

Dr David Stephens
'Not only but also: Three propositions about the Anzac Centenary and WW1'
Address to Pax Christi NSW, 7th April 2014

Not only but also: three propositions about the centenary of World War I

I acknowledge the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of this land, and their elders past and present.

I want to put three propositions about the centenary of World War I or, as we tend to call it in Australia, the centenary of Anzac.

In doing so, I want to look at a broader canvas than the one that is being officially painted for us in Australia as we enter the centenary years, 2014-18.

My first proposition about the centenary is that Australia's war history is much more than Australia's military history.

Secondly, I put the proposition that world war history is much more than Australian war history.

Thirdly, my third proposition about the centenary, is that Australian history is much more than Australian war history.

First, then, to the proposition that Australia's war history is much more than Australia's military history.

Australian military history, as it appears in bulk on the shelves of bookshops and libraries, as it is being flogged by various commercial shysters, and as it is recounted on Anzac Day, Remembrance Day, Battle for Australia Day, Bombing of Darwin Day, VE Day, VP Day, Battle of Long Tan Day, Battle of Kapyong Day and all of the other current and proposed days of war commemoration ...

Australian military history is mostly about blokes in khaki doing heroic things, frequently blokes in khaki making what is described euphemistically as 'the supreme sacrifice'.

That is, dying, often horribly and slowly, a long way from home.

Compared with the number of descriptions of acts of bravery, deeds of valour, assaults on salients, flanking manoeuvres, dawn raids, and so on, there is far, far less verbiage – both in literature and commemoration – devoted to blood, shit, death and horror.

The reality of war.

There are exceptions but 'warts and all' portrayal of front line experience is not generally a staple of Anzac Day speeches.

If you want to read an Anzac Day speech that does give an honest picture of war – any war – get hold of the one given by the Governor of Tasmania, Peter Underwood, last year.

The Governor – who is an ex-Navy officer – used examples from World War I, Iraq and Vietnam, and he quoted descriptions of the appalling smell of excrement and rotting bodies in World War I

trenches, of how killing a man in war feels like killing a part of yourself and of how American helicopter pilots in Vietnam had to kick and push and threaten to shoot panic-stricken wounded soldiers to get them off the craft so it could get into the air.

The Governor said our children need us to portray war honestly, not to romanticise it or sanitise it.

On that point also, among our 5000 war memorials in cities and small towns around Australia, next to those words, 'Lest we Forget', how many of them show a soldier killing an enemy?

Joan Beaumont says this in her book, Broken Nation:

By this stage of the war [April 1918], the 15th Brigade had perfected the "throat jab" – a thrust of the bayonet up through a man's throat into his spinal cord. As Elliott [General 'Pompey' Elliott] put it, this killed a man "easily, quickly and painlessly, often without a cry or movement". Clearly [Beaumont goes on] by 1918 these Australians were highly efficient killers, a fact that twenty-first century commemoration with its high diction of "sacrifice" and "deeds of valour" elides.

Now, Professor Beaumont uses the academic word 'elides'.

'Glosses over', 'leaves out', 'forgets' would do just as nicely to describe the way we avoid the more brutal aspects of war.

Another area where war history differs from military history as we have come to know it is in describing what soldiers do when they are not being heroic.

My colleague, Peter Stanley, wrote the book *Bad Characters*, whose sub-title, *Sex, Crime, Mutiny, Murder and the Australian Imperial Force*, gives a good idea of what the book is about.

Australians in World War I were good at fighting but they were also good at getting venereal disease and getting into other sorts of trouble, some of it serious.

Some Diggers were genuine heroes, some were villains, some were both.

Some of them massacred dozens of Palestinians at Surafend in 1918.

War history also includes what happened on the home front.

No matter how you slice the numbers, going to World War I was a minority activity for male Australians in the years 1914-18.

(Only about 30 per cent of men aged 18-60 enlisted.)

For every soldier, sailor and nurse away, however, there were mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, at home, waiting and wondering.

There were also profiteers and black-marketeers and 'shirkers', so-called.

There were people who supported the war passionately and people who opposed it just as passionately.

There were trade unionists going on strike – a lot of them.

There were desperate battles, sometimes involving physical confrontations, over conscription.

Some historians, indeed, say Australia has never been more divided than it was during that war.

But, if families in that divided nation suffered heartache during the war they endured even more of it afterwards.

War history is about the aftermath of war, as well.

It's about how the soldiers who survived the war coped afterwards, with wounds and psychological damage.

It's about how their families coped with them.

The aftermath of World War I was also about the nation that remained divided between Protestant and Catholic, between Labour and Capital, between ex-servicemen and militant trade unionists.

The aftermath was also about the nation that was supposedly 'born at Gallipoli' but which Billy Hughes described in the mid 1920s as 'more British than the British'.

