endured. In particular, he highlights the sense of belonging, of ‘identifying with Australia’. He also celebrates the achievements of the Indigenous Australian boxer Dave Sands who in 1949 defeated Dick Turpin for the British Empire middleweight title.

■ CORRESPONDENTS

The correspondents represent the nameless Indigenous Australian soldiers who were denied the same rights and experiences as their fellow soldiers. Each of the letters reveals an injustice carried out against them.
- The first letter decrees the fact that a soldier has been forced onto an Aboriginal reserve.
- The second letter laments that he and his four brothers are ‘unable to claim what our white colleagues expect as a matter of course’.
- In the third letter the correspondent has resorted to calling himself a ‘Maori as no-one knows otherwise’.
- The fourth letter reveals that the correspondent’s birth name and enlistment name are different.
- The fifth letter is written on the behalf of a Mr Prudden who is suffering from shellshock.
- The sixth letter angrily expresses resentment that food is being withheld.
- The seventh letter is an appeal to the RSL to seek their assistance in lobbying the government for full citizen privileges.

■ THE SETTLER, THE STOCKMAN AND THE BOUNDARY RIDER

These men are responsible for the murder of an undisclosed number of Indigenous Australians. The settler’s line, ‘You were happy enough to fill its mother’s back with pellets’ indicate the cruelty with which frontier wars were enacted and the disregard for the traditional owners and custodians of the land.

■ RADIO ANNOUNCER

The radio announcer’s declaration that ‘the Australian has arrived. Fair, clear of eye, the finest of the British race cast anew under a southern sun,’ reveal a mono-racial view of Australians, and highlight that Indigenous Australian people are excluded from this definition.

■ RSL SECRETARY

The secretary intervenes when Archie is refused service at the pub on Anzac Day. He says, ‘we don’t see the skin, we see the service’. He is a symbol of hope for a change in race relations in Australia.

■ THE FARMERS

The farmers are archetypes who represent the farmers who were displaced as a result of the Soldier Re-Settlement Program.

IDEAS, ISSUES AND THEMES

The importance of names

There are a number of occasions when the Indigenous Australian characters query the name ‘Australia’, stating that they don’t know the land by that name. The minister burying Tank Stand Tommy in 1935 also reflects on this, when he enumerates the many names that the dead man had been known by over the years.

When enlisting, Ern asks the recruiting corporal ‘Does it have to be my real name?’ on his forms. After they are rejected Ern, Bob and Norm decide to be more cunning in their next attempt and they sign up with false names. This becomes an issue after they are discharged because, while it allows the men to fight under false names, the Department will not pay them their compensation after the war.

The text also shows that nicknames may be used to include or exclude people. Nicknames in the trenches, such as ‘Darkie’ seem to imply affection or respect. When the same kind of epithet is applied in Australia, it is denigrating. Archie, for example, is told by the manager of Bertha Downs station that he is ‘the worst kind of black, an uppity one’.

To highlight the importance of names, Wright includes the 1993 speech by Prime Minister Paul Keating at the Dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown soldier, and follows it with the final scene of Nigel, a man who has lost both his Aboriginal name and his identity.
Race

As the play's title suggests, the issue of race is never far for the Indigenous Australian soldiers. Proud of their ancestry, they encounter racism both overtly, as well as in more subtle ways. In all phases of their experience, from enlistment through to their time on the battlefields and then upon their return, they encounter prejudice and discrimination. They are seldom allowed to forget that they are seen for their ethnicity first, and as soldiers second. Their race is a reminder that they are never fully accepted.

Peppered throughout the play are instances of the race relations that have plagued Australia's history. The opening scene, when the murder of an Indigenous Australian community is carried out on the Bellenden Ker is revealing for its barbarity, and in its depiction of the slaughter of women and children.

The same prejudice that views Indigenous Australian people as inferior is also evident when the men go to enlist and are knocked back because of their Aboriginality. Whether it is their 'Deficient Physique' or 'No White Parentage', the assumption by the commanding officers is that they have no place in the Australian army.

For the Indigenous Australian soldiers, the camaraderie and mateship afforded by the bonds of serving alongside their colleagues goes some way to dissipating age-old resentments. Although they continue to experience racist jibes, exclusion and threats, it could be argued that they also experience acceptance and mateship not afforded back in Australia. Bob's observation that 'they look at you different, don't they?' is echoed by Ern's observation, 'Yeah, can't put my finger on it. Like they've forgotten you're -'. Still the spectre of racism rears its head and they are subjected to taunts even from their peers, such as the Aggressive Private who says to Harry, it is 'upside down

when a coon thinks it's all right to sit and look me in the eye and touch the same metal plate and finger the same spoon and drink the same bloody water as a white man'.

Other members of the colonial forces subject the Indigenous Australians to disparaging comments. The Indian soldiers lambast them with racist taunts, while the enemy soldiers are particularly vicious in their comments.

But it is their return home that proves to be the most challenging for the men. Despite their contributions to the war effort, they are not given the same respect or recognition as their colleagues. As Norm poignantly recounts, 'for three years no-one said a bloody word about my skin' and then, 'they painted my colour back on the day that I get off the boat'.

