

Speech by Tom Griffiths at the Canberra launch of *The Honest History Book*, edited by David Stephens and Alison Broinowski (New South, 2017), 6 April 2017

It's a great pleasure and honour to be invited to launch *The Honest History Book*. Since 2013, the Honest History coalition, with its lively newsletter and website, has been a welcome antidote to the military excesses of the Great War centenaries. It has been a sensible and thoughtful companion through these years of national mourning and triumphalism. Now this book offers us a distillation of that wisdom. But more than that, it challenges us to think deeply and constructively about the nature of history itself.

When the Honest History coalition was launched, there were conversations about that word 'honesty' and what it might mean in the context of the commemoration of war. This book provides a sustained, scholarly answer to that question. 'Honest history', as defined here, doesn't mean history that is intrinsically anti-war, or anti-Anzac or anti-military. It means history that is robustly supported by the evidence, history that is transparent in its use of sources, history that is contestable. It means history that expects, invites and welcomes disagreement and debate about the evidence. It is history that is wary of spin and cliché, that interrogates propaganda, and that sensitively studies the evolution and influence of myth. It is history that complicates rather than simplifies, that challenges rather than comforts, that works against the grain of power rather than submissively with it. So it is history that explores shadows and silences, fissures and flaws, *as well as* heroes and triumphs, pride and romance. It is history that encourages the growth of a rich, unruly and diverse ecosystem of stories rather than a simplified monoculture of sanctioned sentiments.

This book has grown over the four years that the Honest History coalition has been active, and, as we know, it responds especially to the dominance of the Anzac legend in Australian history-making. But the last year in the life of the world has given its title, Honest History, an extra dimension. We cannot help but read those words now with new questions about the prospect of history in post-truth politics. We cannot help but believe that ‘Honest History’ engages with the meaning of ‘fake news’ and the status of ‘alternative facts’. Historians have always been important in civil society – yes, we are the great storytellers! But we are also the storytellers who, when the chips are down, are prepared to do the hard work to try to distinguish between truth and lies, between good history and fake news, between facts and their alternatives.

We seem now to be entering a time when a substantial proportion of people have lost faith in our ability to discern and agree upon a past reality, who don’t even know how one might go about such a task, who don’t understand what might constitute ‘evidence’ or what ‘context’ means. We seem to have lost faith in expertise and even any sense of what it might be based upon. The digital age has levelled and equalised sources and the internet has become a mire of opinion. This is a time when anything goes, and when the noisiest prevail. The need for history – for honest, balanced, self-critical history – has never been greater.

The authors of this book don’t seek to deny the importance of war in Australian life and identity; they are not aiming to impose a silence of their own. Rather, they seek to rebalance our perspectives. They see war as important in our history ‘not so much because of what Australians have done in war but because of what war has done to Australia’. Their mantra is ‘Not only Anzac but also’

or – as the book declares on the cover – ‘Australia is more than Anzac – and always has been’.

The first half of the book confronts the Anzac legend head-on and ‘shows how parochial and Australia-centric has been our appreciation of war.’ Our peculiar form of ‘national narcissism’ comes under the microscope. Douglas Newton reminds us that the Great War was not all about us. Seeking a moment of national awakening on a distant beach has narrowed and trivialised our understanding of a cataclysmic, cynical and tragic world event. We seem obsessed with the question: ‘Did our Anzacs fight well?’ Rather, argues Newton, ‘we should be asking the only truly respectful questions: What happened here? For what precisely were Australian lives given up? Did our Australian government carefully weigh war aims, costs and alternatives? Or, in its servility to a powerful imperial friend, did it lose control over all these things?’

We learn from Vicken Babkenian and Judith Crispin that the 24th and 25th of April 1915 saw not only the beginning of the Anglo-French assault on the Gallipoli Peninsula but also the escalation of the Ottoman government’s systematic destruction of its civilian Armenian population. Anzacs witnessed the Armenian Genocide and helped rescue survivors of the death marches. But Australia’s fascination with itself and its national ‘birth’ means that we have lost the memory of our humanitarian connection to this coincident tragedy. Continuing to explore the Turkish connection, David Stephens and Burçin Çakır analyse the history of those famous words attributed to Atatürk that we have all read on so many memorials – those words about our sons in death becoming their sons too. But it emerges that they were not spoken by Atatürk at all, but constructed later, for political purpose in 1953, by a man probably guilty of war crimes relating to the Armenian Genocide. What comfort are those words now?

So this book doesn't strip away myth just to discard it, but rather, it disentangles myth in order to understand its power. Michael Piggott shows how Charles Bean has been put to fanciful use by the current custodians of the Australian War Memorial's commemorative culture, and he pleads for the complexity of the original man and also for attention to be paid to other founders. Mark Dapin challenges the belief that Vietnam veterans were excluded from the Anzac tradition and he does so with calm evidence-based history. Carolyn Holbrook and Frank Bongiorno offer us histories of the Anzac legend itself and of its political and cultural power. They discern how Anzac Day waxed and waned, and how from the early 1980s it experienced a surprising revival. It was due, they argue, to many factors: the publication of Bill Gammage's *The Broken Years* in 1974, the release of Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli* in 1981, the rise of family history, the state sponsorship of the Hawke government and the enlistment of Anzac in the cultural wars of the Howard government. Ken Inglis's prophetic identification of Anzac as our civic religion has come true.

