• 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 Coniston 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 bugler 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.
**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. Fierce 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: Norm loses his hearing. He, Ern and Bob reflect on what life will be like when they return home. 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.’

**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 home. 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.’

**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.’

**BERTIE**

- 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 skinny 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.'

**BERTIE 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 Auntie May, Archie reveals that Ollie Thomas has made an unsuccessful suicide attempt.
- 1918, near Amiens: Archie writes to Auntie 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'.
- 1922, 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 shear ing 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 decries 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 lines, ‘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.