

# 496 Top down, bottom up, or bit by bit? Teaching children about war: paper to ADFA Summer School, 21 January 2015



## Top down, bottom up, or bit by bit? Teaching children about war

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This is really a talk about the politics of history.

I want to cover three basic areas.

### Introduction

1. Has there been a 'top-down' attempt to indoctrinate children about war?
2. If (a) children are curious and yearn for heroes and (b) teachers need teaching materials, are these dual needs being inappropriately exploited?
3. When do you start to teach children about war and how do you do it?

First, examine the allegation that there is or has been a 'top-down' attempt to indoctrinate children.

Secondly, if we accept that children are curious and they look for heroes and we accept that teachers need teaching materials, I want to look at whether these dual needs are being exploited in an inappropriate way.

This gets us into 'bottom-up' influences.

Thirdly, I want to address the issues of when do you start to teach children about war and how do you do it.

That should get us into the 'bit-by-bit' bit of the title.

Teaching?

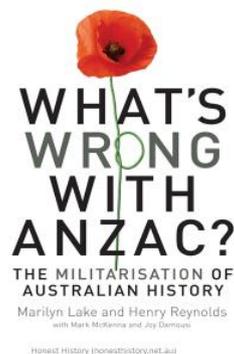
- in the classroom
- in the school yard
- on school excursions
- in families
- in peer groups

When I talk about teaching, by the way, I'm not just referring to what happens in the classroom or in the school yard, but also to what happens on school excursions and what happens in families and in peer groups.

'How do children *learn* about war?' would work just as well as a title.

Top-down indoctrination, then.

I came across this issue first through the book, *What's Wrong with Anzac*.



I'm sure everyone knows the book.

Here's a quote which sums up the indoctrination case.

*What's Wrong with Anzac?* (2010)

- *Schoolchildren are now conceptualised as the inheritors of the Anzac spirit and its custodians. They have been bombarded in recent years and throughout the year with every aspect of the history of our engagement in overseas wars ... History has been appropriated in Australia for militarist purposes and comprehensively re-written in the process.*

Marilyn Lake et al, *What's Wrong with Anzac: The Militarisation of Australian History*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2010, pp. 137-38

Note the word 'bombarde'd'.

My Honest History colleague, Steve Flora, and I decided to do some research to test that argument about bombarding or indoctrination.

We decided to look at the Simpson Prize; as a microcosm of potential indoctrination.

The Prize, as most people here will know, is an essay competition for Year 9 and 10 students.

It has been going since 1999 and the winners each year travel to Gallipoli.

We were not so much interested in the content of the essays, though Steve particularly read a lot of them, but in what the Prize program said about this indoctrination claim.

What did we find?

One key criterion of indoctrination is that you have a narrative or a line you are wanting to plant in people's heads: a doctrine.

It was pretty clear what the Simpson Prize narrative was; over the years, it became almost boringly predictable.

Here's some examples.

## Simpson Prize questions

- *The events at Gallipoli in 1915 and subsequent conflicts have all contributed to the creation of the ANZAC tradition and spirit in Australia. This is commemorated every year on ANZAC day. How did the events at Gallipoli or subsequent conflicts shape the ANZAC tradition and spirit? What does the ANZAC tradition mean to Australia? (1999)*
- *Gallipoli was a turning point in Australia's history. Assess the impact of the ANZAC experience on Australia and Australians since 1915. (2001)*
- *Courage, mateship, determination, resourcefulness and a sense of humour are identified as characteristics of the ANZAC tradition and spirit. (2006)*
- *Consider what values and characteristics demonstrated by the ANZACs at Gallipoli and later reinforced at the Western Front, continue to influence Australians today. (2007)*

But who is being indoctrinated?

The criterion for *mass* indoctrination is that you need to reach *the mass*.

We got the strong impression that the Simpson Prize doesn't.

We found instead that it was a minority pastime.

## Simpson Prize participation

- In any year 2005-14, about 5 per cent of schools with Year 9 and 10 students entered students for the Prize, although Government schools were heavily under-represented
- In any year 2005-14, about 0.2 per cent of Year 9 and 10 students Australia-wide entered for the Prize
- Since 1999, 25 per cent of Prize winners and runners-up have come from nine schools

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Then you compare those numbers with the numbers who go in for the National History Challenge: 6000 or more in recent years; compared with about 1000 in the last couple of years in the Simpson Prize.

