

We go to Rio: questioning received war history

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Honest History

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*It seems appropriate in an Olympic year to use athletic analogies. Here we apply these analogies to an uniquely Australian event – questioning the Anzac-based received version of our war history. This flows through to a contest about our history as a whole. The article refers to some illustrative examples, particularly in Honest History’s Alternative Guide to the Australian War Memorial.*²

The first hurdle

Since we began the *Honest History* venture three years ago, a number of people have said things to us like, ‘We agree with what you’re saying about “Anzackery”, extreme commemoration of the Anzac legend³, and about the need for contestability in history but we are afraid of being thought disloyal’. Historian Frank Bongiorno, a distinguished supporter of Honest History, described this phenomenon accurately when he wrote that ‘those who refuse to participate’ in an Anzac legend defined in inclusive terms – that is, it is meant to include everyone – ‘can readily be represented as beyond the pale’ – ostracised, disloyal, not displaying ‘situational awareness’.

To question, to criticise – to doubt – can become un-Australian ... Anzac’s inclusiveness has been achieved at the price of a dangerous chauvinism that increasingly equates national history with military history, and national belonging with a willingness to accept the Anzac legend as Australian patriotism’s very essence.⁴

The first hurdle to get over, then, is the idea that questioning the excessive emphasis on our military history, calling out “Anzackery”, if necessary, is unpatriotic or disrespectful of the memory of dead soldiers. Yet, the past is not sacred.⁵ Peter FitzSimons’ claim in his book *Gallipoli* that Australians have had ‘a naturally bowed head’ about Anzac Day ever since the 1920s is not only nonsense as history – as Carolyn Holbrook’s *Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography* makes clear – but also objectionable because it can be read as prescriptive.⁶ Anzac may be a secular religion for some of us but it is not the established church; those who are agnostic or atheist about Anzac owe its adherents respect but they should not be required to join

them at the altar. They do not have a ‘responsibility’ to inspect the latest expensive refurbishment of the Australian War Memorial.⁷

Rather than naturally bowed heads – the term seems to imply lack of thought, a knee-jerk reaction – dead soldiers deserve the honour of our asking whether they died in vain. The best way of ensuring that all those wars which were supposed to end war finally, do just that, is to ask questions about why the wars were fought and whether they were worth it. Relentlessly and repetitively – and sentimentally – commemorating war deaths and heroism, without asking those questions, makes it more likely that we will do it all again in future – without much thought.

We honour the dead, too, if we inquire about the fate of their comrades who did not die but came home, physically and mentally damaged, and if we investigate and illustrate how their families coped with them when they returned and how they dealt with their absence while they were away. These are some of the questions *Honest History’s Alternative Guide* encourages readers to ask. The *Guide* exhorts readers to look for exhibits in the Australian War Memorial about what Australia was like before the Great War and after it, about the conscription referenda, industrial action and societal divisions at home during the war, and the police state built around the *War Precautions Act*. The *Guide* then asks:

Has information about the ‘home front’ ... been difficult to find in the World War I galleries? What does that tell you about what the Memorial regards as important enough to give lots of space to? Is there more to our war history than stories about the brave deeds and tragic deaths of men in uniform?

These are legitimate questions. But we still need to get over that first hurdle of letting ourselves ask questions like that, particularly the ‘Was it worth it?’ questions. This should not be difficult for history teachers, whose loyalty is ‘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’.⁸ But teachers may well face parental and community, and government, pressures to fudge these issues.

Boxing intelligently

The late Muhammad Ali, Gold medallist, Rome Olympic, 1960, did not just swing wildly. He sized up his opponent’s strengths and weaknesses and boxed to take account of them. Something similar happens in the events *Honest History* contests, events that could be grouped under the heading ‘the politics of history’.

Honest History does not simply counter the crude, Anzac-foundation version of our history – ‘Every nation has its story. This is our story’, as the Australian War Memorial one-liner has it – with an alternative foundation myth, say, ‘Australia was the social laboratory of the world prior to the Great War’. Instead, we recognise that, of course, war is important in Australian history – not so much because of what some Australians did in war but because of how war affected all of us – but so are many other things. There are many other influences on Australia today besides what happened on battlefields. What we value in the Australian identity does not depend on bloodshed. In the *Alternative Guide* we point out that the qualities depicted in the Napier Waller windows at the War Memorial (comradeship, loyalty, patriotism, and so on) do not come to the fore only when someone is killing or being killed wearing an Australian uniform. They are universal human values.

