

# **Our National Folly: War Romance and the Australian National Imaginary**

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In the light of my work on Australian nationalism, contemporary history and the continuing ‘colonial’ aspects of Australia’s cultural relations, I want to reflect on Anzac. It is the national myth, the national imaginary, the centrepiece of national identity, the significant Australian invented tradition. Even more than sport, it has become Australia’s secular religion.

Anzac Day and the underlying national war myth deserve respect. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both need to be supplanted. They involve a potent combination of admirable traditions and a national folly: the de facto celebration of war, something only possible in a country which has never been invaded nor had a major war fought on its soil. Indigenous Australians, for good reason, challenge that ‘fact’.

Underlying this modest proposal, which counterpoints many other analyses on the topic, are an historically informed analysis and a morally informed contemporary political critique.

Three fundamental assessments inform this interpretation. They comprise arguments about Australia’s defence and about the impact of modern mass warfare:

First, that Australia as an isolated island continent cannot be invaded, and if it was invaded (rather than just attacked) it could not successfully be occupied.

Second, that the colonial assumption that participation in border wars and world wars is an essential part of an insurance policy guaranteeing the nation’s defence is misplaced.

Finally, that the cost of modern mass warfare is unacceptable and contemporary Australians fail to appreciate the scale and cost because they have never experienced invasion, fighting in their streets, or massive death tolls in war. They have little historical knowledge despite the power of Anzac and war history in the national myth.

Noting briefly those three arguments, I want to look at my own sense of war and family experience, the particular late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century fusion of political, social and cultural events which facilitated the creation of the Anzac Legend, its permutations, omissions and, more recently, inclusions, and their implications. After the use of Anzac by politicians of all hues over the last two decades, and the socialisation of children into the war romance of Anzac, it is now time to create a different national day focusing on peace and the prevention of war. Australia cannot afford a commemoration which has the unintended consequence of becoming a de facto national celebration of militarism.

The fear of invasion arguments might briefly be elaborated upon. Fear stemmed from the isolation of Australia, although the imagined Asian enemies were very distant. Osaka is 6433 kilometres by sea from Brisbane, Guangzhou 5966 and Jakarta 4888: rather longer than the 34 kilometres across World War Two's defensive moat, the English Channel. Invasion fear was also based on the size of the continent, and the small population to defend it: from 859 Europeans in 1788 to 3 million in 1891, just over 5 million in 1921, 7 million in 1945, 10 million in 1961, and over 22 million today. Given the size and aridity of the continent, Australia is in fact very difficult, if not impossible, to invade and to occupy. If it could be invaded, and occupied, the size and the bushland parts of its sprawling cities would facilitate resistance. While Australia could be besieged, its food and energy resources will allow it to function for some time.

The idea that Australia needs a 'Great Power' protector and an insurance policy, with down payments in the form of troop commitments to regional wars (eight since Sudan in 1885) has its origins in history. The invaders' isolated small settlement, 20,000 kilometres as the crow flies from its land of origins, was 'born' with invasion fear.

French explorers were nearby in January 1788 when the First Fleet sailed into Botany Bay, while Tasmania was 'settled' in 1803-4 due to fears of the foundation of a threatening French colony, a 'Terre Napoleon'. Anxiety about survival in the early years, danger from the indigenous people, and the fear that port cities could easily be attacked from the sea resulted in large guns marking the harbours of every port city and the imaginations of the settlers. Later, as a European outpost in the Pacific, 1880s fear of other European powers in the region (Russia, France, Germany) was compounded by racial, almost Malthusian, fears of invasion by 'the teeming races' of Asia (Alomes 2001).

The Great Power protector was Britain and the Royal Navy, and, anticipated by the 1908 visit of the 'Great White Fleet', in 1941 it became America. Necessity and/or principle may have also informed the Australian commitment in the two world wars, and the USA was the crucial force in the Pacific. However, the assumption that loyal, and often unthinking, dependence (the 'alliance', or ANZUS from 1951), manifested through participation in the two Anglo-Saxon great powers' regional wars, was essential is erroneous. The ANZUS treaty only requires the nations to 'consult'. In practice, nations have interests not allies, and decisions on war or peace are never based on just a piece of paper. The USA will probably defend Australia because it has become a continental aircraft carrier hosting key American intelligence bases (Ball 1980). However, Australian defence planners are unlikely to conclude that Australia cannot be invaded as this would make their role as superfluous as that of theologians who do not believe in God. The nearest defence planning came to recognition of the strategic facts was the 1986 Dibb report which recognised that Australia would probably be free of danger for some time.

