

MEDICAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE PREVENTION OF WAR

Fremantle Town Hall

8 March 2015

Thank you.

My interest as a historian over the past few years has been in the way that Australians remember the First World War.

But why does it matter how Australians remember war?

I would argue that it matters very much, because the way that we remember past wars has a significant effect on our attitude to contemporary wars.

This argument seems particularly pertinent in a society that is obsessed with the Anzac legend.

If you don't believe that we live in an Anzac-obsessed society, believe the numbers.

Let me compare how much money various national governments are spending on commemorations for the centenary of the FWW between 2014 and 2018:

Britain \$90m

France \$90m,

Germany \$7m

Australia \$145m

Perhaps the best comparison, in terms of comparing like with like, is between Australia and two other British settler nations who fought in the Great War, New Zealand and Canada.

New Zealand has committed \$16 million to the centenary.

Canada is allocating no new money.

When you combine the Commonwealth's contribution of \$145m with the states and territories, which are kicking in \$80m and the private sector, which has promised \$170m, you reach a staggering total of \$395m.

And then there's the blatant commercialisation of Anzac.

Despite laws restricting the use of the word 'Anzac', companies find ways of associating themselves with the brand.

The favoured method is what is called 'cause marketing', where a company donates some of its profits towards an admirable cause, in this case it is usually Legacy and the RSL.

You may have seen the television advertisement a couple of years ago, where Peter Cosgrove, now Sir Peter the Governor General, urged Australians to 'raise a glass' for the Anzacs, as he raised a glass of VB.

If you have concerns about the morality of associating alcohol with war commemoration, you might prefer the Anzac Run, whose motto is 'Exercise your Freedom'.

Continuing the outdoors theme is Camp Gallipoli. You might have seen the ads.

On 24 April this year, at venues around Australia and in New Zealand, people can camp out under the stars.

As the event website points out, these are the very same stars that the Anzacs slept under one hundred years ago.

For \$275, participants can purchase an historic replica swag, just like the ones the Anzacs slept in one hundred years ago.

Target department stores are now selling a range of Camp Gallipoli memorabilia that includes sleeping bags, picnic rugs, homewares and clothing.

Camp Gallipoli's website tells us that "the 'spirit of Anzac' is in the DNA of every Aussie and Kiwi. It is the one thing that unites Australians and New Zealanders from all walks of life and cultures, rich or poor, young or old."

Never mind a commitment to democracy, the rule of law, egalitarianism or any of those values we might consider unite us as Australians.

Anzac is the one thing.

Cruise ships have jumped on the Anzac centenary bandwagon.

Bert Newton is hosting an event called 'the Gallipoli Cruise'.

A sparkling list of on-board entertainers includes Daryl Braithwaite, Kate Ceberano and Normie Rowe.

Crowd numbers at Gallipoli have been strictly limited by the Australian government, so unfortunately cruise passengers will have to watch the Anzac Cove services on the telly like the rest of us.

If a cruise is not on the cards, you can kit out your house with Anzac kitsch.

There are Gallipoli oven mitts and pot holders.

There's a fridge magnet with a recreation of a trench from WWI on it, so you remember the Anzacs every time you open the fridge...to grab that VB, to 'raise a glass'.

You can wrap your little one in an 'Anzac Day thank you baby blanket'.

And pop a hat on your baby's head that's decorated with Flanders poppies.

For the woman who has everything, there are 'Sands of Gallipoli Centenary poppy ear rings'.

The earrings come with a matching apron.

Blokes can choose from a range of t-shirts with slogans such as:

'Thank you Anzacs, Lest we Forget April 25'.

Only the lucky few can wear t-shirts that simply say: 'Anzac Descendant' or 'Proud Son of an Anzac'.

I was confused by the t-shirt depicting Simpson and his donkey.

I couldn't work out why Ned Kelly was riding the donkey!

And I was gob-smacked by the 'Anzac Pin-Up Girl', featuring a VERY large-breasted woman in skimpy khaki latex, wearing a helmet and suggestively brandishing a rifle.

