

Gallipoli: An Exhibition of Photographs by Charles Snodgrass Ryan

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We approach the beginning of what will be a five-year period of commemorative activity. We've never seen anything like what is in prospect. Major anniversaries in the past – the Bicentenary of 1988 was the largest – aroused controversy in the years before the event but the commemoration itself was over and done with during a single calendar year.

Not so this time. Yes, the centenary of the Gallipoli landing will be climactic, but that won't be the end of it. There'll still be occasion to recall all those battles on the Western Front, the heroic charges in the Middle East, and perhaps most tragic of all, the Peace Conference of 1919 and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles; which amounted to little more than a guarantee of another, even worse war a few years on.

How should we remember the First World War? One recent critic, James Brown, a former army officer who has written a fine book called [*Anzac's Long Shadow: The Cost of Our National Obsession*](#), expects 'a discordant, lengthy and exorbitant four-year festival for the dead'. He points out that the Australian government is spending over 200 percent more than the British Government on centenary commemoration. But whatever government spends will be supplemented by money from business, and, as [Paul Daley has recently pointed out](#), we can expect weapons manufacturers to be among those providing funds.

Thoughtful people must necessarily be divided souls over Anzac, including its iterations in the forthcoming centenaries. I am sure that few of us would argue that we should forget the First World War, or indeed the wars of the last century more generally. Recalling war is a precondition for understanding it, including its awful consequences. But public memory is a fundamentally political thing. Political, business and media elites have a strong vested interest in promoting some kinds of memory over others. Language is never politically neutral. Silence is full of meaning.

The first Anzac Day Dawn service I attended was at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne in 1989. My recollection of it was that it was mainly an occasion of silent contemplation over which Bruce Ruxton, Victorian Returned and Services League president, presided. But attend a Dawn Ceremony today, including in our own city, and it will be full of words, words which tell us how we should think and feel. We cannot be trusted to formulate our own understanding; the gaps need to be filled by others. This is perhaps one consequence of the Australia portrayed by Brown in his

recent book; one in which there is little understanding of war or strategy, as distinct from widespread Anzac sentimentality.

My eight-year-old daughter is in a choir at a local public primary school. Just yesterday, she showed me a song that she would be singing at a special Anzac Assembly in a few weeks' time. It is called 'Lest We Forget' and is not to be confused with *The Waifs* song of the same name. It is full of this kind of sentimentality:

Although you're getting on in years,
And memories seem to disappear
Some memories will never fade away
Some memories will always stay
There's one day in each year you will not forget
If this year's your last year we will not forget

Chorus:

*One more parade, one less digger by your side.
One year you're marching, the next year you ride.
Hold your head up high, hold your head up high.
Lest we forget, lest we forget.*

The song ends as follows:

The sound of cannons roaring by,
The smoke and fire covered sky,
The nights of terror as you pray.
Some memories will always stay.

At the closing of the day,
A grateful nation will rise to pray.
Some things will never fade away,
Some memories will stay.
Not for one day but always, we will not forget.
If this year's your last year we will not forget.

Then, after one more rendition of the chorus, *The Last Post* is played.

The lyrics were written by a Queensland school teacher named Michael Reynolds, and have been printed by the [ABC in their singing book and CD designed for primary schools](#). While I'm sure the intentions of the teacher concerned were both worthy and honourable, the value of this song for teaching children about war seems to me, at the very least, questionable. The reference to 'cannons' is telling. The oldest of our war veterans now fought in the Second World War and while I'm no expert on weaponry, I would take for granted that relatively few 'cannon' as such – as distinct from, say, 'artillery' – roared between 1939 and 1945 (or, for that matter, between 1914 and 1918). Yet the seemingly anachronistic 'cannon' reference is quite appropriate in another sense for these lyrics, even down to the title, are straight out of an heroic imperial language of war – they would have been quite recognisable to the generation of young men who signed up in 1914-18 – bolstered by some jargon borrowed from modern Anzackery, such as 'grateful nation'.

Will my daughter, as I did, encounter [Wilfred Owen's war poetry](#) before she finishes school? Will she, as I did, learn Eric Bogle's [And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda](#)? The returned soldier in the latter, you'll recall, couldn't march because his legs had been blown away. Instead, he sat on his porch watching a dwindling number of old comrades march each year. The sensibility about war revealed in this song, compared with that in *Lest We Forget*, could hardly provide a greater contrast.

Schools have long been battlegrounds in the cultural war about the meaning of war. In 1925 the Labor Minister for Education in Western Australia, J.M. Drew, announced on behalf of the government that Anzac Day addresses to children by returned soldiers in State schools would be discontinued. In justifying what proved to be a divisive decision, Drew alleged that 'in the past many of these speeches were directed to the glorification of war'.

When in 2002 there was some polite questioning of whether sending into primary schools posters of the celebrated Gallipoli figures of Simpson and his Donkey was an effective way of promoting a sense of civic responsibility, Brendan Nelson, then Education Minister, with Islamic schools in his sights, [declared](#): '[I]f people don't want to be Australians and they don't want to live by Australian values and understand them, well then they can basically clear off'. Nelson, of course, is now director of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) and will therefore be a leading ringmaster in the coming circus.

