

David Stephens: Speech for AIIA, 2 May 2017

When I was a public servant I wrote lots of speeches for the head of the department.

He liked his speeches to include lists – of key points, lessons to be learnt, and so on.

And he insisted that lists were always in odd numbers – the seven deadly sins, for example.

But he also liked alliteration: each of the items in the lists should start with the same letter.

Now, that departmental head was eventually awarded an AC, so his strictures seem worth following.

And I've tried to follow them today – in this little speech which Richard has kindly offered to read for me, given my unavoidable absence.

Today's remarks are only short so I have a list of just *three* things, all starting with the letter 'C': Coalition; Concept; Complexity.

Coalition

Honest History is a coalition.

(A presenter interviewing me on a Brisbane public radio station the other day insisted on using the word 'collective' for us – but that's acceptable, too.)

The membership of the Honest History incorporated association is quite small (less than 10 members; Professor Frank Bongiorno is the current president and Alison is the vice president).

But our coalition includes more than 20 distinguished supporters, people such as Joan Beaumont, Judith Brett, Richard Butler, Anna Clark, Paul Daley, Mark Dapin, Mark McKenna, Robert Manne, John Menadue, and Clare Wright.

It also includes dozens of writers, including those who wrote chapters in *The Honest History Book*.

It includes, too, the more than 1000 people who receive our regular newsletter, the 10,000 unique visitors a month to our website (honesthistory.net.au), the more than 850 'likes' on our Facebook page, and our more than 1500 followers on Twitter.

(This last figure puts us in the top 1.5 per cent of Twitter accounts world-wide for numbers of followers; we only need another 26 million or so to catch someone called Katy Perry, who holds the top spot.)

As a coalition, we have and express many different views, which is appropriate, of course, because the discipline of history is a *contest* between conflicting interpretations.

Just quickly, about how the Honest History coalition happened: about five years ago there was a successful lobbying campaign against the building in Canberra of two memorials – one for World War I and one for World War II – to rival the Australian War Memorial.

That campaign brought together everyone from peace activists to Burley Griffin disciples to retired generals and air vice marshals.

We all agreed on one thing, though: one War Memorial was more than enough.

After that campaign, some of those involved realised that the forthcoming centenary of World War I – the Anzac centenary – was going to see a lot of officially-sponsored commemoration; a lot.

This meant two things.

On one hand, there was a risk that, by the centenary of the Treaty of Versailles there would have been so much commemoration that some Australians – particularly children – would think there was nothing in Australian history worth noticing that was not to do with war.

On the other hand, though, more positively, this centenary period looked like a good time to encourage Australians to look more broadly at their history – not just the khaki strands but the whole lot, all the rich colours and diversity.

So, a few of us got a website going – it was launched in November 2013 – and it grew, with commissioned articles and links to other people's work under a range of headings – environmental, political, social, economic, and so on, as well as war – which indicated the breadth of our interest.

Not only Anzac, but also lots of other things.

People began to take notice of us, although some people wanted us to go away.

One of those who took notice was Phillipa McGuinness, Executive Publisher at NewSouth, who, in the latter part of 2015 came to us with a book proposal.

The book got under way early last year and you see it before you now.

It's been available for a little over a month.

It's doing very well, thank you, with an amount of media coverage and growing sales in shops and online.

Now moving on to my second 'C' word – Concept.

There are really two things under this heading and they are both mentioned on the front of the book.

You *can* tell this book by its cover.

But, first, to go back a step

I mentioned how we wanted to use the Anzac centenary to remind people that there was more to Australian history than blokes in khaki doing heroic things.

Almost from the beginning we began to express this, in shorthand, as 'not only Anzac, but also ...'

The 'also' stood for all the other bits of Australian history that deserved notice, and sometimes celebration.

There's a key paragraph in chapter 1 which encapsulates this:

The Honest History coalition has always recognised that war is important in our history – not so much because of what Australians have done in war but because of what war has done to Australia, to Australians and to others – *but so are many other events and influences.*

Not only Anzac, but also – or, as it says on the cover, 'Australia is more than Anzac – and always has been'.

The book is in two parts: a bundle of chapters under the heading 'Putting Anzac in its place' and another bundle under the heading 'Australian stories and silences'.

