

Anzac — Why has it lasted?

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I am sure that I do not need to point out to this audience tonight that the Anzac legend' or 'myth' now occupies a dominant place in the Australian political culture. Not only is 'Anzac', to use the common shorthand, routinely invoked by politicians and the press as 'what it means to be Australian', but Anzac Day has become the de facto national holiday.

Often this phenomenon is presented as something natural, and organic, a kind of spontaneous surge of national sentiment from the well springs of the Australian people. But of course it is not. From its origins to today the Anzac legend has been like all collective memory, a construct, a selective memory of the past and only one way of remembering a complex and multidimensional history.

How then do we explain the dominance of Anzac in today's culture, and will it continue to occupy this place in the future? I am not sure that we can yet answer these questions yet, so close are we to them but tonight I will develop a few points for debate and discussion.

First, we need to recognize is that Anzac today is not what it was in World War I. The legend of course had its origins in the Gallipoli landing of 1915 which was reported in extraordinarily euphoric and hyperbolic terms by the English journalist Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and the Australian war correspondent Charles Bean. Their message to the Australian public was that the men of the Australia Imperial Force had performed remarkably: that is, they were great fighters. They had jumped into the sea and scaled the cliffs without waiting for orders. They were 'a race of athletes', courageous, 'happy because they had been tried for the first time and had not been found wanting'; and though they were raw colonial troops, they had proved themselves 'worthy to fight side by side with the heroes of Mons, the Aisne, Ypres, and Neuve Chapelle'.

From this beginning, this valorising rhetoric was embraced by Australian authorities and the press, and — what is often forgotten — the imperial government, all of whom saw in celebrating the Gallipoli landing a means of affirming the role of the Dominions in the wider war effort and maintaining their commitment to it. In 1916, for example, the British hosted a remarkable anniversary ceremony in Westminster Abbey, which was attended by King George V and a galaxy of the British political and military elites. This, to my current knowledge, was the only time in which a World War I battle was commemorated during the war.

But not only was the commemoration of Gallipoli a useful tool in the hands of governments to promote recruitment; it clearly resonated with the bereaved families in Australia who found in these rituals a means of investing their huge personal losses with meaning and significance. It has also been suggested that Anzac served the purpose of providing a focus for identity a nation which had been in existence for little more than a decade.

For these various reasons, Anzac rapidly assumed a place in the cultural imagination of many Australians as the foundational narrative of Australian nationalism. Progressively, in the hands of those great memory makers, Charles Bean and John Monash, it became not only a celebration of the military prowess of the men of the AIF but an affirmation of them as citizens in arms. The ‘digger’, it was claimed, was the product of a society in which the bush shaped the cultural imagination and social mores; in which men learned to be independent in spirit and thus natural and resourceful fighters; in which the relative lack of class made men willing to challenge rank and authority; and in which the quality of mateship was valued above all. In other words, and this is essential to understanding why Anzac has endured, the myth celebrated civilian values.

Whether this representation of the Australian was historically accurate did not really matter because the Anzac legend was not — and is still not — history. That is, it is not an account of the past that can be verified by the normal tests of evidence employed by professional historians. Rather the legend is memory: by which I mean, it one of the ways in which Australians at the individual and collective memory recall the past. Since memories are always multiple and subjective, they are always politicized, and most importantly they tell us more about the values and priorities of the present than about what actually happened in the past.

So what of the present? Some critics have argued that the Anzac memory has become so dominant in today’s political culture because it has been promoted by successive Australian governments, which have thereby militarized Australian history. There is no doubt that there has been, since 1990 particularly, a major and sustained investment by Australian governments in the commemoration of war: in memorial building, in battlefield pilgrimages and in the development of educational materials and activities aimed at socializing school children into the story of Anzac. Mark McKenna has argued that Anzac Day also gained renewed salience in the 1990s because it was less contentious focus for national identity than Australia Day, with all its problematic associations with the expropriation of land and the violence against indigenous Australians. It is clear also that in the hands of Paul Keating, the memory of the war in the Pacific in 1941–45 became a means of articulating a form of exclusive Australian nationalism, one that had shed the imperial loyalty which so much part of Australians’ worldview in 1914. It was the Keating government which initiated such commemorative activities as the Australia Remembers campaign of 1995 and a spate of memorial building which reached its apotheosis under John Howard. In Howard’s term of office, some thirteen new memorials were installed overseas, contributing to what I like to call a global memory footprint by Australia on multiple countries around the world.

