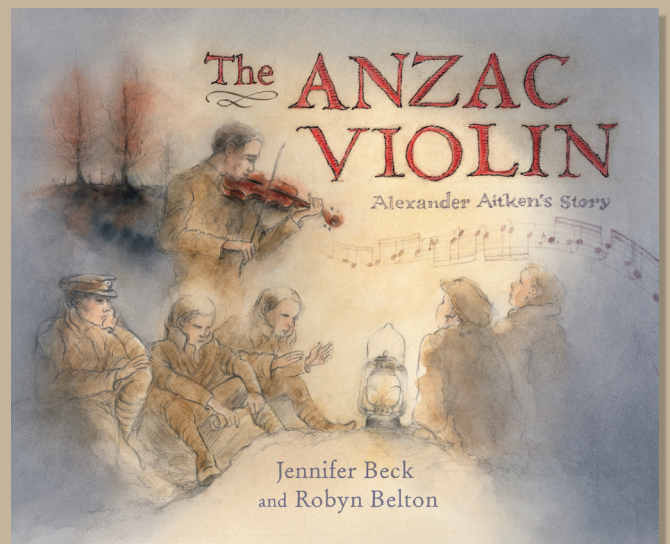


# The Anzac Violin

## Alexander Aitken's Story

Text by Jennifer Beck

Illustrations by Robyn Belton



• Art • Reading • Writing • Thinking Skills

## Synopsis

This is Alexander Aitken's story of how he entertained the soldiers in the shadow of the pyramids in Cairo, and in the dusty ditches during the battles in Gallipoli during WWI. He takes the violin with him on ships, up steep slopes, and while marching to the next battlefield. Whenever he goes off to fight, fellow soldiers keep it safe for him. But when he leaves it behind before going into the battle of the Somme, he's sure it will be the last time he sees his violin again. Alexander is critically wounded during the battle and taken to hospital, eventually sailing home. Back in Dunedin he tries to forget the war and seeks solace in music. In 1918 a large package arrives and he's reunited with his violin again.

## About the Author and Illustrator

Author Jennifer Beck began writing at nine years of age, wrote articles for newspapers in her twenties and had her first book published in her forties. She trained as a teacher and psychologist, working in schools in the Auckland region. Over the years, she has had 50 children's books published, and many are still in print. She has won a collection of awards during that time, including the 1997 Best Picture Book and Book of the Year Award for *The Bantam and the Soldier*, also illustrated by Robyn Belton. The two have collaborated on a number of award-winning books.

Illustrator Robyn Belton kept an artist's journal while she went to boarding school from 12 years of age. "That book became a diary in a sense ... I mercilessly drew every matron, prefect, all the people in the dormitory ...". After school, she studied at the Canterbury School of Fine Arts and once qualified worked for a time illustrating the *School Journal*. Robyn has illustrated numerous award-winning books with Jennifer Beck, Joy Cowley and other well-known authors. As well as illustrating, Robyn visits schools and lectures at polytechnics. Her art has been exhibited in New Zealand, Australia and Japan.

## Writing Style

*The Anzac Violin* is written in creative non-fiction style; based on a true story but written with a classical story arc and including imagined dialogue. Suspense is created at several intervals, encouraging the reader to read-on. The book is likely to be read aloud to 4-6-year-old children and/or read by an independent reader. Junior, middle and senior primary school students will find the sophisticated picture book story interesting. The story is written in third person point of view in the past tense. At the back of the book is the background to the story and the references Jennifer Beck used to research Alexander Aitken's life and what it was like on the battlefield.

# Illustration and Design Style

The book is presented in picture book style, with pictures dominating the page and text written over top of light watercolour backgrounds or on white space. In hardback version, it has endpapers picturing extra illustrations, photographs and captions. Robyn Belton's expressive figures are drawn with loose pencil or black lines and coloured with muted watercolours. The landscape scenes are either intimate or broad, creating electric atmospheres. The designer has captured a historical look with the use of sepia coloured paper, and adorned lines.

## Shared Learning and Discussion Points

### ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

- Look at the cover. Do you think this is a fiction or non-fiction story? Why?
- What information can you learn from the endpapers?
- Turn to your partner, and tell them what you know about WWI.
- Skim and scan, flicking through the pages of the book in its entirety. Judging from the type of pictures and design of the book, when and where do you think this story is set? And who is it about?
- On the very first page of the story is a picture of a boat in an ocean and the caption: 'August 14th 1915, 6th Reinforcements N.Z.E.F.' What could that mean and where do you think they are going?
- How did Alexander receive a violin? (p. 7) Discuss with the class what sort of instrument a violin is.
- Why is Alexander hesitant to take the violin at first? (p. 8)
- Why would having a really good memory help with playing the violin?
- How do you think the passengers felt when they heard the music on the ship and in Egypt? (p. 9)
- What did Alexander write in his violin case and why? (p. 11)
- How did the soldiers hide the violin case during inspections? (p. 12)
- Why did the men help him hide the violin? They would have got in trouble too.
- When you look at the pictures on these two pages, what do you fear for the men most of all? (p. 14-17)
- Why did Alexander feel like throwing the violin in the gully while climbing up the slopes? (p. 16)
- What is a dugout and why would it be a good place to store his violin? (p. 18)
- Why hadn't he wanted to take the violin out onto the battlefield?
- Why did the violin music cheer up the soldiers? (p. 22)
- What sort of song do you think *The First Noël* is and what would it remind the men of? (p. 22)
- What do you think 'imminent danger' might mean? (p. 23)
- Why might Alexander not be allowed to bring his violin when they evacuate from Gallipoli? (p. 24)
- Why was the soldier so astonished when the officer offered to take the violin with his stuff? (p. 24)
- Why did Alexander take his violin to a music shop in France? What did you first think he was going to do with the violin there? (p. 28)
- Why did Alexander think, when he left his violin behind on page 31, it would be the last time he saw it?
- How did Alexander leave the war? (pp. 32-33)
- What did Alexander do when he returned home from the war? (p. 33)
- How did the violin return to him in 1918 and why do you think the soldiers went to so much trouble to keep the violin safe? (pp. 34-35)
- How was Alexander's exceptional memory a gift and a burden? (p. 36)



# Activities

## ACTIVITY 1: PERFORM IT!

Listen to the music that Alexander plays to the soldiers:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uB8mzdO3Mnl>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRFuWf46Izl>

Pick one of the pieces of music and then as a class choral recite\* the story with the music as a backdrop. After a few practice-runs, record it and play it back. Consider also performing it for your school assembly.

\*Choral recite is when as a class you read aloud a story/poem with some words/lines read aloud by 1-2 people, and some are read aloud by three or more people.

## ACTIVITY 2: VIOLIN WRITES HOME

Pretend you are the violin. Tell a story about the adventures the violin got up to when it was in France without Alexander. Alternatively write a letter from the violin to Alexander saying what it is doing in France.

## ACTIVITY 3: SHAPE THAT VIOLIN!

Make up a poem about the violin or Alexander playing the violin and shape the poem in the shape of a violin. Google online for examples of violin/guitar shape/concrete poems.

## ACTIVITY 4: HAPPY MUSIC

The violin music cheered up the soldiers in WWI. Create a piece of music, or song, or dance to perform to a small group or class that is cheerful and will put a smile on everyone's face.

## ACTIVITY 5: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE INTERESTING!

Name something good, something not-so-good, and something interesting that you learned about Alexander's life on the back pages of the book. Here's a chart to help you out:

PMI on Alexander's Life		
PLUS 😊	MINUS 😞	INTERESTING

Written by Maria Gill