## **Respect**

Personally, while I argue that Anzac Day has become a dangerous national event, which indirectly, legitimises current Australian military commitments, I simultaneously respect and recognise those who have served. May I explain.

I grew up with Anzac as a family tradition. As a young boy I had a Tommy gun, that is a powder blue wooden one, and my father's Digger hat. The 'gun' was powder blue, which must have been the paint that was in the shed where I also used to try to make wooden boats. Then there was also the backyard of sporting dreams and picking raspberries, and playing tennis against the wooden garage door decorated in my father's unit colours. That was the world of war in Hobart, with its obelisk cenotaph, its war memorial swimming pools and ovals and an earlier historical legacy, a mountain named 'Wellington', a hill named 'Nelson', 'Salamanca Place' and a 'Napoleon St', as well as city streets named after governors, kings and queens.

My father, Gordon Alomes, TX902, was a 39er, a volunteer and a member of the 2nd/1<sup>st</sup> Machine Gunners in the Sixth Division (Hocking 1997). He served in the Middle East, North Africa, Greece and Crete and the Pacific. Like most returned men he did not talk about the war but when my sister and I fought over what TV show to watch he accused us of sounding like Stukas, those same Stukas that had dive-bombed the Australian troops as they retreated south through Greece.

War was part of my childhood. I read the war books of Russell Braddon, whom I later interviewed during researcher for a book on expatriates (Alomes 1999), including *The Naked Island* (1952), Paul Brickhill's *The Dam Busters* (1951), the naval battle tales of J.E. MacDonnell and Ronald McKie's *Proud Echo* (1953), the story of the sinking of the *HMAS Perth* in the Sunda Straits in 1942. When I tried to write a primary school novel, it was a war story, with its lead character a Group Captain from exotic Prahran in Melbourne. In Hobart, that was part of our wider imagination.

Anzac Day was one of the most important of all days for my father, because the war years were the most important experience in his life. I have the utmost respect for the sense of the past of my late father and his mates, of what they went through and how they felt about it. At the same time, my father never supported the Vietnam war, nor wanted me to be conscripted. I have no patience with the romantic Australian celebration of Anzac, for children, backpackers or the yellow-T-shirted 'Fanatics' on pilgrimages or

‘Smoko Tours’ to Gallipoli or the Somme, or for other absurdities of imagined rediscovery. Australia has many general and family histories for 21<sup>st</sup> children and adults to connect with, not just bloody war.

Why? Am I as an historian a radical sceptic or an iconoclast? No, because the Australian Gallipoli/Anzac/digger myth involves origami-like houses of folly, an architecture of social myth and deception that shows a flawed understanding of history, and only rhetorical sensitivity about human suffering. We need to put war memory in perspective, to have more national – and international – history and less romantic national myth with its ersatz imaginings of the sacred. We need to pierce the balloon of national foolishness so Australia might actually work for a more peaceful, a less absurd, and less dangerous world, coupled with an intelligent sense of Realpolitik.

We should also recognise that in a darkly black paradox, the century of mass war has become the century of individual gravestones and crosses, despite exceptions such as the more traditional burial mounds of St Petersburg with their thousands of unnamed bodies and Shostakovich music eerily playing in the trees. Individualised memorials have become normal paradoxically because of the mass carnage which began on the Western Front. As Joan Beaumont observed, ‘there’s a sense at the Western Front that the individual had ceased to matter, that the individual had no power no matter how brave, how determined, how heroic the individual was just obliterated by this technology’ (ABC 2008). Yet that scale of death made an impact, especially in a country which had a culture which often focused on defeats. In 1916, Tristan Buesst wrote from the front, ‘It makes the terms Civilisation and Christianity almost ludicrous’ (Ziino 2003, p. 149). In 2008 Army historian Roger Lee reflected on the Western Front’s legacy: ‘We’ve lost all sense of success, we’ve all lost sense of what positives you can take out of the War. It’s all been lost under this weight of dead’ (ABC 2008). Looking back on the century, we need to recognise that the ‘era of commemoration’ (Le Goff and Nora 1985) and of historical myth is also one of diminished historical knowledge.