Then you find that the questions are subtly changing from indoctrination-style questions – civic education, if you prefer – to broader history questions (getting away from the Anzac trope) and it becomes harder to make the case for the Simpson Prize as any sort of indoctrination.

## Recent Simpson Prize questions

- *Why has Australian commemoration of ANZAC Day increased in popularity in recent years?* (2012)
- *How well does the Anzac legend tell the story of individual Australian soldiers during World War One?* (2014)
- *To what extent did Australians enlist in 1914 to defend the "Mother Country"?* (2015)

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This is very welcome.

What about some of the other programs: is there indoctrination there?

Time for one.

There is a program at the Memorial to have primary school children write messages to dead soldiers on little plywood crosses, which are then planted on war graves.

## Commemorative Crosses project (pic: AWM)



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The Director of the Memorial wants 102 000 of these to be done, one for every grave.

Might involve 102 000 children; over say four years.

Is this mass indoctrination?

The messages are usually along the lines of ‘thank you for your sacrifice’ and ‘you died for our freedom’.

The education people at the Memorial reckon about 140 000 children visit there annually – that seems a bit low, perhaps it is just those who go there in school groups.

Most of those in school groups are subsidised by the PACER program.

### PACER (Parliament and Civics Education Rebate)

- rebate for students’ travel costs to Canberra provided they meet eligibility requirements
- students are required\* to visit:
  - Parliament House (inc. guided educational tour and, wherever possible, Parliamentary Education Office Program and meeting local Member/Senator)
  - Old Parliament House (inc. educational program at MOADOPH and/or the National Electoral Educational Centre)
  - Australian War Memorial
- other national civic institutions where possible

\* unless otherwise agreed by Department

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Note the three compulsory places.

Including the War Memorial; we checked whether anyone is allowed to skip the Memorial and we were told ‘No’.

Not the National Gallery, the National Museum, the Portrait Gallery, Questacon, just those three places.

That seems a bit odd; perhaps we can discuss that later.

Perhaps we could talk about whether providing a financial incentive to visit a national institution is evidence of attempted indoctrination.

I'll leave you with one quote from the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Centenary of Anzac, Senator Michael Ronaldson.

You might want to consider whether it is evidence of an intention to indoctrinate.

## The language of obligation

- *2014 to 2018 means that you and I have another opportunity to teach another generation of young Australians what their **obligations** are. And if we do not do so ladies and gentlemen, then we have failed them and we have failed ourselves.*

Senator Michael Ronaldson, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Centenary of Anzac, Remarks at RSL NSW State Congress, 27 May 2014; emphasis added

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If all of that *isn't* indoctrination it does seem to add up to familiarisation, normalisation, imprinting.

And it seems to have an impact.

## Anna Clark: *History's Children*

- *I've been surprised by just how many students assume this militarised national identity as intrinsically Australian. At a Catholic boys' school in Brisbane, Brendan says that it's important to learn this history because "Australian identity comes out during the war. The whole mateship sort of thing."*

Anna Clark, *History's Children*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2008, 2012, p. 46

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We've looked at top-down. Let's move on to bottom-up.

2. If (a) children are curious and yearn for heroes and (b) teachers need teaching materials, are these dual needs being inappropriately exploited?

In the literature about nationalism and memory and commemoration, there is a body of work about 'bottom-up' – the longings or yearnings or feelings among individuals and groups that make them respond to the top-down influences and which are there anyway because of changes that are happening in the community and in families.

For example, a lot of people have linked the revived interest in Anzac to the growth in family history: Grandad dies and the grandchildren become curious about what he did to get those medals; someone asks why Auntie Doris never married and what was that story about her having a boyfriend who died in Changi; stories like that.

That's what happens in families.

When we look at bottom-up at the community level we remember the great interest there was in the last few soldiers from World War I as they died, one by one.

Recently, the remaining war widows from that war were featured at the national Remembrance Day ceremony.

There is genuine interest in these remaining players from that war so long ago.

There's another possibility, also.

