

Camouflage and national identity

Ben Wadham

(illustrations by Amy Hamilton)

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye ... An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force. ¹

The centenary celebrations of the outbreak of World War I bring the national narrative to the foreground of the nation's consciousness. In April 2013, Christopher Pyne, soon to be federal education minister, [restated](#) the discourse of a nation forged by the Anzacs at Gallipoli.

I have absolutely no doubt that the experiences of the First World War, as exemplified by the campaign in Gallipoli, bound the Australian nation together like no other event in the first fifteen years of federation.



Tanked warrior (mixed media)

As minister, Pyne [returned to the theme](#).

In forming our national identity, this event [Gallipoli] was more significant than Federation. What might have remained a fragile and untested federation of colonies with vastly different interests became a nation with focus and confidence after

World War I. The bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood forged during that time reached beyond a disparate group of colonies and would see us emerge with a collective Australian identity.

The coalition government is intent on separating Anzac from the less glorious events in our history, events remembered through NAIDOC Week or National Sorry Day. The national character – the straight white larrikin male, of whom the Digger is emblematic – is rendered mundane by such associations with lesser anniversaries, the implicit argument runs. How can you build a nation on past blemishes?

How can we understand this representation and use of history, particularly when it is a representation so clearly contested? Former Prime Minister Paul Keating is but one prominent Australian [to offer](#) an entirely different reading.

Dragged into service by the imperial government in an ill-conceived and poorly executed campaign, we were cut to ribbons and dispatched. And none of it in the defence of Australia ... [W]e still go on as though the nation was born again or even was redeemed there ... This is utter and complete nonsense.



Peacekeeper (acrylic on canvas)

Militarism is characterised by dark and light. Stories of gallantry, honour and sacrifice venerate an institution of state-authorised violence. Militaries sit behind secure fences, have their own police forces, health services and deploy state-authorised adventures under operational secrecy.

The Australian Defence Force is a hallowed institution which is represented as employing the best Australia has to offer, engaging in global security, protecting the nation and its people from the threats that lurk in the dark and uncivilised spaces across the globe. The military cannot be critiqued and neither can Anzac. To do so is treasonous.

To paraphrase [Roland Barthes](#), the Anzac mythology ‘represents a conjuring trick, it turns reality outside, emptying it of its history, filling it with nature’. A national narrative that represents Gallipoli as forging the nation acts as a form of camouflage, rendering the ill-conceived and poorly executed campaign invisible, rendering incompetence and British exploitation as an expression of the national character – mateship, sacrifice and duty.

The Anzac mythology also hides the national division over World War I. The bloodbath of Gallipoli and other campaigns were evident by 1916 and 1917, contributing to the anti-war movement and the failure of prime minister Billy Hughes’s referenda on conscription. Leaders of the anti-war movement, including women, were heckled for their efforts at resistance and [pelted with stones](#) by returned soldiers and supporters of the war effort.

In camouflage terms the Anzac mythology dazzles the national imaginary. During World War I [dazzle camouflage](#) marked the steel skin of Navy ships with stark geometric shapes so that their passage on the horizon was distorted and their target diminished.² The dazzle of Anzac distorts the history of Australia on the horizon of the mind’s eye.

The military provide neo-conservative Australia with an ideological trope that glorifies and distorts ‘as in one of the trick rooms where water appears to run uphill and little children look taller than their parents’.³ Christopher Pyne and other supporters, such as reviewer of the national curriculum Kevin Donnelly or those ‘independent reviewers’, the [Institute of Public Affairs](#), assess Gallipoli and all things military as being part of the natural order. The camouflage they provide naturalises and distorts the national narrative when viewed from a vantage point where masculinity, whiteness and hegemony seem to line up in ‘a perfect chain of echoic meaning’.⁴

It is a vantage point that stands in direct conflict with the recent reform of the Australian Defence Force itself. In the same week that minister Pyne told all Australians that Gallipoli was a valiant battle against the Turks, the Chief of Army Lieutenant-General David Morrison, in his own battle against the rapacious white straight male iconography of the Australian military, [stated](#) that the image of ‘a roughhewn country lad, invariably white, a larrikin who fights best with a hangover and who never salutes officers’ was hurting the institution and its contemporary challenges to diversify and modernise.⁵

It is a paradox that leaves the coalition looking exposed like the diggers that approached Arni Burnu in pinnacles under the light of the moon. Tropes of sacrifice, duty and honour that mark the birth of a nation are like camouflage that seeks to hide the truth from the viewer. But in this case, even the Australian Defence Force is coming to recognise the ruse.

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Introduction: narrating the nation', Homi K. Bhabha, ed., [Nation and Narration](#), Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 1990, p. 1.

² Ben Wadham, 'Ship Shape: A Dazzle Camouflage Sourcebook [book review]', *Armed Forces and Society*, 39, 3, July 2013, p. 578.

³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, '[from Between Men](#)', Dorothy J. Hale, ed., *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1990-2000*, Blackwell, Malden MA, 2006, p. 592.

⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "[Introduction](#)", from *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (1985), Robyn Warhol-Down & Diane Price-Herndl, ed., *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Rutgers University Press, Piscataway NJ, 2009, p. 186.

⁵ See also an [earlier speech](#) by General Morrison.



Fratriarchy (acrylic on canvas)