Whether it is their exclusion from the Anzac Day marches, or being denied the Soldier Settlement Scheme land, the men are not afforded the same equality again. Although some of their colleagues defend their rights; such as the RSL Secretary who says to the publican, 'we don't see the skin, we see the service'; ultimately racism continues to reign by the end of the play.

Equality

'Here in the shit every face is brown
You see the world's turned upside down.'

Despite the wealth people accrue, the status they achieve or the fame they obtain, ultimately death comes to us all. The soldiers in Black Diggers recognise that on the battlefield, for the most part, they gain more equality. The spectre of death hangs over all soldiers, and the changed living and working conditions that they find themselves in precipitate a re-evaluation of the accepted norms and behaviours. What had been once acceptable in Australia is no longer applicable in the realm of war.

Ern, for instance, discovers that Perce Hourigan, the publican from his local pub is prepared to see him as an equal. Despite their troubled history where Perce's 'old man took his belt to [Ern's old man] a few times', Perce promises him that 'If we both get home, you'll be walking into the front bar, mate.' This notion of mateship and equality so central to the myth of Australian egalitarianism, is given full expression in this encounter.

Harry also finds that on the front, Stan says to him, 'we'd always have a beer with you,' and the First White Soldier says, 'You're as good as a white man, Harry.' Yet the promises forged on the battlefront prove to be elusive upon the return home. It is only for that brief, fleeting moment of time, that racism is somewhat subjugated.

Ultimately, Norm will lament, 'For three years no-one said a bloody word about my skin. And when I spoke I was heard. And when they called me mate they meant it. And nothing has felt as good since the day I was demobbed.'

Shattered dreams

Mick says: 'For you the war's over. What's starting to dawn on me is that, for us, it's never going to end.' This highlights that during the war, the soldiers experience a more equal treatment, which proves elusive once they return to Australian society. They learn that society has not progressed at all and that the hopes for a more inclusive community are illusory. Even the friendships forged with their peers are not sustained when they return. The old prejudices resume and the social norms are restored.
For the Indigenous Australian soldiers, this is a cruel blow. In being denied the rights of other returned servicemen, they are reminded that their sacrifices were not worth it and that the respect they experienced on the battlefield has not carried over. They are denied access to the Anzac Day marches, and their rights to land following the Soldier Resettlement Scheme, as well as being prevented from enjoying leisure activities such as drinking at the pub. Through this injustice, they are reminded that they are, in fact, seen for their ethnicity first and as soldiers second.

There is a particular sense of displacement for the soldiers since they can no longer step with ease into the lives that they left behind. Having been exposed to new possibilities, particularly in race relations, precipitated by the war, they find it hard to resume their old lives. Archie, for instance, now having the courage to speak up, finds that he is ostracised as a troublemaker. His discontent and his willingness to question the status quo means that he is targeted. When the manager of the property says to him, ‘you listen to me and you listen to me nice and close. I don’t give a rat’s arse where you’ve been and what you’ve done ... As far as I’m concerned you’re still the boy who used to shut his lip and do as he was told’, Archie is metaphorically slapped down and reminded of his position of inferiority. This ‘troublemaking’ disposition means that he is alienated from people he once knew.

Without a network of support and without the opportunities being made available to them, the soldiers invariably fall on hard times; perhaps most tragically in the case of Tommy, whose homelessness and alcoholism see him permanently ostracised.

For the soldiers, the world may have changed but the same challenges and prejudices have remained.

**Christian beliefs**

Religious, specifically Christian references are sprinkled throughout the play. There is an understanding that most characters involved (Indigenous Australian, European and British) are Christian and share a religious language and culture. Archie’s letters to his aunt meditate on religious lessons that he has learned and reassure her that he has joined a Methodist Bible reading group. In the final letter, however, we sense that he has lost his faith, as he uses the quote from John as a way of explaining the darkness in which he finds himself. This is a contrast with Laurie, who we last see as an usher in a church, where he is seeking sanctuary, reluctant to admit that he was in the Lighthorse in Palestine. Secretly though, he is celebrating the fact that at least the war had allowed him to walk ‘in the Holy Land’.

Wright shows us how pervasive the influence of Christian missionaries was on Indigenous Australian communities. Tommy and Bertie worry that Frank’s soul will not know how to get home, which is an ancient belief about the link to the land they were born in, but they say the Lord’s Prayer over his body as the only fitting ceremony they know. Similarly the narrative uses the metaphor of Lazarus to explain the rebirth of Tommy after he is buried.
4. Research each of the following references that are made in the text and make notes in your workbook. Explain their purpose or link to the text *Black Diggers*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Ottoman Empire</th>
<th>The Huns</th>
<th>Mahommedan Turks</th>
<th>The First Fleet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coniston</td>
<td>David Sands</td>
<td>The Protector</td>
<td>RSL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Western Front</td>
<td>Shellshock</td>
<td>British Empire</td>
<td>Soldier Settlement Schemes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Write a short paragraph that explores the role of the non-Indigenous characters after the war and the ways in which they respond to the Indigenous Australian characters.

6. The play uses some elements of Brechtian Theatre. What does this mean and how is it used in this play?

7. Are the men naive to believe that things will be different when they return home?

8. What ideas about nationhood and nationality are explored in the conversations between Bertie, his mother and his grandfather? How do these contrast with the ideas expressed by the voice from the wireless?