This government investment is continuing today with, by one estimate, some \$325 million of funding at the federal and state level being allocated to activities commemorating the centenary of World War I. To name only some activities being sponsored, each federal electorate is being allocated \$125,000 for commemorative activities, the Australian War Memorial is launching a new First World War gallery and a new Remembrance Trail is being developed linking battlefields in northern France and Belgium.

However, we cannot explain the resurgence of interest of war memory in the last two to three decades — something which has occurred globally as well as in Australia — simply in terms of ‘top down’ orchestration by government of a gullible public. This memory making of government agencies has

been effective only because, like Anzac Day in 1916 and 1917, it has resonated with the emotions and values of at least some sections of Australian society. Australians, like people across the Western world, have manifested a “turning to the past” in recent decades. Perhaps this has something to do with the decline of formal religion and the search for other rituals to take its place.

Almost certainly it is linked to the explosion of interest in family history and genealogy: the *Who Do You Think You Are?* phenomenon. This interest has itself been fuelled by the internet which since the late 1990s has given family historians increasingly easy access to comprehensive sets of datasets about military personnel, thereby enabling them to position their own personal histories in wider national and universal narratives. I do not think we can overstate the importance of the fact that the graves of the British Empire dead list individual soldiers by name, and provide details such as age and date of death, plus a personal inscription from the bereaved family. It is these details which enable the visitors to war cemeteries (significantly named ‘pilgrims’) to experience an often deeply emotional response. What emotions they are feeling can, of course, be debated. I do not think it is grief. Rather it is somewhat sentimentalized melancholy about mortality and particularly the death of the young which in today’s society is now so rare.

The argument that at least some of the impetus for war memory is “bottom up” — for want of a better word — is also supported by the fact that in many instances it has been members of the public, not the government, who have initiated remembrance activities, and then brought the government on board. The most obvious case has been Fromelles. This site was brought into public prominence recently by a Melbourne school teacher who led the campaign to find the mass grave of the missing of 1916. His efforts initially met with some official scepticism, but eventually the missing were found and interred in a new Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery. Another case of bottom-up agency is the peopling of Anzac parade. In 1983 there were only two memorials on this national mall. There are now eleven and a number of them seem to have been the result a copy-cat process: that is, one service or group was honoured and another then invoked the politics of recognition, claiming that they had previously been forgotten but now need to be remembered.

What I am arguing therefore is that the persistence of the Anzac legend today is attributable to a complex process of interaction between individuals, government and self-appointed custodians of memory within the public. Among the latter I would include the popular media, veterans’ associations, popular military historians and a plethora of people who are gaining commercially from battlefield tourism and the associated commodification of remembrance. Take the AFL’s Anzac Day match. Established only in 1995 and now routinely described as a ‘tradition’, it has created its own rituals of remembrance, including a medal for the player who best exemplifies the Anzac spirit – skill, courage, self-sacrifice, teamwork and fair play. The man who established the Anzac Day ‘clash’, coach Kevin Sheedy, claims that it was intended to honour the Anzac Spirit, but there is little doubt that part of its resilience comes partly from its commercial success. It is now the biggest football match outside of the finals.

The question that I find most intriguing, when trying to understand the current and future status of Anzac, is: what *function* does it serve in Australian political culture today?

In answer let me start by stating the obvious: that that Anzac has served, and continues to serve, as a complex signifier of national identity. It has been able to perform that role because it has proved to be endlessly adaptable and flexible. As I have said before, the legend is not the same as it was in World War I. Today it has come to incorporate women, Indigenous Australians and to some extent, multiculturalism. The memorials on Anzac Parade, for example, now include one to the Greek campaign of 1941, one to the Turkish leader Ataturk, and another to the Australian Army Nursing Services.

