

WAR STORY RECALLS A DAD'S GENEROUS SPIRIT

EMMA WILLIAMS

HOPE and perseverance are the overwhelming themes of Brisbane author Vicki Bennett's new picture book *Two Pennies*.

The book is a true story about how her father, Henry "George" McGregor, as a five-year-old boy in Australia, got a job grooming horses each morning with the aim of raising money to build a school in Villers-Bretonneux, France, which had been destroyed in World War I.

He began with two pennies, which inspired fundraising that eventually resulted in the school being rebuilt.

George made it his dying wish that his daughter take two pennies to the school in France as a nostalgic gesture.

The story of the penny drive was one Bennett's father spoke of proudly to his family.

"He used to call it the 'mile of pennies' because he remembered the day the headmaster got them all to place their pennies end to end around the school, like a shiny snake," Bennett says.

"He talked about that being one of the most amazing things he had seen in his life."

Bennett believes the penny drive fuelled his passion for community work, which he continued for the rest of his life.

"France seemed very far away from kids in those days," she says. "For them to help a little village on the other side of the world was amazing. It



NOSTALGIC: Author Vicki Bennett has written a touching children's book based on a story her late father used to tell her about the war; the book cover (inset). Photo: Richard Waugh

was such a dream for my father."

Writing her father's story was an important part of her grieving process after he died in 2012.

"I was talking to one of my daughters and I said to her 'I don't know where this is going, I just have a real need to get the story out'," Bennett says. "She told me to just keep writing and it would tell me where I need to go."

Bennett says the story is particularly poignant with the

centenary of the Gallipoli landing this year, because many of the men who served there were also sent to the Somme, where Villers-Bretonneux is located.

Bennett says it's not only important to remember the sacrifices made in war but also the hope and courage.

"A friend of mine who was an officer in the Vietnam War read the book and loved it," she says. "It touched a real chord in him. He said that's how we should remember war."

When writing the book it was important it looked like it

fitted the time period it was set in. Bennett enlisted the help of John Flitcroft, a scientist with a passion for drawing, to illustrate it.

"I wanted it to look like the books children read in that period," the author says.

"John's illustrations are so detailed, they make you linger on the page."

In 2012 Bennett took her father's last two pennies to the Victoria School in Villers-Bretonneux and made a speech. When she looked up, the headmaster was laughing and crying at the same time.

He was laughing at her French pronunciation but crying because the story was still so emotional for the people of the town.

Bennett will be returning to the school later this year to present a French version of her book.

"My Dad was a very proud father and really encouraged everything we did," she says.

"He'd be tickled pink I wrote his story down."

Two Pennies by Vicki Bennett, illustrated by John Flitcroft, Boolarong Press, \$19.99 vickibennett.com.au