### **A Victim of Fate: History and the invention of a military national myth**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century different streams of events and ideologies shaped the politics and the imaginations of the period, especially in colonial and then federated Australia. The fates would deal even more harshly with the young and hopeful nation than the difficult land, a land which had nurtured fatalism and stoicism. The fusion of colony, nation and empire was apparent in the fact that Australia came to formal nationhood during Britain's South African or Boer War (1899-1902) when the six colonies and then the Commonwealth sent troops to support the British Empire. Defence fears, intensified by the European scramble for colonies since the 1880s, had been the forces behind the movement for Federation, and the birth of the nation was monarchically blessed by the opening of the first parliament by the Duke of York and Cornwall. European tensions would continue and the rise of China and Japan added a new dimension. Japan was the victor over China in 1894-5 and then defeated Russia in the naval battle of Tsushima in 1905, the first defeat of a 'Western race' by an 'oriental race'. However, the 1902 Anglo-Japanese alliance meant that the Japanese navy, the fleet of our ally, protected the Anzac troopships in 1914-15 as Australian troops protected Japanese military engineers in Iraq nearly a century later.

Four other factors led to the young nation defining itself in imperial or colonial rather than national or independent terms. One was the rise of racial ideology, the Social Darwinian view of the survival of the fittest, of rising and falling races, and the association between population growth and 'national vitality'. Colonial 'loyalty' to Britain was reinforced by these regional and racial fears. It continued in the new century with the introduction of military service and a campaign to buy a Dreadnought for the Royal Navy. The second factor was the rise of the idealism of the New Imperialism, which clothed the imperial adventure in poetic imagery, and attributed to it 'civilisation' and 'nobility'. It would be enshrined in imperial socialisation (or propaganda) in school histories and in children's adventure books, including the several editions of the Victorian Rev. W. H. Fitchett's *Deeds That Won the Empire* (1896). Empire Day, an invented tradition from 1905, was a much bigger event in the colonies than in Britain. Britannic idealism was also related to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century neo-Gothic romance, and to a

poetic language of chivalry—discernible in the poems of Bernard O’Dowd, ‘Banjo’ Paterson and Henry Lawson. The third factor which made all this seem possible was the fact that after the mass carnage of the Napoleonic Wars, the first wars fought with large citizen armies, the nineteenth century had no major European wars fought on home soil. It was also still possible to find romance in war as adventure, or even in the British romance of defeat as in the charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War. Finally, the new imperialism and the class conflicts of the Depression of the 1890s sorely damaged the different ‘Australian Dream’, of a 'new world' Australia free of old world tyrannies, classes and injustices. Radical nationalist utopian ideals retreated as many Australians became Lawson’s ‘faces in the street’, the unemployed, but imperial romance and socialisation continued (Alomes 1988).

The total war of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be different, killing millions not hundreds, and wars would no longer be fought over the spring and summer and then concluded. Strangely, Australians did not see the Boer War as a ‘coming of age’, of ‘national manhood’ in the romantic and vitalist rhetoric of the day, even as the Australian troops displayed many of the good characteristics of bushman improvisers in fighting that imperial war against the Boer guerrillas. Unfortunately, sadly, horrifically, the first Australian combat was in a war less bloody, less muddy, than the years which would be spent dying in the trenches of the Somme. I think we should invert Michael McKernan’s argument that Australia was lucky that the first major engagement of its troops was in the Dardanelles Peninsula, rather than in the morass of the Somme:

Think if the Australians had gone straight to the Western Front, as they had expected. Swallowed up in mighty armies to which our contribution would hardly have been seen, we would have struggled to assert that we were different and we would do things in our own way. Gallipoli saved us from that. That was our luck; that is why the story means so much to us. (quoted in Bowers 2002)

In fact, this was Australia's bad luck. It laid the foundations for a dangerous social myth, which exoticises and celebrates national difference while avoiding larger issues. Had Gallipoli happened after the Somme, it would have been ‘small beer’ in the world of social memory, rather like the Beersheba cavalry charge of the Light Horse, which was historically and strategically more important. Scholars, including Peter Cochrane (1992),

Bill Gammage (1975), Graham Seal (2004) and Michael McKernan (1980), have revealed some of the myths (falsehoods as well as social myths) and horrors of the Great War.<sup>1</sup> At the same time they are often called to be priests at the temple of war memory, church historians and part evangelists, rather than doubters or theologians questioning the national war myth. Ever since C. E. W. Bean, professional and popular historians have embroidered this secular religion with story and fable, furnishing words of respect and commemoration. While the academics have been prolific, their popular influence has been small compared to that of Les Carlyon and Peter Fitzsimons, and earlier Patsy Adam-Smith.