I want to talk first about that *second* bundle of chapters – the 'but also' or the 'more than Anzac' chapters, the ones that tell the stories that have often been concealed beneath the khaki Anzac wash.

There is a beautifully written chapter by Rebecca Jones about the influence of the environment on Australian history – fires and floods and droughts.

There is a passionate chapter by Gwenda Tavan about the clash between multiculturalism and a still dominant Anglo-nativist or Anglo-Celtic culture, in which the Anzac myth is a founding element.

(Just ask Yassmin Abdel-Magied about how that clash works out in practice.)

Stuart Macintyre writes judiciously about the impact of boom and bust on Australians over a century, and how we have become unnecessarily sceptical of the role of government economic policy.

Stuart also notes the growing divergence between our ‘Australian value’ of egalitarianism and the reality of growing inequality.

Carmen Lawrence has more to say about this gap in the following chapter: not only is the egalitarian value becoming more and more mythological, it is also not particularly Australian.

The layers of evidence in Carmen’s chapter – and Stuart’s – repay close sifting.

Egalitarianism also features in chapter 14 by Peter Stanley; Anzac creeps back in here also.

Peter asks why, in a military – and a nation – which has supposedly carried since the days of Charles Bean an ethos of egalitarianism and mateship, we make so much nowadays of Victoria Cross ‘heroes’ and the celebrity general, Sir John Monash.

Anzac straddles the next five chapters also, showing the difficulties that the non-khaki parts of our national story experience as they try to disentangle themselves from the military thread.

Joy Damousi in chapter 15 tells the story of Cecilia John and Jessie Webb, important players on either side of the Great War debate over conscription.

Their roles have been overshadowed by the emphasis on blokes and derring-do and death.

Larissa Behrendt in her chapter implicitly addresses the idea that one can tell the story of Australia as two invasions – Gallipoli 1915 and Port Jackson 1788.

This is, of course, far too simplistic – though we should not blanch at the use of the word ‘invasion’ in both cases.

Paul Daley’s chapter 17 goes into detail about the Frontier Wars, the conflicts between settlers, including soldiers and police, and Indigenous Australians.

The latter were fighting for their country, *on* their country, though settler Australia has preferred to forget this.

We argue in the book for the need to *rebalance* our history – to downsize Anzac and upsize non-Anzac – and coming to terms with 1788 is crucial to that.

We say this as almost the final paragraph of the book:

Most of all, upsizing our non-khaki side means facing up to what Larissa Behrendt calls ‘the invasion moment’, for ‘until we do that we will never have found a way to truly share this colonised country’.

Larissa’s chapter includes the story of Lieutenant William Dawes and the Indigenous woman, Patyegarang, who tried to understand each other’s culture in the earliest days of the colony – only about a kilometre away from where we meet tonight.

Mark McKenna’s chapter 18 is a fascinating description of how the Crown and Anzac have reinforced each other, from speeches of visiting royals decades ago, which referred to national birthing in battle but ignored Federation, down

to Prince Harry in dress uniform going straight from the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier to pose for selfies with teenage girls.

All of this has made a solid contribution to Australia's retention of the link to Mother England; countries that fight together, stay together.

Alison Broinowski's final chapter describes a similar tone of adolescent longing and unwillingness to let go, again with a martial layer.

She looks at the decades-long tug-of-war between militarism and independence in our foreign and defence relations, with the Anzac legend as cement, and with militarism mostly winning.

Whether the era of Trump will make a difference only time will tell – if we have that long.

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The other element of the cover of our book is the title, *The Honest History Book*.

We try to pre-empt points scoring about the idea of 'honest history' – believe me, we have heard all the jokes – by defining the term on page 1 of the book.

As EH Carr said, 'history means interpretation'. 'Honest history' is simply interpretation robustly supported by evidence.

The search for and presentation of evidence has been paramount in the book and it has led us to bust some myths – stories where the evidence doesn't stack up.

Like the old one about the earth being flat: it took quite a while for the common people to let go of their images of the earth sitting on the back of a giant turtle, which in turn sat on lots of elephants, then another turtle, then elephants and turtles all the way down.