I have a vivid personal memory of this moment of transition. In 1979, when I was 21, I was writing the history of a Victorian country town called Beechworth and I asked the local RSL if I could observe Anzac Day. They were astonished that someone young was interested and urged me to join them throughout the whole day. What I observed and wrote about was a day that everyone assumed would die out with its elderly custodians. The former soldiers privately and clumsily managed a humble ritual and they felt unworthiness, uncertainty and grief – and extreme discomfort with the brief civic limelight.¹ These were the last days of 'quiet remembrance'.² In that year of 1979, the culture was turning.

¹ Tom Griffiths, 'Anzac Day', *Overland*, no. 87, May 1982.

² David Stephens (p. 123) quotes Michael McGirr (*Bypass*, 2004) as noting that Anzac commemoration had drifted away from 'quiet remembrance' into something noisier, much more boastful, more self-indulgent, more narcissistic.

I think the change came about because the decline of the first generation of diggers forced the sombre ritual either to die with them or be re-born as someone else's celebration.

David Stephens completes the first half of the book with a brilliant essay on 'Anzackery', that wonderful term coined by Geoffrey Serle in 1967 to describe the extreme and jingoistic commemoration of Anzac. David warns us that 'Wallowing in sentiment – pickling ourselves in Anzackery – makes it more likely that we will do it all again next time.' And Alison Broinowski picks up this disturbing argument in the second last chapter of the book and shows it to have become sadly true.

The second half of the book 'downsizes Anzac by giving it context', as the editors put it. It turns to other themes of Australian history – to environment, immigration, economy, egalitarianism, heroes, women, republicanism and Aboriginal life. But these essays, while looking away from Anzac, cleverly weave back into the major arguments of the book. Rebecca Jones shows how Australian nature – expressed in fire, drought and flood – was an enemy to be fought, often by soldier settlers, but she also reveals a subtle, hidden history of learning and adaptation. Gwenda Tavan, in her study of multiculturalism, sees the reconstruction of Australia Day and Anzac Day as national days as playing a role in the politics of immigration and refugees in recent decades. Stuart Macintyre, Carmen Lawrence and Peter Stanley all tackle the idea of egalitarianism and mateship and, by focusing on Australians at home, challenge the military story of Australian exceptionalism. Mark McKenna explores the entangled histories of military commemoration and the Crown, and wonders if Republic Day can ever rival Anzac Day. Joy Damousi looks at the conscription debates and argues for the leading role of women in public affairs and in building international movements for peace.

And, near its end, the book brings war home to ‘country’ in a different sense, to the frontier wars, the original wars. Larissa Behrendt and Paul Daley describe the invasion of Australia by the British and the long, traumatic wars with Aboriginal peoples. Daley calls frontier conflict ‘our most important war’ with death rates in our paddocks likely to have been greater than Australian fatalities in the Great War.

It is extraordinary that the Great Australian Silence about Aboriginal dispossession and frontier violence was, and still is, profoundly linked to the Australian yearning for a bloody sacrifice in an overseas theatre of war.³ Denial and yearning, silence and stridency, are bound together in our national psyche.

The impressive thing about this book is the way it pursues these questions, big and small, with a touching faith in our civic culture. To tackle war is to ask for trouble. War is the great resort of politicians in difficulty and of lazy commentators looking for a short-cut; it can act as a kind of sedative to critical thinking. One risks being branded ‘unpatriotic’ or ‘un-Australian’. I’m reminded of the learned Sydney Professor of History, George Arnold Wood, who opposed the British war against the Boers in South Africa in 1899-1902. In those pre-Anzac days, Professor Wood, as a scholarly historian of Britain and its colonies, calmly argued for a healthy, critical debate about the South African war – but he was pilloried and attacked as un-British and disloyal and even censured by his university Senate.⁴ The history of Australia’s knee-jerk, fearful and unthinking commitment to overseas wars had well and truly begun. Alison Broinowski’s final chapter in this book is a powerful and challenging one, for it

³ See Tom Griffiths, ‘Past Silences’, chapter 5 of *Hunters and Collectors* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴ R M Crawford, *A Bit of a Rebel: The Life and Work of George Arnold Wood*, Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1975, chapters X-XIII.

records that pathetic history and searches valiantly for the frayed strands of Australia's independence in foreign policy. This essay, like the whole book, is thoughtful and reasonable, idealistic and practical – and in this spirit, the two exemplary editors provide a conclusion that suggests sensible, practical ways to change the balance of our history between Anzac and non-Anzac.

Congratulations to all the authors in this book, and especially to David and Alison who have edited it superbly, so that it manages to be both a collection of twenty stimulating essays and also a coherent, coordinated manifesto about the health and balance of Australian history. It deserves to be widely read; it invites reasoned debate; and it offers us precious wisdom. It is my honour to help launch it upon the world.