

The Honest History Book – launch speech by Michelle Arrow, 12 April 2017, Sydney

Thank you to David and Alison for inviting me to launch their provocative, combative and myth-busting *Honest History Book*. It's a punchy collection of essays by some of our very best historians. This book busts myths and bursts bubbles. It is a history book for our supposedly 'post-truth', 'fake news' age, because it insists that the historical stories we tell ourselves as a nation must be based on evidence, not fantasy. In an age where ideology, rather than evidence, has become the filter through which people assess 'truth', it is more important than ever that we historians continue to insist on the importance of making judgements based on evidence.

The Honest History Book is another intervention in the ongoing saga of Australia's 'history wars'. The history wars, of course, are part of a broader culture war going on right now, and the Anzac centenary was an important moment in those culture wars. But I think we can see the rise of contemporary Anzackery in an even larger and longer framework.

For example, when I was thinking about this launch, I happened to hear Eric Abetz on the radio, during the government's futile attempt to reform section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act. [Abetz argued](#) for the reform in the following way, extraordinary even by his low standards of public discourse:

These are the people from the left of Australia ... that spend their days insulting, offending and humiliating people for all sorts of reasons but who then come into this place and say, "yeah, just don't do as we do in the situation of race".

Why not religion, why not the height of the person, or indeed, the shortness of the person, the overweightness of the person, the colour of hair, the lack of hair, whether someone's got freckles or not, the list quite frankly, is, and can be, endless.

It seems astonishing to have to point out that we might attempt to place limits on the practice of insulting, offending and humiliating people on the grounds of race because race – and racial thinking – has shaped human history in profound and terrible ways.

David Marr, in his recent work on the return of Pauline Hanson's One Nation to federal politics, has suggested that the language of culture wars, elites, and political correctness gives cover to those on the right to find ways 'to continue to fight for white privilege'.

I think we can look at the battles over our history through the same lens. Pauline Hanson first appeared in our political life around the time that the history wars first flared, and Howard's attack on 'political correctness' manifested as a series of attempts to delegitimise Indigenous history and its traumatic legacies. Larissa Behrendt's essay in *The Honest History Book* shows us the ways that white Australia has tried – and failed – to properly account for the invasion of 1788.

The history wars were just one skirmish in a longer battle to defend white privilege in Australian politics and culture. The attempts to restore Anzac to its place as *the* seminal event in white Australian history – an event, as Ann Curthoys pointed out, in which white Australians get to be the victims – was an attempt to discredit approaches to history which de-centred white men. Why else would the Australian War Memorial refuse to commemorate the Frontier Wars that Indigenous people fought for their country? Paul Daley’s essay in the book sums up the case for such recognition and eloquently rebuts the arguments made against it.

By reviving the idea first advanced a century ago that Anzac marked our “birth of a nation”, our politicians on both sides attempted to place Anzac inside a history that would make Australians more “relaxed and comfortable”. The century-long distance between us and World War I has fostered a sentimental attachment to war that is unmoored from the reality of the war experience. The impact of Peter Weir’s film *Gallipoli* should not be underestimated in this sentiment-led revival of Anzac, as Carolyn Holbrook’s essay in the book demonstrates. As she notes, the film took the geopolitics out of Anzac and made it a personal tragedy. It is still the template that we use to narrate popular stories of Anzac today.

We were encouraged to *feel*, to emotionally connect with this past, through television dramas, social media campaigns, events like Camp Gallipoli, toys, and popular books by writers such as Peter FitzSimons. Encouraging emotional engagement with the past can be an effective way of piquing curiosity and inquiry. But it also has its downside. Emotion and story have come to dominate public understandings of World War I. A climate of sentimental, abstract attachment to war, an insistence that we can think ourselves back into the mindset of 1915 and know what it ‘really felt like’, feeds myths and resists correction.

Mark Dapin’s essay in *The Honest History Book* is a fine example of the ways that myths about war persist in spite of evidence. Taking the widely circulated idea that Vietnam veterans were not allowed to march on Anzac Day and were refused membership of the RSL, Dapin combs through the available evidence and demonstrates that neither of these things were true, tracing the origins of these stories to the dispute between Vietnam veterans and the RSL over Agent Orange. These stories of being rejected by the RSL, he writes, are ‘the truth of how some veterans felt’. And isn’t acknowledging that contingency more interesting, and more ‘honest’, than simply rehashing myths?

On a similar note, I doubt that anyone involved in the official commemoration of Anzac Day will welcome David Stephens and Burçin Çakır’s contribution, which painstakingly demonstrates that those famous, beautiful ‘Atatürk words’, now routinely included in most Anzac Day services, were almost certainly not Atatürk’s words at all.

One of the most important things that the Honest History group has contributed to our national debate about Anzac is they have answered a difficult question about contemporary commemoration – they tallied its cost. It still staggers me – and it should outrage all of us – that Australia spent more commemorating World War I than all the other combatant nations combined, around \$562 million. We would not know this if Honest History had not kept the spreadsheet.

In their book *What's Wrong With Anzac?*, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds suggested that part of the reason behind the Anzac revival in contemporary Australia was because of the deep pockets and creeping influence of the Department of Veteran's Affairs. This influence has not happened in a vacuum. The ongoing funding cuts to our national cultural institutions like the National Library and the National Gallery have meant these institutions have lost valuable staff and services. The Australian War Memorial is, of course, immune to such cuts. This disproportionate funding for World War I commemoration has reduced the public space available to other kinds of histories.

The Honest History Book, true to the group's credo of 'not only Anzac, but also...' is composed of two halves. The first section, 'Putting Anzac in its place', removes Anzac from the realm of the sacred, reminding us that Anzac was the product of a complex interplay of social and political imperatives. It has also waxed and waned in popularity across the century as politicians of all stripes have sought to turn the legend to their purpose, as Frank Bongiorno describes.

The second half of the book ranges more widely, examining some of the issues and themes that tend to be overlooked by the media and the public in the rush to Anzac. I can't talk about all of them here, but I just wanted to mention a couple here that I particularly enjoyed, apart from the essays I've already mentioned. Gwenda Tavan points out the ways that Australia has a well-developed 'immigration amnesia' that reinforces a view of our history as Anglo-nativist, in which the Anzac legend logically takes a central place.

Peter Stanley's essay examines the changing place of military heroes in Anzac commemoration, suggesting that the elevation of Victoria Cross winners and Generals over the ordinary soldier not only changes our view of war from devastating mass slaughter to a celebration of individual heroism, but takes us far from the egalitarian origins of the Anzac legend itself.

Looking back on the commemorations of 2015, while much of what we might call 'peak Anzackery' was unsettling to historians, I think we can also take heart from it. The public did not merely absorb all of this uncritically, and historians took advantage of increased public interest (and funding) to produce some challenging and rigorous works of history. Many of the TV series produced for the centenary failed, Camp Gallipoli tanked, and Woolworths was raked over the coals for its 'fresh in our memories' social media debacle.

The Honest History Book will hopefully encourage Australians to demand more from the media, government and cultural institutions that shape our views of our past. Every school and university student, teacher, politician and citizen needs to read this book – so everyone needs to take home a copy tonight. And remember, Mother's Day is coming up – and who needs chocolate eggs when the Easter Bunny could bring *The Honest History book* instead? Congratulations to David and Alison for their efforts, to all the contributors for their fresh, readable essays, and to NewSouth for producing such a handsome volume.

And with that, I declare the Honest History Book officially launched!