This way of looking at Australian history has been fundamental to the *Honest History* enterprise. We have repeatedly said, ‘Not only Anzac but lots of other strands of our history’ are significant. Our website, our presentations to schools, the forthcoming *Honest History* book, all make that point. Writing off the search for contestability in history as merely another bout in the ‘history wars’ plays into the hands of those who see history as a set of facts to be learned or perhaps to be tweaked to achieve patriotic uplift. But

discounting complexity and punting for alternative single factor explanations is just as silly. History is mess, and confusion, and puzzle and we should celebrate that.

Staying the course

The long Olympic races are the most difficult but also the most worthwhile for the competitor and inspiring for the spectator. They also offer the most opportunities for tactics, perhaps even strategy. Changing the familiar tropes about war in Australian history will take time but changing them is one aim of *Honest History*’s *Alternative Guide*. Getting from ‘Every nation has its story. This is our story’ to ‘Not only Anzac but lots of other strands’ will not occur overnight but there are a few practical steps which could help it to happen:

- *Honest History* plans to work with teachers and students to improve the *Alternative Guide* and make it a more useful tool for courses dealing with war history and general historiographical questions – and indeed for the general visitor to the Memorial. We welcome suggestions. Meanwhile, the *Guide* has been downloaded more than 1450 times from the *Honest History* website.
- Government would level the playing field so that Anzac looks less like a state religion or ideology, and more like a single – important, but still single – thread of our history. This step would involve, for example, scrapping the requirement that to qualify for the PACER subsidy for visits to Canberra, schools must visit the War Memorial.⁹ It would reduce the profile of Anzac in citizenship material put out by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection: new arrivals, particularly refugees coming from war zones, should not be made to feel that being Australian requires their taking on this anachronistic khaki patina.¹⁰
- The Australian War Memorial would be willing to debate those who disagree with it. Robust organisations with a story to tell are usually prepared to promote it in the marketplace of ideas. As a first step, *Honest History* sent a copy of its *Alternative Guide* to every member of the War Memorial Council and asked for the opportunity to make a presentation on the *Guide* to the Council. The Council Chairman declined our offer.

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6 Teaching History

Endnotes

1. The opinions are the author's own. *Honest History* is a broad coalition of historians and others, committed to frank debate and expressing a diversity of opinions.
2. *Honest History, Honest History's Alternative Guide to the Australian War Memorial*, Canberra, 2016, *Honest History*, <<http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/872-Alternative-Guide.pdf>>, accessed 9 June 2016.
3. David Stephens, 'Anzackery in the time of Anzac', *Pearls and Irritations*, 16 March 2015, <<http://johnmenadue.com/blog/?p=3409>>, accessed 12 June 2016. There will be an entry for 'Anzackery' in the forthcoming new edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*, published by the Australian National University.
4. Frank Bongiorno, 'Anzac and the politics of inclusion', Sumartojo & Wellings, ed., *Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration (2014)*, quoted in Peter Cochrane, 'The past is not sacred', *Griffith Review 48: Enduring Legacies (2015)*, <<https://griffithreview.com/articles/past-sacred/>>, accessed 9 June 2016. For 'situational awareness', see: 'Should we softpedal on Gallipoli?' *Honest History*, 4 February 2014, <<http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/should-we-softpedal-on-gallipoli/>>, accessed 12 June 2016.
5. See note 4.
6. Peter FitzSimons, *Gallipoli*, Random House, Sydney, 2014, p. 687; Carolyn Holbrook, *Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2014.
7. Brendan Nelson, Director, quoted in Siobhan Heanue & Elise Pianegonda, 'Australian War Memorial opens newly refurbished World War I galleries', *ABC News Canberra*, 9 December 2014, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-30/australian-war-memorial-unveils-newly-refurbished-wwi-gallery/5929306>>, accessed 13 June 2016.
8. Peter Stanley, 'Do teachers have "patriotic" obligations? Address to ACT-NSW History Teachers' Associations conference, University of Canberra, 9 May 2014', *Honest History*, <<http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/stanley-peter-patriotic-teachers/>>, accessed 12 June 2016.
9. *Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER)*, <<http://www.pacer.org.au/>>, accessed 12 June 2016.
10. The very first 'practice test question' for intending new Australian citizens is 'What do we remember on Anzac Day?', 'Practice test questions', *Department of Immigration and Border Protection*, <<https://www.border.gov.au/Citizenship/Documents/practice-questions.pdf#search=Anzac%20Day>>, accessed 12 June 2016.



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