

Caravaggio's 'Crucifixion of Peter'

Strange to see this painting on Anzac Day
But apt too, when you think of all those men
Like Peter sliding to death on an upturned cross,
Rammed into foreign dirt.

So often we think of Christ's death.
But what of Peter nailed to a half-raised beam
Who asked to be crucified upside-down
In order not to rival the son of God?

A set-relief of martyrdom. An old man
With the chest and strength of a young saint,
His soul imprinted on the base of his feet,
Refusing to recline in the picture plane.

Surrounding him, three faceless Romans,
Straining against their tidal fates
Unable to bear the weight of guilt
That pulled them into history's shadow.

And what should we make of the work's
Reception? The antiquity of a masterpiece
Commissioned for the Cerasi Chapel
Of Santa Maria del Popolo, but loathed

By its parishioners who objected to seeing
Their gilded idols dressed in rags of baby cloth,
And dying, like the diggers at Gallipoli,
Head-down in galling dignity.