Mark McKenna, I think it was, asked a backpacker at Gallipoli why he and his friends were there and the young man replied, 'it's not about them, it's about us'.

Not about the Diggers but about the visitors, the 'pilgrims'.

Another author, Michael McGirr, said something similar.

## The Anzac mirror

- Michael McGirr, writing in 2001, noted how ‘the remembrance of war is moving from the personal to the public sphere’. Quiet and dignified remembrance of others had become noisy – ‘an unrestrained endorsement of ourselves’ which devalued the forebears we claim to revere.

*People now seem to believe that in looking at the Anzacs they are looking at themselves. They aren't. The dead deserve more respect than to be used to make ourselves feel larger.*

Michael McGirr, *Bypass: The Story of a Road*, Picador, Sydney, 2004, p. 246

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But those people are adults and young adults.

What about children and bottom-up influences; how are they affected?

Well, of course, children are part of families and a family interest in military history, for example, will impact upon children.

Children will imbibe stories about old Diggers and they'll discuss them at school.

They'll learn things around Anzac Day and Remembrance Day; perhaps sing some songs.

(We'll come back to that.)

Children are also naturally curious.

Children look for role models, too, for heroes.

They want to play for Australia and win prizes at school and impress their friends.

Heroes, people who do great deeds in exciting circumstances, are particularly interesting to children.

This is where the bottom-up and top-down pressures intersect.

War is marketable to children because war breeds heroes and children look up to heroes.

## Can you hear Australia's heroes marching?

Can you hear Australia's heroes marching?  
Can you hear them as they march into eternity?  
There will never be a greater love  
There just couldn't be a greater sacrifice  
There just couldn't be

Can you hear Australia's heroes marching?  
The ones who fought and gave their all

Can you hear Australia's heroes marching?  
Can you hear them as they march into eternity?  
There will never be a greater love  
There just couldn't be a greater sacrifice  
There just couldn't be

Can you hear Australia's heroes marching?  
They're marching once again  
Across our great land

Can you hear Australia's heroes marching?  
Can you hear them as they march into eternity?  
There will never be a greater love  
There just couldn't be a greater sacrifice  
There just couldn't be

Can you hear Australia's heroes marching?

Peter Barnes (2002), subsidised by DVA, various  
musical versions available on line for a price

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These efforts perhaps indicate people struggling to find the right word or sentiment, trying to comprehend; sometimes they plunge into banality.

The people at the War Memorial who deal with these matters talk about 'helping children to connect' with the dead soldiers or 'to understand what they went through'.

But I think it's OK to *not* comprehend.

Some things are just *incomprehensible*.

You don't attain understanding or comprehension by reading out names – another War Memorial project called the Roll of Honour Soundscape – or printing something on a cross or singing a song.

In earlier generations, 'commemoration' in many families was something you lived with for decades after the particular war; through memories and stories of brothers and uncles who did not come back or through living with fathers whose personalities had changed and souls had been damaged by war service.

Compared with that, watching sound and light shows on the side of the War Memorial or scribbling words on plywood crosses or singing maudlin songs are trivial and contrived and artificial.

If a child is of a generation lucky enough not to have had close contact with war and its lasting impacts we would be better not to cook up these sentimental substitutes.

Children, of course, are also the recipients or targets of the Australian Curriculum: History, where they get a ladle of war at least three times in their years at school from Year 4 to Year 10.

What does that imply for teachers?

## Teachers and patriotism

- *I do not think that educators have patriotic obligations. On the contrary, I would argue that history teachers' loyalties (in the classroom) should be to the practice of history with integrity and to their pupils' developing of critical understanding, rather than to communicating or instilling a particular point of view.*

Peter Stanley, 'Do teachers have 'patriotic' obligations? Address to ACT-NSW History Teachers' Associations conference, University of Canberra, 9 May 2014' (on Honest History website)

That is a good point at which to lead in to my third question.



### 3. When do you start to teach children about war and how do you do it?

The national history curriculum has one answer, as we saw.

Teachers and resource providers we have had contact with have similar answers: 'we give the children something that is appropriate to their age' or 'they get a nuanced view when they are younger and then more details later'.

David Turnoy, an American primary school teacher and textbook writer, has another answer.