Anzac is also now a sanitized narrative of the war. Australian soldiers of World War I are no longer depicted as superb fighters, or killers who prided themselves on being able to impale a German on their bayonets, as they did in 1918. Rather, they are traumatized victims, sacrificial lambs to an incompetent British high command and to an impersonal industrialised warfare. Consistent with this, the values that the Anzac legend enshrines today are not military, but civilian qualities: courage, endurance, sacrifice and mateship. These are the words inscribed on the four pillars of the memorial at Isurava on the Kokoda Track. It is revealing that outside the Australian War Memorial are two images of compassion: Simpson and his donkey, and an elderly 'Weary' Dunlop, surgeon on the Thai–Burma railway.

These values are, not coincidentally, those which contemporary Australian society needs to affirm. At the heart of any liberal democracy is a contradiction in that, while its highest values are the sanctity of individual life and freedom, the State needs some individuals to be willing sacrifice their personal interests to the collective good. For as long as it has existed Anzac has been a legend of the volunteer, the citizen who was willing to die for the nation. Even today, in a highly materialistic and individualistic society, radically different from that of 1914–18, there is a need to validate such self-effacing behaviour. It might be displayed by the personnel of the Australian Defence Force: but sacrifice can also manifested by police officers, civil defence forces, surf lifesavers or fire fighters who thereby become 'Anzacs'. When police officers die on duty, they are described in the press in language that uses the high diction of war: they are 'the fallen', 'the slain' who pay 'the ultimate sacrifice' 'in the line of duty.

Another, and depending on your political persuasion, less positive function that Anzac serves in contemporary politics is to provide a means by which Australian governments neutralize dissent about current commitment to war. For example, the majority of the Australian population did not support Australia's involvement in the 2003 Iraq war but once the commitment had been made, the Howard government made it difficult to critique the war on the grounds that the men and women deployed to fight it were Anzacs, heirs to an honourable tradition. They should not be stigmatized, as Vietnam veterans were in the 1970s, by the fact that they were fighting an unpopular war.

If Anzac serves the functions I suggest it does, then it will almost certainly continue to maintain its dominant role in the Australian political culture for some time into the future. But perhaps it may not. Perhaps the sheer scale of the centenary tsunami awaiting us will generate a pushback in the form of commemoration fatigue. The Australian government has chosen to commemorate in 2014-18 not just Gallipoli but also 'A Century of Service': that is, *all* wars in which Australians served during the twentieth century. Is it possible that after the orgasmic memory of April 1915 listeners may tune out? Will the message become diluted by excess repetition?

Perhaps, also, the commodification and trivialisation of war memory associated with the centenary will reduce Anzac to irredeemable triteness. The commodification of war memory, it must be said, is worldwide. In Krakow can buy enamel mugs resembling those made by the Jewish workers in Schindler's factory. In Turkey you can buy soaps carrying the statue of a Turkish soldier carrying a wounded Allied soldier, so you can remember Anzac even as you soap yourself up in the morning. It is not surprising then that the shop of the Australian War Memorial now offers aprons and oven mitts bearing Flanders poppies, and a range of new centenary merchandise carrying the message *Their Spirit Our Pride*. Among them is a stubby holder for your beer. Not only does this, as James Brown has suggested in his excellent *Anzac's Long Shadow*, seem oblivious to the problematic relationship between military service and alcohol abuse but it seems to ignore the question of whether such trivialisation debases the sacramental quality which the War Memorial itself maintains is integral to the commemoration of war.