The ANZAC mythology would also be informed by ‘the seduction of the Mediterranean’, (Aldrich 1993)—the traditional associations of ancient Greece, with youthful manliness, bravery, and in its Athenian persona, democracy, and therefore even freedom. The odyssey to Africa and the Mediterranean was itself a reversal of the Australian settlers’ journey from the old world to the new. Perhaps a landing (invasion) and retreat appealed particularly to the Jungian national psyche of a settler-invader people whose odysseys involved crossing the seas in the other direction. Invasion, with all of its drama and excitement, took place in the most storied of lands, a peninsula not far from Greece, although then part of the Ottoman Empire. Ashmead Bartlett’s morale-boosting reports to London and C.E.W. Bean’s reports to Australia of the ANZAC landing at Gallipoli invoked the romance of the Greek warrior and of 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens, which could be embellished into themes of liberty and of civilisation defended against the ‘barbarians’. John Masefield’s romantic images similarly celebrated the ancient Greek warrior tradition and Britain’s storied military history. Of the troops boarding the ships at Lemnos on April 23<sup>rd</sup> he rhapsodised: ‘No such gathering of fine ships had even been seen upon this earth, and the beauty and the exaltation of the youth upon them made them like sacred things as they moved away. ... [feeling] a gladness of exaltation that their young courage was to be used.’ The ANZACs were:

The finest body of young men ever brought together in modern times. For physical beauty and nobility of bearing they surpassed any men I have ever seen; they walked and looked like kings in old poems ... there was no thought of surrender in

these marvellous young men; they were the flower of the world's manhood, and died as they had lived, owning no master on this earth.

(Masefield 1916, pp. 25-6)

Several correspondents were in love with 'the adventure' and with the Greek legends which offered a thematic language for the writer.

The British and Australians storytellers created the myth. Henry Nevinson, the British war correspondent was intoxicated by the epic and heroic themes of ancient Greece and of 'the adventure', as in his account of the Dardanelles. Nevinson's *Manchester Guardian* articles carried such headlines as 'Brilliant Charge of the Irishmen at Suvla Bay' and 'Australians' Reckless Courage'. His biographer observed that he too was impressed by 'the Antipodean soldier's physique, humour and lack of deference' (John 2006, p.147). The heroic conception of Anzac and of war pervaded contemporary journalism, which was not able to inform readers of the actual situation. Control of war reporting is not new. In love with the adventure, 'with Byronic musing, [Nevinson] conjured up ancient scenes'. Similarly, Masefield ecstatically evoked the bravery of the landing:

No army in history has made a more heroic attack; no army in history has been set such a task. No other body of men in any modern war has been called upon to land over mined and wired waters under the cross fire of machine guns... Our men achieved a feat without parallel in war and no other troops in the world (not even Japanese or Gurkhas or Ghazis in the hope of heaven) would have made good those beaches on the 25th of April. (Masefield 1916 pp.25-6)

C.E.W. Bean was central for Australia, mythologising Anzac, in his journalism and then in his edited collection of the writings of the men, *The Anzac Book* of 1916, with its demotic and folk aspects. He then shaped the 12 volume *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* and became an advocate, 'creator' and 'curator' of what was to become the new shrine of ANZAC as Australian legend and the national myth, the Australian War Memorial (McCarthy 1983, Winter 1992).

The sealing of the myth that 'Australian nationhood was born', that colonial and then provincial, if federated Australia had 'come of age' in 'the baptism of fire' at Gallipoli

was not just a male and vitalist idea. Its significance arose because of racial ideology, the dominant pseudo-science and popular ideology of the day. It had been assumed that ‘the convict stain’ had impaired the character of Australians, or that this genetic origin had made them an inferior race, even a ‘degenerate’ race (Charles Darwin). Now, sacrifice removed the blot, the stain of the convict, as ‘Currency’ proved that it was as good as ‘Sterling’: the ‘colonials’, the Australians and New Zealanders, were on a par with the racial standards of Great Britain itself. Finally, war service, death, blood shed, and family members lost, wounded or damaged, on a massive scale, resonated more profoundly than secular events such as Federation. This effect was reinforced by Christian ideas of sacrifice, as Easter occurred only weeks before the Gallipoli landing, and by Australian fatalism.

To Australians, who at times felt themselves to be colonial transplants to the new world, war involved the ‘great trip’, the ‘odyssey’, adding another element to its mythical appeal. I wonder if the appeal was even greater for those at home, like me reading *Deeds That Made the AIF* (1961) which an aunt gave to me in the early ‘60s, than to my father who had fought near the Thermopylae pass—scene of one of the most storied of ancient Greek battles -- but then retreated through Greece and was evacuated to Crete as German aircraft strafed the poorly protected Allied troops.

