

Speech at Anzac Day Reflection 2018

by
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Richardson's Lookout - Marrickville Peace Park
Wednesday 25th April 2018

Welcome everyone to this Anzac Day Reflection.

This is the third Anzac Day Reflection held at Richardson's Lookout – Marrickville Peace Park since its launch on 8th November 2015.

The Gallipoli Centenary Peace Campaign (GCPC) would like to acknowledge the support we received from the former Marrickville Council in having Richardson's Lookout designated as a Peace Park. We also acknowledge the former Council's co-operation in having signage installed in the park that refers to the Indigenous owners of this land, together with the precinct's unique colonial, settler and military histories.

Of significance is the fact that the signage also refers to the Frontiers Wars. This is an important part of our history which rarely gets a mention on historic signage or memorials within NSW or around the country.

In the time allocated to me, I would like to make **four points** about what makes these Anzac Day Reflections distinctive and why official recognition of the Frontier Wars has been a crucial part of GCPC's program.

The first point I would like to make is this – the tributes paid to the victims of WW1 (and other wars) need to be inclusive.

On this day we join with others in paying tribute to Australian soldiers who lost their lives in the Gallipoli campaign between 25 April and 20 December 1915.

On this day we also pay tribute to service men and women who served in all foreign wars that Australia has engaged in. This now includes all Indigenous Australians who served in these wars, including the 500-600 who fought in WW1 who have only been genuinely recognised in recent times.

As well it is important to pay tribute to other casualties of the war: those that returned with physical injuries or psychological trauma.

When focussing on WW1, in particular, we need to acknowledge the suffering that the war caused on the home front, especially among the relatives of those killed, maimed and traumatised by hostilities.

And not least, this event also recognises all those who campaigned against the war, together with those who opposed conscription. Many of these people were vilified and punished by the State for the principled stand they took.

The second point to be made is this – Anzac Day commemorations should actively encourage hard questions being raised about the Gallipoli campaign and other military engagements.

For example, we need to ask:

- How did our country get involved in these wars?
- What were their purposes, and
- What mistakes were made in prolonging them?

Official Anzac Day commemorations tend to ignore such questions in favour of celebrating “sacrifice and heroism”. However we believe these hard questions are a crucial part of genuine remembrance.

In other words, we need to learn from past military tragedies so that we can minimise the chance of them occurring in the future.

The third point is this – we need to reject all the “add-ons” that now seem inseparable from Anzac Day commemorations.

What I am referring to here is the Anzac legend and the historical distortions that this myth entails, such as:

- The nation was born as Gallipoli;
- It was our first blood sacrifice;
- Our national identity was established in war time;
- We fought at Gallipoli for freedom and democracy;
- Our national values are military values.

Contrary to these dubious claims, many historians are at pains to point out that the Australian colonies federated in 1901 and that our national identity and democratic values were forged in peacetime prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914.

It is also worth pointing out that the impact of WW1 domestically generated deep social divisions based upon gender, religion and social class. Those who decided not to serve - 50% of eligible men - were pilloried as ‘stay-at-homes’ and ‘shirkers’ and many were sent white feathers.

Opponents of conscription – the majority of voters – together with peace activists were condemned as traitors and ‘disloyalists’ - that is, being disloyal to the British Empire. Far from instilling a greater sense of national independence, the war made Australia more conservative and more amenable to British imperial interests.

The Anzac legend, by distorting our history and discouraging critical inquiry, has helped to subdue public resistance to Australia’s engagement in foreign wars in the service of “great and powerful friends” – in the past, Great Britain – today, the most belligerent of nations, the USA.

However the work of historians during the last decade or so - Marilyn Lake, Peter Stanley, Henry Reynolds, Joan Beaumont and Douglas Newton among them – has resulted in the Anzac legend suffering a loss of legitimacy. The myths it propagates no longer have the currency they once enjoyed.

My fourth and final observation is this – as we work towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, it is imperative that the Frontier Wars be officially acknowledged.

New work by historians in recent times – Lyndall Ryan from the University of Newcastle and Henry Reynolds among them – has shown without any doubt the sheer brutality and extent of the Frontier Wars.

Coinciding with this has been a vast expansion of the commemoration of war in this country. The cost of commemorating the WW1 Centenary over the last four years has been estimated to be approximately \$552 million of mostly federal, state and territory money.

This includes some \$100 million spent by the Federal government on the Sir John Monash “interpretive centre” or “museum” near Villers-Bretonneux in northern France. This extraordinary expenditure equates to \$8,800 to commemorate each Australian soldier killed in the First World War compared with \$109 per British fatality and \$2 for each German.

The trouble is these two developments are on a collision course. That is, you cannot continue to talk about foreign wars endlessly while at the same time continuing to ignore the war within Australia.

It needs to be emphasised that Aboriginal resistance to the British and settler invasion constitutes the most important war in Australia’s history because it was about the sovereignty of a whole continent. This is of global significance. It is the most important event that has happened in Australia in over 200 hundred years.

The National War Memorial in Canberra, in refusing to deal with the dramatic consequences of frontier warfare, clearly has a case to answer.

It is a disgrace that there is, in the 21st century, no world class national Indigenous museum that honours Indigenous people and their way of life, past and present.

In a recent National Press Club address on 18 April 2018, the writer Richard Flanagan asked: “Surely, when we have the oldest continuous civilisation on Earth, is not such a major institution central to our understanding of ourselves as a people? Is it not necessary, and fundamental, to us as a nation?”

Unless we fully recognise the significance of the Frontier Wars, we as a people will remain a captive of our divisive and tragic colonial past.

According to Flanagan “(f)reedom exists in the shadow of memory. For Australia to find out what freedom means, it has to face up to the truth of its past. And it’s time we decided to accept what we are and where we come from, because only in that truth can we finally be free as a people.”

Notes

Richard Flanagan, [‘Our politics is a dreadful black comedy’](#), Address to the National Press Club, *The Guardian*, Apr 18. 2018.

25 Apr 2018