Finally, it is possible that, as the centenary of World War I passes, the changing demographics of the Australian population will lead to a growing disengagement with the Anzac legend. The legend was spawned when over 90 per cent of the Australian population was Anglo-Celtic and White Australia was a core Australian value. And Anzac remains despite all its adaptation and power and its attempts at inclusivity, a story about white Anglo-Celtic men. Yet Australia is changing: 28 per cent of the Australian population today were born overseas, with an additional 20 per cent having a parent who was born overseas. About 20% of us speak a language other than English at home. The proportion of immigrants who arrive from an Asian country has also been rising. In 2001, the proportion of immigrants born in Asia was 24%; in 2011, this proportion was 33%.¹ What, I ask myself as I venture into the almost completely Chinese shopping precinct of Box Hill, Melbourne, is the relevance of Anzac to such Australians?

The Department of Veterans' Affairs, one of the main government agencies charged with war commemoration, became particularly aware of this when, in 2010, it conducted a focus group to try and identify how the Australian community expected the Gallipoli centenary to be commemorated. Among the findings were the need to integrate into Anzac groups who were previously marginalised, such as indigenous Australians and Vietnam veterans. The focus group also noted that commemorating military history in a multi-cultural society could be 'something of a double-edged sword'. While the centenary would provide opportunities for national unity, it was also potentially an area of divisiveness.²

In response the DVA commissioned a second focus group of a more culturally diverse group, immigrants or first generation Australians. Held across Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide these consultations included Chinese, Greek, Italian, Lebanese, Afghani, Vietnamese, Germans and Japanese. Two groups were held specifically with young multicultural Australians. What this research showed was that these culturally diverse groups were 'universally respectful of Australian-Anzac commemorations', though often disengaged. They perceived that Anzac was important to Australian and Australians, and so long as they were not targeted or treated with disrespect themselves, they were unlikely to have any qualms about the proposed commemorations. Broadly then there did not seem to

¹ <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/04/03/3977736.htm>

² Department of Veterans' Affairs, *'A Century of Service' Community Research; Report*, September 2010.

be a problem with the centenary, though Turkish Australians wanted to be overtly recognised and included in the commemorations as ‘modern day friend’. Japanese– and German–Australians wanted to avoid any vilification as a result of the past history of war. Afghani–Australians wanted to avoid being seen as responsible for the current military action. The Sudanese meanwhile wanted to be engaged in commemoration of their adopted country but were concerned about racism and being able to feel unwelcome on this particularly nationalistic day.³

Even if the findings of these focus groups have fed into some policy planning, and I have yet to see evidence of this, the problem of disengagement from Anzac of much of multicultural Australia will remain. Perhaps, then, the future of Anzac resides in its being able to morph even more radically than it has in the past. Many Australian immigrants previously lived in war zones, experiencing the trauma of war. Could Anzac Day become a day of more generic war memory: on which Australians remembered not just the wars in which the Australian Defence Forces have fought but all wars in which Australians have suffered. If it were to become such a day of remembrance, then how would we deal with the fact that some immigrants may have fought against Australians, or for causes which might be inconsistent with the values of contemporary Australia?

A related question is whether a reconceptualised commemoration of war could incorporate the ‘frontiers wars’ in which white Australians massacred the indigenous populations. For some time there has been a body of opinion that believes that it should. But Brendan Nelson in this speech to the National Press Club in September 2013

the cost [of settlement] borne by Indigenous Australians ... is a story that has to be told. But the Australian War Memorial is not in my very strong view the institution to tell that story. The Australian War Memorial ... is about Australians going overseas in peace operations and in war in our name as Australians. The institution that is best to tell those [indigenous] stories, in my view, is the National Museum of Australia and perhaps some of the state-based institutions who are most likely to have whatever artefacts or relics that exist from this period in our history.

The War Memorial is instead investing in commemorating the service of Indigenous men and women within the Australian Defence Force during the twentieth century.

This should not surprise us, given the origins of the Anzac legend and the functions it has served over the twentieth century in validating military service on behalf of the nation. But what it does suggest is that Anzac is still, to use Bruce Kapferer’s term, a ‘myth of State’ rather than a ‘legend the People’. Herein, perhaps is another source of its vulnerability in the future.

³ Department of Veterans’ Affairs, *‘A Century of Service’ Community Research; Phase II*, August 2011.