Several other forces, aside from ongoing fantasies of race, invasion fear and socialisation into empire loyalism, would ensure that Anzac became the national day. The first was the fusion of the folk tradition with the language of official and religious imperial patriotism. In my summary in the ABC-Clio encyclopedia of nationalism (Alomes 2008, p. 855):

The fusion of official, imperial Britannic and popular folk nationalism occurred after the Gallipoli invasion of World War I. The ANZAC myth... became the dominant national ideology, a secular religion that drew on Australian Legend ideas of the resourceful Australian soldier animated by feelings of mateship for his comrades. The myth had its storied beginnings in the soldiers’ bravery... ... on April 25, 1915. Australia redefined its national tradition as expeditionary nationalism after the World War I force... was sent to Europe and the Middle East, resulting in over 60,000 dead, the ultimate sacrifice for “King and Country”. The immediate cause of this changed view of nationalism was the expeditionary force

loyally serving a larger power, also seen as Australia's down payment on a national defense policy. The underlying cause was a settler colony conception that significance came from elsewhere, reinforced by a search for the sacred in a modern society.

### **'A nation is born where the shells fall fast': Anzac as the national day**

A different force was existential, the role of war in providing a sense of meaning, something even relevant today when we contemplate a media obsessed with finding 'heroes' in war and peace and of children encouraged to 'connect' with their family's service past. This earlier sense of significance involved the search for meaning in a society which was different from some other new world foundations; a society that had not come to terms with the indigenous people of the continent, and perhaps with the continent itself. Australia as a convict foundation lacked the religious and philosophical idealism of the Pilgrim Fathers. Nor had it reached an accommodation, in terms of Victorian social liberalism, with its indigenous people, as happened in New Zealand. It was shaped in its greatest period of growth from the 1850s by the ruling materialism of the Victorian era, by unrealised dreams of yeoman farms, by urbanisation and the derivative culture disseminated around the world by the steamship and the telegraph in the era of the Industrial Revolution and the New Imperialism. Despite an overall Victorian commitment to 'Progress' and Australia's initial leadership in democratic rights, it lacked a sense of the future.

When the undercurrent of utopian nationalism of the radical movement, and even the social progressivism of Labor and liberals, were weakened by the 1890s Depression, the 'Federation drought' and imperial sentiment, the nation wanted of purpose and direction. A disillusioned Henry Lawson, a radical nationalist facing a conservative nation during the 1890s Depression, wrote in 'The Star of Australasia' (1895) 'we boast no more of our bloodless flag, that rose from a nation's slime....the Star of the South shall rise – in the lurid clouds of war... [for] 'the scorn of Nature and the curse of god are heavy on peace like ours' (Kiernan 1976). War would bring unity, of class as well as nation, bringing together boys 'from city slum and the home of wealth and pride'. The vitalist theme of regeneration, personal and national, would continue to inform the Australian war

tradition. War, in the myth, as well as for men like my father, gave meaning, meaning not always found so easily in 'civvy street'. As Graham Seal (2004) has identified, the imperial and official Anzac myth incorporated the Digger or folk tradition. The result was, in Gramscian terms, a hegemonic relationship between imperially-oriented nationalism and popular nationalism.

Two other factors were central in the short and long-term historical trajectory of the nation. One was the power of Australians' lived experience in two entirely different world wars. Although the bitter divisions of the Great War, which many on the Left saw as a war between British and German capital, and which Irish Australians often opposed due to Britain crushing the 1916 Easter Rebellion, and maintaining Ireland's colonial servitude, the magnitude of the war was crucial (McKernan, 1980). Early hesitation marked the first decade after the war; in Australia, as in Europe, many returned men turned away from war memory. Eventually, the RSL or RSSAILA (the Returned Sailors Soldiers and Airmen Imperial League of Australia), commemoration and Anzac Day mattered to Australians (Wilson 1974). The fact that almost 10 percent of the population, and nearly 40 percent of men, had served, and the Australian Imperial Force journeyed to the other side of the world as well as faced death in the first total war, meant that the war made a greater impact than in most societies. Australia is one of few nations with war memorials in nearly every suburb and in every country town. The second factor was long-term, Australia's 'easy war' in the greatest of all cauldrons, World War 2, in the war which killed 60 million human beings and wreaked untold destruction on the cities of Britain, Germany, Russia, China and Japan. The second world war was even more a total war. A similar proportion of the people, nearly 700,000 Australians, served overseas and most of the population was 'mobilised', whether as munitions factory workers or as members of the Australian Women's Land Army. Around 39,000 Australians perished in the second world war, about 21,000 less than those who were killed in the Great War. Although the old Yellow Peril invasion fear was revived, in propaganda warning that 'the Jap' was advancing south, Australia did not share the brutal experience of war fought on its soil, except for those in the bombed northern towns, particularly Darwin and Broome.