And he has schools very much in his sights. The AWM website [explains](#): 'Over 140,000 school children visit the Memorial a year, [and] during the centenary, each child will write their name and school on a wooden cross. These crosses will then be placed on the graves of First World War Australian soldiers throughout Europe.' For Nelson and

the AWM, it's shaping up as a very busy war centenary indeed. (See also the [Roll of Honour Soundscape project](#).)

So what of [Sir Charles Snodgrass Ryan](#) and his photographs? What would he have made of all of this? As a son of empire, he might have been puzzled by the manner in which Anzac and Gallipoli are recalled in Australia today without direct reference to the British Empire. But as a man of war, perhaps he'd be concerned about the way it has been sanitised, sentimentalised and commercialised.

He was certainly a man who'd seen a great deal of the world, having as a young doctor in the 1870s been a military surgeon on the Turkish side in Turkish wars against Serbia and Montenegro, and Russia. He later served as Turkish consul in Melbourne. When he enlisted in 1914, he was unlike the overwhelming majority of men in the Australian forces in that he had seen war at first-hand. Perhaps this experience, along with the wisdom of his years – he was already in his sixties – meant that he was disinclined to see the war as an adventure. In this, perhaps he had something in common with those Boer War veterans who joined up.

When he arrived at Gallipoli as assistant director of medical services, 1st Division, Australian Imperial Force, he must have had a unique knowledge of the enemy. He didn't last long there, however, contracting a serious illness in June and being evacuated to England. He was probably fortunate; Gallipoli contained many disasters for the British Empire's forces but the arrangements for medical care of the ill and wounded were particularly prominent among them. It wasn't really a place for a man entering his sixties. Ryan, however, continued to serve as a senior military surgeon for the AIF in London during the war.

Ryan was a member of a cultured family with an interest in the natural world and art. His grandfather, John Cotton, was a skilled ornithologist, an interest inherited by the son. Ryan's own daughter Maie, herself an artist, married Richard Casey, Gallipoli veteran, politician and governor-general. Ellis Rowan, the great botanical illustrator and artist, was Ryan's sister.

Ryan's photographs of Gallipoli are a valuable historical record and they attest to his openness to depicting unvarnished the vile aspects of this war. His pictures of the burial of troops during the brief truce that followed a few days after the slaughter on the day of the Turkish attack of 19 May 1915 are particularly striking. The Great War was a critical turning point in the treatment of the bodies of those who were killed, witnessing a move away from anonymous mass graves towards dignified burial in individual plots marked by proper gravestones provided by the state. Families would eventually be permitted to compose an epitaph; some of these are among our most moving war documents. Read John Laffin's collection [We Will Remember Them](#) if you don't believe me.

I offer my congratulations to Michael Silver (Photonet Gallery), here today from Melbourne, for making available to us this wonderful collection of photos made from plates in his collection. Judith Crispin, as director of Manning Clark House, is to be congratulated not only for bringing these photos to the House but more generally for providing a forum in which we can all gain a more realistic understanding of the experience of war. Manning Clark House's work is not confined to the Australian experience but is also concerned with the tragic Armenian genocide – which proceeded during the Gallipoli campaign and was linked to it in numerous ways.

In recent months, partly encouraged by the good work being done here, I've become quietly optimistic about some of the possibilities for the forthcoming centenary. Amid the drum-beating of the high priests of the cult of Anzac, there is also thoughtful, critical and respectful commentary, and well-researched, well-written history.

As well as James Brown's little book, which I mentioned earlier, there is the work of David Stephens and his colleagues at *Honest History*, which was launched at this venue late last year. There is the publication of Joan Beaumont's general history of Australia in the First World War, [Broken Nation](#), and of Robert Bollard's more frankly dissident [In the Shadow of Gallipoli](#). Both have had favourable reviews.

There is also the continuing work by Peter Stanley on the human face of Australia's First World War, including a new book, [Lost Boys of Anzac](#), which focuses on the men who died on that first day. John Moses has written an important account of the early history of Anzac Day detailing the role of [Canon David Garland of Brisbane](#). And there is the multi-pronged effort of Bruce Scates and his colleagues in Melbourne, including his [100 Stories project](#), to be published as a book by Penguin but also figuring in an exhibition and a school resource.

These stories aim to present something of the diversity of Australia's experience of the Great War, and they are often harrowing. The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History and many historians associated with it are organising publications and conferences which will draw attention to aspects of the history of Australians at war that won't figure much (if at all) in official commemoration: the peace movement, the fate of the Industrial Workers of the World, the struggle against conscription, the 1917 strike. The [fulmination of Merv Bendle](#) in the latest edition of *Quadrant* against many of the historians I've just mentioned would suggest that they must be doing something right.

Congratulations to Michael Silver, Judith Crispin, Bas Clark and everyone who has brought together this fine exhibition. I have much pleasure in declaring it launched.