We bust myths about the so-called ‘Ataturk words’ (the ones beginning ‘Those heroes that shed their blood’ – that’s chapter 7), or that the reverence for Anzac has been consistent over a century (chapter 4), or about the godfatherhood of Charles Bean – on his own – at the Australian War Memorial (chapter 5), or the ill-treatment of Vietnam returned men (chapter 6) or the Australian value of egalitarianism (as mentioned earlier).

In each case we do so by presenting robust evidence – or pointing to the lack of such evidence.

And if anyone thought Labor was a bit less pro-Anzac than the coalition they should have a read of Frank Bongiorno’s chapter 8.

It’s been bipartisan lock-step pretty much ever since 1914.

So honest history – as a search for evidence and an overturning of comforting and comfortable myths – is bound to upset people.

As the late Inga Clendinnen said, ‘historians are the permanent spoilsports of imaginative games played with the past’.

Or, as we say at a couple of points in the book, bullshit will flow to fill the space available, unless there are people prepared to push it back.

Complexity

Some people would prefer that history was a list of dates and facts that you can learn off by heart – and learn civics lessons from.

John Howard tended to think that way.

But history that starts from statements like ‘Not only but also’ and ‘Australia is more than Anzac’ is bound to lead you into complexity – even mess.

As Larissa Behrendt says in her chapter, history 'is competing narratives, brought to life by different groups whose experiences are diverse and often challenge the dominant story a country seeks to tell itself. There are no absolute truths in history.'

A particularly important element of complexity is *context* – placing Australia against a world background, recognising that other countries have history also.

In the conclusion we say this (and it includes a great quote from Jonathan Green, who launched the book in Melbourne):

Despite 61 000 deaths and many more people than that permanently affected, the impact of that war – and all our wars – on Australia pales beside the overall global impacts. Yet we act as if it does not – and that is national narcissism. If we are ever to value humanity as a whole, we need to cease [and these are Green's words] 'setting Australian life and sense of loss above this common muddle of bones and blood'.

When Australians do commemoration, we don't do context very well.

Douglas Newton reminds us of this in chapter 2, which we carefully titled 'Other people's war' because it was about how the Great War was not primarily a bloody exercise for the Australian nation, but a world struggle that killed 18 million people, and in which Australia played a comparatively small part.

This is despite what the Department of Veterans' Affairs will try to tell you as it spends \$100 million on building a high tech temple to John Monash in the green fields of Picardy.

Context is important also in chapter 3, by Vicken Babkenian and Judith Crispin, which is about the Armenian Genocide, which began on 24 April 1915, and led

to the deaths of more than a million Armenians. Many Australians at the time recognised this event as part of their war but we have tended to forget it since.

Context is important also in chapter 9, where I try to distinguish between 'Anzackery', the over-the-top jingoistic version of the legend and a simpler, quieter, truer Anzac, one which might serve us well and help lead to a peaceful future.

This chapter enjoins us to look not just at the military exploits of Australians – how well we fight, how we allegedly 'punch above our weight' – but at the effects on families during and after wars and at the effects of war on people other than Australians.

There are, after all, *a lot* of these people: we quote a statistic about the number of people killed in wars and conflicts around the world in the twentieth century and we compare it with Australian deaths in wars and conflicts in the same period.

The two figures are 231 million and 101,000; the second figure is just 0.04 per cent of the first.

Yet Australia is spending about \$600 million to commemorate World War I.

Without disrespecting dead soldiers – or disrespecting any talisman phrases like 'Lest We Forget' – we might well ask, 'Why are we doing this?' and 'What difference will it make?'

Not enough of us ask those questions about war commemoration.

But then not enough of us ask those questions about war itself.

Final word

Finally, how should one read this book?

The book has 19 authors and 20 chapters, so it is tempting to treat it as a collection of essays, to dip into according to your interest in the subject matter or your acquaintance with the chapter author.

But the book is really meant to be, as Professor Melanie Oppenheimer said in one of the endorsements, a 'collective history'.

It is an argument that 'Australia is more than Anzac – and always has been' and it gathers and presents evidence to support this argument.

It is, in other words, an attempt to deliver honest history.

So, dip if you must, but please try to read the book from beginning to end, too.

Thank you.