It was also about Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce's three word policy – they had them in the 1920s, as well – 'men, money and markets', each arm of which depended upon a continuing close relationship with 'the Mother Country', as Chris Masters has noted.

We need to know more about the aftermath of World War I.

The release of some of the Repatriation files from that war will give researchers more information – more honest information – about what the aftermath of that war meant for some soldiers and their families.

Finally, under this heading – there is more to Australia's war history than its military history – I want to say something about the Australian Frontier Wars, the wars between Indigenous warriors and white settlers, the wars that struggle (still) to gain official acknowledgement.

Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan and others have shown conclusively that these confrontations were not just skirmishes.

There is plenty of contemporary evidence that the settlers and their governments believed they were engaged in a war; some of them saw the goal of that war as extermination.

Perhaps 30 000 Indigenous Australians – men, women and children – died, along with thousands of settlers.

Many people believe the dead of the Frontier Wars should be commemorated at the Australian War Memorial.

'We will know that we are all members of the same nation', Henry Reynolds says, 'when a shrine in memory of the fallen warriors is placed side by side with the tomb of the unknown soldier'.

The Director of the Memorial does not agree; nor does his Council.

Even some Indigenous Australians do not yearn to commemorate their ancestors in what they regard as a temple to Australia's involvement with imperialist causes.

Meanwhile, we need to consider this irony:

we have come to honour the Turkish soldiers we fought against in 1915;

Australia and Turkey have reciprocally renamed parts of their countries to honour their former enemy;

Australia honours Turks who fought against us when we invaded their country;

Yet we refuse to honour Australians who fought against us – the British – when we invaded their country.

My second proposition about the centenary, you will recall, is that world war history is much more than Australian war history.

This is something that hit me – personally and quite forcefully – when I visited Europe in December.

I wanted to do a story for our website on Flanders Fields, taking particular note of the Tyne Cot Commonwealth War Cemetery.

I did the research on Tyne Cot: largest Commonwealth war cemetery in the world; 11 950 dead Commonwealth soldiers, including 1353 Australians.

When I got there, I noted Tyne Cot's sweeping rows of graves, its looming memorial walls and triumphalist architecture.

The sun came out just as we arrived; Tyne Cot was at its manicured best.

But I also went to the German war cemetery at Langemark, not far away, which I had not heard of until that day: gravestones set into the ground, a few statues, lots of trees and lawns.

There are 44 000 German soldiers buried at Langemark, including 25 000 unknown soldiers in a single pit.

An estimated 3000 of those dead were schoolboys.

Very few German tourists ever visit the Langemark cemetery, our guide said, apart from once a year, when a platoon of German soldiers come to tidy up the graves.

War tourism, it seems, is mostly something for the winning side.

Losing a war, on the other hand, forces a country to look at war more comprehensively.

In Berlin, the captions on exhibits at the German Historical Museum suggested to me that Germans have taken a much more thorough look at why wars occur and what they mean to a country than happens during any war commemoration exercise or at any war memorial in our country.

The Germans have a word *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which means something like 'working through and coming to terms with the past'.

We should try a bit more Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Australia.

Nations who lose wars – like Germany and to a lesser extent Japan – ultimately benefit by having to confront all of their war history.

Winners, on the other hand, lose out by being able to get away with mythology.

Victory has its drawbacks.

Moving on, I hesitate to rely too much on statistics to make the point about war history as a whole, compared with Australian war history.

But I have given myself some licence because we in Australia – from Billy Hughes in Versailles in 1919 onwards – have made an awful lot of our World War I kill count of 62 000.

Sure 62 000 was a high proportion of the men who enlisted, but in absolute numbers – with every number being an individual and a family tragedy – our numbers are pretty small.

During World War I military deaths for all combatant countries amounted to roughly ten million.

Our 62 000 is 0.62 per cent of ten million; 0.62 per cent.

Then there is this statistic.

If you take every Australian war death in the twentieth century – that number is around 100 000 – and compare it with the total number of dead in wars and conflicts everywhere in the world in the twentieth century – one respectable estimate of that is 231 million – you find that Australian war deaths are 0.04 per cent of the total.

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Of course, that 231 million includes civilians, lots of them, whereas civilians killed in war in Australia amount to a few hundred in the raids on Darwin and Broome in 1942 (most of them Americans and Dutch) and a few hundred more merchant seamen.

I noted recently that the Australian War Memorial tweeted a tweet on the anniversary of the raid on Broome in 1942 to remind us that 70 people had died there.

That was 70 individual tragedies.

But we will have come a distance along the commemorative journey, I believe, when the Australian War Memorial is also able to tweet on a suitable day that 40 000 ethnic German civilians died in the city of Breslau in the first four months of 1945 while the Russian Red Army besieged the city.