Despite continued religious divisions in the official ceremonial of Anzac, many Catholics not attending what they saw as Protestant shrines and cenotaph services, war memory would grip Australians. It permeated the novels which I read as a kid, war films, and was manifested in the new utilitarian memorials, the war memorial community centres, ovals and swimming pools of the 1950s, although the RSL criticised a 'tax deduction' approach to naming new community facilities (Inglis 1999, p.354). The new memorials linked the national imagination to shaping the future, rather than just focusing on the sacrifices of the past. Powerful war memory co-existed with continued invasion fear – first of the return of a militarist Japan and then Cold War fears of 'Red China', even though the new communist power neither had a major navy nor the Western powers' habit of conquest far beyond their borders. The conjoined traditions of 'loyalty' to the 'Great Power' and invasion fear regarding the 'Yellow Peril' were overlaid by the spectre of Communism in the region, the 'Red Peril'.

### **The War Myth as a Colonial Myth**

A historic dependence on the 'Mother Country' was one source of fear and anxiety. However, as the students of neo-colonialism and of post-colonial literature have shown, the end of formal colonial status does not guarantee immediate ascension towards sophisticated national autonomy. In Australia, the war myth and its association with defence and colonial fears continued to be a colonial myth, both internally and in terms of Australia's 'external relations' as the foreign affairs department was named. The events at Gallipoli did not set the seal on Australian nationhood, nor did they herald the birth of a nation. They set the seal on a pattern of colonial dependence which would continue, with occasional elements of autonomy, for nearly a century into the morass of post-2003 Iraq.

The war myth would also play another important role. Whereas the myths of frontier colonies usually celebrated male frontier traditions, often on horse (the drover, the Mountie, the cowboy, the gaucho) or in Australia even more the bushman, war, like sport, domesticated and urbanised traditions associated with male bravery, heroism and physical endeavour. The war myth, like sport, brought the bush myth of the Australian

Legend to urban and suburban Australia. While Bean had earlier romanticised the bushman in *The Dreadnought of the Darling* (1911), the Digger archetype celebrated Australians, particularly men, as inheritors of the bush traditions of improvisation and egalitarianism. In external terms, the war myth, interacting with invasion fear, somehow legitimised Australian participation in regional wars, including Korea (1950-53), the Malayan emergency (1950-60), and the Vietnam War (1962-1975). Along with the historic filial British connection, loyalty to the great power encouraged Australians to blindly accept the use of their land as a colonial testing ground for British nuclear bombs, as Algeria and Mururoa Atoll had provided convenient spaces for French nuclear pollution. Then, as now, it was assumed that treaties such as ANZUS guaranteed Australia's defence.

### **The more it changes the more it regenerates: Anzac over the last 50 years**

The Anzac tradition retreated in the Sixties as Hughie challenged his father 'Alf' in Alan Seymour's controversial 1960 play, *The One Day of the Year*. The baby boomer generation challenged the Digger traditions and social values of their parents and opposed what they saw as Australia's servile involvement as a token ally in an American imperialist war - Vietnam. Despite the Whitlam government distancing itself from servility to the USA, while continuing the alliance but also rediscovering Asia, Anzac returned to a position of significance amidst the bicentennial nationalism of the 1980s. In reaction against the feminist critique of Anzac, particularly anti-war graffiti on war memorials, and recognising that the Vietnam veterans had been harshly treated, as much by the RSL as by anyone else, the Anzac tradition was embraced again. The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gallipoli in 1990 and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War 2 in 1995 intensified orchestrated historical celebration. As two world war generations of Diggers grew older, Australians respected the last Diggers of the Dardanelles and the Great War and the ageing of the larger World War 2 generation, including the 39ers. War commemoration's great curators and orchestrators would be Con Sciacca, Labor Minister for Veterans' Affairs, whose department funded Australia Remembers (Reed 2004), and two different prime ministers. Paul Keating offered a romantic embrace of the battle to defend Australia in the Pacific. In contrast John Howard used the war theme, with a

World War I, British and American orientation, to legitimise his government.

Significantly, in the 1990s and 2000s Australia participated in three frontier wars, the two invasions of Iraq and the Afghanistan war as well as peacekeeping operations in Timor L'Este and the Solomon Islands.