Anzac porn—a new low in the commercialisation of Anzac.

Apart from being amusing in its crassness, I believe that this flood of Anzac merchandise raises a serious issue.

I believe that it runs the risk of normalising war, or trivialising it, or even glamourising it.

I worry that the ubiquity of Anzac raises the danger that contemporary military endeavours become rolled into the romanticism of the Anzac legend, and therefore do not receive the scrutiny they would otherwise attract.

I believe that it is essential that we immunise our community against the sentimentalisation of war.

Not by denigrating the Anzacs—it is important that we honour their memory respectfully and *never* forget their suffering.

But we need to provide facts about the Anzac legend in place of puff and propaganda.

For example, people should know how the Anzac legend took root in Australia.

How did a small country in the Asia-Pacific come to embrace a failed campaign in Turkey as its founding mythology?

It is sometimes said that the Anzac legend was created by the official correspondent and official historian Charles Bean or the British journalist, Ellis Ashmead Bartlett.

I don't subscribe to the view that the Anzac legend was imposed upon a passive Australian population.

In my view it was the conjunction of three factors that made such fertile ground for the legend to take root:

- First, we were a new nation in 1915, more a loosely federated collection of states than a nation united.

The experience of fighting as Australians did much to advance a feeling of nationhood.

- Second, the notion was about in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that nations were made in war.

By federating peacefully in 1901, Australians had been deprived of the 'transcendent test' of manhood and nationhood provided by battle.

The Boer War had proved inadequate as a nation-making war.

The Great War did not.

- And third, Australians felt a deep shame about their convict origin.

The sterling performance of their soldiers was proof that Australians were not the degenerate sons of convict stock.

The martial baptism at Gallipoli offered an historical ground zero, a moment at which Australian history could begin again.

And so the Anzac legend—the idea that the Australian nation was born at Gallipoli—took hold.

In its original form, the Anzac legend was steeped in the ideals of early twentieth century Australia.

These ideals included:

- a belief in the superiority of the white races;
- a deep attachment to Great Britain,
- and traditional gender roles for men and women.

This model of Anzac commemoration remained in place for a good forty years.

But by the 1960s it had begun to crumble.

As the first of the baby boomers reached maturity they questioned the values of the Great War generation.

Alan Seymour's famous play *The One Day of the Year* dramatised the generational divide between the baby boomers and their parents and grandparents.

The occasion on which Australia became a nation according to the Anzacs, was in the baby boomers' eyes a day of 'bloody wastefulness'.

And the old soldiers were not heroes, but a 'screaming tribe of great, stupid, drunken, vicious, *bigoted* no-hopers'.

The Vietnam War gave momentum to anti-Anzac sentiment that was already building in the community.

By the late 1960s, any kind of war commemoration came to be seen by a large portion of the population as equivalent to the glorification of war.

The critique of the Anzac legend continued through the 1970s and into the 1980s.

In the early to mid-80s, radical feminists targeted Anzac Day marches.

Notoriously, they called the old diggers limping along or being pushed in wheelchairs 'rapists'.

In 1986 a journalist in the *Canberra Times* newspaper asked: 'How long will Anzac Day keep going?'

He wrote: 'I'm pleased to see that we're still having Easter once a year... and I'd like to think that Anzac Day could last as long.

But you and I know that's not possible.'

Far from being impossible, thirty years after that article was written, Anzac Day is bigger than Easter.

We should not take this revival for granted, but think hard about how and why it has happened.

We should be aware of the changing role of politicians in Anzac commemoration.

It is not as if prime ministers have been bound for Turkey each Anzac Day since the days of Billy Hughes and Stanley Bruce.

Malcolm Fraser told me that if he had gone to Gallipoli when he was prime minister, people would have said: 'What on earth is Fraser doing?'

Fraser recalled that the idea that the Australian nation was 'born at Gallipoli' had been quietly dropped from Anzac rhetoric.