## First impressions

- *I have found that we tend to regard the first information we learn about a particular subject as the baseline, and the way the brain works, all subsequent information is taken in by making connections to this original information and judged in light of it.*

David Turnoy, 'At what age can we introduce children to honest history?' *The Advocate*, 14 October 2014)

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Turnoy is saying that, if we pull punches early on, if we leave bits out, if we sanitise, if we don't talk about the full reality of war, the homefront, the aftermath, the impacts on families, if we apply euphemisms, then how children approach these issues later on will be affected by that filter that was applied at the time of the first encounter.

The national curriculum and the teachers I quoted epitomise the 'bit-by-bit' approach mentioned in the title of these remarks.

Turnoy asks us to realise the importance of the first 'bit'.

If we can't teach that first bit without sanitising – and running the risk of skewing all the later bits – should we wait until we think students are old enough to cope with everything with no sanitising?

Ultimately a question of whether children believe the myths or develop the skills to interrogate history.

As in the remark from Peter Stanley on the earlier slide.

Ultimately, you will be the ones who help children decide whether they have an obligation to have a certain view of their country's past or whether they can choose their history for themselves.

## The language of obligation again

- *2014 to 2018 means that you and I have another opportunity to teach another generation of young Australians what their **obligations are.***

Senator Michael Ronaldson, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Centenary of Anzac, Remarks at RSL NSW State Congress, 27 May 2014; emphasis added

- *[The next generation will be carrying the torch of remembrance.] And when they hop on a school bus, or they walk home, or they go shopping, or they go out at night with relative freedom – that they realise in many instances that freedom has been paid for in blood. **And they must understand that.***

Ronaldson to Sydney Legacy, July 2014; emphasis added

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Here's a slide which might make us think about the implications for the next generation of remarks like Senator Ronaldson's.

## *The next war*

[I]t seems to me  
That the cause for which we fought  
Is again endangered.  
What more fitting memorial for the  
fallen  
Than that their children  
Should fall for the same cause?

Osbert Sitwell, *The Next War* (1918)



AWM DA08570, taken 4 May 1915

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And here's something which suggests the dangers of a sentimental approach to war.

Too much sentiment becomes a figleaf that hides complex questions about wars and why we fight them.

It can also support current agendas, including those which would have us avoid discussing of why we fight.

## Sentimentality and war

- *Sentimentality distances and fetishizes its object; it is the natural ally of jingoism. So long as we indulge it, we remain incapable of debating the merits of war without being charged with diminishing those who fought it.*

Elizabeth Samet, 'Can an American soldier ever die in vain?' *Foreign Policy*, 9 May 2014)

Dr Samet is a lecturer at the United States Military Academy at West Point

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The next slide has a couple of quotes which reinforce Turnoy's suggestion above about the effect of the way we first introduce complex topics like war.

## Two more views to consider

- *Boys in the years after World War I dreamed of “lines of men charging forward with fixed bayonets with astonishing heroism”. The image “was fixed in our minds and was never replaced when the real facts filtered back”. (Brian Lewis, architect and author, 1906-1991)*
- *Despite an apparent endeavour to not celebrate victory, the War Memorial can be guilty of celebrating – or at least assuming the necessity of – the act of war itself. Parts of the memorial are like a fun park. You can be in the trenches, in a navy ship’s bridge, and watch a spectacular Peter Jackson-produced short film about fighter pilots in WWI. It’s shamelessly loud, exciting, fun and gung-ho. It’s hard not to see it as an kind of imprinting ... While victory is not directly exalted, it seems the message is that war can be ok. If you win. Even if you die and win you can find honour. Dead losers stay silent in their unmarked graves. (James Rose, author and blogger, 2013)*

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And this slide goes back to that indoctrination question.

## Indoctrination? (pic: ABC)



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Finally, these are the sources used in the presentation.

## Sources

- All of the references used in this presentation can be found by using the Search function on the Honest History website ([honesthistory.net.au](http://honesthistory.net.au)): *What's Wrong with Anzac*; Simpson Prize; National History Challenge; Commemorative Crosses; PACER; Ronaldson; Anna Clark; Michael McGirr; Australia's Heroes Marching; Roll of Honour Soundscape; patriotic obligations; Turnoy; Sitwell; Samet; Brian Lewis; James Rose.