### **Anzac's Absences and Distortions, Uses and Misuses**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to assess the fundamental dangers of a national celebration based on war. The first is a preference for historical myth rather than history, and for the study of an event rather than its causes, consequences and implications. The major absence, which has allowed the popular 'other' in Australian storytelling—the incompetence and rigidity of British officers—has been the other troops on the British and French side, the British Indians, the French Africans, and, until Australia acquired a Turkish immigrant population, the Turks themselves. Often the British and French are forgotten, and, until recently as Anzac Day has become more popular in New Zealand, Anzac Day rhetoric could even leave out the Kiwis, the 'NZ' in the fabled name. Michael McKernan has convincingly documented the past exclusiveness of the RSL (McKernan 1999). Unfortunately, the new inclusiveness (women, migrants, Aboriginals in war and children in commemoration) has unintended consequences. In broadening and deepening the national war myth, it is a backward step, indirectly legitimising the Diggers' role in new frontier wars.

The absence of the 'other', and of death in war and of the horrors facing the wounded and damaged, both our forces and the enemy combatants and civilians, is the central distortion. A romantic tale of the Australian soldier as a Digger, a mate and an improviser is a folk myth that leaves out the suffering of war. That is partly because war is so unspeakable, even for those who have survived but have been by their mates when they died, that they do not communicate their feelings. When I read *The Dam Busters* and other accounts of the bombing of Germany I was fascinated by Lancaster bombers and Mosquitos, by planes, and by Barnes Wallis' bouncing bomb technology, but thought nothing of those killed by bombing, by flooding, or other German or British civilians massacred by the bombing. Later, when I had heard of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the

barbarism of the nuclear bomb, I did not know that as many died in the fire-bombing of Tokyo as those who were killed by the Hiroshima atom bomb of 6 August 1945.

Because Australians did not have a war on their own soil, these colonial dreamers whose tradition was of fighting in ‘other people’s wars’, as in the AIF journeys which took my father to Jerusalem, to England, and to the Mediterranean and the Pacific, did not think about the scale of modern warfare. My father, and his generation, did not talk about war because it is horrific, as well as deeply moving. It is barbaric to promote the Anzac tradition without fully, rather than just rhetorically, recognising the horror and the scale of the barbarism of modern war.

In 2001, when teaching at the University of Tokyo as the Visiting Professor of Australian Studies, I pointed out, in article entitled ‘Our Romantic Folly’ in *The Age* (Alomes 2001), that Australians are obsessed with war memory and romanticise war. As my students, from Europe, South East Asia and Japan, were aware it is harder to romanticise war when you live in a country or city which has been destroyed by it. The Hiroshima museum, the Okinawa Peace Park war memorial with its monument to the hundreds of thousands who lost their lives in 1945, the museum of the fire-bombing of Tokyo and the ongoing ‘battles’ with the ultra-nationalists who want to celebrate Japanese military tradition are never romantic. Nor is war romanticised in China, in the memorial and museum to the victims of the Rape of Nanjing or in the war memorials of Berlin, from the Jewish holocaust memorial and the Berlin Wall histories to *Neue Wache*, with its sculpture of a woman holding a son. My solution to how to place the Australian war myth in context was to begin with a statistical catalogue: the demographics of death. The total Australian loss in World War Two of around 39,000 contrasts with other deathly demographics: the around 30,000 killed over several days in the fire-bombing of Dresden; the 100,000 killed in the fire-bombing of Tokyo; around 16,000 Allied POWs on the Burma Railway, in an overall total of around 120,000 dead, including Asian slave labourers and 4,000 Japanese soldiers.

The suggestion that Australia had had an ‘easy war’, although not for those who died, or came back with health problems or for their families, provoked several strong, but

reasonable, emails. They told personal stories of how easy it was not as they reflected on what their fathers had brought back. Now, I suspect I am partly wrong to emphasise the death toll. The much larger harm happens to those who saw their mates die, to those scared, shocked and or wounded, or simply exhausted by war. As one email said, in stark and rightly angry terms:

‘I never heard my grandfather take a clear breath because he was gassed in World War 1, I saw my father disintegrate mentally after his experiences in World War 2. I saw a family friend come back from Changi as a human skeleton - I was only a child but it I have never forgotten it - and I lost a half-brother in New Guinea.’

Perhaps it is the shared experience of this horror which explains both the bonds of the different unit associations like the 39ers and the statues and photos of soldiers helping a wounded comrade: at Tokyo’s Yushukan war museum in the grounds of Yasukuni Shrine; or the images of Simpson and the donkey; or of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels helping a wounded Digger in New Guinea. If the army experience produces male camaraderie, the pressures of war form deeper bonds.