Or that more than 100 000 Japanese civilians died on Okinawa in 1945.

Or that six million Jews died in the Holocaust.

That sort of commemoration is to be commended and hoped for.

It would affirm that we Australians, even in commemorative mode, see ourselves as part of a larger collective, known as the human race.

Many of us say that commemoration of war is not glorification of war.

But this statement often comes as an afterthought to moving, patriotic, feel-good – or at least bitter-sweet – ceremonies with lots of flags, remembrance of heroic deeds, eloquent speeches, sonorous hymns and wide-eyed children.

We in Australia do nostalgic commemoration rather better than we do regret.

General Robert E Lee said: 'It is well that war is so terrible – otherwise we would grow too fond of it'.

There are some parts of war and its remembrance that we in Australia are still too fond of; they are the parts that we are able to wrap in the flag and turn into a celebration of who we think we are as Australians.

Perhaps the centenary years in Australia will be different.

Perhaps we will get things more in proportion.

On the other hand, the sheer frequency – the relentlessness – of commemoration over the next four years may convince us that war, if not glorious, is at least inevitable and even normal.

Tony Abbott, in August last year, just before he became Prime Minister, said 'conflict, it seems, is part of the human condition and we must always be ready for it'.

Our common humanity demands that we broaden our perspective on wars and what they mean.

We need to do more than have regular commemorations wrapped in patriotism and clouded with nostalgia.

My third and final proposition about the centenary of Anzac is that Australian history is much more than Australian war history.

Here I want to say a little about our Honest History website, which you can find at honesthistory.net.au.

The title of this speech is 'Not only but also': we in Honest History promote the idea that Australian history is not only about Anzac but also about many other important and intertwining strands.

Of course, Anzac is important but we sell ourselves short if we neglect the rest of our national story.

So, our website has resource material under the headings Anzac analysed and Australia's war history as well as items on the Frontier Wars and on War Literature.

But as well as this war-related material there is a large section called Strands of Australian history, which covers everything from pre-history to art and photography, labour history to the history of our environment, and political events to the history of sex in Australia.

We are also encouraging people to write for us, on as wide a range of topics and from as many perspectives as possible.

We also have an Honest History slot on ABC Local Radio in Canberra and a series of lectures at Manning Clark House in Canberra.

Again the topics and perspectives are many and varied.

And we are spreading our networks Australia-wide.

Unlike the Commonwealth education minister, Christopher Pyne, we do not believe Australian history is best seen as a single thread, within which something called Western Civilisation bulks very large and the Gallipoli Landing is highlighted disproportionately.

We see our history instead as a story of contesting, conflicting, evidence-based interpretations.

We are not asking people to choose between Anzac and something else, between Western Civilisation and multiculturalism, between black armband and white blindfold.

The most effective way of countering a narrow, bigoted view of history is not with another narrow, bigoted view but instead with an inclusive approach, one which allows for a range of differing, even conflicting – but always evidence-based – interpretations.

If that makes us a nuisance to people like Christopher Pyne and the high priests of inflated Anzac commemoration – we use the term ‘Anzackery’ to describe that phenomenon – then so be it.

Which leaves us with the question: why has Anzac – and military history and military commemoration generally – become such a big deal in Australia?

Why do we have this Anzackery?

Why has Anzac become so inflated, so disproportionate in relation to other parts of our history, and why is it threatening to become even more so in the next few years?

Here are two possible answers.

First, Graeme Davison, writing in 2009, felt the Anzac story was an Odyssey, young men voyaging to foreign shores to do heroic things.

Today’s Gallipoli backpackers replicate that journey, but with less danger awaiting them.

There is, Davison believes, a common thread connecting Diggers and backpackers.

The common thread is that Australians have always valued their worth in terms of how they are seen by great and powerful friends.

Put simply and colloquially, we have always been skites, with an eye on the audience.

However, that explanation, if it is plausible, only works for young people undertaking rites of passage.

What about the great majority of us, the people who stay in Australia to do our commemorating?

Here’s a paragraph from Michael McGirr, a former Jesuit priest and gifted writer.

It comes from his book *Bypass*, published in 2001, and I think the tendencies he identifies have grown a lot since then.

McGirr uses the term 'creeping Anzacism' to describe

the way in which the remembrance of war is moving from the personal to the public sphere and, with that, from a description of something unspeakable to something about which you can never say enough.

As fewer and fewer Australians actually know somebody who fought in World War I or World War II, the commemoration of war has changed from a quiet remembrance of other people to an unrestrained endorsement of ourselves.

As ideology comes to replace history, there are fewer and fewer faces to go with the stories.

They have been replaced by a lather of clichés, most of which are as much about filling a void in the narcissistic present as lending dignity to the past.

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.