In other words, the decades-long relationship between Australian nationalism and Great War memory had fractured.

Bob Hawke was the first Australian prime minister to go to Gallipoli for Anzac Day.

He went with a group of old diggers in 1990 for the 75th anniversary of the landing.

Hawke only went after his government made a calculated judgement that the tide of public opinion was turning back towards Anzac commemoration.

Hawke's trip was a great success.

The 'pilgrimage', as it became known, signalled the beginning of the great modern love affair between Australian prime ministers and Anzac.

Nowadays, no prime minister (with the exception of Paul Keating) misses an opportunity to pop over to Turkey in late April when the schedule permits.

John Howard was the most enthusiastic Anzac commemorator, with both a grandfather and father who fought in the First World War.

Howard was remarkably successful in tailoring traditional Anzac values such as mateship and egalitarianism to his political causes.

Anzac remains front and centre in the political battle over Australian nationalism.

When a rumour spread last year that funding might be cut for the travelling Anzac Centenary Exhibition, Bill Shorten was quick to criticise the government in an effort to gain political advantage.

The government just as quickly assured the public that there would be no cut to funding.

Tony Abbott and Joe Hockey are still struggling to find savings in this atmosphere of alleged Budget crisis.

But no one dares to cut funding for the Anzac centenary.

I am not suggesting that the current resurgence in Anzac commemoration is all the result of political manipulation or the doings of those who see an opportunity to make a quick buck.

But I do believe that Anzac in its current form is too entwined with Australian nationalism.

This is not just the view of academic historians like me.

A former soldier called James Brown wrote a book last year arguing that less money should be given to the Anzac centenary and more to services that help today's returned soldiers.

This is a view that is shared by others who have served in the military.

In January I met a distinguished former soldier who had served in Vietnam and rose to command the SAS.

He told me that he was dismayed by the ubiquity of Anzac and its increasingly jingoistic inclinations.

He said the modern, professional Australian army functions on training, equipment and the bonds of loyalty between fellow soldiers, not on a one-hundred year old legend created by an army of citizen soldiers.

The notion of 'celebrating' war is hideous to people who have experienced combat.

‘Remembering’ and ‘recognising’ are very different from ‘celebrating’.

In closing, I want to leave you with an example of the subtle ways in which the Anzac legend—with its tendency to appeal to our hearts rather than our heads—might lead us to be less cautious than we should be in our attitude to contemporary military conflict.

Some of you might have heard of a recently released song by the popular country singer, Lee Kernaghan.

The song is called ‘Spirt of the Anzacs’ and features other popular artists like Guy Sebastian, Shannon Noll, Megan Washington and Jessica Mauboy.

The chorus of the song is based around Paul Keating’s eulogy to the Unknown Soldier: ‘He is all of them, He is one of us’.

The lyrics and the video seamlessly blend diggers old and diggers new.

Thus, we hear of soldiers in ‘the trenches at Lone Pine’ and ‘the Flanders firing line’, as well as the ‘nurse in Vietnam’ and the soldiers ‘on patrol in Uruzgan’.

In the video, images of diggers from World War One are mashed up with those of soldiers in Afghanistan.

Old battle ships are mashed with modern jet fighters, navy ships and helicopters.

It's all part of one big, feel-good Anzac legend.

Both the song and the video are beautiful and brimming with emotion.

But all of this emotion and national pride conceals a serious problem in the way we commemorate Anzac.

The Great War happened 100 years ago.

Perhaps it's okay to feel sentimental about pictures of trenches on pot holders and oven gloves.

But I don't think that it's okay to feel sentimental about images of modern jet fighters laden with missiles, or armoured vehicles with machine guns racing through the Iraqi desert.

By singing about Afghanistan and Iraq in the same breath as Gallipoli, we risk shrouding them in the same nostalgic mist.

Contemporary wars must be assessed in the cold, hard light of day.

They must not be allowed to hide from proper scrutiny in the belly of the Anzac Trojan Horse.

Thank you.