The most extreme and offensive of the contemporary political uses of war memory to support contemporary wars has been in John Howard’s distortion by omission of the anti-war views of the last World War One Diggers to die in the early 2000s. While Paul Keating celebrated the war anniversaries, and Veterans Affairs took ageing Anzacs back to Gallipoli, John Howard appropriated the last diggers of Gallipoli and the Great War to his contemporary militarist aims. The anti-war Anzacs, Tasmanian Alec Campbell and Queenslander Ted Smout, were effectively co-opted in death for the militarist tradition and their anti-war beliefs were rarely noted, except by Jonathan King (King 2004).. The commemorations encouraged the backpacker and general war tourism to Gallipoli, as critiqued by Ward and McKenna (2007), and then to Kokoda and Thailand. While the experience may be emotional and even ‘meaningful’, that does not confirm that the result is historical wisdom, whether about Australian history or about the history of modern war. Similar socialisation into war is now increasing in schools, in the media and at

Anzac Day ceremonies. As Joan Beaumont observed, 'ultimately younger generations are socialised into the memory of war by the agencies of State'. She went on to argue that Anzac had appeal as a 'unifying narrative' or story in an era of increasing multicultural diversity. Noting the definition of a myth as 'a story or a charter about the past that legitimates the present', she observed that 'you can hear in much of the public discourse today the Anzac legend being invoked, to legitimate current military actions' (ABC 2008).

John Howard successfully occupied the middle ground of Australian politics in the years of economic growth, the neo-liberal economic policy consensus, and revived invasion/war fear. Due to belief or political convenience, he played different identity cards as part of his political persona: sporting nationalism, Anzac nationalism, loyalty to the great power and scepticism about foreigners (at the same time as immigration grew).

To some this was a successful quest for the Hanson One Nation vote, and after September 2001 and the boat people, it helped ensure that the Howard government was re-elected several times. The Rudd Labor government has maintained some 'nationalist' continuities, not closing all immigration detention centres, celebrating Anzac and 'inventing' a new day, 'Battle for Australia Day', even if it is more relevant to the interests of the Australian people than a European battle. Like his predecessor, the national sportsman and national military patriot, Kevin Rudd has had an ongoing presence at major sporting events and beats the drum respectfully at military occasions, including the funerals of the several Australians who have lost their lives in the Afghan conflict.

The problem is not legitimate respect for those who served. It is about the gap between emotion and understanding. While Anzac ceremonies, from the Shrine to Martin Place, from Gallipoli to Kokoda, are often moving, bringing young and old to tears, emotion in face of the memory or the idea of past death is not synonymous with understanding the causes and the human impact, in death tolls and suffering, of war. The failure to see the Anzac tradition in perspective is an outdated form of colonial behaviour, which results in

not questioning whether we should be engaged in wars today. When John Schuman sang Cold Chisel's 'When the War is Over' in Canberra on Australia Day 2009 he rephrased the title to 'this War', presumably meaning Iraq or Afghanistan. We need to interrogate any current war or proposed invasion on each commemorative day. Unfortunately, this does not happen now. On Anzac Day, since 2003, while we talk of peace and no future wars, and reiterate profound words such as "there are no winners in war", we have glibly participated in the Iraq invasion force. It continues the story that 'Australia will be there' in over a century of border wars. We reflect on personal suffering, we respect and seek to understand those who served, and we wish for peace, but fail to understand the catastrophe of war. It is perverse, a social evil, to talk of Australian participation in wars since 1945 under the banner 'The Peacekeepers' (MacDougall 2004). If Australians knew the facts about the wars in history then Anzac Day would be a different kind of national day, a much darker and greyer day than it is now.

### **Peace Day August 16 – Inventing a New National Tradition**

Historians, museum curators, politicians past and present, teachers and media workers have helped invent and re-invent Anzac as a national day. We now have a responsibility to invent a day which takes the world forward, away from the last century of mass carnage. We need to transcend commemorative activities which forget history as they preserve rituals about sacrifice in fossilized form, surrounded by often empty rhetoric, however well-intended. We need to celebrate the coming of peace on August 16 in 1945 (even aside from the bloody loose ends). We need to recognise both the 60 million who died in World War 2 and the moral courage, the free spirited Australian rebelliousness even, necessary to fight for peace rather than just remember war. Peace matters even as war has more drama than peace and involves more sacrifice than peace. War also involves massive physical courage as well as 'loyalty'. As Australians agonise over national days (over Anzac Day and over Australia Day which was also 'Invasion Day') we need to invent a Peace Day. We need to celebrate peace, which recognises war but also reminds us of its costs, its folly, and its destructiveness. Unlike loyal service in arms, that is even harder to achieve. At the same time we need to rein in the excess of politicised commemoration and the monstrous socialisation of children into Anzac rather

than the teaching of the true history of war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as Australian history rather than merely imbibing national myths. We need a new approach to history and to the responsibilities of global citizenship, one which supplants well-meaning rhetoric, propaganda and media images which feed an out of date national myth.

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